

Identity Safety Cues Predict Instructor Impressions, Belonging, and Absences in the Psychology Classroom



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Abstract

Background: Students with marginalized identities report a lack of cultural competence among faculty in higher education classrooms. Identity safety cues (ISCs) signal to minority group members that their identities are valued and respected. **Objective:** The purpose of this study was to test for differences in students' perceptions of their professor, sense of belonging, and academic outcomes when comparing an ISC course with a control course. **Method:** We randomly assigned one of two sections of a large social psychology course to receive ISCs while the other section was taught in a control format. The same professor taught both sections. **Results:** Participants in the ISC class believed their professor was trying to create an inclusive classroom and disapproved of social inequalities more than participants in the control course. These students also reported a higher sense of belonging and fewer absences. **Conclusion:** ISCs were associated with favorable impressions of faculty, a sense of belonging in the classroom, and fewer absences. **Teaching Implications:** Professors can make small adjustments to signal identity safety in their classrooms. These ISCs may foster a sense of belonging and motivation to attend the class for learners with diverse identities.

Keywords

identity safety cues, sense of belonging, engagement, SDO, inclusion

In 2018, a professor sued his employer after being reprimanded for refusing to use gender endorsing pronouns when referring to a transgender student (Daugherty, 2018). The Twitter movement #BlackInTheIvory documents the many ways Black students and faculty feel excluded in academia (Subbaraman, 2020). Students with marginalized identities experience identity threats in higher education classrooms, which signal the devaluing of their identities and negatively impact their academics and psychological well-being (Petriglieri, 2011; Steele, 1997). Just as identity threats can harm students, *identity safety cues* (ISCs) indicate their identities are valued and respected (e.g., gender-neutral bathrooms, inclusive imagery, non-discrimination policies; Chaney & Sanchez, 2018). In this work, we test whether ISCs are positively associated with students' impressions of faculty, sense of belonging, and engagement. We also discuss concrete steps faculty can take to integrate ISCs throughout their courses.

Students with marginalized identities face challenges on college campuses and within classrooms. Specifically, these students may feel invisible and believe faculty do not have the cultural competence necessary to support them (McKinney, 2005; Seelman et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2007). Some work has sought to identify whether ISCs mitigate these feelings and improve psychological and academic outcomes. In focus

groups, transgender students suggested setting inclusion norms with classroom discrimination policies, imagery signaling LGBTQ+ safe spaces, and representation of individuals with diverse backgrounds in course curricula (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Linley et al., 2016; Seelman, 2014). Indeed, quantitative work supports the efficacy of these suggestions. For example, gender diverse photos in advertisements increased the proportion of women who enrolled in science courses (Kizilcec & Saltarelli, 2019). Further, diversity statements in syllabi signal a warm classroom climate and highlight equity as a core classroom value (Branch et al., 2018; Fuentes et al., 2020). ISCs may improve marginalized students' well-being in academic contexts.

While ISCs are beneficial for individuals with cue-congruent identities (e.g., gender non-conforming individuals

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benefit from the presence of gender-neutral bathrooms), ISCs also signal safety for people with identities not explicitly targeted. For example, gender-inclusive bathrooms also signal identity safety for racial minorities and women (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018). Notably, the inclusion of ISCs in past work did not lead to majority group members feeling threatened or uncomfortable (Chaney & Sanchez). ISCs targeting one marginalized group can lead individuals with other marginalized identities to believe their identities will be respected and valued in that environment. This is true even for those not specifically targeted, and ISCs do not negatively impact majority group members. Indeed, creating a space where students with diverse identities can succeed may benefit all students, even those without marginalized identities (Gurin et al., 2002).

ISCs signal safety by indicating a leader or organization will treat people with diverse identities in a respectful manner. Specifically, they signal a leader's social dominance orientation (SDO) or preference for inequality among social groups (Ho et al., 2012; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Past work suggests ISC's signal safety because they are associated with beliefs that organizational leaders are low in SDO (Chaney et al., 2016, 2018). Instructors who use ISCs in the classroom may be evaluated by students as lower in SDO and thus fairer compared to faculty who do not.

ISCs also impact students' sense of belonging. ISCs have improved women's sense of belonging in engineering (Walton et al., 2015), computer science (Cheryan et al., 2011), and physics (Lewis et al., 2016). Additionally, ISCs improved sense of belonging at the institution, in the classroom, and in academic disciplines for undergraduate Black women (Booker, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Pietri et al., 2018). Extrapolating from this work, psychology students in an ISC class may report a higher sense of belonging in the class, the university, and in the field of psychology than students without safety cues.

ISCs might also have academic implications. Past work suggests creating an identity-affirming classroom environment improves student engagement and efficacy (van Laar et al., 2013; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Furthermore, students reported fewer absences in classes with a community-based management approach (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Students in a classroom with ISCs may be more engaged in the class material, report higher expectations of success, and come to class more than students in classrooms without these cues.

The Present Work

In the present work, we implemented an array of ISCs during the first weeks of a psychology course at a public university. We predicted students in a class with ISCs would evaluate their instructor as lower in SDO and fairer, report a higher sense of belonging, and experience more positive academic outcomes than students in a control class. Data and materials are available at <https://osf.io/qmfnf/>.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Samples.

	Control	ISC
Gender Identity		
Man	33.9%	22.9%
Woman	65.0%	74.9%
Non-Binary	0.6%	1.7%
Other	0.6%	0%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	85.6%	84.9%
Homosexual	1.7%	3.4%
Bisexual	6.7%	7.3%
Other	1.1%	2.2%
Prefer not to Say	5.0%	1.7%
LGBTQ+ Identity		
Identified as LGBTQ+	8.9%	10.6%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	37.8%	35.8%
Black or African American	6.1%	2.8%
Hispanic/Latino	11.7%	14.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	30.6%	36.9%
Native American	0%	0%
Multiracial	3.9%	1.1%
Other	10%	8.9%

Note. Classes did not significantly differ on demographic variables listed above, $p_s > .07$.

Method

In exchange for extra credit, 359 undergraduate students (Table 1) participated in a study after the fourth week of classes. All students enrolled in two sections of a 300-level social psychology course at a large public university during the Spring 2020 semester were eligible to participate. Sensitivity analyses suggest this sample size is adequate to detect effects greater than $d = 0.15$ at 80% power (Faul et al., 2007). This study concluded in February 2020, before community transmission of COVID-19 within the U.S.

Following a quasi-experimental design, we assigned one section of the course to the ISC class ($n = 179$; 86.89% of class) and the other to the control condition ($n = 180$; 86.96% of class) via a coin flip. The classes met back-to-back in the same classroom twice a week in the afternoon for 80 min. The same instructor taught both sections. The instructor used she/her pronouns, was feminine presenting and had a prototypically Latinx last name.

First Day of Class

The ISC class included a series of ISCs throughout various aspects of the course. For example, only the ISC class syllabus included a rainbow diversity safe space picture, the instructor's pronouns along with a hyperlink to learn more about pronouns and their importance, and a non-discrimination policy. On the first day of the ISC class, the instructor introduced herself with her gender pronouns and included an equity statement in her introduction describing her inclusion values and non-discrimination policy. She also emphasized that social

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables Between Conditions.

Dependent Variable	Control		Identity Safety		t	d	95% CI
	M	SD	M	SD			
Professor is Inclusive ^a	88.65	15.34	95.11	9.84	4.69*	0.50	[0.29, 0.71]
SDO ^b	2.07	0.58	1.77	0.51	5.25*	0.55	[0.34, 0.76]
Fairness ^c	6.25	0.93	6.32	0.94	0.74	0.07	[-0.13, 0.28]
Intellectual Engagement ^c	5.55	1.10	5.71	1.01	1.41	0.15	[-0.06, 0.36]
Course Expectations ^c	6.03	1.15	6.21	0.96	1.59	0.17	[-0.04, 0.38]
Classroom Belonging ^b	3.74	0.55	3.86	0.50	4.57*	0.01	[0.00, 0.05]
University Belonging ^b	3.84	0.76	3.89	0.59	0.71	0.002	[0.00, 0.02]
Field of Psych. Belonging ^b	3.79	0.63	3.85	0.62	0.57	0.002	[0.00, 0.02]

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation, *Significant difference ($p < .05$) between classes, ^a0 (low) to 100 (high), ^b1 (low) to 5 (high), ^c1 (low) to 7 (high).

psychologists often study equity issues and highlighted the researchers who do so at the present institution.

Welcome Survey

Students in both the ISC class (91.26% of class) and the control class (90.82% of class) completed a welcome survey during the first week of class for extra credit. The ISC class survey included a “we welcome everyone” banner and asked students to report their names, pronouns, name pronunciation, and where they grew up. The instructor included her answers in the ISC class welcome survey. The control condition survey did not have these items nor the instructor’s responses to questions. In both surveys, students reported their majors and learning objectives for the course. Each survey ended with facts about the university and the course and information about extra credit opportunities and exam formatting. The ISC class survey included a link to a map of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, information about initiatives from the University’s Diversity Office, and highlighted the racial diversity of the university. The control survey included neutral facts.

Seminar Content

The instructor covered the same content in both sections of the course. However, lectures in the ISC class included explicit ISCs. Those in the control class did not. Before each class, the authors identified places where we could adjust the content to increase the representation of diverse identities. For example, in the ISC class, we replaced “Jack” with “Nisha,” referred to Trevor Noah (who is biracial) rather than Stephen Colbert (who is White), and used “they” pronouns rather than he/she pronouns. The ISC class lectures also contained inclusive imagery when demonstrating examples or to add visual appeal (e.g., images of an interracial queer couple rather than a straight-appearing White couple). Additionally, lectures in the ISC class included photographs of social psychologists of diverse backgrounds, accompanied by classroom discussions of their work. The ISC class lectures also included gender queer and transgender individuals when discussing gender differences.

Course Survey

Students participated in a survey about their class experiences during the fourth week of class. Participants reported the extent to which they believe their instructor tries to create an inclusive classroom environment on a lab-created scale from 0 (*not at all true*) to 100 (*very true*). We used the 16-item *SDO Scale* (Ho et al., 2012) to measure perceived SDO. Participants responded to items as they felt their instructor would respond on a scale from 1 (*instructor would strongly oppose*) to 7 (*instructor would strongly favor*). We averaged items, and higher scores indicate a stronger perceived SDO ($\alpha = .84$). Participants also reported the extent to which they felt their instructor treats students fairly on the five-item *Perceived Procedural Justice Scale* (Kaiser et al., 2013; $\alpha = .89$) on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Students reported their sense of belonging in the classroom ($\alpha = .84$), at the university ($\alpha = .88$), and in the field of psychology ($\alpha = .87$) across an averaged 9-item scale adapted to each context via the *Predicted Belonging Scale* (adapted from Pietri et al., 2019; $\alpha = .84$).

Students reported whether they had any absences. They indicated their engagement in course material via the 7-item *Intellectual Engagement Scale* (Krause & Coates, 2008; $\alpha = .91$) and reported their perceptions of opportunity for success on the 4-item *Academic Expectations Scale* (Chemers et al., 2001; $\alpha = .96$). Both scales were measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Students also reported sense of belonging on a single-item scale and indicated their levels of anticipated discrimination. Results from these items are available on OSF (see link under “The Present Work”).

Finally, students reported demographics and indicated whether or not they completed the welcome survey. Upon survey completion, they were redirected to another survey to receive course credit.

Results

We included descriptive statistics, test statistics, effect sizes, and confidence intervals for all analyses of continuous outcomes in Table 2. We conducted independent samples *t*-tests to compare the ISC and control classes on participants’ beliefs

their instructor was trying to create an inclusive environment, evaluations of their instructor's SDO, and instructor fairness. Participants in the ISC class reported that their instructor tried harder to create an inclusive class and perceived their instructor as lower in SDO than the control class. Evaluations of instructor fairness did not significantly differ between classes.

We conducted a multivariate ANOVA to test for differences between classes on participants' sense of belonging in the classroom, at the university, and in the field of psychology. Participants in the ISC class reported a significantly higher sense of belonging in the classroom than those in the control class. Classes did not significantly differ in their sense of belonging at the university nor in the field of psychology.

Next, independent-samples *t*-tests compared engagement and academic expectations between classes. There was no significant difference in self-reported engagement nor academic expectations between classes.

We used a binary logistic regression model to test for differences in absences between classes. Participants in the ISC class were significantly less likely to have missed a class than the control class participants, $OR = 1.58$, 95% CI [1.04, 2.40]. Approximately 20 fewer participants missed class in the ISC class compared to the control class.

Though some participants have marginalized identities in the present sample, we were not adequately powered to sufficiently test for differences between subgroups. Sensitivity analyses suggest our current sample would only be able to detect differences between effects greater than $d = 0.98$ at 80% power comparing LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants (Faul et al., 2007). We included exploratory analyses on OSF (see link under "The Present Work.") comparing White participants with racial minority group members, LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ participants, and men and women.

Discussion

In this study, participants were exposed to multiple ISCs or completed the first month of their social psychology course in a control format. Participants in the ISC class felt their instructor was trying to create an inclusive environment and believed their instructor disapproved of inequities (i.e., lower SDO) more than participants in the control class. They reported a higher sense of belonging and were less likely to have absences than participants in the control class. ISCs were associated with participants' more favorable perceptions of the instructor, a stronger sense of belonging in the classroom, and fewer absences.

This work is consistent with research suggesting that ISCs have positive implications for students (Murphy et al., 2007; van Laar et al., 2013). While there is a body of work suggesting that ISCs can benefit students, there is little work examining the impact of a multi-faceted program of ISCs aimed at affirming multiple social categories. This work offers a range of easily implemented social cues during the beginning of the semester, which may positively impact a

diverse group of students' evaluations of the instructor, sense of belonging, and absences.

However, this multi-faceted approach also serves as a limitation. We cannot identify *which* ISCs were effective. It is possible that merely introducing a non-discrimination policy on the first day of class is sufficient. Perhaps instructors must employ all of the utilized ISCs to see positive psychological and motivational outcomes. It is also possible that some cues influence one outcome, while others affect other outcomes. Although some work has found that one small change can improve students' engagement (e.g., Cheryan et al., 2009), future work should explore the additive impacts of ISCs. Similarly, the present work does not identify for *whom* ISCs were most impactful. Future work should replicate the current findings with a larger, more diverse sample and extend this work by comparing subgroups of students between and within identity domains.

ISCs were associated with students' beliefs, belonging, and absences 1 month into the course. Whereas some work suggests ISCs early in a course result in favorable impressions of faculty, a sense of belonging, and fewer absences, future work should identify whether early ISCs result in course-long positive effects (Hermann et al., 2010; McGinley & Jones, 2014). Some marginalized students' negative experiences center around beliefs about instructors' incompetence surrounding identity issues (McKinney, 2005; Watkins et al., 2007). Perhaps the initial impression that an instructor tries to create an inclusive classroom environment may be enough to maintain a sense of safety for students with marginalized identities. Alternatively, if ISCs are not maintained, instructors may be perceived as "diversity dishonest" or as though they are falsely inflating diversity values (Wilton et al., 2020). Future work should longitudinally explore the differences between initial and persistent ISCs in the classroom.

Our current results, based in a social psychology seminar course, are consistent with work suggesting ISCs benefit students in the sciences (e.g., Kizilcec & Saltarelli, 2019). However, future work should consider the benefits of ISCs in other academic domains. Additionally, research should aim to replicate these findings across both lower and upper-division psychology courses as first-year students and seniors have different experiences and needs (Sharma, 2012).

Implications for Faculty

This work provides initial evidence that a wide range of ISCs may have favorable impacts on students. The present methodology does not allow us to identify which cues were most effective nor make causal claims due to the quasi-experimental design. However, the development of ISCs for this work involved less than an hour of investment at the beginning of the semester on the instructor's part and were associated with various positive outcomes for students. Based on these findings, we recommend instructors consider the following questions as they develop course syllabi and curricula:

1. What are the environmental cues physically present in my classroom, syllabus, lecture slides, and exams? Do the names, photos, and examples represent diverse identities?
2. Do I set a norm of inclusion on the first day of class? Does my syllabus include a diversity statement and a non-discrimination policy? If so, do I take class time to discuss them?
3. Do I signal inclusion with the language I use? Do I model inclusive behavior by reporting my preferred pronouns and sharing my salient identities?
4. Do I consider diverse perspectives in the content I teach? Am I representing the work and experiences of people with marginalized identities in the research I present?

Conclusion

Students with marginalized identities often feel like they do not belong on college campuses (Dugan et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007). Instructors can make small adjustments to provide ISCs in their classrooms and signal to students with marginalized identities they are valued and respected. ISCs may provide one way to foster inclusion and equity and may lower one hurdle marginalized students face in their effort to thrive in academic settings.

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