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WOMEN OF COLOR IN THE WORKPLACE: THE STEREOTYPES AND
MISREPRESENTATION

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Women of color have been subject to intense stereotyping and misrepresentation in various fields of work, which have impacted them immensely (Hoyt, 2005). As the number of working women of color in America increased, so did the stereotyping and misrepresentation they faced. (Toossi & Morisi, 2017). The questions that this research seeks to answer are: How does facing stereotypes and misrepresentation in their workplaces affect women of color: does it inhibit them from performing their tasks proficiently or does it cause them to work harder towards breaking those stereotypes? Do the recent racial-charged events increase the impact on Asian women as compared to women of other minorities? Through this research, the most prominent stereotypes and aspects of misrepresentation, and the professional and personal impact on women of color will be brought to light. Given that there is a growing number of women of color in leadership positions, it is important to understand these issues and how to discourage them. For this study, we surveyed a sample of 24 women of color from various working sectors, and asked them questions regarding how the stereotyping and misrepresentation impacted them professionally and personally and if they have advice. The results have been compared to pre-existing research and analyzed to learn how the impact of stereotyping and misrepresentation has evolved and how to prevent it from happening in the future. The results for this research include the analysis that stereotyping, and misrepresentation inhibit the performance of women of color and negatively impact their identity.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

i.	Abstract.....	1
ii.	Acknowledgments.....	2
iii.	Table of Contents.....	3
iv.	Introduction.....	4
v.	Methodology.....	12
vi.	Results.....	14
vii.	Discussion.....	16
viii.	Conclusion.....	19
ix.	References.....	20
x.	Appendix.....	23

INTRODUCTION

In the last two years, countless areas of misrepresentation and stereotyping have been brought into the light due to the multiple unfortunate events triggered by severe racial profiling and systemic racism all over the United States. We have heard instances about intense violence and brutality that are obstacles in the growth process for many minorities. There have been protests and rallies all throughout the pandemic to fight for equality and justice for the lives of many African Americans (Westerman, Benk, & Greene, 2020). While these protests primarily circled around the topics of police brutality and criminal injustice, many areas of inequality and discrimination in workplaces have been brought to light. Additionally, due to the traces of the virus beginning in Asia, many Asian Americans have been subject to intense racial violence, stereotyping, and discrimination (Cabral, 2021). The violence has gotten so far and intense that the government stepped in to pass a bill in hopes of ending the anti-Asian crimes (Peterson, 2021). Over 80% of Asians in America expressed that the violence against them has increased, which is much higher than the 56% of all adults in the United States who believe the same (Ruiz, Edwards, & Lopez, 2021). The hate crimes and discrimination have impacted businesses, families, and individuals. It is interesting to notice that the discrimination stems from stereotypes and misrepresentation. Many Asian Americans have no ties whatsoever with the onset of the pandemic, yet they are perceived as the primary cause behind it because of their appearance. They are shunned, yelled at, and troubled by other people because of fake information that has been distributed. We have also heard of many cases in which an Asian individual is mistaken for another ethnic group member and targeted without any sort of valid reasoning. Many Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean individuals have been subject to violence after they were assumed to be of Chinese descent (Wu, 2020). As the virus grows out of control in India, many Indian-

Americans are fearing for their safety all over the United States. These violent attacks and discrimination are all rooted in baseless stereotypes and misrepresentation that heavily impact the professional careers and personal growth of American minorities.

Because this study is emerging research, the questions that it seeks to answer are “How does facing stereotypes and misrepresentation in their workplaces affect women of color: does it inhibit them from performing their tasks proficiently or does it cause them to work harder towards breaking those stereotypes? Does it affect their personalities? Do the recent racial-charged events increase the impact of stereotypes and misrepresentation on Asian women as compared to women of other minorities? We wanted to understand if our sample of women have experienced any stereotyping and misrepresentation in their workplace, and if they have, then how did it impact their work experience and mental health or emotions. The results would be used to discuss and compare against the findings from existing research. In addition to this, we also wanted to see if the recent racial issues against Asians increase the impact on Asian women, especially in their work environment.

While existing research attempts to answer these questions, they do not emphasize or specify the impact on Asian women or highlight the differences of impact on Asian minorities as compared to other minorities. For this study, we surveyed a sample of 24 women of color from various working sectors, and asked them questions regarding how the stereotyping and misrepresentation impacted them professionally and personally and if they have advice. The results have been compared to pre-existing research and analyzed to learn how the impact of stereotyping and misrepresentation has impacted Asian women, how it has evolved, and how to prevent it from happening in the future. The results for this research include the analysis that stereotyping, and

misrepresentation inhibit the performance of women of color and negatively impact their identity.

We often hear the words but are not sure about the meanings of stereotypes and misrepresentation. Stereotyping is when an “oversimplified” image or idea about a group of people is passed around and used as a manner to distinguish the people of that group (McLeod, 2017). These images and ideas are rarely accurate, but exist in abundance towards many groups of people, especially minorities. Stereotyping leads to misrepresentation as people’s races, beliefs, and values are assumed and never addressed. A lot of times, people with minority backgrounds are misrepresented as one of the pre-existing stereotypes or as an entirely different minority (Stereotyping, 2012). Women of color seem to be at the heart of intense stereotyping and misrepresentation, especially in the workplace. It is far more difficult for a woman of color to achieve high ranking executive position (Heilman & Paarks-Stamm, 2007). In a study done in 2018, it was reported that only 4% of C-Level positions are held by women of color (Washington & Roberts, 2019). As of recently, only 3% of women of color hold C-suite positions, while 9% are in positions of senior management, including vice presidents, directors, and senior managers. Twelve percent hold managerial positions and 18%, which is the majority, hold entry level positions (Warner, Ellmann, & Boesch, 2018). These statistics are even more alarming when you compare them to the graduation rate, which is much higher. The stereotyping and lack of proper representation have caused significant, mostly negative, impact on women of color. They have affected their professional experiences, their work ethic, and mental health.

A significant portion of active stereotyping occurs in the workplace (Washington & Roberts, 2019). As a person of color living in the United States and as a woman of color who is actively looking to join the workforce, I found it necessary to prepare myself, and others like me, with

more information on how our skin color may affect our professional experience, our work ethic, and, most importantly, our mental health. I wanted to be prepared to help myself and my peers cope with social environment around us and ensure that we have the most positive experiences possible. I have held a couple of jobs in which I, myself, have been subject to stereotypes and misrepresentation. While these did not impact my professional experience, they have continued to linger in my mind and affect how I perceive myself. Questions and comments like “If you eat curry every day, you smell different” or “Does being good at math run in your blood?” may sound benign, but they can bring out insecurities and seriously impact the well-being of people. Women of color are subject to intrusive and inaccurate questions and comments every day, which impact their confidence and abilities in the workplace (Wingfield, 2020). I found it necessary, especially at this point of time in society, to address these issues and help people realize and be weary of stereotypes that they base their thoughts and comments on, and possibly, change them.

It is vital to understand the possible impact that these experiences may have on young women of color and help them prevent the negative effects, while trying to impede stereotyping and misrepresentation all together. We cannot continue to let women of color be scrutinized because of their gender and skin color. Women of color for many years have been subject to personal, cultural, and external struggles, and they should not have to worry about being judged and seen as “less than” because of cultural or racial differences. They deserve a fair chance at leading and having their voices heard, so I believe it is important to create more discussion on this topic, which can help lead to the identification of the roots of these stereotypes and work towards breaking them. The existing research that has been conducted on this topic has not reached

mainstream media or news; therefore, it is necessary to have as many studies done on the subject as possible.

Literature Review

As described earlier, stereotyping is using a pre-existing image or idea about a group of people and using that concept to steer your belief or behavior about the person standing in front of you. Stereotypes can be formed for a various number of reasons. Many times, we are subject to receiving fake news or false information regarding a person or group of people, which creates an image in our minds (What are the causes of stereotypes?, n.d.). These fake news or information can come from anywhere, such as our family, friends, education system, the news, etc. The stereotype transmissions are further enhanced when we are repeatedly bombarded with similar information from the people around us and the broader society. A lot of times, we subscribe to people and media that aligns with our views and reflects our thinking (Hinton, 2017). Because of this, existing stereotypes are strengthened and acted upon as they are perceived as the truth. Children, especially, can quickly pick up on nuanced cues from their family and friends to use them to form their own stereotypes about a group of people (What are the causes of stereotypes?, n.d.). People of all ages create illusory correlations, which exaggerate the truth to fit the stereotype that has been developed in their minds (Foscaldi, 2014). Most stereotypes stem from the minimal exposure people receive towards a certain group of people. The minimal exposure can be a once-in-a-lifetime experience or daily passing exposure of four to five seconds. Being exposed to one person of a specific minority every day, even if it is for only ten seconds, may increase an individual's chances of believing all people of that minority belief, act, work, and exist in the same way (Eagly, 2015). This repeated exposure to one representation of the whole minority strengthens the stereotype in the individual's mind causing them to create ideas and

misrepresent the minorities elsewhere (Green, n.d.). Misrepresentation is rooted in stereotypes as they pave the way for inaccurate understandings of minorities, other group of people. Individuals believe the stereotypes as fact and use their limited knowledge as ways to represent the stereotyped group of people.

Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes have history of negatively impacting people, especially people of color. There have been countless studies and research conducted to understand “stereotype threat.” Essentially, stereotype threat is a phenomenon that describes an individual’s ability to confirm or conform after awareness of a negative stereotype about his or her group (Stroessner & Good). By conforming to an inaccurate stereotype, individuals lose the ability to move out of their comfort zone to create goals and achieve them. These individuals who are subject to stereotype threat threatens how they view themselves holistically (Bryant & Casad, 2016). People who are confident in their abilities and appearance begin to perceive other stereotypes, even ones they are not personally exposed to, as the truth about their identity. This threat also includes the decreased performance levels (Stroessner & Good). These individuals, despite being high performers previous to stereotype exposure, can immediately begin to perform at a much lower level. In a study conducted on Black and white college students and standardized tests, Black students performed worse than white students when their race was “emphasized.” In contrast, when there was no racial emphasis, the Black students were able to perform at par or better than the white ones (Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap, 2006). The results were further amplified when the tests were compared on a gender basis. When women were “emphasized”, they performed lower than their male counterparts, but when they were not, the women’s performance levels were equal. What is also interesting about stereotype threat is that it sheds light on the fact

that any individual can be negatively affected by stereotypes (Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap, 2006). Because everyone belongs to at least one social group, it is highly possible for them to be characterized by a stereotype that has a good chance of being inaccurate. For example, white men showcase decreased performance levels in sports or education, when stereotyped against African American or Asian “superiority”, respectively. While these stereotypes may not be true, the threat looms over the heads of the individuals enough to diminish their abilities to perform to their full potential (Stroessner & Good). That being said, the stereotypes hold a more lasting impact on women when compared to men. The impact increases even more on women of color.

Impact On Work Performance, Ethic, and Experience

Stereotypes play significant roles in impacting work ethic, usually in a negative manner. Self-defeating strategies, such as reduced practice and task discounting, are increased. Reduced practice time is reflective of the stress that individuals experience while working towards an activity or task (Stroessner & Good). An employee who has been exposed to stereotypes regarding their group can begin to work less towards achieving task completion. For example, if a Black woman of color is constantly exposed to stereotypes regarding her background and scrutinized based on them, there is a high chance of her working less to learn the best practices of her job position. In fact, she may even begin task discounting, which is questioning the importance or necessity of the task (Stroessner & Good). Questions such as “Why does this matter?” “Isn’t this a waste of time?” arise during bursts of task discounting practices. Task discounting also includes believing that the task was unfair or overly difficult, as opposed to, taking the time to learn or develop the skills required to complete the task (Fernandez-Reino, 2019).

Stereotypes also decrease the ability of employees' ability to be open to feedback (Bryant & Casad, 2016). Many employees are unable to utilize the feedback to their advantage when they are exposed to stereotypes. This is because they assume that their peers and managers are biased against them and begin to perceive even constructive or positive feedback with doubt and negativity. Motivation and engagement are heavily affected by stereotypes in the workplace (Bryant & Casad, 2016). Stereotyped individuals have a much higher tendency to disengage from their daily tasks, even those that they used to enjoy, and find it increasingly more difficult to motivate themselves. Employees are more likely to give up on tasks a lot faster than those who are not stereotyped (Leonard, 2018). Because they can begin to feel as though they do not provide the company with sufficient value, individuals who are exposed to stereotypes do not work towards promotions or engage in company activities that could potentially prove those stereotypes correct. Women of color, who are scrutinized harsher as compared to white women or all men, usually have had less motivation to achieve high ranking positions in the past because of the stereotype obstacles that block their path (Wingfield, 2020).

Impact On Mental Health

The American Psychological Association reported that it is more likely for all women, in general, to experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues compared to men. Women of color suffer immensely compared to white women and men from life experiences that can push them towards mental instability, depression, anxiety disorders, frequent high stress, anger issues, and constant self-doubt and low confidence (Stachelberg, 2017). When they are exposed to stereotypes that add stress to their adverse life experiences, the chances of these stereotypes leading women of color to higher risks of these mental health issues are amplified (Bryant & Casad, 2016). Because of the constant surveillance of their actions and ideas in the

workplace, women of color may exhibit more self-doubt and lower levels of confidence that impact how they view themselves holistically. It could seep into their negative self-image and self-worth, both of which can be detrimental the wellbeing of the individuals (Abdou & Fingerhut, 2014).

To tie back with the effects on workplace performance and ethic, employees who are exposed to stereotypes have a harder time accepting feedback because they feel threatened (Bryant & Casad, 2016). They are more likely to become more aggressive and exhibit a higher lack of self-control after they repeatedly face stereotypes and misrepresentation in the workplace (Roseberry, 2017). Their lack of motivation can also stem from their fear or anxiety-driven responses to the tasks. There is a higher chance of women of color feeling doubtful of their abilities because of the meddling and interference that occurs in the workplace due to their race and gender (Roseberry, 2017). The stereotypes and misrepresentation heavily impact mental health and the emotional processing abilities of women of color, especially in their place of work (Washington & Roberts, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For this research study, we gathered a sample of 24 working women of color. We decided upon specifically 24 individuals because they were my personal contacts who knew about the study that was being conducted and expressed interest in the topic and participating in the survey. It was important for the participants to be over the age of 18 to avoid any legal issues, but primarily, to ensure that the participants have had significant working experience for at least 1 year. The total age range consisted of 18-50 year old women. It was also important for the sample to only consist of women as their experiences differ greatly from those of men. Another essential requirement for

the sample was that the women came from minority backgrounds. Because this survey was focused on the experiences and impact on women of color, the racial aspect held a lot of significance. We further divided the sample into Asians versus other minorities to understand the impact on Asian women specifically, in order to understand if the recent social events impacted the responses.

Survey

The questions began with asking demographics and identification questions such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, work industry, and length of tenure. These questions helped us understand the background of the participants in order to analyze their responses. We asked participants based on their experiences with stereotypes and misrepresentation in the workplace. Based on their responses, they were prompted to answer questions on feelings of inclusion in the workplace and identification of any type of discrimination in the workplace. Then, the participants were asked about their workplace. These questions included reflections on the activities and steps that their companies or managers took in order to make them feel welcomed, supported, and included. We then asked in-depth questions on how the stereotypes and misrepresentation affected their performance in the workplace. They included questions on the decrease of engagement or motivation and inhibition of performance. We moved on from there to ask about how their emotions and mental health were affected during and after the stereotype and misrepresentation exposure. Lastly, we requested comments, tips, and tactics to help us better understand their experiences and provide future generations with advice during similar experiences.

Independent Variables

Asian versus all other minorities. The independent variable that we used was to analyze the difference in impact and effects of the stereotypes and misrepresentation on Asian women

compared to the other minorities in the survey group. This data was gathered using the demographic question on racial and minority background. Essentially, we used this variable to understand the impact on the Asian women and see if it was heightened due to recent social triggers. Asians are coded as 1 and all else as 0 in our data analysis.

Dependent Variables

Effect on the workplace experience, ethics, and performance. The effects in this variable refer to how drastically the exposure to stereotypes and misrepresentation impacted the women of color who participated in the survey. We used a ten item scale with questions regarding lack of motivation, a decrease in engagement, and poor quality of work among other factors in the variable. Items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale such that 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agreed. A person who “strongly agreed” with all the questions on this section of the survey has lower motivation, engagement, and quality of work than others. The ten-items demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Effect on mental health and emotions. The impact on mental health and emotions refers to the effects of stereotypes and misrepresentation on the women of color who participated in the study. We used an eleven item scale with questions regarding anxiety, low self-confidence, anger, and lack of inspiration in this variable. Items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale such that 1 = strongly disagreed and 5 = strongly agreed. A person who “strongly agreed” with all the questions in this section had higher levels of anxiety, anger, low self-confidence, and lack of inspiration than others. The ten-items demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.96$).

RESULTS

To explore the relationships between the ethnic subgroupings and the two variables, experience in the workplace and experience on views of self and mental health, I conducted linear regressions in SPSS Statistics. EXWP is experience in the workplace and EXSELF is experience on views of self and mental health.

My variables of interest were understanding how this impacts how people perform in the workplace and how their views of self and mental health were affected. We first examined experience in the workplace and found that stereotypes and misrepresentation affect one's experience in the workplace. Specifically in Model 1, we regressed our dependent variable, experience in the workplace, on the independent variable, Asians versus all else. The results of model 1 illustrate that racial background was negatively related to one's engagement and motivation in the workplace such that Asians were more negatively impacted than other races ($R^2 = 0.16, p < 0.87$). We found that Asians responded more strongly on having their experience in their workplaces impacted ($b = 9.19, SE = 5.1, t = 1.79, p < 0.87$).

We, then, examined experience on views of self and mental health and found that stereotypes and misrepresentation also affect's one's experience with themselves and mental health. In model 2, we regressed our dependent variable, experience on views of self and mental health, on the independent variable, Asians versus all else. The results of model 2 illustrate the existence of stereotypes and misrepresentation in views of self and mental health. Racial background was negatively related to one's views of self and mental health such that Asians were more negatively impacted than other races ($R^2 = 0.13, p < 0.07$). We found Asians responded more strongly on their self-image and mental health impacted ($b = 10.57, SE = 5.5, t = 1.92, p < 0.07$).

The participants also provided us with further advice for other women of color. This advice included a push to be more confident, ask for help, stand up for oneself, and assess gut feelings.

DISCUSSION

The results of our study indicate that there is in fact correlation between stereotyping and misrepresentation impacting women of color negatively in the workplace. We found that existence of stereotypes or misrepresentation correlates directly with an impact on lowered workplace engagement and motivation, as well as higher levels of anxiety, anger, low self-confidence, and self-doubt. Our results also showed us that Asian women react more strongly and possess greater impact than other minorities in the study.

This research further builds on the concepts that stereotypes pose a strong threat to women of color. The results reflect previous research that explains how much the stereotypes and misrepresentation impact women of color. The lack of motivation, the decrease in engagement, and the lack of quality in work are all emphasized through this study as well. These participants' work experiences could also be impacted by stereotype threat, in which they don't even realize that they may be conforming to existing stereotypes. They could be high achieving individuals who have subconsciously changed to fit the stereotypes that are based on them.

For this study, a primary portion of our literature analysis and study creation was centered around the impact on mental health and views of self. While the survey responses were relatively on par with the literature findings that explain that high stereotypes and misrepresentation lead to high levels of mental health issues, it was interesting to examine the advice given by the participants. The advice was significantly different in that it pushed for immense self-confidence and zero self-doubt. Almost every woman advised the future generations to stand up for themselves and work harder to achieve what they know they are capable of. They explicitly mentioned to voice out their concerns and demand what they deserve.

It is scary to understand that these stereotypes and misrepresentation factors inhibit women of color from achieving long term success and trying to work for leadership positions. Mental health is already a difficult subject in today's society and so many people are struggling to find ways to get the help that they desperately need. A person's workplace would be welcoming and open to diversity. The stereotypes are formed on limited information or fake news, but have the ability to significantly impact a person's life. Individuals need to understand that the correlations that are created in their minds regarding groups of people may not be true. It would be the most ideal way of dispelling these stereotypes that negatively impact all minorities.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our results provided us with some insight into the answers for our questions, this study has a number of limitations. Firstly, our sample size is not large enough to provide us with a determinant analysis. Our study consisted of 24 women of color, 6 responses of which were not able to be used. With a total of 19 responses that we could use, our analysis is incredibly limited and prevented us from drawing deeper and larger conclusions. Our sample is not an accurate representation of the thousands of women who are a part of the workforce and deal with stereotypes and misrepresentation on a daily basis. Additionally, the participants were personal contacts, which further influences the data in ways that is not an accurate model of the total population of women of color.

Our participants were also limited by race and gender. We only surveyed women of color for our study, so we could not conduct comparative analysis, which would have really helped us understand the dynamics and the differences between women of color and white women, as well as women of color and all men. By understanding their experiences in the workplace, we can firstly understand if stereotypes and misrepresentation severely impact only women of color or

all people in general. We can also examine the differences in impact between the different segments of people, which would give us a more holistic understanding on the subject.

Additionally, our data is only marginally significant, which impacts our study quite heavily. It indicated initial support, but there is no power in the sample to draw any strong conclusions. We did not use other controls for other individual statistics, which would have helped us analyze the survey data better and gain a better understanding of the responses.

Future studies can include a larger sample for more accurate analyses on the effects on women of color in the workplace. There should also be studies conducted on solely women of color and studies conducted on women of color in comparison to white women or men. This way, we can receive more precise analyses on the impact faced by women of color and comparative analysis to understand the significance of the impact. Our participants were primarily Asian, which skewed the data in one way. It would be better, in the future, to have an even distribution of races to gather more unbiased data. It would also be more helpful wait until the pandemic is over, or at least office is open again, to understand the increased impact on Asian women due to the Asian violence. Because most people are still working from home, it is difficult to attain this data accurately.

Practical Implications

The majority of the advice that the participants revolved around understanding self-worth and promoting self-confidence. Because both of these concepts are so severe in minority groups, it was very interesting to see how the advice shifted over time from pushing through and trying to ignore the stereotypes to standing up for yourself and voicing out any uncomfortableness. The

tips and tactics could be condensed into our primary words of advice that the participants of this study provided for future generations:

1. Speak out. Stand up for yourself and seek help (from HR) if needed.
2. Do the best you can and ask for what you believe you deserve.
3. Follow your instincts. If you feel that something is wrong, then something is definitely wrong.
4. Do not let someone else decide your worth.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this study was to better understand the impact of stereotyping and misrepresentation on women of color. As an addition, we wanted to learn the changes of impact on Asian women with the increase in violence against Asian minorities due to the recent pandemic shifts. We analyzed existing research done on this topic in order to understand if our questions have been answered. We attempted to answer our questions by surveying participants on their experiences in their workplaces during their professional journeys. We were able to find similarities between the literature review and our participants' responses on impact on work ethic and workplace experience. And while we also found similarities between the literature review and our participant's responses on impact on mental health, we found some other impact: an increase in motivation, energy, and perseverance of women of color to break the stereotypes. Our results helped us increased the discussion surrounding this topic and hope that future studies can help shed more light on this content. We hope that over time, stereotypes and misrepresentation not only stop impacting women of color so significantly but stop existing altogether.

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APPENDIX

	Mean	Standard Deviation	totalEXSELF	totalEXWP
totalEXSELF	28.9	12.1		
totalEXWP	23.6	11.6	.70**	
AsianVSAIElse	0.74	0.45	0.4	0.36