Running from Race: An Attempt to Discuss Students' First-Impressions of Professors in Higher Education

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Abstract

Background. Why is it so hard to talk about race, gender, and potential biases in our country today? Over the past two decades, there has been a plethora of information in the literature focusing on professors and their potential biases regarding their view of students, but less is known about the student's potential biases regarding their perceptions of the professors. This was the original focus of this study, but the discussion took a turn. *Purpose.* This study was a follow-up to an earlier pilot study. The purpose of this study was to investigate possible differences in student first-impressions of faculty, based upon the faculty's race and/or gender, and as related to the student's race or gender. *Methods.* Students viewed sixteen, 20-second videos, each with one of eight professors-actors who were all different in appearance (2 Black males, 2 White males, 2 Black females, and 2 White females); however, the scripts were the same for each professor-actor. Each professor was filmed twice: as highly credentialed, and as a new first-time professor with less education. The students rated these professors after viewing each film. *Results.* Although 72 land-grant universities had graduate health science programs at the time of this study, and although most agreed to send out the email requesting participants, thereby soliciting approximately 5000 students, only 48 students initially agreed to participate in the study. Once beginning the survey, 23 participants dropped out immediately, and of the remaining 25 participants, only 14 completed all the questions including the demographic questions at the end. Qualitative answers to questions shed some light on the reason for this small sample size and the possible fear of the discussion. The pilot study initially showed some differences based on gender, but not on race, yet there were no significant differences in this study based on either gender or race. There were, however, significant differences in ratings of faculty based on experience. *Discussion*: Although there were only 14 responses, students in this study were more interested in the faculty member's level of experience than their race or gender. Yet, this could be considered skewed, as the small number of participants who stayed in the study may have been more comfortable with the discussion of biases, than those who dropped out or did not volunteer at all. *Conclusion*: What started out as an attempt to better understand student first-impressions of faculty based on race and gender, turned into a study regarding the fear surrounding a potentially uncomfortable survey, regardless of anonymity. Yet, it is impossible to study an issue that cannot even be discussed. This conversation is vital, especially for those going into health care with a masters or doctoral degree. There is no way to work through the problems in this country related to race if those most educated and most willing to serve others try their best to avoid the conversation.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the past five years, there has been a surge of information in the literature focusing on ways to teach cultural proficiency for professor and teacher preparation (Nenonene et al. 2019; Cormier, 2021; Hutchison & McAlister-Shields, 2020). Many professors and teachers are required to take courses at their schools and universities in an effort to learn cultural proficiency with the goal of reducing potential bias (Simpson, 2020). While there has also been discussion about students' potential biases toward their professors, particularly in the context of course evaluations, additional research is needed (Kreitzer, & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). Understanding the way students view their professors could be helpful, especially in a world where student course evaluations, and tools like Rate-My-Professor carry so much weight. It is also important to know about potential bias of future clinicians and health care providers before they graduate (Brottman et al., 2020; Oikarainen, et al., 2019).

The purpose of this current research was to try to understand the first-impressions that graduate students in a health science program have of their new faculty, and whether or not these impressions are affected by the professor's race or gender. This was a follow-up study from a recent paper published by the same researchers (Michaels et al, 2022). What started out as an attempt to better understand student first-impression of faculty based on race and gender turned instead into a study regarding the fear of a discussion that in today's society is seen by some as uncomfortable.

Theoretical Framework

People respond to racial and gender differences in dissimilar ways. In a classroom, the bodies of instructors and students matter. As embodied subjects, characteristics of race and class afford distinctive signifiers to different people, depending on their identities and schema. This research was intended to investigate college students' perceptions of instructors with regard to unconscious biases, specifically as they relate to gender and race. In the predominantly White and historically male spaces of academia in the United States (U.S.), there is an abundance of curricula built on the interconnection between colonization and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms (Stein, 2022; Wispelwey, et al. 2023). Higher education can be a space where we racial and gendered ideology is transformed.

Critical Race Theory

Racism is ubiquitous in United States society, woven into laws, policies, and institutions, operating individually, systematically, and materially, which either privileges or marginalizes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2013). It is the challenge of institutions, like higher education, to

become places of solidarity, healing, and justice (Raza Memon & Jivraj, 2020; Wame, 2019). Challenging the dominant ideology, Critical Race Theory focuses on both the centrality and intersectionality of racism (Macintosh, 2003). Interrogating the ways in which racism is embedded in our institutions, systems, and culture, we can use Critical Race Theory as a framework to consider how all oppression interrelates (Harris, 2002). Racism is further problematized with the concept of intersectionality, particularly how oppressions (race, class, gender, etc.) intersect (Crenshaw, 1989; Opara et al. 2020).

Resistance to the ideas brought to light by Critical Race Theory are multifaceted. Kendi (2019) suggests that White people resist identifying as White and not unrelatedly anti-racist "to avoid reckoning with the ways that Whiteness – even as a construction and mirage – has informed their notions of America and identity and offered then privilege, the primary one being the privilege of being inherently normal, standard, and legal" (p. 38). Another contention is that some lighter-skinned individuals might not identify as "White" because when it comes to ethnic background, the term, "White" refers to a very heterogeneous group, with ancestors from many other countries. This is also true for the term, "Black" (Jablonski, 2020; Schachter, et al., 2021).

Contrary to popular belief, the U.S. is not experiencing a post-racial era. In fact, it appears that racial division, evident in such policies related to school segregation, is greater than ever. Consequently, negating the importance of racial identities is not productive or a move toward racial equality. "It is one of the ironies of antiracism that we must identify racially in order to identify the racial privileges and dangers of being in our bodies (p. 38). Race as a fundamental power construct must be used as a way to interrogate power.

Oppression

A popular framework used by many organizations is the *Four I's of Oppression* that includes four overlapping levels: *the ideological, the institutional, the interpersonal/individual,* and *the internalized.* As Picower (2021) reminds, us, "For all the ways that the Four I's negatively impact those marginalized by oppression, there is an equal and opposite privilege assigned to those advantaged by that identity marker" (p. 11). That is to say, that all people are impacted and dehumanized, whether oppressed or advantaged.

One must first name inequity and then disrupt it, before change can occur. One way of doing so is to identify the *Curricular Tools of Whiteness*, which Picower (2021) explains "use a variety of strategies to socialize students to internalize existing racist ideologies, ensuring that racial hierarchies are maintained through the education system" (p. 26). For educators at all levels, Curricular Tools of Whiteness can include the following:

- not talking about race and power

- remaining neutral/apolitical

- obscuring current inequalities

- whitewashing history

- teaching through and facilitating the White Gaze

- not interrogating the hidden curriculum that perpetuates gender and race stereotypes (Picower, 2021, p. 27).

Each of the Curricular Tools of Whiteness, used in all levels of classrooms daily across the U.S., work to maintain the status quo, which is detrimental to all students. Only through "in-depth self-examination and reflection on how issues of race, class, and identity play out in" educational institutions will one find sites for disruptions in the spaces where we teach (Picower, 2021, p. 13). We can form multiracial communities of critically conscious researchers and educators who center racial justice.

Race-Evasiveness

Avoiding conversations about race is known as race-evasiveness, and this avoidance a great deal of conscious, active effort (Chang-Bacon, 2022). These conversations are necessary, however, since talking-the-talk typically precedes walking-the-walk (McNair, 2020). Fear of being considered a racist can impede discussions about the topic, limiting self-exploration and growth (Palmer & Louis, 2017; DeAngelo, 2018). Individuals who have this fear may be less likely to talk about their own personal biases, and instead, become defensive (DeAngelo, 2018). This does not necessarily mean that the individual has racial biases, but this lack of communication can impede the ability to learn about oneself and others. The first step toward a better understanding of racial biases, and whether or not they even exist, is open communication with active listening (Baires & Catrone, 2021).

Some people are afraid that an open discussion might make others believe that they experience aversive racism. This is a form a racial prejudice where individuals embrace non-racist attitudes outwardly, but still experience negative emotions when in the presence of people of various racial groups (APA, 2023). Since racial biases are often deeply rooted in an individual's persona, whether from family history or their own past experiences, often reinforced by social ideologies, well-meaning individuals might demonstrate subtle unintentional forms of discrimination (Chang-Bacon, 2022). Strategies to decrease this type of discrimination in our

society requires an understanding of its complexities, but this cannot occur if people are afraid to have the conversation.

The Pilot Study

A two-part pilot study was conducted by these authors and published in 2022 in the *Forum on Public Policy* (Michaels et al. 2022). Purpose of this pilot study was to see if there were measurable differences in students' first-impressions of faculty based upon the faculty member's race and/or gender, and if so, if there would be a connection with the student's own race or gender. The purpose of the second half of the pilot study was to see if students had more difficulty answering quiz questions based on what they heard, when information was given to them is from a professor that they initially rated low based on their visual first-impression. Only 8 of the original 27 volunteer participants completed this study, so further research was suggested. There were no correlations found between a student's first impression of a professor and their ability to learn something new from that person. Using a Chi Square for the number of positive scores versus negative scores given on the video, the only significant finding was between the number of high scores given to an unqualified male versus an unqualified female ($p = .025$). From the video component, students appeared to appreciate the males more than the females regardless of qualifications. There were no significant differences when looking at race, but the black, male professor had the highest visual score (Michaels et al. 2022).

This Study

The pilot study used a convenience sample of students attending a private, primarily White university with a very small sample size. The focus of the study depicted in this paper was on students in graduate health science programs at land grant universities from across the country. The purpose of this study was to see if there were differences in student first-impressions of faculty based upon the faculty's race and/or gender; and to see if there would be a relationship with the student's race or gender. The results were unexpected, however, and provided new insight regarding the fear of this uncomfortable conversation.

METHODS

Exemption status was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Belmont University prior to beginning this study. This section will describe the participants, the survey tool, data collection, and data analysis.

Participants

At the time of this study, there were 72 land-grant universities with graduate health science programs. Emails were sent to each of the department heads and/or deans, and 45 agreed to send these emails to their graduate students in the health sciences, thereby soliciting approximately 3,000 students over the age of 21. This email included a link to the confidential survey. Although reminder letter were also sent, only 48 students initially agreed to complete the anonymous survey. Once beginning the survey, 23 participants dropped out immediately, and of the remaining 25 participants who completed all the questions, only 14 completed the demographic questions at the end. These participants were from eight different states from California to North Carolina (See Figure 1).

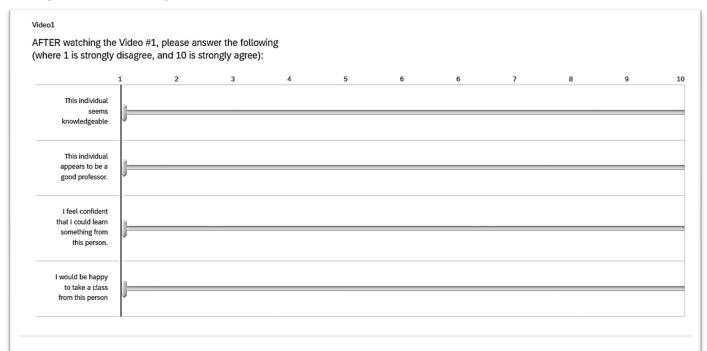The race and gender identification of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Race and Gender Identification of the 25 participants

Participants Identifying themselves as …	Number
Black Males	1
Black Females	1
White Males	3
White Females	7
Mixed Black/White Males	1
Two or More Races - Female	1
Not Answered	11

The Survey

The survey consisted of an anonymous consent form, followed by 16 short 20-second videos, each with a different professor seen introducing him-or-herself as their new anatomy professor. The group of eight professor actors, seen in the videos consisted of two black males, 2 black females, 2 white males and 2 white females. Each appeared in two videos. In the first video, the professors introduced themselves as their new anatomy professor with excellent credentials, and in the second video the professor introduced themselves as their new anatomy professor with minimal qualifications. The scripts for all 8 professors were identical. After each video, student participants asked to quickly rate four sliding-scale statements, and a short qualitative question, giving their impression of the faculty member in the video. The four sliding scale questions were, "The individual seems knowledgeable," "The individual appears to be a good professor," "I feel confident that I could learn something from this person," and "I would be happy to take a class from this person" (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Sliding-Scale and Comment Section.

After the 16 videos, there were a few questions about their preference for a professor and short demographic section, describing the student's race, and gender. This was at the end so as not to influence the results of the study.

Data Analysis

This was an online anonymous survey with imbedded videos. The student provided quantitative data using a modified sliding Likert scale to provide first-impressions of individuals in sixteen 20-second videos. This data was analyzed looking for differences in student first-impressions of faculty based upon the faculty's qualifications, their race, and their gender. The data was also analyzed to see if there were any relationships with the student's race and/or gender. This quantitative data was analyzed using non-parametric data analysis for both within-group differences (Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks), and for between-group comparisons (Mann Whitney U-Test). There was also one qualitative question after each video, and this was evaluated utilizing common themes.

Results

There were significant differences in ratings of faculty based on experience for all 5 categories: Seems Knowledgeable ($p < .001$), Professional ($p = .007$), Good professor ($p < 001$), Could learn from them ($p < 001$), and I'd be happy to have this professor ($p < 001$). Although the pilot study demonstrated significant differences based on race and on gender, this study did not. Follow-up questions, however, depicted a somewhat different story. Five of the participants agreed with the statement: "I tend to learn best from someone who looks like me," 5 disagreed, and 4 remained neutral, and 11 chose not to answer (See Table 2).

Table 2. Answers to follow-up question

"I tend to learn best from someone who looks like me."	Number
Strongly Agree	2
Agree	3
Neutral	4
Disagree	4
Strongly Disagree	1
Total	14
Not Answered	11
Total	25

Although answered in the qualitative component of this survey, it still brought out recurring themes, with most individuals calmly stating that although they prefer someone who looks like them, they learn well with someone who is experienced or knowledgeable (See Table 3 and Figure 3).

Table 3. Common Themes and the number of times mentioned

"I tend to learn best from someone who looks like me."	Number
"Looks like me"	12
"Like" or "Similar"	11
"Background" or "Experience"	8

Figure 3. Word-Cloud of the answers provided by the 14 participants.

There were a few comments that could possibly be cause for concern, such as this direct quote (sic), "I've learned more in depth from caucasians than I did my african american community in my younger years. However, I am earning my degree with more african american professors and I think I had a more privledge education with caucasians." and (sic) "This study is ridiculous. Students in my class had all different viewpoints (including many very right wing conservatives) and beliefs but when it came to professors, NOBODY cares what they look like or how they "identify" as long as they are qualified to teach the topic."

DISCUSSION

Although there were only 14 anonymous survey participants, students in this study reported being more interested in the faculty member's level of experience than their race. This is different from the pilot study and could be due to a different participant pool. The pilot study was done at a primarily White private university, and this study was done at land grant universities, many of which are historically black colleges and universities. The limitation is the small sample size. Yet, these results might have been skewed (and ironically biased), as the small number of participants who were willing to participate in the study may have been more comfortable with the topics of gender and race than those who dropped out or did not volunteer at all.

An analysis of the qualitative responses made it appear that individuals found the questions related to race to be uncomfortable and would rather avoid the conversation. Further research is needed to better understand how higher education can achieve safer spaces in which students can talk, learn and grow, without the fear of ridicule, or confrontation. Once students engage in the conversation, then we can more easily recognize and analyze the biases that may be present and ways to address them. Not talking about race and power is the first Curricular Tool of Whiteness mentioned by Picower (2021). This conversation needs to begin soon, or we could be harmed further from the overlapping *I's of Oppression*: *the ideological, institutional, interpersonal/individual,* and *internalized.* These authors agree with Baires & Catrone, (2021) that the first step toward a better understanding of biases regarding race and gender identification is open communication with active listening.

CONCLUSION

What started as an attempt to better understand student first-impressions of faculty based on race and gender became instead a study regarding the reluctance, resistance, and/or fear of a discussion that in today's society is seen by many as uncomfortable. Authors like Raza Memon & Jivraj (2020) and Wane (2019) contend that is the challenge of institutions, like higher education, to become places of solidarity, healing, and justice. Yet, how can that take place if we are too afraid to talk about the issues at hand? There is no way to confront the problems in this country related to race and gender identification if those most educated and most willing to learn try their best to avoid the conversation.

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