Co-option of resources by white students marginalizes and disenfranchises some BIPOC college students, study finds
24 October 2022, by Rachel Sturtz

Nationally, only about 50% of students pass college algebra, with even fewer students who are Black, Latinx, and Native. Serving as a gatekeeper course for students seeking a degree in STEM, algebra can serve as a barrier for some BIPOC students. Beyond opportunity gaps, a new study from the University of Colorado Denver finds that "white hoarding," the co-option of resources by white students, marginalizes and disenfranchises some BIPOC students in college algebra.

The study was published in the Journal of Higher Education.

Whiteness as property in college algebra

Previous research has shown that the further Students of Color progress in STEM education, the more racism they face in their classes. Naomi Nishi, Ph.D., lecturer in the Department of Ethnic Studies at CU Denver, conducted an ethnographic study of college algebra at a public university.

In the study, Nishi used Critical Race Theory to draw on legal scholar Cheryl Harris' concept of "whiteness as property" (how white people assume the legal tenets of property, namely the rights to enjoy one's property and exclude others from it) and Settler Colonialism Theory (the ways in which early property law in the U.S. only recognized land as property when lived on by white/European people).

The resulting theory suggests that white people, even today, not only treat their whiteness as property, but also don't necessarily recognize the property rights of BIPOC people as they do for whites.

Entitlement vs. ownership

Because race works in concert with systems like class and socioeconomic status, Nishi said it's no coincidence that BIPOC students tend to be from low-income families and are often first-generation college students.

In college algebra, students require several resources to be successful, including a graphing calculator, a laptop or tablet, and access to educational apps. Costs can run at least $300 per student, and these tend to be out-of-pocket costs.

In Nishi's study, one Black woman student was unable to afford the $70 computer application needed to complete class assignments. After saving up for it for months, the student was too far behind once she finally bought it and failed out of the class.

Yet, even in cases where BIPOC students had resources the white students were without, white students were not hesitant to ask for, borrow, or even take the resources they needed to learn.
In another class, a mixed-race Black woman without a laptop had to work with the white woman next to her. The white student tilted her laptop so that the Black student could watch her do the exercise. At no point was the black woman allowed or offered to try it herself. At another table, a Latina woman agreed to share her laptop with a white man. She set her laptop between herself and her classmate, but the white man leaned in and began working on the exercise, forcing her to watch him do the assignment on her laptop.

"Who felt entitled to property? And why?" said Nishi. "This was one of the moments when it was clear that ownership had little to do with it. Entitlement, under the guise of sharing, had more to do with whether someone was white."

Nishi saw that BIPOC students were often excluded from group discussions, subject to a gendered and racial hierarchy in group projects, and they were less likely to ask for help or resources. In her study, one student initially opted to fail a test because he did not have a calculator. He didn't want to ask the teacher if there was an extra he could borrow.

"When I talked to that student later, he said it was worth failing to keep himself from 'looking stupid,'" said Nishi. "For him, failing was better than being vulnerable. Yet, in all the semesters I observed college algebra, I rarely saw a white student hesitate to ask a question or for help or for a resource that they needed."

A learned hesitancy in asking for help

"In interviewing BIPOC students in my study, a theme arose around bad experiences in the K-12 system, where particularly white teachers and classmates had made them feel embarrassed to ask a question or seek help on their schoolwork," said Nishi. "These then manifested in the hesitancy to engage in college algebra."

"White hoarding," occurs when white privilege and entitlement and racism are normalized. To combat these, Nishi said a good start would be to require courses on race and racism for college freshmen, as well as for all faculty. The courses, Nishi said, must go well beyond the current "implicit bias" and "respect diversity"-style education, focusing instead on how white supremacism works with other systems like heteropatriarchy, ability, and classism.

"Because of the dire condition of this pipeline of students, it's essential that STEM faculty understand and engage in deep critical race education so that they might recognize how whiteness and racism are working in their classrooms," said Nishi.

And for the students who find themselves without a calculator or a tablet?

"I recommend that these resources be provided to and literally placed in the hands of all students," said Nishi. "We can't put the onus on Students of Color to buy or seek out the resources they need, because they may not possess the means nor the entitlement of their white classmates."


Provided by University of Colorado Denver
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