


# Fostering Inclusivity: Exploring the Impact of Identity Safety Cues and Instructor Gender on Students' Impressions and Belonging

Teaching of Psychology  
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–7  
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DOI: 10.1177/00986283211043779  
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## Abstract

**Background:** Students with marginalized identities can experience identity threats in higher education. Instructors can help improve student outcomes by using identity safety cues (ISCs), which signal to marginalized groups that their identities are valued. **Objective:** The purpose of this study was to examine whether including ISCs in course syllabi could improve students' belonging-related outcomes and whether these outcomes differ based on instructor gender. **Method:** Using an experimental design, undergraduate students viewed a syllabus that included or excluded ISCs from either a White male or female professor. Participants reported their anticipated belonging and instructor impressions. **Results:** Participants reported greater expected engagement and field belonging and had more positive impressions of the instructor when the syllabus included ISCs compared to the control syllabus. Instructor gender had a minimal impact on participants' outcomes and impressions. **Conclusion:** This work demonstrates including ISCs in course syllabi can positively impact students when course instructors are White men or women. **Teaching Implications:** ISCs improved participants' anticipated engagement and field belonging regardless of instructor gender. This work suggests instructors can improve students' first impressions and intentions by including ISCs in their course syllabi.

## Keywords

identity safety cues, syllabus, inclusion, belonging, impressions

The student population in higher education in the US has grown increasingly diverse. The percentage of undergraduate students with a racial/ethnic minority identity (e.g., Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander) has increased significantly, and the percentage of women in higher education now exceeds the percentage of men (Digest of Education Statistics, 2018). Diversity can improve intergroup relations, improve decision-making, increase innovative and creative thinking (Galinsky et al., 2015), and benefit students' engagement and academic skills in classroom environments (Gurin et al., 2002). Despite this growing diversity in higher education, students with stigmatized identities (e.g., women, racial/ethnic minority groups, LGBTQ+ people, and first-generation students) can experience identity threats—which signal their identity is devalued—that negatively impact their educational outcomes and belonging (Lee et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2007; Steele et al., 2002). Course instructors can help minimize disparities and threats to belonging among students with diverse backgrounds using *identity safety cues* (ISCs), which alleviate threat and signal to stigmatized groups that their identities are valued (e.g., Chaney et al., 2019). Identity safety cues encompass various inclusive pedagogical teaching

strategies that have been found to increase the academic success, belonging, and retention of students with stigmatized identities in higher education (Cheryan et al., 2009; Pietri et al., 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In this work, we explore for the first time how instructor gender and ISCs in a syllabus influence students' expected outcomes (e.g., belonging and engagement) and instructor impressions (e.g., kindness).

Identity safety cues, such as gender-inclusive bathrooms and diversity philosophies, can buffer against identity threats and increase feelings of belonging and safety across stigmatized groups (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). For example, replacing stereotypical objects in

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computer science classrooms with non-stereotypical objects improved women's interest, belonging, and expected computer science success (Cheryan et al., 2011; 2009). Further, ISCs aimed at one stigmatized group can benefit members of other stigmatized groups (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Chaney et al., 2016; 2018). In recent work, a diverse student sample reported greater belonging and believed their instructor was more egalitarian and trying harder to foster an inclusive environment when the classroom had ISCs, like an anti-discrimination policy, inclusive imagery, and resources for marginalized students (Howansky et al., 2021).

Instructors' identities can also serve as ISCs, as in-group role models can minimize the negative impact of identity threats on belonging, trust, and expected course outcomes (Pietri et al., 2019; Stout et al., 2011). For example, exposure to female role models in **science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)** protected women's belonging and trust when facing an identity threat (Pietri et al., 2019). Similarly, Black women reported higher expected belonging and trust in STEM when exposed to Black professors (Johnson et al., 2019). Outgroup experts can positively influence student impressions and outcomes if the expert is perceived as similarly stereotyped (Chaney et al., 2018) or an ally (Johnson et al., 2019). Thus, the identities of role models in students' fields of study have served as ISCs and protected against identity threats.

Syllabi are frequently the first opportunity for instructors to introduce themselves and incorporate ISCs in their teaching. For example, students exposed to visually stimulating syllabi rated the instructor as kinder and more approachable than students exposed to less visual syllabi (Nusbaum et al., 2020). Psychologists have proposed that including diversity statements in syllabi, acknowledging students' diverse identities/backgrounds, and increasing diversity in course materials can improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in psychology courses (Fuentes et al., 2021). While incorporating ISCs throughout a course can improve student outcomes and instructor impressions (Howansky et al., 2021), no work has focused on how instructor gender and ISCs in syllabi alone influence students' belonging-related outcomes and impressions.

## The Present Work

The present study examined how varying the gender of an instructor and incorporating ISCs in a fictitious online, asynchronous social psychology course syllabus influenced student participants' expected outcomes and initial impressions of the instructor. Given that over 80% of psychology faculty in the US are White (Bichsel et al., 2019) and given the importance of identifying majority group allies, we assessed how ISCs in syllabi for courses taught by White instructors influenced students' impressions and expected outcomes. We hypothesized participants who read an ISC syllabus would report higher expected social psychology field belonging,

classroom belonging, engagement, and course interest than participants who read a control syllabus. We predicted participants who read the ISC syllabus would perceive the instructor as lower in social dominance orientation (SDO), which is a measure of preference for social hierarchy, as trying harder to foster inclusivity, and as kinder, fairer, more encouraging, and more approachable than participants who read the control syllabus.

Given that many stigmatized identities are concealable (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013), and students may assume that faculty from stigmatized groups are more likely to use ISCs, we explored whether participants would be more likely to perceive instructors as first-generation students in the ISC condition compared to the control. We also examined interactions among instructor gender and ISCs to test whether instructor gender would impact the effectiveness of the ISCs. Data, materials, supplemental files, and the pre-registration are available at <https://osf.io/u2rmp/>.

## Method

### Participants

We recruited 340 undergraduate students who were enrolled in introductory psychology courses from an undergraduate research pool to participate in an online study during the Spring 2021 semester. A priori power analyses in G\*Power suggested this sample size was sufficient to detect a small-to-medium effect ( $f = .19$ ) at 80% power with a factorial ANOVA (Faul et al., 2009). We excluded 14 participants who failed both attention checks, failed both manipulation checks, did not finish the survey, or viewed the syllabus for less than 1/3 of the median view time. Thus, 326 participants remained (demographics included in Table 1).

### Procedure and Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (syllabus type: ISC vs. control)  $\times$  2 (instructor gender: White man vs. White woman) between-subjects design. The syllabi differed in whether ISCs were present or absent and whether the course instructor was a White man or woman. All syllabi included the name, email, and photograph of the course instructor. Photographs were matched on perceived attractiveness, intelligence, and friendliness in past work (Chaney et al., 2018). The ISC syllabi included ISCs such as the instructor's pronouns, a rainbow inclusive space image, a discrimination policy, resources for students with disabilities and first-generation students, and links to the department diversity statement and a campus diversity and inclusion organization. All other aspects of the syllabi were consistent across conditions. After reading the syllabus, participants completed a four-item syllabus quiz including manipulation checks of the course instructor's identity. Participants responded to two open

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Participants.

	%	Frequency
Gender identity		
Man	29.4%	96
Woman	69.3%	226
Non-binary	0.9%	3
Other	0.3%	1
Race/Ethnicity		
White	28.8%	94
Black or African American	7.4%	24
Hispanic/Latino	11.7%	38
Asian/Pacific Islander	53.4%	174
Native American	0.3%	1
Multiracial	0.9%	3
Other	4.9%	16
First-generation	35.6%	116
LGBTQ+	11.3%	37
Age		
Mean	19.29	
SD	2.65	

response questions regarding parts of the syllabus that made them think positively and negatively about the instructor.

Participants indicated their perceptions that the professor would endorse SDO statements from the SDO<sub>7(s)</sub> scale (Ho et al., 2015) on a scale from 1 = *the professor would strongly oppose* to 5 = *the professor would strongly support*. Higher scores indicate higher perceived SDO ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Participants indicated their expected classroom belonging ( $\alpha = .85$ ) with a 4-item ambient belonging measure (adapted from Cheryan et al., 2011) on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *completely*. Participants indicated their expected belonging ( $\alpha = .78$ ) in the field of social psychology using nine-items adapted from Pietri et al. (2019) on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Participants reported expected course engagement ( $\alpha = .86$ ) on a scale from 1 = *I definitely would not do this* to 7 = *I definitely would do this* with 12-items adapted from the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (Handelsman et al., 2005).

Participants reported their impression that the professor is trying to create an inclusive course environment with a single-item (Howansky et al., 2021) on a scale from 0 = *not at all true* to 100 = *very true*. Participants reported impressions that the professor is kind, approachable, encouraging, and fair with items adapted from Nusbaum et al. (2020) on scales from 1–7, with 1 indicating lacking the trait (e.g., very unkind) and 7 indicating having the trait (e.g., very kind). Participants completed a single-item measure of interest in taking the course on a scale from 1 = *not at all interested* to 5 = *extremely interested*, and a single-item measure of the perceived likelihood that the professor was a first-generation student on a scale from 1 = *extremely unlikely* to 7 = *extremely likely*. For all multi-item measures, scale items were averaged together. Participants then reported demographics, such as gender, sexual

orientation, race/ethnicity, political affiliation, LGBTQ+ identity, first-generation status, and age. Participants were debriefed, thanked, and awarded course credit for participation.

## Results

Across the outcomes of interest, we winsorized 22 outliers beyond three standard deviations of the mean. Additional outlier information and exploratory analyses including participant identities can be found in the supplement. There was one missing SDO value, which we excluded from that participant's average perceived SDO score.

### Instructor and Course Impressions

Research assistants coded open responses to examine whether participants who viewed the ISC syllabus viewed ISCs positively or negatively. Among participants in the ISC condition, 50.92% identified specific ISCs that made them think positively about the instructor, while only 1.84% of participants indicated an ISC gave them a negative impression (see Table 2).

We conducted  $2 \times 2$  factorial ANOVAs to examine the impact of ISCs and instructor gender on participants' interest in taking the course and impressions of the instructor. As predicted, there was a significant main effect of syllabus ISCs on perceptions of the instructor's SDO, attempts to create an inclusive environment, kindness, approachability, encouragement, and first-generation status. Participants who read the ISC syllabus perceived the instructor to be lower in SDO ( $M = 1.53$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ) than participants who read the control syllabus ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ),  $F(1, 322) = 60.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ . Participants who read the ISC syllabus reported greater perceptions the instructor was trying to foster an inclusive environment ( $M = 90.45$ ,  $SD = 15.79$ ) than participants who read the control syllabus ( $M = 77.66$ ,  $SD = 19.28$ ),  $F(1, 322) = 42.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ .

Participants who viewed the ISC syllabus expected the instructor to be kinder ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), more approachable ( $M = 6.10$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), and more encouraging ( $M = 6.16$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than those who viewed the control syllabus ( $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ;  $M = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ , respectively),  $F_s(1, 322) > 9.54$ ,  $p_s < .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2_s > .03$ . There were no differences in perceived fairness of the instructor based on syllabus type,  $F(1, 322) = 3.19$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ . Participants who read the ISC syllabus thought it was more likely that the instructor had been a first-generation student ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) than participants who read the control syllabus ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1, 322) = 5.32$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . There was a significant interaction between instructor gender and syllabus type on perceived first-generation status,  $F(1, 322) = 4.26$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , as participants were most likely to perceive the instructor was a first-generation student when they read the ISC syllabus with a White female instructor ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than in the other three conditions ( $M_s = [3.62, 3.69]$ ,  $SD_s = [1.19, 1.53]$ ).

**Table 2.** Frequency of ISCs Identified as Giving a Positive or Negative Impression of the Instructor in the ISC Syllabus Condition.

Safety Cue	Positive Impressions		Negative Impressions	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Resources for students	47	28.83	1	0.61
Disability-specific resources	13	7.98	0	0
First-generation resources	10	6.13	0	0
Other resources (e.g., mental health and violence prevention)	19	11.66	0	0
Unspecified resources	5	3.07	0	0
Discrimination policy	24	14.72	1	0.61
Rainbow inclusive space image	18	11.04	1	0.61
Unspecified inclusion impressions	18	11.04	0	0
Instructor pronouns	16	9.82	0	0
Instructor photo	9	5.52	0	0
Department diversity page	1	0.61	0	0
University diversity organization	1	0.61	0	0

Note. ISC: identity safety cues.

Participants did not significantly differ in their interest in taking the course based on syllabus condition,  $F(1, 322) = 2.48, p = .18, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . There were no significant main effects of instructor gender on impressions of the instructor and course,  $F_s(1, 322) < 3.44, p_s > .06, \eta_p^2 < .01$ . Aside from the interaction for perceived first-generation status, no other interactions between syllabus type and instructor gender on instructor and course impressions were significant,  $F_s < 1.17, p_s > .28, \eta_p^2 < .01$ .

### Students' Predicted Outcomes

We conducted additional  $2 \times 2$  factorial ANOVAs to examine the impact of ISCs and instructor gender on participants' expected course engagement, classroom belonging, and field belonging. There were significant main effects of syllabus type on expected field belonging and course engagement. Participants who read the ISC syllabus reported higher expected course engagement ( $M = 5.80, SD = 0.81$ ) than participants who read the control syllabus ( $M = 5.61, SD = 0.86$ ),  $F(1, 322) = 4.21, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .01$ . Participants who read the ISC syllabus reported higher expected field belonging ( $M = 3.59, SD = 0.48$ ) than participants in the control condition ( $M = 3.47, SD = 0.48$ ),  $F(1, 322) = 5.17, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Counter to our prediction, expected classroom belonging did not differ by syllabus type,  $F(1, 322) = 0.67, p = .41, \eta_p^2 = .002$ . There were no significant main effects of instructor gender nor interactions between instructor gender and syllabus type on expected engagement and belonging,  $F_s(1, 322) < 2.03, p_s > .16, \eta_p^2 < .01$ .

### Discussion

In the present study, participants read a social psychology syllabus in which ISCs were present or absent, and the instructor was either a gender-prototypical White man or

woman. Over half of the participants who read the ISC syllabus reported that the ISCs gave them a positive impression of the instructor. As predicted, participants who read the ISC syllabus perceived the instructor as kinder, more encouraging, more approachable, lower in SDO, and trying harder to foster course inclusivity than participants who read the control syllabus. As hypothesized, participants who read the ISC syllabus reported greater expected course engagement and field belonging than participants who read the control syllabus. Participants who read the ISC syllabus with a female instructor reported greater perceptions that the instructor had been a first-generation student than participants in the other conditions. There were no other differences in the outcomes based on instructor gender.

These findings suggest that ISCs in course syllabi broadly have a positive impact on students' initial impressions of instructors, course engagement, and belonging within their field of study. While instructor gender did influence impressions that the instructor had been a first-generation student, overall, this work suggests White men and women can incorporate ISCs in their syllabi and see similar benefits for their students. These findings add to past research indicating that ISCs in classrooms benefit students (Cheryan et al., 2011; Howansky et al., 2021; Murphy et al., 2007) and extends this work to demonstrate that including ISCs in course syllabi alone can improve student intentions and initial impressions. The present work indicates that making small changes to course syllabi can foster inclusivity and positively impact students. While ISCs have been found to improve belonging and related outcomes for stigmatized group members (e.g., Johnson et al., 2019), the present work replicates and extends past work (Howansky et al., 2021) demonstrating that ISCs in course syllabi can benefit students across varied identity domains.

While the present work has many strengths, there are some limitations and avenues for future research. The ISC syllabus did not impact participants' expected course belonging or



**Table 3.** Recommendations for Instructors for Course Design/Development.

General Recommendation	Examples/Specifics
Provide students with a list of institutional and community resources available to them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Disability services</li> <li>•Resources for first-generation students</li> <li>•Counseling services</li> </ul>
Adopt an anti-discrimination policy for your course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Commit to inclusive, equitable practices</li> <li>•Prohibit discrimination</li> </ul>
Learn and share information on respecting and using correct gender pronouns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Share your gender pronouns</li> <li>•Enable students to share their pronouns</li> <li>•Share <a href="#">resources on pronoun use</a></li> </ul>
Add inclusive imagery and examples to course materials and syllabus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use counterstereotypical images</li> <li>•Add safe space images</li> <li>•Diversify examples in class</li> </ul>
Include gender neutral language in syllabi and during class meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use “they” singular instead of “he or she”</li> <li>•Use “humankind” rather than “mankind”</li> <li>•Avoid assuming a student’s pronouns</li> </ul>

Note. These recommendations are based on research focusing on White gender-prototypical instructors.

course interest. Researchers found that ISCs (e.g., ingroup mentorship and diverse representation) used consistently over time were associated with greater classroom belonging and helped maintain student interest in their field of study (Dennehy & Dasgupta, 2017; Howansky et al., 2021). While ISCs in the present work yielded positive initial instructor impressions and greater expected course engagement and field belonging among participants, ISCs may need to be incorporated consistently throughout courses to improve student interest and foster classroom belonging. Future work should explore the longitudinal benefits of ISCs in course materials and environments.

Instructor gender had little impact on students’ initial impressions and expected outcomes in the present work. While female role models have alleviated identity threat for women in male-dominated fields (e.g., STEM; Pietri et al., 2019), women make up over half of the psychology workforce and may not be perceived by students as marginalized despite facing broader stigmatization (Lin et al., 2018). Because most participants in the study had minoritized racial/ethnic identities, it is possible that instructor gender would have influenced participants’ intentions and impressions if the instructor had the same racial/ethnic background as participants, was less gender prototypical, or identified outside of the gender binary (e.g., trans\* and non-binary). While some work has examined instructor race and gender as ISCs for Black women (Johnson et al., 2019), future work should further examine how instructors’ intersecting identities (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, and race/ethnicity) influence participants’ impressions and belonging-related outcomes.

While ISCs were in fictitious social psychology course syllabi in this work, the ISCs were not course-specific and could benefit students’ initial impressions and engagement in a variety of courses, both within and outside of psychology. However, these findings should be replicated in the future in other psychology courses spanning different topics, course sizes/styles,

and instructors. Additionally, the ISC syllabi utilized a broad set of ISCs targeting several marginalized minority groups (e.g., race, sexuality, and first-generation). Therefore, it is unclear which ISC is most beneficial or whether a holistic cue approach is ideal. Future work should examine the effectiveness of different ISCs for students from a variety of identity groups.

Given the present findings, we recommend instructors consider including ISCs (e.g., anti-discrimination policies and student resources) in their course materials. For more detailed recommendations, see Table 3 and the supplemental files on Open Science Framework (OSF). Identity safety cues from the present work can also be found on OSF.

## Conclusion

As student populations grow increasingly diverse and students with stigmatized identities continue to experience identity threats in higher education (Lee et al., 2015), instructors can utilize ISCs in syllabi to foster students’ initial positive impressions, field belonging, and engagement in courses. The present work extends past findings on the benefits of ISCs in classrooms and demonstrates that by employing ISCs in their syllabi, White male and female instructors can improve students’ belonging-related outcomes and initial instructor impressions. Identity safety cues in course syllabi can benefit students with diverse backgrounds and identities, and set norms of inclusivity.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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