International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/

2023, Volume 35, Number 1, 36-47
ISSN 1812-9129

Professor Oppressors: College Classrooms as Spaces of Racist and Sexist Microaggressions

Ellen Halvorson
University of Calgary

Jörg Vianden
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

This article describes minoritized college students' encounters with faculty-generated or -condoned racial and gender microaggressions in college classrooms. The Racial Microaggressions Model (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015) and the Taxonomy of Gender Microaggressions (Capodilupo et al., 2010) were used to inform the experiences of microaggressions of 88 college students with minoritized identities at seven institutions around the U.S. Based on the findings, the authors delivered recommendations for teaching and learning in four areas: faculty awareness and training; classroom management; policy, assessment, and evaluation of teaching; and improved mechanisms for student feedback.

During a recent panel discussion at one of our institutions on the widespread police brutality facing Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) individuals, a Black graduate student participant relayed a personal story of the racism to which he had been subjected growing up as a child in Chicago. His vivid memories were of a science teacher telling him "I'll see you in 10 years bagging my groceries," and a Spanish teacher quipping, "I'm surprised you're still in school." Perhaps we as educators should not be shocked that some of us use oppressive language toward students; after all, teachers or college professors are representatives of the larger society that continues to harbor hate for our fellow citizens with minoritized identities. However, the younger generations we attempt to teach, mentor, and guide deserve better, as does our profession. Teachers and college professors are among the most important socialization agents for young people in our society (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What educators do, say, and model; how they behave, act, or communicate matters greatly in the development of K-16 students.

The experiences by the African American graduate student were microaggressions: the insidious, abusive, and often unconscious remarks people of dominant social groups make toward individuals in marginalized communities (Sue, 2010). The body of literature on microaggressions, bias, hate, systemic oppression, power, and privilege in higher education is important and sizable. We know how these slights, often uttered by Whites, affect BIPOC people throughout our primary, secondary, and post-secondary education landscapes, much like our opening story suggests (Berk, 2017; Boysen, 2012, 2013).

Most of the published literature focuses on microaggressions, abuse, or oppression that emanates *from* students in college classrooms and how faculty are supposed to manage or deal with these comments or actions (Byers et al., 2020; Casanova et al., 2018; Cheung et al., 2016; Darvin, 2018; Ford, 2011; Kang & Garran, 2018; Lester et al., 2017; Ortega et al., 2018; Pasque et al., 2013; Pittman, 2010; Suárez-Orozco, 2015; Warner, 2019). Less frequently studied are the ways in which college educators are the *originators* of abusive, discriminatory, or prejudicial behaviors toward their students (Eccles et al., 2016; Park et al., 2020; Ramsay, 2020). Specifically, we know little about how faculty-generated racism and sexism manifests in college classrooms.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it centers minoritized college students' encounters with faculty-generated or -condoned racism or sexism in college classrooms. Second, it aims to challenge college faculty to engage in a reflective process about their own teaching and to stop using oppressive language in their own classrooms. The data for this article stem from a nationwide qualitative focus-group study with 180 college student participants at 13 institutions to explore and understand how college students perceive diversity and social justice efforts on their campuses and in their communities.

Review of the Literature

This literature review broadly covers extant research pertaining to microaggressions. The first part features empirical and theoretical work about microaggressions and their effects on the receiver. The second part focuses on college classrooms and how microaggressions generated by faculty create spaces of oppression for students with minoritized identities.

Racial and Gender Microaggressions

Chester Pierce (1970), the late Harvard psychiatrist, first coined the term "microaggression" to define a subtle, perhaps inadvertent, yet ongoing offense to Black individuals. Pierce differentiated the micro-aggression as small and slight from an obvious macro-aggression such as racial violence by Whites. Originally thought of

as a term to appear in racial contexts, we now think of microaggressions as behavior that harms members of all minoritized communities, including gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

Most of the racism and sexism on college campuses stem from White men students, staff, faculty, and administrators (Cabrera, 2012, 2014; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017; Heinze, 2008; Picca & Feagin, 2007; Vaccaro, 2010). As a result, White men administrators and faculty must interrogate why racial, ethnic, gender and sexual oppression; stereotype threat, and microaggressions are frequent occurrences in institutions of higher education and must help lead the way to stop this oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Feagin, 2013; Vianden, 2020).

Most literature about microaggressions references either *faculty-to-faculty* occurrences (Louis et al., 2016; Pittman, 2012), *peer-to-peer* occurrences (Darvin, 2018), *White student-to-faculty of color* occurrences (Pittman, 2010, 2012), or environmental occurrences, such as *lack of representation of racial diversity in faculty* or *bias in course content or delivery* (Lester et al., 2017; Park, 2020). Few studies feature microaggressions where *faculty are the deliverers and students are the receivers* (McCoy et al., 2015; Park et al., 2020; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015), which is the focus of the current study. Specific literature about faculty-generated microaggressions, without dual reference to other deliverers of microaggressions, is sparse. Much of the microaggression literature geared toward faculty relates to *classroom management* (Darvin, 2018; Sue et al., 2009) and what faculty ought to do when they witness microaggressive acts or overhear verbal microaggressions used students toward their peers (Sue et al., 2009).

In general, the body of literature on gender microaggressions is much smaller than that of racial microaggressions. Literature on gender-based discrimination typically centers around sexual harassment or assault (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018) or blatant sexism. Much less is known about gender microaggressions, with 80% of extant literature published just within the last 10 years (Gartner et al., 2020). Much of the gender microaggressions literature focuses on college-aged women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields because of the notable gender divide and the dated stereotype that STEM fields are specifically for men (Baker, 2020; Kuchynka et al., 2018; Naphan, 2016; Starr, 2018).

Microaggressions have deleterious effects on those who receive them. Aside from immediate outcomes of race-based microaggressions such as feelings of being discounted or disvalued (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2020), long-term effects abound. These include lower self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014); anger, exhaustion, and alienation (Franklin et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2019); high blood pressure and other stress-related physiological concerns (Armstead et al., 1989; Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Brondolo et al., 2008; Pascoe & Richman, 2009); and mental health effects such as anxiety and depression (Ackerman-Berger et al., 2020; Paradies et al., 2015; Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Discriminatory or stereotypical language or behaviors used by faculty also have a negative effect on student retention who suffer lack of sense of belonging (D'hondt et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020), or who feel discouraged and apathetic toward their studies and academic performance (Ackerman-Berger et al., 2020; Komarraju et al., 2010).

Classrooms as Spaces of Microaggressions

Our school and college classrooms undoubtedly reflect the oppressions of society (Pittman, 2010), complete with bias, inequities, and microaggressions. Microaggressions delivered by professors are insults to students' intelligence and ability (Ramsay, 2020; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Compared to other racial groups, Black students report having the least satisfactory relationships with their professors (Park et al., 2020; Ramsay, 2020) and many faculty may in fact treat BIPOC students differently than White students (Ackerman-Berger et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2015; Nadal et al., 2014). Women students reported facing microaggressions from professors more frequently than men students (Baker, 2020; Gartner et al., 2020; Gartner, 2021; Kuchynka et al., 2018; Naphan, 2016; Starr, 2018).

Much of the research focused on oppression in classroom settings addresses the importance of legitimizing discussions about microaggressions after a sexist or racist incident occurs (Darvin, 2018), or on how to have productive dialogue around racism and sexism. Boysen (2012) found that faculty vary greatly in their perceptions of microaggressions, which may be why some faculty are the deliverers of harmful language in their own classrooms. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) sent trained observers to 60 different college classrooms and found racial and/or gendered microaggressions occurred in 30% of the cases, and 80% of microaggressions occurred more than once. McCoy et al. (2015) suggested White faculty did not bring up the topic of graduate school to BIPOC students because they deemed them "not top students" (p. 232). Observing 26 classrooms, Lester et al. (2017) found patterns of women student isolation, gendered language from faculty and in course content, and competitive classroom climates that seemed to exclude women. On the other hand, White college students who are men did not seem to be frequent receivers of faculty microaggressions (Ramsay, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

For the purposes of this article, we are leaning on two related conceptual frameworks: 1) The Racial Microaggressions Model (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015), and 2) Taxonomy of Gender Microaggressions (Capodilupo et al., 2010). Both frameworks operate under the tenets of critical race theory and intersectionality in that they center the experiences of minoritized individuals, as well as critique and challenge systemic inequities.

Racial Microaggressions Model

The racial microaggressions model (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015) provides a lens through which microaggressions can be explained as an inexorable link to systemic and institutional racism and White supremacy. Viewed in the context of our study, the model illustrates ways by which White college faculty exercise their supremacy and exert systemic and institutional racism. This is most often done through frequent racialized comments, slurs, or questions that let BIPOC students feel 'othered' for their color of skin, their upbringing, their culture, or their academic preparation. Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) theorized their model to include three linked components, including racial microaggressions, which are situated in a larger sphere of institutional racism, which is situated in a larger square of macroaggressions.

Institutional racism involves "structural mechanisms, such as policies and processes that systematically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude non-dominant groups and mediates their experiences with racial microaggressions" (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 7). The model supports the view that institutional racism functions as a way to methodically drive policies and processes in all institutions of society, including law and law enforcement, business and industry, government and politics, as well as education. Especially Black college students have experienced institutional racism in their lives. For instance, their exuberance or chattiness in school may have been mistaken for hyperactivity or bad behavior in school (Furfaro, 2020). They may have gone to a high school which admissions counselors from local universities did not visit due to a perceived lack of student preparation for college (Vianden, 2020). Institutional racism is further evident in education by the countless bias or hate incidents that happen on college and school campuses, specifically against racially minoritized students. Institutional racism, specifically in higher education, also works to protect Whiteness as property in that it systemically and insidiously promotes White faculty, staff, and students over BIPOC individuals in access, admission, funding, selection of staff and faculty, as well as promotion and tenure (Bondi, 2012; Patton, 2016; Patton & Haynes, 2020). In higher education, we see institutional racism evident in lower rates of admission or access, as well as lower rates of success or graduation of Black or Latinx students compared to White students.

Macroaggression, the final layer of the model, includes both racial microaggressions and institutional racism. Pérez Huber and Solorzano (2015) defined a macroaggression as the "set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination" (p. 7). Macroaggression becomes an ideological structure on which institutional racism and microaggressions are built. In the context of our study, macroaggression is the philosophy or worldview on which Whites build their institutional racism or their microaggression. In short, macroaggression is the legitimizing agent for White racist behavior against people of color.

Taxonomy of Gender Microaggressions

Gender microaggressions are frequent or daily verbal or behavioral slights, slurs, insults, or abuse of a sexist nature directed at women (Nadal, 2010). As with all microaggressions, gender microaggressions may manifest in conscious or unconscious ways; that is, the perpetrator may not understand why their comments were harmful and the victim may experience a host of negative outcomes as a result of the sexist abuse, including emotional or physical pain or mental health concerns (Capodilupo et al., 2010). Sue and Capodilupo (2008) established an early taxonomy later extended by Nadal (2010). The taxonomy of gender microaggressions we lean on here includes eight categories (Capodilupo et al., 2010).

First, *sexual objectification*, takes place when women are considered sexual objects (e.g., through catcalling or unwanted touching from men). In college classrooms, this may occur when men faculty or students pay more attention to women's dress, body, or shape than their intellectual contributions. The second category, *second-class citizen*, invokes experiences of women who may be passed up for a promotion over men who have equal or lesser qualifications. In a college classroom, this may mean that men faculty may validate what men contribute to a discussion and neglect women's input. Men's behaviors in this category send messages to women that they are not deemed as important to the organization or institution as men. Third, *assumptions of inferiority*, takes place when men assume women are weaker or less competent, for instance carrying heavy items for women without their permission. The fourth category, *denial of the reality of sexism*, features women's experiences with men who

claim that their encounters with sexism are exaggerated. In college classrooms, this behavior may include negating women's perceptions that campuses or institutions are spaces where sexism occurs. Fifth, *assumptions of traditional gender roles*, take place when men assume or propose women must adhere to out-of-date gender roles, such as taking care of household or children. Next, *use of sexist language*, involves calling women belittling names, including "darling" or "sugar." The seventh category, *denial of individual sexism*, involves men who deny using sexist language or behaviors despite women experiencing harm or discrimination of a sexist nature from them. In a college setting this manifestation of sexism and misogyny may be a reason why so many sexual harassment investigations end in a "he said, she said" predicament. Men simply state did not harass or behave in sexist ways, and the investigators believe men's claims, despite the women's lived experiences. Finally, *environmental microaggression* takes place on institutional and systemic levels and involves oppression such as women earning less than men for the same job or women being kept from ascending to positions of leadership despite better qualifications than men. In a college setting this may include women students not receiving the same opportunities for undergraduate research with faculty, or for paid positions on campus.

Caveat on the Term Microaggression

Even though the term microaggression has been used in higher education literature and practice for decades, we must point out that "micro" does not connote subtle, benign, or small. In fact, we agree with scholars like Kendi (2019) who argued that the incessant and unrelenting nature of micro-insults over generations, intentional or not, constitute racial abuse and oppression. Dissecting the term microaggression, Kendi (2019) stated:

> I detest its component parts: "micro" and "aggression." A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor. I use the term "abuse" because aggression is not as exacting a term. Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide." (p. 47)

This perspective of microaggressions as abuse can transfer to the identities of gender as well. The term microaggression is an oxymoron (Lui et al., 2020). It conflates the impact with the intent; the intent may have been "micro" but had an effect on an "aggressive" scale (Lilienfeld, 2017). There is also much overlap between microaggressions and plain, everyday discrimination (Lui et al., 2020). Despite using the term microaggression throughout this article, we adhere to views that racial and gender microaggressions are a form of "everyday suffering that have become socially and systemically normalized and effectively minimized" (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015, p. 8).

Methods

A constructivist epistemology grounded the study assuming individuals seek to understand the world in which they live through subjective and lived experiences. At the same time, researchers acknowledge that their own historical, cultural, and personal backgrounds shape how they interpret findings (Jones et al., 2014). A qualitative approach is suitable for the constructivist paradigm. According to Charmaz (2006), qualitative studies explore participants' experiences in their natural settings, such as college students with minoritized or multiple minoritized identities experiencing their specific institutions, campus climates, and interactions with their instructors.

Authors' Reflexivity

The first author is a cisgender White woman doctoral student in a Curriculum and Learning program at a Canadian research institution, with a specific interest in men and masculinities studies. While supervising college students I have made many mistakes when working with students who hold different identities. As a White woman, I understand the temptation to take on the role of receiver when it comes to gender microaggressions and not challenge my own past behaviors where I have been the deliverer of both racial and gender microaggressions. I continuously reflect on the microaggressions I have delivered and try to ensure I do not repeat them. As I prepare to become a higher education researcher and faculty member, I continue to inspect and dissect the patterns and norms that drive my classrooms and my interactions with students.

The second author identifies as a cisgender White man who is a tenured professor at a regional public institution in the Midwestern U.S. In my attempts to challenge college instructors, I cannot gloss over my own difficulties in the context of microaggressions. I must not disassociate from other faculty who do harm to students in classrooms, because I have also been guilty of using sexist, racist, ableist, heteronormative, and homophobic language in college classrooms. I would love to say none were intentional or meant to harm students; however, I also know that my students' perception of my attitudes or behaviors are their realities, despite my intentions. When I used inappropriate, oppressive, and harmful language, my students either called out my behaviors in person during or after class, or during evaluations of instruction, most often showing me more

grace and good will than I showed in my teaching or speech. As a result of each challenge of my students, I have tried to eradicate the specific language I used in my teaching and everyday behavior.

Research Sites, Sampling, and Data Collection

The data furnishing this article were collected as part of a qualitative focus-group study with 88 college students with traditionally minoritized identities at 13 institutions around the U.S. For the larger study, students had to identify with one or more of the following salient identities: woman; BIPOC student; or a student with diverse gender or sexual orientation. The main research question guiding the larger study dealt with how college students with oppressed identities perceived campus and community diversity issues. The authors received human subjects approval at the second author's home institution, as well as at each individual research site.

For the purposes of this article, we report on data collected at seven of the research sites. Three of the institutions were research universities, two were master's comprehensive institutions, and three were liberal arts colleges. Two were private and five were public institutions. One institution was located in the Southeast, three in the Intermountain Region, and three in the Midwest. All were predominantly white institutions (PWI) and all enrolled a majority of women students. We used purposeful and expert nominator sampling strategies (Jones et al., 2014). Colleagues of the second author worked at each research site, they recruited participants, and scheduled rooms for data collection.

Focus groups served as the method of data collection which ranged in size from three to eight participants. The second author conducted all focus groups in person in classrooms or meeting rooms the colleagues at the respective institutions scheduled. Focus groups were digitally recorded, they lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. Sample focus group questions asked participants to describe what it felt like to carry minoritized identities on campus; how the institution was teaching and communicating the importance of diversity, equity, or social justice; and what attitudes and behaviors related to diversity or social justice originated from White faculty and students.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers performed member checks with participants to authenticate initial interpretations of focus group data, and maintained thick description of all focus groups, field notes, memos, and transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

After each focus group was transcribed, the second author engaged in open and axial coding (Saldaña, 2015) using Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software. A graduate student trained in qualitative research methods assisted in this process. Before we began drafting this article, we engaged in another round of open and axial coding of all data that related to microaggressions, as well as to overt oppression related to race, gender, and sexual orientation inside of classrooms at each institution. Open coding resulted in 14 distinct codes related to classroom oppression, including sample codes such as *Gender-related Joking from Professors*; *Assumptions about Academic Capabilities of Women*; or *Standing out as the Only Black Person.*

We concluded data analysis by another round of axial coding (Saldaña, 2015) to categorize the data into larger themes. This included collapsing the initial codes into the larger data categories of *Gender-based Oppression in Classrooms* and *Race-based Oppression in Classrooms*.

Limitations

Although this study advances knowledge about the experiences of college students with minoritized identities who face oppression in their college classrooms, it does have limitations. First, the stories told in this article reflect the perceptions of 88 participants and we caution the reader to transfer the results to other institutional settings. Second, the participants represented fewer than 1% of the total undergraduate student bodies at the seven research sites and it is possible that other students with minoritized identities would have perceived fewer microaggressions in their classrooms. Finally, we did not study the faculty who are implicated in the microaggressions, and we are unable to check the students' statements for accuracy. It is possible that the institutions or the instructors would present different perspectives. However, the students' perceptions of what took place are their reality and are vital for this article.

Findings

Through the coding process, we identified two distinct themes that describe the participants' experiences with sexist and racist microaggressions in their college classrooms. Some of the findings reflect covert and overt microaggressions by faculty toward students. Other participant perceptions are about the classroom environment as sexist or racist. In either case, faculty who manage and control their classrooms play a direct role in avoiding language or behaviors that make students with minoritized identities feel harmed.

"I Feel Less Respected as a Woman:" Gender-Based Oppression in Classrooms

Women participants perceived sexist language or behavior in classrooms that stemmed from their instructors, the vast majority of whom were men. Sierra (all names changed), a Latina woman, perceived a sense of distance from some of her men instructors:

> Some professors just have the extreme White male attitude, I guess. I don't know how to say it exactly. They talk about sports in class a lot or they act… I can't really explain it but it's more aggressive I guess…. So, I notice a lot of the time females that work with them or in class are just more distant, but [the professors] are friends with all of the guys in class.

Some actions of men college instructors may not be directly sexist. However, an environment created by faculty which seems to favor men may negatively affect women's learning, success, or sense of belonging on campus.

Jaden, a Black woman, had an experience with men faculty not paying attention to her during classroom discussions: "Professors will kind of look over you...and then...[talk] with just like the men in the classroom. [The faculty] don't really talk to me unless I'm kind of like in their faces." Annie, a White woman, shared this experience from a classroom interaction with a professor:

> He was awful, he was really rude and awful. White guy, totally full of himself, thought he knew everything. He thought we were all dumb, you know, like, "I know everything and you know nothing." And I don't care for that attitude. He wouldn't talk to me, I can [have] my hand up like almost the whole class. I totally gave him rage face, sitting in front of him. He wouldn't call on me.

Christie, a White woman, discussed encounters with a man instructor who engaged in unsuitable behavior in the classroom: "The way one of my professors speaks to the female students, it's just inappropriate, the way he down-talks [us]…Personally, [I] feel less safe and less respected just as a woman."

Safety also seemed a concern for Bree, a White woman, who discussed this experience with a faculty member:

> [The professor] said something about women not being the best scientists and the guys in the class kind of looked at each other and chuckled. And I was like literally sitting here and these two big guys—I'm a petite woman—look over me and they laugh…. Like, jokes that are just jokes, [ok], but when you've experienced it in a serious light, it's not funny.

Not only was the initial comment by the faculty member sexist, but it created a culture in which Bree felt uneasy about being in a class with men students who laugh instead of interceding or challenging sexist language. Professors who engage in this behavior shape environments in which women question whether they should accept the sexism as a joke and move on.

Madison, a White woman, shared an encounter with a professor: "[He said,] 'Wow, you are going to be a female doctor that's great!' You don't have to say… female doctor, I'm just going to be a doctor. And so, it's just little things like that, like microaggression kind of stuff." A sexist instructor was also a topic of discussion between Claire, a White woman, and her roommate:

> [My roommate's] instructor makes snide remarks about women saying that, "Girls, this might take you longer to get." Or things that just are totally inappropriate where it's like, how are your students supposed to feel safe and supported when you are saying that stuff?... And then he will make a comment about his wife and [how] it took her forever to learn this.

Claire's perceptions of safety in college classrooms under the management of sexist men faculty hold critical implications for teaching and learning and those academic leaders who oversee and assess postsecondary instruction.

Tiffany, a White woman, shared an experience with a man faculty member in a chemistry course:

> On a daily basis, [he] will make a reference to the kitchen and a woman and sports and a man. Without fail, every single class period...So, I think what's being promoted in the classroom is "Woman, get me a sandwich," "Boys, let's go watch football." Nothing's going to change if professors still promote that.

Again, we point to the establishment of a classroom climate in which women feel unvalued because of the behavior of a man instructor. Tiffany's experience suggests she surmised the institution promotes and perpetuates this kind of environment. A bit later in the same focus group, Lara, a White woman, added: "My professor's talking, all of the time...about women, like, 'let's go to Starbucks, let's walk in a group, let's wear UGG boots.'" We are uncertain what the instructor meant by this comment. However, he seems to deride the way some women dress, the kind of coffee they drink,

and, most detrimentally, the fact that many of them may feel unsafe outside of a larger group. College faculty must be aware of the gendered climate they create, and how their own potential implicit biases toward men and their own sexism shapes the experiences of college women.

"It Was So Blatantly Racist:" Race-Based Oppression in Classrooms

The second theme we identified features BIPOC participants' perceptions and experiences with racial microaggressions in their classrooms, typically originating with White instructors or peers. The theme consists of three subcategories. First, the data tell stories about assumptions, stereotypes, or joking the participants perceived from others in classrooms about their racial identities. Second, some participants discussed the perceptions of being the only BIPOC student in a given classroom at their PWI. Third, a few participants discussed the invisibility they felt being part of a different racial group than the predominant Whiteness in their classrooms.

One of the subcategories of this theme was participant-perceived assumptions, stereotypes, or jokes Whites were making about them in the classroom. Felipe, a Latino student, indicated how one of his White instructors showed ethnocentric behaviors in his classroom: "Like, the Asians sit in one area and the Caucasians sit in another. In this specific situation...the professor said, 'And then Vietnam can do this part of the problem.' And that is just so blatantly racist."

Malik, an African American student, pointed out:

> There have been professors and other students that will look at me and see me first and you can see how their demeanor changes but then as the conversation goes, I feel like, it makes me feel a little bit better that I surprise so many people. I feel like it happens but it kind of hurts that I have to do that…Why do I have to prove to you, why would you look at me differently? Why do I have to make that extra effort?

Charles, an African American student, perceived that professors frequently assumed they could joke with him: "Professors think that they can make jokes with you... if you're a Black male, that you're just funny in class. So, if you say anything, they just burst out in laughter. I'm the class clown even without trying."

Jasmin, an African American woman, addressed White joking she experienced in an undergraduate sociology class:

> We were talking about White privilege and [the professor] showed a video of this White comedian talking about how you should *want* to be White, like being White is right and all this other stuff. All of the White kids were laughing... because he was making a lot of jokes about minorities in the video. And it was me and two of my other friends and we were just sitting there looking at each other the whole time like, "it's not funny."…And we talked to [the professor] after class and he was telling us how he wanted to make light of the situation and he wanted to make people aware but also feel comfortable. And I was like, "They shouldn't feel comfortable because we don't feel comfortable every day being in that class."

The second subcategory in this theme featured student experiences about what many BIPOC students at PWIs have termed the "lonely only" as in being the only person of color in a classroom or out-of-classroom setting. Sensing a spotlight on her during class discussions on slavery was awkward for Jaida, an African American student:

> The professor...[is] not trying to look at you, but you know they are... and then you know the class is looking at you. And I'm like, "I don't know how to react to this." When topics of race come [up], I just feel real uncomfortable…. I have always been that only Black girl, and I have always hated it.

Bina, a Black student in the same focus group as Jaida, mentioned:

> When teachers are giving a lesson about Black history or anything Black, they look to the Black people in the room. Last year, [in] my English class, we were going over Black readings. We had to translate... kind of like Romeo and Juliet talking [to each other] into Black culture. And [students]… were like, "Yo, bitch, get over here and do this" and they kept looking at us. [And I'm] like, "That's not how we talk." They expected us to laugh and they expected us to speak up and say, "Oh yeah, that's how Black people talk."

Salea, an African American student, had a similar experience about discussions of race in classes at her PWI: "Whenever we talk about [race], I feel like my teachers tip toe around it and then everybody looks at me when [the professor] says something about a Black [person], [or] the Black race. They look directly at me."

The final three comments in this theme come from the third subcategory of BIPOC students who perceived they were invisible to their White peers and faculty in their classrooms. Jasmin shared this experience about being overlooked or underappreciated by White faculty:

> In the classroom...you can raise your hand and say something or answer the question and then the teacher will say, "Oh, ok" [*said as if indifferent*] and then... maybe a White student will say the exact same thing and they'll be like, "Good answer, good job." And then I'll be like, "What, I just said the same thing?"

Sasha described an experience inside a large classroom where she and some of her BIPOC student friends sat together: "It was a Bio 105 class and we [sat] in the middle of a lecture hall. And all of the White kids decided to not sit near us, but all around. It was just really messed up and really stupid." James had a similar experience in a science lab on his campus:

> People [had] to pick their partners...and people start coming in and they're people that know each other so they sit by each other. And there's a point where you realize [they avoid you]. They walk in, they look at you and the open seats, and look around and walk away... For the first twenty minutes of class I was the only person without a partner in the class until one girl came and she was forced to sit by me.

When probed about the effect this experience had on James, he responded:

> It puts stress on you because you can't just be a normal student anymore because everybody knows everything you do... As a White student you can blend in... but as a Black student that's what they take you for [for] the rest of your four years of school. So, you can't divert from that identity they already put on you. You know, no one wants to sit by the Black kid in Physics class. Who knows if that was the reason for students not sitting by me…. It kind of felt weird [with] the whole classroom of White students and the Black kid is the only person without a partner and doing the project on his own.

College educators reading these words may wonder whether it is their responsibility to make sure all students feel comfortable in a class or during group or partner work. We argue that it is our responsibility as instructors to create classroom environments where BIPOC students feel comfortable about their own racial identity, specifically at historically White institutions.

Discussion

The findings from the present study point to two main conclusions about the participants and their experiences in their college classrooms. First, the sexist microaggressions experienced by our participants largely emanate from the man who is the instructor responsible for the classroom. Of the eight sexist microaggressions in Capodilupo et al.'s (2010) model, our participants relayed experiences of four, including second-class citizen, assumptions of inferiority, assumptions of traditional gender roles, and use of sexist language. Men instructors' behaviors conformed to these four typologies by making comments or exhibiting behavior that questioned the academic prowess of women; that seemed to favor men students over women students; that ridiculed women or their need for safety; that belittled women or considered them inferior to men; that insinuated starkly traditional gender roles, and that disregarded women's contributions in the classroom.

The outcomes of these gender microaggressions originating from men faculty or from their classroom environments are unequivocal. The women who participated in our study felt unwanted, disrespected, out of place, ridiculed, and unsafe in these classroom settings on their college campus. These findings confirm prior research on the effects of gender microaggressions (Ackerman-Berger et al., 2020; D'hondt et al., 2016; Komarraju et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020). Institutions who fail to monitor and correct the gender microaggressions in their classrooms send a clear message to college women that their experience, safety, well-being, and success are not essential to the institutional mission and ethos.

Second, BIPOC students are the victims of racial microaggressions that take place in college classrooms on their campuses. Perhaps this is not surprising, as a large body of publications has shown for decades that racism on PWI college campuses continues to thrive (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015; Sue, 2010). The participants faced instructors who seemed surprised by their academic capabilities, confirming findings by McCoy et al. (2015). Lowered faculty expectations in college classrooms are insulting to BIPOC students and take place because of the underlying structural and systemic nature of how White faculty are socialized to accept the apparent lack of academic preparation or intelligence of BIPOC students (Ramsay, 2020). These unconscious expectations hold critical implications for instructors to unlearn what they have come to expect about racially and ethnically diverse college students, specifically in the context of in-classroom learning.

BIPOC students in our study also felt excluded or avoided in classrooms by their peers, ridiculed, or gazed upon during classroom discussions on race-related topics. Faculty must support and foster students who are already in the vast numeric minority in their PWI classrooms, rather than continue to exclude or marginalize them. The treatment our participants received from White instructors or peers led to feelings of anger, frustration, and exclusion confirming extant research (Ackerman-Berger et al., 2020; Komarraju et al., 2010). College professors should not underestimate

the effects they may have on BIPOC students, specifically on their persistence, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy (Lawson et al., 2018; Lester et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020), all of which seemed blunted by the actions of the faculty chronicled in this article.

The fact that racial microaggressions are continuing to abound in college classrooms is a sign that we as instructors, administrators, and staff of higher education institutions have critical work to do to effectively disrupt and end systemic and institutional forms of racism. In an unchallenged institutional environment, instructors will continue to emit microaggressions as part of an automatic or unconscious system in which comments, norms, stereotypes, and gazes are common, unquestioned, as well as condoned and perpetuated. Predominantly White colleges and universities can ill afford that treatment of their most vulnerable student populations.

Recommendations for Teaching and Learning

BIPOC college students and college women should be able to expect that college professors cease all oppressive behaviors that potentially harm students. Doing harm, intentional or not, is against the ethos of teaching. Based on the findings and our interpretations, we have the following recommendations for faculty instructional development, classroom management, and assessment of teaching and learning.

We underscore previous conclusions that faculty training of and support for culturally competent teaching is an absolute necessity (Ancis et al., 2000; Berk, 2017; Levchak, 2013; Park et al., 2020). Jasmin, one of our participants stated, "No faculty member should come into a university without having gone through some kind of diversity training." This training must reach farther than the online HR training already required at many institutions, which tends to function as a box-to-check mechanism rather than an enacted institutional value. Many faculty do not receive direct pedagogy training during their doctoral program, especially not on the subject of diversity-related issues (Boysen, 2012). Specific teacher training to strengthen faculty awareness on topics such as microaggressions, cultural sensitivity, and how to update and develop their language and behaviors in the classroom should take place (McCoy et al., 2015; Ramsay, 2020). Centers for teaching and learning at many institutions already offer this kind of training or it might be offered in consultation with other members of the university community, such as experts in diversity, social justice, and inclusion (McCoy et al., 2015). Department chairs and deans must either require or incentivize additional instructional development for faculty and hold them accountable to improve their teaching.

Professors must create classroom environments where all students can thrive. This means faculty must analyze course texts, discussions, and materials to ensure they are not promoting a White heteronormative or patriarchal atmosphere that excludes students (such as showing a bit of a White comedian talking about race to potentially reach White students in the class). Faculty can also take deliberate measures in their classrooms to warrant the comfort of all students, such as assigning seats or assigning partners or groups ahead of time and not leaving the selection up to individual students. This may avoid students feeling isolated or without partners in lab-associated courses. Steps like these are specifically important at PWIs, where BIPOC students often feel like the "lonely only" students who identify across diverse racial or ethnic saliencies. Challenging students to engage with one another, when they might otherwise not, is critical to a diverse and respectful learning environment.

Assessment of teaching is an absolute must in the attempt to eradicate faculty microaggressions toward students (Park et al., 2020). This assessment begins with faculty who engage in self-reflection and critical self-awareness about their positionality toward students and associated effects. If not already part of a general student evaluation of instruction (SEI) process, adding supplemental questions about diversity and inclusion as well as microaggressions or overt oppression is a valuable step to explore and understand the effects of faculty on students. Should these steps not be institutionalized, individual instructors could undertake them on their own to evaluate their teaching, such as climate audits (Park et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This article focused on college classrooms as oppressive spaces with faculty members as the deliverers of racial and gender microaggressions. Relevant literature and theories supported our findings that women and BIPOC students are the most frequent receivers of these microaggressions, affecting their academic life, mental health, and their impressions of their instructors as well as their institutions. Our suggested recommendations are an attempt to develop faculty teaching; hold faculty accountable; as well as shape course content, policies, and assessment in a way that will create classrooms and campus environments where all students can thrive and feel supported.

References

Ackerman-Berger, K., Boatright, D., Gonzalez-Colaso, R., Orozco, R., & Latimore, D. (2020). Seeking inclusion excellence: Understanding racial microaggressions as experienced by

underrepresented medical and nursing students. *Academic Medicine, 95*(5), 758–763.

Ancis, J., Sedlacek, W., & Mohr, J. (2000). Student perceptions of campus cultural climate by race. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 78,*180–185.

Armstead, C., Lawler, K., Gorden, G., Cross, J., & Gibbons, J. (1989). Relationship of racial stressors to blood pressure responses and anger expression in Black college students. *Health Psychology, 8*(5), 541–556.

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited.* Jossey-Bass.

Baker, M. (2020). Daily sexism experienced by women in STEM majors: Incidence and relations to belonging, interest, and intentions. [Doctoral dissertation].

Berger, M., & Sarnyai, Z. (2015). 'More than skin deep:' Stress neurobiology and mental health consequences of racial discrimination. *Stress: The International Journal on the Biology of Stress, 18*(1), 1–10.

Berk, R. (2017). Microaggressions trilogy: Part 3. Microaggressions in the classroom. *The Journal of Faculty Development, 31*(3), 95–110.

Bondi, S. (2012). Students and institutions protecting whiteness as property: A critical race

theory analysis of student affairs preparation. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *49*(4), 397–414. https://doi.org/10.1515/jsarp-2012-6381

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (4th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Boysen, G. (2012). Teacher and student perceptions of microaggressions in college classrooms. *College Teaching, 60,* 122–129.

Boysen, G. (2013). Confronting math stereotypes in the classroom: Its effect on female college students' sexism and perceptions of confronters. *Sex Roles, 69*(5-6), 297–307.

Brondolo, E., Gallo, L., & Myers, H. (2008). Race, racism and health: Disparities, mechanisms, and interventions. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 32*(1), 1–8.

Byers, D., McInroy, L., Craig, S., Slates, S., & Kattari, S. (2020). Naming and addressing homophobic and transphobic microaggressions in social work classrooms. *Journal of Social Work Education, 56*(3), 484–495.

Cabrera, N. L. (2012). Working through Whiteness: White, male college students challenging racism. *Review of Higher Education*, *35*(3), 375–401.

Cabrera, N. L. (2014). "But I'm oppressed too:" White male college students framing racial

emotions as facts and recreating racism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *27*(6), 768–784. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.901574

Cabrera, N. L., & Corces-Zimmerman, C. (2017). An unexamined life: White male racial

ignorance and the agony of education for students of color. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *50*(3), 300–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2017.1336500

Cantalupo, N.C. & Kidder, W. (2018). A systematic look at a serial problem: Sexual harassment of students by university faculty. *Utah Law Review, 2018*(3), 671–786.

Capodilupo, C. M., Nadal, K. L, Corman, L., Ham, S., Lyons, O. B., & Weinberg, A. (2010). The manifestation of gender microaggressions. In Sue, D. W. (Ed.) *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 193–213). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Casanova, S., McGuire, K., & Martin, M. (2018). "Why you throwing subs?" An exploration of community college students' immediate responses to microaggressions. *Teachers College Record, 120*(9), 1–48.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. SAGE.

Cheung, F., Ganote, C., & Souza, T. (2016). Microaggressions and microresistance: Supporting and empowering students. *Diversity and inclusion in the college classroom* (pp. 15–17).

Darvin, J. (2018). Becoming a more culturally responsive teacher by identifying and reducing microaggressions in classrooms and school communities. *Journal for Multicultural Education, 12*(1), 2–9.

D'hondt, F., Eccles, J., Van Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. (2016). Perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers and ethnic minority students' academic futility: Can parents prepare their youth for better or for worse? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 44,* 1075–1089.

Eccles, J., Houtte, M., & Stevens, P. (2016). Perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers and ethnic minority students' academic futility: Can parents prepare their youth for better or for worse? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45*(6), 1075–1089.

Feagin, J. R. (2013). *The white racial frame: Centuries of racial framing and counter-framing*. Routledge.

Ford, K. (2011). Race, gender, and bodily (mis)recognitions: Women of color faculty experiences with white students in the college classroom. *Journal of Higher Education, 82*(4), 444–478.

Franklin, A., Boyd-Franklin, N., & Kelly, S. (2006). Racism and invisibility: Race-related stress, emotional abuse and psychological trauma for people of color. *Journal of Emotional Abuse, 6*(2/3), 9–30.

Furfaro, H. (2020, July 14). To understand structural racism, look to our schools. *The Seattle Times.*

Gartner, R., Sterzing, P., Fisher, C., Woodford, M., Kinney, M., & Victor, B. (2020). A scoping review of measures assessing gender microaggressions against women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 44(*3), 283–306.

Gartner, R. (2021). A new gender microaggressions taxonomy for undergraduate women on college campuses: A qualitative examination. *Violence Against Women, 00*(0), 1–23.

Heinze, P. (2008). Let's talk about race, baby: How a white professor teaches white students

about white privilege & racism. *Multicultural Education*, *16*(1), 2.

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative*

research: Fundamental elements and issues. Routledge.

Kang, H., & Garran, A. (2018). Microaggressions in social work classrooms: Strategies for pedagogical intervention. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work: Innovation in Theory, Research & Practice, 27*(1), 4–16.

Kelly, B., Gardner, P., Stone, J., Hixson, A., & Dissassa, D. (2019). Hidden in plain sight: Uncovering the emotional labor of black women students at historically white colleges and universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education,* 1–14.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist.* One World.

Komarraju, M., Musulkin, S., & Bhattacharya. (2010). Role of student-faculty interactions in developing college students' academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(3), 332–342.

Kuchynka, S., Salomon, K., Bosson, J., El-Hout, M., Kiebel, E., Cooperman, C., & Toomey, R. (2018). Hostile and benevolent sexism and college women's STEM outcomes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 42*(1), 72–87.

Lawson, K., Kooiman, L., & Kuchta, O. (2018). Professors' behaviors and attributes that promote U.S. women's success in male-dominated academic majors: Results from a mixed methods study. *Sex Roles, 78,* 542–560.

Lester, J., Struthers, B., & Yamanaka, A. (2017). Unwelcoming classroom climates: The role of gender microaggressions in CTE. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 178,* 67–77.

Levchak, C. (2013). An examination of racist and sexist microaggressions on college campuses. [Doctoral dissertation].

Lilienfeld, S. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 138–169.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Louis, D., Rawls, G., Jackson-Smith, D., Chambers, G., Phillips, L., & Louis, S. (2016). Listening to our voices: Experiences of black faculty at predominantly white research universities with microaggression. *Journal of Black Studies, 47*(5), 454–474.

Lui, P., Berkley, S., Pham, S., & Sanders, L. (2020). Is microaggression an oxymoron? A mixed method study on attitudes toward racial microaggressions among United States university students. *PLoS ONE 15*(2), 1–25.

McCoy, L., Winkle-Wagner, R., & Luedke, C. (2015). Colorblind mentoring? Exploring white faculty mentoring of students of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 8*(4), 225–242.

Nadal, K., Wong, Y., Griffin, K., Davidoff, K., & Sriken, J. (2014). The adverse impact of racial microaggressions on college students' self-esteem. *Journal of College Student Development, 55*(5), 461–474.

Naphan, D. (2016). Women, strategic identity management, and persistence in college engineering. [Doctoral dissertation].

Ortega, A., Andruczyk, M., & Marquart, M. (2018). Addressing microaggressions and acts of oppression within online classrooms by utilizing principles of transformative learning and liberatory education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work: Innovation in Theory, Research & Practice, 27*(1), 28–40.

Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., Gupta, A., Kelaher, M., & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE, 10*(9), 1–48.

Park, J., Kim, Y., Salazar, C., & Hayes, S. (2020). Student-faculty interaction and discrimination from faculty in STEM: The link with retention. *Research in Higher Education, 61,* 330–356.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol. 2). Jossey-Bass.

Pascoe, E., & Richman, L. (2009). Perceived discrimination and health: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin, 135*(4), 531–554.

Pasque, P., Chesler, M., Charbeneau, J., & Carlson, C. (2013). Pedagogical approaches to student racial conflict in the classroom. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 6*(1), 1–16.

Patton, L. D. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education*, *51*(3), 315–342.

Patton, L. D., & Haynes, C. (2020). Dear white people: Reimagining whiteness on the struggle for racial equity. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*,

52(2), 41–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2020.1732775

Pérez Huber, L., & Solorzano, D. G. (2015). Racial microaggressions as a tool for critical race research. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *18*(3), 297–320.

Picca, L. H., & Feagin, J. R. (2007). *Two-faced racism: Whites in the backstage and frontstage*. Routledge.

Pierce, C. (1970). Offensive mechanisms. In F. Barbour (Ed.). *The black seventies* (pp. 262– 282). Porter Sargent.

Pittman, C. (2010). Race and gender oppression in the classroom: The experiences of women faculty of color with white male students. *Teaching Sociology, 38*(3), 183–196.

Pittman, C. (2012). Racial microaggressions: The narratives of African American faculty at a predominantly white university. *The Journal of Negro Education, 81*(1), 82–92.

Ramsay, S. (2020). Community college freshmen's perceptions of in-class faculty microaggressions and their intent to persist. [Doctoral dissertation].

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Starr, C. (2018). "I'm not a science nerd!" STEM stereotypes, identity, and motivation among undergraduate women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 42*(4), 489–503.

Suarez-Orozco, C., Casanova, S., Martin, M., Katsiaficas, D., Cuellar, V., Smith, N. A., & Dias, S. I. (2015). Toxic rain in class: Classroom interpersonal microaggressions. *Educational Researcher, 44*(3), 151–160.

Sue, D. W., & Capodilupo, C. M. (2008). Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions. Implications for counseling and psychotherapy. In D. W. Sue & D. Sue (Eds.), *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (5th ed., pp. 105–130). John Wiley & Sons.

Sue, D., Torino, G., Capodilupo, C., Rivera, D., & Lin, A. (2009). How white faculty perceive and react to difficult dialogues on race. *The Counseling Psychologist, 37*(8), 1090–1115.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation.*

Wiley.

Vaccaro, A. (2010). What lies beneath seemingly positive campus climate results:

Institutional sexism, racism, and male hostility toward equity initiatives and liberal bias. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *43*(2), 202–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680903520231

Vianden, J. (2020). *Got solidarity? Challenging straight white college men to advocate for*

social justice. Routledge.

Warner, T. V. (2019). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues in the classroom. In J. A. Mena & K. Quina (Eds.), *Integrating multiculturalism and intersectionality into the psychology curriculum: Strategies for instructors.* (pp. 37–47). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000137-004

ELLEN HALVORSON is a PhD student at the University of Calgary in Canada. She is in the Educational Research (Curriculum and Learning) program with special interests in Student Affairs in Higher Education, Men & Masculinities Studies, and Mindfulness Studies. Her Master's work and professional background is in Student Affairs Administration.

JÖRG VIANDEN is professor in the Department of Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in the United States. He teaches master's and doctoral courses in higher education history and administration, qualitative research methods, and capstone and dissertation writing. His research has largely focused on men and masculinities in higher education as well as on diversity, equity, and inclusion.