Belongingness of Transgender Students on College Campuses: The Impact of Professors

Introducing Personal Pronouns in the Classroom Setting

by

Mia Shelton

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Abstract

Belongingness is a basic human need essential for well-being and mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hatchel et al., 2018b). Belongingness requires that people feel like a necessary part of their environment (Asher & Weeks, 2013). People in minority communities are vulnerable to lower belongingness compared to their peers in majority groups, and this is particularly true for members of the gender-diverse community (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). The present study examined the impact of professors including their pronouns in their course introductions on students' sense of classroom belonging and perceptions of faculty diversity acceptance. Participants (N=68) from a small women's college were recruited to complete an online survey consisting of two transcripts of a hypothetical professor introducing herself: one included her pronouns and invited students to share theirs, while the other did not mention pronouns. After reading each transcript, participants completed the College Belongingness Questionnaire (Asher & Weeks, 2013) and a modified version of the Classroom Diversity Climate Scale (Grover et al., 2020). Paired samples t-tests revealed that the transcript with pronoun use yielded significantly higher belongingness scores, $t(67)=2.70$, $p=.009$, and perceptions of faculty diversity acceptance, $t(67)=4.49$, $p<.001$, compared to the transcript without pronoun use. Findings indicate that faculty introducing their personal pronouns and prompting students to do the same can increase belongingness among students in the classroom and student perceptions of the faculty member as accepting of diversity. This intervention is easy to implement and could improve the well-being and retention of college students.

Introduction

Youth who are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population experience higher rates of mental health diagnoses than their cisgender and/or heterosexual peers (Mustanski et al., 2010). The transgender community is a specific group within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations (LGBTQ+) community whose needs and experiences are often overlooked (Hatchel et al., 2018a; Montz & Solomon, 2021). The term *transgender* refers to individuals who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, while the term *cisgender* is used to refer to people who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). Furthermore, many people within the transgender community identify with a gender that is neither woman nor man. For the purposes of this study, the term "gender-diverse college students" is used to refer to any individuals currently attending a public or private accredited higher education institution as undergraduate students who identify themselves as trans-male/female-to-male (FTM), trans-female/male-to-female (MTF), transgender woman, transgender man, and/or transgender non-binary.

Valentine and Shipherd (2018) reported that "depressive symptoms, suicidality, interpersonal trauma exposure, substance use disorders, anxiety, and general distress have been consistently higher among transgender and non-binary adults." It was also posited that the normal responses of gender-diverse youth to discrimination and violence as members of a marginalized community have been over-pathologized, in part accounting for the higher rates of mental illness (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). In order to fully understand the mental health disparities faced by gender-diverse college students, contextual and environmental factors must be considered when studying the mental health disparities faced by this marginalized population.

The contextual factors of victimization and other discriminatory actions toward the LGBTQ+ population are pertinent to the discourse on the mental health of gender-diverse individuals (Mizock, & Mueser, 2014).

The Minority Stress Model proposed by Meyer (2003) has been used as a framework for numerous studies examining gender-diverse populations (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Hatchel et al., 2018a; Lefevor et al., 2019; Budge et al., 2020). The Minority Stress Model explained that discrimination, victimization, and stigma against minority communities create a mentally taxing social environment that leads to the mental health disparities faced by minority populations (Meyer, 2003). Other studies have shown similar findings, such as a study conducted by Barnett et al. (2019) which showed that anti-LGBT victimization was correlated with suicidal ideation, suicide planning, and suicide attempts. The Minority Stress Model was created in relation to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community, but it has also been applied as a framework for other minority populations (Valentine & Shipherd, 2018; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Lefevor et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2018a; Budge et al., 2020).

It is explained by Meyer (2003) that external, observable discriminatory events that are distal to the individuals experiencing them become proximal as stigma is feared as well as internalized. Three processes are described: "external, objective stressful events and conditions (chronic and acute), expectations of such events and the vigilance this expectation requires, and the internalization of negative societal attitudes" (Meyer, 2003, p. 676). Concealment of one's marginalized identity is another process that occurs in response to fears and expectations of negative treatment. The expectations of discrimination and victimization create distress for the individual, and the mental energy put into concealing one's identity creates an added layer of distress (Meyer, 2003; Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

Several studies have examined belongingness as a protective factor against minority stress. Budge et al. (2020) found that minority stress experiences were reported to be less of a psychological barrier when non-binary students felt a sense of belonging on their college campuses. Other studies have found that peer victimization decreases school belonging, and school belonging is associated with improved mental health; therefore, school belonging was found to be a mediating factor in the relationship between victimization and mental health (Hatchel et al., 2018b). Connection to a supportive community has also been found to aid in the resilience of transgender individuals (Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Nicolazzo, 2016; Singh et al., 2011).

Belongingness is a psychological phenomenon described by Asher and Weeks (2013) as "feelings of comfort and security derived from the perception that one is an integral part of a community, place, organization, or institution" (Asher & Weeks, 2013, p. 283). Belongingness is always examined in relation to a specific context; therefore, one can experience various levels of belongingness depending on the environment in which their belongingness is being studied (Asher & Weeks, 2013; Hagerty et al., 1992). One of the earlier definitions of belonging stated that it is the experience of feeling like a necessary part of an environment or system (Hagerty et al., 1992). Hagerty and colleagues (1992) outlined two aspects of belonging: 1) Valued involvement, or the perception that one is needed and valued in an environment; 2) Fit, or the perception of one's unique traits as beneficial to that environment. There are also three antecedents that contribute to a sense of belonging, which are the motivation to be involved, the desire for involvement, and the potential for common traits between the subject and the environment. These antecedents are proposed to be essential in the development of a sense of

belonging; however, there are external factors imposed upon certain individuals that can lower each of the antecedents for belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Recent studies determined that belongingness directly relates to an individual's well-being and mental health (Barr et al., 2016; Hatchel et al., 2018b). Belongingness, well-being, and academic achievement can all be negatively impacted by minority status-based rejection expectations, which differ from expectations of rejection based on characteristics unique to the individual (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). A related concept, belonging uncertainty, occurs when individuals question whether they belong in a certain environment due to their underrepresentation in that environment (Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). When individuals become mindful of social cues related to belonging in a context where their identities could be the basis of poor treatment, they are likely to experience belonging uncertainty (Asher & Weeks, 2013). It has also been found that students from historically underrepresented groups on a predominantly majority-group college campus are more likely to question whether they belong there (Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011).

Valentine and Shipherd (2018) pointed out that while interventions on an individual level are beneficial, broader-scale interventions must be implemented to sufficiently address the mental health disparities faced by gender-diverse populations. One intervention that was examined aimed to affirm gender-diverse individuals in the workplace with the goal of creating an environment in which workers feel comfortable expressing their marginalized identities. Two specific interventions employed were the use of gender-affirming pronouns as well as the discouragement of derogatory comments towards marginalized groups in the workplace. Huffman et al. (2020) collected quantitative and qualitative survey data from gender-diverse workers who had been working in settings where these interventions were implemented. Both

interventions were found to increase employee satisfaction and gender identity openness of gender-diverse employees. It was emphasized that the use of gender-affirming pronouns was seen as more effective because it was a proactive strategy rather than a reactive strategy.

Maimon and colleagues (2021) studied a similar intervention that showed syllabi with and without identity safety cues to students. After reading the syllabi, students were asked to indicate their expected classroom belonging, expected course engagement, expectations that the professor would show a social dominance orientation, impressions that the professor was trying to create an inclusive environment, interest in taking the course, and perceived likelihood that the professor was a first-generation student. Participants were also asked to rate the professor on traits including kind, approachable, encouraging, and fair. It was found that the syllabi that contained identity safety cues were perceived as having an instructor who had a lower social dominance orientation, tried harder to create an inclusive environment, and was kinder, more encouraging, and more approachable compared to the control syllabi. Students who read the syllabi containing identity safety cues also reported greater expected belonging and course engagement (Maimon et al., 2021). Other studies have verified the importance of student-faculty interactions in student perceptions of a campus climate that is welcoming of diversity (Parker & Trolian, 2020; Pryor, 2015).

The existing literature on gender-diverse college students largely overlooks the intersectional experiences of people of color, as the majority of the participants in the studies that examine gender-diverse individuals' belongingness on college campuses are white (Barr et al., 2016; Budge et al., 2020, Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018; Hatchel et al., 2018b; Pflum et al., 2015; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Lefevor et al., 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016). Budge and colleagues (2020) called for more research on the experiences of gender-diverse

individuals who are also part of other marginalized communities, such as racial and ethnic minority groups. Also, much of the current literature on gender-diverse college students groups transgender individuals who identify with a binary gender (woman or man) and individuals who identify with a non-binary gender under the same umbrella (Barr et al., 2016; Pflum et al., 2015; Budge et al., 2020; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Lefevor et al., 2019; Singh, 2012).

The importance of differentiating between the experiences of binary transgender individuals and non-binary individuals cannot be overlooked. Lefevor and colleagues (2019) found that gender-diverse individuals who did not identify with a binary gender faced discrimination at greater rates, experienced worse mental health outcomes, and were more likely to face misgendering on a daily basis compared to transgender individuals who identified with a binary gender. Factor and Rothblum (2008) stated that it is important to recognize the variation among the transgender population and that each person should be viewed as an individual with unique experiences. Researchers cannot assume anything about any aspect of an individual person's experiences and identity (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). Several articles have highlighted the need for qualitative research when looking at the experiences of gender-diverse individuals and when looking at belongingness and Minority Stress, as qualitative research can reveal nuances that are often lost in quantitative data (Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Budge et al., 2020).

The present study examined whether or not professors stating their pronouns when introducing themselves impacted perceived belongingness among students. Students' perceptions of diversity acceptance among professors was also examined. The independent variable for this study was the mention of pronouns in the hypothetical professor's introduction to the class. The dependent variables were the students' perceived levels of belongingness in the classroom and

students' perceptions of professors' levels of diversity acceptance based on written transcripts of instructors introducing themselves to a classroom of students. Based on the existing literature, it was hypothesized that professors introducing themselves to their classes using their pronouns would lead to higher belongingness scores for students as well as higher diversity acceptance ratings of professors.

Methods

Participants

The present study recruited students ($N = 68$) from Meredith College, an all-women's college located in Raleigh, North Carolina. The majority of the participants ($n = 61$) identified as women., while only 7.35% ($n = 5$) of participants identified as non-binary, and 2.94% ($n = 2$) participants stated that they were unsure about their gender. Exactly half of the participants ($n = 34$) identified as racial/ethnic minorities, while the other half identified as White. Participants were all between the ages of 18 and 22 and were all students of various majors at Meredith College.

Participants were recruited through professors electronically distributing study information to students taking their courses. Participation was voluntary. Some students were eligible to receive extra credit for participation depending on their instructors; however, no identifying information was collected. The survey was anonymous and participant responses were kept confidential and maintained in a password-protected Google Forms document. All reports were based on aggregate data.

Although risk to participants was minimal, it was possible for this study to cause participants emotional distress as it queried participants' gender identity and belongingness, both of which can be sensitive topics. Participants were asked to fill out an informed consent form

prior to their participation in the study. The informed consent form warned them about the possibility of emotional distress as a result of participation in the study and provided the contact information of the Meredith College Counseling Center (See Appendix A). The debriefing form also included the contact information of the Meredith College Counseling Center and the TransLifeline Suicide Prevention Hotline (See Appendix G). All participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines specified by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2002, 2015, 2020).

Materials and Measures

The study materials consisted of an online survey that queried demographic information, two hypothetical transcripts, a modified version of The College Belongingness Questionnaire (Asher & Weeks, 2013), and a modified version of the Classroom Diversity Climate Scale (Grover et al., 2020).

The demographic information collected at the beginning of the study included college major, year in college, age, and race/ethnicity. Each of these was a free-response question, other than year in college. Year in college had five options: first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, or other. If "other" was selected, participants were able to type out their own responses (See Appendix B). All demographic questions were created following the best practices for asking questions to identify transgender and other gender minority respondents on population-based surveys specified by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law (Badgett et al., 2014).

Following the demographic questions, two different written transcripts of hypothetical professors introducing themselves to a classroom of students on the first day of class were used.

Participants first viewed the transcript with the professor's pronouns, then they viewed the transcript that did not contain the professor's pronouns (See Appendix C).

The belongingness was measured using The College Belongingness Questionnaire (Asher & Weeks, 2013). This six-item tool was used to assess the belongingness of college students at their institutions. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (*1* = strongly disagree, *5* = strongly agree). This questionnaire was modified to fit the context of the present study. Instead of referring to belongingness in the context of an institution at large, the modified questionnaire referred to belongingness in the context of a classroom setting.

To assess diversity acceptance, the Classroom Diversity Climate Scale (Grover et al., 2020) was used. The Classroom Diversity Climate Scale is a five-item tool that measures student perceptions of their professors' willingness to accept diversity in the classroom. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale (*1* = strongly disagree, *5* = strongly agree). This questionnaire was modified to fit the context of the present study. The original questionnaire asked about the course material introduced by the professor and how it impacted students' perceptions of the professor's acceptance of diversity in the classroom. For the present study, participants read transcripts of a professor introducing herself on the first day of a hypothetical course. Because no course material was introduced, the questionnaire was modified to say, "in future classes with this instructor, I would expect that . . ." to prompt students to think about future interactions with the same hypothetical professor that introduced herself.

Procedure

First, participants were asked to fill out an informed consent form that did not collect any identifying information (See Appendix A). The purpose of the study was not fully revealed in the informed consent. This was done in order to prevent response bias. However, a debrief fully

explaining the true purpose of the study was shown at the end of the study. The debriefing form also included counseling resources for participants in the case that the study does elicit emotional distress (See Appendix G).

Students were asked demographic questions (See Appendix B). Then, students were shown the first transcript that included the professor introducing her pronouns. Students were asked to rate their perceived belongingness and perceptions of the professor's acceptance of diversity based on the first transcript using two different questionnaires. Participants were then shown a second transcript that had several words replaced by synonyms to make it different from the other transcript. The professor's pronouns were not introduced in the second transcript. Following this, students were again asked to rate their perceived belongingness and perceptions of the professor's acceptance of diversity based on the second transcript. Next, participants were asked to fill out a closing demographic questionnaire (See Appendix F). Finally, a debriefing form was shown to participants (See Appendix G).

The data was stored in a password-protected Google Forms document and associated spreadsheet for a maximum of six months. This data did not include any information that could be used to identify participants. The data were analyzed using a paired samples t-test as the study utilized a single-factor, within-subjects design with two dependent variables. A power analysis performed using G*Power Statistical Consulting (Buchner, 2022), indicated that the sample size of 68 was sufficient to detect an effect using a paired-samples t-test with a 95% significance level.

Results

Belongingness

On average, participants reported significantly higher belongingness scores for the transcript with pronouns ($M = 24.16$, $SD = 4.17$) than the transcript without pronouns ($M = 22.54$, $SD = 3.26$), $t(67) = 2.70$, $p = .009$, 95% CI 0.08, 0.57 (See Figure 1).

Diversity Acceptance

Perceptions of diversity acceptance were also significantly higher for the transcript with pronouns ($M = 21.19$, $SD = 3.52$) compared to the transcript without pronouns ($M = 18.56$, $SD = 4.04$), $t(67) = 4.49$, $p < .001$ 95% CI 0.29, 0.80 (See Figure 2).

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that hypothetical professors mentioning their pronouns when introducing themselves on the first day of class led to participants indicating a significantly greater sense of belongingness in the classroom. It also revealed that significantly more students had perceptions that faculty were accepting of diversity in the classroom when pronouns were introduced.

The hypothesis that college professors introducing their pronouns in their classes and inviting students to do the same would result in higher student belongingness and perceived diversity acceptance scores was supported by the data. These results align with the findings within the current body of literature, such as those of Huffman et al. (2020), a study that found that the use of gender-affirming pronouns and titles in the workplace was associated with perceived support for the gender-diverse community. A similar study found that when college students who are part of marginalized groups were told that their peers held pro-diversity attitudes, their belongingness increased (Murrar et al., 2020).

The implications of this study suggest that professors can facilitate student belongingness in the classroom by introducing their pronouns when they introduce themselves. This, in turn,

may improve the overall sense of student belonging outside of the classroom in the larger college community. This may then lead to reduced minority stress and better well-being (Budge et al., 2020; Barr et al., 2016). Furthermore, students with a stronger sense of belongingness to their college are more likely to remain at the institution and less likely to transfer (Tinto, 2015).

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of some limitations. One of the major limitations of this study was that the sample contained mostly cisgender women. If this study were to be recreated, it is suggested that students from larger, public, co-ed universities are recruited to improve generalizability as this was a limitation of the present study. Future studies should sample solely gender-diverse college students in order to examine their belongingness in relation to pronouns as they are the group whose belongingness is most affected by this intervention. While this study was sufficiently powered, it was conducted at an all-women's college and used convenience sampling methods. A simple random sample of students from many different colleges and universities around the country should be conducted. Researchers should also conduct a longitudinal study to find out how long the effects of this intervention last.

Another limitation of the present study was that the professors were only hypothetical, and their words were shown to participants as written transcripts. Future studies should test in-person scenarios where real professors introduce themselves to students. Lastly, researchers should study the impacts of professors using pronouns in their email signatures, on their syllabi, on online learning platforms such as Zoom, or on other materials frequently used in a college classroom setting.

This study was important to conduct as it gives professors more insight on how to foster a more welcoming environment for gender-diverse students. The results suggest that professors

introducing themselves using their pronouns is a promising intervention that needs more exploration in order to gain a fuller understanding of the factors that create a safer, more welcoming environment for gender-diverse students in which they feel that they belong.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent and Participant Instructions

<u>Informed Consent</u>

My name is Mia, and I am an undergraduate student at Meredith College. The purpose of this research study is to assess how professors interact with students. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to rate professors on certain qualities based on written transcripts of them introducing themselves to a class. You will also be asked about your perception of the professor based on the written transcript. The risks of this study include the possibility of emotional discomfort. If you become distressed as a result of participating in this study, you are encouraged to contact the Meredith College counseling center (counselingcenter@meredith.edu). This study will take about 5–10 minutes to complete. Your privacy will be protected in several ways. First, your responses will remain anonymous as you will not be asked to share your name or identifying information about yourself. Second, your responses will be stored in a confidential, password-protected database that can only be accessed by myself and my research advisor, Dr. Betty-Shannon Prevatt. My final report will only include aggregate, de-identified data. Only de-identified information may be used for future research studies. You do not have to participate in this study, and you may choose to stop participating at any point without consequence. Participants will not be compensated for their participation as it is voluntary. Please let me know if you have any questions for me at this time. If you have questions in the future, please contact me (mshelton@email.meredith.edu) or my project advisor, Dr. Betty-Shannon Prevatt (bprevatt@meredith.edu). Thank you for your interest in my study. Please let me know if you have any questions at this time.

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect the rights and welfare of participants. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Janey Sturtz McMillen, Ph.D., Chair of the Meredith College Institutional Review Board (IRB), which has approved this study. She may be reached at (919) 760-8479 or by email at sponsoredprograms@meredith.edu.

I have read and understand the information provided. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose to withdraw my participation at any time for any reason. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old.

- Yes

- No

Appendix B

Introductory Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your major?

2. What year are you in college? (first-year, sophomore, junior, senior, other)

3. What is your age?

4. What is your race/ethnicity?

Appendix C

Transcripts of Professor Introductions

Transcript 1

Hi everyone; my name is Dr. Valentine, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. I just started teaching here at Meredith College, but before that, I had been teaching psychology for five and a half years. My favorite thing about being a professor is that I get to interact with students and help them learn whether psychology may be a field of interest for them. I enjoy teaching psychology because not only does it guide students who are majoring in it, but also, it opens a door for students to learn about themselves and their personal relationships. Now, I'd like to get to know you all. Let's go around the room and have everyone say their name, something about themselves, and their pronouns.

Transcript 2

Hi everyone; my name is Dr. Valentine. I recently started teaching here at Meredith, but prior to that, I had been teaching psychology for five and a half years. My favorite thing about being a professor is that I get to meet with students and aid them in learning whether psychology may be a field of interest for them. I love teaching psychology because not only does it guide students who are majoring in it, but also, it opens a door for students to learn about themselves and their interpersonal communications. Now, I'd like to get to know you all. Let's go around the room and have everyone say their name and something about themselves.

Appendix D

Belongingness Questionnaire

Original Questionnaire:

The College Belongingness Questionnaire (Asher & Weeks, 2013)

Participants respond to all items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

1. I feel like I belong at this school.
2. It's hard for me to fit in here. (Reverse score)
3. I feel connected to this school.
4. I feel welcome at this school.
5. This is definitely the right school for me.
6. I'm glad I came to this school.

Modified Questionnaire:

This questionnaire has been modified from the original to prompt students to consider belongingness in a classroom rather than at an institution in order to fit the context of the present research study.

The College Belongingness Questionnaire (Asher & Weeks, 2013)

Participants respond to all items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

1. I feel like I belong in this class.
2. It's hard for me to fit in here. (Reverse score)
3. I feel connected to this professor.
4. I feel welcome in this professor's classroom.
5. This is definitely the right class for me.
6. I'm glad I enrolled in this professor's class.

Appendix E

Classroom Diversity Climate Questionnaire

Original Questionnaire:

<u>Classroom Diversity Climate Scale (Grover et al., 2020)</u>

Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree).

1. The instructor created a supportive environment for all students, including students from underrepresented groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, etc.).
2. The instructor showed openness, receptivity, and respect for culturally different students.
3. The instructor encouraged students to express different views and perspectives.
4. The instructor included course content related to diversity when appropriate.
5. The instructor demonstrated an awareness of and responsiveness to diverse perspectives.

Modified Questionnaire:

This questionnaire has been modified from the original in order to fit the context of the present research study. Participants will only see an introduction from the professor, so the last three questions have been changed to be in the hypothetical future tense.

<u>Classroom Diversity Climate Scale (Grover et al., 2020)</u>

Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree).

1. The instructor created a supportive environment for all students, including students from underrepresented groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, etc.).
2. The instructor showed openness, receptivity, and respect for culturally different students.

In future classes with this instructor, I expect that:
3. The instructor would encourage students to express different views and perspectives.
4. The instructor would include course content related to diversity when appropriate.
5. The instructor would demonstrate an awareness of and responsiveness to diverse perspectives.

Appendix F

Closing Demographic Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions:

1. What sex were you assigned at birth?

    - Female

    - Male

    - Intersex

    - Other: _____

2. What is your gender identity?

    - Woman

    - Man

    - Non-binary

    - Other: _____

Appendix G

Debriefing Form

Who to contact if you have questions
Thank you for participating in this study. If you have any questions, concerns, or are interested in learning more, please feel free to contact me (mshelton@email.meredith.edu) or my research advisor, Dr. Betty-Shannon Prevatt (bprevatt@meredith.edu). In the case that this study caused emotional distress, please contact the Meredith College Counseling Center (counselingcenter@meredith.edu). If needed, the TransLifeline suicide prevention hotline can be reached at 1-877-565-8860.

Purpose
The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of professors' use of gender-inclusive language on the sense of belonging of students. It is my hope that this research will be able to be used to inform and plan interventions to increase gender-diverse students' belongingness in college, improve their overall college experiences, reduce their stress levels, and reduce their mental health symptoms.

Importance
A sense of belonging in college is important for students to succeed academically and socially. Belongingness has been examined as a protective factor against minority stress. School belonging is associated with improved mental health outcomes for students and is a mediating factor between minority identity-based victimization and mental health outcomes. This study will further add to the literature on the relationship between belongingness, but it will focus on gender-diverse college students, a group that has been underrepresented in psychology research.

If you want to learn more, these academic articles may be of interest to you:

Asher, S. R., & Weeks, M. S. (2013). Loneliness and belongingness in the college years. *The Handbook of Solitude*, 283–301. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118427378.ch16

Huffman, A. H., Mills, M. J., Howes, S. S., & Albritton, M. D. (2020). Workplace support and affirming behaviors: Moving toward a transgender, gender diverse, and non-binary friendly workplace. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2020.1861575

Lefevor, G. T., Boyd-Rogers, C. C., Sprague, B. M., & Janis, R. A. (2019). Health disparities between genderqueer, transgender, and cisgender individuals: An extension of minority stress theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 66*(4), 385-395. http://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000339

Maimon, M. R., Howansky, K., & Sanchez, D. T. (2021). Fostering inclusivity: Exploring the impact of identity safety cues and instructor gender on students' impressions and belonging. *Teaching of Psychology*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1177/00986283211043779

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(5), 674–697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

Valentine, S. E. & Shipherd, J. C. (2018). A systematic review of social stress and mental health among transgender and gender non-conforming people in the United States. *Clinical Psychology Review, 66*, 24-38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2018.03.003