

SAFE SPACE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

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Based on data from a survey of 121 baccalaureate and master of social work students at a western university, this study explores students' perspectives of "safe" and "unsafe" classroom environments. The majority reported that being in a safe classroom changed both what and how much they learned. Students offered a wide range of instructor, fellow student, personal, and classroom characteristics that contribute to the creation of safe and unsafe spaces. Responses about such characteristics were relatively consistent across genders, race (measured as being White or of color), and program level. Implications for social work education and research are offered.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE to create a classroom environment in which students are willing and able to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues? This type of environment, often called a "safe space," has been assumed to encourage participation and honest sharing of ideas (Boostrom, 1998; Latting, 1990). A number of authors from various disciplines discuss the creation of safety or a safe space in the classroom where students can freely express their ideas and feelings, particularly around challenging areas such as diversity, cultural competence, and oppression (e.g., Blum, 2000; Chan & Treacy, 1996; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Latting, 1990; Tatum, 1992; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003). Yet few go into much detail about what they mean by safe space or how

to create it. Additionally, while safe space has become an increasingly used metaphor for a desired classroom atmosphere, the utility of striving for safety is rarely questioned nor are possible drawbacks examined.

While some has been written about the creation of safe space from an educator's perspective, little is available that discusses students' views of safety in the classroom. One aim of the current research is to examine how students' views of safety compare with those of academics who have written on the subject. This information can assist educators in assessing the utility of working toward the creation of safe space and in determining how it can best be achieved. Without this information, instructors may create classroom environments that they believe support honest dialogue and

participation, but from students' perspectives, actually do not.

This article describes an exploratory study that asked for student feedback on the roles of the instructor, other students, physical classroom environment, and the individual student herself or himself in creating an environment that encourages honest and open dialogue. It also explores student perceptions about the importance of this type of space, and its effect on their academic experience. In other words, from students' perspectives, what is safe space and how do we create it, and can we have safe classrooms where students are academically and personally challenged and learn to think critically?

What Is Safe Space and Why Is It Important?

The metaphor of the classroom as a "safe space" has emerged as a description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. It is "concerned with the injuries that individuals suffer at the hands of society" (Boostrom, 1998, p. 399), or when referring to a classroom, at the hands of instructors and other students. A safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession, or other students.

Safe space does not necessarily refer to an environment without discomfort, struggle,

or pain. Being safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students often must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe (Boostrom, 1998; Holman & Freed, 1987; Van Soest, 1996). However, if students are to risk self-disclosure, the rewards (e.g., personal growth and becoming a better social work practitioner) must outweigh the penalties (e.g., possible embarrassment or ridicule or fear of receiving a lower course grade). Creating a safe classroom space can reduce the negative outcomes experienced by students willing to risk disclosure.

Educators in social work and other fields (e.g., education, English, psychology, and sociology) have suggested ways to facilitate the creation of a safe classroom environment. Recommended instructor characteristics include welcoming discussion, approachability, and supportiveness (Fassinger, 1995). Latting (1990) stresses the importance of instructors maintaining a "demeanor of nonjudgmental acceptance of students as individuals" even when their comments are "reprehensible" (p. 43). She suggests that instructors offer opposing positions and support students' honesty and willingness to question their own beliefs. Others recommend that instructors not punish students for unpopular views (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997) and that instructors be emotionally present and not try to keep the class emotionally comfortable and without conflict (Chan & Treacy, 1996). A number of authors recommend setting up discussion ground rules or guidelines (Chan & Treacy, 1996; Good, 1995; Hyde & Ruth, 2002), and having students design their own norms for class discussions (Fassinger, 1995). Using storytelling as a way

of creating shared experience (Rocklin, 1983) and discussing social identities to normalize students' feelings (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997) are additional methods that have been described as creating safe space through reinforcing common understanding.

To become culturally competent and think critically, numerous authors suggest that students not only must acquire information, they also must confront their biases and be aware of their values and beliefs (Diller, 2004; Greene, 1994; Gutiérrez & Nagda, 1996; Lum, 1999; McPhatter, 1997; Van Soest & Garcia, 2003). Encouraging students to examine their values, beliefs, and behaviors can be done in a number of ways, including classroom discussion. The path to self-discovery can be difficult and stressful. Students often are unwilling to risk exposing themselves to criticism, ridicule, or ostracism by expressing views that might not be readily accepted by others. Honest self-exploration often requires "safe harbors for meeting and confronting demons" (Kerr, 1996, p. 54). This suggests that in classrooms where the encouragement of open and honest communication is a goal, an atmosphere or classroom climate should be created where students feel that they are able to risk honesty with the knowledge that they will not suffer too greatly for it.

Encouraging students to speak honestly about their biases and unpopular views is a particular challenge in social work classrooms. From early on in social work programs, students are taught that to be effective practitioners, they should not have racial, ethnic, gender, age, or other biases. They also are taught professional values and ethics that should guide their views in a number of areas. Furthermore, they learn

about the positions that the profession takes on a variety of issues. Yet many social work students have values, beliefs, and attitudes that differ from those espoused in the classroom (Van Soest, 1996). It is important that students in social work classes be able to examine and struggle with their values and worldviews that may differ from those of the profession. This is particularly true in terms of biases toward members of socially and politically subordinated groups.

Challenges in the Creation and Utilization of Safe Space

Some authors have raised concern that safe classrooms might result in a nonacademic environment that stifles student learning (Boostrom, 1998; Weissglass, 1997). Boostrom (1997) maintains that

Problems can occur when students or instructors take safe space to mean a classroom environment where all ideas are accepted equally, and where no one is challenged or made uncomfortable. It's one thing to say that students should not be laughed at for posing a question or for offering a wrong answer. It's another to say that students must never be conscious of their ignorance. It's one thing to say that students should not be belittled for a personal preference or harassed because of an unpopular opinion. It's another to say that students must never be asked why their preference and opinions are different from those of others. It's one thing to say that students should be capable of self-revelation. It's another to say that they must always like what they see revealed. (p. 18)

Similarly, problems can arise when a safe classroom environment is seen to be an environment without conflict. When trying to create a safe space, instructors may err on the side of trying to make the classroom stress-free by making it conflict-free. As Boostrom (1998) notes, "if critical thinking, imagination, and individuality are to flourish in classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it" (p. 407). A classroom in which safe means no conflict, and that no one is ever feeling challenged or uncomfortable is likely to be a classroom in which little learning and growth are occurring.

A second concern about creating a space that is safe enough for students to share openly has to do with harm to fellow students. Can instructors create an environment in which students are encouraged to honestly share their views, yet the views shared do not harm other students in the class? Encouraging sharing of views that reflect underlying racist, classist, sexist, or homophobic perspectives, for example, might be important in providing the opportunity for the view holder to be challenged to increase self-awareness and to change those beliefs. However, hearing those views can be painful for students whose groups are being maligned. Thus, one student's speaking up in a safe space has the potential to seriously harm another student.

Attempts to create space that will feel safe to all students can be particularly difficult in a multicultural classroom. There are cultural (e.g., ethnic, gender, regional, age) differences in the appropriateness of speaking up in a group, sharing personal information, challenging others, public versus private demonstration of learning, and the appropriateness

of disrupting the harmony of a group (Diaz, 1986; Nordquist, 1993; Phillips, 1983; Sato, 1982; Swisher, 1992).

Method

This exploratory study examines the perspectives of social work students on the creation, importance, and utility of safe space in the classroom. Specifically, two primary questions are addressed: (1) What are students' perspectives about the characteristics or behaviors of instructors, peers, themselves, and the classroom physical space that contribute to safe and unsafe classroom spaces? (2) What are students' perspectives about the impact of safe classrooms on their own learning? In addition, recognizing that dominant/subordinated group status and classroom experience likely affect students' classroom experiences, this study explored whether white students, male students, and master of social work students might be more likely to state that they have taken safe classes; and that students of color, female students, and baccalaureate social work students might be more likely to state that they have taken unsafe classes. Finally, the study explored whether the characteristics given for safe and unsafe space differed based on program level (MSW/BSW), race/ethnicity, and gender.

This study used a convenience sample of BSW and MSW students from a Council on Social Work Education–accredited program at a large public western university. Questionnaires were distributed during spring 2002 to students in six sections of four different social work courses. These courses included senior-level BSW practice courses (two sections), a junior-level BSW diversity course, and three sections

of MSW final-semester practice courses. These courses were purposively selected to ensure that the sample included both first-year and continuing students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs and MSW students who had selected micro and macro concentrations. To prevent social desirability bias, the authors' courses were not included in the study sample. Students were told that the survey was anonymous and optional. They were asked to return the questionnaires to an envelope when they were finished with them. A total of 54 BSW students and 67 MSW students completed the survey, resulting in response rates of 90% and 71% respectively.

Questionnaire

The authors developed a questionnaire with consultation from a graduate-level research assistant. The pilot instrument was reviewed by one MSW student for clarity, then for usefulness in answering the research questions, and revisions were made in response to his comments. Completed surveys from one undergraduate class were reviewed to determine whether responses appeared useful in answering the research questions. Because responses did appear to meet this purpose, no further revisions were made to the instrument.

The first section of the questionnaire asked students if they could think of a social work class they had taken in which they felt able and willing to raise controversial thoughts and opinions or share personal experiences that were related to the course material. If they could think of such a class, they were asked to list up to six words or phrases that described what the instructor did, or the instructor's characteristics, that were important in creating

this type of classroom environment. Thinking about the same class, they were then asked to list up to six words or phrases to describe what other students did, then what they themselves did, to contribute to this environment. Finally, they were asked to list up to six words or phrases that described the physical classroom environment that were important in creating this classroom climate.

In the second part of the questionnaire, students were asked to think of a social work course in which they were *not* willing or able to raise controversial thoughts and opinions or share personal experiences that were related to the course material. If they could think of such a class, they were then asked to list up to six words or phrases that described what the instructor, other students, they themselves, and the classroom environment contributed to creating this unsafe environment. Students were asked not to name any specific instructors or students in their descriptions.

The third section of the questionnaire asked questions to determine the importance that students place on a safe classroom climate. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not important at all and 5 being extremely important, they were asked to rate the general importance of creating an environment where they could honestly express themselves. They were then asked to indicate, with a *yes* or *no* response, if such a class environment changed *what* they learned, and if so, to describe what they learned that they did not learn in other classes. They also were asked if a safe class environment changed *how much* they learned, and if so, whether they learned more, less, or the same in a class with this type of environment. Students were asked if they were more or less challenged *academi-*

cally in classrooms where they could honestly express themselves, and if they were more or less challenged in terms of *personal growth* and *self-awareness*.

In the final section of the questionnaire, students were asked to provide demographic information about gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age. The lack of responses from some students to selected demographic items (described below) likely was a strategy used by students from numerical-minority groups to maintain their anonymity. While this situation resulted in some missing data, it likely led to more honest responses.

Sample

The 121 respondents ranged in age from 20 to 54 with a mean age of 29. The vast majority, 88% ($n=106$), were female. With 112 students (93%) reporting their race or ethnicity, 73 (60%) were White and 39 (32%) were of color. These percentages are similar to the program's overall demographics. A sizable minority, 16% ($n=19$), did not report their sexual orientation, while 80% ($n=97$) self-identified as heterosexual and 4% ($n=5$) reported being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Data Analysis

The authors independently developed a list of constructs that emerged from the qualitative data in response to the first two sections of the questionnaire (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The authors then met to compare constructs and categorization of responses. Our respective constructs were in agreement, and in those few instances in which we had categorized responses differently, we discussed the differences until agreement was reached. Finally, a second-year MSW student

was trained in inductive data analysis. The authors' constructs and the raw data from which they were derived were shared with this student to determine whether the constructs developed by the authors (both instructors) made sense from the perspective of a student. Based on the student's review, the constructs were confirmed, though in a few instances raw data were re-coded into different categories. As described above, students were asked to give up to six words or phrases that described characteristics of instructors, peers, themselves, and classroom environment. When students provided more than one word or phrase that fell into the same category, their responses were counted more than once in order to reflect the importance that students placed on each characteristic or behavior.

Data were entered into the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (2001). Responses of selected subgroups (e.g., women and men, students of color and White students, BSW and MSW students) to the two items asking whether students had taken safe and unsafe classes were compared. Chi-square analyses were used to determine if differences between subgroups on these two nominal level variables were statistically significant. Frequencies were run for each construct that had emerged from analysis of the qualitative items.

Findings

In response to the question of whether or not they had taken a class in which they were able and willing to raise controversial thoughts and opinions or share personal experiences related to the course material, from here on referred to as a *safe class*, 88% ($n=106$) had taken such a class while 12% ($n=15$) had not. Sixty-

three percent ($n=76$) reported having taken at least one class in which they were not able or willing to raise controversial thoughts and opinions or share personal experiences related to the course material, hereafter referred to as an *unsafe class*. A higher percentage of MSW students than BSW students indicated taking both safe and unsafe classes (MSW safe class $n=61$, 92%; BSW safe class $n=44$, 83%; MSW unsafe class $n=45$, 67%; BSW unsafe class $n=30$, 58%), though chi-square tests of independence indicated that these differences were not statistically significant. A higher percentage of men than women reported having taken at least one safe class and one unsafe class (men safe class $n=13$, 100%; women safe class $n=90$, 87%; men unsafe class $n=9$, 69%; women unsafe class $n=64$, 62%). More white students than students of color indicated having taken safe and unsafe classes (white students safe class $n=66$, 92%; students of color safe class $n=32$, 82%; White students unsafe class $n=47$, 66%; students of color unsafe class $n=23$, 59%). Chi-square tests of independence are not reported for these analyses due to the number of cells with expected count less than 5.

Importance and Effects of Safe Spaces

When asked how important they thought it was to create safe space in the classroom, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *not important at all* and 5 being *extremely important*, 97% ($n=117$) indicated that it was very important ($n=29$, 24%) or extremely important ($n=88$, 73%). Similarly, 97% ($n=117$) of the students said that being in a safe classroom changed what they learned. When asked to specify what they learned in a safe classroom that they do not learn in other classroom environments, students most often said that: they learn about others' ideas, perspectives, and thoughts; they learn about others' experiences or that others' experiences become more personal; they are challenged to expand their viewpoints and think outside the box; or course content was more "real," "hands on," or experiential (see Table 1).

In addition to affecting *what* they learned, 84% ($n=102$) of the respondents reported that being in a safe class changed *how much* they learned. Of that 84%, 79% ($n=81$) felt they learned more in such a classroom, while 21% ($n=21$) felt they had learned less. When asked

TABLE 1. Most Common Student Responses to What They Learn in a Safe Classroom (N=121)

| Knowledge Cited as Gained | Students Responding (<i>n</i>) |
|---|----------------------------------|
| I learned about others' ideas, perspectives, and thoughts. | 50 |
| I learned about others' experiences, or others' experiences became more personal. | 26 |
| I was challenged to expand my viewpoints or think "outside the box." | 18 |
| Course content was more "real world," "hands on," or experiential. | 13 |
| I developed my communications skills (e.g., listening, dealing with conflict). | 8 |
| I grasped the subject more clearly; I was able to ask clarifying questions. | 7 |
| I increased my <i>self</i> -awareness or experienced personal growth. | 7 |
| I increased my understanding of <i>others</i> . | 6 |

whether they found safe classes to be more, the same, or less academically challenging, 65% ($n=79$) said more, 22% ($n=27$) the same, and 11% ($n=13$) less challenging. A large majority, 85% ($n=103$), reported that they felt more challenged in terms of personal growth in safer classrooms, while 5% ($n=6$) reported feeling the same, and 10% ($n=12$) reported feeling less challenged.

When asked to describe the instructor, fellow student, personal, and classroom characteristics that were important in creating safe and unsafe spaces, student responses were extremely varied. As described below, there was a surprising consistency of responses across genders, race (measured as being White or of color), and program level (MSW or BSW).

TABLE 2. Characteristics of Instructor, Peers, Self, and Physical Environment in a Safe Classroom

| Safe Classroom Variable | Characteristic |
|-------------------------|--|
| Instructor | Not biased; nonjudgmental; open (63) Modeled participation; developed ground rules (51) Comfortable with conflict/raised controversial ideas (35) Respectful/supportive of others' opinions (35) Encouraged/required class participation (32) Demonstrated caring (e.g., friendly) (26) Challenged students (e.g., posed questions) (19) Shared about self (e.g., personal biases) (15) Was informative, knowledgeable (12) Laid back, flexible, calm, or comfortable (10) |
| Peers | Good discussion skills (e.g., respectful, listened, followed ground rules) (62) Honestly shared thoughts, ideas, opinions, and facts (59) Nonjudgmental and open to new ideas or perspectives (48) Sense of community (e.g., were friendly, supportive, trustworthy) (48) Led respondent to think critically (e.g., challenged my thoughts) (15) Had positive attitudes (13) |
| Self | Tried to be open-minded (e.g., considered views of others) (42) Honestly shared ideas, views, and values (33) Actively participated in discussion, spoke up (30) Was supportive of or respectful toward others (21) Was prepared for class (e.g., completed readings, knowledgeable about subject) (20) Felt comfortable (e.g., comfortable with students, encouraged by peers/professor) (17) Listened actively (e.g., listened attentively, gave full attention to others) (16) Used other discussion skills (e.g., raised hand, thought before speaking, controlled voice tone) (13) Was invested in class (e.g., interested, excited, passionate) (13) |
| Physical Environment | Seating allowed seeing everyone (e.g., circle seating) (60) Appropriate room size for number of students (45) Good lighting (18) |

Note. Characteristics are included in this table only if mentioned at least 10 times. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of responses that fell into this category.

Safe Space Components

Instructor characteristics. Students offered a total of 387 descriptors of instructors that contributed to the development of a safe space (see Table 2). They were most likely to describe the instructor in a safe space as being nonjudgmental or unbiased; as developing ground rules for class discussion or modeling how to participate; as being comfortable with conflict or raising controversial ideas; as being respectful or supportive of others' opinions; as encouraging or requiring active participation in class; and as demonstrating caring. Relative to their representation in the sample, students of color were more likely to say that the instructor's attention to cultural issues was important in creating a safe space.

Peer characteristics. Students offered 295 descriptors of their peers in a safe space. They most often described their peers as practicing good discussion skills; honestly sharing their thoughts, ideas, opinions, or facts; being nonjudgmental and open to new ideas, perspectives, or experiences; and sharing a sense of community.

Personal characteristics. A total of 275 words and phrases were provided describing students' own behaviors or characteristics that contributed to the creation of a safe space. The most common descriptors indicated that students tried to be open-minded; honestly shared their ideas, views, and values; actively participated in discussion; were supportive of or respectful toward others; and were prepared for class.

Physical environment characteristics. Students offered 190 responses when asked to describe the aspects of the physical environment that contributed to the creation of a safe space. They overwhelmingly indicated that seating

arrangements that allowed class members to see everyone (e.g., sitting in a circle or square) contributed to the creation of such a space. Students also commonly said that an appropriate-sized room (e.g., not too large or too small for the number of students) and good lighting were important.

Unsafe Space Components

Instructor characteristics. Students provided 230 descriptors of instructors in an unsafe classroom (see Table 3). The most common responses were that the instructors: were critical of or chastised students; were biased, opinionated, or judgmental; and refused to consider others' opinions.

Peer characteristics. Study participants provided 146 words or phrases describing their peers in an unsafe space, most commonly saying that they did not speak up or were afraid to speak up (see Table 3). They also reported that peers in such a classroom were biased, judgmental, or closed-minded; were apathetic about the course; and tried to please the instructor.

Personal characteristics. Students offered 145 descriptors of their personal characteristics and behaviors when asked what they did that contributed to an unsafe classroom (see Table 3). They most often said that they did not participate; that they were fearful, worried, intimidated, insecure, unconfident, or felt vulnerable; and that they did not invest in the course.

Physical environment. Students offered 93 descriptors of a classroom's physical characteristics that contributed to an unsafe classroom. They most often said that row-style seating was a characteristic of an unsafe classroom.

Discussion

While some authors have raised the important question of whether students are academically challenged in a safe space (Boostrom, 1998; Weissglass, 1997), the majority of students in this sample reported being so challenged. A large majority of students stated that safe classroom environments were important in both what and how much they learned. In addition, the majority of students reported that they were more challenged in terms of personal growth and awareness in classrooms that feel safe. Students reported that in a safe space they were more likely to learn about others, to be challenged to expand their own viewpoints, to increase their self-awareness, and to develop effective communication skills. This finding is

particularly important in social work education, as cultural competency requires awareness of the ways in which a person’s values and experiences influence her or his understanding of, and interactions with, others. Students suggest that such a space may better prepare them for practice, as evidenced by their responses that the content from safe classrooms was more “real world.”

Given that this research was based on a self-report survey, the question can be raised about the validity of students’ perceptions of learning more and being challenged in classrooms that felt safer. We do not know that students necessarily learned more of what the instructors intended for them to learn in a given class. However, the authors assume that

TABLE 3. Characteristics of Instructor, Peers, Self, and Physical Environment in an Unsafe Classroom

| Unsafe Classroom Variable | Characteristic |
|---------------------------|--|
| Instructor | Critical toward students, chastised students, or “shot down” their ideas (38) Biased, opinionated, or judgmental (27) Did not consider others’ perspectives (26) Relied on didactic format (18) Abrupt/rude when disagreed with students (13) Did not listen/respond to student comments (13) |
| Peers | Did not speak; afraid to speak (27) Were biased, judgmental, or close-minded (14) Apathetic about course (e.g., did not attend class, unprepared for class) (14) Tried to please the instructor (14) Were frustrated, angry, or hostile (10) |
| Self | Did not participate (35) Was fearful, worried, intimidated, insecure, unconfident, or felt vulnerable (20) Did not invest in the course (e.g., “tuned out,” bored, skipped class) (16) |
| Physical Environment | Seating not conducive to discussion (e.g., row seating) (30) Small or cramped room (14) Uncomfortable temperature (10) |

Note. Characteristics are included in this table only if mentioned at least 10 times. Numbers in parentheses indicate number of responses that fell into this category.

students are able to judge their overall level of learning, and to compare their learning from one class to another.

Results from this survey found fewer differences between students based on various demographic characteristics and program status (BSW versus MSW) than the authors anticipated. However, some of the differences are worth noting as they raise a number of questions for further research. More BSW than MSW students reported that they had not taken a safe class. This difference raises several questions. Does the relative lack of experience of undergraduates in formal educational settings lead them to feel less safe in the same environment in which more-experienced MSW students feel safe? Do their instructors or peers behave differently? Are undergraduates more likely to be in larger lecture-style classes that do not provide opportunities for student sharing and discussion, or classes led by less experienced instructors?

While sample size limited the ability to identify statistically significant differences, the finding that a higher percentage of white students than students of color—and all men—had taken a safe class is important to consider. Does Whites' and men's status as members of dominant social groups make them more comfortable speaking up in a wider range of settings? Are they more likely to be treated with respect by their instructors and peers? Do their cultural characteristics make them more comfortable participating actively in classroom settings? For Whites, did their numerical majority in the classroom lead to an increased comfort level?

Results of this study did not find major differences among gender, race/ethnicity,

or program groups in the perceptions of the characteristics that are necessary to create a safe space. This finding suggests that there are approaches that can be taken in the classroom that can help most, if not all students feel safer. However, instructors may need different skills and knowledge in order to address the unique needs of some students. For example, none of the white students said that inclusion of cultural content was an important instructor behavior, while this was mentioned six times by students of color in their descriptions of safe spaces. This finding suggests that discussing social identities, as described by Garcia and Van Soest (1997), is particularly important in creating a sense of safety for students of color.

Students offered many more descriptors for instructors' behaviors and characteristics that contributed to the development of both safe and unsafe classrooms than they did for peers, themselves, or the physical environment. This finding suggests that students place most of the responsibility for classroom environment on instructors, and may not be aware of their roles and responsibilities in creating or hindering the development of safe spaces. More effort might need to be invested in working with students to develop an understanding and appreciation of shared responsibility for classroom climates.

As described previously, the literature suggests that instructors can encourage the development of safe spaces by being approachable and supportive (Fassinger, 1995), presenting a nonjudgmental demeanor (Latting, 1990), not punishing students who hold unpopular views (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997), not avoiding conflict (Chan & Treacy, 1996), developing guidelines for class discussion (Chan & Treacy, 1996;

Good, 1995; Hyde & Ruth, 2002), and welcoming discussion (Fassinger, 1995). Findings from this study suggest that students would agree with each of these recommended behaviors. Students in this study offered four additional instructor characteristics or behaviors that are not mentioned or strongly emphasized in the literature: that instructors shared about themselves; were informative or knowledgeable; challenged students; and were laid-back, flexible, or calm. This study also suggests that for students of color, inclusion of cultural content is important in the creation of safe space.

The number one category of responses given by students regarding instructor characteristics in a safe space was “unbiased” or “nonjudgmental”; the number one response category for instructor characteristics in an unsafe space was “critical toward students.” Given the structure of the current survey instrument, it is not completely clear what students meant by these descriptors, and whether students and academics interpret instructor behaviors in the same way. On one hand, students may have used terms such as “unbiased” to refer to instructors maintaining a “demeanor of nonjudgmental acceptance of students as individuals” (Latting, 1990, p. 43), not punishing students for unpopular views (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997), and not laughing at, belittling, or harassing them for their beliefs and ideas (Boostrom, 1997, 1998). On the other hand, students may be using such terms to refer to practices that Boostrom suggests are important in creating an academically rigorous classroom, such as critiquing their views, pointing out ways in which their thinking might be faulty, or challenging them to explain why their views or opinions differ from others and

those of the profession. If the latter is true, then one must question whether students feel safe only in an environment where their beliefs go unquestioned and ideas unchallenged. If this is the case, what feels safe for students might be antithetical to the discomfort that is sometimes necessary for true growth and learning to occur. As will be discussed later, further research is needed to determine what specific instructor behaviors students perceive to be supportive or threatening.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that students offered 16 descriptors indicating that they did not invest in their unsafe courses, and 13 phrases indicating that they were invested in their safe classes. For example, they spoke of being prepared for class and completing their readings in safe classes, and being bored, disinterested, and “skipping” their unsafe classes. This finding suggests that creating a safe classroom can contribute to increased student learning, or at least increased effort and commitment.

Limitations

There are several limitations with this study. The use of a purposive sample composed of students from only one school of social work precludes generalization of findings. The relatively small numbers of males and students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender prevented a thorough exploration of differences in their perceptions of safe and unsafe spaces. Similarly, the relatively small number of students of color precluded analysis of the responses of specific ethnic groups. No psychometric information about the instrument developed for this exploratory study is available. Because the survey instrument

used primarily open-ended items, we cannot determine whether more students might have agreed with specific items identified by other students. We also cannot be completely clear what certain descriptors actually mean to students in terms of specific behaviors or attributes of instructors, fellow students, or themselves. Finally, due to the exploratory nature of this study we did not ask students to rate the importance of each characteristic, making it impossible to determine which characteristics are considered most important. Our decision to count student descriptors that fell into the same category multiple times (e.g., one student offering both “non-biased” and “non-judgmental” in describing instructor, peers, or self) was one strategy to capture the importance that students placed on various characteristics. This decision, however, may have resulted in over-weighting the perceptions of students who were able to come up with more descriptors than were other students.

Implications

New information that emerged from this study suggests that the vast majority of students consider the creation of a safe space to be very or extremely important and that the majority of students perceive that they learn more in such a classroom. Based on the findings of this study, and consistent with existing literature, instructors who desire to create safe classes may want to create ground rules for class discussion; demonstrate respect for others’ opinions; demonstrate that they are comfortable with conflict; encourage or require student participation in class; be friendly and personable in their interactions with students; and behave in a nonjudgmental way toward

students. Further, some students may feel safer when instructors demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about the course subject matter; share about themselves; challenge students; are laid-back, flexible, or calm in the classroom; and arrange their classrooms so that students can see each other. Perhaps most important is the development of guidelines for class discussion. As a class develops these guidelines, students learn what behaviors and attitudes their peers and the instructor desire of them. It is likely that student-developed guidelines will include those characteristics identified by students in this study: being respectful; listening; and sharing their thoughts, ideas, opinions, and knowledge.

Given the diversity of social work classrooms and the challenging issues often raised in them, it may be unrealistic to expect any classroom to be truly safe for all students. The findings that some students have never experienced a classroom they would define as safe while others clearly have, supports this point. A comment that is perceived as an appropriate critique by one student might be felt as judgmental or as an attack by another. Possibly the best that instructors and students can strive for is the creation of *safer* space. The process of the creation of safer space could begin with classroom conversations about what it means for students and instructors to feel safe, and the acknowledgment that given conflicting needs, complete safety for all may be unrealistic. It might also be important to discuss the connection between personal and intellectual growth and periodic discomfort or challenge. Having had this conversation, when discussions become particularly difficult or students find their beliefs and ideas being challenged, they

may be less likely to feel surprised or betrayed by the instructor or fellow students, and thus, less likely to shut down.

As was discussed earlier, it is not clear what students mean by nonjudgmental or non-critical instructors or fellow students. Does any critique leave some students feeling threatened and unsafe? Are there many or some students who will not feel safe in any classroom where their ideas or beliefs are challenged? Further research is needed to clarify this point. Focus groups with students would be one way to achieve this end, asking students for specific examples of instructor behaviors that demonstrate that she or he is unbiased or nonjudgmental. Students also could be presented with various scenarios of student-instructor interactions, and asked to rate the level of safety they might feel being part of such an interaction. Given that safety is likely an important component for honest self-exploration, future work might also examine ways in which instructors can encourage students to better accept constructive challenges to their ideas and beliefs, in the service of becoming more effective social work practitioners.

In addition to further research clarifying the meaning of descriptors given by students, it would be helpful to know more about the perspectives of instructors in terms of the utility and creation of safer classroom environments. Do instructors believe that some classes call for the creation of safe space while others do not? If they see the need for creating a safer classroom environment, what techniques do instructors perceive to be successful toward achieving this end? What challenges do they face? Are

there certain situations in which instructors feel more or less safe in the classroom? If so, do instructors' feelings of safety contribute to students' perceptions of safety?

While this exploratory study provides some information about the utility and creation of safer classroom environments, more research is called for. In the meantime, it is interesting to note that many of the characteristics offered by students regarding what the instructor, their peers, and they themselves do in safe classrooms are fundamental skills for social work practice. The safe classroom thus can be viewed as an arena in which students can develop and refine the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for culturally competent practice.

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