Effect of Exposure to a Safe Zone Symbol on Perceptions of Campus Climate for LGBTQ Students

Dillon Federici and Jennifer Katz

Abstract

This study investigated student perceptions of campus climate after brief exposure to a Safe Zone symbol. Undergraduates (N = 265; 78% female, 80% white, 14% LGBTQ, 18-23 years old) were randomly assigned to read an excerpt from a fictitious course syllabus that either did or did not feature a Safe Zone symbol. Afterwards, participants rated campus climate characteristics for LGBTQ students. Participants who viewed a Safe Zone symbol reported more positive campus climate characteristics for LGBTQ students than those who did not view a Safe Zone symbol. Exposure to the symbol was not associated with perceptions of negative campus climate characteristics. The current results provide initial experimental evidence that displaying Safe Zone symbols can promote inclusive, accepting perceptions of the campus community.

In recent years, scholars and the general public alike have increasingly focused on the implicit and explicit forms of bias experienced by individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ). Unfortunately, youth who identify as LGBTQ are at increased risk for school-based bullying and associated outcomes such as poor school grades, depression, loneliness, hostility towards others, substance abuse, and suicide attempts (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Some of these stressors and outcomes seem directly related to campus climate, defined as "attitudes of other members of the campus community toward GLBT persons and issues" (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004, p. 8). Unfortunately, students who identify as LGBTQ tend to perceive school climates as both less positive and more negative than students who do not identify as LGBTQ (Brown et al., 2004; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Clearly, campus-based initiatives to support these youth are needed.

Fortunately, several studies suggest that explicitly inclusive campus policies and programs have a positive impact on the larger campus climate. A comprehensive review of such policies and programs in U.S. high schools and colleges found beneficial effects of "teaching about LGBT issues in classroom curriculum, staff development related to LGBT issues, student support clubs, inclusive antidiscrimination policies, and…showing support through visual displays, such as posters, flyers or media" (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012, p. 324). These interventions were associated with improved psychological and social outcomes for all students. Furthermore, compared to LGBTQ students who attended schools without inclusive policies or programs, LGBTQ students in schools with inclusive policies and programs reported feeling more comfortable with their sexual identities, more empowered, less harassed, and also reported fewer instances of skipping class due to feeling unsafe. The review also suggested that all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, felt more comfortable with faculty known to have participated in Safe Zone, a specific LGBTQ supportive program, than with faculty who did not (Black et al., 2012).

Safe Zone programs are a safe school initiative developed to support individuals who are LGBTQ in both K-12 (e.g., Ratts et al., 2013) and college settings (e.g., Evans, 2002). In general, such programs operate by identifying volunteers interested in promoting inclusivity and support for those who are LGBTQ. Volunteers typically participate in a training program aimed toward increasing their cultural competence

Dillon Federici and Jennifer Katz . Effect of exposure to a safe zone symbol on perceptions . *The Proceedings of GREAT Day* (2015): 4-11.

regarding LGBTQ issues (e.g., Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003). After training, volunteers show support for people who are LGBTQ by displaying some variation of a rainbow symbol and the words, "Safe Zone." For example, instructors, counselors, administrators, or coaches might post Safe Zone symbols on their office doors to let passersby know that these offices are "safe spaces" where LGBTQ-related topics can be openly discussed.

Few studies have evaluated the impact of Safe Zone programs on campus climate. The available research suggests that such programs promote favorable outcomes. In an ethnographic study, implementation of a Safe Zone program on a college campus positively contributed to feelings of safety, inclusiveness, and support among students and staff that identified as LGBTQ (Evans, 2002). Furthermore, students who did not identify as LGBTQ reported increased personal awareness and inclination to seek further education related to LGBTQ issues (Evans, 2002). Similar positive results were reported in a study of a Safe Schools Survey Program in high schools; this program was found to be associated with a greater perceived "safety, tolerance, and atmosphere of respect" (Szalacha, 2003, p. 62) for LGBTQ students. However, reactions to Safe Zone programs and materials did vary in these past studies. Some members of the college community who did not identify as LGBTQ felt indifferent toward or even offended by Safe Zone materials (Evans, 2002). Likewise, youth who identified as LGBTQ reported less favorable campus climates for LGBTQ students than youth who did not identify as LGBTQ (Szalacha, 2003). This finding suggests that some climate problems may not be visible to those who are cisgender and heterosexual.

Although past studies are mostly encouraging, a causal relationship between Safe Zone programming and perceptions of a positive climate for LGBTQ students has not yet been established to our knowledge. External concurrent factors associated with the introduction of a Safe Zone program, such as administrative willingness to implement programs, general commitment by faculty and staff members to inclusiveness, could provide an alternative explanation for the apparent positive influence of Safe Zone programs on both actual and perceived campus climate in past ethnographic and correlational research. Regardless of external factors that may affect perceptions of climate generally, a major goal of Safe Zone programs is to create a visible presence of allies who display the Safe Zone symbol (Ratts et al., 2013). Given the importance of the symbols as visual cues of acceptance and support, the primary purpose of the present study was to examine the potential impact of exposure to Safe Zone symbols on undergraduate students' perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students.

Although no studies have examined the impact of exposure to Safe Zone symbols on participants' perceptions of campus climate, experimental research investigating other types of symbols suggests that even brief exposure can have powerful effects on attitudes and behaviors. In one study, pictures of school-related images influenced school budget voting behavior (Berger, Meredith, & Wheeler, 2008) and, in another, an image of the American flag significantly affected political beliefs up to eight months after exposure to the symbol (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011). Expanding on these past studies showing that symbols affect viewers' attitudes and behavior, in the current study, exposure to a Safe Zone symbol was expected to be associated with more favorable perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students. This was the primary study hypothesis tested in the current research.

Method

Participants

Participants were 265 undergraduate students from a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States. About 78% identified as female (cisgender or transgender), 21% identified as male (cisgender or transgender), and 1% identified outside the gender binary. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 23 (M = 18.91, SD = 0.98). The majority of participants identified as White (79.6%), followed by Asian or Asian-American (10.6%), Hispanic/Latino/Mexican-American (5.7%), and Black or African-American (3.0%). By school year, 36.7% of participants were freshmen, 44.3% sophomores, 11.7% juniors, and 7.2% seniors. Just 13.9% of the sample identified as LGBTQ.

Measures

Social desirability was assessed with the Marlowe-Crown Social Desirability Scale (MC SDS; Marlowe & Crowne, 1960), a 33-item true/false measure of a respondent's need for social approval. A representative item is, "I have never intensely disliked anyone." Evidence for convergent and discriminant validity has been reported (Marlowe & Crowne, 1961). Higher scores reflect a greater motivation to present oneself in a manner consistent with perceived cultural and social expectations.

Perceived campus climate was assessed with 15 self-report items developed by Elze (2003) based on focus groups with adolescents who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. These items were used to measure 10 positive and 5 negative characteristics of the campus environment. Sample positive characteristics include "Faculty members care about gay/lesbian/bisexual students," and "Guest speakers come to campus to discuss issues important to gay/lesbian/bisexual students." Sample negative characteristics include "Gay/lesbian/bisexual students experience verbal abuse on campus," and "Faculty members on campus tell gay jokes." The scale author reported factor analytic evidence for positive and negative characteristics as separate dimensions as well as evidence for internal consistency with a high school population (α = .84 for positive, α = .70 for negative). In the current study, these items were assessed on a 4-point scale (0 = *not at all,* 3 = *a lot*). Items within each subscale were summed so that higher scores reflected more of each type of characteristics of the campus climate. Compared to the high school students interviewed by Elze, college students who identify as LGBTQ describe experiencing similar negative campus characteristics and report appreciating similar positive characteristics (e.g., Phoenix, 2011; Rankin, 2003; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; University of North Florida, 2011). In the current sample, the estimates of internal consistency were acceptable for positive (Cronbach's α = .78) and negative (Cronbach's α = .78) characteristics.

Participants' sexual orientation and gender identity each were assessed with a single item. Participants' sexual orientation was queried with the open-ended question, "How would you describe your sexual orientation?" Gender identity was queried by asking participants to circle all that apply: "male," "female," "trans," "cis," and "other." In response to the open-ended question, LGBTQ students self-identified in various ways, including "bicurious," "bi/demi," "bisexual," "gay," "homosexual," "lesbian," "pansexual," "polysexual," "questioning," and "trans lesbian." Non-LGBTQ students were classified on the basis of identifying as heterosexual and not identifying as transgender, for example "straight," "heterosexual," or "cisgender heterosexual." Three participants who identified as "asexual" and three participants who did not respond to the items about sexual orientation and gender identity could not be classified as either LGBTQ or non-LGBTQ.

Procedure

Undergraduate students were recruited through a voluntary human participant pool for an anonymous study of "Attitudes about Different Kinds of People and our Campus Community." Data collection sessions were held in classrooms and lasted no more than one hour. All participants were seated in alternating rows to ensure privacy. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to receive a packet of measures with an excerpt of a fictitious syllabus that either did or did not include a Safe Zone symbol (appended). Participants responded to self-report measures of social desirability and traditional and modern homophobia, were asked to read and answer questions about a fictitious syllabus excerpt, and then responded to measures of perceived campus climate. After completing these measures, participants submitted study materials face down into a folder for privacy and were fully debriefed. Participants earned course credit for their time. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Results

About 53.7% (n = 138) of participants were randomly assigned to the Safe Zone symbol condition, whereas 46.3% (n = 120) were assigned to the control condition. Univariate analyses suggested that random assignment produced comparable groups. That is, those assigned to the symbol condition did not significantly differ from those in the control condition with regard to age, race/ethnicity, class year, gender, or LGBTQ status. Furthermore, participants

did not significantly differ in self-reported social desirability scores. Across conditions, participants perceived many positive characteristics of the campus climate for LGBTQ students (M = 20.14, SD = 5.15, observed range 7 to 30, possible range 0 to 30) and they perceived few negative characteristics (M = 1.88, SD = 2.01, observed range 0 to 11, possible range 0 to 15).

The primary study hypothesis was that students randomly assigned to view a Safe Zone symbol would report more favorable perceptions of the campus climate than control students who were randomly assigned not to view a Safe Zone symbol. To test this hypothesis, a single factor multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with positive and negative characteristics of the campus climate as dependent variables. The overall analysis was significant, $F(2, 261) = 3.28$, $p < .05$, Wilks' Lambda = .98.

Univariate follow-up analyses revealed a significant main effect of exposure to the Safe Zone symbol on perceived positive characteristics of the campus climate, $F(1, 262) = 5.61$, $p < .05$. That is, students who viewed the Safe Zone symbol reported perceiving more positive characteristics (M = 20.83, SD = 4.99) than students who did not (M = 19.33, SD = 5.24). In contrast, exposure to the Safe Zone symbol was not associated with differences in perceived negative characteristics of the campus climate, $F(1, 262) < 1$, $p = .37$.

Discussion

The present study evaluated the effect of brief exposure to a Safe Zone symbol on college students' perceptions of campus climate characteristics affecting LGBTQ students. Students were randomly assigned to conditions in which they viewed a fictitious syllabus extract that either did or did not feature a Safe Zone symbol. As expected, students who were exposed to the Safe Zone symbol perceived more positive campus climate characteristics for LGBTQ students.

This favorable result adds to a growing body of ethnographic, qualitative, and correlational studies documenting the favorable effects of Safe Zone and related programs on campus communities (e.g., Evans, 2002; Ratts et al., 2013, Szalacha, 2003). The current results expand on past observational studies by adding experimental evidence for the beneficial effect of even a brief exposure to a single Safe Zone symbol on perceived climate. The current study also informs a previously unknown relationship between Safe Zone programs and existing climate on campuses. More specifically, it was unclear from existing research whether implementing a Safe Zone program improves campus climate, whether campuses with more accepting climates were more likely to implement Safe Zone initiatives in the first place, or both. The current study begins to address this gap by showing that exposure to a Safe Zone symbol affects perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students. Additional research is needed to examine the effect of exposure to Safe Zone symbols on actual campus climate, including community members' attitudes about LGBTQ students. To our knowledge, however, this study offers the first experimental evidence demonstrating the positive impact of the Safe Zone symbol, the most visible aspect of the Safe Zone program, on perceptions of the campus climate.

The current study also extends existing research demonstrating the important role of symbols and imagery in shaping attitudes and behavior. More specifically, in past research, brief exposure to images associated with schools (such as lockers, classrooms) led to support for school taxes (Berger et al., 2008) and brief exposure to the American flag led to more conservative beliefs, attitudes, and voting behavior (Carter et al., 2011). The current study expands upon these past studies by focusing on the perceptions of general attitudes of others in the community toward a specific population: LGBTQ students. Of note, in past research, such symbols have been studied as "primes" (Berger et al., p. 8848), "incidental cues" (Carter et al., 2011, p. 1014), or both. This may also be true of the Safe Zone symbols displayed in the experimental condition of the current study. However, Safe Zone symbols are intended to be more than incidental cues or primes: they are displayed in an explicit attempt to communicate acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and inclusive attitudes more generally (e.g., Ratts et al., 2013).

Future research is also needed to identify additional potential effects of exposure to a Safe Zone symbol. In the current study, exposure to a Safe Zone symbol was associated with perceptions of more positive

but not more negative characteristics of the campus climate for LGBTQ students. One possible explanation for this pattern of findings is that perceptions of negative characteristics were quite low. However, it might also be speculated that the presence of a positive cue, a Safe Zone symbol, impacts perceived positive characteristics of the campus climate (like the presence of supportive allies) more so than negative ones (like others' use of homophobic slurs). Additional research should examine other potential effects of exposure to a Safe Zone symbol on other outcomes, such as both explicit and implicit attitudes about people who are LGBTQ and behavior toward those who are perceived to be LGBTQ. For example, Ferguson and Hassin (2007) found brief exposure to the American flag increased aggressive thoughts and behavior. If the same type of pattern extends to brief exposure to a Safe Zone symbol, exposure to a Safe Zone symbol could promote more prosocial thoughts and behavior, both in general or perhaps specifically in response to microaggressions like "that's so gay" (Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013). Future research is also needed to examine the durability of the effect of viewing a Safe Zone symbol on perceptions of campus climate.

The current research suggests that campuses without active Safe Zone programs may benefit from implementing such programs. That is, the visible symbol of the program has a measurably positive impact on perceptions of the campus climate. More generally, the current research implies that core values of many colleges, as expressed by student affairs professional organizations, can be at least partly addressed through Safe Zone programs and symbols. For example, according to the website of the college where the study took place, guiding principles for the campus community include integrity, innovation, and diversity. Implementing Safe Zone programs and associated policies aligns with these values, and displaying the Safe Zone symbol is one way to quickly, effectively communicate that the campus adheres to these principles.

The current research also suggests that campuses that already have active Safe Zone programs and policies would likely benefit from directing student attention to the Safe Zone symbol along with sharing information about Safe Zone programs and policies. Multiple examples of such practices could be used throughout students' time on campus. For example, an orientation program might introduce the Safe Zone program and associated symbol to the group and invite new students to count how many symbols they can find on campus. These introductory comments could then be used to segue into more meaningful conversations such as group dialogues that promote "intergroup understanding, intergroup collaboration and action, and relevancy of diversity in higher education" (Thakral et al., 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, faculty and staff who are Safe Zone trained might also include the symbol in multiple places, such as class syllabi as well as office doors and announcements for speakers. Doing so might highlight for students that faculty members are open to diverse points of view, which in turn, positively predicts students' own openness to diversity (Ryder, Reason, Mitchell, Gillon, & Hemer, 2015).

To our knowledge, the current study is the first to report experimental evidence for the benefit of exposure to Safe Zone symbols on perceived campus climate. Overall, results suggested that those who viewed a Safe Zone symbol reported a more positive perception of the campus climate. Additional research on the impact of initiatives to support LGBTQ students is needed to provide an inclusive learning environment—not merely the perception of an inclusive environment—for all students.

Appendix

All participants viewed the following fictitious syllabus excerpt. Those in the experimental condition viewed the excerpt below with the Safe Zone symbol. Those in the control condition viewed the excerpt below without the Safe Zone symbol.

****

Group Conflict

Instructor: Dr. X

Dept: Sociology

Office: Bailey 013

Email: x@schoolname.edu

In this class, we will be both studying and experiencing group dynamics and group conflict. In addition to traditional readings and lectures about stages of group development, you'll spend time in groups exploring various identity categories and continuums (e.g., gender). Group members will explore patterns of similarity and differences within each group, and then later, group members will work with other formed groups to learn more about the unique experiences of others. More generally, you'll be expected to integrate knowledge about group dynamics to analyze your work both within your group and between different groups. In addition, you will be asked to make a communication profile for yourself, indicating your perceived strengths and weaknesses, and to keep a communications journal that tracks your achievements, challenges, and progress. I'll be available to meet with individuals and groups to help resolve any difficult issues that may arise, and I'm dedicated to helping provide an inclusive class community and environment.

References

Berger, J., Meredith, M., & Wheeler, S. C. (2008). Contextual priming: Where people vote affects how they vote. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 105*(26), 8846-8849. doi:10.1073/pnas.0711988105

Black, W. W., Fedewa, A. L., & Gonzalez, K. A. (2012). Effects of "safe school" programs and policies on the social climate for sexual-minority youth: A review of the literature. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 9*(4), 321-339. doi:10.1080/19361653.2012.714343

Brown, R. D., Clarke, B., Gortmaker, V., & Robinson-Keilig, R. (2004). Assessing the campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students using a multiple perspectives approach. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(1), 8-26. doi:10.1353/csd.2004.0003

Carter, T. J., Ferguson, M. J., & Hassin, R. R. (2011). A single exposure to the American flag shifts support toward Republicanism up to 8 months later. *Psychological Science, 22*(8), 1011-1018. doi:10.1177/0956797611414726

Elze, D. E. (2003). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths' perceptions of their high school environments and comfort in school. *Children & Schools, 25*(4), 225-239. doi:10.1093/cs/25.4.225

Evans, N. J. (2002). The impact of an LGBT safe zone project on campus climate. *Journal of College Student Development, 43*(4), 522-539.

Ferguson, M. J., & Hassin, R. R. (2007). On the automatic association between America and aggression for news watchers. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 33*(12), 1632-1647. doi:10.1177/0146167207307493

Finkel, M. J., Storaasli, R. D., Bandele, A., & Schaefer, V. (2003). Diversity training in graduate school: An exploratory evaluation of the Safe Zone project. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34*(5), 555-561. doi:10.1037/0735-7028.34.5.555

Hassin, R. R., Ferguson, M. J., Shidlovski, D., & Gross, T. (2007). Subliminal exposure to national flags affects political thought and behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 104*(50), 19757-19761. doi:10.1073/pnas.0704679104

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Palmer, N. A., & Boesen, M. J. (2014). *The 2013 National School Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN. Retrieved from http://www.glsen.org/article/2013-national-school-climate-survey

Marlowe, D., & Crowne, D. P. (1960). A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 24*(4), 349-354. doi:10.1037/h0047358

Marlowe, D., & Crowne, D. P. (1961). Social desirability and response to situational demands. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 25*(2), 109-115. doi:10.1037/h0041627

Phoenix, T. L. (2011). *Campus climate regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression: A report issued by the provost's committee on LGBT life*. Unpublished manuscript, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved from http://provost.unc.edu/files/2012/09/campusclimatereport.pdf

Rankin, S. R. (2003). *Campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people: A national perspective*. New York, NY: The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Retrieved from http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/CampusClimate.pdf

Ratts, M. J., Kaloper, M., McReady, C., Tighe, L., Butler, S. K., Dempsey, K., & McCullough, J. (2013). Safe space programs in K-12 schools: Creating a visible presence of LGBTQ allies. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 7*(4), 387-404. doi:10.1080/15538605.2013.839344

Ryder, A. J., Reason, R. D., Mitchell, J. J., Gillon, K., & Hemer, K. M. (2015). Climate for learning and students' openness to diversity and challenge: A critical role for faculty. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(4), 339-352. doi:10.1037/a0039766

Szalacha, L. A. (2003). Safe sexual diversity climates: Lessons learned from an evaluation of Massachusetts safe school program for gay and lesbian students. *American Journal of Education, 110*(1), 58-88. doi:10.1086/377673

Tetreault, P. A., Fette, R., Meidlinger, P. C., & Hope, D. (2013). Perceptions of campus climate by sexual minorities. *Journal of Homosexuality, 60*(7), 947-964. doi:10.1080/00918369.2013.774874 0.1080/00918369.2013.774874

Thakral, C., Vasquez, P. L., Bottoms, B. L., Matthews, A. K., Hudson, K. M., & Whitley, S. K. (2015). Understanding difference through dialogue: A first-year experience for college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 9*(2), 130-142. doi:10.1037/a0039935

University of North Florida Commission on Diversity, & Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equity. (2011). *University of North Florida campus climate for sexual orientation and gender identity and expression*. Unpublished manuscript, University of North Florida. Retrieved from https://www.unf.edu/uploadedFiles/sa/lgbt/CampusClimateJune2011.pdf

Woodford, M. R. Howell, M. L., Kulick, A., & Silverschanz, P. (2013). That's so gay: Heterosexual male undergraduates and the perpetuation of sexual orientation microaggressions on campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 28*(2), 416-435. doi:10.1177/0886260512454719

Yost, M. R., & Gilmore, S. (2011). Assessing LGBTQ campus climate and creating change. *Journal of Homosexuality, 58*(9), 1330-1354. doi:10.1080/00918369.2011.605744