

Misgendering in Student-Professor Interactions

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Introduction

A proactive step in reversing the pattern of negative mental health outcomes faced by transgender and non-binary (TNB) people involves understanding how individuals respond to instances of gender-based bias in everyday life. There is significant indication in the literature that some less blatant forms of bias, known as microaggressions, compound over time to negatively affect TNB individuals' mental health (McLemore, 2018; Morris et al., 2020). Importantly, microaggressions and the corresponding effects on mental health have been studied in many different contexts; for example, within counseling settings (Anzani et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020), interpersonal relationships (Paz et al., 2014; Pulice-Farrow et al., 2017), and institutions of higher education (Garvey et al., 2014; Linley et al., 2016). There are limited studies on microaggressions in the classroom, specifically related to TNB students. Thus, it is not clear how often fellow students consciously perceive that a microaggression towards a TNB individual has occurred.

One type of microaggression towards TNB individuals, misgendering, occurs when a person uses pronouns that incorrectly label another person's gender (Nadal et al., 2014). According to TNB college students, faculty are the most common source misgendering (Linley et al., 2016; Tompkins et al., 2015). Despite the prevalence of misgendering in student-professor interactions, there is little indication of how individuals perceive the microaggressor (professor) after a microaggression has occurred. In the present study, we sought to address the lack of baseline data on how often people are aware of microaggression occurrences and study how a misgendering event will influence perception of those who perpetuate the microaggression.

Methods

Participants: 137 undergraduates.

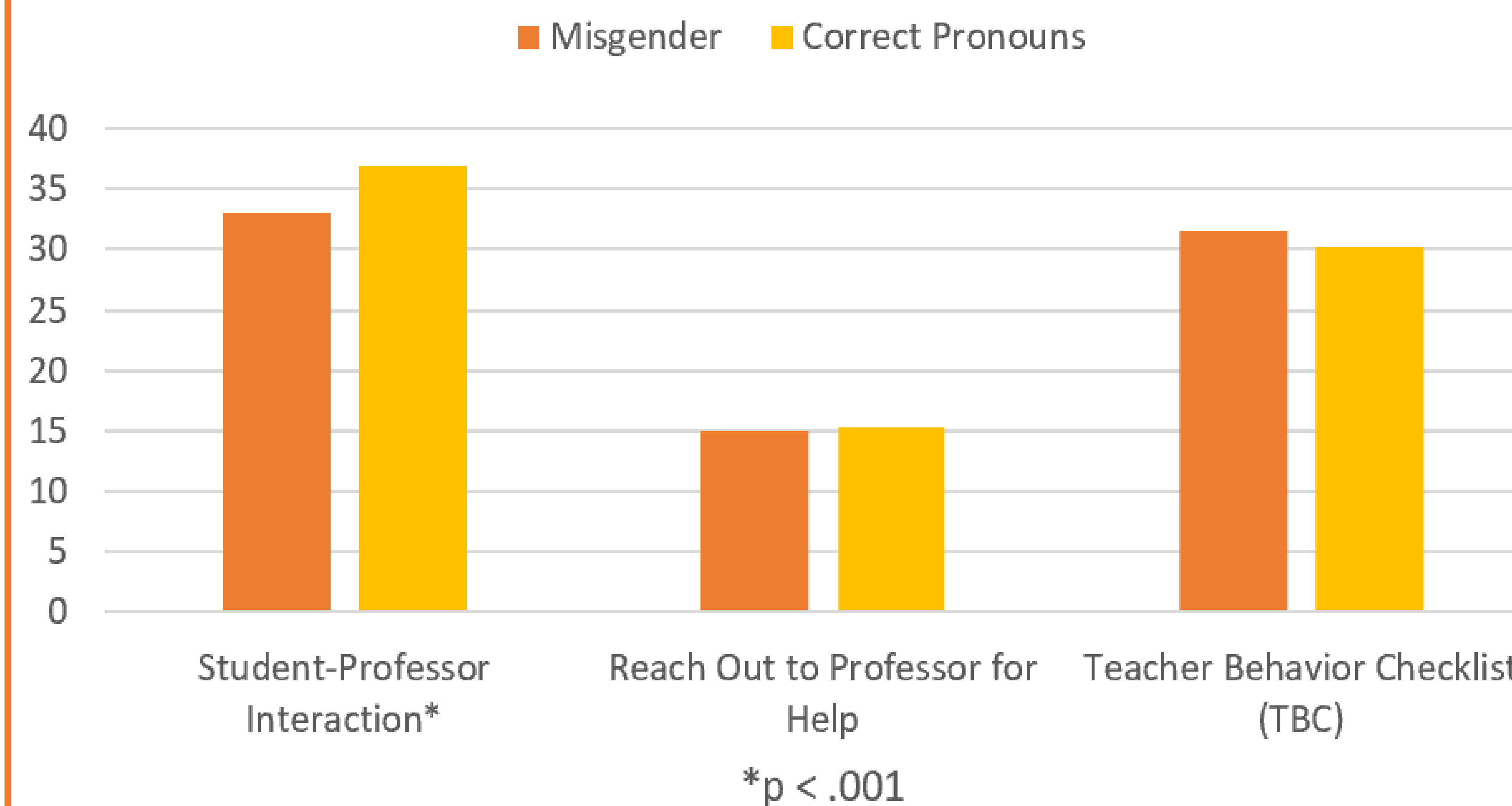
Materials: 15 captioned pictures of a student-professor interaction; demographics; open-ended questions about noticing misgendering; rating student-professor interaction questions; likelihood of student to reach out to professor for help questions; Teacher Behavior Checklist (TBC).

Procedure: Participants were randomly assigned to either a misgendering or correct pronoun usage condition. They then completed the survey.

Students recognize the occurrence of misgendering in a student-professor interaction and form a **less favorable** impression of the interaction itself but not the **microaggressor** (professor).



Mean Ratings by Misgendering Condition



Results

- An ANOVA reveals participants noticed when the professor misgendered the student, $F(1,136) = 35.13, p < .001$.
- Participants in the correct pronoun condition rated the interaction more favorably ($M = 36.97, SD = 6.38$) than those in the misgendering condition ($M = 32.96, SD = 6.92$), $F(1,136) = 12.45, p < .001$.
- Perceived likelihood of the student to reach out to the professor again was not significantly different between the misgendering condition ($M = 14.91, SD = 3.79$) and correct pronoun condition ($M = 15.28, SD = 4.08$).
- Ratings of the professor using the TBC were not significantly different across the misgendering condition ($M = 31.50, SD = 9.68$) and correct pronoun condition ($M = 30.20, SD = 11.16$).

Discussion

Participants do recognize when misgendering occurs in a student-professor interaction. This finding has implications for reducing the occurrence of microaggressions on campus; for example, bystander intervention training. Moreover, this study has contributed to the understanding of how microaggressors are perceived by observers. Reduced favorability does not seem to extend to general views of the microaggressor (the professor) despite rating the interaction with misgendering less favorably. One potential explanation involves participants acknowledging the discomfort of the student caused by being misgendered, but also giving the professor the benefit of the doubt by assuming it was an innocent mistake. After all, microaggressions are often downplayed due to their seemingly "micro" impact.

This study was conducted entirely online, which may be a limitation. Occurrences of misgendering often occur in face-to-face interactions with bystanders having more of a stake in the interaction. Viewing a microaggression online removes feelings of personal involvement and potentially reduces discomfort.

In order to get a better understanding of why people rate the interaction poorly but not the microaggressor, more research on how students perceive misgendering in general is needed. If misgendering is viewed as something that is uncomfortable but unimportant, then it may help explain why the microaggressor isn't perceived more negatively. Additionally, people may not feel comfortable making negative generalizations about the microaggressor without having a baseline of the microaggressor's intentions.