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# Recognizing Oppression: College Students' Perceptions of Identity and its Impact on Class Participation

*Michele J. Eliason and Ruby Turalba*

**Abstract:** Class participation benefits students by enhancing engagement, critical thinking, interpersonal communication, and motivation, but the role of underrepresented minority identities on class participation has not been well-studied. We surveyed 94 undergraduate health education students about experiences/attitudes about class participation, finding three major themes drawn from the ecological model: individual factors, classroom environment, and recognition of structural oppression. One-third of students thought their identities affected their participation. The findings have implications for pedagogy connecting social determinants to students' personal experiences in college, and for compassionate strategies for students who currently fear misunderstanding, judgment, and ridicule because of their identities.

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"I've learned to claim myself and all of my intersecting identities and feel empowered by what makes me who I am." (21 year-old, Latinx, heterosexual female)

The effects of identifying with an oppressed minority group are far-reaching. For college students, most of the research focuses on serious adverse consequences, such as college drop-out rates or achievement gaps (Babco, 2005; Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; U.S. Dept of Education, 2007). But the effects of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression have daily consequences that may impact college success, whether or not students are consciously aware of them (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011). One area that may be affected is class participation. Who feels empowered to speak up, share opinions, and demonstrate their knowledge of the class content? Who earns participation points toward the final grade? Power and privilege issues found in the broader society are often reproduced in the college classroom, allowing for some students' voices to be heard and valued, while others are not (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). Structural oppression reflected within the university setting can adversely impact class participation and the student's learning experience, particularly for students from stigmatized minority populations.

This pilot study focuses on students' awareness of the role of structural oppression related to marginalized identities versus individual level factors on their class participation. The findings have implications for professors concerned about empowering students to raise their voices in class. For example, students who are aware of structural oppression may be less likely to blame themselves and more motivated to participate actively in their own education. The next section summarizes the research on class participation, with a particular emphasis on the role of structural oppressions such as sexism and racism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Benefits of Class Participation*

The literature is clear in demonstrating that class participation is beneficial to student success. Fassinger (1995) found that students' questions or comments to a professor or other students' ideas during a class enhanced intellectual development. The benefits of class participation for college students include improvements in grades, motivation, learning, critical thinking, character development, written and oral communication, appreciation of cultural differences, and group interpersonal interactions (Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott, & Oestreicher, 2017; Czekanski & Wolf, 2013; Prince, 2004; Rocca, 2010). All of these factors are also associated with engagement and sense of belonging, which in turn are related to student retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

### *Reasons for Not Participating in Class*

The reasons for not participating in class are complex, and Rocca (2010) reported that those reasons include student confidence, personality traits (self-esteem, ease of communication, assertiveness, insecurities and self-consciousness), and logistics (class size, seating arrangements, timing of the class, course policies, and type of class). Petress (2006) also noted that the behavior of peers affects other students' participation, such as when peers provide long-winded comments, repeat what someone else just said, or show signs of being bored, impatient, or superior to speakers. Other factors that may inhibit or foster student class participation include a student's age and year in school, an instructor's behavior and use of pedagogical methods, and classroom climate (Howard, Zoeller, & Pratt, 2006; Rocca, 2010). Thus far, none of this body of literature has addressed whether structural level factors may adversely affect class participation.

### *Who Participates in Class?*

The articles we reviewed included little mention of the social identities of students or the effects of racism, sexism, and other social structural oppressions. The little research on differences in student characteristics has focused mostly on gender differences, with many studies finding that male students participate more than female students (Galvin, Dolly & Pula, 2013). Gender differences are further complicated by the gender of the professor and the type of class. Previous studies fail to mention the negative effects of mandatory classroom participation, particularly for students of color who may have different cultural norms, patterns of communication, values, and belief systems. For example, Tatar (2005) proposed that non-native English speakers in U.S. universities often feel like "cultural outsiders" and stay silent out of respect for the authority of the teacher, but remain mentally active during class. We expand on these potential differences in the next section.

### *Class Participation Among "Minoritized" Groups*

A handful of studies have examined the impact of having a stigmatized identity on class participation, whereas a small number of studies have examined the level of cultural and linguistic differences. In addition, other minoritized identities such as sexual identities and disability may impact class participation, but have scarcely been studied.

**Minoritized ethnic identities.** Few studies examine differences among minoritized groups, and those few often define minoritized as non-white (African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian & Pacific Islander, Native American). Those studies that have compared class participation between white and non-white college students have utilized either small sample sizes or case studies and do not fully answer whether or not racial disparities in class participation exist and more importantly, why (Howard, Zoeller, & Pratt,

2006; White, 2011). Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt (2006) examined differences in level of class participation in terms of age, gender, and race. Their findings supported previous research demonstrating that age is a statistically significant factor: students aged 25 years and older tend to participate in class more often than those younger than 25 years. While White students had more interactions per class session compared to non-whites, this finding was not statistically significant, and the authors attributed this to the small sample size. Similarly, findings related to gender were not significant. They acknowledged that their study was unable to determine differences among various ethnic groups, having categorized African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian students under the umbrella category "non-white."

Feelings of intellectual inadequacy and academic inferiority have been reported among African American college students, thereby affecting class participation (Harper, 2007). Harper found that **inadequacy sentiments engender African American students' need to prove both their academic and self-worth. In addition, black college students often are put into the position to serve as the "spokesperson" for the entire black community,** when their white counterparts were not. They also reported strong feelings of racism and discrimination from their white peers and professors. Negative experiences faced by black college students ultimately affected their self-esteem and confidence and can lead to reduced levels of class participation and student engagement.

**Cultural and linguistic influences.** White (2011) studied the impact of culture and language on class participation using case studies of four first-generation college students identified as Native American, African American, and Hispanic/Latinx. White reported that **students of color may have an aversion to and report lower levels of class participation because of: 1) differences in language and discourse commonly used in college classrooms, which reflect "White" behaviors and norms** that conflict with their own cultural background and upbringing; 2) their **fears of feeling academically inferior to their White counterparts,** primarily resulting from inequitable academic preparation in high school; and 3) **their resistance to assimilation to the status quo,** as a way of maintaining their cultural identity and pride. This paper touches upon the effects of historical and systemic oppression on college students of color. Although the study relies only on a few case studies, the students' experiences contribute to this growing body of knowledge and support other studies on the experience of college students of color (Brown, 2008; Harper, 2007; Liu, 2000).

Ochoa and Pineda (2008) studied class participation in the context of racial/ethnic oppression. In a class primarily focused on Latinos and education, the authors had 24 students write essays about their participation upon observing that the few White students in the class tended to dominate

discussions. Most students of color mentioned race/ethnicity, class status, and gender as influences on participation, whereas only one White student had this recognition. Other studies have found that cultural differences affect class participation.

Brown (2008) reported that differences in cultural values and norms may inhibit Latinx college students' level of class participation. Specifically, Latinx values of group solidarity, community, and cooperation tend to clash with the traditional university norm of individual achievement and competition. Socio-cultural values and norms have also been associated with Asian students' level of class participation. Sato (1982) observed that Asian students had lower incidents of participation compared to non-Asians, and concluded that for Asians, class participation depended largely on individually-directed teacher solicitation. That is, Asians tended to speak up only when the instructor individually addressed them, rather than when the teacher addressed the entire class. The author also found that Asian students typically do not initiate classroom discussion or pose questions to the instructor or class. Other socio-cultural factors—including avoidance of confrontation with authority figures, a sense of the interdependent and collective self, and saving face—were also found to impact Asian graduate students' "silence" or limited class participation (Liu, 2000). These studies assert that clashes with Western or dominant communication patterns and belief systems may affect Asian/Pacific Islander students' willingness to participate in college classrooms and participation may be compounded by feelings of insecurity, resulting from long-term injustices imposed on communities of color.

**Other minoritized identities.** The effects of heterosexism and gender normativity on classroom interactions for sexual and gender minority students have not been studied; however, the challenges faced by LGBTQ college students have been extensively documented. Rankin (2005) described how LGBTQ students experience discrimination, harassment, and violence on their college campuses more frequently than their non-LGBTQ peers, and are more likely to feel unsafe and threatened on campus and in the classroom. A study of seven LGBTQ students in a biology class found that some pedagogical practices that tend to encourage participation in many students, such as active learning exercises and small group discussions, are potentially threatening to LGBTQ students who fear having to reveal their identities to peers with unknown attitudes (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). While these studies do not look exclusively at classroom participation patterns among LGBTQ students, there are implications of how oppression may play a role, similar to that experienced by ethnic minority groups. Other minoritized identities that may affect class participation that have not yet been studied include some types of disability, particularly psychiatric disabilities, immigration status, religious affiliations, age, and socioeconomic class status.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

This review of the literature shows that relatively little research has been done on the impact of social structural oppressions on self-perceptions regarding class participation, although several authors point out **the clash between individualistic and communal values as a source of stress in the classroom** and a reason given for not participating by many minority students. These self-perceptions of the impact of values (individual vs. communal) may be important in enhancing student engagement and sense of belongingness in a major or in college in general. In addition, most of the research reviewed above was not put into a theoretical framework that may allow for more systematic study of class participation.

According to the social ecological model, individual behavior is influenced by ever widening circles of interpersonal relationships, neighborhoods, communities, societal institutions, and public policy, law, and larger discourses of society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These are sometimes classified as person or individual, micro (interpersonal), meso (community/institutions), and macro (societal level) influences. **Class participation research, thus far, has focused primarily on the characteristics of individual students or class dynamics and structures, and not on the student perceptions of how upstream social determinants may influence their class performance.** These upstream influences are often invisible, so that academic failures or challenges are explained as personal short-comings rather than being placed in the context of the social determinants of health and well-being (Krieger, 2012). While widely used to study violence prevention and other health and wellness factors (Henderson, DeCuir-Gunby, & Gill, 2016; McLeeroy, Steckler, & Bibeau, 1988), an ecological model has been applied to some aspects of higher education (e.g. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; McLinden, 2017; Renn, 2003; Stebleton, 2011), but has not yet been applied to class participation. Katz and Somers (2017) used the ecological model to frame the factors that might predict adjustment to college, but did not consider the role of minoritized identities or structural influences. Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, and Aquilar, (2011) found that individual level and school or institutional level factors interacted in students' perceptions of their academic success as a whole.

### ***Rationale and Research Questions***

In this study, we address the gap in the research literature on how minoritized identities might affect student's class participation. This pilot study explored awareness of what students themselves thought were barriers and facilitators to their own class participation, seeking to study whether they recognized the influence of oppression on their personal levels of participation versus ascribing their lack of participation to individual shortcomings.



In regards to our own positionality in this study, the first author is a White, older, lesbian full professor from a rural working class family, and employs the ecological framework in her teaching and research. The second author is adjunct faculty and identifies as a second generation Filipino-American heterosexual woman. Similar to the first author, she utilizes the ecological model and popular education methods in her teaching. Both authors understand the complexities of their intersectional identities from dominant and subordinate groups, which could contribute to a more robust data analysis.

## METHODS

### *Sample*

This west coast urban campus is among the most ethnically diverse public institutions in the United States (Priceonomics, 2016) with a 62% non-White, 48% first generation, and 60% female student body (institutional data from 2016). College undergraduate students from an introductory course in health education/public health, the first course in a two-year sequence, were asked to volunteer for an anonymous online survey. The purpose of the survey was to determine students' level of class participation and potential factors that inhibit their level of participation, including awareness of their social location as defined by their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual identities.

The quantitative data are reported elsewhere (Eliason & Turalba, in progress), but to provide some context for understanding the students' responses on open-ended questions, we provide some **descriptive data** here. Of the potential pool of 151 students, 94 completed the survey for a 62% response rate. Students ranged in age from 19 to 54, with 52% between 20 and 22, 38% between 23 and 29, and 10% age 30 or older. By ethnicity, 32% were Asian, 28% Latinx, 18% White, 10% Pacific Islander, 4% African American, and the remainder were mixed race or other (8%). The majority (79%) were female and 21% were male. Most respondents were juniors (83%) and in the first semester of their health education major (69%). The socioeconomic indicator used in the study asked about the family's economic situation when the participant was growing up. Nearly 40% said that their families were financially comfortable; 39% said that they had their needs met, but not much else; 17% were lacking in basic needs at times; and 8% came from households that were constantly struggling to make ends meet. Most (74%) were born in the United States, and of those born elsewhere, 75% of those had lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years. By sexual identity, 78% were exclusively heterosexual, 9% mostly heterosexual, 3% bisexual, and 9% gay or lesbian.

### *Survey Development*

The institutional review board approved the study prior to the launch of the online survey. The survey instrument was developed specifically for this



project, as there were no existing tools to measure the concepts of interest. The study began in a graduate research seminar taught by the first author, where students were assigned the article by Ochoa and Pineda (2008) to serve as the foundation for creating a mixed methods survey tool to study students' perceptions of class participation. The draft instrument was later refined for the current study. Subsequently, the second author was invited to participate in the study while the first wave of data collection was underway, two semesters after the research seminar that developed the instrument. The study used a mixed methods design, with quantitative and qualitative data collected in the same instrument.

The online survey took 15 to 20 minutes to complete and had both open- and close-ended questions about student socio-demographic information (age, sex, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, sexual identity, immigration status, socioeconomic status of their family of origin, and semester in school) as well as perceptions of their participation in classes in their college careers thus far. Survey questions asked students about: 1) their perceived level of class participation; 2) situations which inhibit and foster their participation; and 3) their feelings of identity and validation within their classes. Questions were framed to get at broader issues of class participation rather than focusing on any specific class. As Patton (2002) notes, open-ended questions on surveys allow participants to offer viewpoints that researchers may not have considered, thus add value to a research study. The open-ended questions that we analyzed for this study included the following questions (and percent of the sample that answered each open-ended question):

- If this happened [you were asked to speak for or represent “your people”], how did it make you feel? (57% answered this question)
- Can you give an example of when you were expected to speak for a whole group or community? (52% answered)
- If there have been times in the past semester when you wanted to say something in class but did not, what kept you from participating? (74% answered)
- How has your social location in society (based on your race, ethnicity, language, country of origin, gender, sexuality, age, etc), influenced your participation in classes? (83% answered)

### ***Procedure***

An email from the first author describing the study and containing the link to the survey was sent to all students in three sections of a first semester course in the health education sequence in the first month of the semester for two consecutive semesters. Students were informed in the email that the study was voluntary and anonymous. The first author taught one section of this course, and second author taught two sections, but was not involved in participant recruitment, and had access only to de-identified data after the semester had ended.

### **Data Analysis**

A simple content analysis was conducted using the ecological model as the overarching framework. Each author separately read all transcripts and independently devised a list of themes guided by the major components of the ecological model: individual, interpersonal, community, institutional, and societal/social structural levels. We then met, compared themes finding a high degree of agreement, and devised a coding system to assign statements across the open-ended questions into three categories. These three categories were sufficient to assign nearly every student comment into one of the codes. Finally, quotes that exemplified the major themes were identified. The three themes included:

- A response that placed the issue as a factor of individual personality factors, individual behaviors, peer behaviors, or family conditioning (unrelated to culture). This theme combines the individual and interpersonal levels of the ecological model.
- A response related to the classroom environment such as size or type of the class ("science" versus an ethnic studies class for example) or class dynamics. This theme addresses the community and institutional levels of the model: classroom and the university levels.
- A response that indicated some recognition of the impact of social forces/oppression on class participation. This theme addresses the macro, or societal level of the model.

### **Results**

Table 1 shows selected responses to the close-ended questions about class participation to provide more context for understanding the qualitative data responses. Students varied in their level of participation in class, with only 3% reporting no participation and 46% reporting participation at least once in each class session. Many felt they were about average in class participation, although over 30% thought they participated less than others. **Most had experiences of wanting to speak in class but not doing so, or disagreeing with a professor or classmate and not knowing how to respond.** About half reported that they did not always feel heard by their classmates, although **two-thirds thought they had found their own "voice."**

The remainder of this section focuses on responses to the open-ended questions that give richer detail about class participation and the factors that facilitate or challenge participation. Most of the open-ended questions elicited the same themes, thus are grouped together in one section. The question about being asked to represent one's own cultural group produced responses different enough to warrant reporting in a separate section.

**TABLE 1.**  
**QUANTITATIVE DATA ON CLASS PARTICIPATION**

<i>Item</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>How would you describe your level of participation in classes so far, across all classes you have taken in college?</i>	
Participate 2 or more times per session	20%
Participate once per session	26%
Occasionally participate	28%
Rarely participate	23%
Never participate	3%
<i>Compared to other students in your classes, do you participate:</i>	
More often	21%
About equally	48%
Less often	31%
<i>Have you felt you are were asked to speak for or represent "your people"</i>	
Very often	5%
Often	7%
Sometimes	26%
Rarely	21%
Never	42%
<i>Which statement is most like you when you are working in a small group?</i>	
I am almost always or mostly a talker	24%
I am equally a talker and listener	55%
I am mostly or always a listener	21%
<i>Do you feel you have found your voice?</i>	
Strongly agree/agree	64%
Neutral	23%
Strong disagree/disagree	13%
<i>Have there been times in the past semester when you wanted to say something in class, but did not?</i>	
Yes	79%
<i>Have there been times when you disagreed with a classmate or the professor but did not know how to challenge them?</i>	
Yes	41%
<i>Are there times when your participation in a class discussion may have affected the involvement of other students (made them more or less likely to participate)?</i>	
Yes	12%
No	26%
Don't know	62%
<i>Do you feel seen and heard by your classmates?</i>	
Yes	43%
Sometimes yes, sometimes no	35%
No	11%

### ***Factors Related to Classroom Participation***

In responses to open-ended questions about what kept them from participating, and the impact of their social location on participation, three major themes emerged: individual level factors, circumstances in the class, and social structural issues. The recognition of social structural factors was relatively rare in earlier survey questions (only 8% of responses), and only was elucidated when students were asked specifically how their social location affected class participation, where 34% noted a social structural issue. Examples of responses for each of the three themes are noted below.

**Individual level responses.** We grouped the individual and interpersonal levels in this theme, because many students reported about **individual beliefs or fears that stemmed from what other people might think**. Many students were afraid of being judged or embarrassed by saying the wrong thing, of feeling “stupid,” not having enough knowledge to speak about a topic, were embarrassed by having an accent, afraid they would not be understood, or that their opinion was not important. Several others mentioned **shyness as a barrier to participating** in class. For some students, positive personality characteristics such as one’s **level of confidence contributed to their level of class participation**. This may have been related to high self-esteem, preparedness, or even interest. One student noted that her participation in class might increase if the topic related to that identity:

If we’re discussing something in class that pertains to my social location . . . I am probably more likely to participate/ask questions because I want to find out more (20-year old, mixed race, bisexual female).

Self-criticism and insecurity appeared to be individual level factors that contributed to students’ reticence. Judgment, embarrassment, and the fear of looking unintelligent in front of professors and peers were mentioned repeatedly, such as **“fear of being judged”** (21 year old Latina, mostly heterosexual female), “being judge (sic) and I questioned myself” (22 year old Iranian heterosexual female), “I was afraid of ridicule or that my statement would be labeled and judged negatively” (21 year old Asian heterosexual female), and “I don’t know how to construct my thoughts into words. I’m afraid I don’t sound as sophisticated as my classmates that do participate more” (20 year old Iranian heterosexual female). Several students’ comments suggested they did not feel like they would be understood, or that their opinion did not matter, such as “I feel like people may not understand what I am saying” (21 year old Asian heterosexual female), and “Most of the time, I’m not confident that my opinion matters” (21 year old Latinx heterosexual female). Yet another noted,

I feel as if I haven’t found my voice. I am usually all over the place with my thoughts and constantly fighting myself because I over think everything. I am

second guessing myself and make myself believe my answer or information is not good enough (19-year old, Latinx, heterosexual female).

For a few students, having an accent was identified as an individual level barrier that kept them from participating, but they did not put this in the context of a structural oppression (national origin, immigrant status, or dialect). For example, students simply stated, “because of my accent” (30 year old African heterosexual female), and “I do not feel very confident speaking English, and often people do not understand my accent” (32 year old White Ukrainian heterosexual female).

For other students, their personality was attributed to family conditioning. As a few students reported, their ability to assert themselves publicly and vocally was shaped by earlier family experiences such as “My parents encouraged me to speak my mind and be assertive. I’m the oldest male in my family and need to be a leader” (20 year old Pacific Islander heterosexual male) and “My parents raised me to be very vocal” (23 year old Pacific Islander heterosexual female). For the majority of respondents who mentioned family upbringing, however, one’s silence, or lack of speaking up and questioning authority figures, was valued as part of their upbringing. All of the respondents who noted that being quiet was a value instilled in them by family were female. For example, the first quote below directly relates family conditioning specifically about gender and the others are more general comments about parental conditioning related to socialization about being silent and out of sight. Given that all the respondents were female, this socialization may have been linked to their gender.

I was taught to be quiet as a girl and not express my opinion. I guess that affects my participation in class because I am still very quiet (21-year old Latinx, mostly heterosexual female).

My family and culture taught me to be quiet and polite and not stand out (20-year old, Asian, mostly heterosexual female).

Growing up, my parents didn’t let me get out much, so I’m always stuck at home. This makes it difficult for me to develop that social aspect when interacting with others (21-year old, Asian heterosexual female).

Finally, personality traits such as being shy or an introvert were reported as a reason for not sharing their opinions or thoughts by nearly 30% of students. One student elaborated,

I’m a bit shy. I feel that when I speak out in class it’s all eyes on me and that makes me uncomfortable . . . I’m not sure if it’s something similar to stage fright (20-year old, Latinx heterosexual female).

**The classroom environment.** These comments were typically related to dynamics in the classroom, such as the size of the class, or when some other student said what they intended to say. Thus, the comments incorporate the community and institutional level influences from the ecological model. **Some students stated they had not participated or spoke up in class because the topic had changed before they had the opportunity**, reflecting the challenges of engaging in discussion in large groups that are inherent to college classes. For example, one student said, “the conversation had moved on to something else before I had a chance to talk” (22 year old White mostly heterosexual female). Others said, “the timing was off or the topic was changed before I got called on” (20 year old Pacific Islander heterosexual male), and the “topic drifted away into something else” (24 year old Latinx gay male). Other comments reveal how their peers’ participation impacts one’s ability to speak up or share their opinion. Many students mentioned how their class members shared similar thoughts and ideas as themselves, or rose to the occasion before they had the chance, such as “someone had already answered with the same response I had” (22 year old Pacific Islander heterosexual male), and “too many people share their thoughts . . . sometimes I don’t want to sound redundant” (29 year old Latinx lesbian female).

For a majority of students who reported that the classroom environment was a factor, **class size seemed to affect them the most**. In general, larger class sizes tend to inhibit student class participation, such as “I don’t like talking in large settings” (21 year old Asian heterosexual female), and “Being nervous speaking in front of large groups” (21 year old Pacific Islander mostly heterosexual female). Other comments pertaining to the classroom environment involved not wanting to offend others, such as “**It may be offensive or cause problems for me if I spoke honestly**” (54 year old mixed race gay male), and “there was so much diversity in the class I did not want to say something that could have offended someone” (20 year old Latinx heterosexual female). While the majority of students mentioned class size as influencing their level of participation, another comment addressed dynamics with peers, particularly class members who may dominate a discussion: “**There are times when there is a more powerful personality in the group** or class, and that tends to trump other people including me from participating” (36 year old White gay male).

**Recognition of structural oppression.** One quarter of respondents explicitly stated that their social location in society had no impact on class participation, and about 40% attributed class participation only to individual factors such as shyness or fears. **Only a few students linked structural oppression to their inability to speak up in class (34%)**. A few hinted at this, such as one student who suggested “sometimes people from other backgrounds can’t relate” (24-year old Asian heterosexual male). The following comments

suggested a surface level understanding of their social location, specifically around being an English language learner and feeling ashamed or embarrassed with their accent or language capabilities: “English is my second language and sometimes I feel self-conscious of my accent” (20 year old Latinx heterosexual female), “My social location in society does influenced (sic) my participation in class because I always think about my language speaking” (22 year old Asian heterosexual male), and “I don’t want people to hear my accent and I’m afraid of their judgment” (21 year old Asian mostly heterosexual female).

One student had a lengthy eloquent response to this question that highlighted her feelings of difference from classmates and peers. Unlike other students who mentioned having an accent as a potential inhibitor to classroom participation without any linkage to oppression, this older student put her accent in a broader context of different cultural and personal understandings about the educational system.

A fear that I will not be understood, that I will be judged and criticized. I do not feel very confident speaking English, and often people do not understand my accent. I always fear that other (sic) will laugh at me behind my back (I had such situations in the past). A fear that I will not be supported. Most of the time **I have a very different opinion from other students and teachers about many subjects. I can only share my true thoughts and feeling (sic) with a group of very close people that I trust. I do not feel like I can trust school.** I feel like the main goal of the school is to raise new members of society who all think the same, who are basically told what to think, and fully trust what they have been told by upper members of society. These new members only think they think critically, but in reality their thoughts are all based on somebody else’s words and opinions, and very often are not supported with truth (32 year-old, White, heterosexual immigrant female from the Ukraine).

For a few students who identified with the dominant majority—such as being heterosexual, White, and a native English speaker—there was an understanding that their privilege shaped their willingness to participate in class more than others, such as “possibly because I am a white, heterosexual, American adult, male, it is easier to feel comfortable and speak up in class since I fit the social norm” (21 year old White heterosexual male), and “My social location in society has allowed me to want to participate in classes. I am a straight white female, fluent in English” (20 year old White heterosexual female).

For most students, however, one’s cultural, ethnic, religious, or even sexual identity influenced their class participation patterns. As the following comments suggest, identifying with a specific community that is considered a minority or has different cultural norms of communication may inhibit class involvement. Most of these comments were brief, such as “if I had to take a



closer look race/ethnicity would be a factor” (19 year old Latinx heterosexual female), and “I feel that being gay has influenced my participation at times” (36 year old White gay male). Somewhat more elaborate answers that tie class participation to a marginalized identity included these four comments, **all from Asian students who explicitly mention their ethnicity or culture:**

I think growing up Chinese American has been a big factor . . . I was supposed to be a follower (20-year old, Asian heterosexual female).

I’m Asian so I am typically stereotyped as being smart and quiet in class (21-year old, heterosexual Asian female).

I did grow up in a Filipino culture in which I was not encouraged to ask questions to authority. On top of this, I was sent to Catholic school where I was taught not to question anything (31-year old, gay male Filipino).

I was raise (sic) in a culture that students couldn’t ask too many questions in class. Students have to play a listener role in the classroom. The thing changed when I came to the USA (25-year old, Asian heterosexual immigrant female).

For one student, her analysis of social location deeply impacted not only her college experience but her life as an immigrant in the United States in general. She reported feeling like an outsider, a factor often associated with college drop-out (Strayhorn, 2012):

I was born and raised in a very poor family. I came to the US in my 20s and have a different mentality and set of values from most Americans (those who were born here). English is my third language, which I begun to learn in my 20s. I know I will never be able to speak it at the same level with those who were born here. I often feel like I do not belong here, like an outcast. I still do not know and do not understand many things that are common sense to those who were born here, or immigrated in their childhood and had many American friends. This all raises a huge barrier for me. I feel like I never will be able to assimilate here and often want to go back to my county . . . I feel much better around other immigrants who were sort of “in the same shoes” with me. For example, in a community college I attended roughly half of the students were immigrants just like me and the other half -- people who were born here. I’ve participated a lot more and felt more accepted. Here at XXX most of the time I’m the only student in the class who speaks with an accent and has a different opinion about things . . . my heart feels isolated and shut and I cannot help it (32-year old, White, heterosexual immigrant female from the Ukraine).

Another student also acutely felt the pressures of social oppression on a daily basis, including topics covered in the classroom, and stated in the response to the question about how her social location affected her class participation:

I feel like there are things I just want to scream out. Yesterday . . . we were addressing the question as to why the Tuskegee experiment went on for so long, and the class was covering the idea that the public just didn't know about it. They also covered the topic of racism amongst government officials being a contributor. I honestly felt alone in my thought (sic) that the whole damn country was racist as hell, and even if the public knew about the Tuskegee experiment, no one would do anything about it! Whites would lynch a Black man for looking at their wife for God's sake! (22-year-old, mixed race, heterosexual female).

Finally, one student noted that the major itself was known for a social justice emphasis and suggested that her social location was a critical reason for selecting a health education major:

HUGELY. Understanding social justices and issues related to society is one of the reasons that I chose health education as my major. Because I am so interested in the subject, I come to class more aware and prepared to listen and learn, and try to do my best in speaking up (21-year old, Pacific Islander, heterosexual female)

### *Speaking for "Your People"*

Because the question about **being placed in a situation of having to speak for one's entire community** elicited comments that were specific to one type of class participation, these responses are considered separately from general class participation. **Well over half (58%) of the student respondents had been put in this position** (see Table 1). The following analysis was drawn from two follow-up open-ended questions that asked about their feelings and reactions to such a situation and an invitation to share examples of when this had happened. Of the 42 who responded with a feeling statement, 22 of those **(52%) noted a positive reaction** such as "good," "ok," "confident," or "proud." One student stated:

I felt good, knowing that I can do my part to represent 'my people.' I would rather it be me than someone else who had no idea what they were talking about (21-year old, Latinx, male heterosexual).

**Negative responses (40% of the comments)** included feeling "awkward," "annoyed," "uncomfortable," "offended," "nervous," "angered," and "overwhelmed." A few examples of more detailed responses suggested that these experiences were negative because they felt bullied, put on the spot, singled out, and/or made to feel inferior. Some feared being judged by their group membership and/or being held accountable for anything done by a person of their group.

I felt victimized and bullied by the instructor (54-year old, mixed race gay male).

I felt like I was put on the spot and if I said something wrong or different than what they have heard, I would be judged and thought of as uneducated (21-year old, White heterosexual female).

As if I were inferior or different enough to be classified as a whole other category (20-year old, Latinx, female heterosexual).

It made me feel as if I were the spokesperson of my people and I was held responsible for everything that my people do (21-year old, Asian mostly heterosexual female).

A few students had mixed responses, such as this 21-year old African American heterosexual woman who had experienced both positive and negative consequences of being forced to speak for her group:

Mix of feelings—both proud because I am that voice for my people, clarifying stereotypes and perceptions and also annoyed because when that happens, that means that I'm that token black girl in the class and everybody's ready for me to become that 'angry black woman.'

The situations in which these requests to be a “spokesperson” or “native informant” for one's group occurred were varied, and students often mentioned specific types of classes, such as ethnic studies or courses in their major where health or social inequities were discussed. Others spoke of situations with friends or more informal conversations with peers, such as while working in small groups. A few examples of the context of being asked to be a spokesperson that made the student uncomfortable included responding to current news items as well as scheduled course topics:

In a class, one white student said, ‘What do Latinos think about immigration?’ and wanted me to speak for all Latinos everywhere (21-year old, Latinx, mostly heterosexual, female).

I remember when Don Imus called a women's basketball team ‘nappy headed hoes’ and my professor asked me to comment on that and how it made me feel as a black woman (24-year old, African American, heterosexual female).

In a sex ed class where Hispanic/Latinos were asked to explain the reasons or motives behind becoming parents at a younger age compared to other populations (21 year-old, Latinx, heterosexual female).

In these specific examples, students described their experience of *tokenism* (being a rare member of a marginalized group in a certain context, and having one's presence being used to justify that the institution has addressed “diversity,” Niemann, 2016). In these situations, students reported that they were put on the spot and had to speak for their entire community. Some of them were targeted by instructors and others by fellow students who asked

them inappropriate questions. Such instances may isolate students even further from their peers and instructors and promote **feelings of inadequacy in representing their group**, thereby inhibiting future class participation. One student reported being called on by the instructor in a manner that perpetuated racial stereotypes:

I was told to stand up and reach high on the wall to prove that all people of my culture have long arms. I objected but was forced to do it anyway (54-year old, mixed race, gay male).

## DISCUSSION

All of the student responses could be captured by the ecological model. Table 2 shows how the responses of students' track to each level. **We found little recognition of the role of structural factors related to minoritized identities in the responses of these students when they reflected about their own class participation.** Only 25% of students showed any awareness of factors beyond the individual, interpersonal, or classroom levels. Students in this study were mostly juniors, with two or more years of college experience, but new to their health education major where the focus of the program was on social determinants of health and social disparities. Many (26%) reported that they never or rarely participated in their classes. We found that most, whether active participators or not, had not yet developed a worldview related to social structural determinants in regards to their own experiences in the classroom, and **the majority fell back on individual level or classroom situation explanations** for their lack of participation confirming prior research (Rocca, 2010). We did find cursory recognition of the role of White privilege and oppression in the responses of some students, as well as some comments that might relate to different cultural values about the role of the student in an academic setting (such as deferring to the authority of the teacher and being listeners rather than speakers), and differences in patterns of communication that come from their cultural backgrounds or family conditioning (Sato, 1982; White, 2011). The recognition of social forces driving class participation mostly focused on language, ethnicity, and to a much lesser extent, gender. Sexual identity and religion were mentioned by only a few students.

**Accent/Language.** **Students who were born in other countries or had languages other than English as their first language seemed to be more aware of the structural effects of immigration and culture** than students born in the U.S. or those with other minoritized identities. The very noticeable signifier of accent seemed to create more critical consciousness of difference in the classroom. As Dunstan and Jaeger (2015) noted, "speakers of less valued varieties [of non-standard English] feel they must adapt their speech or face

TABLE 2.  
THEMES IN THE DATA MAPPED TO THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL

<i>Individual</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Community (Classroom dynamics)</i>	<i>Institutional (University)</i>	<i>Social Structural (Societal)</i>
Embarrassment	Fear of peer judgment	Size of class	Purpose of the university to indoctrinate with cultural values	Non-English speakers (immigrants) devalued
Lack of knowledge	Feel of looking ignorant to others	Someone else said it already		Privilege gives permission to participate
Lack of confidence	Family conditioning and upbringing	The topic changed/timing off	Belongingness	Stereotypes about one's group (ethnic, gender, national origin, other)
Accent; lack of confidence in speaking skills	Fear of offending someone	Diversity of the classroom		
Shyness		Focus of class		
Feel opinion not important				
Lack of interest in topic				

consequences such as not being taken seriously, not being considered educated or intelligent, and not being able to take part in what Delpit (1995, 2006) called the ‘culture of power’” (p. 778). Most of the immigrant respondents in this study reported that they were aware of, and feared, these consequences. Yet few teachers are trained to help non-standard English speakers feel more accepted in their classrooms—indeed, they may be more likely to refer such students for writing and language support rather than feel competent to help them themselves. The perceived need to speak “impeccable English” is one of the ways that immigrant students and students of color from the U.S. with dialects or non-standard English, may feel they have to give up their culture to be successful in academics (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008).

**Being a spokesperson.** Nearly 60% of students had been asked to be spokespersons for a group of people to which they belonged, and these requests elicited both positive and negative responses. Whereas some felt proud or empowered by the experience of being “native informants” (hooks, 1983), many others felt put on the spot, embarrassed, and even humiliated by this. Little in our curriculum prepares them to address such situations, which may be fairly common in community health work when the workers are questioned about their own experiences and the groups to which they belong or identities that they embrace. In the classroom where students are not prepared, these situations may contribute to silencing or increasing the stress level around classroom participation. Instructors are also not always prepared to address these situations, which may have been prompted by questions from classmates rather than teachers. How one intervenes or not, when a student asks another to “represent” an entire community’s perspective on a situation, may affect participation in the class by other students.

**Recognition of structural influences.** In the field of health education and public health, we train students to work with diverse communities on issues related to health disparities. Our instruction points out the social determinants of health, and we hope that students will graduate with critical thinking skills that extend their knowledge of social determinants to both their own health and well-being and that of the communities they serve. We found that **pre-requisite and general education courses had not yet prepared students for this level of analysis of the role of social identities on their own classroom behavior.** In future studies, it would be useful to compare students at the beginning and end of their health education majors to determine whether there is a shift in their worldviews to consider the role of social forces on their own academic experiences. A pre/post design study might be used to assess the extent to which the public health/health education curriculum facilitates this shift to systems thinking in our students, and it might also serve to identify factors related to low participation in classes so that they can be addressed earlier in education. For example, many students reported

shyness as a factor in class participation, yet little research was found about strategies that make the classroom more conducive to participation by self-conscious and shy students.

Students who fear judgment from others or fear offending others may also be effectively “silenced,” thus foreclosing opportunities for growth through making mistakes. In social justice-oriented programs like health education/public health, it is vital to develop skills in intercultural communications and openness. The concept of cultural humility may be instructive here, as it introduces the idea that we are all lifelong learners who must develop better listening skills, openness to really hear others, and commit to understanding diversity and power imbalances in society (Foronda, Baptiste, Reinholdt, & Ousman, 2016). In our program, students take a course steeped in cultural humility during their first semester; this survey was done in the first few weeks of the semester before this concept was presented.

Although students in our study did not explicitly state this, we as faculty should be mindful that introducing small group discussions and more active learning exercises that encourage participation in many students may be perceived as threatening to those with less visible socially marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ students (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). We need to create and model a tone of respect and healthy dialogue so that students feel supported in personal disclosures.

### ***Study Limitations***

There are limitations with the study, as it was conducted in only one geographic region and one school that has a greater multi-ethnic and multi-cultural mix of students and faculty than most other U.S. universities. Students of color (82%) and women (79%) were in the majority, thus the dynamics reported in classrooms with mostly White students and a greater proportion of men may not be as significant in the diverse environment these students experienced. We were unable to make comparisons by gender or ethnicity because of small numbers in some groups. In addition, we asked about class participation in general; focusing on one specific class would allow for richer detail about the nuances of class participation. We also did not ask about the role of the teacher, match between teacher identities and student identities, or the various pedagogical strategies that might influence class participation.

### ***Implications for Research and Practice***

Our literature review revealed a paucity of research on how marginalized student identities, and by extension, the structural oppressions that accompany a minoritized identity, impact class participation. Thus this is a fruitful area for further study using larger samples and more diverse types of programs and classes. Class participation is one of the pieces of the larger



puzzle of student success. Faculty members who are aware of these classroom dynamics can more thoughtfully structure pedagogical strategies that foster class participation for all students, with particular attention to students for whom English is not the first language. Because class participation is linked to student outcomes that are highly valued, such as improvements in critical thinking and written and oral communication, it warrants more attention as both a classroom level and institutional issue related to student success especially for students from underrepresented groups. The development of theoretical frameworks, such as the ecological model used in this study, will help to design future studies with more robust research questions that are capable of handling the complexity of individual students, their classrooms, and the structural forms of oppression that deeply impact the daily lives of minoritized individuals and communities. For example, future studies could be designed to determine whether teaching about structural oppression broadly and its impact on individual student performance, including class participation, is a positive intervention for minoritized students. Does explicit discussion of the factors that facilitate or inhibit class participation actually impact the class participation of students? Do students who participate more in class have a greater sense of belongingness in college? And what about the teachers? Do they recognize the factors that are associated with class participation, and if so, how do they address the role of structural oppression in their own classes?

In conclusion, the study findings suggest that only about one-third of students in a health education course had thought about how their own identities and social locations might impact their participation in class. Teachers of health education and other social justice-oriented courses that focus on social determinants of health and wellbeing can help increase the relevance of the content by explicitly discussing the impact of ethnic identities, accents, and other stigmatized identities and indicators that may affect students' willingness to fully engage with their classes. In particular, this study highlighted the alienation felt by non-native English speakers who experienced much distress and fear in the classroom. Students entering our classrooms have often experienced many years of socialization within classrooms operating from an individualistic perspective of meritocracy (a belief that success is based solely on one's individual merits), and our efforts to broaden student understandings of social and structural determinants need to include the ways we structure our classrooms. An ecological framework was an effective model for understanding the diverse factors associated with class participation.

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