

Discrimination in the College Classroom

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Abstract

Discrimination occurs in many forms. In the college classroom, discrimination raises questions of equity and can ultimately influence the success and outcomes of students. The research in this paper explores whether certain college classroom environments promote the development of discrimination. Through the review of secondary data analysis, including surveys around racism, sexism, and sexual orientation discrimination, experiences were examined to find the common themes and situations that lead to discrimination occurring in the classroom. Results show that how the professor sets the tone in the classroom, as well as how aware the professor is of unintentional biases and what the response is to these, heavily influence how other students behave.

Keywords

discrimination, college, classroom, racism, gender, sexuality, sexism

Literature Review Introduction

The United Nations (2016) published a report that describes discrimination as one of the leading causes of social exclusion. When this happens on college campuses, students feel isolation that can in turn alter their ability to do well academically. These incidents cause both short-term and long-term effects on students.

According to Social Identity Theory, a person's sense of self is determined by their group membership (Mcleod, 1970). During the early years of college, students are often navigating multiple social identities, which might include their race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Researchers from the University of Michigan found that for students entering college, this maybe the first significant opportunity they have to engage with considerable differences of social identities (Graham-Bailey et al., 2019).

A college student may see themselves as part of the in-group with their classmates, but anact of discrimination might quickly cause conflict with this view, leading to a loss of self-esteem. Discrimination can have detrimental effects. Students experiencing discrimination often have increased depression and loneliness, poorer health, and are less successful in their careers (University of Washington, 2019).

This literature review will examine the following research thesis: do certain college classroom environments allow discrimination to thrive? If college leadership and instructors have a better awareness of what leads to discriminatory occurrences, they can implement practices to reduce or even eliminate them. To further understand this issue, the definition of how discrimination occurs should be understood. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines discrimination as “prejudiced or prejudicial outlook, action, or treatment” as well as “the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually.” It is important to define this because discrimination extends beyond those commonly discussed such as race, ethnicity, or gender. It can occur because of someone's religious beliefs, health issues, socio-economic status, or even learning disabilities.

In a study by the University of Washington (2019), researcher Jennifer Mankoff commented that “coping strategies are really important, but we also need to ask how we can change the structural things that are leading to these experiences.” This literature review will examine the “structural things” to see if it can be determined what leads to discrimination taking place in the college classroom. This will be done by analyzing existing research around different kinds of discrimination, how it occurs, and in what types of situations. To fully explore different how discrimination

takes place in the classroom, it will be critical to study the ways that many types of commonly-occurring discrimination manifests. For this research, only race, gender, sexual orientation discrimination will be explored. While other areas of discrimination are just as important and critical, it was necessary to narrow in more specifically for data purposes. This focus in no way intends to minimize or downplay the experiences of those that have faced discriminations in other forms.

Racism in the College Classroom

Discrimination has been occurring in college classrooms since colleges have existed and were once almost exclusively for the elite. Cornell Law School (n.d.) describes how in 1954 *Brown v. Board* helped remove some of the barriers in education, stating that “denial of opportunity for an adequate education would often be a denial of the opportunity to succeed in life, that separation of the races in the schools solely based on race must necessarily generate feelings of inferiority in the disfavored race adversely affecting education as well as other matters.”

Racism can occur before a student ever sets foot on a college campus. In the summer of 2019, Harvard University found themselves in the middle of a court case claiming that their selection criteria increase admissions of some demographic areas while discriminating against others (Weisman, 2019). In this case, it was Asian Americans.

It begins quickly stacking up for students from the admissions process. Professors Harper and Davis (2016) state that “faculty members sometimes unknowingly or inadvertently contribute to a racist climate in their classrooms.” A few of the ways that they describe this happening is by professors failing to recognize their own implicit biases and racial illiteracy, one-dimensional literature missing diverse cultures and people, and the shutting down of racial tensions when they arise rather than using them as a powerful learning opportunity.

Professors Harper and Davis (2016) state that students of color want faculty members to hold white students accountable for offensive comments, rather than implementing censorship or disciplinary action. Even

worse is when no action at all occurs. This form of discrimination is described by Patricia Olivia Covarrubias, a Professor of Communication at the University of New Mexico, as “masked silence sequences.” Covarrubias (2008) describes this happening as a co-pairing of a discriminatory statement combined with a dismissive silence. In an example to demonstrate this, she tells the story of a professor who shared with his class that he did not believe American Indians to be a legitimate U.S. minority because there are so few of them (Covarrubias, 2008).

Gender Discrimination in the College Classroom

Not surprisingly, research shows that gender discrimination in college classrooms takes place more frequently in fields that have historically been predominantly male. These include areas of STEM: science, technology engineering, and mathematics. A recent study found that the perceived gender bias against women in those fields contributes to the lack of gender balance in college majors (Ganley et al., 2017). Respondents to the study stated that if gender bias was not a concern when choosing a major, they would be more likely to choose one of these fields that would lead to higher-wage careers.

In a paper published by Columbia University’s Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Center (n.d.), they describe just some of the gender inequalities that take place in the college classroom:

- Male students are called on more frequently than female students.
- Professors are more likely to use male students’ names when calling on them.
- Male students are asked more abstract questions, while females are asked more factual questions.
- Male students speak more frequently and longer in the classroom.
- Female students are more likely to be interrupted before completing their responses.
- Female students share ideas less assertively and with less certainty

Professors seek out students that actively participate in discussions (Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Center, n.d.). Since females may often have a different communication style in the classroom and may prefer to work with others rather than speaking publicly, a disproportionate number of males often rule the conversation. Professors that fail to recognize these differences contribute to the inequality of classroom participation.

Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the College Classroom

According to researchers Cooper and Brownell (2016), many students begin exploring their LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) identities during college. Existing research shows that these students have experienced “homophobia, subtle discrimination, and feelings of isolation on college campuses.” Like other students that are subjected to some form of discrimination, they face mental health issues resulting from this such as anxiety, anger, depression, and even suicidal ideation.

Similar to gender discrimination, LGBTQIA students face more challenges in STEM classrooms that are dominated by straight white men (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). Since the climate has changed in classrooms from traditional learning (lecture type) to active (more student engagement), the feelings of isolation for students identifying as LGBTQIA have been intensified. It can be difficult to find others in the classroom with whom they identify which can make group work challenging. Students may also struggle with introducing themselves to the class as well as pronoun preference. Even more concerning, a 2010 study found that 25% of LGBQ students and 33% of transgender students had experiences harassment or violence on their campus because of their gender or sexual identity (Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

In a 2015 study by researchers Garvey & Rankin (2015) of over 5,000 undergraduate students, it was discovered that “less-inclusive curricula and poor institutional support significantly relate to more negative perceptions of classroom climate.” Students respond to these kinds of

classrooms as unfriendly. This study proves that instructor interaction with discrimination directly correlates to the classroom environment.

Synthesizing the Results

A common theme throughout each observed discrimination is that the instructor sets the tone for the classroom. For example, students identifying as LGBTQIA had positive experiences when the instructor used preferred pronouns and names in the class and other students followed suit (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). On the other hand, when students felt isolated it was often because the instructor did not acknowledge hidden bias as in the case of gender inequalities (Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Center, n.d.). In seeking secondary data, it will be important to look for similar themes.

Method

To address the research question, the project uses secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis relies on the information that other researchers have collected to answer a new research question or provide a different perspective on the original question (Foley, 2019).

Using this method as opposed to performing my own survey of students is necessary to look for data that includes many different institutions and student types: both large and small universities, those that are rural and in large cities, as well as ones from different regions around the country. The length of this project as well as the scope of the research does not make it feasible to conduct it thoroughly firsthand.

In performing secondary data analysis, the same basic research principles of primary data are applied (Johnston, 2019). The process includes developing the research question, identifying the dataset, and evaluating the dataset. For this research, it was important to seek data that answered the question of how discrimination manifests in each area: race, gender, and sexual orientation. The data used for this project comes from several reputable sources.

One primary data source is the Diverse Learning Environment Survey from the Higher Education Research Institute (2019), which evaluates

campus climates based on diversity including experiences regarding discrimination, cross-racial interactions, and the overall sense of belonging. Over 115 private and public colleges have participated in the survey since 2010.

College must release this data for it to be public, so for this project data from the California State University-San Marcos is being examined. Another important resource to gathering data was from the January 2018 poll *Discrimination in America* that examined personal experiences with discrimination in seven specific situations, one of which was when applying to college or while at college (RWJF, 2020). Since each experience with discrimination has the potential to be somewhat unique, having firsthand accounts was critical to include. This research came from interviews of 3,453 people identifying with many different races, genders, and sexual orientations.

Finally, *Coming Out in Class* (Cooper, K. & Brownell, 2016) provided especially valuable insight into the experiences of students identifying as LGBTQIA. Seven students provided specific situations that help to identify what happens in the classroom environment that leads to LGBTQIA students perceiving discrimination. The study also notes the influence of social identities on the classroom experience.

To respond to the research question, data was analyzed for its ability to answer the following questions:

- In what ways does discrimination occur in the classroom?
- Who is the subject of discrimination?
- How does the instructor respond?
- How do the students respond?
- How does the student(s) who is discriminated against process the responses?

Data Collection Plan

For this project, I primarily sought qualitative data. This research is less concerned with the number of occurrences as it is with the circumstances surrounding classroom discrimination. It was also important to look at descriptions, behaviors, situations, and locations where classroom discrimination occurs to better understand the environments that lead to discrimination. This research seeks to find common themes and new patterns of data from previously performed studies and research. I collected content analysis over a timeframe of four days: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday. Data was tracked on a Word document table underneath questions that were hypothesized as being important before data collection. This data included:

- Source
- Sample Size
- Who is the subject of discrimination?
- Results
- In what ways does discrimination occur in the classroom?
- How does the instructor(s) respond?
- How does the student(s) respond?
- How did the classmates respond?

The data method used is purposive sampling since it is based on a pre-defined set of criteria as outlined above. It uses subjective methods to decide what should be included in the sample. This type of sampling is also intended to logically represent the entirety of a population (Lavrakas, 2008). It is important to note that while this research attempts to capture broad experiences that occur in the classroom, it in no way implies that each experience is the same or to generalize the incident. I am confident that this data collection plan gives the information needed to answer the research question. When considering the best data collection method and seeking out research for the literature review, I found surveys and data that gave initial insight into the type of information I would find. The next steps were compiling additional data and synthesizing the results to answer the research question.

Data Description:

Results of Data Collection

The following charts graphically illustrate key ideas described in the following Data Analysis section of the article.

Source	Sample Size	Who	Results
Discrimination in America (2020)	3,453	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women • LGBTQ • Whites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% of LGBTQ and women experienced discrimination at college, • 11% of whites experienced it
Diverse Learning Environment Survey (2019)	1,753	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian • Black • Latina • White • Biracial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 40% of respondents from all races, besides Asian, stated they have witnessed discrimination • Almost 13% of Black students said they have had damage to personal property because of discrimination • 32.6% of Black students were disappointed with the college administration's response to discrimination incidents • 38.3% of Black students said they had experienced racial discrimination • Across all races, an average of 13.81% respondents said they have been discriminated against because of a disability and 19.3% because of their gender • 91.8% percent of students said they have never reported an incident of discrimination to a campus authority
Coming Out in Class: ...	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LGBTQIA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% experienced some degree of discrimination based on identity

Chart 1: Provides source of discrimination information, sample size, group responded, and percentages of and types of discrimination.

Source	Ways discrimination occurs in the classroom?	How instructor(s) respond?	How student(s) respond?	How did the classmates respond?
Discrimination in America (2020)	-	-	-	-
Diverse Learning Environment Survey (2019)	-	-	-	-
Coming Out in Class..:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Other students notwelcoming ● In an online discussion board, a student experienced hostility for sharing sexual orientation ● Traditional classrooms are more comfortable for students because they do not have to be open about identity ● Students have to write name on assignments, which can confuse the instructor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Instructor accidentally calls student by the wrong pronoun, catches the mistake and corrects it, which brings more uncomfortable attention to the student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student misses classes because instructor changed group she's comfortable with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students do not use preferred pronouns even when the student announced preference ● Attitudes change for the positive by sitting next to LGBTQIA students

Chart 2: Provides in classroom discrimination examples and participants responses.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to determine what college classroom environments promote or lead to the occurrence of discrimination. To establish this, it was important to first understand more about the prevalence of discrimination and how it occurs. Several studies were examined across multiple types of discrimination (gender, race, and sexuality) to look for disparities or apparent differences.

According to the results of the research, discrimination across all differences can be observed. In the Discrimination in America (2020) survey, 20% of both women and those identifying as LGBTQ stated they had experienced discrimination at college. When comparing this data with the results from Gavin & Rankin's (2015) research that showed a significant number of this population experience harassment or violence, it is clear that discrimination is an area that needs significant attention.

When exploring the instance of racial discrimination, an alarming 38.3% of students at the liberal California State University-San Marcos stated they have experienced racial discrimination while at college, and almost nearly as many were disappointed with how college administration responded to cases of discrimination (Diverse Learning Survey, 2019). This echoes the comments of Harper and Davis (2016) who state that cases of discrimination are often brushed off or ignored. When discrimination is overlooked or disregarded in the classroom, not only does it impact the students that experience it but it essentially permits other students to continue these types of behavior.

More than 40% of students across all races stated they had witnessed some type of discrimination occurring on campus, yet a disappointing 91.8% of students say they have never reported an incident of discrimination to a campus authority (Diverse Learning Survey, 2019). It can be argued that it would be difficult for college administration to appropriately handle cases of discrimination if they are unaware they are taking place. Further research could establish whether students have access to a safe and anonymous reporting system.

Although not specifically examined for this research paper, it is important to include that 13.81% of students at California State University-San Marcos responded they had been discriminated against because of a learning disability. This further establishes that the occurrences of discrimination are widespread and unfortunately fairly common.

Once it was established that discrimination frequently occurs across all spectrums, data was then analyzed for how it occurs in classrooms as well as how others in the classroom respond. Research had already established that professors play a prominent role in the outcomes leading to and promotion of classroom discrimination with their choice of materials or their response to racial tensions (Harper and Davis, 2016). We have also confirmed that professors might participate in discrimination themselves, whether deliberately or through unintentional biases. For example, this was demonstrated to occur when teachers predominately call on male students to participate (Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Teaching Center, n.d.).

In the study of LGBTQIA students in one biology classroom, it was found that 100% of students experienced some degree of discrimination based on their identity. The qualitative data provided in this study is important in answering the research question because it provides specific situations where classroom discrimination occurs. Perceived discrimination often took place as soon as students entered the classroom and were unable to find someone they were comfortable sitting with (Cooper & Brownell, 2016).

The discrimination continues as the class progresses. Students are asked to write their names on assignments which can cause confusion if they identify as someone other than the legalname that might be on the rosters (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). Students also experienced professors calling them by a pronoun other than what they preferred, which causes embarrassment and further confusion to other students. This led to classmates also not using the students' preferred pronouns.

Positive outcomes were noted in the study as well, including attitude changes in students sitting next to those identifying as LGBTQIA (Cooper & Brownell, 2016).

per & Brownell, 2016). Some students also found that when the teacher was intentional about using their chosen name and pronoun, other students followed suit. This further demonstrates that professors set the tone for classroom discrimination, in both negative but also positive ways.

Conclusion

Data proved that the classroom environment does influence whether discrimination is permitted to occur or continue. Research showed that when a professor allows biases, either intentional or unintentional, to influence classroom behavior, discrimination is more likely to take place. This was evident in the occurrences of instructors calling on more males than females, choosing to use a pronoun or name that a student no longer identifies with, and promoting racial stereotypes.

On the other hand, positive experiences were also noted. This included actions by the instructor including decisions to use students' chosen identifiers, being conscious of changing group dynamics where a student might have already felt comfortable in sharing identities, as well as students becoming more open to different identities from sitting nearby. These positive experiences helped to combat the negative occurrences of discrimination.

Having this research can help instructors and college administrators make important decisions on how to best approach deliberate efforts to decrease discrimination in the classroom, and ultimately across campuses. This information can guide professional development tools as well as generate conversations about awareness in behavior and actions that might promote acts of discrimination from both professors and fellow students. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will help to increase acceptance and awareness of students of all identities.

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