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Rankism in Higher Education: A Critical Inquiry of Staff Experiences

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Abstract

Missing from the discussions of inequitable treatment of employees in higher education are the experiences of staff members. In work interactions, staff are frequently treated differently (often as inferiors), depending on their level of education and their role in the hierarchy on the non-academic side of an institution (Anonymous, 2006; Young, Anderson & Stewart, 2015). This difference in treatment has been termed, "rankism" in the broad sense or "hierarchical microaggressions" for smaller incidents and is especially troublesome as higher education is presumed to create upward mobility and lead towards a more equitable society (Young et al., 2015).

The research questions for this critical inquiry study were: "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism and the meaning they make of those experiences? What narratives, both explicit and implicit, emerged about rankism? What changes can an institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?" This research involved conducting semi-structured interviews of eighteen individuals who were currently working as staff members in higher education.

Key findings included themes of: staff's role in the hierarchy; culture enacted from the top down; money equals worth; staff feeling undervalued; accepted divisions in higher education; self-questioning; staff roles being frequently misunderstood; and how people are treated matters. Suggestions include naming rankism, creating processes and training sessions by expanding Diversity Offices, and examining the role of leadership.

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Rankism in Higher Education: A Critical Inquiry of Staff Experiences

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Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

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by

Erin M. Christensen-Mandel

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ABSTRACT

Missing from the discussions of inequitable treatment of employees in higher education are the experiences of staff members. In work interactions, staff are frequently treated differently (often as inferiors), depending on their level of education and their role in the hierarchy on the non-academic side of an institution (Anonymous, 2006; Young, Anderson & Stewart, 2015). This difference in treatment has been termed, "rankism" in the broad sense or "hierarchical microaggressions" for smaller incidents and is especially troublesome as higher education is presumed to create upward mobility and lead towards a more equitable society (Young et al., 2015).

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Chapter One: Introduction

Media has recently focused attention on the inequitable treatment of adjunct faculty at U.S. colleges and universities. This attention highlights that even though a majority of faculty positions are held by adjuncts, they, unlike tenure-track faculty, have little job security, few protections for academic freedom, and often lack benefits (AAUP, 2017). While these issues are a primary focus of organizations, such as the American Association of University Professors, missing from the discussions of inequitable treatment of employees in higher education are the experiences of staff members. In work interactions, staff are frequently treated differently (often as inferiors), depending on their level of education and their role in the hierarchy on the non-academic side of an institution (Anonymous, 2006; Young, Anderson & Stewart, 2015). This difference in treatment has been termed, "rankism" in the broad sense or "hierarchical microaggressions" for smaller incidents and is especially troublesome as higher education is presumed to create upward mobility and lead towards a more equitable society (Young et al., 2015).

While there have been few studies on rankism in higher education, research into hierarchical structures, power, and status show that leadership communication and actions have a larger impact than expected (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Studies also show that status is perceived by a variety of cues that vary in accuracy, and that insults and

disrespect are more strongly felt by those located lower in a hierarchy (Lumby, 2013; Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Rowe, 1990; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). However, even though hierarchies are common at colleges and universities, it is not hierarchy, but the abuse of power and the abuse of rank that create rankism (Clark, 2008; Fuller, 2003, 2006, & 2012).

In examining the culture of higher education, especially campus culture, staff morale, and employee retention in higher education, the impact of neoliberalism has caused a shift towards the commodification of education, knowledge, and human capital and has changed the focus of higher education from meeting an educational need to generating revenue (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2000). Additionally, there can be a perception that staff positions are detracting from faculty responsibilities and that those staff who are lower in the hierarchy are less valuable to institutions, due to their lower pay and assumed lower skill sets (Anonymous, 2006; Acker, 1990; Acker, 2012; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012; Schwartz, 2014; Tierney, 1988). This often results in the value of the position to the institution impacting the perceived value of the person; those in more valuable roles end up being treated as more valuable people (Young et al., 2015).

The low-ranking positions and the lowered expectations of success surrounding them have a variety of negative impacts on employees, as some lower-level positions come with an unspoken expectation of poor performance and employees often perform as is expected of them by supervisors (Rowe, 1990). Complicating the issue of rankism is the fact that many lower-ranked staff positions are held by women and people of color (Acker, 1990; Berk, 2017a; Chan, 2017; Lumby, 2014). This intersection of identities

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highlights the importance of an in-depth exploration of rankism in order to have a better understanding of its impact.

Finally, studies on rankism, especially in higher education, have mainly focused on student and faculty experiences (Clark, 2008; Trammel & Gumpertz, 2012)**.** In spite of the awareness and a growing amount of literature examining the impact that various types of microaggressions have on individuals and steps that people and institutions can take to lessen that impact, there is a scarcity of literature specifically examining the topics of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions in higher education. The sole study on staff experiences, "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," by Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) was conducted through a grounded theory qualitative study collecting short, anonymous, written responses from a training session on microaggressions. A majority of the responses indicated that participants had experienced microaggressions based on their role at the institution. However, as the responses were anonymous notes left on the tables, the authors were unable to gather demographic information of the respondents.

The studies done on rankism in higher education to date have been small-scale studies with anonymous participants self-reporting brief examples of past events (Trammel and Gumpertz, 2012; Young et al., 2015). One limitation of these reviewed studies and of this research project is these focus on the experience of rankism in the United States. As noted in Lindner (2007), the experience of rankism in other cultures, particularly cultures centered in honor, will differ greatly from rankism experiences in the United States. As higher education institutions administer campus climate surveys in an

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effort to be more inclusive and as more attention is paid to the inequalities surrounding contingent employees, the hierarchical, non-academic side of institutions is often overlooked. By examining the staff experiences of rankism, campus leaders can work to ensure a respectful work environment for all employees.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical inquiry study was to examine the employees' experiences with rankism, the meaning they make of those experiences, and examining existing structures of power and the associated narratives reinforcing the status quo (Carspecken, 1996; Gildersleeve et al., 2010; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Plihal, 1989; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993; Wright, 2004). This research involved conducting semi-structured interviews of eighteen individuals who were currently working as staff members in higher education. The semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and by using critical narrative analysis, this study additionally aimed to identify explicit and implicit narrative themes surrounding power and rankism.

Research Questions

The main research question of this study was: "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism and the meaning they make of those experiences?" In addition, there were two sub-questions: "What narratives, both explicit and implicit, emerged about rankism? What changes can an institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?"

Definition of Terms

At this stage in the research, rankism is defined as the abuse of power which occurs when people use their rank and position to demean or disadvantage those they outrank (Fuller, 2003, 2006; Clark, 2008). Hierarchical microaggressions are defined as the "everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person" (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015, p. 61).

Rankism and hierarchical microaggressions can be received from other staff, administration, students, faculty, or the public. In higher education, staff is defined as a person holding a non-academic, non-instructional, and non-research position that directly reports to another staff member or administrator (Hocker, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Administrator is defined as a senior level executive that reports to the institution's President/Chancellor/Provost (Hocker, 2015).

Significance of Study

Even though the effects of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions have long been felt, the two topics are relatively new areas of study. Rankism was first named in Fuller's 2003 book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, and the experience of hierarchical microaggressions being named in the 2015 study by Young, Anderson, and Stewart. Having terms for these experiences allows both for increased awareness of the issues and for future topics of research.

This study contributes narratives of the experience of rankism and hierarchical microaggresisons as well as identifying narratives that reinforce the current power

structures. These data further expand the current understandings and bring a depth to the topic, which is currently covered by the sole study focused on staff conducted by Young, Anderson, and Stewart on hierarchical microaggressions. Awareness of rankism is growing. Berk (2017a & 2017b) lists it alongside racism, sexism, and other "-isms" as adversely impacting campus culture, staff morale, and employee retention in higher education. Along with other types of macro- and microaggressions, the effects on the recipients are cumulative and have negative physical and psychological effects (Berk, 2017a). By raising awareness of rankism, institutions may be able to address current shortcomings in diversity and inclusive training sessions on their campuses. As institutions better create inclusive climates, this can lead to new types of policies and institutional practices focused on creating a space of respect, professional and social support, and intentionally adding value to the lives of all employees and students (Berk, 2017a). The topics of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions expand beyond the realm of higher education staff, which offers many opportunities for future research, such as quantitative and longitudinal studies, examining an individual's day-to-day experiences with microaggressions, an in-depth exploration of experiences at one specific institution or at a singular type of higher education institution, or a phenomenological study using other data collection methods.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The topics of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions are relatively new areas of study. Emerging literature has begun documenting the impact of microaggressions within hierarchies and the role of individuals and the institutions in lessening their impact (Berk, 2017a; Berk, 2017b; Moore, 2016; Russell, 2016; Trammel & Gumpertz, 2012; Wells, 2013; Young, et al., 2015). As there is little literature on rankism in higher education, literature on the topics of rankism in general, microaggressions, hierarchies, status, abuse of power in workplaces, and higher education culture were reviewed. The literature surrounding rankism and hierarchical microaggressions are grouped into four broad themes: intersectionality; rankism; hierarchies, status, and power; and higher education culture and neoliberalism.

Intersectionality

As each person is a combination of different identities, when examining the impact of rankism on a staff member, complicating the research is the fact that microaggressions occur based on gender, race, ability, sexual orientation, and other identities, in addition to rank (Acker, 2012; Berk 2017a and 2017b; Fuller, 2003 and 2006; Wells, 2013; Yamada, 2007). This combination of different identities has been termed "intersectionality," which is distinct from the intersectionality research framework (Acker, 2012). The definition of intersectionality that best fits this literature review is from Acker's (2012) work on intersectionality and gendered organizations:

"'Intersectionality' [is] the idea that gendered processes do not stand alone, but intersect with and are shaped by race and class processes, as well as other forms of inequality and exclusion" (Acker, 2012, p. 214).

By focusing on staff experiences of rankism in higher education, rather than on the experience of administrators, awareness of each of the interviewee's different identities will be critical as repeated studies have found that lower-level staff positions are disproportionately filled by women and people of color (Acker, 1990; Berk, 2017a; Chan, 2017; Lumby, 2014).

In seeking to isolate experience of rankism from people's intersectional identities, Acker (2012) notes that focusing on certain aspects of inequality can simplify the research process but comes at the risk of potentially eliminating, a priori, an aspect that may later prove to be important.

Rankism

Rankism is greatly informed by Fuller's 2003 book, *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*. While not a research text, Fuller introduces the concept of rankism and states that virtually everyone has both suffered from rank-related abuse and has perpetuated rankism, as rank is an identity that fluctuates with job changes, such as promotion or demotion. Fuller (2003, 2006) goes further to assert that rankism is at the heart of *all* discriminatory behavior, underlying all the other types of –isms as: "racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism and others all depend for their existence on differences of social rank that in turn reflect underlying power differences, so they are forms of rankism" (Fuller, 2003, p. 2). By assuming that a white male has more social rank than a

Black female, Fuller would view any sexist and/or racist actions by the white male fundamentally as expressions of rankism. However, other authors dispute the use of rankism as the overarching umbrella term for all –isms and argue that Fuller's definition of rankism is so vague, it could be carried to the point of absurdity (Breenan, 2013; Kleiner, 2004). Secondly, other authors argue that Fuller's view of rankism and its workplace effects are not legally enforceable and emphasize the benefits of unionization of staff and faculty (Schwartz, 2014; Yamada, 2007).

Despite these critiques, these same authors agree on the importance of naming rankism and that acknowledging human dignity can serve as a remedy for the injustices caused by the various "–isms" (Anonymous, 2006; Breenan, 2013; Clark, 2008, Kleiner, 2004; Lindner, 2008; Schwartz, 2014; Yamada, 2007). For example, Clark (2008) has focused her research on rankism in nursing education and its negative impact on students. Kleiner (2004) looked at how rankism affects the business sector and noted that studies of people on successful, diverse teams found they would treat other people as worthy of respect, belonging, and being taken seriously, no matter their role at the organization. Anonymous (2006) is a faculty member concerned with how rankism affects staff in academia and wrote a collaborative article detailing her and two staff accounts of their experiences of rankism at their college and its negative impacts on the institutional culture. This literature, while expanding on Fuller's concept of rankism in various settings, lacks an in-depth exploration of staff experiences across multiple higher education institutions.

Rankism in Higher Education

There is currently only one published study on hierarchical rankism focused on staff in higher education. In "Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education," Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) conducted a grounded theory qualitative study on 191 anonymous "written artifacts" from training sessions on microaggressions. These accounts documented microaggressions the participants had received, witnessed, or perpetuated. A majority of the responses did not fall into any previously recognized category of microaggression type (such as racial, gender, class, etc.), therefore the authors created the category of "hierarchical microaggressions." The authors note that this category is especially relevant in higher education due to the rhetoric about college-going and its relationship to equality and upward mobility. Staff take on an identity associated with their status at the university and that is related to the amount of education they have attained (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Young, et al., 2015). For example, those with doctorate degrees are more privileged than those staff with lesser, or no, degrees (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Young, et al., 2015). Young, Anderson, and Stewart also highlight the importance of hierarchical microaggressions as these can adversely impact staff's day-to-day interactions and negatively contribute to the overall climate of the university (Young, et al., 2015).

In a similar vein, in 2009, Trammel and Gumpertz began a program at their university to be more welcoming and inclusive toward women and minority faculty. Here, they found meetings involved many incidents of microaggressions based on hierarchies: "senior faculty vs. junior faculty, staff vs. faculty, male vs. female, minority

vs. nonminority, and STEM vs. non-STEM" (Trammel and Gumpertz, 2012, para. 2).

People were being defined both by their role in the hierarchy of institution and in their

identity characteristics. As noted above, additional research has been done on rankism in

nursing education, where concerns about rankism begin with the student/faculty

relationship and can, with time, adversely impact the nurse/patient relationship. Clark

(2008) conducted a phenomenological study on nursing students' experiences with

rankism from nursing faculty. She found that, in spite of nursing being founded on the

principle of caring for others, faculty behaved in demeaning, unreasonable, and unfair

ways while students felt powerless in response. Clark concludes that, "rankism represents

a logical theoretical concept in making sense of the data derived from [her] research

study" (Clark, 2008, p. 5).

Rankism against staff is often perpetuated by faculty, who can view staff as

"underlings and servants," because one's academic identity is ranked according to the

amount of education one receives (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Young et al., 2015).

An example of the invisibility of rankism is demonstrated both in Young's forthcoming

(2019) study on the experiences of women of color as administrators in higher education

and in Wells' (2013) article on microaggressions. Young (2019) found that staff,

particularly women of color, described that acts of hierarchical microaggressions that left

the employees with a feeling of invisibility which felt demeaning and could distort these

women's mode of being (Young, forthcoming 2019).

In Wells' (2013) article, the act of rankism, itself, is invisible to the author. Wells'

article focuses on the prevalence of microaggressions in higher education, the power of

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language during interactions with others, and the damage microaggressions do to women and people of color. Wells (2013) recounts accidentally being mistaken for a secretary instead of as her rank as a tenure-track faculty member. In the two paragraphs spent describing the encounter, she uses the word "demeaning" three times. To justify herself, in a footnote she writes, "It is difficult to complain about these things without sounding as though you think you are better than servants and secretaries. In an ideal world, I would not feel demeaned by the fact that someone mistook me for a secretary. However, in a hierarchical world, it is difficult to overlook the fact that such conduct is, in fact, a sign of disrespect" (Wells, 2013, p. 344). All work has value; the secretary in this case probably would not feel insulted to be mistaken as a secretary but would likely feel disrespected by Wells' feeling of being demeaned and of grouping secretaries with servants. This is one example of how rankism is invisible even to scholars investigating microaggressions and the harmful effects that these have on employees in higher education.

Hierarchies, Status, and Power

Hierarchies, a structure where employees report to the supervisor above them, are usually the organizational system used by colleges and universities to function (Clark, 2008; Fuller, 2003, 2006, & 2012). Fuller (2012) claims that hierarchies and rank will always be a part of our society; rank is neither good nor bad and earned rank can indicate experience, skill, and proficiency. However, problems arise when rank and power are abused (Fuller, 2012). In fact, college leaders' attitudes and how they behave has a larger, direct impact on both employees and institutional culture than expected, with employees

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two to five levels down the hierarchy noting the use/misuse of authority and communication styles of the leadership (Detert & Treviño, 2010).

Linked to the idea of meritocracy, where rewards are distributed based on the merits of the recipient, there is an assumption that status is a signal of quality (Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009). However, in examining how status is allocated, Lynn, Podolny, and Tao (2009) conducted a quantitative study simulating the evolution of thousands of small groups using a dyadic model of status allocation and this study, in addition to others, showed that status and quality are only loosely linked and sometimes completely decoupled. Status does not originate from underlying qualities, but rather from circumstances (Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). This unexpected disconnect between status and quality, in turn, highlights an erroneous underlying assumption in rankism: those people who have higher status must be of higher quality (Fuller, 2004). As quality is often unobservable, employees will make judgments of co-workers based on cues such as status/role, competence, popularity, and the size of the employee's office (Lynn, et. al., 2009; Schwartz, 2014). Based on these cues, staff and contingent faculty who may not have an office or be on campus enough to socialize with co-workers will be ascribed lower status by their co-workers and will likely be assumed to be producing work of lower quality or, potentially, be seen as lower quality employees.

Power is closely related to hierarchy and status. Generally, the higher up in the hierarchy or the more status someone has, the more power and influence they have, as well (Acker, 1990; Lumby, 2013). One problem with power is that those who are less

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powerful and less influential are often faced with greater inequities, which often stem from the preferences of the dominant, high-power group (Lumby, 2013). Frequently, these preferences appear so normal to those in power that it is not viewed as an issue, especially since more powerful people are not as easily injured by insults from below (Lumby, 2013; Rowe, 1990).

Even though the staff/non-academic side of colleges and universities are routinely organized as hierarchies, it is not hierarchy, status, or power but rather the abuse of power and the abuse of rank that comprise of rankism and that damage relationships (Clark, 2008; Fuller, 2003, 2006, & 2012). Understanding the impact hierarchies, status, and power have on staff serves to frame challenges staff experience in higher education culture.

Higher Education Culture and Neoliberalism

Higher education organizational culture is generally hierarchical with faculty, administrators, and staff having specific roles and responsibilities that inform how interactions occur and how relationships across the institution are formed (Anonymous, 2006; Acker, 1990; Barratt-Pugh & Krestelica, 2019; Henning et. al., 2017). Leadership is able to influence the allocation of resources, clarify employee responsibilities, spread communications, create partnerships, and influence people to create an organization's culture (Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen, & Domans, 2017, p. 47). In addition, the differing perspectives of staff and faculty can create conflicts of interests, with the effects of interpersonal conflicts potentially leading to employee dissatisfaction and a weak organizational culture (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012). Florenthal and Tolstikov-

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Mast note that an organization's culture is the personality of an institution and encompasses the norms, values, and beliefs which are expressed through the actions of individuals (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012, p.88).

Staff at many institutions state there are often systematic gender and race biases, unfair treatment, subjective evaluations, threats, and bullying (Anonymous, 2006; Acker, 1990; Barratt-Pugh & Krestelica, 2019; Henning et. al, 2107). Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica (2019) notes that employees working in education report the highest level of bullying of all industry sectors, with one-third of staff in higher education have either experienced or witnessed bullying in the workplace in the previous five years (Barrat-Pugh & Krestelica, 2019, p.110). Additionally, there are concerns about staff conditions as women and people of color frequently hold the lower-ranking staff positions at the same time that many institutions lack an active commitment to multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusiveness from all the stakeholders (Berk, 2017b; Lumby, 2013).

Recent efforts to include staff as equals in higher education leadership/decision-making processes through the use of distributed leadership have raised issues surrounding the distribution of power, the marginalization of women and people of color, and of the inequality of opportunities available (Lumby, 2013). Instead of an effort aimed at equality, distributed leadership can be seen as a way to reconcile staff to neoliberal conditions in the workplace by undertaking an ever-increasing workload without additional compensation or role/title change, to reconcile staff to the status quo, and to render troubling underlying power structures invisible (Lumby, 2013). Staff who seek to create change in the workplace or seek to increase their level of autonomy are seen as

transgressors, which leads to leadership opportunities that exclude some employees and does not allow dissent (Lumby, 2013). Additionally, the premise that these programs offer equal opportunities to all employees masks the underlying fact that leadership is unequally open to people, depending on gender, race, and other characteristics (Lumby, 2013).As with all other aspects of American society in the past several decades, higher education is being impacted by neoliberal practices and policies (Gildersleeve, 2017a; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). In recent decades, neoliberalism has caused a shift towards the commodification of education, knowledge, and human capital and has changed the focus of higher education from an educational need to generating revenue (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). In seeking to generate more revenue, competition for students has lead campus administrators to focus on improving student life experiences, shifting to budgeting systems that pit internal departments against one another, and encouraging faculty to research/publish more in an effort to boost the school's rating in college ranking systems (Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012; Schwartz, 2014). The increasing focus on faculty research and publication has, over time, fed into efforts to decrease the number of tenure-track faculty positions at institutions and has prevented many tenured faculty from participating in the student support, teaching, and governance of their institutions (Schwartz, 2014). This gap in leadership has been taken over by an ever-increasing number of administrators, professional staff, and contingent faculty with an overall shift in focus from traditional educational goals to topics such as strategic planning, marketing, and management issues (Schwartz, 2014; Tierney, 1988).

Institutional Role Affecting Actions

In this view of higher education as heavily influenced by neoliberal norms, it is understandable that positions that receive less compensation are viewed as less valuable to an institution (Acker, 2012). Additionally, there is often the view that money is correlated to a person's worth, outside of their role in an organization (Acker, 2012; Smith, Mao, & Deshpande, 2016). The justification for lower compensation for lower-level positions reflects the assumptions that these positions come with low levels of complexity and responsibility (Acker, 1990). However, managerial tasks are frequently delegated to these lower-level positions, without any change in job title or increase in compensation for those completing the tasks (Acker, 1990; Lumby, 2013). Rowe (1990) noted that this type of delegation of duties can be damaging as it can prevent advancement behavior from occurring, such as an employee being so overloaded with other, delegated duties that this prevents them from doing other work that would have prepared them for a promotion.

Acker (1990, 2012) describes how jobs are created on paper as if they are gender- and race-neutral while the underlying assumptions about the ideal candidate and their availability are actually gender- and race-specific. This assumption of neutrality serves to obscure systemic discrimination where lower-level positions tend to be filled by women and people of color (Acker, 1990). Some of these lower-level positions come with the unspoken expectation of poor performance by the employee, which can be damaging as employees have a strong tendency to do what is expected of them (Rowe, 1990).

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In light of the culture of higher education, the neoliberal commodification of human capital, and the idea that a person's worth can be linked to their compensation, the rank of a staff member can be seen as proxy of their value. Viewing some positions in an organizational hierarchy as less important and filled by employees who are lower-paid and assumed to be low-skill creates the opportunity for rankism and to view the employee filling that position as having less value as a person than those who are higher ranking. These assumptions linking the role held and the value of person is, in addition to being dehumanizing, a form of rankism.

Limitations

Studies about rankism and hierarchical microaggressions in higher education were located in the United States and were qualitative, small-scale studies, based on anonymous, self-reporting of previously experienced events (Trammel and Gumpertz, 2012; Young et al., 2015). Due to anonymity, some studies were unable to collect demographic data and others only had short quotes about experiences. Having open-ended interviews with staff members allowed for the in-depth exploration of experiences and meaning of rankism in higher education.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Critical inquiry as a methodology allows for the examination of participants'

experiences in a way that disrupts the status quo and brings into focus the social structure

and power relations that perpetuate inequity (Gildersleeve, 2017b; Gildersleeve, Kuntz,

Pasque, & Carducci, 2010; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Martinez-Alemán, Pusser, &

Bensimon, 2015; Plihal, 1989; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Wright, 2004). As research has

historically silenced the voices of marginalized groups, critical inquiry involves

participants in the interpretation and meaning-making of the phenomena (Martinez-

Alemán et al., 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This enables the participants to more

clearly see themselves in their current social structures and allows them the self-

determination to decide how to engage, intervene, and alter conditions they may find

repressive (Gildersleeve, 2017b; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Plihal, 1989). This

interpretation and meaning-making aligns with the social constructivist worldview,

especially in terms of examining interaction among individuals and the context in which

people live and work (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Vygotsky,

1978). Social constructivism also assumes that language, which is a social phenomenon,

plays a central role in how people perceive and interpret their experiences and knowledge

(Vygotsky, 1978). In researching the essence of rankism using this framework and

worldview, the subjective experiences of the interviewees can inform the questions asked

during the interview and can also examine the existing structures and narratives of power in higher education.

Role of Researcher

I am a 41-year-old, heterosexual, married, white, cis-gendered woman, who began working in higher education in 2008 as an administrative assistant in Admissions/Student Services at a private, graduate theological school. I am currently the Grants Program Director and Division Coordinator (my division consists of Admissions/Student Services and Institutional Advancement). I am now starting my twelfth year in higher education and while my job duties and titles have changed with time, many of my division coordinator duties are similar to what I was originally hired to do: the day-to-day, behind-the-scenes work to keep the department on track. Only now, instead of one department of four people, I do this for ten people across two departments. My duties as the Grants Program Director involve researching, writing, and reporting on grants as well as monitoring specialty grant-funded programs throughout the school run by faculty and other staff.

Over the years, even as I've taken on more responsibilities and progressed through titles, I have noticed some of my co-workers still treat me like an administrative assistant while others treat me like a program director. I find it fascinating to be treated so differently while I go through the workday in my dual roles. I have also noticed discrepancies in how co-workers treat and talk to the President versus the grounds and facilities staff. While working on a final paper on microagreesions for a class, I discovered the concepts of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions in the 2015 article

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by Young, Anderson, and Stewart. In a way, I felt relieved to have a name for what I had

seen and experienced in many work places, including higher education. The experiences

of rankism are not new, but the topic is.

Methodology

In researching rankism, the presence of power and the social structures supporting

the current status quo are closely intertwined and a critical inquiry methodology was best

suited to examine this topic. Critical inquiry is based on critical theory, which can be

traced to Hegel, Marx, and Max Horkheimer, a founding member of the Frankfurt

Institute of Social Research in the early 1920s (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Plihal,

1989). The goal of critical theory is to develop research to address the structures that

create, maintain, and perpetuate social inequities and to use the data to actively transform

society by challenging narratives of colonialism, racism, sexism, class, and sexual

orientation (Horkheimer, 1982; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Plihal, 1989). Critical

inquiry, as a methodology, grew out of the epistemological claims of critical theory:

traditional research methodologies and typologies are normative, silence marginalized

voices, and perpetuate inequities. Hence, a more flexible methodology was required to

reveal structural distributions of power (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Rossman & Rallis,

2003; Plihal, 1989).

While researchers do not fully agree on the description of a critical inquiry

methodology, in general, critical inquiry aims to reveal disparate distributions of power,

disrupt the status quo, and work towards progressive social change (Carspecken, 1996;

Gildersleeve et al., 2010; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015;

Plihal, 1989; Wright, 2004). Based on the characteristics presented by Gildersleeve

(2017b), Tierney and Rhoads (1993), and Rossman and Rallis (2003), critical inquiry as a

methodology is understood as the following four premises:

1. Research efforts involve issues of power and existing structures (Rossman &

   Rallis, 2003; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993).

2. Research is authored by positioned subjects, who are raced, gendered, classed,

   and politically oriented (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993).

   These positions are crucial for understanding experiences (Rossman & Rallis,

   2003).

3. Research is oriented toward practical actions that intervene, deconstruct, and

   disrupt the normative narratives (Gildersleeve, 2017b; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993).

4. Knowledge is contested and political; historically, traditional research has

   silenced the voices of marginalized groups (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Tierney &

   Rhoads, 1993).

In examining rankism and the narratives surrounding existing structures of power,

the use of critical inquiry as a methodology, as opposed to using a more traditional form

of methodology, is consistent with this proposed study's topic, framework, and the

critical theory foundation of critical inquiry. This methodology allowed for close

examination of the participants' experiences in terms of power dynamics while also

allowing space for the participants to reflect on their various identities. Participants also

had language to name their experiences and several reported they further discussed

rankism with their co-workers, which could be viewed as a method of disrupting the

normative narratives in their organization. Finally, multiple participants described how hearing about rankism and participating in the story made them feel less marginalized and more visible than they had been in their workplaces.

Framework

The framework ideally suited for this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism relies heavily on the participants' views to create meaning from a lived experience and its contextual factors (Creswell, 2013; Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism assumes that language plays an important role in how humans perceive, interpret, and impose culturally-defined meanings on their world (Vygotsky, 1978). As language is a social phenomenon, knowledge and cognitive structures are socially constructed as a collaborative process (Vygotsky, 1978). The social constructivist concept of creating meaning from lived experiences aligns directly with critical inquiry methodology.

The framework and methodology both informed the categorizing of the themes from the participants. Both allowed the examination of underlying power structures as seen through the participants' language and the meanings they made from their experiences as well as giving the participants language to describe what they had experienced.

Methods

Because critical inquiry challenges normative research criteria, it is the responsibility of the researcher to fashion an inclusive analysis that is relevant to the subject of inquiry (Martinez-Alema et. al., 2015). This study used critical narrative

analysis, which combines critical discourse analysis with narrative analysis, to create an analytic tool to investigate how institutional power discourses affect the everyday narratives of participants (Souto-Manning, 2014). In an effort to collect rich narratives on participants' experiences with rankism and the narratives surrounding the existing structures of power, confidential, individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the flexibility to explore and respond to the topics that arose (Hickson, 2016).

In a 2017 project, van Rijnsoever ran computer simulations to determine what approximate sample sizes would be needed for the saturation and repeating of codes in analyzing qualitative interviews. His results reflect what was indicated in the literature and point to a range of 10 to 50 participants, with the lower number appropriate when the researcher has extensive knowledge of the topic, the population, and the likely codes to appear in interviews (van Rijnsoever, 2017). The higher end of the range was appropriate when the researcher had very minimal knowledge about the topic and is similar to random chance (van Rijnsoever, 2017). Additionally, Marshall and Rossman (2011) state, "A large sample in disparate and varied settings with diverse participants would also be seen as very useful, since the ease of transferability would be enhanced" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 103). In this study, as I had knowledge of the topic, general knowledge about the diverse participants in a variety of settings, but was uncertain on the expected codes, I had proposed to interview 30 participants in an effort to reach saturation and code repetition. However, only 18 staff members ultimately participated.

Currently in critical narrative analysis, the expectation is one or two interviews of each participant. Souto-Manning's (2014) first study involved interviewing 12 women, one time, for 40 - 70 minutes each. In Hickson's (2016) study using critical narrative analysis, she included 35 participants: some being interviewed once and many being interviewed a second time, however no rationale was provided as to the difference in method. I conducted one semi-structured interview with each of the 18 participants. The interviews averaged 40 minutes in length. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcriptions of the interviews and to add clarifying details.

I also wrote field notes, which recorded what I experienced and thought during the data collection process (Groenewald, 2004). These notes served as a process of reflection, as a secondary data storage method, and as a preliminary step towards data analysis (Groenewald, 2004). Field notes included observational notes about what happened, methodological notes on ways of improving future interviews, and analytical memos as an end-of-day summary (Groenewald, 2004).

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through referral sampling with a general call to participate sent through social media and through email to staff and faculty that might be potentially interested in sharing this study. The call for interviews was open to staff working in higher education. Participants self-selected and had no obligation to participate. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, interested staff members reached out directly through both school and personal email accounts and through social media. Participants received an informed consent form. The one-on-one interviews were

held either in person, online through Zoom, or over the phone, depending on the preference and location of each participant and were recorded for the purposes of transcription. The interviews were in-depth and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and occurred over seven months, between August 17, 2018 and March 25, 2019. Interviews took place in locations that allowed the staff member a neutral space to talk freely about their experiences of rankism, as it would be difficult to speak openly about a difficult experience with a co-worker in a physical space where that co-worker could enter.

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on the experiences the participants have had with rankism in their role as staff members working in a higher education institution. Questions were aimed at gaining rich descriptions and stories about the participant's experiences and examining existing structures of power and the associated narratives reinforcing the status quo. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had anything else to add. Several participants followed-up with additional experiences after the interview was concluded. Participants received a transcription of their interview for them to review, correct, or to include additional information. Electronic communication was sent to whatever email address, or social media account, they preferred, as some work email is monitored and not considered private. Participants were under no obligation to review the interview transcriptions. Participants who expressed interest were sent a list of the themes generated from all the confidential interviews.

Site and Sample Populations

By focusing on staff experiences of rankism in higher education, rather than on the experience of administrators, awareness of each of the interviewee's different identities was critical, as repeated studies have found that lower-level staff positions are disproportionately filled by women and people of color (Acker, 1990; Berk, 2017a; Chan, 2017; Lumby, 2013). While the goal was to interview 30 staff members with as diverse gender, racial, educational attainment, and class identities as possible, only 18 participants responded so the findings are more limited in scope. In seeking to isolate experience of rankism from people's intersectional identities, Acker (2012) notes that focusing on certain aspects of inequality can simplify the research process but comes at the risk of potentially eliminating an aspect that may later prove to be important. By approaching the project as a critical inquiry with semi-structured interview questions, the research was aimed to examine experiences of rankism and power without negating or silencing other identities held by the participants.

Over the duration of the study, there were 18 participants interviewed: 14 identified as female, four as male. Fourteen of the participants identified as white, two as Pacific Islander, one as Native American, and one as multi-racial. All of the institutions represented were non-profit. Seven of the institutions are classified as public and eleven as private. Institutions ranged from community college to Ivy League universities and were located across nine states.

The largest number of participants had completed doctorates, followed by bachelor's and master's degrees. The full list of the highest education level completed by the participants is detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Highest Education Level Completed

- Some undergraduate (1)
- Bachelor's (5)
- Some graduate (2)
- Master's (4)
- Doctorate (6)
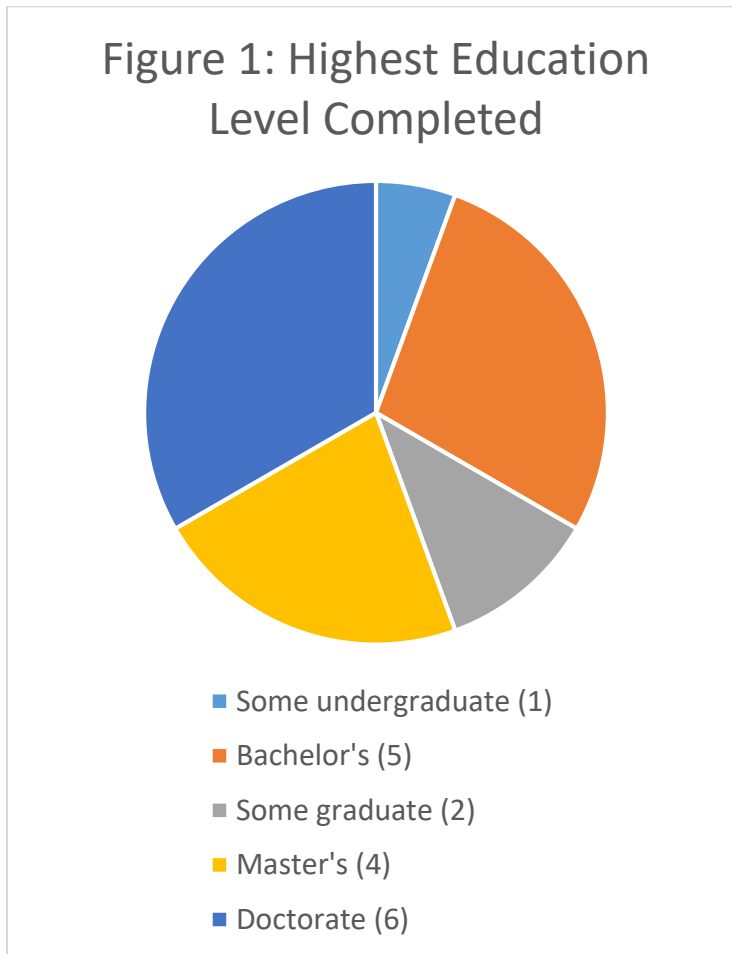
Participants worked in a variety of areas, both centralized and in academic departments. A limitation of this sample population is not having participants from facilities, food service, or other positions that typically are not based in an office setting. The full list of the participants' institutional area of employment is detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Institutional Area of Employment

- Administrative Support (3)
- Admissions (3)
- Advancement/Fundraising (2)
- Mathematics/Physical Sciences (2)
- Business (1)
- Education (1)
- Finance (1)
- Financial Aid (1)
- Information Technology (1)
- Law (1)
- Public Relations (1)
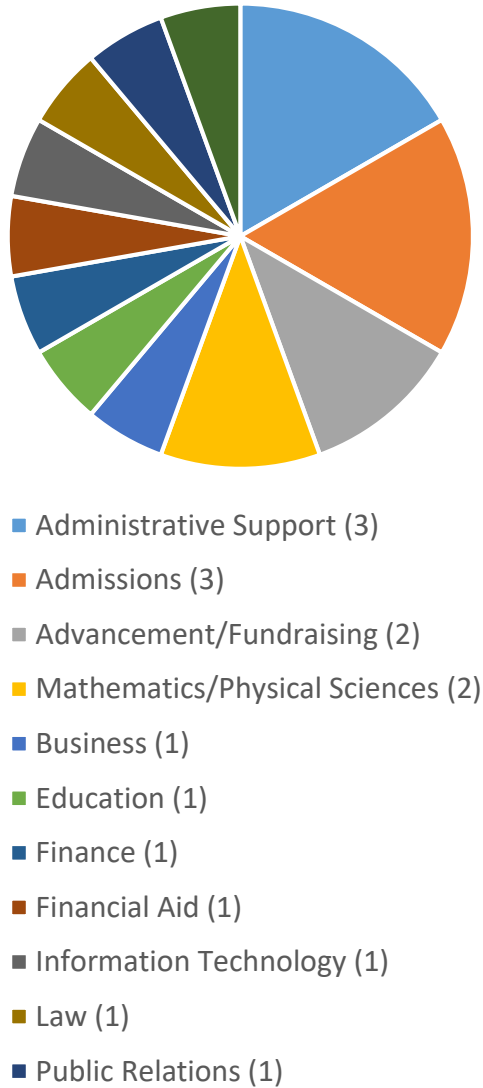
Finally, almost half of the participants held director-level positions. While some participants reported directly to their President/CEO/Provost, all participants were two to five levels removed from the top position at their institution. The full list of the participants' job titles is detailed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Job Title

Director (8)   Coordinator (4)
Manager (2)   Specialist (2)
Counselor (1) Officer (1)
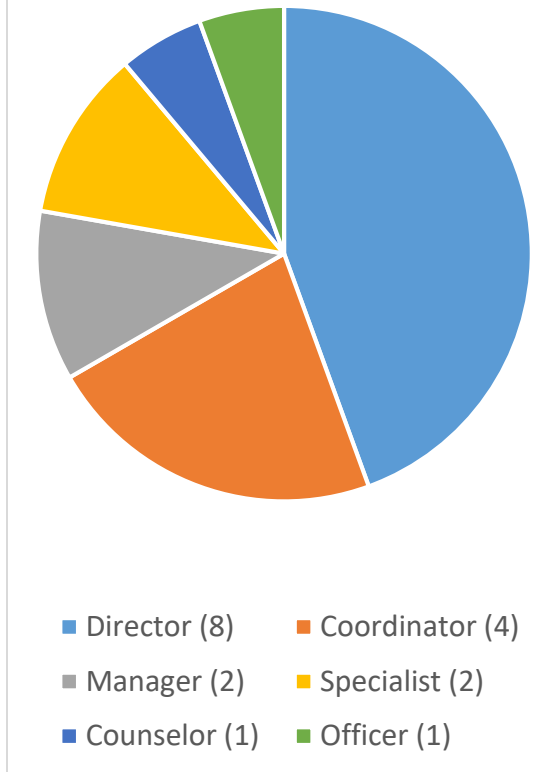
One limitation of this study's sample population was the lack of ethnic/racial diversity. Of the 18 participants, 14 self-identified as white, two as Pacific Islander, one as Native American, and one as multi-racial. Possible explanations for the lack of diversity include: the method of data collection, as referral sampling relies on existing social relationships, which could have tended towards racial/ethnic homogeneity or that potential participants ascribed their experiences to causes other than rankism (such as occurring due to their race or gender).

Ethical Considerations

Paper copies of the interview transcriptions are being stored in a locked filing cabinet for two years after completion of the research and then will be shredded. Recordings of the interviews are being kept off-line, on a password-protected removable thumb drive for six months in a locked filing cabinet after the transcription is complete and will then be erased. Names of participants, their institutions, and their participant codes are kept in a handwritten log in a locked filing cabinet at a separate location than the interview recordings/transcriptions and will be shredded at the conclusion of the study. Field notes, which do not have participant names, are stored in a locked filing cabinet for two years after the study is complete and will then be shredded.

The names of the participants have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Job titles are kept generalized and identifying characteristics (such as race, gender, etc.) are only used in an aggregate overview of the respondents. The names of the institutions involved have been removed.

Reliability and Rigor

In critical narrative analysis, participant feedback of transcripts is solicited to both ensure accuracy as well as to prompt the participant as narrator to question ways that institutional narratives can be challenged (Souto-Manning, 2014). In critical inquiry, the role is to involve participants in the meaning-making of their experiences as well as to problematize current power narratives that maintain the status quo (Martinez-Alema et. al., 2015). Participants were given a transcript of their interview, a list of the themes generated from the interviews, and a copy of this final project. Any clarifying interviews,

additions to and corrections to the original interviews took place during the analysis process.

Data Analysis

In alignment with the critical inquiry methodology, critical narrative analysis seeks to question power dynamics in the participants' organizational life (Mumby, 2004; Souto-Manning, 2014). Souto-Manning (2014) argues that critical narrative analysis is necessary in qualitative research. She states that the focus of narrative analysis is on how participants make meaning and interpret new experiences, but lacks an examination of power dynamics (Souto-Manning, 2014). In contrast, critical discourse analysis focuses on institutional and societal issues of power through language, while everyday narratives are overlooked, even though these everyday narratives can serve as effective power discourses, especially if they recycle the language used in the larger, institutional discourses (Souto-Manning, 2014). She proposes that, "when individuals make sense of their experiences through narratives, they bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional) situations in place" (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 163).

The analysis process involved the transcription of the interviews, coding and identifying institutional discourses appearing in personal narratives, and member checking to both ensure transcription accuracy and to encourage the participants to question, challenge, and change the institutional discourses of power and the status quo (Souto-Manning, 2014). The interviews were transcribed and sent to the individual participants for review and feedback. During the in vivo coding process, themes were grouped according to the underlying power dynamics that were being described by the

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participants. For example, in creating the theme "Faculty > Staff" all the descriptions were of how faculty had more power and were more valued and held less accountable than staff. In the theme around staff feeling "Undervalued," the descriptions were around a group that had power that was not acknowledged by others in the institution. Additionally, during the analysis process, the normative narratives at an institutional/system level were identified and highlighted when these normative discourses appeared in the individual's narratives.

Mumby asks critical researchers to focus on answering, "In what ways do narrative performances embody contradictions that suggest possibilities for insight and organizational change?" (Mumby, 2004, p. 246). The practical application of the data from the proposed study not only served as a prompt for the participants to complicate prevailing narratives in their institutions and in higher education, in general, but also lead to recommendations that higher education institutions might adopt to create a workplace that is more respectful of staff.

Limitations

Limitations of the critical inquiry methodological approach include: the assumption that societal problems, such as rankism, can be explained by sociological theories and unjustifiable relations of power (Freundlieb, 2000) and that the experiences may only be true for that participant, that participant's role, that specific institution, or that particular type of institution (ex: public community college). A limitation common to interviews is that an individual's description of their experiences is limited by language, which may not adequately capture the individual's experiences and feelings.

Additionally, interviewers can implicitly and explicitly influence interviewees' responses and can lead to a social desirability bias (Fowler, 2014, p. 111).

Conclusion

Clark (2008) notes that the more fundamental of a role that rank plays in the mission of an organization, such as in higher education, the more important it is to distinguish between rank and rankism, especially as rankism by faculty, administrators, and staff can cause problems that would compromise the educational mission. By examining staff experiences, the understanding of rankism and its effects allow higher education faculty and staff to take a leading role in addressing it, just as they have for other issues of exclusion.

Chapter Four: Findings

In order to address the research question, "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism and the meaning they make of those experiences?" and the sub-question, "What narratives, both explicit and implicit, emerged about rankism?" the interview transcriptions were coded for "structures of power," "meaning," "explicit narrative," and "implicit narrative." The final research sub-question, "What changes can an institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?" is discussed in the following chapter. Using in vivo coding, themes emerged in participants' responses and are discussed, in detail, below.

Structures of Power

In response to the question, "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism?" all of the participants reported a hierarchical structure in their institution, with many reporting to other staff/administrators and several reporting directly to faculty members. Hierarchies are routinely the organizational system used by colleges and universities (Clark, 2008; Fuller, 2003, 2006, & 2012). Fuller (2012) notes that hierarchies and rank will always be a part of our society and are a routine organizational structure; rank is neither good nor bad and earned rank can indicate experience, skill, and proficiency. Problems arise when the abuse of power and the abuse of rank that comprise of rankism occur and damage relationships (Clark, 2008; Fuller, 2003, 2006, & 2012).

Additionally, the literature indicates that staff conditions in higher education are often hierarchical, with systematic gender and race biases, unfair treatment, subjective evaluations, threats, and bullying (Anonymous, 2006; Acker, 1990). There are concerns about women and people of color holding the lower-ranking positions, with a silence around many institutions' lack of a commitment to multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusiveness from all the stakeholders (Berk, 2017b; Lumby, 2013).

Regardless of their position, participants recounted examples of being made clearly aware of their place in hierarchy, having an institutional culture that was shaped by the leadership, and feeling that money (whether in terms of compensation, departmental resources, or income generated) equated to their worth.

Place in Hierarchy: Faculty > Staff

"Yeah, when I hear 'rankism,' I think of faculty demeaning staff. That's just like how I envisioned it happening in a university'" (Eric, August 29, 2018 *note: all participant names have been changed). All the participants reported having a hierarchical reporting structure in their institutions, with higher-ranking positions holding more decision-making power. As Olivia described it, "In higher education there's even within the word, there's higher – hierarchy" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). As this study focused on mid- to low-ranked staff experiences, all of the participants reported to someone up a level in their hierarchy.

What was common among the participants was that when they experienced derogatory interactions that made their place in the hierarchy clear, tenure-track faculty members were the most frequent transgressors. In most of the participants' experiences at

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their institutions, faculty were considered higher ranking than staff. Olivia stated, "Faculty can do whatever they want…no one will tell them what to do. Deans won't tell them what to do…so faculty are king" (Olivia, August 17, 2018).

For example, at her current university, Amy described the staff's place in the hierarchy as "like a caste system almost. I hate to put that kind of negative connotation on it, but that's really what it feels like" (Amy, September 5, 2018). She described her job at a previous university as a place where faculty and staff interacted more regularly and that it didn't have the blatant obviousness of the hierarchy at her current institution. In her previous position, Amy witnessed a professor call a staff member a "bitch" and human resources intervened immediately with the professor facing consequences for their actions. However, at her current institution, Amy has witnessed and experienced "horrible behavior" from faculty towards staff with zero repercussions and, when she has brought these interactions up to her supervisor, has been told that she had no reason to complain, or even bring it to anyone's attention, because faculty behavior is the way it is and it is most likely that Amy is the problem (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Linda expressed a similar situation at her college where interactions highlighting her relatively low-ranking position have come from faculty members, rather than from other staff. She added that this also extended to behaviors, not just verbal interactions. Even though she works at a small school that has a sense of community and an expectation of pitching in to help, she gave the example of the school putting on a large event with everyone working hard to make it happen. However, the faculty members left as soon as the event ended and the staff were left behind to stay late to clean up (Linda,

August 19, 2018). In this situation, faculty actions reflected a division between which employees were expected to pitch in and help and which employees could act as guests.

Both Melanie and Brian separately shared experiences with faculty actions that portrayed faculty interacting with staff in a transactional, rather than relational way. Melanie said, "We all get codes for using copy machines and so on. There have been some faculty who felt like it should not be their responsibility to make copies of things for their classes and so they would leave it for someone else to do: me or other staff" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). Brian's work in the public relations and marketing department frequently included faculty dropping off flyers and saying, "I need 50 copies of this" without wanting him to provide any collaboration or creative suggestions. He also noted that there was, "No 'please' just 'do this. Make copies.' It was very transactional and lead to us making deliberate 'mistakes' on the things we could control: 'oops, we misspelled your name' 'oops, it's going to take an extra three weeks to do this for you' 'oh, is it *that* important that you be referred to as doctor? I didn't know'" (Brian, March 25, 2019). The participants expressed a desire to be seen as professional peers to their co-workers, rather than as just a role that is treated in a transactional way.

Rachel described her college as having a long history of staff being less valued than faculty. She shared, "the former department secretaries would babysit the faculty's children, they would get [the faculty's] dry cleaning done. There was one story that at an all-male college that a woman secretary had to go to a dorm to use the bathroom, like a separate building to use the bathroom, and that her faculty required her to enter the back door so that she wouldn't be seen" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). She also told how there

are faculty members she has worked with for years that will not say "hi" to her in the hallway. Rachel felt that the institutional valuing of faculty over staff had been in place so long that it was no longer visible to the administration. She also felt that this has led to some problems with how staff are treated, which she felt were predictable, based on the history and structure of her college.

In his experiences with faculty and the staff's position in the hierarchy at his institution, Eric noted that "a lot of the experiences of rankism happened within the academic areas where you get a big mix of faculty and staff and I think there's just an understood culture within academe, not even just at [University], that universities exist for the faculty" (Eric, August 29, 2018). Hannah related times that she had seen faculty members verbally abuse staff members. She has been working to feel more able to acknowledge and call out when people are being demeaning. Overall, she was concerned about the "communication cues that people leave their place of work feeling really crappy that day because people have said stuff and you internalize some of it, a lot of people do, and so you're not able to do the best work you possibly can. It's a hard place to be and as a faculty member, I would hope that folks could...say, 'God, this is important and maybe the way that I talk to people really does impact how they function in their workplace'" (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

All the participants remarked on the division between faculty and staff and the staff's position in the hierarchy was considered as "less than" that of the faculty. Sophie speculated that tenure played a major part in rankism from faculty:

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Tenure is a part of rankism. It's a protection, it's an invisibility cape, an invincibility cape, whatever you want, where once you have it, you're good to go. And that is not offered to staff, so there we already have a division. I know the argument is, "Well, if we don't have tenure, then we could get fired if we're studying something unconventional." But really, staff can get fired also for doing that. There's no accountability and no repercussion and that, again, adds more to the dramatic apartheid. And I think that's the right word for this (Sophie, January 15, 2019).

Finally, Michelle and Denise summed up their experiences with faculty and the status of staff in the hierarchy. Denise discussed how, at her institution, faculty are so high-ranking that despite "multiple super-embarrassing incidents with this particular faculty member…the faculty are protected so strongly that our college is literally in a headlock and can do nothing" (Denise, August 31, 2018). Michelle stated that faculty at her university said, "'Oh, I'm tenured, so it doesn't matter what I say to you, I can say whatever and they're not going to get rid of me' or, 'I get paid more and have more responsibilities, so I'm going to treat you like a lower-level person or lower-class citizen' or, 'Technically, my position is higher than yours'" (Michelle, September 15, 2018). In these instances, faculty members have been very aware of their place in the institutional hierarchy in relation to the staff and have communicated it verbally and through their actions.

The recognition that faculty are seen as higher ranking than staff and the frequency of rankist interactions by faculty is discussed in the literature. Faculty can view

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staff as inferiors, because one's academic identity is ranked according to the amount of education one receives (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Henning et. al., 2017; Young et al., 2015). While not all of the interviewees had interactions with faculty as blatant as these, the participants were very aware - and were explicitly made aware - of where in the hierarchy staff, as a whole, were located: as less than faculty.

Knowing Your Place/Powerlessness

One sub-theme that arose when discussing where staff were located in their organizational hierarchy was about knowing their own place as an individual. Many participants expressed feeling powerless when they were involved in interactions with higher-ranked individuals at their college, whether faculty, administration, or other staff members. When Linda started at her institution, she was a student worker before she was hired as a staff member. She said that, perhaps because of the "student worker" tag, she feels she is not listened to and that her opinion is not valued. When she had a disagreement with a higher-ranking employee, she was told, "She's a vice president. If she tells you to do something, you do it. I don't care if you don't like her but you need to swallow it. Bitch about it later but you're not in a position to make that decision" (Linda, August 19, 2018). In a later exchange with her supervisor about this same vice president, Linda said "I was told that I 'need to learn my place.' I retorted with, 'So just because I'm a front desk worker means that I don't get treated with respect?' and that made her silent for a brief moment before continuing on" (Linda, August 19, 2018). The situation was eventually resolved when the vice president moved on to a different institution, but Linda's interactions and questions were never addressed.

Melanie is in charge of setting up committee interviews of students applying for a Fulbright award. She brings in faculty to help interview as they have been helpful in the past, treated the students fairly and kindly, and offered useful feedback to the students. However, Melanie described one round of interviews where the two invited faculty members deliberately asked questions and made comments which made the students cry. Melanie said, "It's not about making the applicants cry, it's about helping them get better and I don't have a lot of power in those situations other than to try and stop whatever is happening in the interview setting and to not ask that person back. Because I'm also not going to try and call somebody out right in the middle of all that, too. That wouldn't go very well" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). In a different situation, Melanie described where staff were relocated into a new building and the Vice Provost decided that based on the classifications of staff, some would have a shared plan workspace while others would have private offices. This was regardless of the staff member's type of work, where an open plan might not be appropriate, or if the staff member previously had a private office or not. The Vice Provost made the decision unilaterally and Melanie said, "There was a lot of hurt feelings...and a level of discomfort with that and not much we could do because we all reported up to this woman" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). When in situations with higher-ranking individuals, staff are frequently in a position where they feel powerless to address issues that arise.

Rachel described her working environment as a group of staff who don't have coworkers, as they each work solely with their department's faculty and with a department chair position that rotates every few years. She noted, "I don't think there's a

week where I don't have some experience, even if it's just a microaggression of someone reminding me of my status" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). When she encountered some serious difficulties with a faculty member (detailed later), she found that her department chair was powerless, as well. Rachel said, "if you have a rotating chair, they have no real power. It's a problem for them, they have no incentive for challenging their colleagues…the easiest way [to solve a problem] is to find means to put pressure on the staff person, because they are isolated anyway. It's very predictable based on the structure and the set up" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). At her organization, powerlessness to effect changes has become embedded in the structure of the college.

Individual feelings of powerlessness also appeared during interactions with other, high-ranking, staff which served to remind the participants of their individual place in the hierarchy. Cathy's position reported to the Chancellor's Assistant at her university. While the working relationship started off fine, it eventually became unpleasant to the point of Cathy taking another position in a different department. The Chancellor's Assistant went so far as to tell a newly hired employee, "'I'm sorry, but I don't do nice. I'll do nice for the Governor's Office or the President's Office'" (Cathy, August 24, 2018). When Cathy started being demeaned and belittled by the Chancellor's Assistant, she felt powerless. "Because she was the Chancellor's Assistant, it's like, 'How do I go about this?'…Because of her position, she just thought she was above the law…I never felt like I could win against a Chancellor's Assistant. I just thought it was a no-win" (Cathy, August 24, 218).

Nicole also had a similar experience with an Assistant Vice President, where unsolicited remarks made it clear that the Assistant Vice President did not like her. It has gotten to the point where, when they are in meeting together, the only recourse Nicole feels she has is to remain silent.

> I don't say anything; it's not worth whatever might come back at me in the next moment. I've had her come in my office, one time, to apologize for being inappropriate, but the excuse was that she was in pain, like a physical pain. I accepted that and thanked her for the expressed thought and was sorry that she was hurting, but I knew good and well the truth behind it, because it has been so repetitive…that I'm not sure she could admit to (Nicole, January 5, 2019).

These experiences with people further up in the hierarchy left the individuals feeling powerless and clearly aware of their place at their institution.

The feeling of "knowing their place" and the staff members' powerlessness extends beyond conflicts and into everyday interactions. As an administrative employee for the Dean, Amy noticed that people were slow to respond to her emails and would sometimes never respond at all. However, she noticed that, "if I dropped [Dean's] name in an email, it got done even faster. People who were notoriously four or five days to answer emails, suddenly were two to three hours at answering" (Amy, September 5, 2018). By using her Dean's name, Amy was able to borrow enough power to make her job easier. In describing another everyday interaction, Michelle recounted a conversation with an administrator: "I was very busy and a higher-up, he needed [technical] help. And he's like, 'Let me sit you down and talk to you about life. Oh, you probably don't make

enough money to stay at this hotel but it'd be really cool if you did, if you ever travel to this place' and I'm like, 'Look, you know I'm busy and I need to do stuff.' 'No, no, no, stay here." And I'm thinking, 'This feels like a total abuse of power because, I don't know, I feel awkward to say anything because you're in a position where you could decide if I stay or not, for no reason" (Michelle, September 15, 2018). When staff are in a position where they feel powerless to respond or to get everyday aspects of their job completed, they are made keenly aware of their individual place in the organization.

In addition, Hannah noted the non-verbal cues that individual staff used to signal their place in the hierarchy. In Hannah's day-to-day experiences, she noted that in any campus-wide meetings, "you could tell who had more power and who didn't based on how they presented themselves in the room, how they talked over others, or not…how they are trained and how they are talked to is just different" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). At her organization, and likely others, there are a variety of cues to staff to signal their place.

Interviews with staff members highlighted the various ways they have learned to know their place in a hierarchy, both their individual position and where staff, as a whole, are considered to be: lower than faculty and administration. This powerlessness in being lower-ranking is reflected in the literature, as those who are less powerful and less influential are often faced with greater inequities, which often stem from the preferences of the dominant, high-power group (Lumby, 2013). Frequently, these preferences appear so normal to those in power that it is not viewed as an issue, especially since more powerful people are not as easily injured by insults from below (Lumby, 2013; Rowe,

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1990). Many of the overt interactions the participants experienced were either with tenure-track faculty members speaking down to them and/or acting in ways that expressed that staff were lower ranking than faculty or with staff who were protected in some way from the consequences of their actions towards a lower-ranked staff member.

Culture from the Top Down

The second theme that arose from examining the structures of power that surround and shape employees' experiences of rankism was the idea that culture flows from the leadership at the top of the organization downward. This is reflected both in the background of the administration and in the policies that are or are not enforced. This culture at the top then informs how managers and their employees interact the rest of the way down the hierarchy.

The background of the administration influences what is considered a "normal" culture in an organization. Hannah noted, "I think it's probably important to note the way that I've experienced administrators who have come from a faculty background and the way that they think about how to treat staff comes from a faculty perspective, oftentimes. And unless they have had really key conversations or gotten some experience from other folks, that divide becomes even bigger and faculty are then allowed to perpetuate these same kinds of microaggressions to staff members. I feel there's a great injustice there" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Additionally, Rachel recounted how, at a staff question and answer session with the President at her university, a staff member, "asked about staff morale and the President responded that there are some staff on campus, who hold PhD's themselves, that for reasons of ego like to sow discord because they're failed

academics" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). This distinction between staff and faculty with doctorates from the leadership perpetuates the treatment of staff throughout the entire organization.

The background of leadership also extends into the various identities they hold and which are also a contributing factor to the culture of a campus. At Eric's institution, he noted that, "it's a lot of white men running the show who don't really understand the idea of inclusive excellence, don't understand how it applies to what they're doing at the (University), and think that they're sort-of above it" (Eric, August 29, 2018). Olivia agreed and said, "I think that titles are definitely connected to [rankism]. Rankism is very tied in to sexism and racism, ageism and all those things because you usually have old, white dudes at the top" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). She then talked about how a group of male Deans and Directors across different departments began meeting exclusively together, having lunch together, and now bypass standard methods of communication and reporting lines: "they have secret meetings and everything just kind-of originates in the group and so they're getting a little infamous. I don't think they know that, I think that they just have to talk a lot, but there's been cases where the Dean will talk to the Facilities Director and then he's telling people who don't work for him what to do…and we've got these people who are running the whole administration, so everything just trickles all the way down" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). None of these staff reported directly to their President, but all of them noted how the background of their leadership was actively influencing the culture of their organizations.

An additional point that impacted culture, raised by several participants, was on what policies, both official and unofficial, were enforced. Melanie recounted an experience at her college:

> I remember a few years ago, we had something that came out that we have a policy on work/life balance. And we looked at each other like, "Oh, yeah, ok. Whatever that means." "We want you to work late" or "We're going to let this person go but everybody's job is going to take on part of it" and how is that part of work/life balance, exactly? I don't know. We have policies, but sometimes they don't seem to make very much difference. Somebody at the top needs to help make sure that, whatever that policy is, that we're going to follow it and have some way for people to talk to each other about it (Melanie, August 24, 2018).

In discussing which policies were enforced by the leadership, Nicole described how, at her university, the administration enforced an unofficial policy where faculty who had a reputation of being "diva-like" do not advance in their career there. "They're not promoted, that's just not the culture of [University]. They don't like that sort of thing; I don't think that the university believes that the best work will be done in that kind of environment" (Nicole, January 5, 2019). While this unofficial policy could help improve Nicole's campus climate, this expectation of faculty behavior could change with new leadership.

The culture created by the administration is reinforced further down the hierarchy by lower-level managers and by the staff members, themselves. In Melanie's college, she talked about how "there are some units where people feel like they're not treated as well.

I really think it's more about who's in charge and whatever message it is for their unit, the culture of their unit" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). In a more blatant example of how the culture is passed along, Sophie, a staff member working in reception at a medical center attached to a public university, became good friends with a master's level clinician student. However another clinician, who was a team lead, pulled Sophie's friend aside and said, "'You should not be friends with a receptionist, or a student, or anything like a lower staff member.' And it was point-blank stated that she should not co-mingle with staff and that it was frowned upon" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). Sophie now works with donors and thinking back on this incident, concluded with, "I've never had a donor make me feel bad like that made me feel bad. And they're definitely outside my 'rank' or my social circle. After that incident, I was only in the job for two or three more weeks" (Sophie, January 15, 2019).

Similarly to how the administration at her college was inconsistent in enforcing policies, Michelle's supervisor sent mixed messages about what was expected from staff in his department:

It was very confusing because I often felt like I was told one thing but it really meant something else. For example, my boss would travel a lot and I was like, 'Oh, I should be able to work from home,' but I didn't want to ask for that because of how it would be perceived. So there was a lot of mixed messaging for me to deal with and sometimes, if I misunderstood something, it became much bigger than it really should have…it was like walking on eggshells coming to

work, like some days, I'd be scared to come to work (Michelle, September 15, 2018).

As culture is replicated down through the hierarchy, it is beneficial for the leadership to be aware of what official, and unofficial, policies are being enforced.

While the participants talked about how culture originated with the administrators at their institutions, several interviewees noted that staff frequently work at a college far longer than many administrators do. Denise recounted how her co-worker told her, "'Don't worry, because administrators are temporary. All you have to do is do a good job and you're ok.' And those words were golden to me, because he was totally, totally right. In the 20 years that I've worked here, we're now hiring an Interim Dean, but that person will be my 13th Dean in the time that I've been at this school, from the time that I was a student employee up until today - a new one every two years" (Denise, August 31, 2108). The longevity of staff members also influences the culture, as they, too, interact with their own direct reports, such as student employees. Cathy described a high-ranking staff member who was excellent at her job while treating lower-ranked staff members horribly but, due to the turn-over in administration, was never held accountable. "The fact that she never had that horrible personality with the Chancellor, and there were three Chancellors while I was there, they never saw that…people come in and they were there a couple of years and then they were out of there" (Cathy, August 24, 2018). Similarly, Hannah described instances where staff would "talk down about student-workers, that 'I've got a graduate assistant that's just, oh my god.' And demeans their experiences as opposed to using that as a teachable opportunity, because I am, at my core, an educator, 'I get that

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you're frustrated, but seriously, this is their first job out of undergrad and they might need a little extra coaching. You've got to devote some time to that because if you don't, they are going to fail'" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). The longevity of staff careers in organizations means that staff, in turn, impact the culture. When they perpetuate a climate that disrespects lower-ranking positions, they are enacting rankism and further cementing it into their campus climate as a normal action.

The theme that culture is influenced from the top down is supported by the literature. Detert and Treviño (2010) found that the attitudes and behaviors of college leaders impact their campus culture and affect employees two to five levels below them in the hierarchy. These employees were aware of and noted the communication style and the use, or misuse, of the leader's authority (Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen, & Domans, 2017; Detert & Treviño, 2010).

Three additional sub-themes emerged in discussions about the top-down culture of the participants' workplaces: the exclusion of staff in governance decisions, how the problems staff faced, especially in regards to rankism, were invisible to those further up in the hierarchy, and the prevalence of unearned promotions over earned promotions.

Exclusion from Governance

The first sub-theme that arose in discussing their organization's culture was the staff's exclusion in governance decisions, both at an organizational level and in relation to their own position. Eric describes efforts of the staff council at his University to include staff in the various decision-making processes across the campus. He found it interesting that the staff council was considered a "special interest group" by the

administration, when the staff make up a considerable portion of the employees there. He noted that both in his department and in the institution, as a whole, any decision-making had to go through the faculty and that it, "definitely made me feel undervalued and devalued and then, again, as the whole staff. It sort-of made me ask the question, 'Why are we here, if not to participate in the decision-making processes within the school?'" (Eric, August 29, 2018). His view is that staff are growing in number, are becoming more professionalized, and are bringing more experience and advanced degrees to the positions across all of higher education and frequently have more student-facing experiences than some faculty do, especially over the summer. Because of the responsibilities of staff, they need to be involved in decision-making, especially when it affects staff (Eric, August 29, 2018).

Staff often have to navigate the consequences of having little to no decision-making powers in their institution. Melanie described a decision made by the administration that only Director-level employees or higher would receive certain communications from the central office. The problem was that Melanie, while a Director-level staff member, had a different title than "Director." Because of her title, the administration does not include her on emails and she continually misses important information that is pertinent to her job. When she brings this up, the email list is updated to include her. However, the email list is eventually updated again by the administration and she is again removed because of her title. It has been going for years and is a source of frustration for her that she is impacted by what she sees as an arbitrary decision from above (Melanie, August 24, 2018). Compounding the problem is that Melanie got a new

boss about six years ago who refused to talk with any of his staff except Melanie's peer, the Executive Director. The staff were frustrated to be cut out of both the communication and input process and that has left the staff in her department feeling that their voices aren't being heard (Melanie, August 24, 2018).

Mark described his organization as a "title hungry organization" where, "titles are king and EVERYONE just has to be a director…I'm the only one in my department who does not have a fancy title (I'm a Coordinator rather than Director) and what I'm realizing is that I am completely disrespected, overlooked, and delegated the most meaningless tasks because of my title. I have no say in any decisions even though I have been here for over nine years" (Mark, March 1, 2019). Mark deals with the ongoing consequences and resulting frustration of not having input into how his organization is run.

Finally, the lack of staff inclusion in governance decisions can trickle down to decisions made that impact individual staff members. Amy said that she, in general, "[has] a really challenging time feeling heard and valued and that what I'm saying matters" (Amy, September 5, 2018). Natalie describes a situation at her University that occurred a year before she began, where the administration decided to change the titles of all staff who were below Director-level to "Coordinator." While this was an improvement for some employees, for many staff, this was considered at least one step down, especially by those who had been managers. As the decision was made without input from the impacted staff, who were simply notified by a letter in the mail of their new title, there was a lot of anger and turnover that has resulted and morale among the staff is

still recovering. Natalie noted that, "higher ed can often create too many ranks in an effort to validate what people do, but also not to create bloat, they went through this process…and, apparently, that caused some significant trauma to people across the university. They're now starting to change the title structure to better match what people are actually doing" (Natalie, January 29, 2019). The new structure now involves the staff members giving input on what they believe their own titles should be, based on their responsibilities.

In another example of staff not being included in decisions that directly impact them, Linda described a situation where the Registrar at her college needed help in her office and had talked with the President about personnel options. The Registrar thought that Linda, at the time working in a receptionist capacity, might be interested in transitioning over to the Registrar's office. Before the Registrar had a chance to talk with Linda or with Linda's supervisor, or to get any feedback on the idea, the President told Linda she would be working for the Registrar. The transition has worked out well for Linda, but it was a surprise to be informed of her new role without having applied for a new position or have had any input on the situation. (Linda, August19, 2018).

While participants were aware that various levels of a hierarchy do have differing decision-making responsibilities, many were frustrated with decisions being made that impacted them and their work and not having any method for input, participation, or effective feedback on the decision-making processes on their campuses. The literature highlights this lack of staff engagement in organizational decision-making (Bendermacher et. al., 2019; Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012; Lumby, 2013). The

limited, and ineffective, efforts to include staff as equals in higher education leadership/decision-making processes through the idea of shared ownership and the use of distributed leadership have been examined (Bendermacher et. al., 2019; Lumby, 2013). Critics of distributed leadership have raised issues surrounding distribution of power, the marginalization of women and people of color, and of unequal opportunities (Lumby, 2013). Instead of an effort aimed at equality, distributed leadership can be seen as a way to reconcile staff to neoliberal conditions in the workplace by undertaking an ever-increasing workload without additional compensation or role/title change, to reconcile staff to the status quo, and to render troubling underlying power structures invisible (Lumby, 2013).

Invisible Problems

The second sub-theme that arose in discussing the culture of their organizations was the experience/belief that staff problems, especially when dealing with situations involving rankism, were invisible to those higher up in the organization. When participants discussed incidents, most stated that their institutions were not aware of or were oblivious to rankism and that the people involved swept incidents under the rug and acted as if nothing had happened. Natalie noted that, at her institution, "the complete obliviousness to [rankism] is something cultural" (Natalie, January 29, 2019). During one conversation with a faculty member, Denise said something that the faculty member interpreted as sarcastic and Denise has been dealing with the consequences without being able to bring it to the attention of her supervisors:

That precipitated a feud between me and this person that has lasted through two

Deans and four years. I'm not joking. So much hostility, so much nasty hostility.

Where I just can't get over it. There's no reconciliation of that relationship.

Immediately, I don't trust anything she says to me. I'm like, "You're not giving me

honest feedback and then you're chirping in the ear of every supervisor I have"

(Denise, August 31, 2018).

Coming to higher education from a background in other non-profit organizations,

Sophie observed, "I have *never* experienced rankism nor the politicking that goes on in

higher education – I think it's a systemic issue throughout higher education...at my

institution, I do feel like it's the staff that's making more of the effort to be aware of

rankism, because they are impacted by it. I don't see faculty making much headway in

that and I don't see the leadership doing anything about it, so I don't think the institution

thinks that's it's a problem" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). Eric agreed and said that in

dealing with instances of rankism, his institution either ignores it or shoves it under the

rug, without any active acknowledgement that anything was happening. (Eric, August 29,

2018). Nicole recounted a story of a colleague in a different department who had taken

over a position with high turnover and who ended up being bullied by her director for

over two years. When her co-worker brought up it to her supervisors, "they would not

listen to her so she finally just had to look for other positions outside of campus" (Nicole,

January 5, 2019). Participants frequently felt that their problems and their experiences of

rankism were invisible to those higher up in their institution.

Finally, in the final year of her career as a staff person at her institution, Cathy experienced a leadership transition in her department with a new Executive Vice Chancellor, who brought in a lot of new people as well as a new performance evaluation system that penalized more experienced employees, as their salaries cost more. After 27 years of excellent reviews, under the new system, Cathy was flagged for demotion. Despite challenges from both Cathy and Human Resources on the process, the new evaluation system remained in place and Cathy had no recourse except to either accept a significant pay cut on par with what she "should" be receiving as a staff member or to retire early. She noted that neither her supervisor nor their boss was backing her up, at all, so she chose to retire early. As she left her retirement party, she told her colleague, "not to threaten them, but not to think it can't happen to you, because it can. I never would have dreamed that it could be possible" (Cathy, August 24, 2018). In the end, Cathy noted that the administration still remains oblivious to what happened to her, despite having H.R. involved.

A large number of the participants had moved on from positions where the culture of the organization was to ignore problems, especially with rankism. As Hannah stated:

Perhaps to the world outside of higher ed [rankism] is invisible, is unseen, but I would have a tough time believing that anyone who has spent time professionally in higher ed, I would be surprised if they said they had never seen it…I think staff feel bitter and unsupported. I think faculty would say, 'I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't know this [rankism] was a thing.' And if it were to be brought up to the Chancellor or Provost, I don't know that it would be addressed.

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I'm sadly not optimistic that the institution would do much about it (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

When staff feel that their problems are not visible to those higher up in their institution, it can lead to staff leaving their positions. These descriptions of staff feeling invisible are reflected in the literature by Wells (2013), Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast (2012), and Young (forthcoming, 2019). Both Wells' and Young's studies focus on the invisibility of rankism, especially on women and people of color. Young (forthcoming, 2019) focused on the experiences of women of color as administrators in higher education. She noted that a common theme among participants in her study was a feeling of invisibility which feels demeaning and can distort these women's mode of being (Young, forthcoming 2019).

Unearned Promotions

The final sub-theme about institutional culture that emerged from the interviews was the prevalence of unearned promotions among staff. While several participants reported that staff promotions at their institutions were equitable and were seen as "earned" by those who received them, the majority of participants felt that staff promotions are generally unearned. As Denise puts is, "the difference between our administrative classified ranks of employee and who gets protection and all the opportunities, for instance, and how that gets decided has not been very equitable, it's been very subjective and difficult. It's kind-of hard to exist in a system where you feel like a second-class citizen at times" (Denise, August 31, 2018). Denise also noted that professional development experiences for staff members were scarce, which contributed

to a lack of equitable promotions (Denise, August 31, 2018). Hannah also stated her institution offered very little funds for staff professional development. She recounted that, at her institution, people who receive promotions are, "folks who represent the same ideology [as the administration]. It's just a buddy system. I think the Dean at the [College] is a part of that system and continues to perpetuate it" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Melanie noted a similar situation in her college, feeling that promotions were sometimes earned but "I also think it's about who you know and whether they like you. Sometimes it's definitely about skill, but that's not always the case" (Melanie, August 24, 2018).

Olivia was turned down for an earned promotion because her boss did not have a high enough title to accommodate what her new title would have been. She noted, "titles and actually hierarchy is very limiting to people's careers because it keeps them out of a promotion, because then it's determined by what happens to the person on top of you." (Olivia, August 17, 2018). Limiting career promotions based on the title of those higher in the institution feeds into the belief that promotions in an organization are not equitable.

Finally, Sophie noted that her institution only hands out cost-of-living raises each year, rather than merit-based increases or bonuses. She said, "if you can't give someone a dollar, give them some other form of change, like a title change, something that will help them strive to better themselves where they are. Otherwise, you get complacency and boredom like 'Oh, nothing's going to change so why should I change how I'm doing something if it's just functional?' I think that limits the whole institution's agility to

match a changing market" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). Multiple participants discussed how the lack of opportunities to advance in their career led them to leave that institution.

The theme about the prevalence of inequitable and unearned promotions on the participants' campuses is reflected in literature surrounding the mistaken idea that those who have higher status must be of higher quality. Status is seen as a signal of quality and how, frequently, improvement in status actually arises from circumstances, rather than from underlying qualities (Fuller, 2004; Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). An institution's practices surrounding promotions contributes to the culture from the top, down, that directly impacts staff members and their careers.

Money Equals Worth

The final theme that emerged in examining the structures of power that surround and shape staff members' experiences with rankism was the idea that money (whether in terms of compensation, departmental resources, or income generated) equated to their worth at their institution. Amy described it as:

> I can tell you that the staff members in [international studies] are paid better. And I think that people who work in different departments, especially "cash cows" as I call them, are treated better. I think that they are valued more because they bring in more. Being a very, very small department, no matter how prestigious it is, no matter how unique it is, we're not a "cash cow" so trying to get something done, it often gets put behind those who are from "cash cow" areas and they're treated with preferential treatment (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Amy noted that this treatment was similar to what she experienced at her previous institution. There, Amy first worked in a humanities department and then took a similar position in the health sciences department, which was considered the "cash cow" department (Amy, September 5, 2018). In her new role, she found that when she reached out to any other part of the university, she received help and responses much more quickly, and nicely, than she had in her role in the humanities department (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Olivia also talked about the treatment she received, as she works in a department that focuses on online learning for adults, which is very different than the main focus of the rest of school on traditional-aged, residential, undergraduate students. Because online learning is not part of the intuition's mission and is not bringing in traditional sources of income, such as on-campus housing fees, Olivia feels she is working against the system and that faculty do not listen to her when she talks about effective online pedagogical practices. She says, "freshman are our bread and butter so they [faculty and administration] do not want online classes in the regular semester, they do not plan to expand online learning." She says she has the non-endearing nickname of "Online Olivia" and that when she speaks to faculty and administration about her program, they get upset because she is interfering with established systems. She feels that the school decided they needed to have an online component to stay competitive, however, since it has brought in less income than expected, the program is no longer an institutional priority (Olivia, August 17, 2018). At the same time, her program is associated with the Business School and, "we've got all the money…[with] a precedent on campus of

[Business] College is hard to deal with, but also I do think that we carry some prestige on campus, so people aren't going to not work with us – they're just going to dread it" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). Olivia has experienced both the positive and negative sides of income-generating programs being highly valued at her institution.

Natalie described a current dispute her department is having over payment for parking. She works in graduate admissions and they partnered with undergraduate admissions to host a day where prospective students came to campus for information sessions and degree-specific programming. Natalie said the graduate admissions' office was charged $3,500 for parking, while the undergraduate admissions' office had the parking fees waived, "because they are the 'income generator' for the university, they don't pay for parking. So [our office] is working to say, 'we're not paying this bill because you don't charge undergraduate admissions and we bring in revenue, as well'" (Natalie, January 29, 2019). She noted that the different units of the university that are considered to be bigger revenue-generators get more perks and resources than the others.

Michelle, Eric, and Rachel stated their institutions treat the income-generating departments better than others. Michelle saw it in how quickly some department's requests for resources were met as well as being told explicitly that she, as a support staff member, needed to prioritize any requests from certain, income-generating areas of the college (Michelle, September 15, 2018). Eric noticed that renovations and new building construction occurred for departments like Business and Law, but that other departments were in older, non-renovated spaces. He said, "I do think there's something to be said for the fact that the money-makers of the institution, I think, are treated better. I don't have

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concrete evidence for this, there's just a sense around campus that places like Business

and Law are treated a little bit better than arts, humanities, social sciences, natural

sciences, and mathematics" (Eric, August 29, 2018). Rachel saw the difference of

treatment expressed through furniture and technology, "my predecessor was using, I kid

you not, an old fax machine with a phone handle as her copier and printer…and you

could tell that her furniture hadn't been replaced in 20, 25 years and so the resource

neglect is very, very clear" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). Additionally, when Rachel was

collecting money for the custodians at Christmas time, the Chair of her department called

it "panhandling," which she said definitely influenced the culture surrounding money and

the worth of staff (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

This theme of money equaling the participant's worth is also reflected in the

literature, as there is often the view that money is correlated to a person's worth, outside

of their role in an organization (Acker, 2012; Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012; Smith,

Mao, & Deshpande, 2016). Money can also serve as a proxy for "quality" in the

assumption that status, and corresponding higher compensation, is a signal of quality.

Since quality is often unobservable, employees will make judgments of co-workers based

on cues such as status/role, competence, popularity, and the size of the employee's office

(Lynn, et. al., 2009; Schwartz, 2014). Additionally, with the increasing impacts of

neoliberal practices and policies on higher education organizations, there has been a shift

towards the commodification of education, knowledge, and human capital and has

changed the focus of higher education from an educational need to generating revenue

(Gildersleeve, 2017a; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2000). The neoliberal commodification of

human capital, assumptions about an employee's "quality" and the view that a person's worth can be linked to their compensation, the rank of a staff member can be seen as proxy of their value. Viewing some positions in an organizational hierarchy as less important and filled by employees who are lower-paid, and assumed to be low-skill, creates the opportunity for rankism and to view to the employee filling that position as having less value as a person than those who are higher ranking.

While the majority of the participants were not in income-generating areas of their institutions, the few participants who were acknowledged that they were privileged and received special treatment across their campuses. The themes of money equaling their worth, experiencing culture as coming from the top down, and continually being reminded of their place in the hierarchy are all structures of power that surround and shape staff's experiences with rankism at their institutions.

Meaning Made from Experiences

In looking at the second half of the research question, "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism and the meaning they make of those experiences?" participants described what their experiences of rankism meant to them. Three themes emerged from the interviews: being undervalued, accepted divisions, and self-questioning.

Undervalued

After instances of rankism, a majority of the participants felt they were not valued by both the people they work with or by the institution. In dealing with her experiences with faculty and the meaning she has made of the experiences, Amy stated, "I think it has

to do with how people are valued on some level. I think if you appreciate staff and you treat them well and you treat them like human beings and colleagues, rather than minions, or you know, 'less than' …I think that would go a long way to [feeling valued]" (Amy, September 5, 2018). Amy further explained that her experiences in her current position are significantly different than those of her predecessor, who had a higher-ranking title (director versus manager). Amy says, "I felt really blown off, I felt really underappreciated and unvalued, is that even a word? Devalued? You know, it was quintessential of 'Well, [faculty] is up here and you're down here, so he's going to get away with whatever he wants and you're just not; you just have to suck it up and deal, buttercup'" (Amy, September 5, 2018). She has been questioning the impact the difference of titles held by her and her predecessor has had on how faculty value her role and how they treat the staff member in her position.

Both Linda and Hannah described the use of the word "just" felt devaluing when talking about staff. Linda felt that she was being described dismissively by her supervisor when she was told, "'Oh, you're just that position'" (Linda, August 19, 2018). Hannah, described her interpretation of rankism and of "just" as a descriptor:

I hear that as not only an intentional verbal attack, as such, but also, essentially, a microaggression and slights toward other people. It's tone of voice. It is taking a certain seat at a table or needing to close the door when people are walking by, like, "You're not invited." It's an inclusion and exclusion, to some extent. And using the word "just." Like "she's 'just' a such and such" as opposed to, "this is our department chair" (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

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Hannah went on to describe an encounter she had with a long-time faculty member who assumed that she was in charge of making coffee in the communal kitchen. However, the culture was that anyone who wanted coffee would make a pot, whether they were a student, staff, or faculty. Hannah was a Director and he had interrupted her in a conversation with her direct reports to ask her, "Is anybody making coffee?" She replied that no one had made any yet and that there were coffee grounds in the kitchen. He then acted as if it were her job to make him coffee, because her office was closest to the coffee pot. She ended the interaction by saying, "'if it hasn't been made yet, it's open for anybody to make a pot of coffee.' I refused to go and do it for him" (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

Reflecting on that incident, the meaning Hannah made from that was, "it meant that I was not at the same level as this other person. That what I was doing in that moment was less important than making him coffee" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Hannah described the role of a staff member as, "you feel like you're being crapped on all the time and whatever faculty's wishes are your command" and being part of a community that is frequently told, "'everything is about students and faculty.'" She felt that, based on her experiences of rankism, "they don't see the work that I do and understand what I'm capable of" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Brian came to a similar conclusion and said that when he had encountered rankism from a faculty member, he felt that it was because, "faculty just don't see the skills that staff have" (Brian, March 25, 2019). Sophie described it as a "lack of interest in what is going on around the organization and knowing that staff are putting their work life into making education

accessible" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). The participants felt undervalued when their contributions to their organization were not recognized.

Michelle described the meaning she made from her experiences as, "sometimes people don't value my opinion as much because it's like, 'Oh, you don't know what you're talking about, you don't have a master's or PhD.'" (Michelle, September 15, 2018). Natalie had a similar insight regarding the role education plays, as well as gender, "not only does it have to do with the rankism of title, it also has contributing levels of education and, in a lot of ways, gender" (Natalie, January 29, 2019). She then expanded her thought on how staff are undervalued:

> I think that has a lot to do with some of those diversity and inclusion trainings, especially around gender diversity, ethnic diversity. Basically, all of the schools I've worked at would come to a screeching halt if the staff members didn't show up one day. Faculty can't do the higher education piece on their own. I know a lot of really talented faculty who cannot organize anything other than coming to their class. They have brilliant knowledge but they just wouldn't have students in their class. So, figuring out a way for faculty to understand the value of those staff, I don't really know how to do that, though. Other than I really think that some of those staff I've worked with in higher ed need to unionize and just walk off the job one day and let the faculty figure it out. And they'll realize that maybe they were doing some things (Natalie, January 29, 2019).

Participants discussed how a lack of compensation or growth abilities made them feel undervalued, as well. Eric stated, "the fact the we were so egregiously underpaid and

still are, to some extent, is telling. And the fact that there are very few opportunities for professional growth within the university. I think universities really need to figure out what they're doing with staff" (Eric, August 29, 2018). He also noted, "I think it's hard to change the culture around a perception that a group, a growing group of people, are not worthy of certain things or certain tasks" (Eric, August 29, 2018). Offering professional growth opportunities and fair compensation are ways an institution can help staff to feel they are valued.

Some participants described experiences where staff were simply not recognized or named. Robin described the shift in language when a new President arrived at her institution, "our new president came from more of a staff position at his previous school and he has made it very clear any time we talk as a community, that it's 'faculty AND staff AND students.' Before, it was just all about 'faculty and students' and staff were never mentioned, we weren't even being named and that made my work feel so invisible" (Robin, February 17, 2019). William described an awards ceremony where the staff were starkly undervalued:

> We had an awards ceremony where they were handing out awards to distinguished faculty and staff who were being recognized for their contributions for the previous year. The department has this focus on justice, equality, and inclusion and the Dean got up and went into great detail about each of the faculty members receiving awards. A lot more detail than was in the little bios. You could hear the pride and affection for these faculty and the good work they had done. When it was time for the staff awards, the Dean's Assistant came up to the

podium. And the Assistant didn't know the staff, so there was no further information about them and he was mispronouncing their names. And it's like, "Really? Do you think no one notices the discrepancy in how these two groups of people are being treated? You can't even get their names right?" It was really glaringly obvious about who was important enough to have a personal connection and what their position in the hierarchy is. I mean, it would have been great if the Dean had given out all of the awards, especially if he could've taken the time to get to know the staff, too. But instead, it was handed over to the Assistant and the Assistant either didn't have the time, or care to, check with the recipients on how to pronounce their names. And this is just one instance – it's pretty indicative of the overall culture. In spite of all the talk about equity, equality, and inclusion, there is this hierarchy that really highlights what the institution feels about my role as a staff person. It's disheartening (William, January 19, 2019).

In another example of an institution undervaluing staff, Melanie talked about a co-worker who was retiring after 25 years and had asked about getting "Emeritus" status so she could have library access, parking, and other similar services. After a lot of debate, she was denied. Melanie and other staff members were frustrated with the decision because, "it really raises a question about who really gets Emeritus status and why…I don't think that this particular woman would have done much with it, she just had given a lot of herself and her time to the university over a long period of time. She wanted to be paid that respect" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). At institutions where staff have long

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careers, revisiting the policies about granting emeritus status to include staff could help them feel their long-term contribution to the organization are recognized and valued.

Finally, Olivia told the story of a long-time employee working in the dining hall who went out of her way to support students and act like a "mom away from home" for them. Olivia was at an event where the President of her college was talking about the people around campus who make students feel welcome and there was a picture of the dining hall woman on the podium. While the President was talking, Olivia kept thinking, "say her name!" But the President never named the woman even though Olivia feels like the reason they have a campus climate that is so supportive of students is because of people exactly like her. She was left wondering why the President, or the institution, fails to name the staff who are doing good things at her university (Olivia, August 17, 2018).

When recounting their experiences, the meaning that was conveyed to many of the participants was that they were treated that way because they are not valued by their institution. Findings in the literature reflect this with staff reporting feelings of being unappreciated (Florentahl & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012) and staff being told they produce nothing of value (Kim, 2017). The literature also examines the flip side of this theme, from how it looks when positive: Kleiner (2004) looked at how rankism affects the business sector and noted that studies of people on successful, diverse teams found they would treat other people as worthy of respect, belonging, and being taken seriously, no matter their role at the organization.

Staff Are Not as Educated

"Twenty minutes later, she called my phone and the condensed version is she told me that because I wasn't an academic, I wouldn't understand the importance of having a PhD behind a name" (Linda, August 19, 2019). A sub-theme that emerged around discussions of feeling undervalued were the assumptions made about staff generally being less educated than the faculty and administration. Some staff experienced their career trajectories stalling because they were told they could not advance into a higher position without a graduate degree or a doctorate. Additionally, the assumption that staff are generally uneducated can affect how staff are perceived and treated. As Cathy put it, "the higher the degree, the better the attitude, or rather, treatment" (Cathy, August 24, 2018).

Olivia has a PhD and she noted that, "if somebody doesn't call me 'doctor,' I'm not upset, but people work really hard for that and I can see how people, especially in marginalized positions, get treated differently [based on their perceived level of education]" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). Sophie's experience was that, as a staff member with a bachelor's degree, "within my first year of working here, it was made *very* clear that I'm one of the least-educated people on staff, where most people have master's or doctorates, and it was a humbling moment…even though I only have a bachelor's, I'm a director level, so it kind-of equals that out, it's the equalizer" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). Michelle reported a similar observation that many of the staff at her institution only had bachelor's degrees and "when people with master's or doctorates did something a little

bit wrong, it's like 'it's really personal and like you're treating me a certain way [because of my level of education]'" (Michelle, September 15, 2018).

Eric, too, saw examples of this at his institution: "I do think that there can be a faculty perception that if somebody has a PhD then, 'Oh, they're qualified.' There's still, I think, a little bit of faculty elitism which leads to rankism around, 'not only do I have a PhD…but I'm a faculty member, I'm a professor – even if you have a PhD, you're not a professor'" (Eric, August 29, 2018).

Both Rachel and Brian have PhD's and discussed how differently that impacted their interactions with faculty members. Rachel found her PhD made no difference in how she was treated. Faculty assumed she was less educated and she recounted, "I have a PhD and I can't tell you how many times a faculty will stop mid-sentence to define a word they just used for me and I'm like, 'I know'" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). However, when Brian came into his new position, his staff were having difficulties working with faculty members and were complaining of being mistreated. He found that he, "didn't have the same experience with the faculty, but then I had been a professor and had a PhD and being introduced as Dr. [Name] to the faculty, I think that made me more of a peer" (Brian, March 25, 2019).

In thinking about the perception that staff are less educated, Hannah described it as, "there's very much a sense of elitism with what degrees you hold at the academy and I know that was the case with staff holding bachelor's degrees vs. master's degrees. I can imagine that only exponentially happening at the master's and doctoral level" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Hannah recounted working with two faculty members on a project

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and how much she enjoyed working with one faculty member, who encouraged her to be more creative. At the same time, the other faculty member treated Hannah in a condescending, passive-aggressive way. Hannah said, "it dawned on me, about my second year through with working with her and through the program, that academically, I had more education than she did. And still that didn't change how she saw me" (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

When Hannah did complete her PhD, she was surprised how after the ceremony, some faculty completely changed how they treated her: "some of the folks that I worked with were very congratulatory, as if I had never worked with them as a staff person. It was bizarre, so bizarre, and then the Dean came up and gave me a hug and congratulated me and I went, 'oh my god, did I just grow wings and start flying? Because you were nasty to me'" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Amy also saw this play out with doctoral students' interactions with faculty. Once the students were awarded their doctorates, she saw how the "professors take them more seriously, I think that professors are much more chummy-chummy with them. I think that the distinction between them is smaller than the distinction between those of us [staff] who don't have a PhD" (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Similarly, Natalie did note that, at her institution, even though she should be the contact person for her program, many faculty go above her to the Associate Dean. She assumes it is because "she's got a PhD and I think there's some of that rankism in education, as well, that people with more advanced degrees, faculty tend to go to them rather than to the people who will actually know the information" (Natalie, January 29, 2109). She also mentioned she had witnessed how the staff who served as academic

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advisors were treated, in spite of them having PhDs. Because several of the advisors also served as adjunct faculty, she witnessed them be treated as "less than" by the faculty. She said, "if you're an advisor, that's a different title than Associate Director or, you know, if you have an Associate Dean with a PhD, it's different than an academic advisor with a PhD who is an adjunct. I think there's a combination of title and education that can influence how you are treated" (Natalie, January 29, 2019).

The focus and assumptions on the education levels of staff members is also found in the literature, as staff frequently take on an identity associated with their status at the university which is related to the amount of education they have attained (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Young, et al., 2015). For example, those with doctorate degrees are more privileged than those staff with lesser, or no, degrees (Anonymous, 2006; Berk, 2017a; Young, et al., 2015). The meaning made by many of the participants after experiencing instances of rankism is that they were not a valued part of their institution. Whether it was from having their input discounted, not having their skills acknowledged, being deprecated for their level of education, or even being denied emeritus status after a full career at an institution, staff felt that their work was undervalued and not seen as important to their organization as other work was.

Accepted Divisions

The second theme that emerged in discussions about the meaning made from staff member's experiences was "accepted divisions." Many of the participants thought that rankism was a normal expression of the environment they were in with clear divisions between staff, faculty, and administration. Rachel thought that since her university was in

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competition to be the top-ranked institution for their category and was proud of its elite status that this elitism and competition trickled down into the internal environment. She explained, "It's very predictable based on the structure and the set up…I realize there's a systemic part, too, that is just the way the organization is set up, at least for the folks in my role, that we don't really have a recourse" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Rachel also noted that the divisions between faculty and staff have gotten so bad, last year her college hired an external company to survey all 1,000 of the employees in regards to morale and turnover. When the results came back, how faculty were treating staff was among the top five major issues. The head of the consulting company gave a presentation after the results came in and said, "'Staff who work in higher ed often report feelings of being treated like they're second-class citizens…but at [College], and I don't use this word lightly, it's a caste system here. The classism is built into the institution'" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). The survey found that Dining Services and Facilities staff had the worst experiences, as they were also additionally dealing with rankism from students as well as faculty, especially in their work in dorms and in the dining center. Rachel mentioned that now the administration has quantitative data from the survey, they are no longer ignoring the problems of the ingrained divisions within the school.

Sophie echoed the idea of staff having no recourse for issues across the division between faculty and staff. At her institution, "inclusivity is only thought of racially and problematic behavior only as sexual harassment, so there's nothing that's stated about where someone ranks or how someone behaves in that manner beyond 'If your supervisor sexually harasses you, you don't have to go to your supervisor to report it.' Beyond that,

there's not a lot of thought put to these issues and what to do" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). At her organization, the division between faculty and staff is accepted and fully embedded into the structure of how faculty, staff, and the administration interact.

Linda also realized that the divisions between staff and faculty are fairly fixed at her institution. She assumed that the interactions she had dealt with in her position as a receptionist were because she was young, but she found that "as the years have gone on, I've noticed that those divisions are *deeper* and I don't know if it was 'young eyes, rose-colored glasses' and being optimistic. But also when I was younger, I thought I was the bottom of the totem pole, 'You're 22, you're coming out of college,' and I am such a non-confrontational person, I just went, 'ok, that's how it is; fine'" (Linda, August 19, 2018). Many of the participants felt that both the divides and much of the resulting treatment of staff were embedded and were just the way things were at their institution.

Eric pointed out that the idea of professional staff is relatively new in higher education. It has taken generations for these divisions to build up and it will likely take generations for them to be changed (Eric, August 29, 2018). Amy said something similar, "If there wasn't such a chasm between them and us, I think that would go a long way to [creating a climate that is respectful of staff role]. How you create that, how you demolish a Grand Canyon that's been growing since the 1800s, I have *no* idea" (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Helping Others

A sub-theme that came up around the topic of division was the idea of helping others, whether that be staff or students, as a way of creating positive meaning after

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experiencing rankism. Nicole said of staff, "we have to take care of each other, we're not going to get it from [administration], you know. We have to take care of each other" (Nicole, January 5, 2019). Gina stated that, for her, no matter what she experienced from the faculty and administration at her college, it was worth it, given the appreciation of the students:

When they come back on campus, who do they stop and see? Not the faculty. They stop and talk with the staff who were working here when they were taking classes. It's worth it to see these students and alumni succeed in their lives and knowing that I had a part, however small, in that (Gina, February 19, 2019).

Denise reflected on her experiences and decided that all employees in higher education need to evolve and to demonstrate healthy ideas of respect and put them to work, not just with staff, but including student employees as well. She described her school's environment as a lifeboat, with people shoving their rowing partners: "We need to look to the people who need the most, not what we can get for ourselves the most or what's the best for us…I would like to get better at serving others, which is really what I'm doing in my job. I don't have my own children to go home to, this is it for me" (Denise, August 31, 2018). Multiple participants stated that helping others, especially students, as the reason why they started to, and continue to, work in higher education, in spite of the negative experiences they have had.

In most of the interviewers' experiences, there were divides between staff, faculty, and the administration. These divides are also reflected in the literature in the 2009 study by Trammel and Gumpertz. The authors noted many incidents of

microaggressions based on: "senior faculty vs. junior faculty, staff vs. faculty, male vs. female, minority vs. nonminority, and STEM vs. non-STEM" (Trammel and Gumpertz, 2012, para. 2). These divides have been part of the participants' organizations for so long that some of the participants, when describing the meaning made from their experiences, would point to the divisions as to why rankism was occurring.

Self-Questioning

The third theme that appeared in examining staff's meaning-making of their experiences was the idea of self-questioning. For example, multiple participants questioned whether they misunderstood what occurred or if what happened was because of some other identity they hold (gender, person of color, younger/older than others in department, education level, socio-economic status, etc.). Sophie described by wondering "what is the difference between generic complaining and processing vs. legitimate 'this is problematic?'" (Sophie, January 15, 2019). After experiencing rankism, in response, many of the participants would question their own interpretations and expectations of how to be treated in their organization.

Similarly, in thinking about her experience with the faculty member who expected her to make him coffee, even though the expectation was for everyone to make their own, Hannah began questioning the different possible reasons why that incident occurred:

So I caught myself with a, "Wait, was this a student thing? Was this a staff thing? Was this a woman thing?" And it was very off-putting. After he left, my colleague and I both acknowledged "Wow, that was really weird" and wondering was that his experience at other institutions? Is this an age thing? This particular faculty

member was very old-school and perhaps that's just the way things were and worked at a previous institution. It was very awkward, very awkward (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

Rachel described the aftermath of her multiple-month-long altercation with a faculty member which resulted in her taking a new position elsewhere in the university and taking a stress-related medical leave: "just the way they handled it, I kept sitting there like, 'Am I in bizarre-o world?'" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). Another way that self-questioning appeared was when Michelle described how she started feeling like she was acting a role:

And I don't know if that's because I was in [educational support] or because I'm a woman or because I am a woman of color, you know, like I didn't know. And so sometimes I would just avoid interactions with certain people or, with certain people I would just do it. Whether it would take longer, whatever, but it definitely affected how I would perform my job with certain people. And in the back of my mind, it's like, "Oh, it's this person calling. So I have to act a certain way to help them" or, "It's this person, so they get mad if I talk with them on the phone too long, so I have to go all the way up to [to their office]." …[It was] really draining. Like physically and mentally because I felt like I often had to perform for people and that was a lot, you know, physically but emotionally, too. Because being at an institution that's all about, "We should look into social justice" or "Think about the minority cultures and what's going on with them." It was just, yeah, it was

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very mentally draining because it's like here I'm at this place that says, I don't

have to act, but often I do (Michelle, September 15, 2018).

When faced with rankism, some of the participants would question themselves

and whether they had misunderstood what was happening or whether it was because of

their role in the institution, race, gender, age, or other identity. This self-questioning is

seen in the literature in the topic of intersectionality because microaggressions occur based

on race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other identities (Acker, 2012; Berk 2017a

and 2017b; Fuller, 2003 and 2006; Wells, 2013; Yamada, 2007; Young, forthcoming

2019). This self-questioning, in addition to the accepted divisions in their institutions, and

the feeling of being undervalued are the themes that emerged from discussions of what

meaning staff members made of their experiences of rankism.

Explicit and Implicit Narratives

Exploring the first research sub-question, "What narratives, both explicit and

implicit, emerged about rankism?" led to a large number of responses and originally

resulted in 18 different themes surrounding these narratives. All but two of these themes

also appeared in relation to the main research question, such as: the prevalence of

rankism due to the environment of the institution, knowing your place in the hierarchy,

staff is less important than faculty, staff work is undervalued/unseen, staff have no voice,

and how money is equated to their worth. The two new themes that emerged were "how

you treat people matters" and "misunderstanding staff roles." In the interviews, the

explicit narratives about the organization were positive, institutional language (such as

the use of "we") about the culture while the implicit narratives were negative, individual-

based language around how the participant experienced the culture. When looking at the narratives, both explicit and implicit, participants gave many more concrete examples of their experiences than before. Therefore, in addition to discussing the two new themes, several of the participants' stories will be shared as a way of highlighting the explicit and implicit narratives surrounding rankism at different institutions.

How You Treat People Matters

"It's kind-of hard to legislate niceness, isn't it?" (Cathy, August 24, 2018). The first unique theme to emerge in relation to explicit and implicit narratives about rankism was "how you treat people matters." The majority of participant experiences involved faculty members and many of the staff noted that, in the current higher education environment, faculty members are not encouraged to prioritize collegiality. As Amy put it, how people are treated is not taken into account in faculty tenure cases, "which I think also contributes to the caste system being so great here, because they're focused on ten things for tenure, and teaching is like eight or nine, and dealing with staff is even lower than that, or being a good human being…don't get me wrong, I think a PhD is no small feat, I think that it is a hell of a lot of work and that they deserve all the accolades they get that come with it, but I don't think that gives you carte blanche to be an asshole" (Amy, September 5, 2018). Rachel had a similar observation when it came to faculty tenure and how their treatment of other people is not taken into account, "if I think about it as a former academic, I'm like, 'No, it's not relevant.' But if I think about it as a human being working in a workplace, it's absolutely relevant" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Additionally, Robin noted that, at her institution, "in all our diversity and other trainings, the underlying message is 'people come from different backgrounds, treat them like people' and there's a lot of people who take advantage of systems here and they're not called out on it. I sometimes think it's because, if they have a 'doctor' in front of their name or a PhD or EdD at the end of their title, a lot of folks think they know what they're doing, but I think having a degree doesn't necessarily mean you're a good person. Those are different skill sets with a little bit of overlap" (Robin, February 17, 2019). Nicole noted that her college also places a lot of attention to educate on bias, "there is a huge effort, through our H.R. department to educate and promote treating each other well: not being biased, being aware of bias, being aware of racial bias, just different awareness workshops, and even in the hiring process" (Nicole, January 5, 2019). Despite these training sessions, both Robin and Denise recounted experiences of rankism they had experienced and observed in their institutions.

Many of the participants stated that how people are treated matters and sets the tone of the workplace environment. Both Melanie and Denise noted that it is also important for staff to remember in their dealings with their own direct reports. As Melanie has been promoted over the years to her current management position, she said that even though her responsibilities have grown, "people treat me like I'm a secretary, too, and I'm not sure if that's more related to gender than it is to rank, I try and say, 'It's ok, let it go, let it go.' And I try to make sure that my staff aren't getting that kind of attitude from me" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). Similarly, Denise said, "When I work with my students and I realize that my ego's coming into play a little bit in some times,

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I'm also aware of the emotional intelligence that it takes to be mindful of that. [I try to behave in a way so] I can demonstrate to my student employees an equitable and healthy workspace interaction" (Denise, August 31, 2018). How people are treated matters from student employees on up through an organization.

Due to the prevalence of devaluing actions and language that staff members experience, having co-workers, whether faculty, administration, or other staff, treating them with respect and dignity matters to them. This also appears in the literature, with examples such as Clark's (2008) phenomenological study on nursing students' experiences of rankism with faculty that behaved in rankist ways which, in turn, can eventually impact the nurse/patient relationship. The students then replicated these same interaction styles they experienced when they held a higher ranking position than the patients they served. Many of the participants reported having supportive and considerate staff co-workers and working in cohesive, tight-knit groups with other staff members. How people are treated shapes the work environment and, in turn, influences the overall culture of the campus.

Misunderstanding Staff Roles

The second theme that emerged from examining explicit and implicit narratives about rankism is the general misunderstanding of staff roles and of what staff do. Nearly every participant noted that others in their institution were unclear on what the participant does in their role. Some of the confusion was understandable or expected due to similar roles/titles, such as the difference of responsibilities between an Office Assistant I, Office Assistant II, or Office Assistant III, which are clearer to those within the department.

However, while some of the misunderstanding of staff roles was felt to be deliberate and disrespectful, most of the misunderstandings left the participants feeling as if their contributions to the institution were not clear.

The way Melanie described it was, "there have been instances where a faculty member seemed to be disrespectful, or even other staff members, because they didn't understand the position that I hold or what level it is. Sometimes that's a challenge" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). Linda has had multiple experiences in her role for the past two years where people would ask her a question and if they did not like the answer, they would go and ask her supervisor, even though the answer would be the same. She feels, "like they don't believe me…I really do think it's the title, to be honest or just [my] role within the school…I feel like understanding each other's positions a little bit is key" (Linda, August 19, 2018). Linda also discussed that, in interactions with faculty members, "they don't understand what we do…the responsibilities and how many extra tasks we take on" (Linda, August 19, 2018). Sophie saw it as, "just a lack of understanding on either side of the coin of what a person actually does or what their role actually is…and it might not be a passion. I feel like academia, if you're faculty, you've gotten there because you're passionate about it, not because you've fallen into it. And I think there is a lot of privilege in that that isn't explored" (Sophie, January 15, 2019).

Meanwhile, Eric noted there are, "two groups that exist in the same universe doing totally different things and there's a lack of understanding and therefore some animosity between the two…there needs to be education about who faculty are and who staff are and how we can interact productively for the benefit of the students and a better

understanding of why the university exists" (Eric, August 29, 2018). Rachel agreed that

understanding is lacking on both sides between staff and faculty and stated that, from a

faculty perspective, "staff really don't understand higher ed and they don't understand

how academics think and behave" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

The general misunderstanding of staff roles and responsibilities aligns with the

earlier theme of staff feeling undervalued. This theme has appeared in the literature in

how staff roles lack clarity to the rest of the institution (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast,

2012) to examples of how additional tasks are delegated to lower-level staff employees

without any change in title or compensation (Acker, 1990; Lumby, 2013; Rowe, 1990).

These additional tasks do not take into account the existing responsibilities and duties of

the staff and are a result of the misunderstanding of all that staff do. As Sophie stated it,

"I don't always understand what other departments do, but that doesn't mean that they're

not serving the institution. And I think without curiosity, there's criticism" (Sophie,

January 15, 2019). When staff roles are not understood by others in the institution, it can

lead others to minimize the contributions these roles make to the organization.

Participant Stories

Many of the participants gave examples of actions and language that was

devaluing of them as staff members at their institutions. In examining the narratives that

emerged about rankism, many of the same themes appeared as before. However, as many

participants gave more concrete examples of their experiences, several participants'

stories have been highlighted to demonstrate how the various prior themes and issues of

power and meaning-making interact to create daily experiences in the participants' work lives.

Participant Story: Denise

Denise worked as a staff member in the science department of her college. In describing her position, she said, "I regard myself as an academic professional. I regard the custodians who support me in my area as being academic professionals; my public safety officers are academic professionals…[we] are aware of how [our] work affects the learning environment for our students" (Denise, August 31, 2018). While the staff members in her area work together well, Denise noted that her institution has difficulties holding faculty accountable, due to how they are protected so strongly and that "everyone's so afraid of the faculty contract and so afraid of the disparity that we have between the different work groups" (Denise, August 31, 2018).

Denise had been a long-time defender of a particular faculty member. Over the years, she had seen him have difficulties with Deans, which she thought were "almost racist" since he was a faculty of color. She had spoken with a lawyer in his defense, stood by him, and served as his confidant.

She recounted how, one Friday morning, she was working with the faculty member to solve a technical problem in his lab. She had a 10:45 a.m. appointment with a high school group of prospective students who wanted to tour the science building and labs. When 10:45 came, the faculty member was still on a phone call with tech services, so Denise gathered up all the tools she knew he would need and then left to answer the bell for her appointment. She had decided against interrupting his phone call and assumed

that he had heard the bell ringing and knew that she was needed elsewhere. Since she had left all the tools for him and he was on the phone with tech services, she assumed he would be able to solve his problem without her. Denise began her tour with the high school students and described the events that occurred:

> Five minutes later, this faculty members comes elbowing and pushing their way through the group of high school students, rudely, and slams the door on the way out of the lab. I get done helping the students' tour, which took 20 minutes. I raced to this faculty member's office. It's on faculty row, everybody's there, everybody's working. His door is closed. I knock on the door. He opens the door and he says, loudly – he's yelling at me – he says, "You're *extremely* unprofessional. You should not have done that. There's nothing you can do and nothing you can say to me." He slams the door, a heavy wood door, in my face so hard that I had to step back to avoid being hit by the door. I was destroyed. I'm actually pretty sensitive and I was almost in tears. I was upset. I was seriously personally and professionally crushed…I was so crushed that I was looking for other work within three days. An administrator saw me after that and made me report it to H.R., or else I probably wouldn't have said anything. There's been no resolution for that. At all. I think that has been just unbelievably unresolved (Denise, August 31, 2018).

Their relationship has not been repaired. Recently, Denise's college hired a new human resources professional who heard about this incident and reached out to Denise. The new H.R. employee has been working to create a safe reporting structure for

incidents across campus. Denise said that she, "was interview[ed] extensively and [wrote] statements about what happened, that was the first time in my life that anyone has ever sat down with me. Obviously I got really emotional just talking about and recalling the incident where the door was slammed in my face; my feelings were terribly hurt" (Denise, August 31, 2018). In reflecting on her experience with the faculty member, she said:

> I think we all contribute to each other and the ecosystem of higher education must evolve. We have to demonstrate healthy evolution of this, of these ideas, and put them into work. Because that's what we do. This is the breeding ground for thought. And if we don't, the concept of Ubuntu matters, it's a big deal. And if we don't lift up [staff], and our student employees, and everyone that's on the ride with us, we're not going to get very far… I would hope that if I'm employed in a system or espousing policies or even ways of being that are not conducive to producing an environment that's good for my students, that I would be made aware of that, and kindly called to examine that and consider and grow. Because that's why I'm here, too… I don't pretend to be the most altruistic person in the world. Obviously, I get a paycheck and I'm well-paid for what I do because there isn't anything else that can engage me this much, because access and opportunity are critical. We need to look to the people who need the most, not what we can get for ourselves the most or what's the best for us (Denise, August 31, 2018).

Participant Story: Amy

Amy has worked in higher education for ten years and began her new role as a staff member in a humanities department about one year ago. At her previous position, she recounted a story of how the staff in her department had been invited to participate in the annual faculty retreat. Each year, the Assistant Dean would put together gift bags with personalized, embroidered materials in them. He ordered them for all of the faculty members and handed them out to everyone, except the four staff members participating that year. The staff members were upset and Amy said that "even when it was, in retrospect, a little bit silly," the situation was addressed immediately and their department had a series of conversations about how to be inclusive of the staff.

Amy described how at her current position, during her first year, she has had several run-ins with a professor in her department. Amy described how she was giving a tour to an incoming student and the professor was in the lobby having a conversation with some people. Amy had not met the professor yet, officially, so when she and the incoming student walked by and the professor mentioned the name of her program, Amy said, "my ears perked up and I heard him tell this person how poorly managed it is, how poorly run it is, how we don't help students, and how basically horrible we are…I'd never had a conversation with him other than on email when I needed something. And he's sitting there, in the open, being *really* blatant about this" (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Afterwards, Amy went to her boss who dismissed Amy's concerns by saying that, "He is who he is." Amy asked to bring this situation up to the departmental Chair and the Chair also was dismissive and said, "He is who he is." (Amy, September 5, 2018). Since

then, the professor has continued to belittle the program and the staff who are involved. She described how she has "watched [my supervisor] be treated by some of these older, male professors deplorably and her not do anything, her take it. There was an email chain in December where two professors were just railing on her and had included a student. And there were zero consequences for any of those actions" (Amy, September 5, 2018).

In reflecting on her experiences, and how the lack of accountability at her current position is completely different than at her prior position, Amy said:

I think it really clearly showed me where I fit in the structure. When I took this job, I was told that I would be part of the team, I would be part of decision-making, I would have a lot of authority, and that hasn't worked out to be the case. But I don't know if that's because…they're professors and I'm not. My opinion is that the person before me had a different title. Her title was "Administrative Director." And I feel like the word "director" encompassed a higher level of respect than "manager." I have felt that this was really clear about what I'm allowed to speak up about and what I'm not allowed to speak up about. What it's ok to bring attention to and what it's not ok to bring attention to…[to change the culture] I think you need education. I think you need to deflate the professors, I think you need to deflate the faculty. I think you need to make them as not important and god-like as they appear to think they are… here, I've witnessed *such* horrible behavior and there's zero consequences, even though I'm standing here going, "This is not ok. This is not ok." It's still being like, "You're the problem, not him." You know what I mean? Like, "You shouldn't be complaining

about this. You shouldn't be bringing this to our attention, because it is the way it is." And somehow that makes it ok. (Amy, September 5, 2018).

Participant Story: Rachel

Rachel worked as the sole staff member in a department of 24 faculty members. When asked about how she understood rankism, Rachel replied, "That's my job, on a daily basis! I'm actually in therapy right now for maintaining a sense of stoicism around how I'm treated and how I'm talked to" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). As her department's sole administrative support, she is involved in the day-to-day running of the department and has responsibilities in all the processes and procedures involving students or faculty, from managing the catalog, tenure cases, and everything involving students. As the only staff member in her department, she does not have a traditional reporting structure with a supervisor, rather, all of the faculty are her supervisors.

In the department she was in at the time, there was a faculty member coming up for tenure review, who started to act inappropriately towards her. He started harassing Rachel and physically threatening her. She reported it immediately to the Chair of her department in January. The Chair position rotated every two years in July, so the current Chair said she would discuss the situation with the incoming Chair, and they would, together, tell the faculty member that he had to stop harassing Rachel. The current Chair told Rachel that she had "done nothing wrong and that they were going to sit him down and tell him that he had to stop, that he *had* to stop" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Several weeks passed and nothing in his behavior had changed and Rachel had heard nothing from either the current or the incoming Chair until the incoming Chair

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came into her office and said, "we decided we can't add more stress to his tenure case, so we can't talk to him" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). Rachel reached out to the current Chair because she was expecting some action in response to the continued harassment. The current Chair said, "that she could only see he would escalate both on me and on her and her exact words were, 'He's crazy and he's on the ledge about his tenure case and I'm afraid if we try to talk to him, he's just going to get worse. I'm just hoping this will go away'…And I was like, 'So you're telling me that his stress is more important than my physical safety in the workplace, based solely on rank" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Not long after these conversations, Rachel received her performance review and she had been downgraded because she was not on good terms with the faculty member who was harassing her. She escalated the situation to human resources where it was decided that she could not be punished in her review for the situation. At this point, the incoming Chair told her and human resources, that "under no circumstances could I discuss this professor with him, as my boss, because they couldn't do anything that would jeopardize his tenure case" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Due to the situation escalating, Rachel requested a transfer to an open position in another department, which she received. After she moved, a student came forward with a story exactly like Rachel's and this opened a series of formal investigations on campus. After the student came forward, three additional students came forward. The faculty member was denied tenure and was removed from campus. Afterwards, Rachel also found out that this faculty member, during his earlier appointment phase, had been in a physical fight with campus police and had been banned from campus for a period of time.

None of this information had come up during her process of reporting and, in reflecting on her experience, Rachel said:

> I took a medical leave because during that whole time, I found out that they hid my situation from everyone. And they, basically, they made it very, very clear that if a student comes forward, it's important, but if a staff person comes forward, they have to bury it...I took an extended medical leave in the fall for stress because I was really afraid to go to campus because I didn't want to see him. I was genuinely afraid, especially when all the stories came out about how many women he's harassed. The good news is that he didn't get tenure, but the bad news is that it had nothing to do with me (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

While Rachel has now moved into a different department, she ended the interview by discussing a co-worker in a different department who was currently having difficulties with a faculty member who had knowingly misused grant funds. As Rachel's co-worker would not process a bill for him, Rachel can now see the faculty members in her co-worker's department distancing themselves from her. Like her own situation, there are no mechanisms in place to check any escalating mistreatment of staff members by tenured faculty at her institution. She describes the situation with tenured faculty members as, "as a worker, that means that they're untouchable in their work places. That means, because I've done tenure files for 10 years now: there's no mention of how they treat their co-workers, it's not there, and so they really are untouchable, especially if it's low-grade stuff; they're not breaking the law" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Recently, Rachel's university did a campus climate survey with outside consultants which reported the dysfunctional power dynamic at the school. The administration is currently working to create ways of supporting staff members across the campus.

Discussion

These findings represent the self-reported experiences of what the participants identified as rankism. While the participants were reporting on the impact and the meaning they made from these experiences, these interactions may have been fueled by other intents and could have other interpretations. The participants, themselves, at times questioned whether some of their experiences were due to their position in the organization or was due to some other identity they held. Additionally, as these experiences are only told from one point of view, the other party (or parties) could have been acting in a larger context given their history with the participant, having more "need to know" institutional knowledge than the participant (such as a manager), or could have been communicating in a style that is more common and acceptable in industries outside of higher education. While these potential complications are possibilities, and offer possibilities for future research, these participants described their experiences as due to rankism, rather than attributed to other causes.

Areas of Contradictions

In reviewing the participant's responses, a pattern emerged in the narratives: areas of contradictions. The areas of contradictions were frequently when the participant was describing the culture on their campus one way and then, usually within a few minutes,

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describing their actual experiences in a way that contradicted their prior description. For example, one participant described her institution as very supportive of staff and that the culture there does not support people behaving badly, so there were no problems with mistreatment at her college. However, in the next sentence, this participant described a co-worker who was being bullied by a faculty supervisor and that there are certain departments she knew had trouble keeping staff because of how bad the environment was with an abusive supervisor there. Another participant detailed the ongoing problems and the confrontations, including being yelled at often, she had had with her supervisor and detailing the many times that these actions had made her upset and want to quit and how difficult it was, in general, working with her supervisor. After describing all these things, the participant finished by saying that they had a good relationship.

Additionally, many participants used language negating/minimizing their experiences. These examples occurred after participants described an event, usually seemingly small to an external observer, but that deeply impacted the participant. They would describe their experience and how it impacted them and then finish with a dismissive statement about how it was not important, or was silly, or that it was fine.

These, and other, contradictions throughout the participants' stories highlight the difference between the explicit and implicit narratives about rankism and the culture in their workplaces. Generally, the explicit narratives were positive and used what seemed to be institutional language about their culture. However, the implicit narratives were mostly negative, used individual-based language (such as "I" vs. "we"), and reflected the reality of the workplaces these staff were in. These narrative contradictions did not seem

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to be conscious choices on the part of the participant and were not discussed in the interviews. The contradictions only became apparent during the analysis process. The topic of contradictions actually aligns with a finding in the literature from Mumby (2004), who charged researchers to answer, "In what ways do narrative performances embody contradictions that suggest possibilities for insight and organizational change?" (Mumby, 2004, p. 246). The participants are living these contradictions in what their organization says the culture is and what the staff members are actually experiencing.

Conclusion

In examining the structures of power that surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism, the meaning they made of those experiences, and the explicit and implicit narratives that emerged about rankism, many of the same themes emerged across the different participant stories. Participants felt that the current structures of power in place at their institutions vastly valued faculty more than staff, that the culture was replicated from the top of the organization downwards, that staff experiences and difficulties were invisible to the rest of the organization, that staff felt powerless and misunderstood, and that staff frequently questioned whether their interpretation of their experiences was accurate. Participants felt that how you treat other people matters and that was not a priority in many of their institutions. This being the first, in-depth study focused solely on staff experiences with rankism and hierarchical microagressions on higher education campuses, the findings from the interviews aligns with the prior, similar, studies cited in the literature review. Additionally, the participants had suggestions for how their institutions could work to create a campus climate that respects

all staff roles. These suggestions, in conjunction with research and practices underway at

Metropolitan State University of Denver, will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this critical inquiry study was to examine higher education staff members' experiences with rankism, the meaning they made of those experiences, and examining existing structures of power and the associated narratives reinforcing the status quo (Carspecken, 1996; Gildersleeve et al., 2010; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015; Plihal, 1989; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993; Wright, 2004). This research involved conducting semi-structured interviews of eighteen individuals who were currently working as staff members in higher education. The semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and by using critical narrative analysis, I additionally aimed to identify explicit and implicit narrative themes surrounding power and rankism.

The main proposed research question was: "What structures of power surround and shape employees' experiences with rankism and the meaning they make of those experiences?" In addition, I proposed two sub-questions: "What narratives, both explicit and implicit, emerged about rankism? What changes can an institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?"

Participants were recruited through referral sampling and the call for interviews was open to everyone. Participants self-selected and received an informed consent form. The one-on-one interviews were held either in person, online through Zoom, or over the

phone, depending on the preference and location of each participant. Interviews were recorded for the purposes of transcription. Interviews were in-depth and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the experiences the participants have had with rankism in their role as staff members working in a higher education institution.

The analysis process involved the transcription of the interviews, coding and identifying institutional discourses appearing in personal narratives, and member checking to both ensure transcription accuracy and to encourage the participants to question, challenge, and change the institutional discourses of power and the status quo (Souto-Manning, 2014). I used in vivo coding to group data from interviews and field notes into themes about the experiences of rankism and the normative narratives at an institutional/system level, based on the underlying power dynamics described, and located where these normative discourses appeared in the individual's narratives. Participants had a chance to review their interview for accuracy and to clarify any statements.

The major themes that emerged around structures of power were:

- Institutions valued faculty over staff and staff were made very aware of their place in the hierarchy, both individually and for staff as a whole.

- The campus culture of (dis)respecting staff comes from the top of the organization and flows downward. This encompassed issues such as staff exclusion in governance and decision-making, staff problems being

invisible to those higher up in the organization, and the perception of the

prevalence of unearned promotions in participant's institutions.

- The feeling that money equaled a staff member's worth, whether in terms

  of compensation, departmental resources, or income generated.

In terms of the meaning made from the participant's experiences, the major

themes were:

- Staff are undervalued, invisible, and are also assumed to be not as

  educated as the faculty and administration.

- There are accepted divisions between staff, faculty, and the administration

  which feeds into staff experiences with rankism.

- Staff would question themselves and their perceptions after experiences of

  rankism.

When examining the explicit and implicit narratives that emerged about rankism

during the interviews, in addition to the previous themes that continued to appear, two

new themes emerged:

- How people are treated matters in a workplace, even though many

  institutions do not have systems in place to encourage better treatment or

  hold people accountable for bad treatment.

- Staff roles are frequently misunderstood, which contributes to staff feeling

  undervalued.

The practical application of the data from the proposed study not only served as a

prompt for the participants to complicate prevailing narratives in their institutions and in

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higher education, in general, but also led to recommendations that higher education institutions might adopt to create a workplace that is more respectful of staff.

Significance

What this study contributes to the literature is the first-hand, in-depth, narratives of the experience of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions of low- to mid-level staff members working in higher education. This study also contributes identifying narratives that reinforce the current power structures. These data further expand the current understandings and bring a depth to the topic, which is currently covered by the sole study of staff experiences conducted by Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) which is based on brief, written, anonymous descriptions of hierarchical microaggressions.

This study also highlights how frequently staff roles are misunderstood by faculty, administration, and sometimes by other staff. The participants in this study converged on the theme that how you treat people matters and how many of their institutions neither incentivized treating others well nor, outside of certain behaviors (such as sexual harassment), had processes in place to hold people accountable for their actions. As awareness of rankism is growing, Berk (2017a, 2017b), lists it alongside racism, sexism, and other "-isms" as adversely impacting campus culture, staff morale, and employee retention in higher education. Along with other types of macro- and microaggressions, the effects on the recipients are cumulative and have negative physical and psychological effects (Berk, 2017a).

Finally, this study offers recommendations for organizations on how to work to create a climate that respects all staff roles as well as offering the example of how the

Metropolitan State University of Denver is working to address hierarchical microaggressions on their campus. By raising awareness of rankism, institutions may be able to address current shortcomings in diversity and inclusivity training sessions on their campuses. As institutions better create inclusive climates, this can lead to new types of policies and institutional practices focused on creating a space of professional and social support, respect, and intentionally adding value to the lives of all employees and students (Berk, 2017a).

Recommendations for Organizations

The final research sub-question was, "What changes can an institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?" While the participants had a variety of suggestions, the recommendations could be categorized as either proactive or reactive ways that an institution could help address rankism on campus.

Naming Rankism

The most frequent suggestion was that institutions proactively name and talk about rankism in conversations and in training sessions. As Robin put it, "I think naming it is helpful because it's kind of invisible and just because things are invisible doesn't mean they don't exist or have an impact" (Robin, February 17, 2019). Michelle described that, at her institution, rankism was not talked about. She stated:

> You're almost *afraid* to talk about it…What I wish is that while I was there, I could have openly talked to more people about my experiences and feelings and not be reprimanded for it, I wish I could just be really open about all sorts of things. You know, even when we get that letter every year saying like, "Hey,

here's your raise, blah, blah, blah." There's a little note that says, "But you're *not* allowed to talk about it." And that, to me, it doesn't feel good because it's just reinforcing that rankism. It's like you're constantly reminded that it's there, but we're not going to say it's there because we don't want to say it exists. Yeah, I wish, we could just talk about it more and not get in trouble for it. I think part of it, too, is sometimes when you talk about these things, people take it so personally (Michelle, September 15, 2018).

Hannah observed that at her institution, inclusive excellence is largely focused on race, which is an important issue at her college. She added, "however, there are a lot of pieces [of inclusive excellence] that are being left out and I think [rankism] is one of them. I don't know that faculty and staff are being taught or given an opportunity to explore and be challenged by the idea of rankism and how our language continues to perpetuate it" (Hannah, November 8, 2019). She wished that her campus promoted more purposeful relationships across campus where people could meet in small groups, "to talk through the good, the bad, the ugly, the right, the wrong, the whatever, specifically related to inclusive excellence and equity and what their roles are doing to promote that and having dedicated time to do that" (Hannah, November 8, 2019).

These suggestions from the participants align with recommendations made by Robert W. Fuller and Pamela A. Gerloff in their 2008 book *Dignity for All: How to Create a World Without Rankism*, in which they discuss the importance in naming rankism and removing the taboo surrounding it. The naming of rankism and acknowledging human dignity as a method of remedying various injustices was also

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reflected in the literature (Anonymous, 2006; Barratt-Pugh& Krestelica, 2019; Breenan, 2013; Clark, 2008, Fuller, 2003; Fuller, 2010; Kleiner, 2004; Lindner, 2008; Schwartz, 2014; Yamada, 2007). By naming rankism and making it a topic of discussion, rankism becomes both seen and to be seen as an unacceptable, though common, means of interaction which organizations can work to change by implementing training, creating new governance processes, and ensuring all stakeholders have input in the decision-making process (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008).

Policies, Training, and Reporting Processes

The open naming and acknowledgement of rankism can lead to the solution of creating policies, practices, and training sessions that address rankism on campuses, both proactively and reactively. The participants also stressed that it would be beneficial if staff members had a chance for input on the changes. Naming and educating about rankism is especially relevant on higher education campuses, as education, in general, is the primary focus of these institutions.

Melanie made a suggestion for a policy change concerning the idea of who gets emeritus status after retirement (Melanie, August 24, 2018). At institutions where staff have long careers, revisiting the policies about granting emeritus status to include retired staff could help staff feel their long-term contribution to the organization are recognized and valued.

As an example of how training could benefit her campus, Rachel described a concerning inclination among some staff at her college, which has a large amount of resources and offers need-blind financial aid to the students. In some meetings, white,

male staff working in the facilities departments saw all the resources going to students, half of which are students of color, and these staff members began to direct their hostility to the students since they felt the staff were "neglected because 'those' students are being given all the money…if staff see that there's all these resources thrown at students for how much students are struggling, but that the issues we experience along class lines are ignored, you can see how that grievance is nurtured, even if you know that it's grotesquely misinformed" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). Rachel noted that, "we get the training to help students, but we don't have the training to help us" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

Several participants suggested that having some sort of reporting process in place would greatly benefit the staff in their institutions as they currently have no recourse when they experience rankism. As Robin put it, "in this institution I work at, there's no one I can report these things to. I mean, I can talk shit about that faculty member, and I have, but just telling the story doesn't change anything except maybe that I feel heard when I tell the story to my staff co-workers" (Robin, February 17, 2019). When Hannah was describing her experiences at her former college, she noted, "I don't even know that there would be a formal complaint system in which, if that situation were to happen again, how would that be resolved in a way that is both beneficial and educational to both parties? I don't think there is a formal route for that" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Having a formal reporting structure in place, as a reactive response for instances of rankism, was suggested by many participants.

One method of reporting and of training that was brought up repeatedly, was to expand the role of existing Diversity/Inclusion officers and departments. Rachel stated, on her campus, it would be beneficial if "staff have spaces on campus where their needs and concerns are regularly aired and addressed in the same way the Diversities Offices function to help students…I think if Diversities Offices took inclusion to include staff and staff issues, I think that would be very, very helpful" (Rachel, January 15, 2019).

On many campuses, the Diversity and Inclusion Offices tend to be centralized, work to serve the whole school, and frequently report to high-ranking individuals. Especially as many of these departments are charged with training sessions focused on inclusion, working to bring up issues surrounding the misuse of power, in all its manifestations around the institution, could be a logical extension of work these departments already do (Suarez, Anderson, and Young, 2018). This idea was also suggested by Fuller and Gerloff (2008) as diversity training increases understanding, respect, and the recognition of microinequities on campus while also teaching communication, interpersonal skills, and response strategies to participants (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008, pp. 50-51).

In creating processes, training sessions, and reporting procedures, many of the participants stressed the importance of including staff input. Rachel mentioned how, at her institution, committees were formed of faculty members to monitor the salaries and creation of new staff positions each year. Staff fought hard to get on that committee, which now consists of two staff members and four faculty members. She thinks "a big thing is: do you have staff on every committee?" (Rachel, January 15, 2019). Eric came

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to a similar conclusion, "I think staff needs to be at decision-making tables" (Eric, August 29, 2018). When processes are implemented that impact staff, the participants believed that involving staff in their creation greatly improved the processes and their impact.

Hannah suggested mandated training sessions as a way to improve her campus. She viewed the idea of training sessions the same way she views being a citizen, "if I want the rest of the world to be better, I still have to do my part even though it's a 'you're preaching to the choir'"" (Hannah, November 8, 2018). Hannah also thought the training sessions should span through a person's career at the institution, beginning in the hiring process:

> At the end of the day, if you want everyone to be on the same page and to help create a community and a campus environment where people feel appreciated and challenged to do their best, you have to be all-in. And I think that starts with the hiring process. That should be embedded in evaluations, your job evaluations, promotions, things like that. As well as tenure. I guess, in some ways, the softer skills. I would love for managers, directors, deans, provosts to have similar training on navigating some of those difficult conversations with faculty, like "Dear god, you can't say things like that. That's rude. As an institution that values inclusive excellence and we work towards this, this is an example of what not to do." (Hannah, November 8, 2018).

Florenthal and Tolstikov-Mast (2012) recommend a better understanding of staff roles, providing opportunities for faculty and staff to work together, and to attend training workshops together to form collaborations (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012, p. 83).

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During individual interactions, Fuller and Gerloff (2008) suggest treating someone's rank in an organization as a temporary role. This would move the interaction from one with disparate power, status, and the view of someone being "more important" in the interaction and to reframe it as an interaction with someone who is filling a needed, but temporary, role in the institution, much like a character in a play. All the roles are necessary and, with time, the people playing the roles will change. Fuller and Gerloff note that approaching individual interactions this way can help minimize instances of rankism, as it helps individuals recognize that the power they have with their rank does not give them any lasting specialness or importantness once they leave that role (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008, pp. 71-72).

Creating processes, training sessions, and methods of reporting, especially with input from staff, can help create a climate that respects all staff roles. While Young and Anderson (2018) noted that it is difficult to create a "one-size-fits-all" approach with policy making, universities can center the experiences of and expertise of marginalized groups in strategic plans, task forces, programs, policies, and processes to help transform the value systems on campus (Young & Anderson, 2018). Similar to how the participants described how their campus' culture came from the top down, suggestions for improving the campus climate involved the role that leadership would need to play in embodying a different culture.

The Role of Leadership

"A leadership system that does not allow people to voice their own needs, hopes, and concerns is inherently rankist because it presumes that those in power always know

best what is important and necessary to others' lives, even without asking them" (Fuller

& Gerloff, 2008, p. 62). Many of the participants discussed the importance of buy-in

from the administration especially as, in their institutions, campus culture was influenced

from the top all the way down. Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica (2019) note the importance of

both managers and administrators enforcing policies for *all* employees, regardless of their

level in the organization, as staff members viewed actions as portraying the true intents of

the leadership, rather than verbal assurances and written policies (Barratt-Pugh &

Krestelica, 2019, p. 111). Fuller and Gerloff stressed the importance of leadership

providing frequent opportunities for people throughout an organization to discuss their

complaints and concerns. If those conversations are not available with leadership, these

conversations will still occur but will not be visible to the leadership, as people will vent

their dissatisfaction to others in an attempt to make sense of their experiences. This lack

of visibility to the leadership will lead to divisions among the employees and will

negatively affect the organizational culture (Fuller & Gerloff, 2008, p. 34). As Melanie

puts it, "We have policies, but sometimes they don't seem to make much of a difference.

Somebody at the top needs to help make sure that, whatever that policy is, that we're

going to follow it and have some way for people to talk to each other about it" (Melanie,

August 24, 2018). Many participants reported that their leadership choose which policies

to enforce, or not, and these decisions impacted the climate throughout their

organizations.

When Nicole was suggesting ways her campus could improve its climate to be more respecting of staff roles, she also noted the importance of the leadership at an institution:

I think that it begins with the leadership of an institution. I saw a cartoon once that was describing good leadership. The first picture was poor leadership and it was chariot with the president/director in the chariot seat and their staff, in ropes, pulling the chariot behind. Really striving, really pulling very hard to keep this thing going. And the next frame was an empty chariot and that person was in the front, pulling. Everybody else was behind. That, to me, is the perfect example of servant leadership. I think that servant leadership is one that will consistently value a person and their contribution to an organization fairly because they value the contribution that each individual is making…I think that a good institution should promote that from the top down and not put up with, or tolerate, an environment where that is missing…Who do we know has got our back? Who do we know is going to support us and treat us fairly and maybe understanding the pressures that we're under? (Nicole, January 5, 2019).

As the participants noted throughout their responses, the leadership of an organization shapes the campus culture at their own level and on the levels below them. Having leadership that respects the contributions that staff make on campus, promotes ongoing training surrounding diversity and inclusion of various types, and is willing to listen and respond to staff concerns and experiences will shift the culture on campus. Sophie noted the small changes that had been taking place in her organization after new

leadership came on board. The new leadership team came from a staff background and was more respecting of staff than the previous administration had been. Sophie said, "it's so much of a cultural shift – it's not instituting a new rule that we have to do something. It's small things, providing coffee every day for staff, it's such a small thing but it says, 'You know what, we're going to invest a little bit in giving you a break, a reason to get up, move, and have this.' It's just that cultural shift in making it so much more welcoming to staff" (Sophie, January 15, 2019).

Olivia hoped that the leadership at her organization would take the time to give consistent messaging about the people working at her university. While the highest levels of leadership are always saying that the staff are what make things happen, she wishes they would be more specific and even talk about the staff at all levels, including those who are even less visible than staff in the offices: "(University) would not be as successful and beautiful if we didn't have the landscapers, you know, if we didn't have the people who clean our buildings, who wants to go to school in a trashcan? It really makes a difference. Just as much as we value things like football, [it would be great if] we heard consistent messaging about people" (Olivia, August 17, 2018). Participants reported that the leadership of an organization shaped the culture of their institutions. If the leadership works to create a culture that respects all staff roles, the rest of the organization will be impacted.

Organizational Example: Metropolitan State University of Denver

In their 2018 chapter "Microagressions in Higher Education: Embracing Educative Spaces," Kathryn S. Young and Myron R. Anderson describe the steps taken

by the Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU) in an effort to address rankism and hierarchical microaggressions (microaggressive expressions of rankism) and to improve campus climate for respecting and valuing the roles held by staff, faculty, and students. Similar to the suggestions given by the participants of this study as ways of creating a climate that respects all staff roles, Young and Anderson state that MSU has taken both proactive and reactive steps to improve campus climate. Young and Anderson note that organizations that value having diversity on campus need to both plan for conflict and to allow space to engage with it (Young & Anderson, 2018, p. 294).

In an effort to change previously accepted behaviors on campus, MSU implemented strategies through a centralized Office of Diversity and Inclusion to educate employees about diversity, reducing microaggressions, and providing tools for how to engage with microaggressions when they occur. The proactive educational spaces are on a systemic level and include:

- An annual "Higher Education Diversity Summit," which provides space for the community to engage in work on diversity, social justice, and equity.

- A "Tenure Track Supper Club" as a mentoring program for junior faculty and faculty of color by tenured faculty. A core component of the program is discussion on microaggressions and how to remove them from the classroom and daily interactions with staff, students, and other faculty.

- Small, cross-disciplinary groups as "Faculty and Staff Learning Communities," which meet throughout the year. The faculty and staff, together, are engaged in collaborative learning on topics around diversity and inclusion.

- Diversity Initiative Grants are offered by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to staff and faculty to support the creation of professional development and educational experiences that lead to a change in policies, practices, and standards across campus.

- Mandatory training for supervisors across campus about their role in promoting diversity. MSU has developed a 90-minute interactive workshop that is a core component of the training to help supervisors become more effective at addressing and removing microaggressions in the workplace (Young & Anderson, 2018).

Despite the proactive steps taken by the university, microaggressions still occur across campus. Due to the fleeting nature of microaggressions, MSU believes that the more educated individuals are on microaggressions, the better they can intervene when they occur. As universities have a built-in hierarchical structure, the reactive educational opportunities are more focused on individual and have been framed through a lens of power. These include:

- Training individuals on when it is safe to and how to speak up. MSU has a list of strategies for individuals to use to increase their power on campus and to work to decrease microaggressions: having allies/social support, advocating for others, using their credibility, listening to other perspectives, interacting with those different from you, experiencing marginalization, acting as a model of owning your own microaggressions, and creating space during an experience for diplomacy (Young & Anderson, 2018, pp. 302-303).

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- Creating general educational tenets for when microaggressions occur: have an "agreement to say 'ouch'" when witnessing an incident, embrace the least dangerous assumption about the person who microaggressed, and knowing the difference between their intent and of the impact for the person experiencing the microaggression (Young & Anderson, 2018, p. 303).

- Having those in power model constructive ways of handling microaggressions. This shows students, staff, and faculty that the campus is a space where it is safe to make mistakes, learn from them, and to have a dialogue. In turn, this leads to a more welcoming campus climate and imparts that everyone has a role in improving it (Young & Anderson, 2018, p. 303-304).

While each institution is different, by thinking through the various proactive and reactive strategies suggested by the participants and as enacted at the Metropolitan State University of Denver, an organization can begin to work towards a climate that respects all staff.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study have come from a small sample of 18 self-selected participants who work as staff in non-profit higher education organizations. This study was intended to generate data that would help inform the depth of information available about staff experiences working in higher education, rather than a breadth of data. Consequently, the limitations of this study are that the experiences of the sample population may not be indicative of staff experiences at most higher education

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institutions. The participants' experiences are not necessarily representative of the experiences of staff working at for-profit higher education campuses. Furthermore, the self-selecting participants may have reported experiences significantly different from other staff members at their own institutions. As only one full-length interview with each participant was conducted, contextual data was limited in each case, especially as the participant's stories were told from only their point of view.

As the topics of rankism and hierarchical microaggressions expand beyond the realm of higher education staff, there are many opportunities for future research, such as quantitative and longitudinal studies, examining day-to-day experiences with microaggressions, exploring ongoing reconciling dialogs between a staff member and someone who was rankist towards them, an in-depth exploration of experiences at a specific or at a singular type of higher education institution, or a phenomenological study using other data collection methods.

To conclude, Melanie sums up staff experiences with rankism as, "I know that staff would like to be considered more as equals…maybe it's a slow process over time, maybe it needs to be something that is a message that comes from the top down that we need to be humane and think about people's needs and treat them all the same, as much as possible" (Melanie, August 24, 2018). Higher education's central mission of education needs to be extended to include educating staff and faculty on the various inequities that exist on campus in an effort to be more fully inclusive of the various roles that exist in an organization.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Script – Rankism In Higher Education: A Critical Inquiry of Staff Experiences

SECTION I: Consent Form Review

Principal Investigator (PI): Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today! Before we begin, I wanted to talk about the consent form you received. Did you have any questions about the study or the consent form?

(pause for reply – answer any questions)

PI: I also wanted to bring up again that participation is voluntary and you can stop at any point in this interview. And, as a reminder, this interview is being recorded for transcription purposes. Do you consent to participating?

(pause for reply – continue with interview if participant agrees. If participant declines, thank them for their time)

SECTION II: Personal Experiences

PI: This first set of questions is focused on your career experiences. What is your motivation for working in higher education?

PI: What are your goals in your career trajectory?

PI: Would you describe your duties in your current staff position?

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PI: The purpose of this study is to look at staff experiences with rankism, which is defined as the abuse of power based on a person's rank and position. This occurs when people communicate valuing, or devaluing, of another person because of the institutional role they hold.

An example of this is a faculty member is mistaken for a secretary. She then recounts her "demeaning" experience by comparing secretaries to servants and feels that being mistaken for a secretary is a sign of disrespect.

How do you understand rankism?

PI: Have you experienced rankism in your career?

PI: Would you describe your experience(s)?

PI: Why do you think that experience was related to your role rather than other identities you hold?

PI: What did that experience mean to you?

SECTION III: Institutional Experiences

PI: These next questions will be aimed at looking at your current institution and its culture. How do you think your institution perceives experiences of rankism?

PI: What policies and practices does your institution have around inclusive trainings?

PI: What is it like as a staff member working in your institution?

PI: What is it like working with your boss?

PI: Do you think that staff members with doctorates are treated differently than those without?

PI: Do you think that staff members working in different departments/areas are treated differently than others?

PI: Do you think that promotions at your institution reflect one's experience, skill, and proficiency?

PI: In your opinion, what changes can your, or any, institution make to create a climate of respecting all staff roles?

SECTION IV: Conclusion

PI: Is there anything else you would like to add?

PI: I want to thank you again for taking the time to participate. I will create a transcription of this interview and will send it to you in the next couple of weeks. If you are willing, you can review it for accuracy and can make any clarifications you would like. However, you are not obligated to review it. If you are interested in seeing a list of themes compiled from all the completed interviews, I can send those to you when they are ready. And if you are interested in seeing the final study, I can also send that to you once it is complete.

PI: Thank you again – goodbye.