Space-Focused Stereotypes and Their Potential Role in Group-Based Disparities in Social Work Services

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1   Introduction

The global definition of social work stipulates respect for diversity as one of its core principles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Social work practitioners, perhaps even more than professionals in other help-oriented fields, feel deeply committed to provide services that are sensitive to and respectful of their clients' diverse backgrounds and social identities (e.g., Melendres, 2022). Despite social work's unique commitment to provide services that are sensitive to diversity, several findings suggest systematic disparities in social work and related services along different diversity dimensions (e.g., Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2013; Staudt, 2011). One main area of research within the field are ethnic and "racial"[1] disparities in decisions of child welfare and suspected child maltreatment (for reviews see Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2013). Specifically, research mostly from the US and Canada suggests that group disparities exist at each of the different stages of decision processes: Black children are more likely to be reported (e.g., by school personnel) as being at risk of maltreatment than White children ("overreporting bias"; e.g., Hill, 2004, 2006); child maltreatment reports involving Black children are more likely to be investigated by child welfare professionals than those involving White children (e.g., Harris & Hackett, 2008); and Black children have higher odds of being placed in out-of-home care following a child maltreatment report or investigation (Dettlaff, 2021; Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky, 2015; Keddell, 2014; Knott & Donovan, 2010). Several explanations have been proposed for these group disparities. In the present article, we focus on stereotypes among social work service providers—a factor that is increasingly considered to explain disparities in social-work services (e.g., Staudt, 2011).

In doing so, this article sets two foci. First, we pay particular attention to the diversity dimensions of "race" and ethnicity, and to stereotypes among providers (and not clients). Second, we adopt a (social) psychological perspective focusing on the client-provider dyad and conceptually analyze how stereotypes might impact the way social work providers perceive and interact with clients. Accordingly, we will primarily draw from relevant theoretical approaches and empirical findings in social psychology, but include research from social work and related disciplines whenever suitable in our conceptual analysis.

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[1] Quotation marks are placed to clarify that "races" do not exist in a biological sense, and to emphasize instead that "race" is a social construct (see Martinez, 2023). Additionally, to highlight the social construction of "race", we will use the term "racialized" throughout the present article.

The present article first introduces a traditional conceptualization of group-based stereotypes, i.e., beliefs, assumptions, inferences, or expectations about traits and behaviors of members of social groups. Group-based stereotypes are either applied to a specific person or to an entire social group. We then derive from this traditional conceptualization how stereotypes may also be applied to physical space (Bonam et al., 2016). Subsequently, we elaborate on a number of ways in which social work providers' stereotypes about spaces (e.g., a client's neighborhood; the location or built environment of a service-providing institution) might impact how they perceive and interact with clients in ways that contribute to (existing) disparities in social work services. In a final section, we discuss how a space-focused perspective on providers' stereotypes may inform intervention and prevention approaches that might go unnoticed in a traditional conceptualization of stereotypes as solely group-based phenomena.

2   The Traditional View: Stereotypes About Social Groups

Stereotypes can be best understood on the basis of the traditional conceptualization as group-based stereotypes. Group-based stereotypes are commonly defined as "knowledge" or beliefs about social groups or their members, which are applied to individuals or to entire social groups (e.g., Stangor, 2015). For example, categorizing someone as a "woman" might activate group-based stereotypes such as "compassionate" or "warm" (Eagly et al., 2019), consistent with societally-shared stereotypes ascribed to women in many Western societies. These stereotypes are sometimes thought of as "pictures in our head" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 3), encompassing beliefs, assumptions, inferences, or expectations about the traits and behaviors of social groups. Consequently, such stereotypes may contain expectations about characteristics and behaviors of social groups (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), about their positive or negative intentions or about what they are capable of (Fiske et al., 2002), encompassing abstract ascriptions like "intelligence" (e.g., Reyna, 2008), or concrete ideas about how typical members of these groups look like (e.g., Dotsch & Todorov, 2012).

Stereotypes are thought to serve various functions. Stereotypes help people to navigate the social world, by providing simplified group-based explanations for why people behave in a certain way or by helping predicting the intentions of others based on assumed characteristics of the social groups to which they belong (Fiske et al., 2002; Reyna, 2008). However, there are also various negative consequences associated with the reliance on group-based stereotypes. First, because stereotypes are applied at the social group or category level, they direct a perceiver's attention away from existing differences *within* groups. In other words, the use of stereotypes often implies ascribing (assumed) characteristics of a group to most or all of its members without considering an individual's unique features (e.g., Stangor, 2015). Second, stereotypes shape the perception and interpretation of the behaviors of others, thus increasing the likelihood of misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings in encounters between members of different social groups. For example, experimental evidence suggests that stereotypes affect the interpretation of emotional facial expressions. Studies on the so-called anger bias suggest that people are more likely to misinterpret neutral facial expressions of Black (compared to White) individuals as angry (Halberstadt et al., 2018; Halberstadt et al., 2020), consistent with group-based stereotypes in US society that link African Americans with danger and threat (e.g., Correll et al., 2002). Third, in addition to their effect on perception, stereotypes also shape (discriminatory) behavior. For example, experimental studies suggest that people display threat-related behavioral biases toward individuals from negatively stereotyped racialized groups (Correll et al., 2002; Essien et al., 2017; Stelter et al., 2023). Group-based stereotypes are also reflected in subtle forms of behavior, such as less friendly nonverbal behavior (Dovidio et al., 2002; Penner et al., 2010)

or less respectful language (Voigt et al., 2017) towards members of negatively stereotyped social groups. These findings are complemented by both laboratory and field research suggesting that group-based stereotypes shape important societal outcomes across different domains like school discipline (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), medical treatment decisions (Hoffman et al., 2016), access to the housing market (Mazziotta et al., 2015), and group-based disparities in policing (Hehman et al., 2018; Stelter et al., 2022), thus contributing to group disparities in these domains.[2]

Whereas a large body of research focuses on group-based stereotypes among teachers, physicians, and police officers and on how these stereotypes affect their behavior, the role of stereotypes among other professionals, including social work professionals, has been relatively under-researched so far. Still, there is empirical evidence suggesting that social work professionals–similar to professionals in other domains—harbor negative stereotypes towards different social groups, including racialized groups, sexual minorities, and individuals with higher body weight (e.g., Chonody & Smith, 2013; Lawrence et al., 2019). Moreover, stereotypes among providers are assumed to be an important factor in most multi-determinant frameworks of explanations of group disparities at different stages of child welfare decision-making in cases of suspected child maltreatment (e.g., Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2013). In line with this assumption, empirical research on child welfare in the US suggests that provider stereotypes might indeed contribute to group disparities (Ards et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2013). Specifically, a number of studies have shown that disparate outcomes for Black children and their families continued to exist throughout the different stages of child welfare decision-making in cases of suspected child maltreatment (e.g., report, investigation, out-of-home placement decision) even when statistically controlling for various alternative factors (e.g., family income, type of maltreatment; Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Ards et al., 2003; Dettlaff et al., 2011; Wittenstrom et al., 2015). Although more direct evidence for the causal role of stereotypes is needed (see also Middel et al., 2022), in sum these findings suggest that group disparities can at least in part be traced back to group-based stereotypes among providers.

3   A New Perspective: Space-Focused Stereotypes

Whereas group-based stereotypes have been widely investigated, stereotypes that target other entities than social groups have been relatively neglected so far, including in social psychological research (Bonam et al., 2017). In fact, the term "stereotype" is mostly linked to social groups and their members. Only recently have social psychologists begun to conceptualize stereotypes not only as operating at the group level, but also as operating at contextual levels, including the physical space in which people are embedded.

Social psychological conceptualizations of *space-focused stereotypes* have mainly focused on the association of space and racialized perceptions. At the heart of these conceptualizations lies the idea that physical space is racialized (Bonam et al., 2017). In the United States, for example, "race" has historically been tied to physical space. Until the 1960s, Jim Crow laws codified „racial" segregation, dictating where Black Americans were allowed to live, what schools they could attend, and which public institutions they could use (Bonam et al., 2017;

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[2] Note that *prejudice*—feelings and affective responses to social groups—in addition to stereotypes has also been shown to be related to discriminatory behavior and group-based disparities (see Essien et al., 2022). Importantly, stereotypes and prejudice are distinct but interrelated concepts, with higher levels of stereotypes being causally related to higher levels of prejudice, and vice versa (e.g., Kurdi et al., 2019; Phills et al., 2020).

Payne et al., 2019). In addition, US federal loan programs, city and municipality legislation, as well as White community organizing worked towards confining Black Americans, who moved to industrializing cities, to impoverished and disadvantaged neighborhoods while preventing them to rent or buy in other (predominantly White) neighborhoods or suburbs (Banaji et al., 2021). These examples illustrate how policies and discriminatory practices led to substantial levels of „racial" segregation in cities in the US, creating Black and White spaces—a racialization of physical space that still exists today.

Based on the historical racialization of physical space, scholars in the United States have recently argued that physical spaces—that is, the built environment (e.g., homes, institutions), natural environments (e.g., forests, grasslands) and geographic areas or locales (e.g., neighborhoods, metropolitan statistical areas)—are fraught with „racial" meaning (Bonam et al., 2017). As a consequence, people are thought to apply "racial" stereotypes not only to social groups, but also to physical spaces (Bonam et al., 2016). To empirically investigate this idea of space-focused stereotypes, Bonam and colleagues (2016) conducted a series of seminal studies, in which US participants were asked how they would characterize Black neighborhoods. Participants characterized Black neighborhoods negatively using descriptors such as poor, dirty, crime-ridden, and dangerous (Bonam et al., 2016). Subsequent studies in the US not only replicated these stereotypes of Black spaces, but also showed that White spaces were characterized by an opposing mental image including descriptors such as wealthy, clean, green space, suburban, and safe (Bonam et al., 2020; Yantis & Bonam, 2021). Moreover, recent research suggests that the application of space-focused stereotypes is not only restricted to perceptions of Black and White spaces in the US, but can also be observed regarding racialized and non-racialized spaces outside the US context. Specifically, in a series of studies, Essien and Rohmann (2024) examined the perception of immigrant versus non-immigrant neighborhoods in Germany and observed that these spaces were also differentially stereotyped. Immigrant neighborhoods were consistently described as crime-infested, dirty, and dangerous, whereas non-immigrant (i.e., middle-class or majority-German) neighborhoods were described as quiet, clean, and safe. Taken together, empirical evidence suggests that people's stereotypes about racialized and non-racialized spaces differ considerably in terms of content and valence (i.e., positivity vs. negativity). In fact, the mental images of racialized and non-racialized spaces can be seen as "opposite ends of a spectrum from socially and physically disordered to ordered" (James et al., 2023, p. 142). Importantly, results from field studies suggest that these perceptions hold up even when statistically controlling for a variety of objective indicators of social and physical disorder (e.g., actual crime rates, drug sales, graffiti; Quillian & Pager, 2001; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

At this point, critical readers might ask whether space-focused stereotypes do not merely reflect the stereotypes people hold about the social groups that ostensibly inhabit the spaces (e.g., the social group that is most represented in a specific neighborhood). Or, put differently: Why is it necessary to consider space-focused stereotypes as a phenomenon on its own right? There are at least three answers to that question. First, recent empirical evidence suggests that applying stereotypes to people and applying stereotypes to spaces are related yet distinct concepts. Specifically, the reported disparities in the mental images of Black versus White spaces that have been observed in several studies remained even when statistically controlling for anti-Black attitudes and generalized stereotypes about Black *people* (Bonam et al., 2016; Bonam et al., 2020; Yantis & Bonam, 2021). Space-focused stereotypes thus seem to be a distinct phenomenon that goes beyond group-based stereotypes.

Second, evidence suggests that people might be more likely to "racially" stereotype physical spaces than people (Bonam et al., 2020). A possible explanation for this asymmetry in stereotype application could be that people are less concerned when evaluating or judging physical spaces than when judging people, because social norms against expressing negative stereotypes about spaces are either weak or even non-existent (Bonam et al., 2016). People might thus invest more effort to avoid applying "racial" stereotypes to individuals (e.g., Glaser & Knowles, 2008; Plant & Devine, 1998) whereas applying "racial" stereotypes to spaces might be more normatively acceptable. Results from studies testing this explanation have been inconclusive so far (Bonam et al., 2020). Still, the observed differences in the strength of person-focused versus space-focused stereotypes are important, because stronger stereotypes might be more likely activated (Fazio, 1990). Space-focused stereotypes might therefore have an even stronger influence on people's perceptions, emotions, and behavior than person-focused stereotypes.

Third, relatedly, some findings suggest that space-focused stereotypes might be more resistant to counter-stereotypic information (e.g., that a Black neighborhood is wealthy). Specifically, while objective counter-stereotypic information might have the potential to reduce the application of person-focused stereotypes, the application of space-focused stereotypes seems to be even more pronounced in the face of counter-stereotypic information (Bonam et al., 2020). Thus, some approaches that have been successfully applied to reduce the application and influence of person-focused stereotypes may be less successful or even counterproductive when it comes to space-focused stereotypes.

Taken together, there is a theoretical and empirical basis to assume that applying stereotypes to people and applying stereotypes to spaces are distinct (yet related) phenomena that guide social perception in different ways. The evidence also implies that space-focused stereotypes may be a "particularly insidious form of stereotyping" (Bonam et al., 2020, p. 41–42).

4 Space-Focused Stereotypes and Group-Based Disparities

Physical spaces are relevant for social work services in multiple ways: social work professionals often know their clients' personal address and may visit clients in their homes or neighborhoods. Moreover, service-providing organizations themselves are physical spaces, i.e. specific buildings that are embedded in specific neighborhoods. We next elaborate on how social work professionals' mental images of physical spaces, especially racialized spaces, might contribute to group disparities in social work services, focusing on child protection decision-making processes. Although we are not aware of research that has directly examined space-focused stereotypes in the context of social work services, research suggests at least two ways in which space-focused stereotypes might be linked to disparities in the domain of social work. First, space-focused stereotypes can contribute to disparities by affecting social work professionals' perceptions and judgements of *space itself*. Second, space-focused stereotypes can contribute to disparities by affecting social work professionals' perceptions and judgements of their *clients*.

4.1 Perceptions and judgement of physical space

As noted above, physical space—e.g., a client's neighborhood; the location or built environment of a service-providing institution—can be the target of stereotypes in a similar manner as people can be stereotyped: For instance, whereas non-racialized spaces are assumed to be safe and clean, racialized spaces are assumed to be dangerous and dirty (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016; 2020; Essien & Rohmann, 2024; Yantis & Bonam, 2021). Importantly, these stereotypes not only shape how people perceive physical spaces but also how people

feel about spaces (e.g., how much they feel psychologically connected to them) and ultimately how they treat these spaces (e.g., how much they are willing to invest into, take care, or protect them; Bonam et al., 2016; Bonam et al., 2017). In one of their seminal studies, for instance, Bonam and colleagues (2016) presented US participants with fictitious profiles of houses located in different neighborhoods. They found that participants were more likely to underestimate the value of the house and perceive it as being worth less when it was located in a Black (vs. White) neighborhood. In another study, the authors discovered that these effects of space-focused stereotypes did not only shape how valuable participants thought the space was, but also affected how much they felt connected to and were willing to protect that space. Bonam and colleagues again presented participants with fictitious descriptions of either Black or White neighborhoods, and then assessed, in addition to space-focused stereotypes, how much participants felt psychologically connected with these neighborhoods (e.g., if they could imagine living there) and how willing they were to protect the neighborhood against an environmental hazard (i.e., to what extent they would be opposed to a chemical plant being built in the neighborhood). The researchers observed that when the neighborhood was described as being primarily inhabited by Black people, participants felt less connected to the neighborhood and were less willing to protect it from environmental hazards. These findings could also be replicated with regard to immigrant versus non-immigrant neighborhoods outside the US context. Specifically, in their study on immigrant neighborhoods in Germany, Essien and Rohmann (2024) observed that participants reported feeling less psychologically connected to immigrant as compared to non-immigrant neighborhoods, as reflected in their reported willingness to live in these neighborhoods or their general appreciation of these neighborhoods. Importantly, these observed effects of perceived neighborhood composition on feelings of connectedness were fully mediated by space-focused stereotypes. In other words, differences in the extent to which participants felt connected to immigrant as compared to non-immigrant neighborhoods were fully explained by the negativity or positivity of space-focused stereotypes about these neighborhoods (Essien & Rohmann, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that space-focused stereotypes not only substantially affect how people perceive physical spaces, but also how they judge and treat physical spaces.

From these findings, a number of predictions can be derived about how space-focused stereotypes might affect social work professionals' decisions and actions regarding a specific physical space. First, certain stereotypes about a physical space might affect whether social work professionals "enter" a space or not. For instance, *threat*-related stereotypes about specific areas (such as dangerous or crime-infested; Bonam et al., 2016; Essien & Rohmann, 2024; Yantis & Bonam, 2021) could lead social work professionals to avoid providing services in these areas, to restrict the time they spent in these areas, or to prefer providing services in areas that are stereotyped as non-threatening. This reasoning is in line with recent findings from a study investigating space-focused stereotypes about local communities in China in which people living with HIV/AIDS are overrepresented (Wen et al., 2022). Specifically, the more participants endorsed negative (threat-related) space-focused stereotypes about these communities (e.g., chaotic, dark), the less willing they were to approach them. Avoidance behavior can also be observed in the amount of time spent with clients, such that social work providers who perceive negatively stereotyped areas as threatening and unsafe might be tempted to spend less time with clients who live in these areas. Space-focused stereotypes might thus contribute to a so-called intergroup time bias, i.e. the tendency of helping professionals to spend less time with clients from racialized groups (Do Bú et al., 2023). In addition to threat-related space-focused stereotypes, need-related

stereotypes might impact whether social work professionals provide their services in a specific space or not. For instance, middle-class neighborhoods might be stereotyped as having fewer social problems (e.g., fewer family conflicts), which, in turn, can lead to the stereotype-driven assumption that the provision of services that target these problems is less needed in these neighborhoods. Such need-related space-focused stereotypes may not only affect social work professionals' decisions on which places (not) to seek out, but also higher-order decisions on where to locate the service-providing organizations (e.g., Dotson et al., 2017).

Second, space-focused stereotypes might not only impact whether or not services are provided in a specific area, but also *how* social work services are provided in that area. More specifically, social work providers likely act differently in racialized spaces compared to non-racialized spaces. To illustrate, in the context of child welfare, stereotypes of racialized neighborhoods as poor, unsafe, and dangerous (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016; Essien & Rohmann, 2024; Yantis & Bonam, 2021) might prompt social work professionals to respond in stereotype-congruent ways, i.e. to be generally more wary, tense, or rigorous when providing services in these neighborhoods. These biases may unfold at each decision point in the context of child welfare. For example, case workers might: assess risks for child abuse and neglect more thoroughly in negatively stereotyped areas; be more likely to initiate investigations if reports of suspected child abuse or neglect come from negatively stereotyped areas; invest more time and effort in gathering evidence to substantiate reports; be more likely to place children who live in negatively stereotyped areas in foster care; be less likely to grant that these children exit the foster care system; or be less likely to opt for deescalating approaches to respond to clients in cases of suspected child abuse or neglect (e.g., prefer investigations over supportive services with families or other deescalating responses subsumed under the label "Alternative Response Pathways"; Connell, 2020). In line with this reasoning, studies with police officers suggest that interactions between police officers and civilians may be more tense in areas that officers stereotype as dangerous (e.g., Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Specifically, study findings show that police officers were more likely to use physical force in Black neighborhoods than in White neighborhoods, regardless of whether the target person was Black or White. Taken together, space-focused stereotypes might influence both decisions to provide social work services in certain areas and the way in which these services are delivered.

4.2 Perceptions and judgement of clients

The research reported above suggests that space-focused stereotypes might contribute to "racial" disparities in social work services by affecting providers' decisions whether or not to provide services in a specific space, and by prompting providers to interact with their clients in accordance with space-focused stereotypes and potentially independent from clients' specific attributes and characteristics. Recent research points to a further pathway through which space-focused stereotypes might affect "racial" disparities: by affecting providers' perceptions and judgements of clients themselves.

This reasoning is based on a growing body of social psychological research suggesting that space-focused stereotypes not only impact the perception and evaluation of spaces, but also shape the perceptions and evaluations of individuals who happen to be in these spaces (Bonam et al., 2017; James et al., 2023). Several processes are potentially involved here. First, space-focused stereotypes have been theorized to affect the social categorization of others (Bonam et al., 2017). Perceiving physical spaces as racialized facilitates perceiving

individuals who are encountered in these spaces through a racialized lens. For example, experimental evidence suggests that people are more likely to categorize "racially" ambiguous individuals as belonging to a racialized group (e.g., as being Black) when they had previously learned that the individuals came from a racialized space (e.g., that the target lived in a "racially" diverse neighborhood) than when they received no information about the individuals' social environments (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). Similarly, participants in another study (Freeman et al., 2015) more quickly categorized Asian faces as Asian when they were seen in a stereotypically Chinese scene (e.g., a traditionally Chinese home) and White faces as White when they were seen in a stereotypically US-American scene (e.g., a traditionally US-American restaurant). Together, these findings suggest that the composition of spaces can affect the cognitive accessibility of "racial" categories. These social categorization processes are important due to their potential downstream consequences on person perception. Specifically, social categorization is known to be an important precursor to the activation and application of group-based stereotypes (Roth et al., 2019), which, in turn, may lead to discriminatory treatment. Based on the reviewed findings, social work providers might thus be more likely to "racially" categorize their clients when they are encountered in racialized spaces. As a consequence, clients might be perceived less on the basis of their individual attributes and more on the basis of group-based stereotypes that are associated with the social category. Perceiving clients through a racialized lens of group-based stereotypes, in turn, might trigger stereotype-congruent interpretations of a client's behavior and decision-making biases mentioned above, that might ultimately contribute to disparities in social work services.

Second, space-focused stereotypes and group-based stereotypes likely interact. Specifically, different studies indicate that a perceiver's judgment about a person is influenced by both group-based stereotypes and space-focused stereotypes about the social environments that the person supposedly comes from. Empirical work conducted by Williams et al. (2016) in the US, for example, suggest that physical context that can be seen as stereotypically Black or White can lessen the impact of group-based stereotypes on person perception. When study participants were asked to imagine a White or a Black individual with no information about the individual's social environment, they rated the Black individual as more impulsive and opportunistic than the White target, i.e. in line with group-based stereotypes about Black and White people. When participants were asked to image a White or a Black individual with information about the individual's social environment, however, the environment information had a stronger influence on the perception of the individual: When the environment was described as an under-resourced ecology (i.e., in line with stereotypes of Black spaces), both Black and White individuals were rated as more impulsive and opportunistic than when the environment was described as a resource-sufficient ecology (i.e., in line with stereotypes of White spaces). Still, other research indicates a different pattern. Results from a study by Drexler and colleagues (2023) on criminality perceptions, for instance, suggest that space-focused stereotypes might intensify the influence of group-based stereotypes on person perception: Study participants in the US perceived a Black individual in a suburban neighborhood (i.e., a stereotypically White space) as more criminal than a White individual. Moreover, this effect was especially pronounced for participants who endorsed strong White space-focused stereotypes (e.g., safe, wealthy, and well-maintained) about suburban neighborhoods, potentially because those participants were more likely to believe that Black people are "out-of place" in suburban neighborhoods (for a similar reasoning in the context of "racial" profiling see Meehan & Ponder, 2002). Similar processes might operate in social work settings. In the context of child protection decision-making, for example, group-based

stereotypes about Black people might guide social work professionals' judgements of Black clients. Such effects of group-based stereotypes might be especially pronounced when clients are encountered in a White neighborhood and social work professionals endorse strong space-focused stereotypes about White neighborhoods that run counter to their group-based stereotypes about Black people. Still, much more research needs to be done to disentangle the complex interplay of group-based and space-focused stereotypes in person perception to more fully understand how these processes generally operate and how they might influence social work professionals' or other street-level bureaucrats' perceptions of their clients.

5 Discussion and Practical Implications

In the present article, we introduced a novel perspective on how social work professionals' space-focused stereotypes might affect their client- and service-related decisions, and thus ultimately contribute to observed "racial" and ethnic disparities in social work services. In doing so, we added to a mounting body of research at the intersection of social psychology and social work that addresses the question of how stereotypes among providers and group disparities relate to each other (Middel et al., 2022; Staudt, 2011). The present article might thus not only help to provide a better understanding of the factors that play a causal role in disparities in social work services, but also build a bridge between two disciplines (social psychology and social work) that are often considered in relative isolation from each other.

Moreover, with its focus on space-focused stereotypes, the present article has the potential to raise awareness of a perhaps particularly insidious form of stereotypes. As outlined above, people seem to be more likely to "racially" stereotype physical spaces than people (Bonam et al., 2020), perhaps because social norms against expressing negative stereotypes about spaces are relatively weak or even non-existent (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016). The application of space-focused stereotypes might therefore be perceived as more socially acceptable and legitimate, and less as a problematic bias that needs to be controlled. However, this should by no means trivialize the often detrimental consequences of group-based stereotypes. Rather, we wish to emphasize that group-based stereotypes and space-focused stereotypes are distinct (though closely interrelated) phenomena that might both impact perceptions and decision-making in social work contexts.

5.1 Critical Reflection

The present article is not without limitations. First, we approached the topic of space-focused stereotypes and their potential effects on social work services primarily from a social psychological perspective. With its traditional focus on the micro-level, this perspective allows to theorize how space-focused stereotypes might affect social work professionals' individual perceptions, judgements and behavior. However, most of the proposed effects of space-focused stereotypes on social work services derived from our conceptual analysis have not yet been empirically tested. Thus, more research is needed that systematically investigates the role of space-focused stereotypes in the context of social work. Ideally, a comprehensive analysis of the effects of space-focused stereotypes might also consider approaches from other disciplines with foci on meso- and macro-level processes (e.g., the concept of spatial stigmas that is used in public health science to explain health disparities; Halliday et al., 2020).

Second, the present article elaborated on the role of space-focused stereotypes in disparities in child welfare decision-making processes. Still, disparities can be observed in a variety of domains. For instance, empirical research in the US on "racial" disparities in the quality of mental health treatment provided by clinical social work professionals suggests that families from racialized groups receive lower-quality child welfare services than families from non-

racialized groups (for an overview see Staudt, 2011; see also Kazdin, 1990; Kazdin et al., 1993). Effects of space-focused stereotypes might contribute to disparities in these domains as well. Consequently, more research is necessary to examine the role of space-focused stereotypes in group-based disparities across various domains of social work services.

Third, the present article is restricted to the providers' perspective. However, space-focused stereotypes might affect clients' perceptions, evaluations and behaviors, too. For instance, specific stereotypes about the neighborhood a service-providing institution is located in might reduce clients' willingness to turn to that institution for support and also shape their perceptions and judgements of individual staff members working at that institution. Moreover, when clients perceive an institution (or its surrounding neighborhood) as an "outgroup place" (e.g., a White space from the perspective of Black clients), they might feel a lower sense of belonging there. This, in turn, could lead to social identity threat. Social identity threat can occur when cues in the environment (e.g., cues that mark an institution as stereotypically White) increase the salience of negative group-based stereotypes about an individual's social group (e.g., Black people). Such environmental cues have been shown to trigger psychological and physiological processes that negatively influence cognition, affect, and behavior (e.g., increased negative cognitions, increased anxiety, reduced working memory capacity; Burgess et al., 2010; Steele et al., 2002), including an individual's communication skills (Goff et al., 2008). During client-provider interactions, for example, social identity threat might impair a client's fluency, ability to self-disclose, and responses to the provider's questions, resulting in a poorer overall quality of the interaction (Burgess et al., 2010; see also Murphy et al., 2018). In sum, then, to more thoroughly understand their impact on disparities in social work services, space-focused stereotypes of both providers and clients need to be considered in future research.

Forth, we paid particular attention to space-focused stereotypes about White and Black spaces in the US, as this has been the focus of the majority of research on space-focused stereotypes so far. However, we believe that many of the described concepts and findings also apply to other diversity dimensions apart from that Black and White binary. In line with this reasoning, as reported above, Essien and Rohmann (2024) observed that immigrant and non-immigrant spaces in Germany are each associated with distinct stereotypes. Still, a number of socially relevant diversity dimensions have been neglected so far. Consequently, we hope that future research investigates how space-focused stereotypes along other diversity dimensions (e.g., sexual orientation) might contribute to group disparities in social work services.

Fifth, relatedly, although the present article focused on racialized spaces, we did not use the term "racism" to describe stereotype-based processes and their potential role in disparities in social work services. The term "racism" was deliberately not used in order to provide conceptual clarity about the general nature of space-focused (and group-based) stereotypes. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that many if not most of the presented ideas and findings are situated in the contexts and histories of racism. For example, the creation of segregated, racialized spaces in the United States are arguably a result of racist, discriminatory policies and actions that can hardly be understood without considering the history of slavery and racism in the US (see Banaji et al., 2021). Similarly, many of the stereotype-based processes described in the article (e.g., associating Black people with threat or perceiving Black spaces as run-down; Bonam et al., 2016; Correll et al., 2002; Halberstadt et al., 2020) can hardly be separated from the legacy and present-day operation of racism. Moreover, using a lens of racism allows researchers to more comprehensively study the ways in which space-focused stereotypes might interact with social work services. Thus, future

research is needed that explicitly conceptualizes how racism shapes space-focused stereotypes, thus contributing to disparities in social work services.

5.2 Practical Implications

If space-focused stereotypes contribute to disparities in social work services, it is imperative that social work students, practitioners, and decision-makers are made aware of these biases and learn ways to overcome them. For example, in the context of child welfare, social work students could be made aware about the specific ways in which space-focused stereotypes might impact decision-making at various decision points (e.g., by affecting risk assessments for child abuse and neglect in negatively stereotyped areas; by affecting the amount of time and resources invested into substantiating claims of reported child abuse and neglect in stereotyped areas). While most social work education programs include teaching units that aim at increasing students' awareness and acknowledgement of their group-based stereotypes (e.g., Staudt, 2011), we are not aware of any educational approaches that systematically address students' *space-focused* stereotypes. This lacuna is especially important in light of the increasing evidence suggesting that people are more likely to apply "racial" stereotypes to places than to people, and that space-focused stereotypes are stronger than person-focused stereotypes, perhaps because the application of stereotypes to spaces is perceived as more normatively acceptable than the application of stereotypes to people (Bonam et al., 2016; Bonam et al., 2020). Space-focused stereotypes might therefore have an even stronger impact on people's perceptions, judgements and behaviors than group-based stereotypes, while at the same time being less recognized as problematic biases. Raising students', practitioners', and decision makers' awareness of space-focused stereotypes might thus be a valuable goal in social work education, furthering professionals' critical reflectivity and awareness of own stereotypes and biases (Nadan & Stark, 2016).

When integrating professionals' space-focused stereotypes as a topic into social work education, two things in particular should be considered. First, as with every approach aiming at confronting people with their own stereotypes, teachers or trainers should not only raise students' or trainees' awareness of their vulnerability to harboring space-focused stereotypes, but also provide them with strategies and tools to reduce the application of these stereotypes (Carnes et al., 2015; Cox & Devine, 2019; Devine et al., 2012). Specifically, creating awareness about own space-focused stereotypes without providing any guidance in the form of strategies would likely leave students helpless and ill-equipped. Second, educational approaches about space-focused stereotypes may also include education about place-based critical history (e.g., by showing how physical space has been strategically used as a tool to perpetuate "racial" and ethnic disparities; Bonam et al., 2019). Such knowledge might be especially helpful to increase people's understanding of space-focused stereotypes' detrimental role in perpetuating and exacerbating existing disparities along different diversity dimensions.

Moreover, (social psychological) micro-level approaches with their focus on individuals' perceptions and behaviors need to be complemented by meso- and macro-level approaches. For instance, service-providing social work organizations might consider space-focused stereotype as one potential reason why some clients are less willing to approach them and use their services. To illustrate, space-focused stereotypes about a White neighborhood a service-providing organization is located in might reduce Black clients' willingness to seek out these services. Empirical research suggests that one way of how organizations could tackle such

barriers related to space-focused stereotypes could be to publicly emphasize their openness to diversity (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

In sum, then, a combination of approaches might be needed to reduce space-focused stereotypes' potential contribution to group-based disparities in social work services: Social work professionals may need to become aware of space-focused stereotypes, understand their role in perpetuating group-based disparities, and learn strategies to reduce such stereotypes. In addition, organizations need to critically reflect on the role of space-focused stereotypes as potential barriers to their services, and develop ways to reduce these barriers.

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