Inclusive Teaching Practices and Other Strategies to Promote Equity and Belonging

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Abstract

Achievement gaps in grades and graduation rates persist between students from marginalized and non-marginalized backgrounds. Many groups, including students of Color, first-generation college students, LGBTQ+ students, women in STEM, religious minorities, and students with disabilities, face both structural and psychological barriers that undermine their performance. In this chapter, we review ten inclusive teaching practices aimed at reducing psychological barriers and promoting a more inclusive classroom climate. We briefly review the scientific evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of each practice and provide concrete recommendations on how social psychology instructors can implement them in their courses. Undergraduate social psychology courses are often students’ first exposure to the field, making them a critical determinant of students’ interest in social psychology and sense of belonging in the discipline. By adopting the inclusive teaching practices described in this chapter, instructors can create more equitable learning environments and promote the success of students from marginalized groups. [149 words]

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Educational inequities in opportunity, experience, and academic achievement persist between social groups in the U.S. educational system. Members of historically marginalized groups— including students of Color, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation college students, women in STEM courses, and students with disabilities— often navigate spaces and learning environments that are not conducive to their success. This inequitable system results from a combination of structural and psychological factors. Structurally, individuals from marginalized social groups are systemically underrepresented in many academic fields (National Science Foundation, 2023). Psychological factors, such as differences in cultural norms, concerns about belonging, and beliefs about social mobility also affect the motivation and performance of students from marginalized groups (Browman et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Although systemic reforms are needed to mitigate educational disparities, a growing body of research demonstrates that instructors’ beliefs and behaviors shape students’ experiences and outcomes (Starck et al., 2020; Turetsky et al., 2021). One way that instructors can reduce achievement gaps in grades, student retention, and graduation rates is to adopt inclusive teaching practices. In this chapter, we review ten of these practices with special consideration as to how they can be implemented in undergraduate social psychology courses.

Our list of practices is not intended to be exhaustive as we focused on practices that a) have been evaluated in rigorous randomized controlled trials and b) have been shown to improve consequential outcomes (e.g., grades, retention rates) for students from marginalized groups (see Moreu & Brauer, 2022 for a more extensive review). As an organizing framework, we categorized the first five practices as “student-centered,” or ways that instructors can help
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

students develop resilience in the face of adversity. Student-centered practices are designed to improve the performance of students from marginalized groups by helping them form different attributions of themselves, their interactions, or their experiences (Walton & Wilson, 2018). The remaining five practices are “classroom-centered,” or strategies to promote inclusion and belonging for students from marginalized groups. These practices often involve making pedagogical changes. Note that these two categories are not mutually exclusive. Increasingly, researchers are finding that the success of many student-centered interventions (e.g., adopting a growth mindset) depends on features of the broader classroom or university context, such as norms that are consistent with the intervention’s message (Walton & Yeager, 2020). However, the two categories provide a convenient framework to organize the ten practices. For each practice, we review the scientific evidence and give concrete recommendations on how to implement the practice in social psychology courses.

<b>Student-Centered Practices</b>

<c>Help students make connections between the course material and their own lives

Encouraging students to make personal, specific, and content-related connections between the course material and their lives can increase students’ interest in the subject and reduce achievement gaps. Hulleman and colleagues (2010) evaluated a utility value intervention in introductory psychology courses by randomly assigning students to either write an essay summarizing a course topic (control condition) or to write an essay connecting the course material to their own life (utility value condition). Students in the utility value condition were more interested in psychology and more likely to want to major in psychology. Subsequent studies have found that utility value interventions can be effective in reducing achievement gaps in grades and promoting diversity in STEM fields (Asher et al., 2023; Harackiewicz et al., 2016).
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

Social psychology instructors can help students find relevance in the course material by assigning exercises based on the utility value intervention. These exercises are most beneficial when introduced early in the semester, are integrated into the course, their purpose is clear to students, and when students generate their own arguments for the utility value of a topic, rather than when the value is communicated by the instructor (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015; Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2020). Utility value exercises would be particularly effective in social psychology courses for more abstract concepts that may seem less applicable to students’ own lives (e.g., facial feedback hypothesis). To complete a utility value exercise, students select a topic covered in the course, formulate a question based on that topic, and then write a 500-600 word essay reflecting on “why this specific information is relevant to your life or useful to you” (Harackiewicz et al., 2016, p. 749). For example, students could write an essay on prejudice reduction in which they first answer the question “which prejudice reduction methods are the most effective?” and then contemplate how these methods relate to their personal goal of reducing group-based inequality.

**Provide wise and motivating feedback**

One of the instructor’s primary responsibilities is to deliver feedback on students’ performance, which should empower rather than demoralize students. How feedback is delivered is particularly important when the recipient is a member of a marginalized group, as students from marginalized backgrounds often contend with concerns that negative feedback is attributable to a stereotype about their social group, rather than their ability (Crocker et al., 1991). One way to mitigate these concerns is to give “wise feedback”: the instructor communicates both their high standards and their belief that students can meet these standards (Cohen et al., 1999). This technique can increase students’ motivation while reducing concerns
that their instructor is biased. Attaching a “wise feedback note” to written comments on students’ essays has been shown to increase the likelihood that students revise the essay, improve the quality of their work, and reduce the achievement gap in grades between White and Black students (Yeager et al., 2014).

Social psychology instructors should provide feedback in ways that will motivate students and prevent them from disengaging from the course. For example, instructors can incorporate principles of wise feedback by reiterating their belief that students can meet their high standards. Another strategy is to practice “agentic feedback” by giving detailed comments that raise specific issues without correcting errors for students (Griffiths et al., 2023). Instructors should also attribute underperformance to controllable factors (e.g., effort, class attendance, regular studying) rather than uncontrollable factors such as intelligence. Terms such as “brilliant” or “talented” are more commonly used to describe privileged groups (i.e., White men), and can imply that students from marginalized backgrounds cannot succeed in psychology. Academic fields in which brilliance is perceived as a requirement for success are associated with that field’s underrepresentation of women and Black Americans (Leslie et al., 2015). Instead of attributing students’ performance to their intelligence, social psychology instructors should emphasize how feedback is intended to help students improve their abilities, which, in turn, will help them achieve their goals.

**<c> Have students affirm values important to them**

Stereotype threat – the concern of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group – can undermine learning and performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Providing students the opportunity to affirm important values, such as independence or family, can lessen these counterproductive feelings (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Affirming one’s values by completing
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

“self-affirmation exercises” can reduce stereotype threat. A study evaluating the effectiveness of these exercises found that completing a self-affirmation exercise led to a 40% reduction in the achievement gap between White and Black students, which persisted for two years post-intervention (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009).

Self-affirmation exercises can seamlessly be integrated into social psychology courses as these courses often address issues related to students’ values, such as morality or reducing inequality. To complete the exercise, each student selects from a list one, or several, values that are important to them. Example values include creativity, religion, independence, or membership in a social group. Students then write a paragraph about why the value plays a central role in their lives. Having students affirm an important value is most effective when administered at times when threat is likely to be high, such as when students are experiencing a transition or are about to complete a difficult task (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Students can then complete the exercise again roughly halfway through the semester (i.e., after completion of a midterm exam) to achieve maximum effectiveness (Jordt et al., 2017). Another option is to have each student give a five-minute presentation early in the semester, introducing themselves to their classmates and sharing one or two values that are important to them.

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Encourage students to adopt a growth mindset

Students’ beliefs about intelligence influence their motivation, achievement, and how they respond to adversity. Those with a “fixed mindset” – the belief that intelligence is innate and cannot be changed – are less likely to invest time and energy to improve their skills when confronted with challenges. However, promoting a “growth mindset” – the belief that intelligence is malleable and can improve over time – can lead to long-term improvements in students’ motivation and grades (Dweck & Yeager, 2020). Social psychology instructors can
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

encourage students to adopt a growth mindset by stating that intelligence is malleable and that students can improve their performance by engaging in the “right” behaviors (e.g., studying regularly or seeking help when needed).

However, an instructor’s mindset is also a critical determinant of students’ achievement. A study by Canning and colleagues (2019) found that courses taught by an instructor with a fixed mindset had achievement gaps nearly double those of courses taught by instructors with a growth mindset. Social psychology instructors can engage in certain behaviors to signal a growth mindset supportive environment, such as reiterating the belief that everyone can learn and placing more emphasis on learning than evaluation (Kroeper et al., 2022). Course policies that are consistent with a growth mindset can be conveyed to students through the syllabus or by sending a post-exam email to students (see supplemental material for example email). In one study, undergraduate students were exposed to a course syllabus that contained either fixed mindset policies (e.g., “I do not give partial credit on answers—students either get the questions correct or they do not”) or growth mindset policies (e.g. “I am interested in your learning and approach to problems…partial credit will be given when you have solved parts of the problem correctly”; Canning et al., 2022, p. 930). Not only did students anticipate less belonging in the course after reading the fixed mindset syllabus, but the fixed mindset message was more likely to induce stereotype threat in women.

<e> Administer exams in a way that promotes students’ learning

Exams are commonly used to assess students’ knowledge of the material, making it imperative that they are administered in a way that reduces barriers to achievement. Social psychology instructors can help students reappraise their pre-exam anxiety by framing anxiety as benefitting their performance. For example, Brady and colleagues (2018) worked with
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

introductory psychology instructors to randomly send students one of two emails the night before an exam. In the control condition, students received an email reminding them about the upcoming exam, while in the intervention condition, the email included the additional message that “recent research suggests that arousal doesn’t generally hurt performance on tests and can even help performance” (p. 400). First-year students who received the intervention message were less worried and performed better on that exam and in the course.

Social psychology instructors can also reduce achievement gaps by implementing low stakes testing. “Low stakes” implies that students are frequently tested on the course material but each assessment counts for a relatively small amount of the student’s final grade. Prior research has demonstrated the benefits of testing oneself on recently learned material, rather than continuing to study, as frequent testing increases retention of the material (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). For example, Pennebaker and colleagues (2013) implemented low stakes testing in an introductory psychology course, beginning each class by having students complete an online ten-minute quiz. Low stakes testing not only improved students’ introductory psychology grade but also their grades in other courses for that academic year. Furthermore, there was a 50% reduction in the achievement gap between students from upper-middle class backgrounds (parents had completed some graduate work) and lower-class backgrounds (parents had not graduated from college). Note that a key aspect of low stakes testing is to provide students with immediate feedback to avoid them retaining incorrect information. Social psychology instructors can also insert “knowledge check” questions into lectures, having students answer using “clickers” or by using online apps (e.g., Kahoot). Another option is to assign quizzes as homework through online learning systems (i.e., Canvas, Blackboard).

<b>Classroom-Centered Practices</b>
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

**Cultivate student contact and cooperation**

Face-to-face contact between different social groups can reduce prejudice, leading to a more positive classroom climate (Paluck et al., 2018). Carey and colleagues (2022) conducted a longitudinal study at two universities to understand the frequency of intergroup contact between students of different racial and social class backgrounds, and the downstream effects of contact on academic performance. Intergroup contact occurred less often than would be expected based on the racial and socioeconomic demographics of the universities. However, for underrepresented minority (i.e., Black, Latinx, or Native American) students more contact with White or Asian students was associated with higher GPAs and an increased sense of belonging on campus. The same pattern of results was observed for first-generation or low-income students, whose improved academic performance and belonging were associated with increased contact with students from higher social class backgrounds.

These findings demonstrate the importance of social psychology instructors purposefully creating opportunities for students to interact with members of other social groups. Students generally perform better in classes with a cooperative, rather than competitive, learning environment (Johnson et al., 2014). Social psychology instructors can promote cooperation by avoiding grading on a curve, not calling on the first student who raises their hand, or encouraging students to work in groups. There are several ways to implement group work in social psychology courses, such as by having students complete jigsaw activities, where students learn a part of a topic and then teach each other (Nolan et al., 2018). Another strategy is to have students engage in “think-pair-share” activities, where they first individually respond to a question and then, after a few minutes, have a brief discussion with a classmate on their answers. Instructors should randomly assign students to groups to ensure that they get to know one
another, as opposed to only working with classmates who are similar to themselves. Another strategy is to have students introduce themselves to those sitting near them early in the semester. Group work is not just limited to class time – instructors can also encourage students to study together outside of class.

Make inclusion normative

Social norms have a powerful influence on behavior, as individuals conform to norms to be accepted by their peers (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). Changing classroom social norms can encourage pro-social and inclusive behavior. For example, Murrar and colleagues (2020) found that social norms messaging on diversity and inclusion reduces achievement gaps among several marginalized groups, including students of Color and religious minorities. Students in the intervention classrooms watched a five-minute video on the first day of class that conveyed that the majority of students supported the university’s diversity efforts and tried to behave inclusively (see link to the video in supplemental material). Results from several randomized controlled trials revealed that students from marginalized groups in the intervention classrooms reported that their peers treated them in a more positive and respectful manner. These students also had a greater sense of belonging and reported improved well-being. Notably, there was a significant reduction in the achievement gap in course grades between students from marginalized and non-marginalized groups in courses where the video was shown, relative to those in the control condition.

Social psychology instructors can establish a social norm of inclusion by incorporating pro-diversity materials and messages into their courses. For instance d, they can add a diversity statement to the course syllabus that emphasizes that the course instructor, as well as administrators and students, support the university’s efforts to promote the success of students
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

from all backgrounds. Whether the statement can mention words such as “diversity, equity, inclusion” likely depends on whether the state in which the instructor teaches has banned diversity initiatives. In locations where discussions of diversity are restricted, social psychology instructors can still emphasize the widespread support for fairness and equal treatment of all students.

Instructors should also be mindful of what norms they are conveying when discussing topics related to racism, prejudice, and inequality. It may be more beneficial to communicate a positive descriptive norm about inclusion (that most people are supportive of diversity, equity, and inclusion) rather than a negative descriptive norm (that most people discriminate; Brauer, 2024). Although instructors should reiterate the importance of and widespread support for inclusion, they should be mindful to not invalidate the experience of students who have experienced discrimination.

<c> Foster social belonging

Students from marginalized social groups often experience belonging uncertainty, or the pervasive feeling that members of one’s social group do not belong at the university (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Belonging uncertainty negatively affects students’ motivation and belief in their ability to succeed academically. However, research has found that reinterpreting social difficulties by framing them as common and transient can improve students’ performance and well-being, especially when students are undergoing a major transition and concerns about belonging are likely to be salient. For example, Walton and Cohen (2011) presented first-year college students with survey results and testimonials from juniors and seniors that revealed that many students on campus, regardless of their identity, experienced a lack of belonging during their transition to college, which lessened over time. Participants were then asked to write an
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

essay about how these findings related to their own experiences. Relative to students in the control condition, who read about social-political attitudes, Black students who participated in the belonging intervention had improved health and grade point averages at the end of college three years later.

There are numerous ways that social psychology instructors can foster social belonging in their classes, such as by having more advanced students attend class early in the semester to share their own experiences transitioning to college. Instructors can also lead an in-class discussion early in the semester on the topic that experiencing social difficulties is a common experience that usually improves over time. Binning and colleagues (2020) evaluated the effectiveness of these discussions, finding that courses that implemented the in-class discussion had reduced achievement gaps in course grades for students from marginalized racial or ethnic groups in biology courses and for women in physics courses. However, research suggests that it is not enough to just tell students that they belong at the university. Messages about belonging are most effective when the university context and climate affords students from marginalized groups the opportunity to belong (Walton et al., 2023). In other words, telling students that concerns about belonging are common and transient is most likely to benefit students from marginalized groups when paired with other teaching practices discussed in this chapter (e.g., making inclusion a social norm, individualizing students, etc.).

<c> Promote positive beliefs about social groups

Social psychology courses cover topics related to inequality, prejudice, and discrimination, and the students in these courses come from a variety of backgrounds, some of whom will have lived experience as members of a marginalized group. Instructors must take proactive steps to make courses welcoming to students from marginalized groups while also
being prepared for defensive reactions from members of non-marginalized groups (Onyeador et al., 2021). Rather than allow students to voice harmful opinions, instructors should dispel inaccurate group-based stereotypes. For example, when discussing differences between groups, such as when introducing the stereotype content model, social psychology instructors should present groups as variable rather than imply that all members of a given group act or think the same way (Er-rafiy & Brauer, 2013).

Social psychology instructors can also embrace multiculturalism by valuing differences between social groups. A multicultural ideology contrasts with a colorblind ideology, which typically minimizes the importance of one’s social group identity (Plaut et al., 2018). There are numerous ways to promote multiculturalism, such as inviting guest speakers to class who identify as a member of a marginalized group, or including a multicultural diversity statement on the course syllabus. In one study, underrepresented minority (i.e., African American, Latinx, or Native American) students who were exposed to a multicultural diversity statement during their first semester of college had higher GPAs at the end of their second year of college than underrepresented minority students exposed to a colorblind diversity statement (Birnbaum et al., 2021; see supplemental material for example syllabus statement).

Course materials should also be diversified to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented, especially those from scholars of marginalized social groups. If the research presented in class was predominately conducted by White men, many women and students of Color may worry that their contributions will not be valued. One way to counter this implication is to diversify the course content and include a picture of the researcher when presenting the research in class, especially if the study was conducted by a member of a marginalized racial or ethnic group.
Individualize students by recognizing their unique skills and strengths

Students benefit from being in classrooms where they feel a connection to the instructor. One of the easiest ways to build relationships with students is to learn their names (Brauer, 2011). For example, on the first day of class, social psychology instructors can ask students to state their name and share some individuating information about themselves (e.g., major, fun fact, outside hobby/interest). Although learning each student’s name is challenging in larger classes, instructors can use numerous techniques such as having students write their name on 8.5 x 11 index cards, assigning a “get to know you” survey as homework, or having students record a brief video of themselves with their name and pronouns (Tanner, 2011).

Instructors can further individualize students by viewing their backgrounds as an asset rather than as a barrier to their success. Social psychology instructors have a unique opportunity to highlight students’ backgrounds given the course material. For example, when teaching about cultural psychology, instructors can emphasize how culture shapes meaning and behavior, and how such differences in interpretation vary across social groups and contexts. This emphasis can challenge narratives that students’ backgrounds prevents them from succeeding in social psychology, but instead gives them a unique perspective that is valued by the field. Research suggests that having students from marginalized social groups reflect on how their background influences their college experience can make their identity seem more compatible with the university environment. In turn, this enhanced sense of “fit” can increase students’ self-efficacy and reduce achievement gaps (Hernandez et al., 2021; Stephens et al., 2014). Beyond directly targeting students’ beliefs, instructors can acknowledge how experiences with discrimination or fewer resources can lead to skills such as perseverance and coming up with creative solutions to problems, both of which are skills critical to success in college and social psychology (Silverman...
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

et al., 2023). However, we should note that this practice has shown to be effective for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but further research is needed to evaluate how these messages are perceived by members of marginalized racial or ethnic groups. More generally, recent proposals have suggested that creating inclusive environments requires not only reducing prejudice but also finding ways to help students celebrate their identity (Brannon & Lin, 2021).

**Conclusion**

There are numerous practices that social psychology instructors can use to reduce achievement gaps and promote the success of students from marginalized groups. The practices reviewed in this chapter will certainly not ameliorate the effects of systemic racism, economic inequality, and discrimination, but purposeful changes to course content and structure can target psychological barriers to success. In turn, these changes can alter students’ perceptions of themselves and their environments in ways that promote lasting change. Many of the practices discussed above are designed to help students during transition periods, when they are facing challenges, or when they are experiencing psychological threat. Notably, many teaching practices and educational interventions are most successful when the message aligns with broader changes at the university or institutional level (Destin, 2020; Walton & Yeager, 2020). Although these inclusive teaching practices provide instructors with an opportunity to improve their own courses, they should ideally be complemented with more systemic changes that will promote the success and belonging of students from marginalized groups.
INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

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INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES


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INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES


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INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

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