



An Organizing Framework for Teaching Practices that Can “Expand” the Self and Address Social Identity Concerns

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Abstract

The contributed papers in this special issue each provide valuable perspectives on how social processes are relevant to academic motivation. Yet a critical question remains: How can this research lead to concrete guidance for educators who wish to create motivating and equitable classrooms? We propose this complex task can be simplified by encouraging educators to address students’ concerns about how they are viewed by instructors in school. Our review of the literature suggests that two meta-concerns are particularly important to address for students from groups marginalized in education: whether instructors may (1) see them as limited in academic potential and (2) narrowly define them by their academic success. We argue that effective teaching practices address these concerns by communicating two corresponding messages: (1) *inclusive expectations*, “I recognize your potential for academic growth” and (2) *broad regard*, “I regard you as a whole person, with a range of personal values, social identities, and relationships.” These messages can shift students away from a “narrow” sense of self, in which their value is defined by current academic performance, and towards an “expansive” sense of self, in which students feel both academically capable and valued for more than just their academic success. We present evidence that novice instructors can use this framework to develop or adapt practices that are attuned to marginalized students’ two meta-concerns and enhance student motivation and engagement. Throughout this commentary, we describe how this framework can build on the important theoretical advances presented elsewhere in this special issue.

Keywords Social identity · Education · Intervention · Relationships · Motivation

School is more than just a place for academic growth—it is also deeply social (Crosnoe, 2011; Wentzel & Skinner, 2022). Each of the contributed articles in this special issue highlights this fact and sheds light on how social processes can influence

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students' motivational states. Several articles extend the study of motivation to broader social systems, such as how ecological contexts (e.g., the racial composition of the peer group) structure the motivational affordances provided to students (Graham et al., 2022; Kilday & Ryan, 2022; Skinner et al., 2022), or how experiences of care in the classroom can amplify motivational outcomes (Wentzel, 2022). Some articles focus on the social nature of prominent motivational constructs in the literature, such as how students' academic goals and social goals can work together rather than in opposition (Liem & Senko, 2022), or how teachers' beliefs or goals for their classrooms can influence their relationship-building behaviors (Robinson, 2022) or evoke frustration (Park & Ramirez, 2022). The special issue also extends scholarship on ways to improve the educational experiences of students with marginalized identities (e.g., Black and Latinx students), by focusing on community-based assets such as family belief systems (Starr et al., 2022) or students' desire to make a contribution beyond their immediate self-interest (Gray et al., 2022). Overall, these articles set the stage for a more holistic future of the psychology of education—one that could ultimately lead to a more human-centered view of the student.

There nevertheless remains a perennial challenge for many of us in the field: How can these and other insights from educational psychology be practically integrated into educators' everyday teaching practices? In the current commentary, we seek to explore this issue by examining how one particular class of social processes can promote inclusive and motivating classrooms: the concerns that arise in students' minds about how educators view them and their social groups. That is, when students anticipate they may be viewed in a negative or limited light, it can evoke *social identity concerns*, which in turn can initiate a negative recursive cycle of appraisals, behaviors, and relationships that results in poorer performance than what students are capable of (Steele et al., 2002; Walton & Wilson, 2018; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Let us consider a student who sees the value of education, enjoys learning, and believes in their academic potential. What happens when this student enters a new classroom and faces significant challenges understanding course material or staying motivated? Without the foundation of positive relationships with teachers and peers, even otherwise well-prepared students are apt to ask themselves existential questions, such as: "How do people see me here?" (e.g., as competent vs. incompetent; as valued vs. not valued) (Goodenow, 1993; Walton & Brady, 2017). Indeed, how an individual believes they are seen (or could be seen) by other people with authority in an institution influences how they view themselves and what they are capable of (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Steele, 1997). Such questions are not a sign of individual or group-based deficits but instead are evoked by the powerful situation of entering a new space in which one's status and reputation are uncertain. Nevertheless, how individuals answer such existential questions can have important implications for students' experiences, behaviors, and ultimate outcomes (Walton & Brady, 2017; Yeager et al., 2016).

In particular, when students respond to the question "How do people see me here?" with answers such as "solely in terms of my (low) academic performance or motivation," then it increases the likelihood of negative, self-reinforcing cycles of disengagement and poor performance (see Walton & Brady, 2017). As we explain below, such cycles can be especially pronounced for students who are

forced to contend with societal stereotypes or stigma about their groups, such as students from racial, ethnic, gender, or socioeconomic groups marginalized in educational settings (e.g., Black or Latinx students in the USA). Such students may be given reason by their educational environments to question whether peers and instructors will apply societal stereotypes and biases to them. This questioning can create greater uncertainty about whether other people in school view them or their abilities in a negative light (Brannon & Lin, 2021; Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2007). In particular, we review research on stereotype threat and social identity threat that suggests students whose identities have been marginalized can experience at least two broad types of concerns: (1) that others may see them as limited in potential or (2) that others may narrowly define them in terms of their performance on a specific task or domain. These two social identity concerns are prominent in diverse student populations and can undermine other motivational supports if not considered.

How can educators address these social identity concerns and spark more positive, recursive cycles of engagement and learning? Our review of the social-psychological literature led us to the following proposal: the complex set of instructional best practices growing out of the vast literature can, to a large degree, be organized around the extent to which they communicate two relevant messages to students: (1) *inclusive expectations* “I recognize your potential for academic growth”, and (2) *broad regard*, “I regard you as a whole person, with a range of personal values, social identities, and relationships”. Our proposed simplifying framework is designed to help educators create more inclusive and equitable schools and classrooms by counteracting the “narrowing of self” that an identity-threatening environment can create.

We propose that when educators communicate both inclusive expectations and broad regard—when they convey that all students have academic potential and that students are multifaceted human beings with unique perspectives and social lives—then it can “expand the self,” especially among students with marginalized social identities, potentially starting a more positive recursive cycle of motivation, engagement, learning, and equitable performance. In particular, inclusive expectations expand the self from a current, potentially low-performance self, to a more competent, higher-performing self in the future. Broad regard expands the self from an academic-only identity to include other important values and social identities.

In this paper, we focus on teachers, rather than on other ecological systems such as the broader school or neighborhood, because teachers are not only traditional gatekeepers of success (by assigning grades), but also set the rules and norms for how students engage with the material and with each other. Therefore, teachers have an important influence on how students’ identities are threatened or supported. But the overall framework should, in theory, apply to other relationships as well.

We note that in drawing attention to inclusive expectations and broad regard, our goal is not to propose another comprehensive theory of motivation—there are many powerful and well-articulated theories in the literature. Rather, our goal is to present a relevant and research-based framework that researchers and educators can use to

organize the practices that improve the educational experiences of diverse student groups (also see Anderman, 2020).

Why do we need a simplifying framework? We suspect that much basic research in psychology can be too complex, with too many competing solutions, for working educators (especially novice educators) to act on. This complexity is particularly notable in the proliferation of interventions that have shown promising effects in the classroom. Students' academic performance can improve when students reflect on the relevance of course material (Canning et al., 2018), complete activities that showcase how intelligence can grow (Paunesku et al., 2015), hear stories of past students' struggles and how they navigated those struggles (Walton & Cohen, 2011), or think about who they might be in the future and plan for obstacles that may arise (Oyserman et al., 2006). Each of these interventions could spur a particular activity or practice in the classroom, but there are dozens of such practices an educator might implement (see Walton & Wilson, 2018; <https://www.wiseinterventions.org/>). How can teachers act on this information? We argue that what is lacking in this rich literature is a simplified framework for structuring the social components of interventions, which would better allow instructors to find relevant practices for their classrooms.

Therefore, our framework aims to transform questions such as "How do I improve my relationships with students?" or "How do I enhance students' feelings of competence?" into specific tasks such as "How can I convey what *I personally believe* about all of my students' potential to learn and grow?" Testifying to the applicability of the framework, a recent pilot study (Smith et al., 2022b), summarized below, showed that providing this framework to novice instructors enabled them to implement practices that conveyed inclusive expectations and broad regard to students, resulting in improved classroom experiences across student identity groups. This commentary seeks to build on the advances presented in the articles of this special issue, which emphasize the role of the social context at multiple levels of analysis, by adding an actionable and practical framework that can help busy educators improve upon their instructional practices.

Theoretical Foundations of the "Narrow" and "Expanded" Self in the Classroom

Our emphasis on students' questions such as "How do people see me?" is rooted in the notion that peoples' impressions of how others see them shape what they believe about themselves (Cooley, 1902). As we described above, students come into an educational context with many important questions about who they can be there (see Walton & Brady, 2017) and may look to others to help answer these questions. In an active state of questioning, students could bring different aspects of their multifaceted identities to mind (see Leary & Tangney, 2012; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Indeed, salient aspects of the self or of one's identity tend to be activated by cues in the environment. For example, a cross-race conversation in school could activate one's racial identity, or entering a male-dominated space could activate a female gender identity. As a result, people's active views of themselves can change across settings that differ in their identity-relevant cues (Markus & Wurf, 1987; McConnell, 2011). This process

occurs in schools and across classrooms, as it does in other settings (e.g., the home or the workplace). Further, because different teacher practices make different aspects of self or identity salient (e.g., when teachers say “good morning boys and girls;” Bigler & Liben, 2007), then different teacher behaviors can shift students’ construals (or active perceptions) of their classroom identities (e.g., their self-perceptions and relevant behaviors of themselves in the classroom) and their future identities (e.g., their goals and expectations for the future) (Destin, 2020; Oyserman & Lewis, 2017).

Here, we define a person’s identity as simply the collection of personal and social attributes that differentiate them and their groups and connect them to others (Brewer, 1991; Master et al., 2016). This includes group-based identities (e.g., Asian, first in family to go to college, or female), social roles (e.g., student, sister, or athlete), desired future roles (e.g., doctor, parent, or leader), important values (e.g., equality, enjoying life, or being ambitious), and many other aspects of self. Social identities are the subset of identities that are ascribed to a person and may influence a person’s social interactions with others. Thus, an individual may have social identities based on how others see them (or may see them), because these identities influence their social interactions regardless of whether the individual identifies themselves in a particular way.

School is a context in which social identities can contract or narrow because school in general is highly evaluative (i.e., emphasizing grades, standardized test scores, or advanced course-taking). As such, students might feel they are seen *only* as students whose value is defined by their current performance. As elaborated by Expandable Selves Theory (Walton et al., 2012), when people are constrained to a static, narrow identity that is threatened or impugned (e.g., when performance is or could be viewed as low) then it can undermine feelings of belonging and reduce resilience to challenges. Expandable Selves Theory furthermore suggests that when students can maintain “expansive” identities, in which they are connected to multifaceted aspects of their current self (i.e., different social identities) and future selves (i.e., who they could be), students are better equipped to weather the storm of threats to their purely academic identities. For example, when students encounter an academic challenge with a “narrow” sense that their value in the social context comes solely from their purported academic ability, they may ruminate on this experience until it becomes a global threat to their value as a person (Beilock et al., 2017; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele et al., 2002). But if students encountered that same challenge with an “expanded” self, they might respond more adaptively to the challenge (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009), because they did not construe that solitary academic challenge as a reflection of their entire social worth (Binning et al., 2021).

We emphasize that the narrowing or expanding of the self is not only an intrapersonal process. It is also sensitive to how others (such as educators) appear to perceive a student (from the student’s perspective). Thus, the narrow versus expanded self depends on the social context—particularly the actions and words of educators and how these actions and words are construed by students. Although peers, parents, and others certainly play a role (Osterman, 2000; Starr et al., 2022), educators play an important role because they are the evaluators of academic progress and can shape the classroom culture (Allen et al., 2018; see also Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993). For example, teachers can influence the climate for interactions

within the classroom (Kilday & Ryan, 2022; Robinson, 2022), they can build on cultural assets and familial practices (Starr et al., 2022), and they can provide students with communal learning opportunities to enact meaningful contributions (Gray et al., 2020, 2022). Given this role, teachers have substantial power over students' salient identities in school. Educators can thus address students' social identity concerns when they "expand" students' sense of self beyond feeling like "just a number" (i.e., their grade in a course).

Although educators may hope students view instructor practices in an optimal light—that a teacher provides essay feedback because they believe students can improve, or asks students about their lives out of an authentic desire to get to know them better—negative interpretations can also occur that may undermine any potential benefits of these practices (Cohen et al., 1999; Wyatt & Haskett, 2001; Yeager et al., 2014b). That is, there is substantial *attributional ambiguity* in the classroom that students must resolve—ambiguity about why an instructor does a certain action and what that action may reveal about how they view students (Walton & Brady, 2017). This ambiguity is especially prevalent when students are from members of groups that are stereotyped or stigmatized in school.

Students from marginalized groups, such as Black or Latinx students in the USA or women in highly quantitative fields, might worry that others see them through the lens of a stereotyped identity (i.e., under *stereotype threat*; Steele et al., 2002). This threat, based in part on stereotyping, underrepresentation, or devaluation in academic settings, can ambiguate the meaning of everyday events in school. That is, students who belong to a racial, gender, or other group that is negatively stereotyped may worry that people will apply the stereotype to them if they do not immediately succeed on an academic task, eliciting questions about whether others may think "people like me" can't succeed or will be seen through a narrow lens (e.g., "Will they recognize and value all parts of who I am?"). These stereotypes, and the resulting "threat in the air," can permeate educational settings (see Steele, 1997).

Despite the many challenges noted above, in the following sections we argue that educators have an opportunity to convey that they see students in an "expansive" way along two distinct dimensions to alleviate social identity concerns: They can communicate that they view students (1) as capable of future academic success (inclusive expectations) and (2) as being more than just their academic success and failure (broad regard).

Inclusive Expectations Address Meta-concern #1: "Am I Seen as Limited in my Academic Potential?"

Laboratory and field research has suggested that addressing students' concerns about whether they are perceived as having low academic potential can mitigate social identity threat. In a seminal study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) increased teachers' expectations for a randomized subset of children in their class by providing results of an exam that suggested that certain students over the next year

would have large academic gains. Students in 1st and 2nd grade randomly identified as these “bloomers” to their teachers showed greater gains in IQ over the year compared to their peers. Subsequent meta-analyses and narrative reviews of this research found effects among students who were the least likely to experience high expectations (students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students of color) at moments when their status and ability were most called into question (i.e., early in a school transition) (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Raudenbush, 1984). Although intriguing, this research did not examine teachers’ visible behaviors nor students’ *perceptions* of teachers’ differential treatment, both of which presumably drive effects of teacher expectancies. Follow-up research, however, found that when interacting with students who purportedly had greater growth potential (the “bloomers”), teachers were more friendly, gave students more challenging tasks, and allowed them to take more time when answering questions, which in turn impacted students’ academic gains (see Harris & Rosenthal, 1985; Rosenthal, 1981 for review). Teachers’ expectations were also more strongly related to student success in classrooms where students reported differences in teachers’ behaviors (Brattesani et al., 1984).

This research relates to a broader lesson that was supported by more recent studies: Teacher behaviors such as consoling students (e.g., “It’s okay, not everybody can be a math person”) or assigning easier homework after a poor test score, can lead students to perceive low expectations from the teacher; these students in turn may have lower expectations for themselves (Rattan et al., 2012). These findings reinforce the idea that *conveying* high expectations for all (rather than teachers privately *holding* these high expectations) can impact students’ performance.

It is also critical that high expectations are applied to all students, not just a subset of exceptionally talented students (like in the original Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968 study). We call this idea *inclusive expectations*, which we define as teachers’ recognition of all students’ potential for academic growth. The use of the word *inclusive* is meant to connote expectations for *all* students’ learning and growth, regardless of students’ prior knowledge or social identity group. When teachers communicate inclusive expectations, it addresses students’ concerns about whether they are defined solely by their current academic performance.

Inclusive Expectations and the Expanded Self

Laboratory studies illustrate how teachers’ communication of inclusive expectations can expand students’ sense of self from an exclusively “here and now” self (my current performance) to a “desired possible self” (the performance I could attain in the future) (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). In particular, we examine prior research on social identity threat and describe methods of providing inclusive expectations for students’ academic potential that alleviate this threat.

In many stereotype threat experiments (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995), students take an evaluative test in which they are only assessed on their academic

ability at one time point. When students perform under conditions of being evaluated on one dimension (their test performance), it can cause them to show disparities in performance if they are from negatively stereotyped groups. And yet subtle differences in how activities were presented by experimenters have either reduced or eliminated group-based disparities; these manipulations conveyed that the experimenter had a more expansive view of a participant (e.g., “I know you are academically capable and your value as a person is not dependent on your performance”) rather than solely their academic performance or specific identity (e.g., “I see you as representative of your group and I am only interested in documenting your performance”; Good et al., 2008; Gresky et al., 2005; Johns et al., 2005). In doing so, these manipulations can clarify that experimenters don’t have a negative or fixed stereotypical view of the student. Much of stereotype threat research has focused on Black and Latinx students and female students in STEM classrooms, but has also been documented in other groups, including those from lower SES backgrounds and older adults (see Liu et al., 2021). To illustrate how treatments can attenuate the impact of social identity threat on academic performance, we draw from research examining college-age women under stereotype threat while completing STEM-relevant tasks (see Wang & Degol, 2017).

Providing inclusive expectations for growth or performance can reduce achievement disparities in exam performance. For example, when experimenters framed a test as promoting learning rather than being evaluative (Alter et al., 2010), it clarified that the experimenter had expectations that the participant was able to grow in the subject, rather than having a static view of the participants’ current capabilities. Other manipulations that conveyed that a test administrator believed that women and men are equally capable in STEM produced similar equality-promoting effects (Good et al., 2008; McIntyre et al., 2003; Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Spencer et al., 1999), suggesting that women benefit when they feel they are not seen as limited based on their gender identity. Moreover, when experimenters provided information on stereotype threat and how test anxiety could arise from societal stereotypes, women also performed better (Johns et al., 2005). In this case, the experimenter seemed to recognize that the participant’s performance on the task could underestimate their true academic potential. Even when expectations not directly relevant to societal stereotypes were provided by experimenters (i.e., “women are better psychology participants”), these expectations improved women’s performance (McIntyre et al., 2003).

Interventions that Illustrate the Effects of Inclusive Expectations

In one intervention experiment that provided messages of inclusive expectations (Yeager et al., 2014b), a hand-written note was attached to an assigned paper turned back to students. Students randomly assigned to a treatment group received a note that gave students a particular understanding of the feedback the teacher had given on the paper (“I’m giving you these comments because I have

very high expectations and I know that you can reach them”). Students in a control group received an uninformative note (“I’m giving you these comments so that you’ll have feedback on your paper”). Black students in the former condition, who had insight into the teacher’s expectations for success, were more likely to turn in a revised draft of the essay when revisions were optional and earned higher scores on the final version when revisions were required (Yeager et al., 2014b).

Other interventions have targeted students’ personally-held growth mindsets of intelligence, defined as their beliefs that intelligence can be developed with time and effort (see Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Yeager & Dweck, 2012 for review). For example, students who were taught a growth mindset of intelligence tended to earn higher grades, and interventions that have targeted students’ growth mindset can improve academic success (particularly for lower-achieving students or those from under-represented groups; Blackwell et al., 2007; Paunesku et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2022). Interestingly, the benefits of students’ private mindsets depend on their social contexts. For example, students who learned a growth mindset from an intervention later looked to the educational context (e.g., the teacher-led classroom culture) to assess whether they could act on their mindsets (Yeager et al., 2022). This suggests that students’ perceptions of how their abilities are viewed by their teachers can be a critical element in the effectiveness of mindset interventions. Applying this finding to interpret a previous large-scale replication of growth mindset effects (Yeager et al., 2016), which built growth mindset intervention materials into a college pre-orientation checklist, it is intriguing to ask how important it was that the activity reflected the ethos of the university (i.e., the “University of Texas Mindset”). Did this make the intervention more effective at increasing full-time enrollment rates for students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Yeager et al., 2016)? Moreover, students assigned to receive treatment messages reported an increased perception that professors give feedback to help students improve and grow (Yeager et al., 2016, supplemental materials p. 40). This provides indirect evidence that a growth mindset, with its message that one’s current ability or performance does not define one’s future, can help expand students’ sense of self when they are evaluated by college instructors.

In another study, students who were told by an instructor during a mock lecture that “Everyone can learn statistics if they try” compared to those told “Not everyone is good at statistics” reported a greater generalized growth mindset of intelligence, not related specifically to the domain of statistics (Smith et al., 2018). This study is intriguing because it documents how one instructor’s expectations in the local setting can impact students’ reports about the global nature of intelligence. In line with this, a recent intervention found that when instructors were involved in providing a growth mindset intervention to middle school students, then students reported greater growth mindsets and struggling students earned higher course grades (Porter et al., 2022). These findings suggest that students’ private mindsets, and their perceptions of the expectations they are held to by educators, are related in important ways.

Broad Regard Addresses Meta-concern #2: “Am I seen as Narrowly Defined by my Academic Success?”

Educators’ focus on inclusive expectations for growth and learning, although important, cannot fully address students’ social identity concerns. Indeed, many qualitative studies have noted that students appreciate teachers who don’t “just teach” (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 387), and teachers who make them feel like “a person in the world, not just a student that they have to help or teach” (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004, p. 62). Some instructors may explicitly state these sentiments (e.g., “What do you need as a human being and also as a student?”; Schademan & Thompson, 2016, p. 202). Yet for many students, school can often feel like a place where many aspects of who they are must be left at the door (see Valenzuela, 1999).

This recognition of students’ broader lives, rather than limiting instructors’ focus to academic success, builds on a tradition of scholars who have proposed that students being authentically valued as “whole people” in the classroom is critical for supporting diverse student populations (e.g., Thompson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999; Ware, 2006). It highlights the notion that when people feel they are not constrained to one identity, but rather are seen as a person with multiple values, identities, and relationships, this feeling of breadth has a range of benefits. First, it makes students more resilient to academic challenges by making those challenges less threatening to a student’s overall integrity as a capable person (see Critcher & Dunning, 2015). When seen as only a student, a failure to learn material could reflect inadequacies as a student, and thus (with a narrow construal of the self), as a person in general. In this narrowed state, students may respond by abandoning their role as a student to maintain their self-integrity (Woodcock et al., 2012), or attempt to “double down” in their academic efforts to restore this self-integrity, but may do so in maladaptive ways such as inflexibly perseverating on tasks (Carr & Steele, 2009). Connections to a broader self can mitigate this all-or-nothing threat, encouraging more fruitful responses to academic challenges.

In addition, making connections between valued identities and a particular setting may permit students to see school as worthwhile (see Hulleman et al., 2010; Rozek et al., 2017). In doing so, it can make academic efforts seem like a path for achieving meaningful goals (see Yeager et al., 2014a) and allow for greater coherence between students’ social and academic goals and behaviors (see Liem & Senko, 2022). Moreover, broader representations of self may allow for more opportunities to forge meaningful relationships with others and promote prosocial behaviors (Crocker et al., 2008; Lindsay & Creswell, 2014; Shnabel et al., 2013). In fact, people often form social connections because of a broadened self. They connect over shared interests, values, and perspectives. If students feel defined by their score on an exam, they will be limited to the extent they can form connections to others.

Broad Regard and the Expanded Self

Prior laboratory research shows how social identity threat can be mitigated through procedures that suggest test administrators see participants as more than just their

academic capabilities. As above, we focus on studies that examined gendered identities in STEM contexts, but the same lessons should, in theory, apply to other marginalized identities. For example, when experimenters asked students to draw large “self-concept” maps with many nodes connecting the concept of “me” with a network of attributes (e.g., school, hobbies, friends, etc.), women performed better on a subsequent math test compared to those who drew more limited or no self-concept maps (Gresky et al., 2005). When experimenters asked participants to complete other activities where they reflect on or disclose non-academic aspects of their lives, women showed improved performance on STEM-relevant tasks (Ambady et al., 2004; McGlone & Aronson, 2006; Taylor & Walton, 2011; see also Rydell & Boucher, 2010). Women also performed better even when asked to report both negative and positive aspects of self (Ambady et al., 2004). That is, participants under threat—who have greater reason to believe others may see only their narrow identities—often perform better at the task at hand when individuated by experimenters who acknowledge multiple aspects of their identities.

We propose that in the experiments described above, participants were asked to consider aspects of self they have certainly thought about previously—their identities, interests, characteristics, and values. Yet these manipulations also communicated information relevant to social identities—that is, how the experimenter viewed them. We propose that, when the manipulations reduced the effect of social identity threat, it was in part because they showed that experimenters recognized participant’s capabilities and their multifaceted lives, rather than solely documenting participants’ performance on an academic task. These manipulations shifted students’ construals of what their evaluators thought about them.

Interventions that Illustrate the Effects of Broad Regard

Field experiments, which have tracked effects on performance over time, also demonstrate the importance of educators recognizing students’ lives beyond academics. These interventions conveyed broad regard—that students were regarded as whole people with a variety of personal values, social identities, and relationships. For example, during *values affirmation* interventions (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006), students are asked to reflect on non-academic values important to them (such as creativity, religious values, or relationships with family and friends). These brief writing activities have been found to increase students’ learning and performance if they are from groups that are experiencing stereotype threat (e.g., Borman et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2006; Cook et al., 2012). In the prototypical procedure, teachers deliver values-affirmation activities several times during the year (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006; Sherman et al., 2013). We note that this follow-up raises the possibility in students’ minds that the teacher not only read about the students’ values, but also kept track of their values so that they could ask students more about them in the future. This potentially signaled that these teachers saw students as more than just students with solely academic lives, but also appreciated their broader (more “expanded”) selves. In line with this idea, a meta-analysis found that values-affirmation activities have the greatest benefits to students’ academic success when they are presented as a classroom assignment by teachers, rather than,

for example, something created by researchers for a study (Wu et al., 2021). A recent study also found that affirmation activities can shift students' positive perceptions of their teachers, but only when presented as coming from those teachers (Smith et al., 2021). That is, simply completing the activity was not enough for students to perceive that their teachers saw them in a more expansive light—the values affirmation activity also needed to be linked to students' experiences with teachers in their classrooms. Thus, values affirmation interventions can convey broad regard by communicating that instructors are interested in students' perspectives and values beyond their performance on assignments.

A recent intervention with college students (Smith et al., 2022a) elucidates that it is not necessary for students to disclose broader aspects of self to instructors, nor have instructors learn about these aspects of self, for broad regard messaging to be effective. That is, instructors can signal a recognition and interest in broader aspects of students' identities without eliciting information about the student. In this study, students were randomly assigned to receive one of three messages about the purpose of office hours in an introductory psychology course (Smith et al., 2022a). Students receiving one set of control messages were not told why instructors provided office hours. Students in a second control group were simply told that office hours were provided to answer students' academic questions and discuss academic topics. Treatment messages, in contrast, emphasized that office hours are intended to support students holistically because the instructor cared about students' broader values and goals in life. In contrast to control messages, first-generation students and students with a marginalized racial-ethnic identity who received treatment messages earned higher grades in the course, reducing group-based achievement disparities by 50% (Smith et al., 2022a). Interestingly, this improvement in grades occurred even though students were no more likely to attend office hours with the treatment message. It wasn't greater contact or academic coaching that made the difference. Instead, it was a message that acknowledged and welcomed students' multifaceted lives into the classroom.

Another way to recognize students' lives is, paradoxically, to highlight the importance of one aspect of self that may already be salient and even stigmatized or stereotyped. Part of recognizing the breadth of students' identities is recognizing the strengths, assets, and connections that they can draw from every one of those identities. Students can derive benefits when they take pride and feel connection with those identities (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009), and use these identities and communities to navigate societally imposed barriers and biases (Starr et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2022). For example, after Black students took an ethnic studies course that highlighted a national history of racism and discrimination, they had greater academic success and well-being (Bonilla et al., 2021; Brannon & Lin, 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017). In a set of studies with European refugees, primarily from middle eastern countries who were stigmatized, participants read messages endorsed by universities that clarified how their refugee status had helped prior students build useful skills and allowed them to be successful in their university (Bauer et al., 2021). This message and a reflection exercise increased refugees' engagement in online courses over a year (Bauer et al., 2021). Another activity, in which lower SES college students reflected on how their backgrounds were assets to both school and society, helped students to view academic challenges as surmountable (Hernandez et al., 2021).

Without recognizing and celebrating these identities, many students may have quietly resisted negative stereotypes in ways that were harmful or maladaptive, such as deidentifying with the threatened identity or minimizing their academic identities (Pronin et al., 2004; Woodcock et al., 2012). Instead, providing students with opportunities to reject negative representations and gain strength from their identities can rehumanize individuals (Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016; Yosso, 2005), in turn allowing them to respond more adaptively to challenges (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2012).

Addressing Both Social Identity Concerns Simultaneously

Addressing both social identity concerns, of being seen as either limited in academic potential (via *inclusive expectations*) or narrowly defined through academic selves (via *broad regard*), may be fruitful. These social signals can reinforce each other in meaningful ways and build the basis for greater motivation, well-being, and performance. Many existing interventions blend these two social identity concerns in impactful ways. In one intervention (Walton et al., 2021), teachers were provided self-introductions from students returning from juvenile detention. These introductions included the student's description of their personal values and challenges they face that the adult can help them with, encouraging the recipients of these messages to see students in both a broad and growth-oriented light. These messages reduced recidivism rates. In an experimental follow-up, these messages from students led teachers to feel more love and respect for those students and raised teachers' expectations for students' academic and long-term success (Walton et al., 2021). Other interventions that draw from distinct theoretical backgrounds and research traditions may similarly convey elements of both expectations for academic growth and broad regard for students' multifaceted lives. Even if not discussed as the theoretical mechanism underlying the effectiveness of interventions, participants who complete intervention activities may feel that administrators or instructors recognize the expansive nature of students' identities and potential.

Helping Educators Use the Simplified Framework

From the perspective of an educator who wants to build positive, supportive relationships, where do they start? We discussed above how instructors might adapt activities from the toolkit of psychological interventions that have been found effective in educational settings. There are also several promising practices that have been developed by instructors and researchers, such as those presented by Gray and colleagues (2022). There are also rich motivational frameworks, such as the one presented by Skinner and colleagues (2022) that present an organized array of motivational supports. Across these sources of information, there are an overwhelming number of practices that an educator *could* do, and yet they seem to require psychological expertise to determine which of those practices might provide the greatest levers of support. If we intend to get high-leverage practices

into the hands of educators, we must provide simplified frameworks for navigating and utilizing the wealth of practices available.

We start with the notion that instructors do not require a comprehensive theory of student psychology to have an impact—most instructors have little formal training in psychological processes, yet still find effective ways to build student motivation, well-being, and positive relationships with their students. On the other hand, instructors also need some scaffolding to be able to categorize and build a suite of interconnected practices to effectively implement (see Robinson, 2022, for related discussion). Some easy-to-implement practices that are recommended to instructors can backfire if the social meaning behind that practice is not considered, such as how a handshake greeting from a male or female instructor may be interpreted differently (Wilson et al., 2009). This leads to the question: How can we provide instructors with a framework of high-leverage practices, without requiring teachers to first earn a PhD in psychology?

Initial Evidence from Instructor Trainings

Instructors are well-positioned to address social identity concerns and build recursive cycles of engagement and motivation when these concerns don't loom as large in students' minds. In line with what we have noted earlier, practices that convey both inclusive expectations and broad regard directly address social identity concerns. A recent instructor training program provides evidence that this heuristic framework of addressing student identity concerns can be powerfully utilized by novice university instructors (see Smith et al., 2022b).

This training recruited STEM undergraduate learning assistants (ULAs) of a large introductory Chemistry course. These ULAs were students who had succeeded in the course previously and signed up to lead small-group discussion sections for course credit. Most had no prior training in teaching. Half of the ULAs who signed up for the training were assigned to a control group that received business-as-usual training for ULAs, which consisted of two meetings per week to review course material and discuss leadership and communications skills, ethics, and professionalism. The other half of ULAs were randomly assigned to receive an additional once-weekly training that provided a framework of conveying inclusive expectations and broad regard to build more inclusive and motivating discussion sections. This additional training provided ULAs examples of research-based practices that convey inclusive expectations and broad regard (as reviewed above). ULAs were then asked to brainstorm opportunities where they might communicate these messages to students. A key component of this training was to create a collaborative environment where ULAs had ample time to share and discuss among each other, with weekly reflections to share how any practices they implemented were received by students. Near the end of the term, ULAs created and presented resources to share what they learned with future ULAs.

At the end of the program, ULAs were asked to report on both inclusive expectation and broad regard practices, by answering questions such as “How often did you say or do something that encouraged students to share things about

their lives beyond academics?” In parallel, the students in the discussion sections answered questions about whether they experienced those same practices (e.g., “My ULA said or did something that encouraged students to share things about their lives beyond academics”).

There were two particularly relevant findings from this training. First, ULAs were able to effectively implement practices that were visible and salient to students. ULAs randomly assigned to the supplemental fellowship reported greater use of broad regard practices, and their students reported greater use of these practices by ULAs. Second, students also reported better experiences in the discussion sections including being more engaged, motivated, and comfortable. These effects were especially large for Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Native American students, as compared to their White and Asian peers, thereby narrowing group disparities in the student experience. This provides initial evidence that a framework of addressing social identity concerns can be effective in developing and using meaningful practices in the classroom.

Ensuring Practices Are Relevant to the Population and Context

For any educational psychology research to be relevant in the coming decades, it must speak to the experiences of diverse student populations and contexts. This challenge is elaborated by Gray and colleagues (2022), who draw a contrast between theorists who strive for *generality* across contexts, and those who strive for locally informed, *targeted* approaches that speak to particular student populations. The authors go on to argue that “targeted perspectives are valuable because they provide texture and specificity to discussions about motivational support by speaking squarely to issues of race, ethnicity, and culture” (Gray et al., 2022). Starr and colleagues (2022) similarly note the limitations of using frameworks that do not fully account for race/ethnicity and culture, and how this can lead to biased conceptions of how we define motivation and develop the supports provided. Graham and colleagues (2022) make a similar point that existing measures may be inadequate for capturing the experiences of diverse student populations. Many scholars have critiqued how dominant motivational frameworks do not center the unique experiences that diverse groups face in schools (see Matthews & López, 2020; Wigfield & Koenka, 2020; Zusho & Kumar, 2018). Yet salient experiences of stereotyping, marginalization, and the unique assets that students bring into the classroom are particularly relevant in theoretical frameworks (see Brannon & Lin, 2021; Gray et al., 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Our focus on social identity concerns builds from decades of scholarship on creating inclusive classroom cultures and supporting diverse student populations. A focus on social identity concerns can position instructors to address students’ meaning-making systems by explicitly stating how they view their students (e.g., “I have high expectations for your academic potential...”) and link practices and context to give credence to this belief (e.g., “...which is why I made this test challenging”). Moreover, relevant practices can be chosen and adapted across settings based on instructors’ expertise in their local context, which may allow for both fidelity to

meaningful psychological experiences and flexibility in practices that provide those experiences. In attempting to address the student concern “Am I seen as narrowly defined by my academic success?” one teacher may directly ask about the interests or values of their students (e.g., Cohen et al., 2006). Another instructor may build interdependent and communal opportunities into course activities, such as those proposed by Gray and colleagues (2022). A third instructor may provide reasons for existing classroom structures to clarify that they hope to learn more about students’ broader lives, such as explaining why instructors provide times to meet with students outside of class (e.g., Smith et al., 2022a). These practices, on the surface, may feel quite distinct. Yet all are in service of answering the same social identity concern. It should be noted that much of the literature reviewed in the current commentary draws from post-secondary settings, and more research is necessary to understand how social identity concerns play out across students’ developmental and educational trajectories. However, given this flexibility in implementation, we believe social identity concerns are well-positioned to provide a framework that can be adapted with fidelity across contexts.

Conclusion

Using different theoretical lenses and focusing on different drivers of academic motivation, a strong consensus emerges from the contributed articles of this special issue: social processes are critical for student motivation and performance. In the current commentary, we describe how educators might focus on addressing students’ social identity concerns (i.e., how students are viewed by instructors) to discover and use impactful research-based practices that “expand the self,” potentially creating more positive cycles of motivation, engagement, learning, and performance. We document the theoretical basis for two student meta-concerns: whether instructors (and other influential people) will (1) see them as limited in academic potential and (2) narrowly define them solely in terms of academic success. We draw from stereotype threat procedures (and the manipulations that alleviate threat) and interventions that have been effective in improving students’ performance to suggest ways in which instructors can effectively target these concerns. Namely, instructors can provide messages of inclusive expectations (conveying that they believe in all students’ academic potential) and broad regard (conveying that they see students as more than their academic success). In combination, we suggest that ensuring students feel they are seen in an “expansive” light—as academically capable and more than just their academic success or failure—can help build more inclusive and equitable school environments.

We hope this framework can provide a novel lens on the social processes and contexts presented by the contributing authors and spur questions that can further build conceptual and practical developments. As one example, contributing authors describe the role of multiple social ecologies (e.g., school, home, peer groups; see Skinner et al., 2022), such as how parents’ beliefs and behaviors have the potential to enhance academic motivation (Starr et al., 2022). How might parents or other influential adults (e.g., coaches, religious leaders) partner with teachers to further address salient social

identity concerns and enhance the effectiveness of related teaching practices? Other contributions to the special issue provide impactful frameworks that structure complex social constructs (e.g., Liem & Senko, 2022; Park & Ramirez, 2022), including caring teacher-student relationships (Wentzel, 2022). Could social identity concerns provide a simplified structure to our conceptualizations of how teacher care is experienced by students in the classroom? Relatedly, how might practices that convey inclusive expectations and broad regard provide a foundation on which meaningful teacher-student interactions and relationships can flourish? Many contributing authors also focus on other salient experiences of students with marginalized identities (e.g., Graham et al., 2022) such as the importance of providing classroom opportunities in which students can contribute to others (Gray et al., 2022). To what extent might instructors' attempts at providing inclusive expectation and broad regard backfire if not considerate of the specific culture and history of the student population? And how might teachers be equipped to build messages that are more attuned to their students' experiences?

In summary, all contributing authors propose a range of fruitful investigations, and we believe the research stimulated by this special issue has the potential to transform educational spaces. The challenge ahead of us as educators and researchers is to discover the most meaningful aspects of the social environment that provide relevant and high-leverage supports to promote learning, motivation, and well-being for all students.

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