The Oblivious Organization: Understanding Racial Stereotypes in the Public Sector*

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Organizational obliviousness is a theoretical framework that acknowledges how socially constructed stereotypes of marginalized groups become embedded individually, culturally, and institutionally within organizations. Prior work on organizational obliviousness has focused on exploring gender within organizational contexts. This work builds on previous scholarship on organizational obliviousness in the public sector and discussions of race in public organizations. It also builds on applying the organizational obliviousness framework in order to understand how racialized and intersectional forms of oppression manifest within public organizations. Specifically, we use the organizational obliviousness framework to explore how grooming and appearance policies that seem neutral on the surface can be exclusionary and grounded in racial stereotypes.

Public administration scholarship and practice are grounded in ideals that emphasize neutrality and objectivity. Historically, both public organizations and public employees were tasked with being neutral actors. Ideals of neutrality were grounded in a push for professionalism at the outset of the field. However, an overemphasis on neutrality grounded in professionalism leads to administrators and organizations overlooking the complexity of managing competing values present within the communities they govern, and an inability to fully grasp their role in shaping public life (Green, Wamsley, and Keller 1993). The tradition of the neutral administrator, or the neutral organization was first challenged in the era of New Public Administration. Specifically, literature from this era highlights that we cannot expect neutrality from public employees because implementation of public laws and policies require interpretation and discretion (Frederickson 2010) and individual values of the employee are bound to manifest in their administrative behavior.

More recently, several public administration scholars have studied the ways that neutral organizational policies and practices may actually generate disparate outcomes or have uneven impacts across social groups. This line of research has sought to identify how organizational processes that seem neutral on the surface actually harm marginalized identities (Bishu, Guy, and Heckler 2019; Mastracci and Bowman 2015; Portillo, Bearfield, and Humphrey 2022; Portillo, Humphrey, and Bearfield 2020; Starke, Heckler, and Mackey 2018). This literature builds on understandings of equity from New Public Administration, suggesting that we should not assume neutrality in the development and creation of policies surrounding public organizations. In this article, we build on this previous scholarship by exploring organizational obliviousness as a theoretical framework within public administration.

Developed by Doan and Portillo (2019), organizational obliviousness highlights "the intangible ways that stereotypes influence the everyday practices of the individual and organization" (1). This builds on their early work, which used a gendered organization lens to explore organizational resistance to women serving in the Special Forces of the United States military (Doan and Portillo 2017). Specifically, using interview and survey data, the authors found that military members' resistance to integration was often embedded in their perception of gender as a fixed, static trait, and grounded in socially constructed gender stereotypes. Many of these stereotypes were subtly legitimized through organizational policies and practices and

became so deeply entrenched in the organization that they were taken for granted and inconspicuous. Doan and Portillo (2019) describe this phenomenon as organizational obliviousness, which operates at the individual, cultural, and institutional level of an organization. Based on their data, the authors contend that organizational obliviousness is frequently exercised without malicious intent; however, the impact of it results in creating barriers for female employees to thrive and succeed in an organization. While Doan and Portillo (2019) highlight the implications of organizational obliviousness with respect to gender, the authors also suggest that this theory can be applied to other identities, such as race.

Our central purpose in this article is to expand the application of an organizational obliviousness framework to the concepts of race and intersectionality. By connecting race, intersectionality, and organizational obliviousness, we make several contributions to public administration scholarship. First, we utilize the organizational obliviousness framework to explore equity in the public sector. This framework helps connect the actions and behaviors of administrators with biased organizational policies that become institutionalized within the public sector, but has received little attention in public administration scholarship. Second, we expand this discussion by incorporating race and intersectionality, providing a critical analysis of the implicit ways that public organizations can exclude racially marginalized groups. Third, by discussing race explicitly and connecting it with a theoretical framework that previously was applied empirically to the study of gender, we demonstrate how this framework functions with an intersectional perspective. Finally, we explore workplace grooming policies, which are organizational policies that appear neutral, but in practice, have implications for racial and gender equity.

In the following sections, we explore organizational obliviousness in more depth, providing an explanation of how the framework takes place in workplace settings. We follow this review of the literature with a discussion connecting race and organizational obliviousness. We then further connect previous work on gender and current discussions of race to present an intersectional discussion of organizational obliviousness. Next, we apply this framework to organizational grooming policies within the U.S. military. Specifically, we explore how organizational policies involving the hairstyles of employees can be exclusionary and grounded in stereotypes. After this application, we conclude with a discussion of directions for future research.

Race in Public Administration

Doan and Portillo's (2019) analysis of organizational obliviousness focuses on gender. In this article, we build on their work and apply organizational obliviousness to race. The exercise of soft power is maintained through a negative social construction of a marginalized group's identity and enforced through institutional hierarchies to produce inequitable policy outcomes. "The visibility and apparent salience of some issues and the invisibility and apparent unimportance of others is an effect of the political process, not an outcome. This 'second face of power' is intimately linked to the maintenance and preservation of dominant interests . . . [that] are sustained through both tangible means such as institutions, laws, and resource distribution, and intangible means such as the reinscribing and reinforcement of socially created understandings of groups" (Doan 2011, 32). Race is a social construct (Carroll, Wright, and Meier 2019), meaning that it is a phenomenon which is created and given meaning by people (Yanow 2003). Specifically, race is often treated as a means of categorization, where people deemed as similar are placed within the same group (Yanow 2003). These categories are socially constructed because they reflect shared meanings and interpretations from a collection of people (Yanow 2003). Furthermore, these meanings and interpretations are not static. Shared perceptions of race change over time.

For the individual, race is a lived experience (House-Niamke and Eckerd 2021). It shapes the way someone interacts with other people, as well as the organizations and institutions they encounter on a daily basis. While someone may possess an individual understanding of their race, the way they are treated by people, organizations, and institutions, are often a reflection of how each actor perceives that individual's race (House-Niamke and Eckerd 2021). In short, race is relationally constructed and helps justify differential treatment by individuals and institutions (Ray 2019).

The United States has a history of racial bias (Alexander and Stivers 2020), which reached one of its most tumultuous points in the summer of 2020. Specifically, George Floyd was killed during an interaction with four police officers from the Minneapolis Police Department, in which one of the officers knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes. A bystander caught Floyd's death on camera. Within a few days, the video of his murder was shared around the world. This situation seemed difficult for the field of public administration to fully grasp—a constituent was killed by a

local public servant in a horrific and public display. The calls for reform were immediate (Navratil 2020; Reinan 2020). In addition, calls for reform were not just directed at the Minneapolis Police Department but included the profession of policing. Police departments were charged with addressing racism (Lippman 2020; Walsh 2020), while local governments sought to show their commitment to racial equity before backlash could ensue (Mills 2020).

The last time the field of public administration struggled with the concept of race to this extent was likely during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. During this time, the field of public administration hosted the first Minnowbrook conference. Catalyzed by political and social turmoil grounded in racial inequity, scholars attending the conference explored how the field of public administration could contribute to resolving these issues (Gooden and Portillo 2011). More than 50 years later, we find ourselves in a similar place—political and social turmoil deriving from long-standing racial disparities have reached a breaking point, and the public is calling for change. Described as a time of racial reckoning (Blessett and Gaynor 2021; Chang, Martin, and Marrapodi 2020), the summer of 2020 brought race to center stage in public administration scholarship and practice.

The field of public administration has a complex history with the concept of race. Scholars have described it as a neglected area of public administration scholarship (Stivers 2007), with several suggesting that the field has avoided explicit discussions of race and racism (Gooden 2014; Starke et al. 2018). At the same time, race is a foundational part of the administrative state (Alexander and Stivers 2020), and the development of public administration as a field of research and practice (Portillo et al. 2020; Portillo et al. 2022). In short, what we often see across public administration scholarship is a contradiction between the influence of race, and the attention we give race. Although socially constructed understandings of race are deeply embedded into our public institutions, we often overlook the ubiquity of race. Our purpose is to highlight the omnipresence of race within the public sector using the organizational obliviousness framework.

Intersectionality and Public Administration

The traditional discourse concerning issues of race and sex has long minimized, silenced, or pushed aside the experiences of Black women (Giddings 2006). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) uses the term *intersectionality* to describe this phenomenon. In case law, Black women often face discrimination because they are both Black and female. A focus on just one of those categories obscures the particular form of discrimination they experience. According to Crenshaw, "[t]hus for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast" (1989, 140).

Since then, intersectionality scholars have built upon Crenshaw's initial framing to explore questions involving women of color, sexual orientation, class, and national origin, among other categories of marginalized groups. The scholarship also moved beyond legal studies to include a variety of academic disciplines and fields (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). This includes Public Administration, where several scholars advocated for the use of an intersectional approach (see Bearfield 2009; Hutchinson 2001). In the past decade, scholars used intersectionality to examine important Supreme Court decisions (Gaynor and Blessett 2014), satisfaction with family-friendly policies among federal workers (Hamidullah and Riccucci 2017), public leadership (Breslin, Pandey and Riccucci 2017), representation in higher education (Fay, Hicklin Fryar, Meier and Wilkins 2020), the need for an increase in scholarship focused on policy and actions directed toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations (Larson 2022), and women of color in federal law enforcement (Yu 2021).

Still, a recent call to action from many of the field's leading social equity scholars suggested a need for more research on intersectionality and highlighted that it lags behind other areas of interest (Blessett et al. 2019). The field still has not fully tapped into the potential of intersectionality to illuminate cases and stories that are often missed when organizations and researchers focus on a single point of identity. We contend that the lack of understanding around intersectionality contributes to organizational obliviousness, given the tendency of organizations to focus on the concerns of single or dominant identity groups and not those of marginalized populations with overlapping claims of discrimination.

Organizational Obliviousness

Organizational obliviousness centers the "assumed naturalness" of an organization's culture, policies, and every-

day practices in its analysis. This framework examines the exclusion of marginalized identities in workplace settings through the use of three concepts: organizational identity, organizational resistance, and stereotyping. Specifically, organizations possess identities that are established through shared values among dominant members. Members that align most with the organization's identity often rely on stereotypes, based on the prevailing social construction of a marginalized group's identity, to challenge the ability of others to fit within the organization. Doan and Portillo (2019) demonstrate this through their exploration of integrating women into the U.S. Special Forces. When an organization is presented with opportunities to adjust its policies or structures to be more inclusive, there is resistance to change, and this resistance is often embedded in institutionalized—or taken for granted assumptions—about the organization's need for the policy or practice. Organizational obliviousness becomes an embedded behavior when it is reflected at the individual, cultural, and institutional levels of an organization (Doan and Portillo 2019) (see Figure 1).

Individual Level

As Doan and Portillo (2019) highlight in their study, the individual level of organizational obliviousness is rooted in the social construction of a marginalized group. Dominant members of the organization draw on stereotypes and anecdotes about a marginalized group to create broad generalizations about them that rationalize and justify their subordinate status in the organization. For example, offhand comments about where a person lives or where certain individuals are willing to move based on their racial or ethnic background may be shared to justify why members of a particular race or ethnicity are underrepresented in a workforce. An example of this is claiming that people of color do not want to live in the suburbs and therefore may not apply to jobs in suburban jurisdictions. That is a stereotype about an entire group that is used to justify the lack of representation and to discriminate against individuals who might apply to jobs in the suburbs. These stereotypes apply assumptions to entire categories of people and rarely take into account how racialized redlining shaped particular neighborhoods or regions (Rothstein 2017).

Cultural Level

At the cultural level, organizational obliviousness can look like individuals being held up as tokens to symbolize the values of an organization. An example occurs when a leader in an organization points to a Black or Latinx manager to "prove" that the organization is inclusive without working to understand the lived experiences of employees of color throughout the organization. Similarly, the organization can point to the missteps of one person with a particular identity to imply that all people with a similar identity may not "fit" in the organization. This is often an example of confirmation bias that keeps people of color and women from receiving equal opportunities within organizations.
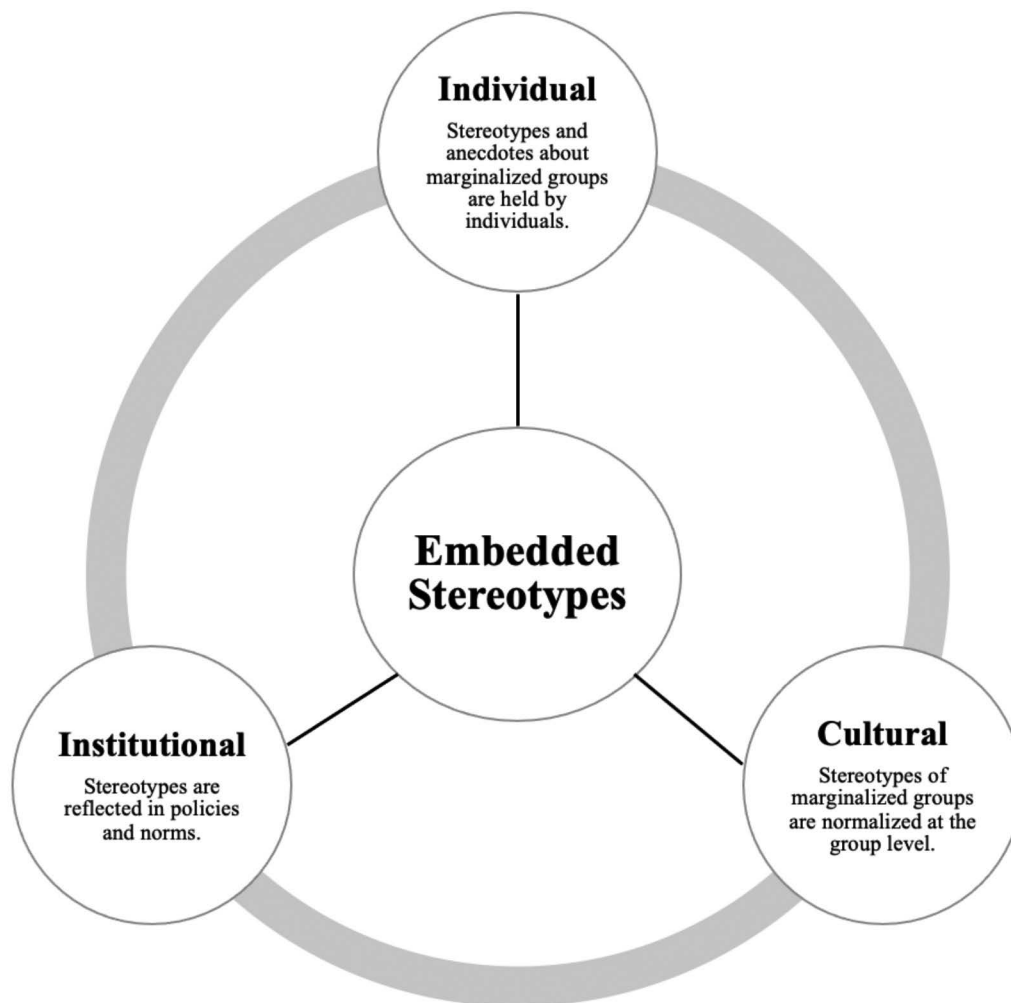
Institutional Level

At the institutional level, organizational obliviousness manifests itself in policies that may appear as neutral, but have disproportionate impacts on women, people of color, and other historically marginalized identities. One complicated example is policies requiring public servants to live in jurisdictions where they are serving. While these policies may increase a sense of community commitment, they make it more difficult for dual career households that are balancing living arrangements for two careers. Specifically, because the household must reside in the community where residency is required, other employed household members may struggle to maintain employment or face additional challenges commuting to work. With more than 85% of police officers in the United States identifying as men (National Institute of Justice 2019), these types of policies can have gendered implications. Again, these policies are seemingly race and gender neutral, but their impact is not. They are often not intentionally designed to target marginalized members of an organization, but the result is that they cause harm to employees who do not fit the norms of the organization.

An Application to the Public Sector

Central to the organizational obliviousness framework is the idea that those reinforcing biased policies and procedures are often (not always) oblivious to their bias and the implications it has for marginalized groups. Recognizing this central tenet of organizational obliviousness, it was essential when we selected a policy to explore this framework that we chose a policy that presented as neutral, but had underlying implications for the treatment of racially marginalized groups. One policy that fits this criterion is grooming policies in the U.S. military. Grooming policies are often presented as neutral and focused on professionalism, regardless of identity, but they have significantly gendered and racialized implications.

Congress determines who can serve in the military,

Figure 1. Organizational Obliviousness Framework

and under what conditions; however, the military is tasked with developing detailed policies and regulations as well as designing training for its members. As the largest public institution, the military was created to serve and protect citizens, while reflecting the values and priorities of the nation. The military prides itself on crafting universal policies and regulations intended to be applied uniformly across service members and ostensibly uphold norms of professionalism and respectability in the institution. However, the implementation of these regulations has always been subject to the interpretation, assumption, and preferences of military leadership who enforce them, which has resulted in disparate treatment of racial and gender minorities (Bailey et al. 2022).

At times, the military has been at the forefront of challenging, shaping or defining societal norms, while at other times, it has been forced to change through the courts and Congress (Bailey et al. 2022). The evolving policies targeted at, and treatment of, female service members exemplifies the fluidity of military regulations that both challenge the status quo while also maintaining norms of professionalism and white middle class respectability. In 1943, the Women's Army Corps (WAC) was awarded full military status. Women were subjected to the same military regulations as men; however, they also had to abide by an additional set of morality regulations that focused on maintaining their femininity, marriageability, and virginity or face discharge (often dishonorably) from WAC (Bailey 2022). Responding to the changing gender norms ushered in by the women's movement, by 1973 the Army modified several of these blatantly gendered regulations. The "moral character" restrictions on female service members and prospective enlistees were rescinded. Prospective female enlistees were no longer required to provide three character reference letters or provide a waiver for any pregnancy they had outside of marriage. Yet, while the military has liberalized some poli-

cies and regulations, other less obvious gendered regulations persist. For example, under the guise of neutrality, lactation rooms were not provided for nursing service members until July 2020 when the Army issued Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, which required breastfeeding and lactation support in the workplace for nursing service members. The institutional logic animating this decision was rooted in the appearance of gender neutrality and fairness. Lactation rooms provide a separate space uniquely for nursing women. But more telling, many military leaders believed that women breastfeeding in military uniforms were "unprofessional" (Vuic 2022).

Professionalism and Organizational Grooming Policies

Professionalism is a core tenet of public administration. As a field, we often trace the genesis of public administration to the Progressive Era. At this time, reformers sought to end the spoils system and machine politics through the incorporation of *professional* practices in government administration. Central to the idea of professionalism in public administration is achieved competence (Gargan 2007). Prior research suggests that professions should contain the following qualities:

> (1) application of skills based on technical knowledge; (2) requirements for advanced education and training; (3) some formal testing of competence on admission to the profession; (4) existence of professional associations; (5) the existence of codes of conduct or ethics; and (6) the existence of an accepted commitment or calling, or sense of responsibility for serving the public. (Fox, 1992, 4)

Broader and more contemporary explanations of professionalism suggest that the defining features of a profession include, "the establishment of jurisdiction over an esoteric body of knowledge, as well as self-regulation over membership and appropriate conduct by professionals" (Kadowaki 2015, 325).

Organizational grooming policies are often grounded in ideals of professionalism. These policies seek to outline standards of appearance for organizational members. Across disciplines and professions, we regularly fail to recognize how expectations of professionalism are often embedded in our understandings of race and gender. As prior research suggests, professionalism is culturally rooted in a manner that penalizes women and people of color (Ferguson and Dougherty 2022). Role congruity theory (RCT) helps provide an explanation of this phenomenon. Specifically, RCT suggests that people possess stereotypes of different social groups, as well as behavioral expectations of different organizational and social roles. When someone stereotypes an individual as incongruent with a certain position, it can lead to harsher evaluations of that individual's behavior and performance (Eagly and Karau 2002). For instance, multiple studies have found that employees of color are less likely to be viewed as congruent with prototypic behavior of managerial and leadership positions (Chung-Herrera and Lankau 2005; Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips 2008), which can negatively impact evaluations of employees of color. In short, expectations of professionalism are often implicitly connected to race and gender and have implications for people of color and women. The following example demonstrates the point. In 2010 Catastrophe Management Solutions (CMS) hired Chasity Jones, a Black woman, but rescinded her job offer when they requested Jones remove her dreadlocks and she refused. The organization argued that Jones had violated their professional conduct requirements:

> At the time, CMS had a written policy that said: "All personnel are expected to be dressed and groomed in a manner that projects a professional and businesslike image while adhering to company and industry standards and/or guidelines. . . . [H]airstyle should reflect a business/professional image. No excessive hairstyles or unusual colors are acceptable[.]" (*EEOC v. CMS* 2016)

Further explanation was given by a human resources manager for CMS who told Jones that dreadlocks "tend to get messy" (*EEOC v. CMS* 2016). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed a lawsuit on behalf of Jones, suggesting that her hairstyle should be protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Specifically, the EEOC argued that because dreadlocks have a cultural association with people who are Black or have African descent, the rescinding of her job offer should be considered discrimination. In the end, "the federal district court and the Eleventh Circuit in *EEOC v. Catastrophe Management Solutions* strictly applied the immutability doctrine to hold that CMS' prohibition against Ms. Jones' locks did not constitute unlawful race discrimination" (Greene 2017, 992). Immutability often

describes characteristics that are considered to be unchosen by the individual (Clarke 2015) and unchangeable (Hoffman 2010). With the court strictly applying the immutability doctrine and siding with CMS, it is arguing that Ms. Jones' hair is chosen and changeable.

Furthermore, the court argued that the CMS policy was race-neutral: "Under our precedent, banning dreadlocks in the workplace under a race-neutral grooming policy—without more—does not constitute intentional race-based discrimination" (*EEOC v. CMS* 2016). Here the court is recognizing that while dreadlocks may often be associated with Black communities, they are not a hairstyle worn exclusively by Black individuals. Because of this, the court can argue that Jones has not experienced racial discrimination because it is a policy that would apply to her regardless of her race. However, it is important to consider why Jones, as a Black woman, may prefer or even need to wear a natural or protective hairstyle like dreadlocks.

Natural hairstyles are those that do not require straightening or chemically relaxing one's hair, while protective hairstyles describe styles that tuck in the ends of the hair, like braids, locs, and twists. The key benefit of protective hairstyles is that they can be worn for an extended period of time and allow hair to grow while minimizing breakage (Bosley and Daveluy 2015). In contrast, straightening one's hair involves using heat to transform hair from curly (or wavy) to straight (Quinn, Quinn, and Kelly 2003). An important feature of straightening is that it cannot withstand water or humidity. Upon exposure to water or humidity, the hair will return to its state prior to the straightening. In comparison to straightening, "chemical relaxing straightens curly hair using chemicals that alters the hair's natural texture" (Quinn et al. 2003, 282). It is important to note that chemical relaxation does not fully straighten someone's hair. It typically makes someone's hair wavier and is a step toward straight hair. Once chemical relaxation is complete, it is followed by straightening the hair until it is no longer wavy. Chemical relaxing is often viewed as providing an extended benefit, since it keeps hair from returning to its natural state when exposed to water or humidity (Quinn et al. 2003).

Prior research has described straightening and chemically relaxing hair as "traumatic hair care practices" (Bosley and Daveluy 2015, 78), because of the long-term damage this process can cause. Extant research suggests that continued use of chemical straightening products for more than a year can result in, "itching, burns and scars on the scalp, thinning and weakening of the hair shaft, discoloration and hair loss, apart from allergic reactions to chemicals" (Miranda-Vilela, Botelho, and Muehlmann 2014, 9). Because of this, an increased number of people have begun using natural and protective hairstyles in the United States (Bosley and Daveluy 2015). In short, there are several reasons why someone may choose a natural and/or protective hairstyle, or a straightened hairstyle. However, it is important to remember that the reasons are often more complex and personal than realized.

While courts have argued that Title VII does not necessarily address natural or protective hairstyles, there has been a legislative push to correct this. In 2019, Representative Cedric Richmond of Louisiana introduced the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act (known as the CROWN Act). In 2022 the Act passed the House but it has not yet passed in the Senate. Many state level elected leaders and advocates are not waiting for federal legislation. Currently, 14 states have passed the CROWN Act, with legislation filed in more than a dozen additional states (https://www.thecrownact.com/about). This legislation would update hair texture and protective hairstyles as a protected class by expanding the definition of race to protect traits associated with race, such as hair texture and protective hairstyles.

Race and Organizational Obliviousness in the Army

On March 31, 2014, the United States Army issued its updated grooming and appearance policy, AR 670-1. Within this updated policy, the Army prohibited women from the wearing of dreadlocks and twists, while placing several limitations on the wearing of cornrows and braids. See Table 1 for a complete description of the Army's requirements. Similar to the policy from Catastrophe Management Solutions, the Army's grooming appearance was considered race-neutral. However, although the policy makes no reference to race, many viewed this as a means to target the appearance of Black women (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Cooper 2014).

While this seems to be a recent issue, the policy only continues a long-standing conflict over the hairstyles of Black soldiers in the military. During the 1960s and 1970s, there were problems over Black men wearing afros (Bailey 2019). As Bailey (2019) suggests, "Despite army hair regulations' uniformity—or at least the intention of uniformity—they nonetheless drew charges of unfairness and preferential treatment" (647), with Black soldiers feeling as though their hair was policed more than their white counterparts.

Table 1. Hair Appearance Policies for Braids, Cornrows, Dreadlocks, and Twists 2014

Army Regulation 670-1	
Braids	Medium and long hair may be braided. Multiple braiding (defined as more than two braids) is authorized. When worn, multiple braids will be of uniform dimension, small in diameter (approximately ¼ inch), show no more than ⅛ of an inch of scalp between the braids and must be tightly interwoven to present a neat, professional, well-groomed appearance. Foreign material (for example, beads and decorative items) will not be braided into the hair. Braids must continue to the end of the hair in one direction, in a straight line, and can be worn loose per medium hair length guidelines or secured to the head in the same manner as described for medium or long length hair styles. Ends will be secured only with inconspicuous rubber bands. If multiple braids are worn, they must encompass the whole head. When braids are not worn loosely and braided close to the scalp, the braids must start at the front of the head.
Cornrows	Cornrows are defined as hair rolled (not twisted using two strands) or braided closely to the scalp producing a continuous, raised row of hair. When worn, cornrows must be of uniform dimension, small in diameter (approximately ¼ inch), show no more than ⅛ inch of scalp between the cornrows and must be tightly rolled or braided to present a neat, professional, well-groomed appearance. Cornrows must start at the front of the head and continue in one direction in a straight line and end at a consistent location of the head. Only one cornrow style (braided or rolled) may be worn at one time.
Dreadlocks	Dreadlocks are defined as any matted, twisted, or locked coils or ropes of hair (or extensions). Any style of dreadlock (against the scalp or free-hanging) is not authorized. Braids or cornrows that are unkempt or matted are considered dreadlocks and are not authorized.
Twists	Twists are defined as twisting two distinct strands of hair around one another to create a twisted ropelike appearance. Although some twists may be temporary, and can be easily untwisted, they are unauthorized (except for French twists). This includes twists formed against the scalp or worn in a free-hanging style.

Note: From AR 670-1 (2014), Chapter 3: Appearance and Grooming Policies, pp. 4–6.

When considering how the U.S. Army implemented organizational policies both banning and limiting hairstyles associated with Black women, the organizational obliviousness framework can provide a helpful lens. Specifically, applying the framework allows us to explore the connection between individual stereotypes, cultural practices, and institutionalized policies. The following sections address this topic, incorporating race and intersectionality into the framework by analyzing stereotypes of hairstyles often associated with Black women, and how these stereotypes become embedded in organizations. See Table 2 for an application of organizational obliviousness at each level of an organization.

Individual Level

At the individual level, obliviousness starts to become embedded in the organizational environment through socially constructed stereotypes of a group (Doan and Portillo 2019). Within the context of their study, Doan and Portillo (2019) focused on gender stereotypes. However, in the context of this research, we focus on racial and intersectional stereotypes. Stereotypes depict, "overgeneralized beliefs about the characteristics of a group of people" (Grandey, Houston, and Avery 2019, 2165).

For instance, Koval and Rosette (2021) conducted four experimental studies, each of which depicts a bias against natural hair among the research participants. Notably, across

Table 2. Application of Organizational Obliviousness

Level of Resistance	Example
Individual	Racial stereotypes regarding professionalism or competence
Cultural	Whiteness is implicitly considered the norm within the organization
Organizational	Racial policy prohibiting or restricting natural and protective hairstyles

each study the authors find that Black women with natural hairstyles are less likely to be viewed as professional, and this bias becomes even more salient in industries with strong dress norms and etiquette (Koval and Rosette 2021). These findings support additional research from Opie and Phillips (2015), another experimental study, which also finds that Black women with natural hair are viewed as less professional compared to Black and white women with straight hair.

Cultural Level

At the cultural level, "obliviousness becomes further embedded in the organization through the normalization of collective stereotyping that reinforces the dominant culture of the organization where it often remains invisible" (Doan and Portillo 2019, 27). Organizational culture represents the shared norms, values, and assumptions among the dominant group in an organization (Schein 2010). Following the gendered organizations literature, Doan and Portillo (2019) highlight how the military has an organizational culture embedded in masculinity. Our discussion follows the racialized organizations literature, highlighting how there is also an implicit culture embedded in whiteness. The military as a public organization is shaped by both gendered and racialized identities, and is an organization embedded in white masculinity.

Several public administration scholars have explored how whiteness can become a cultural element of public sector organizations (Heckler 2019; Humphrey 2021; Portillo et al. 2022), referred to as white normativity. Within organizational settings, white normativity depicts, "the cultural norms and practices that make whiteness appear natural, normal, and right" (Ward 2008, 564). The grooming practices introduced by this policy center whiteness as the professional norm, while failing to explicitly acknowledge race.

Institutional Level

The military has a reputation of regulating every part of an enlistee's life (Smith 2018). This means that the military dictates appearance standards for everyone based on policies and regulations that are introduced at basic training and followed throughout an employee's career. At the institutional level, we see organizational policies that reflect individual stereotypes and the established culture (Doan and Portillo 2019).

The military has historically been a racialized and gendered institution (Bailey 2019; Cohn 2000; Doan and Portillo 2022; Rosen, Knudson, and Fancher 2003). While passage of the updated grooming and appearance policy in 2017 (AR 670-1) improved upon the 2014 policy (e.g., allowing twists), it still limited natural hairstyles through complicated requirements of how hair could be worn (see Table 3). It reinforced the way that racialized and gendered stereotypes show up in policy. A policy that was presented as race and gender-neutral codified taken for granted stereotypes about who belonged and who did not in this particular work environment. When the policy change was introduced in 2017, the media reported that soldiers were feeling pressured to have a "white" appearance though discussion of race did not explicitly come up in the regulation (Terkel 2017). Initial criticism was met with a response from Sgt. Major Raymond Chandler, who defended the policies noting, "The Army is a profession and one of the ways our leaders and the American people measure professionalism is our appearance" (quoted in Terkel 2017). The blowback and discussion that followed the 2017 updates were explicitly racialized and gendered. Black women in the military spoke out as well as the Congressional Black Caucus. When the Army changed its standards in January 2021, it explicitly noted the goal was to be more racially and gender inclusive (U.S. Army Public Affairs 2021). This reversal acknowledged the ways that race and gender were institutionalized through the policy. The policy change was necessary to move toward a more inclusive institution.

Table 3. Hair Appearance Policies for Braids, Cornrows, Locks, and Twists 2017

Army Regulation 670-1	
Braids, cornrows, twists, and locks	Medium and long hair may be styled with braids, cornrows, twists, or locks (see glossary for definitions). Each braid, cornrow, twist, or lock will be of uniform dimension, have a diameter no greater than a ⅛ inch, and present a neat, professional, and well-groomed appearance. Each must have the same approximate size of spacing between the braids, cornrows, twists, or locks. Each hairstyle may be worn against the scalp or loose (free-hanging). When worn loose, such hairstyles must be worn per medium hair length guidelines or secured to the head in the same manner as described for medium or long length hair styles.
	Ends must be secured inconspicuously. When multiple loose braids, twists, or locks are worn, they must encompass the whole head. When braids, cornrows, twists, or locks are not worn loosely and instead worn close to the scalp, they must stop at one consistent location of the head and must follow the natural direction of the hair when worn back, which is either in general straight lines following the shape of the head or flowing with the natural direction of the hair when worn back with one primary part in the hair (see para 3–2*a*(1)(*c*)).
	Hairstyles may not be styled with designs, sharply curved lines, or zigzag lines. Only one distinctive style (braided, rolled, twisted, or locked) may be worn at one time. Braids, cornrows, twists, or locks that distinctly protrude (up or out) from the head are not authorized.
	The bulk of the hair may not be such that it impairs the ability to wear the advanced combat helmet (ACH) or other protective equipment or impedes the ability to operate one's assigned weapon, military equipment, or machinery. A fully serviceable ACH including all of its component parts must be worn in accordance with its technical manual to ensure proper fit for safety.

Note: From AR 670-1 (2017), Chapter 3: Appearance and Grooming Policies, pp. 6–7.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ultimately the U.S. military revised their grooming regulations to allow Black women to wear some protective hairstyles. The Army is the largest of the military branches and revised their policy first, followed by the Air Force and the Marines. After protests and critiques by organizational members, the public, and the Congressional Black Caucus, the military explicitly tied the revisions to their efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion within the organization (U.S. Army Public Affairs 2021). Earlier revisions of grooming standards were presented as race-neutral and tied to classic public administration values of neutrality, objectivity, and professionalism. This shift to explicitly discussing how grooming standards and notions of professionalism shape the racialized and gendered identity of organizations matters. Open and explicit discussions allow for policy and cultural changes that create more equitable organizations.

Our analysis of the grooming standards in the military extends the organizational obliviousness framework (Doan and Portillo 2019) to consider racialized and intersectional practices within a public organization. By centering the intangible and difficult to measure aspects of organizational hierarchies in its analysis, the organizational obliviousness framework interrogates how dominant groups within an organization exercise power to maintain their interests. Originally applied to an analysis of gender, this robust framework can be expanded to examine other dominant values—in this case normative whiteness—to distill how social constructions of historically marginalized groups' identity subtly inform institutional policies and practices that produce inequitable outcomes for members of the organization.

The organizational obliviousness framework can be used to understand how the application of seem-

ingly neutrally written policies can produce inequitable treatment among different members of the organization, and account for the disconnect between different groups' experiences of belonging and exclusion. By focusing on historically marginalized groups' experiences, the organizational obliviousness framework can illuminate how systemic oppression becomes embedded and maintained in organizational hierarchies through individual, cultural, and institutional practices that often subtly reflect the assumed naturalness of white male normativity.

Organizational obliviousness offers a robust framework for public administration scholars; however, it has limitations. Doan and Portillo (2019) analyzed gendered policies in the military, and in this article, we applied the framework to examine the ways in which grooming policies target Black, female military members. Organizational obliviousness has not been used as a framework to examine public organizations outside of the military setting. The framework is also limited by its assumption that much of the inequity in contemporary organizations is unintentionally produced through the application of policies and practices that appear neutral, but in reality, they are gendered and raced. While Doan and Portillo's (2019) research found instances of intentional gender-based discrimination, their framework theorizes that overt acts of discrimination reinforce systemic oppression in organizational settings, as opposed to causing it.

Organizational obliviousness can be leveraged in future public administration research to distill how invisible intersectional logics of oppression shape the policies, practices, and everyday behavior of institutions. Illuminating and challenging these logics is a productive means of attaining a more equitable public organization. In addition, this framework may be useful for understanding how the processes within organizations that lead to inequity for its members may also shape disparate outcomes for the constituents served by it. Future studies should consider using the organizational obliviousness framework as a more robust lens through which inequities in institutions, such as those tasked with addressing issues such as education, welfare, or incarceration, to name a few, can be examined.

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