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Bias in the Classroom: Types, Frequencies, and Responses

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Incidents of bias still occur in college classrooms, but no research has specifically explored this topic. To address this gap in the literature, professors (N = 333) completed anonymous surveys assessing types of bias they perceived in their classroom, their responses to the bias, and the perceived success of their responses. Results indicated that 38% of professors perceived an incident of bias in the classroom in the last year, and that they perceived overt (i.e., explicit) and subtle (i.e., implicit) bias with similar frequency. Professors believed their responses to bias were successful on average, but many could not assess success. Bias, in all its forms, still exists in college classrooms, and more discussion and research about its management is necessary.

Imagine a situation in which students are giving presentations in a college class; a student who learned English as a second language is struggling to speak, and from somewhere in the room a comment emerges: “We cannot understand a damn word” (Samuel, 2004, p. 418). What should the professor do? Numerous methods of dealing with this example of bias exist. The teacher could interrupt class and clearly state that such comments will not be tolerated, privately confront the commentator outside of class, or simply ignore the comment. Unfortunately, some evidence indicates that bias on college campuses occurs most frequently inside the classroom (Marcus et al., 2003). Thus, responsibility for dealing with bias falls, in part, on professors, and this study attempts to provide basic facts to aid in fulfilling that responsibility. We document the frequency with which professors perceive bias in their classrooms, the methods used to respond to that bias, and the perceived effectiveness of those responses.

Teachers of psychology must be prepared to address diversity-related issues in their classrooms. At the professional level, the American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics states that psychologists should promote fairness, justice, and equal rights in professional pursuits such as teaching (APA, 2002). In addition, the APA’s multicultural guidelines conceptualize all teaching as inherently cross-cultural and encourage the inclusion of specific multicultural issues into psychology courses (APA, 2003). Such emphasis on multiculturalism is echoed in the APA’s undergraduate education learning outcomes, which stipulate that students should be able to “recognize and respect human diversity” (APA, 2006, p. 17). Efforts to address diversity in the psychology curriculum have the benefits of increasing students’ knowledge about psychological processes, awareness of the unstated and often overlooked biases in scientific methods, and skill in applying psychological concepts in the real world (Kowalski, 2000). Furthermore, even the most basic introductory and methodological courses can be effective platforms for lessons about diversity (Borshuk, 2006; Warren, 2006). The growing interest in and emphasis on incorporating multicultural topics into psychology education will lead to increased discussion of issues related to diversity and create opportunities for bias to emerge in the classroom; thus, dealing with bias in the classroom should be a priority for psychologists who teach.

Although a literature exists about teaching diversity (e.g., Kranz & Lund, 2004; Lawrence, 1998; Organista, Chun, & Marín, 2000; Tatum, 1994), it contains only general discussions pertinent to classroom management. For example, with regard to methods of handling

bias in the classroom, some assert that “pejorative terms” and “inflammatory language” should be prohibited (Organista et al., 2000, p. 13), and others suggest that topics be discussed in the “vernacular comfortable to the speaker” as long as each class member is shown respect (Kranz & Lund, 2004, p. 378). Even with some useful general guidelines, more specific knowledge about the occurrence of bias in the classroom is needed if effective classroom interventions are to be developed. Unfortunately, there are few resources for professors who want to know how frequently bias occurs in the classroom, what type of bias occurs, and what methods exist for handling bias. The purpose of this study is to explore each of these topics.

We conducted a study examining several research questions to gather basic information about bias in the classroom. First, how often do professors perceive expressions of explicit and implicit bias in the classroom? Explicit bias is overt and intentional. In contrast, implicit bias tends to be subtle, automatic, and often occurs without the perpetrator’s intention or awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Second, what specific types of explicit and implicit bias do professors perceive in the classroom? Third, how do professors respond to explicit and implicit bias in the classroom? Fourth, do professors perceive their responses to explicit and implicit bias as successful? Fifth, are there demographic characteristics that are related to perceiving bias in the classroom? The answers to these questions will provide a starting point for teachers of psychology who are interested in maintaining a positive classroom climate in the face of student expressions of bias.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 333$) included faculty members at a large, public university in the Midwest ($n = 267$) and a small, public university in the Northeast ($n = 66$). The majority of the sample was male (58%) and White (86% White, 6% Asian, 3% Latino/a, 3% and multiethnic; all others were less than 1%), and these demographic characteristics were representative of the universities’ faculty population. The participants’ average age was 48 ($SD = 10$), and the average number of years teaching was 16 ($SD = 11$). The majority of participants were tenured (57%), and participants held positions in the natural sciences (28%), social sciences

(26%), humanities (18%), engineering (11%), business (5%), design (3%), and other combined departments (2%). We recruited participants through campus mail or e-mail, and offered no inducements for participation. Although the large university is research focused and the small university is teaching focused, there were no significant differences in the characteristics of the two subsamples; thus, we combined the data from the two groups for all analyses. Students at both schools were primarily White (85%), with no other ethnic group making up more than 4% of the population. Recent campus climate assessments at both schools revealed some dissatisfaction among minorities regarding acceptance of diversity, but overt multicultural controversy or tension was not typical.

Measures

Participants completed a brief questionnaire. The first section consisted of demographic questions. Then, participants responded to the explicit bias yes–no question, “In the last year has a student said or done something obviously prejudiced during class?” They next selected the targets of explicit bias (i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, class, disability, other) and the types of bias that occurred (i.e., slur, stereotype, insult, offensive joke/humor, avoidance/isolation, other). An open-ended question followed that asked for participants’ response to the bias. Participants then rated their response to the bias on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely unsuccessful*) to 4 (*extremely successful*); they could also select *unable to assess success*.

Next, participants answered the implicit bias yes–no question, “Sometimes people do not act in an obviously prejudiced way but are still subtly insulting, hostile, derogatory, or negative. In the last year has a student said or done something subtly prejudiced in your class?” An open-ended question asked them to describe the incident of subtle bias. Participants also answered an open-ended question about how they responded to the implicit bias and rated the perceived success of their response to the subtle bias using the previously outlined scale.

Procedure

At the small university, the researchers placed a copy of the survey and a self-addressed return envelope in the campus mailboxes of 180 full-time faculty members. The response rate was 36%. At the large university, participants completed the questionnaire via the

Internet. The researchers sent an e-mail containing a link to the research Web site to all full-time faculty members ($N = 1,313$). The response rate was 20%.

The first author categorized the open-ended responses by creating a list of all responses. We present descriptions of the response categories that occurred three or more times individually in the Results section, and responses that occurred less than three times are included in the category called "other." Sue and colleagues' (2007) description of types of microaggressions guided the categorizing of the implicit types of bias. We coded responses as specific types of microaggression. *Microinsults* included assumptions about intelligence or ability, treating people like second-class citizens, viewing other cultures as abnormal, assumptions about dangerousness or criminality, and other stereotypical notions. *Microassaults* included verbal derogation of a specific group, discriminatory behavior, and avoidance or exclusion. *Microinvalidations* included characterizing minorities as foreigners, professing color blindness, asserting that bias does not play a role in minorities' experiences, and denying personal bias. We created an additional category (disrespect) for behaviors that belittled a person without specifically targeting his or her personal characteristics; students directed nearly all of the disrespectful behaviors toward faculty members.

Results

Explicit Bias

We first computed the frequency with which participants perceived explicit bias generally and for each specific type of explicit bias and target of explicit bias. More than a quarter of participants (27%) noticed explicit bias in their classroom in the last year. We then counted multiple types of bias reported by the same person separately to calculate the frequency with which all of the types of bias were reported. Of the 139 incidences of bias, stereotypes were the most common, comprising 47% of all cases. The second most common type was offensive jokes or humor (20%), followed by avoidance or isolation (12%), slurs (9%), insults (9%), and other (3%). We calculated the target of bias frequencies using the same method. Sexual orientation (20%) and race (19%) were the most frequently reported targets of bias (159 total targets), followed by sex (16%), ethnicity (15%), religion (13%), class (10%), disability (3%), and other (4%).

Next, we categorized participants' responses to the explicit bias and calculated the frequency of response types. Eight common responses emerged from the 85 total responses to the open-ended item. Some participants reported more than one response, and we coded each type mentioned. Starting with the most common, 22% of participants reported turning the bias into a topic for discussion. For example, some professors asked other students to comment on the bias specifically, and other professors allowed the discussion to follow its natural progression after the bias occurred. Providing a rebuttal was the next most common response (20%). Rebuttals consisted of giving counterevidence, providing another perspective, or challenging the students' assumptions. Direct confrontation (19%) closely followed in frequency and mostly consisted of professors immediately stating that the bias was not appropriate and that they would not tolerate it.

Several other responses were considerably less common. One interesting response was to correct ignorance (11%), which professors implemented when student bias seemed to result due to incorrect information or lack of information. For example, students sometimes used outdated terms to describe a group and needed to learn updated terminology. Some professors asked the students who expressed the biased remark or behavior to produce counterarguments themselves (6%). This typically consisted of a Socratic dialog with students whom the teacher asked to examine the bias from another perspective or to produce and consider evidence against their position. Private confrontation outside of class also occurred 6% of the time, as did ignoring the bias. The only other response reported more than once was referring the incident to a campus judicial organization (2%). Some responses occurred only once (8%). For example, one professor reported attempting to model nonbiased behaviors, and another reported responding nonverbally by raising his or her eyebrows and allowing an awkward silence to linger.

We then examined participants' ratings (81 total) of how effective their responses to explicit bias had been. Unfortunately, the low frequency of some types of responses prevented direct comparison of their effectiveness. We can make two generalizations, however. First, participants who responded to a biased remark or behavior rated their responses as successful or extremely successful 43% of the time with an average score of 2.88 ($SD = 0.74$) on a 4-point scale, and no type response was rated as unsuccessful on average. Second, 40% of the participants who responded to bias were unable to assess the success of their response.

Implicit Bias

We computed the frequency with which participants perceived implicit bias generally and for each specific type of implicit bias. Thirty percent of participants noticed implicit bias. Although reporting explicit and implicit bias were correlated ($r = .55, p < .001$), some professors did report experiencing one and not the other; 38% of the sample noticed at least one type of bias. We coded the 84 open-ended descriptions of incidences of implicit bias based on the type of microaggression represented. Microassaults (44%) and microinsults (37%) were the most common, and microinvalidation (8%) occurred with much less frequency. In addition, 10% of the incidences did not fit as a type of microaggression, which we discuss further later. In order of frequency, participants noticed the specific microassaults of verbal derogations of a specific group (30%), avoidance or exclusion (13%), and discriminatory behavior (1%). Regarding specific microinsults, participants noticed assumptions about intelligence or ability (11%), perceptions of other cultures as abnormal (9%), assumptions about dangerousness or criminality (8%), other stereotyping (6%), and a tendency to treat people like second-class citizens (3%). Regarding specific microinvalidations, participants noticed assertions that race does not play a role in people's experiences (5%), characterizations of minorities as foreigners (3%), and professions of color blindness (1%). A final category that did not fit with the microaggression subtypes was disrespect that was not targeted at a specific group (10%). Most of the incidents in this category consisted of students who refused to accept the professor's authority (e.g., ignoring requests to stop talking, shouting at the professor in class about exam difficulty).

Next, we examined the responses to implicit bias and ratings of their effectiveness. There were 84 responses to the open-ended item, and the implicit bias frequencies were similar to the explicit bias frequencies. In order of frequency, the responses were direct confrontation (25%), discussion (19%), providing rebuttals (13%), ignoring (13%), asking the student for counterarguments (7%), private confrontation (7%), and correcting ignorance (5%). Another 11% of responses occurred only once. For example, one professor told the student expressing bias to leave class, and another connected the incident to course topics.

We also examined participants' ratings (83 total) of the effectiveness their responses to the implicit bias. Participants rated 36% of responses as successful or extremely successful with an average score of 2.84

($SD = 0.82$) on a 4-point scale, and no response to bias was rated as unsuccessful on average. However, participants most frequently indicated that they were unable to assess the success of their response to the implicit bias (42%).

Demographic Characteristics and Bias in the Classroom

We also wanted to explore what demographic characteristics were associated with reporting bias in the classroom. We performed two logistic regressions using sex, age, and their interaction as predictors of explicit and implicit bias. We standardized age before entering it into the regressions (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). We included sex (0 = male, 1 = female) and age in the first-block predictors of reporting explicit bias (0 = not reporting, 1 = reporting). Then, we entered sex, age, and the interaction of age and sex in the second block. The results indicated that age, $\beta = .452, SE = .195, p = .021$, and sex, $\beta = .938, SE = .268, p < .001$, were significant predictors of reporting explicit bias, but their interaction was not significant, $\beta = -.239, SE = .275, p = .386$. Women were more likely to report explicit bias than men, and younger participants were more likely to report explicit bias than older participants. Next, we repeated the regression with reporting implicit bias as the predicted variable. Age, $\beta = .599, SE = .198, p = .003$, and sex, $\beta = 1.065, SE = 2.65, p < .001$, were significant predictors of reporting implicit bias, but their interaction was not significant, $\beta = -.481, SE = .188, p = .199$. Once again, women and younger faculty members were more likely to report implicit bias than men and older faculty members.

Discussion

This study examined the incidence with which professors perceive student bias in college classrooms and how they respond to that bias. The results indicated that 38% of professors noticed student bias in their classrooms in the last year and that explicit (27%) and implicit bias (30%) occurred with similar frequency. This result is generally consistent with previous documentation of bias on college campuses (Marcus et al., 2003; McCormack, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Stereotyping was the most common form of explicit bias, and verbal derogation of specific groups was the most common form of implicit bias. When

professors responded to incidents of bias, they tended to use three techniques most frequently: confronting the bias directly by stating that it was not acceptable, rebutting the bias with counterevidence or alternative perspectives, and facilitating discussion. Professors believed that these responses were somewhat successful; however, they could not assess the success of their responses about 40% of the time. Perceiving explicit and implicit bias in the classroom was associated with being younger and female. Together, these results provide some initial answers to our research questions and offer a starting point for educators and researchers interested in this topic.

One positive finding that emerged from this study was that relatively few professors reported ignoring incidences of bias in their classrooms. Unsurprisingly, teachers were twice as likely to ignore implicit bias, which is more ambiguous than explicit bias. Nonetheless, the vast majority of professors reported taking action when they perceived bias. This is a positive trend because silence in the face of classroom bias would imply complicity. Arguably, any response identifying that bias has occurred will have a more positive effect than ignoring the bias. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine from the data how many incidents of bias escape professors' frequently divided attention, and many types of implicit bias may be especially difficult to perceive. Thus, we must conclude that although professors typically do not ignore bias when they perceive it in the classroom, many incidences may go unnoticed.

A negative finding from this study is professors' frequent inability to assess the success of their responses to bias. About 40% of professors did not know if their response to bias was successful; furthermore, it is likely that a high percentage of professors simply intuited their success rather than actually measuring it in some objective fashion. Following up on responses to bias in the classroom is important considering bias's potential impact. Assessment of success could be very simple. For example, a few minutes at the end of class could be used to solicit anonymous feedback as a form of midsemester evaluation (Keutzer, 1993), or the students involved could be contacted by e-mail after class. Although no method of assessment is perfect, the simple act of following up on the event could further illustrate its importance to students.

Women and younger faculty were most likely to notice and report bias, and future research should seek to explain this finding. One possible explanation is an actual difference in the number of incidences of bias. Such a difference could occur because faculty who are younger or female may elicit more bias from students.

Additionally, they might use teaching methods that allow for more expression of bias, or they might teach more topics conducive to expressions of bias. However, the difference could also be perceptual. Faculty who are younger or female might simply be more aware of bias in the classroom, or they could have broader definitions of bias.

Although this research provides a starting point for new research, there were some limitations. The most important limitation was the sample. The sample was self-selected, and the response rate was 28%. As such, professors who are willing to respond to a survey about bias may be systematically different professors in general. Participants in this study were faculty members at predominantly White universities and were mostly White themselves. The experiences of minority professors are different than those of majority professors (Harlow, 2003), and having a larger proportion of minority professors in the sample might change both the frequency and the type of bias reported. Furthermore, the sample mainly consisted of faculty from disciplines outside of psychology who might differ significantly from psychologists in their perceptions of bias and responses to bias. The operationalizations of dependent variables were also limiting in their reliance on single item self-reports; this might have allowed social desirability or other types of error to affect the results.

In conclusion, this study indicated that bias, in all its forms, still occurs in college classrooms. Ignoring bias in the classroom is at odds with the professional identity of teachers of psychology and the ideal of higher education as a vehicle of personal, not just professional, development. As such, teachers of psychology should prepare for incidents of bias in their classrooms, respond to bias using appropriate methods, document the effectiveness of their responses, and, hopefully, share what they learn with other teachers.

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Note

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