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## You're Not Like Everyone Else: Sexual Orientation Microaggressions at a Catholic University

Bryce E. Hughes  
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*Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students at Catholic colleges and universities face a campus climate rife with sexual orientation microaggressions, subtle or covert expressions of hostility the impact from which can compound over time. In this case study, I draw from interviews with 14 students, 12 faculty, and 6 staff members from one Catholic university their experiences with microaggressions. Participants indicated that sexual orientation microaggressions were common on their campus, like other colleges and universities, and the university did not have a systematic method for addressing this problem. The Catholic affiliation of the university shaped microaggressions uniquely, especially in instances where influential actors felt Church teaching needed to be more explicitly represented in LGBTQ-related programming. Microaggressions are an affront to LGBTQ people's inherent dignity; this study lends support to the efforts of educators at Catholic schools who are concerned with ensuring an inclusive, safe learning environment.*

### Keywords

Sexual orientation, microaggressions, higher education, case study, campus climate, LGBTQ

In his book, *Building a Bridge*, Fr. James Martin, S.J., responded to what he perceived as silence on the part of Catholic Church leadership in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, FL, in 2016 (Martin, 2018). Although he acknowledged that many Church authorities expressed sorrow and horror over the incident, few of these leaders referred to *gay* or *LGBQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer),<sup>1</sup> or *sexual minority* communities in recognition that the nightclub was a popular LGBTQ establishment. He felt by not acknowledging the specific grieving of LGBTQ communities, Cath-

1 I generally use the initialism *LGBQ* throughout this manuscript to demarcate a focus on sexual orientation, as all participants in this study identified as cisgender. Gender identity and sexual orientation are interrelated, but distinct, experiences, so my decision to use *LGBQ* is intended to reflect precision. That said, in references to other literature I use the abbreviation that reflects the focus of each study.

olic leaders were perpetuating the invisibility of LGBTQ communities within the Church. Educators within Catholic colleges and universities experience this tension in discerning the best approaches for addressing the climate for LGBTQ students (Maher, 2003).

LGBTQ students on college campuses generally continue to experience a hostile campus climate (Ramirez & Zimmerman, 2016), reporting higher rates of harassment, bias, and discrimination than their heterosexual peers (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Anti-LGBTQ microaggressions in particular occur frequently on college campuses and lead to negative psychological and physiological outcomes for LGBTQ students (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012).

Given students who report higher religiosity tend to hold less supportive views toward their LGBTQ peers (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012), the climate at religiously-affiliated colleges and universities may even be more pronouncedly hostile for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students at Catholic universities are experiencing frequent microaggressions that affect their personal well-being and academic success, a fact that concerns many faculty and staff in Catholic education. The purpose of this study, then, is to shed light on microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ students at a Catholic university. I hope to help bring visibility to these experiences in order to increase the sense of urgency around their need to be addressed, as well as to identify implications for how educators at Catholic schools can go about meeting this critical need.

### Microaggressions

The concept of microaggressions was first introduced by Pierce and colleagues as a way of defining the everyday, subtle incidents of racism that began to characterize racism in the United States following the Civil Rights Movement (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978). These subtle incidents became known as *aversive racism* (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002), reflecting implicit biases against African Americans and other racially minoritized people in the United States (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997). Implicit bias is a judgment or action resulting from an automatic evaluation based on subconscious associations between specific qualities, often negative or stereotypical, and members of a particular social group (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit bias then manifests behaviorally through microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions are subtle, often surprising, offenses perpetrated by those in the majority, who hold privilege and power toward those in the minority, who are marginalized and oppressed in frequently subconscious, automatic ways (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). What sets microaggressions apart from other hostile encounters is the difference in perception of the incident's impact between the target and the perpetrator (Sue, 2010). The target is left feeling hurt, offended, frustrated, or even threatened, whereas the perpetrator may view their action as minor, honest, and/or defensible. As these experiences compound over time, microaggressions lead to lowered self-esteem, higher incidences of depression, and lower overall psychological well-being (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Woodford, Howell, et al., 2012).

### Anti-LGBQ Microaggressions

Although work on microaggressions began with a focus on racism, the concept of microaggressions has demonstrated utility for revealing parallel processes at work in the oppression and marginalization of other groups as well. Work that has expanded microaggression theory to LGBTQ communities has identified several types of microaggressions experienced by these communities (Nadal, 2017). Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus (2010) proposed eight distinct categories of sexual orientation microaggressions. These include use of heterosexist language, endorsement of heteronormative cultures and behaviors, assumption of a universal LGBTQ experience, exoticization of LGBTQ people, discomfort with or disapproval of LGBTQ experiences, denial of the reality of homophobia, assumption of sexual pathology or abnormality, and denial of one's individual heterosexism.

Sue et al. (2007) also proposed that microaggressions can be produced at a macro level, referring to these incidences as *environmental microaggressions*. This classification includes examples of the aforementioned types of microaggressions that may not be directed toward any target in particular or that reflect the more pernicious effects of systemic and institutionalized discrimination. Environmental microaggressions remain somewhat undertheorized in Sue's work, but have been examined in further detail by other researchers (Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015). Given the unique interaction between environment and individual observed at Catholic-affiliated colleges and universities (Schaller & Boyle, 2006), this particular context may give rise to unique environmental microaggressions.

### LGBQ Climate at Catholic Colleges and Universities

Catholic Church teachings on LGBQ issues lead to two primary but contradictory conclusions: (a) sexual activity between two people of the same sex is “intrinsically disordered” and “contrary to the natural law” (Catholic Church, 1994, article 2357), and (b) “every sign of unjust discrimination” against LGBQ people should be avoided (article 2358). Further, the Catechism states that LGBQ people should be treated with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” given their inherent dignity as human persons. Given these mixed messages, microaggressions should be of concern to educators at Catholic institutions.

Little has been written regarding the climate at Catholic colleges and universities for LGBQ college students, and none focuses explicitly on the experience of microaggressions. A few studies have found that, on average, student attitudes towards LGBQ individuals or political issues tend to be positive at Catholic universities (Gray & Cidade, 2013; Maher, Sever, & Pichler, 2008). The major contributing factors to these attitudes appear to be broader trends toward social acceptance of LGBQ people: students tend to cite knowing an LGBQ person as a factor in their views (Maher et al., 2008), and are more likely to enter college supporting issues like same-sex marriage (Gray & Cidade, 2013). That said, research demonstrates that students who affiliate with a religious tradition tend to hold more negative views of their LGBT peers than those who do not (Woodford, Silverschanz, et al., 2012), and Catholic male students in particular hold more negative views compared to non-affiliated male students (Finlay & Walther, 2003).

Fortunately, Catholic institutions appear to provide a more welcoming climate for LGBQ students than institutions affiliated with other religious traditions. Wolff, Himes, Soares, and Miller Kwon (2016) found that sexual minority students at Catholic universities had an easier time coming to terms with their sexual identities than students at Mormon, Evangelical, or non-denominational religious institutions. Participation in a gay-straight alliance also positively affected several of the outcomes in their study, and Catholic universities are more likely to host these organizations than many other types of religiously affiliated institutions (Coley, 2017). Several pieces have been written describing programming efforts at Catholic universities to support LGBQ communities and to educate others on LGBQ issues (Kirkley & Getz, 2007; Perlis & Shapiro, 2001; Yoakam, 2006). McEntarfer (2011) also suggested Catholic universities affiliated with specific religious orders like the Jesuits or the Benedictines may be even more likely to do so (see also Yoakam, 2006).

However, one problem Catholic universities face is criticism from influential stakeholders, both internal and external, that LGBTQ programming undermines these institutions' Catholic identities (e.g., Associated Press, 2018). In response, proactive efforts to address this criticism has become a routine aspect of LGBTQ programming at Catholic universities. For example, to seek approval for a cluster of sexuality-themed courses at the University of San Diego, Sumner, Sgoutas-Emch, Nunn, and Kirkley (2017) noted following an atypically rigorous process that was only necessary because of the LGBTQ content of these courses. They also made sure to "...[highlight] Catholic teachings on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and gender fluidity. We presented pro- and con- perspectives on most issues, to be both as balanced as possible and also in alignment with our university mission and values" (Sumner et al., 2017, p. 97). Presenting Church teachings, such as "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered," could be reasonably expected to be experienced as an environmental microaggression by LGBTQ people (Nadal, 2017), yet administrators would typically not allow such programming to be approved without these stipulations.

These environmental microaggressions can have the same deleterious effects on mental and physical health as interpersonal microaggressions (Robinson & Rubin, 2015; Woodford, Howell, et al., 2012) and can also have unforeseen consequences for organizations whose mission is to help people, like education. For instance, Dean, Victor, and Guidry-Grimes (2016) argued that environmental cues in healthcare settings signal invalidation and exclusion to queer individuals, which increases their distrust with health providers and makes them less likely to seek healthcare. In other words, environmental microaggressions could adversely affect student development and learning in insidious ways that Dean et al. (2016) argued cannot be completely rectified through LGBTQ diversity training. Signaling that LGBTQ experiences are still validly up for debate can further isolate and marginalize students on Catholic campuses, creating a tension for campus leaders that may never be fully resolved as long as the Church maintains its current conflicted stance and tone on LGBTQ issues.

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of sexual orientation microaggressions on a Catholic university campus. As the experience of microaggressions is interpretive in nature and rooted in social power dynamics (Sue, 2010), a critical, constructivist lens was applied to examine this

phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Constructivism assumes knowledge is socially constructed and “truth” emerges from the consensus of these constructions, and critical research calls attention to the ways power dynamics and injustice shape people’s experiences. Specifically, I employed a case study approach, given this study’s focus on microaggressions within the context of a Catholic university. Case study research is appropriate for studies concerned with a contemporary social phenomenon and the real-world context in which it unfolds (Yin, 2014).

### Data Collection

The site I selected for this study was Chardin University (a pseudonym), a small (undergraduate enrollment is approximately 5000 students), masters-comprehensive Catholic, Jesuit university located in a metropolitan area of about one half million people. I selected Chardin as an instrumental, common case. An instrumental case foregrounds the phenomenon of interest and considers the specific case secondary (Stake, 1995), and a common case is concerned with the circumstances and conditions of an everyday phenomenon (Yin, 2014). Chardin also made for an ideal case given its resemblance to other Catholic universities in terms of LGBQ resources present on campus. The university has LGBQ-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, two LGBQ student organizations, and a LGBQ campus resource center, which are common among Jesuit universities.

The data for this study were drawn from a larger case study on LGBQ grassroots leadership at a Catholic university, conducted over one week in August 2014 and two weeks in November 2014 (Hughes, 2015). The primary source of data for this study is a subset of 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews drawn from the study total of 52 interviews. These 33 interviews were chosen because the participant spoke about microaggressions during their interview. Participants were selected through key informants at the site, snowball sampling, and flyers distributed via email lists and on campus. Participants for the present study included 14 students, 11 of whom identified as a sexual minority, as well as 15 faculty and 4 staff members, most of whom worked within the student affairs division. Eight of the 15 faculty, and all four staff members identified as a sexual minority. Two students were graduate students, and students ranged in age from 18 to 25 (average of about 20). Of the faculty and staff included in the sample, faculty generally had the most longevity at the university, with an average of 13 years employed and a range of 2-40 years. One staff member had been employed at the university for 10

years; the other three had been employed for two years. I replaced participant names with pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

I conducted individual, in-person interviews with all participants but one, who I interviewed via Skype after I had concluded my visit to the site. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with an average around one hour in length. Participants were asked about the campus climate, and microaggressions emerged as a primary theme. The responses from this subset of participants elicited rich descriptions of experienced or observed microaggressions. Responses to this early section of the interview informed later portions of the interviews, which included questions about how individuals responded to issues, as well as the experience of power dynamics on campus in response to their efforts to improve the climate. These responses were triangulated with reviews of documents such as campus climate reports, articles in student and university publications, and documents describing university mission and governance (Merriam, 2009). I also conducted participant-observations of LGBTQ student organization meetings, a professional development opportunity for student affairs staff on supporting LGBTQ students, and the campus physical space (Patton, 2015).

### **Analysis**

I coded for instances of microaggressions as part of the overall case study, and, given the richness of these data, analyzed the coded text a second time for this study. First, I reread all text coded as microaggressions to categorize them according to the taxonomies developed by Sue et al. (2007) and Nadal (2017). Second, I reexamined other themes from the larger case study with respect to this study's framework for relevance to the purpose of the study, specifically pertaining to participant responses to microaggressions. I used matrices to cluster responses about similar incidents as well as to compare experiences of microaggressions with participant responses (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Campus documents and participant-observations helped triangulate findings from interviews.

In qualitative research, as the researcher is the primary instrument performing the analysis, I also critically reflected on my positionality relative to the phenomenon under examination. I approached this study as an *inside-outsider* (Patton, 2015). Generally, I am not a member of the campus community where I conducted the study. However, I have some insider information as I am a graduate of two Catholic universities and identify as openly gay. My unique positionality afforded me some rapport with participants, although



my familiarity with the setting may also have sensitized me toward the data in ways a complete outsider may not have been.

I established the trustworthiness of this study through several techniques to ensure credibility, consistency, and transferability of study findings (Merriam, 2009). Credibility was established through triangulation of findings, member checking by sending transcripts and early drafts of findings to participants, and reflexivity on my positionality as a researcher. Consistency was established through an audit trail of all methods used to construct findings as well as the database maintained throughout the process. Transferability was ensured using thick description in findings, maximizing variation in the study's sample regarding sexual minority status and religious background, and establishing an *a priori* conceptual framework to improve analytic generalizability (Yin, 2014).

### Limitations

A reader should also be aware of potential limitations of this study when interpreting and transferring findings to other contexts. First, the study was performed at a Jesuit university, which is a subset of the broader universe of Catholic universities. Jesuit universities are generally perceived to be more open to providing LGBTQ support resources than most Catholic universities, and some of these findings may reflect that distinction. Second, this study is a secondary analysis of an existing qualitative dataset; participants' responses would likely have differed if interviews were particularly focused on the experience of microaggressions, as opposed to the climate in general. That said, because these data were drawn from a larger case study, not only was information on microaggressions elicited through interviews, rich information about the setting and ways microaggressions were—or should be—addressed was present in the dataset that may not have been present otherwise.

### Findings

Microaggressions were nearly unanimously identified as the most pressing issue facing LGBTQ students at Chardin. Brandon, a staff member in student affairs, stated, "We could do a better job of educating our students about microaggressions." A recent campus climate report at Chardin supported this assertion; both LGBTQ and heterosexual students reported the highest number of hostile incidents on campus were against LGBT (abbreviation from the report) students. Most of the findings section focuses on environmental microaggressions, as they reflected the majority of examples described, but some examples of individual microaggressions are provided as well.

### **Impersonal Derogatory Language**

Participants spoke about experiencing or observing a variety of microaggressions on campus. Most common was overhearing impersonal, derogatory language about LGBTQ people, like use of the word “gay” to describe something a person intensely disliked. Typically, these incidents remained unchallenged as the offenders tended not to target any specific individual, but three students spoke about confronting peers who made these types of remarks. Alice, a bisexual student, found a quick confrontation could lead her peers to realize the impact of their words:

I hear freshman boys being like, “That is so gay,” and I call them out, and you almost see like the light click in the back of their, like, that is, “I did not realize saying that was as, you know, awful and derogatory as it is.”

In instances like Alice’s, offenders have become inured to the use of casually heterosexist or homophobic language as though it were a bad habit (Nadal, 2017). However, perpetrators may eventually learn how to conceal their behavior, but never undergo a transformation of attitudes or beliefs. Kenny, a heterosexual student, lamented, “They [peers] are complacent with me for what I said [calling them out], but then they will forget about it once it’s over, and they will attribute it to whatever they want, oversensitivity, or something like that, you know.”

These types of microassaults were generally committed by students, though, on occasion, the source was an administrator, staff member, or faculty member. In one instance, a faculty member recalled his department chair making a derogatory remark about a student, sharing, “I forget what the comment was, something about ‘pink slippers,’ or something like that, but a clear allusion to sexuality.” He mentioned he felt embarrassed that he did not speak up, but he also felt very uneasy as an openly gay pre-tenure faculty member in that climate.

Students also reported hearing much more severe language, especially “fag” or “faggot,” regularly. Aven, a gay male student, recalled an experience where he was harassed on campus:

My first week here, I was walking to [the campus sub sandwich shop], and I got a sandwich. Then a car pulled up and they were, I guess, taunting me. They were like, “Hey, faggot.” I just kept on walking.... I laughed. ‘Cause it was just—it’s not like anything hurt me. It’s just they didn’t have anything better to say.

They looked awkward 'cause it was right between where the construction is happening, so they pulled [the car] back, went forward, like that, to yell at me, I guess, taunt me. Then when they left, it took them two minutes to pull back out.

Aven did not indicate whether the perpetrators knew that he identified as gay with respect to being targeted for that reason, or if it was a random occurrence, but it made him feel unsafe nonetheless.

More insidious than the aforementioned microassaults are environmental microinvalidations, including one several people mentioned goes unchecked both on campus broadly and within campus queer communities: the invisibility of bisexuality. Jacquelyn, a bisexual student, stated, "I've even had a professor who said in class one time that bisexuals don't exist." Leah, a bisexual student, expressed concern for what she referred to as "bar sexuality," or heterosexual students engaging in same-sex activities under the influence of alcohol. She stated, "It really discredits bisexuality." The consequence of a lack of awareness of bisexuality then, of course, is the marginalization and isolation of bisexual people. Jacquelyn summed up,

And I almost wish that people were more aware of that fact because, I mean, also, when you're trying to come out, you feel very alone.... I'd never imagined there was another bisexual at the school. I thought I was like the only person here.

### **Microaggressions in the Classroom**

Environmental microaggressions can be a more difficult problem to address than individual microaggressions because they are impersonal in nature and thus no specific person is being targeted. They also manifest in different ways depending on the extent to which the setting is public or private. One public setting that was mentioned by several participants was the classroom. Taylor, a bisexual student, mentioned an incident with students she referred to as, "dude-bros," who disrupted a discussion in one of her philosophy classes:

We discussed gender identity and the whole spectrum...the dude-bros in my class, obviously more masculine, coming from a smaller place, not understanding, were like completely flabbergasted, and you could tell the frustration on my philosophy professor's face.

She felt these students may not have been exposed to gender diversity before college, though these students were more likely expressing discomfort than misunderstanding. Madeline, a lesbian student, stated that such reactions caused her to question whether she should even talk about queer issues in class:

Is it okay to say that? Like, what's the reaction going to be? Like, is it going to impact me once I leave, and if I'm open about that right now, and they know that, is that going to be okay later on?

These environmental microassaults caused students to reconsider participation in class.

Clearly the individual who sets the tone and establishes the climate in these situations is the faculty member (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013), and faculty participants recognized the classroom was the setting where they had most capacity for responding to and preventing microaggressions. However, as Monica, a bisexual faculty member, observed, "I've really struggled with knowing how to confront [microaggressions] in a meaningful way where kids just don't get defensive and push back." She elaborated with an example from one of her classes:

I did have a moment, my very first year; in one class, we were talking about gender identity and sports. It was after the summer Olympics, and we were talking about Caster Semenya and the gender testing that they were doing. There were a few people who made comments that were really transphobic. I did my best to jump on those and offer correction, but a number of students in the classroom were really upset by some of the words that were used and wrote that in their evaluations.... I do more vocabulary work now.

I also feel really hesitant to create a climate in which I'm policing what people say and how they say it, and I would rather use dialogue as a corrective rather than be prescriptive because I think that does turn students away who I want to pull in.

As a first-year faculty member (at the time), Monica faced a specific set of circumstances that likely shaped how she was able to respond in the moment. She could be perceived as oversensitive on issues of gender identity

and sexual orientation, especially as she is open about being bisexual with her classes. Yet if she does not address these comments, students may perceive her silence as tacit approval of students' microaggressive behaviors. By comparison, Anthony, a tenured, heterosexual male faculty member, is more direct in his response to students' homophobic remarks: "I'm not going to be able to help you at this moment publicly in class, sympathetically reconstructing your homophobic view.... I'm not going to be able to help you with that." Instead, he simply shuts the offender down.

Faculty who are unable or unwilling to respond to microaggressions in their classrooms is one problem, but two students provided examples of faculty who themselves committed anti-LGBQ microaggressions in front of a class. Madeline provided an example from a friend of hers who observed a faculty member make very homophobic remarks in front of a class. She mentioned her friend "turned to the girl next to her and was like, 'I'm really uncomfortable,' and she was like, 'You need to calm down, it's not that big of a deal.'" Not only did the instructor enact a severe environmental microassault, but Madeline's friend's peer then committed a microinvalidation by minimizing her feelings of concern.

In a second instance, Kristopher, a gay male student, spoke about one of his professors who he has observed make frequent, carelessly heterosexist (and cissexist) comments in class. To his knowledge, Kristopher is the only openly gay member of an all-male chorus on campus. He mentioned his professor often makes remarks like, "Gentleman, the ladies will love it if you sing this song like this," or, "All the girls will be crazy about this." He elaborated:

It's little things like that that remind you, "Oh, every other guy in here is heterosexual. I'm not," or, "How would they feel if they knew that I didn't want 'the ladies' to enjoy this song, necessarily?" I want them to enjoy it as viewers or listeners, but not necessarily in a romantic sense. It makes you think, "Should I say something? Should I not say something? Would it change their perspective if I did say something?"

### Residence Halls

Despite the examples provided of microaggressions in the classroom, faculty participants felt that microaggressions were becoming increasingly rare in the classroom. Joy, a bisexual faculty member, stated, "People aren't going to pull out their bad behavior in front of faculty members. Not if they're

smart.” On the other hand, Lilian, a lesbian faculty member, noted, “I’ve had students say privately to me, ‘No one was willing to defend this, but, in the dorms, we still see people who are hostile.’” Participants felt social norms are beginning to dictate that expressing openly anti-queer sentiments publicly is unacceptable, but students continue to commit these offenses privately. The consensus among student participants was best summed up by this description given by Kenny, who had previously worked as a resident assistant: “If you walk around [the co-ed residence hall], I am sure you are going to hear [anti-LGBQ language] a bunch.” Jesse, a bisexual staff member, expressed concern: “I think it is challenging on a college campus, when the residence halls are filled with microaggressions; where does that safe retreat happen [for LGBQ students]?” In other words, these “homes away from home” may increasingly become some of the more hostile environments on campus.

Four student participants specifically cited as a problem a lack of training among student resident assistants (RAs) in how to handle these incidents and support their LGBQ residents. The professional residence life were generally all Safe Space-trained, meaning they had participated in the university’s in-depth LGBTQ ally training, but, as Alice said, “Your RA lives in your dorm with you, and if they do not have the training, like, they can’t help, like, when they should be able to.” Kenny explained that the entirety of training provided to RAs regarding LGBQ issues is a brief introduction to these issues and an invitation to participate in Safe Space training. However, through this introduction Kenny observed, “I got the sense from some people that this was maybe the first time being introduced to some of the issues.” As a result, Taylor cautioned, “We do not teach RAs enough...they are the first line, they are the first people these kids come into contact with.”

Participants described microaggressions in other private settings as well. One faculty participant spoke about receiving a threatening email after she and her family were featured in a university publication. Alice spoke about her experience on a trip with the choir where one of her peers was making derogatory anti-queer remarks and telling offensive jokes loudly enough for their peers to hear, but beneath the professor’s awareness. As a student leader, she felt the responsibility to make sure the incident was reported, even though she second-guessed her own feelings on the matter: “This went on for months, and I was like, ‘It is fine; I am sure he does not mean it.’ Finally, I was like, ‘No, that is stupid, that is uncomfortable, that is wrong. I am not doing it.’” She was able to receive support from both her professor and the campus bias incident response program.

### Microaggressions and Religious Belief

Most germane to the Catholic university setting, some of the most difficult experiences participants had were encounters with open disapproval of them as a queer person, rooted in religious beliefs. One graduate student participant shared her experience with a classmate, a local pastor, who made it a regular point to publicly remind her how unacceptable he found her queer identity:

There's this guy in the class who would say, "Well, all of you are my brothers and sisters, and you are all going to heaven, except you, and you know why." It was awful, and the professor only says, "Let's get on to the next topic."

She mentioned it was a major contributor to her long time-to-degree in her program. A couple other student participants had variations on this type of experience; one had a roommate who avoided her when her queer friends were over to visit, which she indicated was based in her roommate's religious beliefs, and one of the law students spoke about a friend who was told, "I really like you, but you're living in sin." She responded to her friend, "Whoa, that is really intense."

One incident demonstrated how an institutional action became an environmental microaggression when a speaker was invited to campus to talk about her experience becoming a marriage equality advocate. The year she was invited to speak a marriage equality initiative was on the ballot, and she was involved with one of the campaigns. The local Bishop became concerned that the invited speaker may use her presentation to advocate for marriage equality, which the Catholic Church opposes, and requested the university cancel the event. Faculty organized to prevent the speech from being cancelled, but, as a compromise, the university administration agreed to hand out a document from the Bishop on the Church's teaching. Grace, a heterosexual faculty member, called it "organized self-hate" inflicted by the university: "I get impatient about what I see as intentional infliction of more suffering on people who are sometimes pretty willing to suffer because they are used to it. We ought to be saying, 'Don't be used to it.'" Her statement illustrated how the compromise became an environmental microinsult as LGBTQ students were handed materials outlining the Church's objection to their right to marry.

The result of these environmental microinsults is a systematic disregard for queer experiences or identities. Grace summed up the impact of these experiences in the words of a former student she knew:

When we finally had a campus climate conversation about LGBTQ students on campus, I'll never forget the student who said, "I feel like I can be gay at Chardin as long as I'm very circumspect about it. Meaning I can't act gay."

Kristopher summed up the effects of ongoing exposure to anti-LGBTQ microaggressions, "In my experience, the hardest thing about being gay is not any overt discrimination that I face, it's just constantly being reminded every single day that you're not like everyone else."

### Discussion

One central teaching of the Catholic Church is the inherent dignity of the human person (Catholic Church, 1994), and Martin (2018) highlights how the Catechism indicates LGBTQ people should be treated with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Therefore, educators at Catholic colleges and universities, as well as other Catholic schools, should be concerned with addressing and preventing experiences of microaggressions as part of the campus climate. This study helps shed light on how these experiences unfold and point to implications for practice.

As previous literature would suggest (Wolff et al., 2016; Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013), students, and a few staff and faculty, experienced a range of anti-LGBTQ microaggressions at Chardin. For instance, hearing impersonal derogatory remarks like, "That's so gay," was still common on this campus, like Woodford, Howell, et al. (2012) found. However, responses to these incidents were inconsistent at best, and participants' experiences pointed to a need for more systematic methods for addressing microaggressions. The few students who spoke about confronting their peers directly only did so when they were not personally threatened, and when they perceived their peers were using these phrases in careless ways. Students also only responded when the instigator was another student, and they were especially unlikely to respond when the perpetrator was a faculty member in the classroom. These comments rose to the level of environmental microaggressions as faculty made them in front of an entire class, rather than in an interpersonal setting. The source and the setting of the microaggression are



important dynamics to consider in determining the impact, and what may be more alarming is that administrators recognized the problem, but seemed unsure how to respond.

Faculty did note that students were becoming less likely to commit microaggressions, in the form of microassaults, in classes as social norms begin dictating the unacceptability of anti-LGBQ comments. As a result, microaggressions are increasingly concentrated in private settings where students engage with each other, and most especially in residence halls. The fact that residence halls remain a problematic space for queer students is not new (Evans & Broido, 1999), but the increasing concentration of microaggressions in private settings should be of utmost concern for campus administrators. Student participants pointed to uneven preparation among resident assistants for handling these incidents as especially problematic. If a residence hall is meant to be home-like, all students should be able to expect a place to retreat from the constant watchfulness required in a hostile climate (Maher, 2009).

As Woodford et al. (2015) postulated, the religious affiliation of the university did introduce unique elements in terms of the microaggressions experienced on campus. Similar to Nadal's findings (2017), students did experience interpersonal disapproval of their queer identities from peers with religious affiliations and in a couple instances these interactions rose to the level of environmental microaggressions. What had not been captured in previous work was the way institutional responses meant to project a "faithful" image of the organization were also likely experienced as microaggressions by students. In this case, the example was passing out literature at an LGBQ-organized event about the Catholic Church's stance on same-sex marriage.

Granted, this experience was in the words of a faculty member; student participants did not speak about feeling this way, though many of them may not have been at the university at the time of the event. That said, this faculty member explained why students may not have recognized the incident as a microaggression—they likely have internalized messages from religious authorities about LGBQ identities and experiences, and were able to compartmentalize these as a small compromise to prevent the speaker from being cancelled. LGBQ students are very good at compartmentalizing the microaggressions they experience on campus (Fine, 2011), which means administrators may be less likely to think critically about the expectations they place on LGBQ student organizations. Yet, might one interpret this as administrative complicity in the hostile climate students experience?

## Implications

Overall, a systematic approach, facilitated by institutional actors, provides a more effective response to microaggressions, especially to relieve students of the burden of addressing a hostile climate through directly responding to their peers. As such, one important implication from these findings is the ongoing need for training across the board, and, as Dean et al. (2016) pointed out, this training cannot be limited to LGBTQ awareness. Faculty felt conflicted between the need to respond swiftly and directly to maintain classroom safety, and the need to meet offenders where they were in terms of their LGBTQ attitudes to help educate them. The former addresses the immediate needs of LGBTQ students, but the latter prevents defensive reactions and invites students to learn. No amount of awareness-raising will address these pedagogical questions (Dean et al., 2016). Faculty champions and faculty development offices play an important role, then, in making sure LGBTQ trainings, such as Safe Space, are available for faculty, and for developing opportunities that provide faculty with the tools necessary to respond in the classroom (Hughes, Huston, & Stein, 2010). Faculty hold a great deal of power in the classroom both in terms of establishing the classroom environment and as the arbiter of student academic performance (Tetreault et al., 2013), so faculty have a responsibility to enact an environment that demonstrates inclusion and respect to enable all students to succeed.

Students pointed to a second implication in terms of the inconsistency of resident assistant training to prepare RAs for addressing microaggressions. Participants felt RAs should be required to attend Safe Space training, which is currently voluntary. Mandatory Safe Zone attendance would not be recommended as it would undermine these programs' missions (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008), but RAs should be trained to deal with conflicts between residents (Manata, DeAngelis, Paik, & Miller, 2017). It would not be out of the question to train RAs to recognize microaggressions in the residence hall as a type of conflict and provide them tools to intervene (Evans, Reason, & Broido, 2001). Bystander intervention training is a potential opportunity to provide students tools to intervene when they witness conflicts and help relieve the target of the incident of the burden for responding (Thurber & DiAngelo, 2017).

Third, administrators at religiously affiliated colleges and universities should consider exercising some creativity in responding to questions raised by important external authorities regarding the religious image of the organization. Church teaching on LGBTQ issues is widely known and accessible

(Martin, 2018); the work facing administrators is crafting a defense of these events grounded within Church teachings and institutional values (Kirkley & Getz, 2007). For example, in the larger case study, participants spoke about reframing LGBTQ events as congruent with Church teachings on social justice and the dignity of LGBTQ persons as a way of responding to opposition (Hughes, 2015). One participant even suggested that Catholic universities should be a location for thinking about LGBTQ issues within the Church in new ways.

Further, Maher (2003) pointed to imperatives for Catholic education grounded within Church teachings to raise awareness around LGBTQ issues and support for LGBTQ communities. The strongest example he provided was the document from the United States Catholic Conference (USCC; 1991), *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*. In it, the USCC noted that Catholic education must teach about homosexuality for no other reason than to teach and model respect for all people. In other words, it may actually be “un-Catholic” to avoid LGBTQ issues altogether out of a concern for provoking conflict on campus. Pope Francis took this sentiment further in the Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, written at the conclusion of the Bishops’ Synod on the Family, where he indicated the need to meet people where they are and try to see the world how they do, even in situations that may fall short of what is considered by the Church to be “ideal” (Francis, 2016).

### Conclusion

Microaggressions against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer people pervade college campuses (Rankin et al., 2010; Rios-Aguilar, Eagan Jr., & Stolzenberg, 2015), and can vary in type and impact by setting and perpetrator. This study helped explore the contextual factors affecting the experience of microaggressions on a Catholic university campus, offering insight not only into the ways the environment shapes these microaggressions, but how the religious affiliation of the institution plays a unique role. By analyzing the various elements shaping microaggressions, educators will be better prepared to play a role in interrupting and preventing these incidents. Reducing the prevalence and impact of anti-LGBTQ microaggressions is imperative on Catholic campuses wishing to treat all students with dignity, respect, compassion, and sensitivity.

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