How College Students in the United States Make Sense of Examples of Gender and Intersectional Microaggressions in Classroom Settings

Allegra J. Midgette[1], **Grace Anderson**[2], **Sara Geiger**[2], **Rogerlyne Slawon**[2], **Brock Derrow**[2], **Kelly Lynn Mulvey**[2]

[1]Texas A&M University

[2]North Carolina State University

Abstract

Women and racially minoritized college students report frequent experiences of being targets of gender and race-based microaggressions in the classroom context. However, while much research has focused on reports of experiences by targets, less is known about how observers would evaluate and make sense of these microaggressive experiences. Thus the present study used vignettes based on real-life situations to ascertain how 272 college students (76% White, 52% ciswomen) in the United States interpreted gender-based and intersectional microaggressions occurring in the classroom. Thematic analysis revealed that microaggressions were deemed acceptable when participants believed: 1) the situation humorous, 2) the instructor did not cause the situation, or 3) the stereotype/statement to be true. Microaggressions were evaluated negatively when: 1) the topic was deemed sensitive, 2) the classroom was perceived as unsuitable, or the instructor was seen as: 3) making students uncomfortable, 4) being defensive, or 5) teaching misinformation. The findings highlight the complexity involved in observers evaluating and interpreting gender-based and intersectional microaggressions.

Keywords

Women and racially minoritized college students report frequent experiences of being targets of gender and race-based microaggressions in the classroom context in the US (Capodilupo et al., 2010; McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2015) and internationally (e.g., Gonzales et al., 2023). These experiences of microaggressions, or "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults," (Capodilupo et al., 2010, Sue et al., 2007, p. 271; Sue, 2010), can lead to negative health outcomes (Blume et al., 2012; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Gender microaggressions contribute to a "chilly

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the first author, Allegra J. Midgette, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Texas A&M University, 4235 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843, Phone: 510-493-3802, Fax: N/A, amidgett@tamu.edu.

climate" where students feel unwelcome or discriminated against (Hall & Sandler, 1982) and may push women away from pursuing certain domains of study (Yang & Carroll, 2016). Much of the research has focused on individuals' reports of their own experiences of microaggressions (Gartner et al., 202; Kim & Meister, 2022). Scholars have noted the need to investigate the role of observers who, through their action or inaction, can contribute to a more inclusive climate (Basford et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2019). However, less is known about how students, many of whom may not be themselves targets (Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue et al., 2008), come to evaluate and make sense of microaggressions.

Given that gender and intersectional microaggressions, which target one's gender and race, are quite common (Gartner, 2019; 2021; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), and occur globally (Cho & Corkett, 2022), there is a need to investigate how students observing such events come to accept or reject their occurrence. Microaggressions often occur in social settings, such as in classrooms (Fisher et al., 2007), and when others are present. Further, relational partners such as friends or peers of the target may observe these microaggressions (Casanova et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2007). Understanding how students make sense of these occurrences can inform interventions designed to help individuals 1) recognize that microaggressions are occurring and 2) effectively intervene to address these microaggressions. This is important to investigate, as research documents that bystanders can prevent escalation of aggressive behaviors and that the first step in deciding to intervene is recognizing what constitutes as problematic situations (Latane & Darley, 1970). Thus the present study employed the use of vignettes to investigate how college students attending a Primarily White Institution (PWI) in the United States. The current study aimed to explore how these students evaluated and made sense of examples of real observed gender-based and intersectional microaggressions occurring in the classroom context.

Gender Microaggressions

Gender discrimination is often perpetuated through subtle, or covert sexist jokes or comments that manifest themselves as microaggressions (Gartner et al., 2020). Gender microaggressions occur in various settings including in institutions of higher education (Gartner, 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al, 2015). College attending women have reported experiencing such behaviors and comments about twice a week on average (Swim et al., 2001).

In one of the few studies to investigate experiences of gender microaggressions in higher education, Gartner (2019) using a mixed methods design found manifestations of gender microaggressions where women-identifying undergraduate participants reported feeling ignored or treated like they did not exist. Nearly every participant (N= 440) reported experiencing a gender microaggression within the academic year (99.6%; Gartner, 2019). Gartner (2021) found that women reported examples of being targets of intersectional microaggressions (e.g., gender race-based), feelings of invisibility (e.g., not being listened to), as well as sexual objectification, among others. Importantly, research documents that non-binary and transgender individuals are also exposed to microaggressions (Truszczynski et al., 2022). In the current study, however, we focused on gender microaggressions targeting cisgender women.

Being the target of gender microaggressions is associated with anxiety, binge drinking events, and a lower sense of self-efficacy, particularly in college students (Blume et al., 2012). Thus, gender-based microaggressions are common in higher education settings globally (Cho & Crockett, 2022) and harmful, although little is known about how they are interpreted in college settings.

The Importance of Intersectionality

Aligned with scholarship on the importance of considering intersectional identities in understanding one's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991), research on microaggressions has also noted the importance of considering multiple identities in the context of microaggressions (McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al, 2015). Scholars have termed, "intersectional microaggressions" as microaggressions that may be influenced by more than one identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and social class (Lewis, 2018; Nadal et al., 2015). Employing an intersectional lens allows for a broader and more complex understanding of how multiple identities are interconnected (Singh et al., 2021). For example, a study with Black undergraduate students at a PWI identified intersectional themes of exoticism, hypersexuality, and aggressiveness, where microaggressions included assumptions not only of race, but also about gender and class (Morales, 2014). McCabe (2009) found that Latinas, Black men, and Black women also reported experiencing microaggressions that were specific to both their gender and race. Similarly, Nadal et al. (2015) found intersectional themes related to the exoticization of Women of Color and assumptions of inferiority or criminality of Men of Color. Further, research suggests that international students are often the targets of microaggressions, including intersectional microaggressions, in US educational settings (Kim & Kim, 2010). In an observational study investigating both race and gender-based microaggressions on three community college campuses, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that microaggressions occurred in nearly 30% of the classrooms observed. Thus often intersecting identities are involved in gender-based microaggressions. However, while the focus has previously been on target's own intersectional identities, less is known about how intersectional microaggressive events are interpreted by others.

Interpreting Microaggressions

While the majority of prior scholarship has focused on the experience of being a target of microaggressions (Gartner, 2019; Morales, 2014), considering consistent reports of the presence of microaggressions, scholars have begun to investigate how individuals come to perceive and interpret microaggressive events. Foundational research on bystander responses highlights that the very first step in intervening is recognizing the act as harmful (Latane & Darley, 1970). If one does not perceive a situation to be problematic, they simply will not be motivated to intervene. Thus, understanding how observers interpret microaggressions is critical. Vignettes have been particularly useful for investigating perceptions of microaggressions (Basford et al., 2014; Boysen, 2012; Hughey et al., 2017, Kim et al., 2019), as participants can evaluate potential microaggressive events without researchers needing to directly expose them to microaggressions (Hughey et al., 2017). Prior research using vignettes has found that the how blatant versus ambiguous a microaggression

is plays an important role in participants' interpretations of the microaggressive event. For instance, Basford et al. (2014) found that undergraduates were more likely to report (using a likert scale) perceiving a gender microaggression occurred the more explicit and blatant the discriminatory behavior was described (in the form of type of microaggression, e.g., microassault versus microinvalidation), and to expect worse outcomes following a blatant microaggression. Similarly, Kim and colleagues (2021) found that subtler forms of racial microaggressions (i.e., microassaults more blatant than microinvalidation) were considered to be less harmful by participants. Zou and Dickter (2013) find that a scenario in which a person is described as confronting a more ambiguous gendered racist comment (not explicitly specifying that the comment is related to racial group) was rated more negatively than one in which the comment was more blatant. However, prior research has been using quantitative measures and primarily focused on negativity ratings as the outcome variable, and thus the factors that individuals themselves identify or use to assume the situation to be offensive or negative are not well explored.

Moreover, prior research suggests that the positionality of the evaluator may also play a role in interpreting microaggressions. For instance, Boysen (2012) found that college instructors who taught diversity courses were more likely to evaluate racial microaggressions negatively than faculty who did not. Dodd et al. (2001) found that undergraduate men were more negative in their evaluations of the likability of a woman if she was described as confronting a sexist remark. Williams and colleagues (2016) found that Students of Color were more likely to rate racially microaggressive internet memes as more offensive than White students. In addition, experience played a role: for Students of Color, experiencing more racial microaggressions was associated with being more likely to find racially themed memes offensive. Mekawi and Todd (2018) found that racial microaggressions were more likely to be rated as acceptable by college-attending men than women. On the other hand, Midgette and Mulvey (2022) did not find a significant relationship between gender and students' negativity ratings of racial microaggressive events. Together, prior work suggests that knowledgeability, experience as a target, and belonging to the targeted group may play a role in negative evaluations of microaggressions.

However, less is known about why events may be considered biased or not biased and what aspects of the situation can lead to individuals concluding that the situation is negative or not (i.e., what do individuals attend to). In the first study to our knowledge to investigate both evaluations (i.e., negativity ratings) of microaggressive events and also how individuals reason about these events, Midgette & Mulvey (2022), found that White college students do not always recognize the harm caused by such behaviors. However, the study focused exclusively on racial microaggressions, and therefore less is known about how gender-based and intersectional microaggressions are interpreted from the perspective of observers. Thus, recent findings suggest that there is value in investigating the why underlying negative evaluations and perceptions, to gain greater insight into how microaggressive events are interpreted by observers and what educational interventions may be necessary to contribute to a more critical orientation.

The Present Study

The present study investigated how college students attending a PWI in the United States evaluate microaggressions. The focus of the current paper was on how participants made sense of a gender-based microaggression and an intersectional (gender and race-based) microaggression through analyzing their open-ended responses following their assessments on a Likert-type scale of how biased, inappropriate, and realistic they found two vignettes. Little is known about how college students make sense of reported or observed gender-based and intersectional microaggressions, and what knowledge or assumptions contribute to one being critical versus accepting of their occurrence.

Therefore, to better understand how college students interpret gender-based and intersectional microaggressions, the present study employed thematic analysis of interpretations of vignettes based on examples of real situations to address two key research questions: First, how do college students interpret situations in which a gender and intersectional microaggression has occurred? And second, what factors do students within the situation do students attend to when judging these situations acceptable or not acceptable?

Methods

The current study draws on data collected for a larger study aimed at investigating how college students attending a large PWI in the United States experience and make sense of microaggressions occurring in higher education (Midgette & Mulvey, 2021; 2022). Data was collected through an undergraduate psychology subject pool at a large public PWI in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA from September to December of 2019. The study underwent IRB review at North Carolina State University (IRB # 20347) and followed research ethics guidelines, including obtaining participant informed consent. Participants completed a survey administered using Qualtrics, responding to vignettes that were presented randomly.

Participants

A total of 272 undergraduate students were included in the current study. Participants had a mean age of 19.12 (SD = 1.34, median = 19, 18-31), and 52.21% identified as ciswomen, and the remainder identified as cismen. The majority (90.44%) identified as heterosexual, 5.88% identified as a bisexual, 1.84% identified as gay, 0.37% identified as pansexual, and 1.47% preferred not to report. Most participants (76.84%) identified as White and non-Latinx, 7.72% identified as Asian, 5.51% identified as Latinx, 4.78% identified as African American, 4.77% identified as multiracial, and .003% identified as Arab. Slightly under half of the participants (44.85%) were in their first year of college, and the remainder had completed at least one year of college.

Procedures

Following previous studies investigating evaluations and perceptions of microaggressions through vignettes (e.g., Basford et al., 2014, Boysen, 2012), participants were presented with two vignettes (See Appendix A for detailed description of vignettes). Both vignettes were taken from situations reported by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) based on observations

of microaggressions in community colleges. They were chosen for being real events, for being done by faculty in a public classroom setting where there was an opportunity for many students to observe, and for already being classified by leading scholars in the field of microaggressions as either gender-based microaggressions or intersectional microaggressions. Vignette 1 (Objectification of Women) was classified as a gender-based microaggression because it perpetuated gender stereotypic attitudes regarding women: "The instructor asks the class, "Anyone know somebody beautiful?" A male student responds, "I know someone beautiful. She is an exotic dancer. …" The instructor responds by singing, "I'm in love with a stripper." The class laughs in response. Later, the instructor asserts: "Beauty is power. Who uses it more?" Most of the students respond "women." Continuing along this discussion, the instructor calls on a male student by name and elicits the response "women."

Vignette 2 (Joking about Rape and Slavery) was classified as an intersectional microaggression that involves both gender and race, and involved dismissing the possibility of exploitation and abuse: "The instructor started to speak about Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. A student of color asked, "He raped her?" The instructor disagreed, saying, "He had three or four children with her." The student then asked, "Oh, so he had a relationship with her?" The instructor replied, "He was an honorable guy. He bought her a sandwich." The instructor grinned, and moved on with the discussion."

In line with Boysen (2012), participants were first asked to evaluate each vignette on a bipolar adjective scale (1-7) on how biased/unbiased (1 "very much unbiased", 7 "very much biased"), inappropriate/appropriate (1 "very much appropriate", 7 "very much inappropriate"), and unrealistic/realistic (1 "very much realistic", 7 "very much unrealistic") they found each vignette. After rating the vignette, participants were asked, "Please explain in a sentence or two why you rated the situation the way you did. Why did you perceive the situation as appropriate/inappropriate, biased/unbiased, and/or realistic/unrealistic?" The analytical procedure for open-ended responses is described in more detail below.

Coding & Reliability

We drew on a post-positivist approach (Ponterotto, 2005) and realist/essentialist theoretical framework as our thematic analysis had the goal of reporting participants' meanings through analyzing student's open-ended responses, and thus assuming that their answers reflect their reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We thus used Boytazis's (1998) coding reliability approach to thematic analysis. Such an approach includes a recognition of the value of testing coder reliability, as it provides evidence of consistency in observation and interpretation– which is particularly useful in the case of interpreting participants' interpretations of microaggressive events, which are often considered ambiguous and subtle (Sue et al., 2007). Coding was done at the "manifest level" (p. 4, Boytazis, 1998), or semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where we analyzed ideas for their literal and explicit meaning. We used inductive analysis, as we were exploring the possible reasons participants themselves gave for their evaluations. The coders met weekly for a year to discuss analysis and familiarize themselves with the data. The first author who led the weekly meetings and trained the other members of the team (coders), identified as a ciswoman multiracial

Brazilian American with experience in thematic analysis and with prior familiarity with the microaggression literature. The three other members of the team served as primary coders and were undergraduate students who were previously unfamiliar with the microaggression literature and with thematic analysis and one identified as as a White ciswoman, another as a White cisgender woman of Jewish cultural background and third as a Black American cisgender woman of African cultural background. Each coder independently and inductively developed a codebook (code, definition, and example from the data) for each vignette based on the reading of all the open-ended responses. Thereafter, the three coders met and compared their codebooks, and through discussion created a first complete codebook for each vignette. To refine the definitions and examples of the codebook for each vignette the new codebook was tested on 36% (n = 100) of the data. A final codebook for each vignette was developed based on agreement on modifications in response to the application of the codes to the responses. Following this, the three research assistants independently coded 22% (n = 62) of the responses per vignette to ascertain interrater reliability. Interrater agreement across the three coders was good (see Tables 1 & 2). Following the establishing of agreement, coders agreed on final codes through discussion. The remainder of the data was coded by individual coders. Coders checked for rater drift after coding every thirty participants.

Themes

Following the application of codes, we first created a table of the most frequent and infrequent codes across each vignette to assess the prevalence of ideas. Codes were then analyzed to see how they fit together in the creation of a shared theme, and reviewed in relation to the coded extract responses. To analyze the link and patterns between acceptability/biased evaluations and themes and sub-themes (rationales for evaluation), coded quotes were tabled in relation to the stated qualitative evaluations in participants' open-ended responses (e.g., "everything is fine/ nothing wrong", "yes, I find this inappropriate). This allowed us to categorize responses into global evaluations of "acceptable" or "problematic/ negative" in relation to our themes and subthemes in order to answer our second research question (what rationale is used when the situation is found (un)acceptable). The quotes are included in the original words of the participants (including typos). We italicize phrases in the quotes to highlight main ideas found in relation to the larger theme. Next to each quote, we have the identified gender of the speaker (M = men, and W = women).

Results

Objectification of Women Vignette

Most participants evaluated the vignette "Objectification of Women" as slightly unrealistic ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.83$), inappropriate ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.52$), and biased ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.42$). Women were slightly more likely to consider the situation inappropriate ($M_{women} = 5.63$, $M_{men} = 5.22$, $F(270,1) = 4.99$, $p < .02$) and biased ($M_{women} = 5.32$, $M_{men} = 4.75$, $F(270,1) = 10.94$, $p = .001$, although no differences were found in overall realism ($p = .12$). No statistically significant differences between racially majoritized versus minoritized students' evaluations were found. Overall, participants interpreted the situation to be one

in which women were being stereotyped as more beautiful. However, five main themes were identified: 1) " Not all women," where participants objected on the grounds that the statement in the vignette was untrue or problematic because it was generalized across women; and 2) "It's not what you say but where" which centered on not what was said (the content was considered accurate), but rather that the topic was not appropriate for the classroom setting; 3) "the miseducator" where the teacher was seen as actively encouraging bias; 4) "the professor is making the student uncomfortable" where the focus was on how students were being harmed by the professor's behavior, and 5) "it's a joke" where participants interpreted the situation to be primarily a joke. Below the themes are presented in detail (See Table 1 for themes and code frequency).

This is Okay because Not all (or only) Women do This

Many participants evaluated the vignette "Objectification of Women" in response to the gendered assumptions present in statements in the vignette. Many participants, and more frequently women participants, disagreed with the generalization that all women, or women more than men, were beautiful, cared about beauty, or used beauty to gain power. For instance, one participant noted:

> "The whole situation was very biased because it was objectifying the *concept of beauty to only women* and assuming that women only care about beauty. It was very inappropriate because the instructor was making all of these claims and singing an offensive song in response to a comment about women."

>   M

In particular, the source of participants' recognition of the problematic nature of the microaggression was either due to recognizing that the situation involved making generalizing assumptions about women as a group (i.e., stereotyping) or describing women as having traits or characteristics that significantly differed (or were more) from that of men. There were also concerns with the particular focus on women, without also attending to men:

> "I think it would be very inappropriate for a professor to respond to this situation and call somebody a stripper and personally call out a student to respond to a sensitive question. It is biased to assert that a certain trait belongs to one gender."

>   W

> "I felt it was not inappropriate because they were simply having a class discussion. I felt it was biased because they were specifically focusing on only women."

>   M

In fact, of the participants who disagreed with the assumption that women used their beauty more, some noted that not only women, but men also, used their beauty or benefitted from their good looks:

> "This instance of the professors singing "I'm in love with a stripper" seems a little inappropriate for a lecture hall setting, however it deems pretty likely to actually occur now-a-days. This statements made by the students of women being more

likely to use their beauty for power is biased because, as seen in the work place, it is very frequently seen that *both attractive men and women* are often chosen over those who are "less beautiful.""

W

Some participants directly responded to the generalizations about women, in particular. As presented below, participants noted that not all women used their beauty to gain an advantage, some questioned what can be considered beautiful, and others noted the implicit assumption that beautiful women were equated to being strippers:

"I believe this is very much inappropriate and biased because the class and professor are essentially assuming that women use looks/beauty for power when in reality, women can be very intelligent and beautiful at the same time."

W

"It is inappropriate and rude to be saying these things. It is limiting the beauty and power of women to their looks and implying that if a woman does not have a nice body, they are not to be considered beautiful."

W

Maybe All Women Do; Justifications for Acceptance—A portion of participants agreed with the assumption that women used beauty for power. Many who agreed that it was true, considered the situation acceptable. For instance, a male participant noted, "Unbiased since technically, they are right." Another male participant noted, "These are the laws of life, why would we censor this." A female participant noted:

"I think this was appropriate because women can and will sometimes use their beauty for power and most men won't typically use their looks to gain something, not always true but it more than likely not. So I don't think this was inappropriate."

W

Other participants were more ambivalent in their evaluations, noting both that the assumptions were true, but that they could be seen as offensive (by another). Although often stating agreement with the assumption presented by the professor and students, some participants noted that the situation could either be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the context and in their uncertainty often shared that it *could* be seen as offensive by some students: "I think this could be seen as inappropriate because what the student and teacher did by commenting on strippers could be offending to some students." (W)

Overall, many participants noted the stereotypical assumptions present in the comments made in the "Objectification of Women" vignette. Some questioned the act of generalizing all women, others questioned the assumption that "only" women engaged in particular behaviors, while others thought it was biased to imply that women were more beautiful than men. Others questioned assumptions regarding beauty itself, rather than focusing on the gendering of beauty and power relations. Finally, some considered the assumption that women used their beauty to gain power to be true, and those who did were more likely to consider the situation acceptable.

It's Not What You Say, but Where You Say It: We don't talk about things like this in class

One of the most common themes was that the situation was not acceptable because it was occurring within the classroom or academic setting. Participants often stated beliefs regarding appropriate behaviors within the educational context. In their responses, those who highlighted the classroom context were often less concerned about what was said, but that it was said in the classroom setting. For instance, a female participant agreed with the content of what was said, but noted that: "I do not think that anything said was extremely hurtful or wrong but it is a bit inappropriate for a classroom setting."

Similarly, participants noted that although the content was not harmful or incorrect, and potentially humorous, the setting made the situation inappropriate. For instance, one male participant stated, "I believe what the people are saying is mostly accurate, but the situation itself would be inappropriate and unrealistic for a typical classroom setting." M. Another wrote: "The male student is obviously trying to be funny and impress people its inappropriate for a school and teaching setting."

Moreover, participants believed that the discussion of certain topics, such as that of stripping or sex, were not appropriate for the classroom setting. For instance, a woman said: "I think it is very much inappropriate because the topic of strippers, etc, should not be talked about in class. Also, I think it is somewhat biased because not any females are putting their input in it." In sum, participants often noted standards of what should and should not be discussed in the classroom setting.

The Miseducator: Teacher as Encouraging Bias—Many participants disagreed with the professor's behavior. However, participants differed on how they considered the professor's behavior problematic. A few noted that the professor was actively encouraging a biased and sexist view of women. For instance, a female participant wrote: "In some ways this seems to be enforcing societal norms and sexualizing young women bodies, even if it is just meant as a joke." Another noted, "The professor should not have generalized women like that, as well as encouraging a negative perspective on women."

Similarly, several participants suggested that the professor was knowingly creating the situation by purposefully eliciting a biased response. In other words, the bias was seen to result from the procedure the professor employed to elicit responses:

> "I think it's inappropriate and somewhat biased that he picked a specific student and evoked a response out of him, and by singing the song to the other student, he was being inappropriate."
>
> W

Participants noted that the conversation, therefore, was biased because only the male perspective was being sought in the discussion. A female participant wrote: "This is completely inappropriate the comments being made and also the fact that *only males are* being called on." Another male participant stated, "The teacher may have just been a weird guy. It is slightly biased because *he calls on a male student.*"

Others saw the professor's behavior as inappropriate because he did not stop the discussion, meaning he was passively contributing to a biased discussion. For instance, a female participant noted: "Its inappropriate because it is demeaning to women and the professor did not object to any of the comments made and did not recognize any of them as wrong."

On the other hand, in direct contrast to those who claimed the situation was inappropriate because the professor intended to elicit a specific response from students, some participants believed that the professor did not influence students' answers. For instance, one female participant wrote: "It was a little inappropriate for the professor to sing that song, but the instructor didn't seem to influence the students responses." Another noted, "Each student was stating their own opinion on the topic and was not being told or forced to believe what the professor believed so I think its unbiased and appropriate."

Professor is Making Students Uncomfortable—However, other participants also considered the situation inappropriate because they considered the professor's behavior to be negatively affecting the male student in the situation. Rather than considering the situation to be one in which the male student(s) already agreed with the notion, some participants considered that the professor was putting the student on the spot by calling them, or viewed the singing of the song as mocking the student's response:

> "I find this situation somehow inappropriate for the professor to sing "I'm in love with a stripper" and somewhat bias because the professor made it obvious they were seeking the specific response of women and *humiliated the male student by singing him out.*
>
> W
>
> I think *calling out an individual student on any topic related to sex is risky for that student* is slightly inappropriate."
>
> M

It's a Joke: Reasons for why it is Okay

On the other hand, many who considered the situation as acceptable or neither inappropriate nor appropriate considered the situation to be informal or took it to be a joke. For instance, one female participant noted, "It seems the professor and students are interacting in a joking, light-hearted manner." Another male participant noted, "The teacher made a joke." In these instances, the joke was seen as not harmful and rather a cause of improving the classroom mood: "I see this as nothing more than a professor having fun and making a harmless joke to his class to keep it entertaining." M

Many participants focused on the classroom context and teaching procedures as an important factor in deciding whether the situation was appropriate or biased. Those who considered the situation problematic often noted that this should not be discussed in the classroom setting or considered the professor as either negligent or intentionally creating a biased discussion. Others who considered the situation acceptable considered the professor's behavior to be humorous or as having no direct influence on the class. Therefore, participants often considered the context of the behaviors (classroom), the intentionality of the professor's

teaching (to elicit or to joke), and the effects of the behavior (made a student uncomfortable/called them out, or no influence).

Joking about Rape and Slavery

Most participants evaluated the Joking about Rape and Slavery vignette as slightly unrealistic ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.90$), very inappropriate ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 1.24$), and biased ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.33$). Women were slightly more likely to consider the situation realistic ($M_{women} = 4.27$, $M_{men} = 4.76$, $F(270,1) = 4.63$, $p < .03$) and biased ($M_{women} = 5.60$, $M_{men} = 6.00$, $F(270,1) = 6.25$, $p < .01$), although no differences were found in overall rating of appropriateness ($p = .06$). No statistically significant differences between racially majoritized versus minoritized students' in evaluations were found. Overall, participants' responses were more universal in their condemnation and agreement that the situation was biased and unacceptable. This suggests that this vignette was potentially more "blatant" and perceived as racist and sexist compared to the prior vignette. However, similarly to the Objectification of Women vignette, participants differed in their interpretations of which aspects of the vignette were cause for evaluating the situation negatively. Overall, there were two main themes: 1) "This is no joking matter" where the topic was considered to be a sensitive one; 2) "professor as defender rather than teacher" where participants focused on the actions of the teacher as problematic for aiming to defend and protect the image of Thomas Jefferson rather than to educate students about the past. Below the themes are discussed in more detail (See Table 2 for a summary of themes, code frequency and percentages).

This is no Joking Matter

Participants noted that the topic content should not be one that the professor makes light of or jokes about. Participants were critical of both the instructor's mannerism (i.e., grinning) and behavior (i.e., joking), because they believed that his behavior made light of a sensitive topic. Many participants believed that the instructor made light of racism, sexism, and rape. Participants disagreed with the fact that the instructor grinned when discussing the issues of rape: "He should have not said this at all. He should have explained what really happened and not should emotion towards the topic. *Smiling after talking about rape is never okay.'*W. Other participants noted that the topics of rape and slavery should not be joked about. For instance, one male participant noted, "Making a joke about rape is never okay, especially when it involves slavery as well."

Moreover, some participants highlighted that the joke was problematic not only because of the topic choice, but also because it was offensive towards women and rape victims and downplayed racism and sexual violence:

> "This is very inappropriate and even if it was said in a joking matter that is how some people actually think in society today and it is unexcusable and needs to be changed. This is both *misinformation and a rewriting of history that completely hides the struggle that black people had to go through, and it shows an offensive opinion of women.*"

W

> "This is extremely *rude and disrespectful not only to Sally Hemmings but to anybody that may have been sitting in that class who had been raped, listening to the professor try to downplay sexual violence.*"

<div align="right">W</div>

A few participants directly disagreed with the notion that Jefferson was honorable, or that his actions could be defined as such:

> "I have actually been in classes with people (not necessarily instructors) who would behave in this way, and I would not find it surprising to hear of this happening. The instructor is clearly brushing over the topic and doing their best to ignore the question; *they refer to a slave owner as "honourable"- clearly biased-* and the skirting of the topic in this manner is highly inappropriate."

<div align="right">W</div>

Participants considered the joke in poor humor because it made light of the suffering of those who experienced slavery and sexual violence. However, many participants that considered the situation unacceptable focused not only because of the content of what was said (Theme 1), but also on the instructors' choice to joke rather than answer the student's question and theorized about the instructor's motivations for his behavior (Theme 2).

Important Men Can Do No Wrong: Professor as Defender rather than Teacher

One primary theme was that the professor was engaging in inappropriate behavior because he was more concerned with defending Thomas Jefferson than in responding to the question and teaching historically accurate information. Participants' responses revealed that they expected an instructor to answer questions directly and to provide accurate and truthful information. For instance, one noted: "The answers from the instructor are *not answering the questions themselves* but like excuses of the behavior." (W). In particular, many participants first noted that the professor was avoiding answering the student's question, and evaluated such behavior as inappropriate: "It appears that the Professor is biased towards Jefferson in the sense that he couldn't do anything wrong. This is also inappropriate because it seems the Professor *just dismissed the student's question with his/her/their own opinion.* " M.

Participants noted that the instructor was not only dodging the question, but also interpreted this to be due to an intentional desire to protect Thomas Jefferson's image:

> "In my opinion the reaction of the professor implies a *biased opinion towards what I would call national heroes.* Not addressing controversial issues such as rape when it comes to famous people is really biased and inappropriate. In my opinion it should be possible to talk about issues like rape even when it comes to figures like Thomas Jefferson."

<div align="right">W</div>

In particular, many participants noted that the instructor was defending Thomas Jefferson's actions because of his status as president, and as a White man. In their responses, they suggested that the source of the instructor's bias was not so much agreement with the behavior, but rather accepting the behavior because of the status of the individual doing it.

For instance, one female participant wrote: "It very much shows the instructor's bias when *they can't admit that a white male did something wrong.* I think this is slightly realistic but not common for sure."

Some participants (19%) also assumed that the instructor's gender identity (being male) played a role in the instructor's motivation for their behavior in the vignette. Although the vignette is gender neutral in the presentation of the instructor, all participants who assumed the instructor's gender, assumed that the instructor was male. Several participants assumed that being male biased the instructor either towards deciding to joke about the topic or defending a person of a similar positionality (e.g., White male). For instance, a student noted how the professor is a man in power, who is making a joke of another man in power engaging in rape:

> "This situation is inappropriate because he is a man of power that is outright downplaying rape. Given the fact that Sally Hemmings was a slave and that he used his power as a male to get what he wanted and the instructor joking about it saying that "He gave her a sandwich" is disgusting."
>
>   W

Similarly, another student assumed the male professor was biased positively towards Thomas Jefferson, a White man:

> "The professor seemed to be biased toward the white male rather than the slave, and this shows that he had a bit of a racist perspective. I rated the situation as inappropriate because he was disregarding the bad things that happened to the slave and avoiding the student's questions."
>
>   W

Others also noted that the defense represented bias, not only because of the individual being protected, but in defending his actions, were also showing support of racist and sexist practices, such as slavery and rape culture. For instance, one female participant highlighted, "He obviously is a *victim of rape culture.* He is unable to admit that someone he looks up to has raped someone." Whereas another stated, "This is inappropriate because the teacher is defending Thomas Jefferson raping Sally Hemings. It is biased in *favor of misogyny.*"

Moreover, several participants critiqued the professor's defense of Jefferson because it also involved teaching information that was untrue or historically inaccurate.

> "This is slightly inappropriate because the professor is *wrongly teaching information about Jefferson*, and it is somewhat biased because he feels the need to honor Jefferson's name even though it is true that he raped his slave."
>
>   W

However, a few participants who considered the situation appropriate did so because they considered the content to be historically accurate. For instance, one participant noted, "the situation was appropriate *because he was stating history and something that happened* but no one knows if he raped the slave or she willingly gave in. He probably treated her way better than other slaves" (W). Similarly, another noted, "The situation is neither inappropriate or

biased *because the lifestyle back then was different,* but in today's standards it would be very inappropriate, but the situation still wouldn't be biased." M.

Overall, many participants who found the situation biased and unacceptable focused on the action that the instructors' joke took (defending behaviors and implying falsehoods). In particular, many noted that it was unacceptable to avoid the question, for "While clearly avoiding the question and trying not to taint his name, it is important for teachers to tell the truth and also tell things for what they are." M. In summary, many participants objected to the microaggression because the instructor was seen as defending Thomas Jefferson's actions because he was a powerful figure and a White man.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how college students in the United States interpret examples of gender-based and intersectional microaggressions that have been reported to occur in classrooms of higher education. Findings revealed a great deal of heterogeneity in participants' responses. Participants recognized that there may be harm present in these scenarios, but also discussed taking into account the context in which the situation was occurring (e.g., such as what is appropriate in a classroom setting), norms around gender and beauty, presentation of historical data, and asserted that some topics related to gender were seen as potentially humorous while others (i.e. rape) should never be the subject of humor. The findings suggest that participants not only focused on the content of what was said to decide whether the gender-based and intersectional microaggressions were acceptable, but also were influenced by where the microaggression was occurring and the role of the instructor in bringing about the situation. This finding highlights the importance of investigating microaggressions within the various settings in which they occur. This is especially important given that microaggressions are reported in higher education settings globally (Cho & Crockett, 2022).

Assumptions about Real Situations as Unreal & Stereotypes as Facts

While participants, generally, evaluated both scenarios as unaccepted and potentially biased, they also asserted that they found both scenarios to be rather unrealistic. This finding is unexpected given that situations described were actual events of gender and intersectional microaggressions occurring in classroom contexts (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Prior research suggests that almost all women undergraduate participants experience a gender microaggression within the academic year (Gartner, 2019). This finding suggests that college students may not be as attuned to microaggressions that are happening around them, or may be more attuned to peer-to-peer interactions (Gartner, 2021), and less critical of faculty-based microaggressions (Midgette & Mulvey, 2022). Or this may indicate a belief that blatant microaggressions do not often occur, and therefore are unrealistic. Indeed, recent research on recognition and evaluation of racial microaggressions occuring in the classroom setting found that students were more likely to find more blatant forms of racial microaggressions to be unrealistic (Midgette & Mulvey, 2022). In other words, the more negatively a situation was evaluated, the more likely students were to report it was unrealistic. This may reflect a general belief that more blatant forms of discrimination are

less likely to occur. This is in keeping with recent research that finds that students are less likely to report that they would commit a racial microaggression the more unacceptable they think it is (Mekawi & Todd, 2018). Together, this finding suggests that less blatant forms of gender and intersectional microaggressions may be more likely to be perceived as realistic. However, prior studies find that blatant or explicit forms of bias do occur frequently in the classroom context (Boysen & Vogel, 2009). Future research should investigate what contributes to greater awareness of the prevalence of blatant forms of microaggressions in higher education.

However, women were more likely to find the intersectional vignette realistic compared to men. This may be due to the fact that they are more likely to be targets of sexist behaviors (Levchak, 2013), that White women may feel threatened by observing racism (Sanchez et al. 2017), as well as greater knowledge in women (including White women) of others' experiences of racial and gender microaggressions (Midgette & Mulvey, 2021). Indeed, women were also more likely to find both vignettes more biased than men. These findings lend further support to positionality playing an important role in interpreting microaggressive events (Boysen, 2012; Mewaki & Todd; 2018; Williams et al, 2016). Future research should investigate how not only being an individual that identifies with a targeted group of the microaggression, but also their overall knowledge of the prevalence of microaggressions plays a role in interpreting how realistic microaggressive events are evaluated as.

Participants' responses provide novel insight into how college students interpret microaggressions. In the Objectification of Women vignette, participants used a range of justifications. Participants, particularly women, noted the problematic nature of generalizing all women based on stereotypes about women and beauty. It may be that as more frequent targets of such stereotypes and sexual objectification (e.g., Swim et al., 2001) women may be more likely to recognize and mention the problematic nature of these types of behaviors. The recognition that participants showed of the harmful nature of stereotypes about women and beauty as well as their understanding the generalization of a group can perpetuate these stereotypes suggests that future interventions to prevent microaggressions might focus on helping individuals realize that microaggressions are often rooted in stereotypes or assumptions about groups (McCabe, 2009; Nadal et al., 2015). Interestingly, some participants, mainly those who did not judge the situation as problematic, argued that the assumption that women use beauty for power is accurate and thus dismissed the scenario as only reflecting societal realities. Thus, some college students may not recognize that microaggressions are occurring because they view stereotypes as facts rather than stereotypes. Thus, this finding highlights that an important microintervention (Sue et al., 2019) may be to encourage students to be aware of the assumptions behind gendered stereotypes which may contribute to their being better able to be critical of stereotypical statements made within and outside classroom settings.

The Importance of the Setting

While participants varied in terms of their perceptions of how stereotypic the professor's statements were, many participants noted that the situation was problematic because of

the classroom setting and the expectations society holds for educators. Classrooms are inherently social spaces (Fisher et al., 2007), but conventions govern what type of behavior is expected from educators and students in these spaces. They highlighted concerns with talking or joking about strippers in the classroom context, singling out a male student to speak, and noted that the professor was acting in an unprofessional manner. These responses highlight participants' understanding of the norms of classroom culture and societal expectations for how students and teachers interact. Additionally, participants noted that the faculty member was making students uncomfortable with their behavior and comments. They expressed particular concern about how the professor singled certain students out to respond. These uncomfortable feelings are important to note, as they suggest that participants believed that this behavior created a problematic classroom climate. Students may be less likely to intervene to challenge such microaggressions if they feel the environment is uncomfortable or unsafe, and microaggressions often do create feelings of discomfort (McCabe, 2009), however friends are also often present when microaggressions occur (Casanova et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2007), which may mean that, if given the skills and tools to intervene, bystander intervention may be likely.

Together, the findings suggest students' recognition of the power that instructors have in their role as educators in higher education. Instructors in higher education can and do perpetrate microaggressions (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Indeed, prior research suggests that instructors can play an important role in creating an educational environment that contributes to the existence of gender microaggressions, both from students and instructors (Lester et al., 2016). Similarly, prior research has shown that instructors may not always address when a microaggression has occurred, although students do prefer that instructors respond to incidents of microaggressions (Boysen, 2012). Thus our findings suggest the need for discussing how instructors can be better equipped not only to respond to, but also prevent themselves from creating situations and perpetrating microaggressions. In addition, for students, recognizing the power imbalance if instructors are the perpetrators, interventions might highlight training students to not only recognize what is appropriate in classroom settings, but also to know and understand resources outside of instructors who are available to them to report when unacceptable behavior occurs.

Additionally, these findings also reinforce the importance of investigating microaggressions within and across social contexts. Students have distinct expectations for the classroom context. Thus training to prevent microaggressions should include all actors in a particular environment, including educators. Recent research affirms this, noting that faculty often feel unprepared to respond to microaggressions in university settings, and acknowledged that they did not respond when witnessing gender-based microaggressions (Haynes-Baratz, et al., 2021). While this analysis centered on faculty perceptions of microaggressions, whereas the current study centered on students' perceptions, what is important to note is that in both settings norms and expectations for how educators "should" act were paramount. Students noted that instructors had the particularly important role of avoiding being "miseducators" or spreading bias.

One important barrier to recognizing the harmful nature of microaggressions, which was found as a theme as participants responded to both scenarios is the perception that the

actors involved were "just joking." Prior research highlights that when sexist behavior or stereotypes are framed with humor, it is more difficult for individuals to recognize the harm that is happening (Mallett et al., 2016). However, the type of the joke may matter. Participants were much more likely to indicate that joking about rape and slavery was unacceptable and more likely to simply acknowledge that the professor may have been joking about women and beauty. Given how frequently participants in this study mentioned jokes, it may be important for interventions that address microaggressions to highlight how harmful jokes can be and to train participants on specific strategies to confront inappropriate jokes.

Considerations of Intersectionality & Historical Injustice

In addition to admonishing the use of rape and slavery as topics of humor, participants also highlighted the important role that educators play in challenging the behavior of privileged historical figures. Participants often noted the intersectional nature of the vignette—not only of the harmful assumptions of the microaggression, but also in the role that Thomas Jefferson's positionality as a White man with power influenced the instructor's behavior. This finding further highlights the value of investigating intersectional microaggressions, providing evidence that students are using an intersectional lens to evaluate and interpret their social situations (Nadal et al., 2015; Suárez-Orozco et al, 2015). This also suggests the importance of continued research on microaggressions that may be rooted in the particular history and context of different settings globally. On the other hand, others justified the behavior given their understanding of the historical context. Thus, it may be important for students to feel empowered to rewrite narratives that excuse historical injustices.

Limitations

While the current study highlights the many perspectives college students have about gender and intersectional microaggressions, and provides insight into factors that might shape interventions, there is still additional research needed. In particular, we were not able to completely consider how the participants' own positionality may have shaped their responses. Future research might ask participants how their own experiences and identities inform how they interpret and respond to microaggressions. Moreover, this study was limited to college students who attended a PWI in the Southeast US and primarily identified as White and cisgender. We also did not investigate participants' disability status, and thus were unable to consider how other factors of one's positionality, such as disability, in addition to gender or race may influence their interpretation of microaggressive events. Future research is needed to investigate how various positionalities and social contexts may play a role in interpreting microaggressive events. In addition, the study was limited to two vignettes in which the instructor was the cause of the microaggressive event, which allowed for in-depth analysis of shared assumptions of this type of microaggression, such as a focus on the assumption of what an instructor should do, but was unable to capture the various types of microaggressions that occur, such as those in which the instructor was not the perpetrator. Future research is needed to investigate how interpretations may differ across distinct situations, particularly ones in which the role of authority figures and those in power may vary. Moreover, a few participants assumed the instructors' positionality played a role in interpreting their behavior. Future research should investigate how the positionality

of the aggressor, particularly as it relates to the topic of their behavior may influence how a microaggression is interpreted. Finally, following prior research (Boysen, 2012), participants' open-ended responses were prompted through the framing of bias, acceptability, and realism. Thus, this framing while giving important insight into why they may evaluate the situation as problematic, may also have influenced participants' responses to focus on issues of acceptability, bias, or realism. Thus future research should consider presenting participants with microaggressive vignettes and use open-ended prompts (e.g., "What do you think of this scenario?" to investigate how students may interpret microaggressive events with fewer cues about the possible existence of bias in the scenario.

The current findings suggest that interventions should: 1) help students to recognize harm, even when the perpetrator uses humor, and 2) guide students to speak up when content shared in class is not appropriate for the classroom, when the professor's behavior is not appropriate or when the content perpetuates stereotypes or inaccuracies. It may also be important for future interventions to raise awareness of just how common and harmful microaggressions are in higher education settings.

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Table 1:

Themes and Codes for Vignette 1: Objectification of Women

Major Themes Codes	Descriptions	Counts/ Percentages	Cohen's Kappa	Exemplary quote
Not all (or only) Women Do This				
Objectification of Women	Refers to how women are objectified in this scenario through bias, generalization, oversexualization, demeaning, and the use of stripping/sex work in discussion.	63 (21.80%) *W: 40/M: 23* *White: 50* *POC: 13*	k = 0.95	"The professor talks about women in an oversexualized way makes this situation a bit inappropriate, especially when he repeats from a song, "I'm in love with a stripper." M
Inclusive	Respondents acknowledge the possibility of men being affected by this situation.	7 (2.42%) *W: 3/M: 4* *White: 5* *POC: 2*	k = 1.0	"I think that both sexes looks to impose power on others." M
It's not what you say, but where you say it: Not in the Classroom/We don't talk about things like this in Class.				
Classroom Setting	Respondents believe that the situation is not fit for the classroom setting.	45 (15.57%) *W: 26/M: 19* *White: 37* *POC: 8*	k = 0.78	"It doesn't seem to me like a topic which a teacher should be talking in the class. The manner in which he addresses the class is inappropriate." M
The Miseducator: Teacher as Encouraging Bias				
Professor evoked response from student	Responses include concern about the professor eliciting responses, specifically from students.	36 (12.46%) *W: 18/M: 18* *White: 32* *POC: 4*	k = 0.78	"It is biased because most of the students respond women, and from there the professor elicits the response to women…" W
Professor Behavior	Responses discuss how the professor's behavior can be classified as unprofessional or inappropriate.	72 (24.91%) *W: 44/M: 28* *White: 57* *POC: 15*	k = 0.85	"Getting a humorous response from one student in a class is typical. Professors should try to be professional and bring the class back around…" M
Professor is Making Students Uncomfortable				
Harm	Respondents believe that the instructor's behavior could possibly be harmful to students.	28 (9.68%) *W: 18/M: 13* *White: 19* *POC: 9*	k = 0.71	"People often behave in this way because they don't realize how insulting it can be to hear this, so it is completely believable that this would happen…"W
It's a Joke				
Nothing wrong with the situation	Respondent believes that this situation is fine/okay/ non-problematic.	28 (9.69%) *W: 13/ M: 15* *White: 23* *POC: 5*	k = 1.0	"I feel it is alright to make jokes with students but I do not know if the instructor should assert things without having sources to back up his claims." W
Joke	Respondent refers to the situation as humorous.	24 (8.3%) *W: 13/M: 11* *White: 17* *POC: 7*	k = 0.71	"I think the joke is inappropriate but it is also harmless and is a good way to make students have a good laugh." M

Note. W = woman, M = man, POC = Person of Color.

Table 2:

Themes and Codes for Vignette 2: Joking about Rape and Slavery

Major Themes / Codes	Descriptions	Counts/ Percentages	Cohen's Kappa	Exemplary quotes
This is no Joking Matter				
Make Light of Serious or Sensitive Topic	Respondent feels that the professor speaks about a sensitive subject that should not be made light of.	17 (5.88%) W: 9/M: 8 White: 13 POC: 4	k = 1.0	"The instructor was making light of a legitimate problem and making excuses for Thomas Jefferson." M
Joke	Respondent discusses or criticizes the professor for making a joke.	40 (13.84%) W: 21/M: 19 White: 32 POC: 8	k = 0.80	"It was inappropriate because the professor made a joke about something very serious. It was biased in favor of Thomas Jefferson." W
Rape & Consent	Responses include discussions around ideas of rape and consent portrayed within the situation.	49 (16.96%) W: 31/M: 18 White: 42 POC: 7	k = 1.0	"The professor made a rape joke; that's unacceptable." M
Important Men Can Do No Wrong – Professor as Defender rather than Teacher				
Defending Jefferson	Respondent acknowledges that the professor defends the actions of Thomas Jefferson or thinks of him as an honorable historical figure.	62 (21.45%) W: 36/M: 26 White: 45 POC: 17	k = 0.82	"I think people say microaggressions and brush off things very often. I think it is extremely inappropriate because it justifies what Jefferson did. It is biased depending on the demographic of the professor." M
Teacher's Response	Responses discuss the nature of the professor's response such as brushing off or not answering the student's question.	84 (29.07%) W: 43/M: 41 White: 64 POC: 20	k = 0.89	"The fact that he brushed over something like rape is not appropriate in a learning environment. He seems to favor a patriarchal, white bias based on his response." M
Racism	Respondent addresses possibilities of racism in this situation through professor and student's race and their subsequent interaction.	32 (11.07%) W: 15/M: 17 White: 26 POC: 6	k = 1.0	"The situation is definitely inappropriate because the instructor is trying to cover up for something Thomas Jefferson did because he was white." W
Historically Accurate/ Inaccurate	Respondent finds the professor's remarks to be either historically (in)accurate or a way of ignoring history as it happened.	43 (14.88%) W: 22/M: 21 White: 30 POC: 13	k = 0.78	"Inappropriate as retaining all slander against a historical figure when inaccurate is wrong. Both the student and instructor are biased in their views on the history of Jefferson." M

Note. W = woman, M = man, POC = Person of Color.