"Why Are You Talking to Me Like I'm Stupid?": The Micro-Aggressions Committed Within the Social Welfare System Against Lone Mothers

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with 92 welfare-reliant lone mothers living across Canada, this article explores the "micro-aggressions" experienced by these women in their interactions with the social welfare system. Micro-aggressions refer to the verbal and nonverbal, relational exchanges that send denigrating messages to persons of marginalized and discriminated against social groups. From the analysis, we conclude that class and gender become sites, intersecting and interlocking, where micro-aggressions as a form of interpersonal violence and discrimination occur against women/lone mothers living in poverty that act to diminish the agency and sense of public worthiness of these women, in turn limiting their access to contesting these constructions.

Introducing the Issue

This article emerges from work conducted as part of Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion, a large community-university, research alliance involving five universities and various community organizations across three cities in Canada, namely, Vancouver, Toronto, and St. John's. The aim of the Lone Mothers project was to examine the impact welfare reforms had on lone mother-headed households that were receiving social assistance. Emerging from the analysis of a series of qualitative interviews conducted over a 4-year period with 92 ($n = 92$) lone mothers was a long list of unsettling ways the women/mothers were degraded or dismissed in their interactions with

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professionals working in various social service systems. This article critically examines the nature of the encounters the women/mothers had with the social welfare system.

A useful concept for understanding these negative exchanges is "micro-aggressions." A term used to explain the subtle forms of discrimination associated with racism, sexism, and heterosexism, micro-aggressions refer to the everyday, verbal and nonverbal, interpersonal exchanges that send denigrating messages to persons who are members of groups that face marginalization and discrimination whereby their personhood, experiences, and lives are devalued and dismissed (Sue et al., 2007). Described as more than harmless or innocuous exchanges, micro-aggressions are considered to be a form of interpersonal abuse and violence that reinforce, intentionally or unintentionally, the structural disadvantage and discrimination of marginalized persons within society (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). The effects of these assaults on the health and well-being of marginalized people and groups, in particular of racialized people, are well documented (Nadal et al., 2011; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011). Interestingly, although race, gender, and sexual orientation are considered, there is little written about the subtle forms of prejudice associated with poverty or socioeconomic status. Although welfare systems as social institutions are understood to contribute to the marginalization of women and "poor women" within society (Bedard, 1991; Lessa, 2004; Rice, 2001), Smith and Redington (2010) challenge the lack of research about micro-aggressions. Instead, they call for research that examines "class-based" exchanges as forms of "classism" and classist prejudices, as well as research examining "double jeopardies" in the ways class-based prejudices intersect with gender and/or race. The intention of this article is to explore the relevance of class-based "micro-aggressions" in the lives of lone mothers living in poverty. This particular intersection—class and gender—is especially salient given the high prevalence of women's poverty in both Canada and the United States (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2005; Kaufman, 2012).

Using interview data from Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion,[1] we present findings about the nature of the encounters welfare-reliant lone mothers have with the social welfare system. Based on the analysis of these data, we propose that class/poverty and gender/lone mothering are intersecting and interlocking sites where micro-aggressions as forms of interpersonal violence occur as class and gender-based prejudices and discriminations. Organized in three parts, we first review the literature on the concept of micro-aggressions. Second, we present an analysis of the interview data from Lone Mothers project in which we consider the applications of this concept to the experiences of welfare-reliant lone mothers in their everyday exchanges with the welfare system. Third, we conclude with a discussion about the implications of micro-aggressions on lone mothers receiving social assistance and more broadly consider the impacts of such intersecting oppressions, such as the gender and class issues discussed here on social work practice and education.

Literature Review: Micro-Aggressions as Interpersonal Forms of Discrimination

As a concept originally developed within critical race theory to describe subtle forms of racism, "micro-aggressions" refer to the everyday, verbal and nonverbal, exchanges that send denigrating, hostile, or negative messages to racialized persons as members of groups who experience marginalization and discrimination within a racist society (Sue et al., 2007). Micro-aggressions are classified as three types, namely, micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations (Ross-Sherriff, 2012; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). Micro-assaults are usually blatant and intentional discriminatory exchanges, such as the use of racial slurs or the telling of racial jokes. Micro-insults and micro-invalidations are the verbal or nonverbal exchanges that are more subtle and ambiguous, often dismissed as harmless or unintentional by well-meaning people (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). Micro-insults are demeaning exchanges, such as snubs or stares of

suspicion, while micro-invalidations are interactions that discredit or dismiss the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and realities of the person or group, such as a comment that racism no longer exists and a person claiming to experience it is simply over sensitive.

Generally, micro-aggressions are considered unintentional on the part of the persons or groups committing the aggressions. And although "unintentional" as deliberate slurs or slights, their very frequency of occurrence and their most often marginal and minoritized targets are supported by hegemonic structures valuing whiteness, maleness, and so on. As a result of their subtle nature, micro-aggressions are not easy to detect as a single exchange, but rather require the accumulation of small exchanges that create an overall hostile and uncomfortable environment for the persons targeted by the assaults (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). Persons who commit micro-aggressions do not necessarily perceive their interactions as discriminatory and instead believe them to be innocent and harmless. Such a position fails to acknowledge and understand the potential impacts these interactions have on the persons receiving the assaults and their rootedness in structures of oppression. It is of critical importance to note that although all persons can say they have experienced denigrating messages, micro-aggressions point particularly to the acute differences in social power between those delivering and receiving such messages given the already marginal social status conferred on the latter group by virtue of racialization, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation, and so on. Hence, historically and contemporarily, hegemonic forms of economic, political, and social power and privilege define and impose their reality on others with lesser power (Sue, Capodiluo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008).

Moving beyond race and racism, within feminist theory the concepts have also been applied to study the denigrating exchanges experienced by women as features of sexism (McCabe, 2009; Owen, Tao, & Rodolfa, 2010) and by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) persons as features of heterosexism (Balsam et al., 2011; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). In addition, the concept is used to consider exchanges that occur at the intersections between different forms of social oppressions, such as the intersection between race and sexual orientation (Balsam et al., 2011), race and gender (Garcia, 2006; McCabe, 2009), and class and gender (Smith & Redington, 2010). The nature and impact of micro-aggressions as subtle but powerful forms of discrimination are well documented and include descriptions of the interpersonal aggressions committed by professionals, such as educators and mental health professionals. In addition to their ability to denigrate and devalue at an individual level, they are also powerful in reproducing hegemonic social discourse.

Micro-Aggressions Committed by Professionals

A review of the literature reveals numerous studies that report on the racist, sexist, and heterosexist micro-aggressions committed by educators and mental health professionals. For instance, in the area of education, Cartwright, Washington, and McConnell (2009) describe the experiences of racialized persons in academe and note invisibility, marginalization, or hyper visibility. Specific micro-aggressions include being asked to represent committees as persons of color (hyper visibility), or their achievements not being recognized or opinions not counting (invisibility). Other racial micro-aggressions include the denial that racism has occurred or assertions that a person's academic success is a credit to their race (Rollock, 2012; Sue, 2010). At the intersections of race and gender, similar concerns are reiterated adding "tokenism," whereby the presence of racialized men and women (academics and students) is manipulated for institutional interests, such as creating the image of gender and racial diversity (Garcia, 2005; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

With respect to social work practice, examples of the micro-aggressions that are committed by professionals include "color blindness" by claiming that race does not have an influence in the ways counsellors relate to their clients; failing or avoiding to consider the role race, gender, and/or sexual

orientation may play in the issue for which the person is seeking help; reinforcing stereotypical gender roles; perpetuating heteronormative expectations for sexuality; or making recommendations that are inappropriate or deny the realities of marginalized persons. Specifically, while exploring the experiences of women in psychotherapy, Owen, Tao, and Rodolfa (2010) assert micro-aggressions committed against women include reinforcing stereotypical notions about women's dependence on others suggesting women would be happier in a relationship. In other instances, Nadal et al. (2011) and Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011) describe how LGBTQ identifying adults and youth experience pathologization of their sexuality through the use of heteronormative language and expectations or the avoidance of issues related to their sexual orientation. In the case of socioeconomic status, Smith and Redington (2010) draw attention to class-based biases whereby middle class therapists suggest unrealistic goals and options in their work with clients living in poverty—recommendations that are not permitted by their clients' financial situations.

Generally, the exposure to micro-aggressions committed by professionals, such as social workers and educators, is understood to have detrimental consequences for the physical health and emotional well-being of racialized and LGBTQ identifying persons, as well as causing significant barriers and inequities in education, employment success, and health care (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).[2] Examples of the consequences range from negative stereotyping; increased surveillance and policing; social exclusion; elevated stress levels and fatigue; higher incidences of emotional distress, such as low self-esteem and depression; to the reduced effectiveness of counselling because of negative effects on the therapeutic alliance and process (Balsam et al., 2011; Constantine, 2007; McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2011; Owen et al., 2010; Romero, 2006; Smith et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011).

The negative beliefs held about poor and working class women, and mothers in particular, include being perceived as immoral, irresponsible, and poor parents (Caragata, 2009a). These stereotypes reinforce class-based beliefs that, in turn, fortify the devaluing of poor and working class people within society (Smith & Redington, 2010). Should such women also happen to be racialized a further devaluing occurs invoking a wide variety of negative discursive constructions by race and confirming a triple indemnity of gender, race, and class. We contest that these discursive constructions are thus likely to (and in fact do) play out in interactions with professionals who tend to represent the dominant social order and are most likely to interact with clients who represent marginalized groups. As many such constructions are invisible and unacknowledged their representation in interactions is both too common and unsurprising.

Method

The data utilized in this article derive from *Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion,* a national longitudinal study of the implications of welfare policy change on welfare-reliant lone mothers. The project brought together academic researchers from five universities across Canada partnered with nonprofit community organizations that shared an interest in the well-being of lone mothers and their children, including both advocacy and service delivery groups. Beginning with a series of pilots in 2003 and 2004, the full study occurred during the period of 2006–2011. The following questions framed the study: (1) What are the impacts of work-first welfare policy and programs on lone mothers? (2) What are the job-getting/job retention experiences of lone mothers on welfare? (3) How do lone mothers (and their children) experience the multiple dimensions (e.g., sociopolitical, economic, subjective, and spatial) of social exclusion? (4) How are these experiences mediated by social locations such as race, class, and gender? (5) How do lone mothers' experiences, including their transitions between the labor market and welfare, affect their material, physical and mental well-being, social relations, decisions, and goals? How do lone mothers contest and/or accommodate exclusionary experiences? (6) How can we better engage lone mother-led families in political, social, and

economic life (changes to policies, programs, and services)? The outcomes reported here address the questions about the experiences the women had of the social welfare system; the ways social exclusion is perpetuated (at the micro-level of interpersonal relationships with welfare workers); and the ways welfare-reliant lone mothers contest and/or accommodate those experiences.

In 2006, a longitudinal panel of approximately 105 lone mothers in Toronto, St John's, and Vancouver, Canada was established. All of the women were receiving social assistance at the time of their recruitment, and all had at least one child living with them. The longitudinal design was imperative as the project sought to examine how the nature of severe benefits cuts, tightened eligibility, and a work requirement impacted these women and their families over time. Interviews took place over 12–15 month intervals and four rounds of interviews were completed.

The project was grounded in feminist participatory action research (PAR), which starts from the premise that research should not originate exclusively from the perspective of the researcher, but rather in collaboration with the very people it seeks to study. Berg (2007) has defined PAR as "a form of *collective,* self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social relationships with one another in order to improve some condition or situation with which they are involved" (p. 223). Principles of a feminist methodology acknowledge confirm women as knowers examine women's gendered and racialized experiences, ensure mutuality in the research process, and attend to women's ways of knowing and resisting oppression (Code, 1991; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Patton, 2002; Ristock & Pennell, 1996). The *Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion* project included lone mothers in all stages of the research and incorporated social change goals and social action endeavors in a wide variety of realms. Lone mother research assistants helped in the development of interview guides, conducted interviews, and participated in data analysis activities and in a wide range of knowledge dissemination initiatives. They also served as an ongoing reference group to help measure if the project was meeting its goals effectively.

The majority of the interviews were conducted by the lone mother research assistants augmented by interviews conducted by female academics, doctoral students, and project staff. Interviewers were carefully matched with lone mother participants according to a number of factors including demographics such as age, number of children and country of birth, and geographical location that might facilitate data collection and ease of access. Most often the same interviewer conducted the entire sequence of interviews in an effort to build trust and rapport. The interviews were recorded and ranged from 45 min to 2.5 hr in length. In total, 400 qualitative interviews were conducted across the three research sites, St. John's, Toronto, and Vancouver. The researchers contacted the participants by phone in between interviews to keep in touch and participants were invited to contact their interviewer, the research director or the principal investigator if they had information they wished to share in between interviews. This contact between interviews kept rates of attrition very low.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Doctoral student researchers stripped the transcribed interviews of their identifying information (i.e., names of children, schools, and work places). The stripped interviews were uploaded into NVivo; students involved with the project coded the interviews using a descriptive codebook. The descriptive coding was established through a process of inter-researcher reliability with six individual researchers each developing their own coding frame and then co-constructing a common frame. It is important to emphasize that this initial coding frame was descriptive only, subsequent coding by the research team using analytic codes has continued according to researcher interest. At the conclusion of each round of interviews, data were summarized and shared with the lone mother research assistants as a check on our categories and resulting analysis.

The research team in conjunction with the lone mother interviewers developed interview questions. As is appropriate to qualitative research, the focus of each of the four interviews developed iteratively based on areas of social exclusion that correlated with empirical work on lone mother experiences. Employment, income, health, housing, and social networks were determined as areas

of importance thus a commitment was made to begin with these areas and engage in an iterative process that would enable the researchers to understand a wide dimension of lone mothers experiences across most life realms. Although some questions were identified from the outset, each subsequent round of questioning was finalized only after the previous round had been preliminarily coded. Thus, subsequent rounds of interviews very specifically built on previously acquired data and followed up on issues and information provided in previous rounds.

Study participants were recruited by identifying 30–40 lone mothers in each site that represented geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Recruitment processes included both social assistance offices and community organizations with the former limited to identifying a maximum of 20% of the sample because of concerns about worker bias in identifying "good" candidates and because of concerns about women feeling pressured to participate. Caseworkers and staff in community organizations made initial contact and asked the lone mothers for permission to allow the research team to contact them. Once permission was granted, the research team contacted the lone mothers to ensure that they were open to participating in the project and that they did not feel pressure from their workers. Lone mothers wishing to participate were then asked to contact research offices where demographic information was collected. In each site, lone mothers who were recruited for the study were then asked whether they might wish to also act as a Research Assistant to the project and those interested/suitable were provided intensive paid training. Thus, lone mother research assistants were also research participants, with their interviews conducted by academic team members.

This article is based on the analysis of qualitative data collected at the third and fourth round of the semi-structured interviews in all three sites. Across the three sites, there were 92 participants remaining in the project of the original 105 participants. They ranged in age from 18 years to 58 years old. Seventy were born within Canada and 22 were born outside of Canada (immigrant women from Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, China/Hong Kong, Vietnam, England, Eastern Europe, and/ or the Middle East). Of the 70 Canadian-born, 12 were first nations/aboriginal women. As lone mothers, the women were parenting a total of 191 children, with an average of two children each. The length of time the women received social assistance ranged from 2 months to more than 30 years.

Of the data from the 92 women included here, comments that suggested the experiencing of micro-aggressions were explicit in more than 25 interviews and can be clearly inferred in an additional 23 interviews. Micro-aggressions were experienced most directly in interactions the lone mothers had with their caseworkers but also at intake with those workers. Data related to micro-aggressions surfaced most often in sections of the interviews when women were asked to comment on their experiences with the formal social service system. Thus, although asking about micro-aggressions was not a part of the interview guide, the data do point clearly to women experiencing these subtle and not so subtle forms of gendered, class-based, and racialized discrimination.

Finding and Discussion

Based on the descriptions provided by the women/mothers involved in this study, a powerful narrative is told about the denigrating messages, and interpersonal assaults they experience in their encounters with the welfare system. There were two main ways micro-aggressions were committed against welfare-reliant lone mothers: (1) through the welfare worker's dismissive tone of voice, attitude, and degrading comments and (2) through the processing of claims-making whereby lone mothers were made to feel like they were a problematic "case" rather than a person in legitimate need. Together these subtle interpersonal exchanges sent denigrating messages that dismissed the realities of lone mothers living in poverty and instead reinforced a problematic discourse that suggests being poor and being a lone mother living in poverty are identities that are devalued and at times,

demonized. When presenting the findings, pseudonyms are used and identifying information is altered to protect the confidentiality of the women.

Dismissive Tone of Voice, Attitude, and Degrading Comments

Consistent with the literature about the ways micro-aggressions are committed against individuals from marginalized social groups (racialization, sexual orientation, and gender), welfare-reliant lone mothers across Canada described that a welfare workers' tone of voice, attitude, and comments were a significant source of denigration.

Celina:	I probably got more education than who I'm speaking to, and you know, you've got to tell them that, you've got to say that, you know, "Why are you talking to me like I'm stupid?" . . . And it really makes you feel really bad.
Sharron:	The main thing would definitely be the way I'm treated by the workers . . . they do make you feel like . . . "crap." The certain tone in their voice, the way they're speaking to you.
Sally:	They [welfare workers] degrade you, the way they talk to you. They talk down . . . Like that last worker I had, she was horrible . . . They act like you're blowing your money.
Ann:	This woman [welfare worker] that I was dealing with, I basically looked at her and said, "I have no job, and I have no money, and there's an alcoholic in my house and I don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next." And I said, "I'm worried about me, and I'm worried about my children." And she just said, "Well, what do you want me to do? What can I do for you? You're just 'gonna' have to wait your turn like everybody else . . . "she spoke to me like—she didn't speak to me, she spoke at me, which is different . . . and I just thought to myself, ok I feel like someone's looking down at me now, not looking across, but looking down at you . . . and—I felt like a piece of crap, is what I felt like. I felt bad enough going in, and then she just pushed my nose in it.
Maggie:	I wanted to apply for assistance until I could apply to get back to work . . . He [welfare worker] was sitting there and he was popping peanuts into his mouth with his foot up on the edge of the desk and he says, "what do you want me to do for you?" . . . he was quite disrespectful . . . and I said exactly what I just explained to you . . . He said, "Okay, you're this age, you're out of work, and you need help with social assistance. Do you have any other income? Why don't you do it this way? Why don't you go to a couple of places and apply for jobs. Go to a few places and get on the computer and look for jobs and then come back to me." Then I went to him, "Didn't I just tell you that I don't have the income and I don't have the money to run around like that and do that. I don't have it." And he said, "Didn't I just tell you what to do. I'm the social worker here." I said, "I understand you are a social worker, but I'm sorry, but I also understand that you are an idiot." I swear it's the truth. He looked at me and said, "Pardon me." I said, "No. There is no pardon me. You are treating me like I'm an outcast. I'm human. I belong to this planet just as much as you do and I'm not afraid to speak to you like that because you are no better than me."

Each of the above-mentioned descriptions of the subtle and not-so-subtle interactions with their workers demonstrates the feelings lone mothers had of being disrespected. In some, such as Maggie's description, the disrespectful interaction clearly seems more purposeful but in all of them, the lone mothers experienced degradation, a reinforcement as Ann says, of her already present feelings of low status and shame. The power of micro-aggressions rests in their ambiguous nature in that persons committing the aggressions may not see themselves as acting in discriminatory ways or intentionally sending denigrating messages. As a practice consideration, drawing attention to the issue of micro-aggressions can be complicated as most social work professionals would see themselves as decent and moral human beings and thus, raising their awareness about the ways they commit class

and gender-based discriminations can threaten their self-image and professional identities (Sue, 2010).

Dehumanized by Being Treated Like a "Case"

Women also felt dehumanized by the ways their claims and needs were responded to or processed often in a seemingly unnecessarily bureaucratic fashion. As a function of such systems, the recipients felt like a problem or an unwelcome demand on the worker. In many instances, lone mothers described feeling as though they were a ''number'' rather than a person.

    Jennifer: I'm very appreciative that I am able to stay home with my children and raise them, but I'm not appreciative of the way I was treated. I am not holding a grudge, but you get treated like a non-person—as a number.

    Brittany: I don't think they treat myself like or anyone as a person. They treat you really just as like a number, you know. Like when you go, they don't know who they're dealing with and they treat everybody the same. Like because you're on assistance they treat you lower than what they are.

In spite of their feelings of being a problem or nuisance, many participants were still at pains to explain these interactions as being functions of the restructuring of welfare programs that resulted in larger caseloads for welfare personnel. Such feelings and concern for the worker, trying to explain away or justify their being poorly treated, are perhaps evidence of the impact of these and previous interactions. The lone mothers' self-worth has been so denigrated that they excuse the behavior of the abuser.

    Jamie Lee: I can understand being hardened to these people [clients], working on the counters, being hardened dealing with hard cases and soft cases and cases constantly, but we're not all numbers and to be treated like that and spoken down to, there's been several times I've been looked at like I'm something off someone's shoe.

    Tracy: [Recalling the three occasions she had to apply for assistance] ... each time it gets more intimidating and more intimidating and way more red tape ... Very intimidating. I know they don't have 'lots of money and I know their job changes every day ... It is within the system and their caseload is huge and no wonder they get ''bitchy.'' It is what they have to do ... [But what I experience is] intimidation, ''bitchiness,'' you are beneath me, pretty much. You are beneath me is what it is.

Closely related to feeling dehumanized, welfare-reliant lone mothers also described feeling as though they were a hassle to the system and/or to their caseworkers.

    Jade: Some workers, you know, you think that you were asking for money from their own pockets. You know, things that you are entitled to, and they just won't give it to you. You know, like they want to make things hard for you, you know.

    Hana: It is hard to deal with this new worker. The way she leaves me messages, you know. I fax it to her, my paper and I say to her that please let me know when she receives this fax. She gave back to me this message, ''Don't expect me to call you every time when I receive your fax or something. If I don't get back to you it means that I received the paper.'' How do I know if she received it or not? ... That is the message that she left on my voicemail ... She says that she is too busy. She doesn't have time to call me back.

Lois: If you were unfortunate enough to have one [welfare worker] who wasn't really friendly, which I had—I had a really "bitchy" one—you know, you don't even want to call her, because it seems like you're inconveniencing her.

In such interactions, while workers are indeed stretched and may not mean to communicate a lack of valuing their clients, these experiences are cumulative. The stress associated with the accumulation over time of these ambiguous and hostile discriminatory encounters can be detrimental to a person's emotional and/or mental well-being (Huynh, 2012). The implications for social work practice, and in particular, for social workers working within social welfare systems are serious given that we are identified to be a source of that stress.

The Intersections of Class and Gender-Based Micro-Aggressions

Consistently throughout the interviews, welfare-reliant lone mothers described encounters in which they felt as though they were negatively judged as unworthy and consequently, treated with suspicion of wrongdoing because of their claims and reliance on financial aid. Such judgments of course have been both supported and almost encouraged by a dominant discourse that presumes a high prevalence of welfare fraud combined with a belief that single mothers are among its major perpetrators. For example, in Ontario during the period of welfare reform led by a neoliberal government, welfare snitch lines were heavily advertised and among "reforms" were major initiatives intended to catch fraudulent users (Bezanson, 2006). In these data, women reflect suffering these judgments, leaving them feeling disrespected, humiliated, and without dignity as women, in their roles as mothers and as "lone" mothers.

Sonja: When you go to these offices they treat you like, kind of without dignity, like they treat you like you're lazy or you're, you know, you like staying on welfare, going to the food bank each week.

Clare: If I want to see her [welfare worker] I have to go in. She does not return my phone calls ... So I am not treated like a regular person ... I'm not worthy of being treated like a regular person who deserves to have a phone call. Excuse me, you know, that's very, in a way, it's disrespectful.

Giselle: The welfare office, you know, they always don't treat you well, the way they talk it's, it's like they think like you are lazy or something, like not having like a job ... it make you feel down.

Rose: I don't call for crisis grants—very rarely—and I don't, you know, I don't ask them for anything. I don't understand why they get so angry. It's, you know, I'm not asking you because I don't need it ... I ask for stuff that I need, and then that's it. But when it comes to certain things they are rude and, some of them that are working there are really rude, like it's coming out of their pocket or something.

The suspicion and surveillance the women encountered clearly, for Sam, Jennifer, and Pauline, added to already present feelings of not being trusted and being in a situation wherein they had no power to resist—either the demands themselves or the pernicious ways in which they were being constructed.

Sam: I don't want to go back on it, because it's so hard to go back on it, because people look at you differently if you're on welfare ... and they're always on your business, always, all the time.

Jennifer: The worker I had before her I did not like her at all. She was not friendly, she was very dis-
             tant . . . It was very weird. I was in the hospital, three days in the ICU [intensive care unit]
             . . . and she had to come and I had to sign some papers . . . She came into my room. I was
             very delirious and still throwing up . . . she was surprised and I was very upset. You could
             see the look of surprise and amazement when she came to my room and saw me. She said,
             "Oh, you are really here" . . . so that was very disturbing to me.

Pauline: The worker that I have now, right now, she just called me last week and she started really drilling
             me and she was asking me about my banking information. I said, "I gave all that to the previous
             worker" and she started with the threats, she said, "you're not getting your special diet any-
             more. You're not getting your volunteer allowance. You volunteer too long. You need to get
             back into the workforce." . . . I tried to explain to her, actually, I'd really like to go back to
             school if I'm eligible for that and I'd be working if I wasn't suffering from extreme fatigue
             . . . she said, "well, I'm not giving you your money" . . . I personally and professionally can't
             understand why they would have to treat you in such a derogatory, demeaning way when it's not
             necessary. All they 'gotta' do is ask a question, I'll answer it. They have all the power to verify
             all the information but to treat you like that when you're already down.

Madison: Unless you're in dire strait and it's all about filling document, proving information—mak-
             ing sure you really need it. Then they'll consider it; then they'll process it; and then maybe
             you'll be accepted for whatever amount . . . the government case workers they don't really
             talk to you . . . It's like having a job just being on social assistance, you know what I mean?
             It really is like having a job, 'cause like I said all the running around you do, all the docu-
             ments you have to file, all these things that you have to organize and stuff like that. It's like
             having a 'friggin' job.

Lillian: I just keep distance with that, because I am scared of them [welfare system/worker]. I heard
             of them, very, they control you . . . I just think they—I don't know how to say, I just think—
             maybe I'm second [class] citizen.

Taken as interpersonal exchanges, these negative encounters and the lack of power to resist can
be dismissed and attributed to the practices and abuses of individual caseworkers. Instead, both Pau-
line and Madison (and earlier Jamie Lee and Tracy) suggest there is a connection between the indi-
vidual practices of their caseworkers and the institutional demands of their work as the context for
those practices. In other words, a caseworker's attitudes and actions do not necessarily occur as sin-
gle stand-alone occurrences and instead, are organized by the mandates, policies, procedures, and
practices of the social welfare system. The surveillance described in these narratives has been widely
reported as a feature of class and gender-based prejudice and discrimination (Worth, 2003), espe-
cially perpetuated by neoliberal ideologies and discourses that reinforce notions that persons—
women/lone mothers—living in poverty or relying of government aid are lazy, fraudulent, and a
burden to society (Caragata, 2009a; Grabham & Smith, 2010; Power, 2005; Wacquant, 2001).

Inherently bound to class-based micro-aggressions were exchanges in which the women experi-
enced their roles as mothers, their mothering, and their status as "lone" mothers denigrated and the
significance of their caring labor and mother-work devalued (Grabham & Smith, 2010; Smith &
Redington, 2010) and subjected to moral surveillance (Caragata, 2009b). From a feminist perspec-
tive, considering these women solely as wage earners simply needing employment to move out of
poverty (Pulkingham, Fuller, & Kershaw, 2010) ignores their social realities as lone mothers, mak-
ing the circumstances and social significance of their mother-work simultaneously both invisible
and morally incriminating.

Belle: It is absolutely the most horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, system set up in this world . . .
             Because there is absolutely no incentive really to make you feel good about yourself, make

you feel good as a parent, make you feel good as a person, there's just none of that. Like when I walk in there [the social welfare office] … I almost feel like I have leprosy, like everybody's staring at me because I am an awful person, like I don't know how to be a functional citizen.

Diana: What I have found is being, choosing to be a stay-at-home mom I'm not treated with respect. I'm treated as if I'm stupid. That I'm here because, they think that I'm here because I don't know anything else other than—who would choose to stay poor, you know? Who would choose to be a stay-at-home mom if they were single, you know and on Welfare? Who would choose that? And that is the basis of why I'm being treated as being … I'm always being treated as if I was stupid … like no one else actually cared to know that I was educated … It's very harmful. It hurts.

Amy: I just find that you just feel like a bucket of crap when you go into welfare, and they don't care … I think I would have got treated better if I would have went in there looking like a drug addict or, you know, with ripped clothes and dirty hair, do you know what I mean? … after she [daughter] was born, they open the file. Somebody calls me "We're holding your cheque until you come down and have this meeting with [name of department that collects child support]. I went down and I said "Listen, I don't want to, he's too abusive. I don't want you to go near him." Because it's not them that has the stress, it's us, the parents that have to deal, you know, with the men mad at us because we look like gold diggers.

Sally: I had asked for a crisis grant and they denied me and I went into the office … my worker actually came out without a reason and I started talking to her, and I said, come on, you know, my daughter's wearing her last diaper. [The worker said] well, no, I'm sorry, you haven't been managing your money. I said okay fine, tell me where I can go and get free diapers and I'll go there … she said no. So I went to the supervisor and the supervisor said no … and I lost my temper. I didn't swear with them, but I started yelling … Her diaper was full. I didn't know what I was going to do, you know. Like, it was horrible. It was just horrible. You know, it's just so humiliating … And they're looking at you like you're crazy like when you're like waiting down in the waiting room. Like you're crazy. It's like, listen, I'm not crazy. I'm out of diapers.

In some instances, in what might be hard to construct as only a micro-assault, the women described being threatened with losing the care and custody of their children.

Pauline: I was evicted … I lost all my children's stuff. I lost everything. The social worker at that time was just the worst person I ever met in my life. She said, "You're homeless and you're irresponsible and I'm calling [name of child protection agency]." I thought she was 'gonna help me to move, like to get me money to put my stuff into storage … I asked her on the phone, is there any way I can get help … So, she said, "Yeah, sure, come on down, come on down," so I go down there and instead she tells me that I'm irresponsible, that I'm homeless and she's calling [child protective services] … It's just that difference in how they treat you. It's just like they can kill whatever self-esteem you've got … Oh, my god, I never felt so helpless in my life. They can tear you down.

By individualizing and personalizing women's poverty such that it is their failure to get a job, secure child support from fathers, or better manage insufficient incomes, lone mothers are denigrated, pathologized, and rendered invisible (Grabham & Smith; 2010; Power, 2005; Pulkingham et al., 2010), while the hegemonic patriarchal structures that devalue women, mothering, and caring labor are maintained.

Resistance to the Micro-Aggressions

Over and over again, across Canada, welfare-reliant lone mothers described negotiating and managing the negative and denigrating experiences by avoiding contact and encounters with the social welfare system, and its personnel, only connecting with their workers if they were forced to by unforeseen financial crises, above and beyond the circumstances that led to their need for aid in the first place.

Julie:	I don't really have any interaction with them (social assistance workers), as little as possible . . . the least interaction with them the best, and I know that that's not the way it should be. It should probably be that we feel comfortable to talk to them and interact, but I don't because— you know, I'm terrified they'll cut me off.
Marie:	I don't really have a relationship with them [welfare] . . . Like right now I don't even see my worker. I don't see her at all down at the [welfare office], not at all . . . You know, the least contact is the better, because I don't want them to know me, I don't. I don't want them to have an opinion of me.
Rose:	They intimidate you, so you don't ask for help . . . just the hassle you have to go to get through, to get some things out of them. It makes it hard. I mean you get stressed out . . . But you know, they don't have to treat you the way they do . . . That's why I try not to ask them for anything.

As a consequence of the micro-aggressions, lone mothers actively avoided contact with their welfare workers to make their lives as "invisible" to the system as possible, thereby mitigating exposure to further degradation. Although all of Julie, Marie, and Rose reported avoiding worker contact because they fear its pernicious subjective impact, in a sense the discursive work of "anticipated" micro-aggressions has already occurred. The women disqualify themselves from the benefits they need and are entitled to, and in spite of these difficult acts fully reflect the ways in which these negative judgments impact them. Such acts are considered adaptive and represent the ways women resist against the interpersonal and relational discrimination and oppression they experience (Garcia, 2006; Hernandez, Carranza, & Almeida, 2010).

Implications

Based on these findings, welfare-reliant lone mothers experience a long list of denigrating micro-assaults and insult in their encounters with the social welfare system vis-à-vis their interpersonal relationships with welfare caseworkers. The denigration can include being spoken to in a dismissive tone of voice, being told degrading comments, or being made to feel unworthy, stupid, and incompetent. At the intersections of class and gender, welfare-reliant lone mothers are made to feel morally suspect and incompetent for both their need and reliance on aid and for their roles as "single" mothers. The feelings of being a "second class citizen" as Lillian suggested, or being judged not to be a "functional citizen" as Belle described are profound comments, telling of some of the larger social impacts of micro-aggressions.

As a personal impact, welfare-reliant lone mothers experience considerable surveillance by the social welfare system, including surveillance over their parenting with implied threats that they could lose custody of their children. The surveillance was identified as connected to the ways welfare services are delivered with explanations that a caseworker's behaviors may be attributed to organizational demands, such as managing high caseloads. The women felt dehumanized—reduced to being another number and an unworthy demand on the system. These encounters were not necessarily surprising given social work's long history of scrutinizing and moralizing lone mothers as "corrupt women" and as "bad mothers" (Caragata, 2009b; Leskosek, 2011; Lessa, 2004). The

prejudices continue at the intersections of living in poverty and being a lone mother—both devalued and stigmatized statuses that create an overall hostile environment for these women. For racialized lone mothers, a third intersection adds a compounding negative view. The effects, consistent with those noted in the literature, included self-shame and being shamed, more stress on top of already stressful conditions, and avoiding contact with their workers as a way to mitigate exposure to the assaults and insults (Nadal et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011). Furthermore, these experiences include shaming these women in front of their children who are often (and necessarily) present as witness to these disparaging encounters.

Two main implications derive from these findings that have implications for feminist theory in social work practice and education. They warrant immediate consideration. The first relates to the age-old task within feminist work of revealing the subtle forms and processes of women's oppression and marginalization within society (Mann, 2011). In the case of micro-aggressions, the task is complicated since micro-aggressions are often subtle and innocuous exchanges, they can be difficult to recognize as discriminatory for both the person committing the offence and the recipients. Furthermore, because most social work professionals see themselves as ethical and helping, they may not see their actions as discriminatory. As such, the professional committing the assaults may deny the prejudices, and the recipients may be construed as misunderstanding or misinterpreting the exchange.

For well-meaning social workers, attempts to raise their awareness and then change hidden discriminatory behaviors can threaten their self-image and professional identities, thus making attempts to draw attention to the issue of micro-aggressions difficult. As Sue (2010) suggests, "the power of micro-aggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients" (p. 6). Therefore, training and education must take place in a forum in which micro-aggressions can be made visible, and social work professionals have the opportunity to reflect on their prejudices in a safe environment that encourages such critical reflexivity. Social work education has an important role in preparing practitioners to recognize and change their discriminatory practices and can perhaps more readily construct such settings than in work-related training environments (Cartwright, Washington, & McConnell, 2009; Goldstein, 2008; Sue, 2010).

Moreover, as advocates of change with code-directed values of social justice, social workers have an important consciousness-raising roles to play supporting service recipients (i.e., welfare-reliant lone mothers) to recognize, name, and act against the discrimination they encounter when accessing and using social services (Ross-Sheriff, 2012). Anti-discriminatory or the more familiar "anti-oppressive practice" means actively acting and working against prejudice and discrimination. In the case of welfare-reliant mothers, this means looking at constructions of class, race, and gender that are enacted on women through the myriad small interactions that occur through the delivery of financial aid, as well as class-based beliefs that intersect with sexist notions that reinforce the devaluing of "poor" women and their mother and care work.

Although we agree that education and consciousness raising are crucial, there is a second implication to consider related to the focus on micro-aggressions as interpersonal exchanges. There is a possibility that activities aimed at changing the persons committing and receiving the assaults can individualize and shift the accountability of the discrimination to the persons—both the professional and the recipient—at the center of the exchanges. In social work, this has particular significance given that the profession and frontline social services are dominated with women and women's caring work (Fiore & Facchini, 2013; Kosny & MacEachen, 2010; Schilling, Naranjo-Morrish, & Lui, 2008). It is complicated to blame some women (social workers/professional/women) for the class and gender-based assaults committed against other women (welfare-reliant/lone mothers/women), instead of understanding these individual exchanges as examples of structural/institutional enactments of classist and sexist discriminations performed at an interpersonal level. The point is not to minimize or deny some women's oppression as perpetuated by other women (i.e., the critique

of Liberal feminism by women of color, Holvino, 2010), but rather to problematize such constructions so that the accountability and responsibility for change are focused not narrowly on the individuals involved in the interpersonal exchanges but on the structural conditions. In other words, it is necessary to shift from the politics of "victim/perpetrator blaming" to the politics of race, class, and gender (Bedard, 1991).

Although there is much helping professional rhetoric about anti-oppressive practice (Bains, 2011), there is often a gap between its theoretical embrace and its praxis. Although educational and reflexive strategies may prove useful in supporting individual social workers/women to understand their actions as discriminatory (Mattsson, 2014; Sayce, 2003), there is a need for leadership within organizations to critically examine the ways class and gender-based discriminations are embedded and enacted through institutional mandates, practices, and policies. Feminist organizational theory draws attention to the ways that organizations produce discriminatory conditions, such as sexism and racism (Berman-Brown, 1995; Holvino, 2010), such as the ongoing documentation requirements of social welfare programs that produce the conditions for women's surveillance by social welfare workers (Lessa, 2004) or workfare training initiatives that do little more than move lone mothers out of "welfare poverty" into "work poverty"—precarious employment arrangements with less stability, low pay, and few benefits (Rice, 2001). The power of micro-aggressions lies in the ability to remain hidden from scrutiny in structures, such as social welfare programs that assume gender and class neutrality (as well as race neutrality) in their policies, practices, and service delivery (Coleman & Rippin, 2000). Moving forward, there is a need for research and practice interventions that examine and reveal the workings of social work organizations for "the ways in which race, gender, and class relations and stratification are built into organizational structures" (Holvino, 2010, p. 262) as sites where classism, sexism, and racism are actively produced and reproduced (Reskin, 2000). In other words, education and consciousness-raising efforts might only become effective once the very concept of micro-aggressions are understood, acknowledged, and targeted for change as structural forms of discrimination. Thus, the combating of denigrating agency-damaging micro-aggressions requires both complex structural and political changes as well as the individual/interpersonal ones.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. For more information regarding the Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion project, please contact Dr. Lea Caragata, lcaragata@wlu.ca.
2. Although we are talking in general terms, it is important to note that not all marginalized persons within the same group have the same experience of oppression or that the experiences of marginalized groups are homogeneous. It is as important to think about the differences and nuances of individual experiences as it is to know the similarities.

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Maria Liegghio has held both national and provincial projects examining the stigma of mental illness in child and youth mental health. Her main areas of research are social work epistemology in child and youth mental health; the stigma of mental illness; critical social work education, theory, and practice; and collaborative, community-based and participatory action research. Her current work is focused on the experiences psychiatrized children and youth and their caregivers have of policing and police encounters.

Lea Caragata has led a national research program on the work to welfare experiences of single mothers followed by recent funded research on resilience and single moms. She continues to blend academic and research interests with her interest and commitment to public policy change and community development. Her recent book *Not the Whole Story: Challenging the Single Mother Narrative* is an illustration of her participatory, activist work.