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Exploring a nuanced understanding of safety in the classroom

Leslie Lei Luck
San Jose State University

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EXPLORING A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING
OF “SAFETY” IN THE CLASSROOM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Leslie Lei Luck

August 2008

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Dr. Deanna Fassett

Dr. Anne Marie Todd

Dr. Jay Baglia

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

07/07/08

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF “SAFETY” IN THE CLASSROOM

by Leslie L. Luck

“Safety” in the classroom is not a concrete topic discussed in the field of communication. In the field of communication, there is a limited understanding of the idea of a “safe” classroom. The purpose of this thesis was to explore a nuanced understanding of safety through focus group interviews. The participants consisted of undergraduate students and Graduate Teaching Associates. From the focus group interviews, three themes emerged: safety as individualized, safety as the sole responsibility of the teacher, and safety involves discomfort as well as comfort. Having analyzed the data, recommendations for students, teachers, and researchers emerged. This project found a nuanced understanding of “safety.” “Safety in the classroom must be co-created by teachers and students.

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My fellow Graduate Teaching Associates became my friends; the opportunity to share our unique experiences as new teachers and support each other both inspired and educated me.

I would not have made it through graduate school without my family. My husband has supported me through everything, and my children were patient and encouraging. My mother-in-law’s help with childcare allowed me time to write, and my father and sisters’ belief in me kept me going. Finally, without my mother’s encouragement to pursue a master’s degree, I would never have gone to graduate school; she always said, “You can do anything if you put your mind to it.” And so I lovingly dedicate this thesis to her.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Safety in the classroom is more complex than it seems. Even as I explore my own experiences of feeling safe or unsafe in the classroom, there is no certain or fixed understanding of what safety means. For example, when I mention “safety,” I don’t just mean safe places, where everyone knows where to gather during a fire alarm or how to “duck and cover” during a major earthquake. I also mean safe spaces, where students and teachers can openly disclose bits of their lives, in order to help others and to gain deeper, more personal, understandings. As a Graduate Teaching Associate, as both a student and a teacher, I want to encourage my students to take risks and share their own thoughts on sensitive topics like race, sexual orientation, faith, and socioeconomic class. Students might cringe at hearing others talk about experiencing discrimination or oppression, but these exchanges are important for learning more about one another, about the ways culture and power are intertwined with communication.

As a teacher, I want all students—irrespective of their backgrounds—to feel “safe” or welcome and know their stories—uncomfortable or otherwise—are meaningful for them and for the class. Sharing stories in discussion or through performance creates a deeper learning, one you could not experience from a textbook; as bell hooks observes, this learning “...cannot be acquired through books...to me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the ‘authority of experience’ but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance” (hooks, 1994, p. 90). Many students would prefer unthreatening or unchallenging stories, tending to adopt a colorblind approach to race and ethnicity and avoiding discussions they perceive to be difficult or irrelevant (Giroux,

2003). There is a certain kind of safety to this approach, a denial or conflict avoidance that can create a feeling of security and comfort. Instead, I argue we should explore safety as something more complex, something that isn't readily equated with comfort and ease. What can students and teachers do to create "safety" for the classroom? Moreover, what does safety mean for the field of communication?

In what follows, I will share some of my own stories, the experiences that influence my own relationship to the topic or issue of safety. My hope is that readers will think about their own stories, about what they feel it means to have a "safe" place to learn, where classroom participants can share meaningful experiences and teach each other. In this sort of environment, the students may even teach the teacher, as well as each other. Our understandings of safety in the classroom do not begin with college curricula; our understandings are informed by all our experiences, in and outside of the classroom, from the time we are very young. The stories I share here constitute an "ethnographic narrative" (Goodall, 2000) of my personal thoughts and feelings from the past. I hope you will join me in this journey; I hope you will consider your own, most formative experiences of classroom climate. Some of the names in these stories are fictitious, but the stories are nonetheless real and I will never forget them. These stories illuminate different, conflicting understandings of "safety."

Feeling Bad for Keisha

I am in the fifth grade with Mrs. Stern. I enter her classroom and feel the teacher's anger. Her lips are pursed and her eyes are squinted. Her dark black eyebrows arch up and her face is as red as my old Strawberry Shortcake doll's hair. She paces back and

forth for about a minute and then suddenly turns to us students and yells, “YOU ARE ALL A BUNCH OF LITTLE ASSHOLES!” She yells so loud that I can feel my heart jump out of my chest. “Our friend Keisha is not here right now because someone said something very mean to her, having to do with the color of her skin...If anyone ever makes fun of you because you are different, you have the right to punch them in the nose!” Several minutes go by as a few students cry quietly. Mrs. Stern quiets down while she paces back and forth in front of the class. Keisha doesn’t come back to class. She’s upset because a boy in our class teased her in a derogatory manner because she is black. For a brief moment when Mrs. Stern tells us this story, I feel uncomfortable. My heart races, and I feel bad for Keisha. I want to run to her, to hug her and tell her it’s OK but I know it’s not. Why is this happening in my class, and why do I want to go home now?

Mrs. Stern’s outburst happened several years ago; not only can I remember it as if it happened yesterday, but I am glad it happened. Mrs. Stern was able to express her feelings even though it made me feel uncomfortable. And, even though I was uncomfortable at the time, I also understood that Mrs. Stern cared about Keisha, cared about me, cared about us all. This story reminds me that our understandings of “safety” are a function of difference; we all come from various cultural backgrounds, and we all need to feel heard and protected. This “safety” was both uncomfortable and strangely comfortable at the same time. It was uncomfortable in that the teacher yelled and created

an awkward tension. Yet, the teacher also vulnerably opened up and expressed her own emotions to the class.

In this story about Keisha, “safety” is when the teacher took a risk and became vulnerable to her students by expressing her adamant feelings against racism. So, in essence, “safety” in the classroom was an uncomfortable feeling for the students, and perhaps for the teacher as well, but the teacher needed this space in order to express her thoughts to her students. So “safety” may not always be comfortable, and, whether effective or otherwise, there is always some type of moral that everyone in the classroom learns. Throughout life after that point, I was more aware of what was happening around me because I found myself in situations, too, where I was sidelined because I was different. However, there have also been certain instances in my undergraduate and graduate years when I noticed the classroom provided “safety” for students to share such stories.

Students, for whatever reason, may or may not share personal experiences because it involves risk taking. It’s definitely difficult to share personal stories and, mostly, people want to remain discreet. I can say that this is risk taking because we, as human beings, are afraid of what others in the classroom may think about us. Mrs. Stern could have chosen not to tell us what happened to Keisha. But instead, she chose to disclose what had happened to Keisha and even express her emotions. I think getting in trouble with school authorities was the last thing on her mind. I think, for a brief moment, her fifth grade students, including myself, may not have felt safe and definitely wanted to go home. On the other hand, this teacher disclosed her hatred for racism;

though it meant taking a risk, she wanted her students to know where she stood about racism.

Many people would rather avoid talking about racism; it can be painful (for victims, perpetrators and bystanders alike), and people's emotions can flare as they talk about uncomfortable situations that involve race. I am Filipino and married to a White man who both wants to understand the world as I experience it and also hold to the hope that racism is no longer an issue. He does understand a little bit, but not to the extent that I see it because I live in my own brown skin and he does not. He is very supportive when I tell him things that bother me about race, like the time that White man said to me and my co-worker at the hotel, where I worked as a front desk receptionist, "Wow, are you two from here? Both of you speak English very well!" My former co-worker is Chinese, and this comment didn't bother him at the time; I am still not sure why it bothered me so much. Situations such as this one disturb me, and I am not afraid to share these stories in any classroom. I need to create "safety" for myself and those around me, and I attribute this in part to the experience I felt in Mrs. Stern's class. I acknowledge that what feels safe to me may not be—or feel—safe for other students. I want to embrace my own inner Mrs. Stern. I must do my best to create a safe classroom; I must be mindful of all the different possible understandings of safety, of people's different experiences of the classroom. Further, since safety is co-constituted in communication, it is important to talk explicitly about safety in the classroom.

Admitting Racism

I am at a local community college, in a class on intercultural communication. We are in a huge circle discussion, and most of us are sitting on the carpet. It feels intimate and cozy. I love this class! Everyone seems so nice, open, and honest. Nice, until Mike opens his mouth. Mike is a student who doesn't talk very much. We are all talking about our own experiences with difference. One international student from Japan talks about waiting in line at a deli and practically being ignored, feeling invisible. She is clearly in line first but isn't served for an unreasonable amount of time. Mike decides he should put in his two cents. He says pompously, "I'm racist. I say racist things all the time to my friends. I don't care what anyone thinks." This, of course, causes a tense feeling within the very diverse classroom. I feel so frustrated and want to slap the guy. How could he say such a thing? Doesn't he know people have feelings? What a freakin' jerk! What a racist! And he isn't afraid to admit it! I don't know why Mike feels like he needs to say this. It's not helping the class discussion at all, and instead, it's causing major tension. I am so angry about his statement, but somehow I admire his honesty. Is this a horrible thing? Probably so, but at least I am being honest now. Later in the quarter, I truly feel that he has changed because he is civil to everyone and never says he's racist anymore. It could very well be that he decided not to disclose his candid feelings about race. Maybe he's finally concerned about others' feelings.

I feel confident in saying that there was "safety" in the classroom, something that made it possible for us to open up to our peers and empathize with them. I felt I

empathized with Mike, even though he admitted being racist. I wanted to learn more about why he said this so forcefully in class, and I still respected him as a human being. I found myself wanting to know more about him, about why he felt the way he did, about the ways in which we were similar to and different from each other.

Empathy is important for people to be able to learn from one another in the classroom, helping to create a safe classroom environment. The instructor worked with the students and engaged them in tasks that involved taking risks. For instance, we performed as racist people in front of the class, at the request of one of the student groups. Some students refused to do so and were respected if they chose not to participate in this particular exercise. One side of the room had to pretend they were members of the *Ku Klux Klan*, while the other side had to pretend to be people of color, responding to such racist comments. Students learned, in this course, to speak across and, to some extent, feel across difference. As a result, some students were moved to express their feelings about what had happened to them in the past involving racism. Some were very open in sharing risky and uncomfortable stories about race. Some people shared experiences of religious and sexual discrimination as well. The teacher pushed for performances that addressed race and encouraged the class to engage in deep discussions about racism, a topic many students did not want to broach. I can't help but wonder now: While I felt this was a safe space, did Mike? Did my classmates? In this story about Mike, I take "safety" to represent my respect for Mike, even though he admitted he was racist. While Mike felt he could express himself, at least in that moment, I could respect him and his risk without respecting the values he expressed.

Performing and Audiencing Pain

I am extremely nervous because I am about to spill most of my insecurities onto the table. I am in a communication studies seminar in feminisms, and I have to perform in a few minutes. My heart is beating so fast, and I can feel the dryness in my throat. My feet are tapping nervously, and I hope my classmates don't see that I am about to explode on the inside. I am excited. Nervous. Obnoxious. Scared. I am about to perform for about ten minutes about my life, and I am next.

"I was in the fifth grade and, this boy, I never liked this boy, he looked at me and asked, 'Why do you have a mustache?'...I was shocked. Why would he ask me this?...Women in history have suffered from hypertrichosis, a disease where they are excessively hairy. Who says women HAVE to wax their upper lips? My uncle told me not to date my boyfriend because, since he is Black, he would beat me! He said, 'You're going to end up just like my sister with no husband and a child!'" I constantly pace back and forth in front of the classroom trying not to hover over any of the students who are in the front row. Breathe! Breathe! You're doing OK. Feel the support. You're in a safe space. Continue.

I tell story after story, each about my understanding of feminism. Are my classmates looking at me in awe or sympathy? Am I a fool for sharing all of this information about myself? What has gotten into me at this moment? Why didn't I choose to go the "safe" route and talk about being in an interracial marriage? Oh, dear. My life is out there, with an audience that hardly knows me...maybe some of them do, but not this much. Too much information? What exactly are they learning?

I am realizing now that I think there was something about performance that helped me feel safe. I felt empowered, comfortable, entitled, risky, confident, scared, terrified, happy, excited, nervous, and loved. Without this feeling of safety, I most likely wouldn't have performed such self-disclosive aspects of my life. This safety almost felt like I needed my audience's empathy while listening to my stories. Could the professor have created this climate by herself? People generally care what others think but somehow, in this performance, I felt such a strong desire to share bits and pieces of life, for them to understand me and for me to understand me. When others performed, I felt a similar desire: I wanted to know more about my classmates, about these people and their lives. Even though the professor assigned the performance, it was the students who made it safe; our collective risk taking made us vulnerable, drew us together, and helped us learn.

Resisting Safety, Redefining Comfort

Our intercultural communication class has just read an article about White privilege by Peggy McIntosh (1988) and has already written down the number of privileges we have. Out of 50 privileges, I write down only five. I am in class now and have to share how many actual privileges I have from the article. The instructor leads us through an exercise and tells us all to stand. He calls out several numbers, starting from the most number of privileges: "Sit down on the floor once you hear your number." We are all standing in a circle. "50, 49, 48..." The numbers get lower and lower. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five." Most of the students sit down, and I am one of the few left

standing. I am feeling so embarrassed. Why didn't I just sit down with the rest of my classmates? I am one of the two students left standing. My classmate who is standing across from me in the circle is a Black man in his late thirties, and there is me. I am a nineteen-year-old Filipino woman. I wonder why I feel like I have fewer privileges than most people in my class. One student says he is very surprised that I am one of the ones left standing. So they assume that because I am Asian, I should have more privileges? But it's true. I feel like I have fewer privileges than most. I share a few experiences about how, when I was younger, kids had called me derogatory names such as "nip," "gook" and "chink." I tell them how degraded I used to feel, how worthless. I feel OK about sharing these stories. I feel OK about challenging their stereotypes.

The environment in that classroom was such that I felt I could speak out, that I could name experiences that would challenge my peers' assumptions and stereotypes about me. I wouldn't have shared such feelings had I not felt comfortable in that class. And yet, I'm not convinced my peers were comfortable in that moment. My resistance—my challenges—might have felt comfortable to me, but my peers may have felt named or threatened. I hope they felt safe too, though. We had already built alliances with one another, alliances these experiences could not break. But how should I seek to engender these alliances in my own classrooms? What guidance might I receive by looking to published work in communication studies?

Researching “Safety” in Communication Studies Scholarship

When I recently typed the word “safety” into scholarly communication databases, I didn’t find what I expected. For instance, the search came up with tourist safety information, promoting gun trigger-lock use, emergency medications, kidnapping, and a few other items on safety that were startling in their harsh reality. These issues, of course, are all very important, but, as far as communication in the classroom, I found very little on the subject of safety. I did, however, find an article by Foss and Griffin (1995) about invitational rhetoric that noted the importance of teaching speakers about how to engender a sense of safety in their listeners: “The condition of safety involves the creation of a feeling of security and freedom from danger for the audience. Rhetoric contributes to a feeling of safety when it conveys to audience members that the ideas and feelings they share with the rhetor will be received with respect and care” (p. 10). In principle, these authors make a lot of sense. Students of all ages have the right as human beings to feel secure from danger—whether literal or emotional violence—in the classroom. Unfortunately, there is very little explicit analysis of what safety in the classroom means, and little to no guidance regarding how to build safe classroom spaces that move beyond physical safety to less tangible, but nonetheless real, emotional considerations.

The scholarship in communication studies, to the extent that it addresses classroom climate or safety, exhibits a tension between understanding safety in terms of physical places and more emotional or ideological spaces. To some extent, this tension mirrors disagreement in the field about the role of power in the classroom. Where the

field addresses communication and learning, there is a paradigmatic tension between instructional communication scholars and critical communication pedagogy scholars. On one hand, the instructional communication scholars see the teacher-student relationship as relatively top down and authoritarian: Teachers hold power, and students either comply with or resist this power. On the other hand, critical communication scholars see power differently, exploring how communication can empower both teachers and their students; these scholars describe the student-teacher relationship as less authoritarian or hierarchical. These scholars do not see power and resistance in the same way, nor would they address “safety”—or the responsibility for how best to give rise to safety—in the same way. For example, where instructional communication scholars argue that teachers hold sole responsibility for creating and maintaining their classroom environments, they are likely to assign responsibility for safety to teachers as well; by contrast, critical communication pedagogy scholars, because they take power to be fluid and distributed, are likely to attribute responsibility for safety to all classroom participants, students and teacher alike. There is no consensus about “safety” in our field; in our research, there is an assumption that the reader knows what “safety” means, when we really need to expose our own multiplicity of understandings and how these are ideologically formed.

Communication scholars use the term “safety,” mostly assuming we know what they mean. However, “safety” is more than feeling comfortable or at ease but also engaging ideas and experiences that challenge us to learn about others’ thoughts and feelings on sensitive subjects such as racism or sexual orientation—a process that can be

very discomforting. I will explore the literature to argue why we really need a more nuanced understanding of the term. Power plays a significant role in how communication scholars see safety. I will present what instructional communication scholars argue about power as well as what critical communication scholars argue about power. These understandings are influenced by their respective paradigms: social scientific and critical.

Understanding Paradigmatic Tension:

Social, Scientific, and Critical Understandings

It is important, at the start, to note that a paradigmatic tension between critical and social scientific perspectives in communication scholars' research is not necessarily negative as it gives rise to new ideas, and, in newer generations of scholars, a more complex conversation. Instructional communication scholars fall under the empirical or positivist paradigm, while critical communication scholars fall under the critical paradigm; therefore, each researcher sees the student-teacher relationship differently, especially with respect to power and resistance. I will discuss this further in my literature review but, first, I want to offer a general overview of each paradigm.

Social scientific communication researchers work to predict certain communication behaviors and use instruments like surveys and experiments to study those behaviors (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Social scientific research aims to find predictive statistical patterns or trends (quantitative research) and use those numbers to solve certain research problems. For instance, instructional communication researchers have measured certain "student misbehaviors" (Kearney et al., 1988). One example of a student misbehavior is a student choosing not to participate in class. Another example of

a student misbehavior is speaking out of turn during class. There are ways of battling those student misbehaviors with behavior alteration techniques as well as behavior alteration messages, or BATs and BAMs (Paulsel, 2004). An example of a BAM is if a student fails to turn in several assignments, the teacher uses a punishment strategy and says something along the lines of “You will fail the course if you fail to submit your work.” This attitude from the teacher assumes (and, one might argue, builds) a particular relationship between the student and the teacher, very similar to a parent-child relationship, where the child feels guilty when s/he doesn’t abide by parents’ rules.

This is different from what critical communication pedagogy scholars may think of the student-teacher relationship, where power and resistance may be empowering. The critical paradigm is very different from the social scientific paradigm not only because it explicitly works toward social justice, but also because it strives to be more reflexive. Reflexivity involves exploring how our own ideological assumptions inform our scholarship (and, similarly, how our scholarship shapes our identities as researchers). Fassett and Warren (2007) stress that “reflexivity is the process of exploring how we, as teachers and researchers, create phenomena we observe, through our assumptions, values, past experiences, language choices, and so on” (p. 50). With reflexivity, students and teachers can better understand why people are the way they are, especially with sensitive issues that emerge in the classroom. Critical theory “involves an ethically heightened and politically reflective study of relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse that produced in contexts of historical and cultural struggle” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 47). Reflexivity is key to the critical paradigm, so scholars do not necessarily mean “critical”

in the way we might first assume. In essence, “critical” is not judging negative aspects or finding fault, but instead is a way of hope and learning that strives toward social justice. As hooks observes, “Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups...Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process” (hooks, 1994, pp. 88-89). Hence, critical communication pedagogy is a way of learning and exploring different concepts through reflexivity in such a way as to name and confront inequity and injustice.

Misbehavior then, from a critical perspective, is not even seen as misbehavior at all, but rather resistance to complex and often-times dehumanizing social structures. The critical paradigm does not readily embrace BATs and BAMs but instead, explores why students are resistant. Students may have other reasons, other than a particular teacher’s teaching style, to resist. Critical scholars may be interested in the background of the student in learning why s/he is resistant. This surfaces a more complex relationship between the student and the teacher, one that puts the teacher and the student at the same level, not similar at all to a parent-child relationship.

Not only does the student-teacher relationship seem different between the social scientific and critical paradigms, but the bodies of research aforementioned are obviously different. On one side, we are concerned with creating orderly and task-oriented classrooms, and, on the other side, we want work with students to empower themselves and to question authority. Bostrom (2004) argues, “I could think that paradigmatic distinctions in communication should be more than simple disagreements about

definitions” (p. 346), and that is so in this case. Paradigms can be extremely complex, as Lather (1991) notes:

The central argument is that ‘paradigm’ may be a useful transitional concept to help us move toward a more adequate human science...I will later deal with the poststructuralist argument that we must abandon our efforts to represent the object of our investigation as it ‘really’ is, independent of our representational apparatus, for a reflexive focus on how we construct that which we are investigating.(p.108).

There is no escaping paradigm, so of course there will be tensions.

There are implications of this analysis for the present study of safety. Our assumptions about students and teachers, about their respective responsibilities in the classroom, are influenced by our paradigmatic orientation. That is precisely the difference between resistance and misbehavior. This distinction between resistance and misbehavior is also relevant in that it may map onto a person’s understanding of her/his actions as contributing to a “safe” classroom space, as well as what s/he understands as “safe.” For example, it may be possible that a student or teacher who assumes the teacher is the authority in the classroom may feel unsafe in a classroom where codes of conduct and community are openly negotiated and in flux.

In the next chapter, I will explore three key tensions as they appear in communication studies literature: classroom as safe place as opposed to classroom as safe space, safety as comfort as opposed to safety as discomfort; and (individual) student resistance as opposed to (collective construction of) resistive space.

Final Introductory Thoughts

This research project extends beyond a practical exercise of how we can make our classrooms safer to a more meaningful and reflexive exploration of what safety means and how our assumptions about safety shape students' and teachers' experiences in classrooms. One goal of this thesis is to help the reader, whether researcher or teacher, to gain new insights on "safety" in the communication classroom. Following this introductory chapter, I will present my literature review. I will address scholarly understandings or metaphors of "safety" and explore what these may mean for communication scholars. In my third chapter, I will present how I will engage focus group methodology to better understand how teachers and students understand safety. In the fourth chapter, I will present my findings and analysis. In the fifth and final chapter, I will conclude our discussion and present implications of my study, including recommendations for researchers, teachers and students. I hope to encourage a more complex understanding and conversation regarding "safety" for the communication field; I hope this project also encourages this conversation to continue.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Foregrounding Tensions

“Safety” is complex because researchers, teachers and students in our field typically assume we know what we mean when we read about “safety” in our literature or even talk about it in our classrooms. What may appear to be safe to one student may seem unsafe or frightening to another student. It may help us, in our exploration, to think of the role metaphors play in shaping our understanding. Think, for a moment, about a situation where you feel safe. For instance, my “safe place,” as a mother of three who is also working to finish her graduate degree, is one where I can have a cup of tea in a quiet, private room. That said, there is a tension that characterizes my example: Is this quiet moment with my cup of tea a “safe place” or a “safe space?” What is it about this environment that makes me feel safe? It may be that the tea is warm and soothing; it may be that the quiet helps me relax and think without interruption. I don’t fear for my life in this room, I’m not worried about being attacked, and yet that does not, in itself, constitute safety. This tension, between physical and emotional safety, in the literature is made more difficult to analyze in clean, simple pieces because there is no specific mention of “safety” in the literature but rather words that hint at “safety” such as “comfort,” “empathy,” or “resistive space.” This may be further complicated by our own anecdotal understandings of safety, as informed by our own experiences as students and teachers; for instance, we tend to think we can say anything we want in a classroom and be “safe” but there is much more to it than that. In what follows, I would like to call out three scholarly tensions related to “safety”: physical as opposed to emotional safety, safety as

comfort as opposed to safety as discomfort, and students' resistance as individuals as opposed to students' and teachers' cooperative work to build resistive spaces.

"Safe Place" and "Safe Space"

When we think of "safe place," many of us imagine a space where we are physically safe from any danger to our bodies as our surroundings are constructed well and free from hazards. To help us understand a "safe place," we can link this notion to a hospital stay. We mostly have "safe" hospital stays, where we are free from physical harm. Hospital staffs work to protect us and make us healthier, by administering tests and medications and assisting us when we are in need of food or hospital clothes. However, when we hear "safety" and "classroom" in the same sentence, various ideas come to mind. First, we think of safety for ourselves and possible evacuation plans we may follow should a natural disaster occur. Other, more uncommon but nonetheless dangerous scenarios may also occur to us. Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004) remind us of an incident where a student shot and killed three of his professors. More recently, our minds might call up images of the shootings at Virginia Tech. In these moments, of course, our safety as students and teachers is at the forefront of our minds. We hope to learn and teach in safe classroom environments where we will not be hurt or attacked. As a student or teacher, I want to be able to walk into a classroom without fear for my own life. Since "safe place" calls attention to a more physical safety, we can use "safe space" to signal a more emotional and vulnerable setting.

A "safe space" is also a physically safe place but, moreover, it is a place where a person feels s/he can express her/himself, and perhaps confide in a person or a group of

people, relatively confident that s/he will not be harmed for doing so. When I met my thesis committee members to defend my thesis prospectus, I knew I was in a “safe space” because I knew that although disagreements might arise, I knew everyone had my best interests at heart. Or, to return to the example of a hospital: A hospital may be a safe place, but it may not be a safe space. While we might feel protected from danger or attack, we might also feel vulnerable, violated or alone, which is why visitors, whether family or close friends, can be so important to us. Teachers and students in the communication field perceive safety in the classroom in various ways, as free speech, as passionate debate, as the ability to withdraw from discussion, and so forth. Heated communication classroom discussions sometimes take on issues of race, class, sexual orientation, and many other controversial or sensitive topics. Resistance to such topics exists as the classroom environment starts to become uncomfortable. Teachers often work to create “safe spaces” or “safety” in the classroom so their students are better able to engage in substantive discussion of their own and their peers’ experiences. This notion of “safety” has not yet been consistently explored or explicitly engaged in the field of communication.

Where “safety” appears in the literature, it is ambiguous. We have our own assumptions of what safety is, so we tend to read on, already assuming that this “safety” is what we all think it is. It is important to explore assumptions surrounding safety more fully because it is unclear whether researchers equate safety with comfort or with frequent self-disclosure or with other actions. As a researcher, I looked for “safety” in literature, and there was no concreteness to the word. This analysis is valuable because

we can further explore these authors' underlying meanings, rather than upholding taken-for-granted assumptions that alter our understandings of the teacher-student relationship in ways we might not fully realize.

Safety as (Dis)comfort

Students and teachers should be free to express emotions. If they do not, they would not gain the value of transformative learning, one that invites their peers to share life stories that intrigue and engage us as learners. As bell hooks (1994) observes, "If we are all emotionally shut down, how can there be any excitement about ideas? When we bring our passion to the classroom, our collective passions come together, and there is often an emotional response, one that can overwhelm" (pp. 154-155). In order to have a common ground for sharing experiences, we must know that where these stories touch difficult or painful subjects like racism, for instance, sharing takes risk. Some students, and some teachers, are often afraid to take these risks for fear of being judged. Fassett and Warren (2007) argue that "Dialogue is not a matter of negotiation and not a process of friendship building, though both may occur; it is a process of sensitive and thorough inquiry, inquiry we undertake together to (de)construct ideologies, identities, and cultures" (p. 55). We need to be sensitive to those who do the risk taking and know that their stories might make us feel comfortable and connected. Moreover, in order to create safe environments, we must empathize with our fellow students and teachers. However, we must also remain acutely aware that comfort may not imply safety, but rather compliance or disengagement; safety may be soothing, but it may also be challenging.

In order to have “safety” in any classroom, the students as well as the teacher must learn to empathize with each other, especially when the class engages in discussions that broach sensitive topics. Tina Harris (2003) mentions self-disclosure and racial sensitivity as important elements to “safe space” in an interracial communication course. “As a professor, my purpose is to create a safe space that encourages supportive communication and that welcomes personal disclosures yet reinforces the notion of mutual respect when disagreements arise” (p. 312). She also mentions that emotions come into the classroom and that it helps for the students to establish ground rules for classroom discussions at the beginning of each semester; she also talks of creating a classroom that engages everyone. hooks advocates that engaging personal experiences does deepen learning. However, she assumes what constitutes safety for her students, without taking into consideration their own understandings of these experiences. I feel there is a lack of discussion of these issues in our field. Communication scholars understand safety in such varying ways. Cayanus (2004) stresses that teacher self-disclosure is a powerful tool in the classroom and can lead to positive student outcomes. Self-disclosure (Cayanus, 2004) is defined as having to do with trust and love. Perhaps if teachers were to interact with their students in a more intimate and self-disclosing way, safety in the classroom may be better established.

Even though Broome (1991) does not explicitly equate safety to empathy, the understanding of empathy may further nuance an approach to safety. Broome stresses empathy is a true skill that helps students “get in touch with the other’s real self” (p. 239). Empathy asks the students to have an attitude that understands others, especially when a

sensitive topic is broached. I think empathy is so important in all communication courses but maybe more so in intercultural or interpersonal courses that deal with sensitive topics such as race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class. We should remind ourselves that empathy can take place once we have communicated to each other our own understandings of safety. It is the way in which we speak, gesture, and react to each other's self disclosures. Empathy is difficult but knowing that everyone should try to incorporate empathy in a classroom would perhaps help the environment become more comfortable. However, discomfort does not put safety to rest; safety can and does include discomfort. Our understandings of power may inform this tension between comfort and discomfort with respect to safety.

Power

Power creates "safety" but it also complicates and disrupts it. If we think of power as a tool that can be used to control certain aspects of day to day life, then this alters our understandings of safety. For instance, if a teacher and her/his students presume that s/he can, through institutional authority and sheer force of will, make the class orderly and stable, and students compliant and task-oriented, may well have a different understanding of safety than the teacher or student who believes that power is more fluid and emergent in our communication with one another. Perceptions of power do not necessarily imply safety. Let's imagine a public speaking teacher who is enamored of her or his role, who flaunts her/his "power" over students; students in this teacher's class may feel unsafe, may feel that their grades are subject to that teacher's whims. However, let's imagine another teacher, someone who acknowledges that power

is present and that everyone—students and teachers alike—plays a role; students may feel more or less secure, depending on whether they feel supported or cast adrift in a sea of communication. This second teacher might be more inclined to work with her/his class to build a code of conduct, to discuss openly issues of rapport and community. Power, therefore, and our perceptions of it, necessarily mediates our experiences and understandings of safety.

The term “power” is as complex as “safety,” though somewhat more addressed by communication studies scholars. One possible definition of power in the classroom comes from instructional communication researchers: “Power is an individual’s capacity to influence another person to do something he/she would not have done had he/she not been influenced. If a teacher does not exert influence in a classroom, that teacher cannot enhance student learning” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 125). This particular understanding of power assumes the teacher has the power to control or manipulate students—a common, but incomplete, understanding of power. I would argue, as do critical communication educators, that instead of thinking of power as a sort of tool teachers use to control students, we should see it as a mundane force that permeates any environment where there are organized bodies of people. As Foucault argues, “...power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action” (Foucault, 1972-1977, p. 89). This understanding of power illuminates that power is something we truly cannot control, whether the students have power or the teacher has power. We cannot control each other as human beings. Instead, we should understand that power exists mundanely every day, including in classroom

communication. When we think of talking about racism in a classroom, we could see power as moving through the student who has the floor, or who is disclosing an experience having to with racism, or who decides to leave the class and the discussion early. Once we understand power, we can better understand the concept of what “safe” is supposed to feel like in our classrooms. Perhaps “safety” is not a constant feeling of comfort but an awareness that discomfort is there and that it is acceptable. Misbehavior can be seen as discomfort to the teacher and one such “misbehavior” is resistance.

Resistance

There are at least two contradictory understandings of resistance in instructional communication scholarship: (1) instructional communication scholars’ belief that resistance is misbehavior teachers ought to control (Burroughs, et al., 1989; Kearney, et al., 1988; Kearney, et al., 1991;; McCroskey, et al., 1983; McCroskey, et al., 1985; Richmond, et al., 1987), and (2) critical communication educators’ belief that resistance may be productive, an important indicator of power as fluid and distributed (Wood & Fassett, 2003). Critical communication pedagogy scholars would most likely illuminate how student resistance may be a function of empowerment instead of deemed as misbehavior. In order to understand “safety” in a nuanced way, we should also explore resistance, as in students’ resistance to engage in particular kinds of classroom discussions or resistance to assume responsibility for the co-creation of safety in the classroom. While students, teachers and researchers might appreciate the comfort of colorblindness, which can be a convenient ideology to allow people to ignore the fact that racism exists (Giroux, 2003), it is, in a sense, a logic of colorblindness that has

encouraged instructional communication scholars to neglect identity and ideology, treating these as insignificant to our understandings of power and safety in the classroom. As communication scholars, we need to explore our own (as teachers and researchers) and our students' understandings of resistance with respect to issues of culture, identity, and power.

We should discuss how teachers in the communication field plan on creating learning climates where student resistance is not necessarily a problem, but perhaps a necessary (and sometimes uncomfortable) dissonance. For example, Warren's (2001) study of performing race in the classroom as performative accomplishment explores race and illuminates the importance of anticipating and engaging student discomfort and frustration when it occurs. Resistance to talking about race or other difficult subjects is not necessarily problematic, especially if we can learn to work together as students and teachers to nurture and sustain a supportive, humane classroom climate. Unfortunately, there are few models in instructional communication of how to accomplish this challenging task.

In the extant literature, especially in power in the classroom literature, researchers commonly articulate resistance as misbehavior. For example, one article mentions studying the students' likelihood of expressing hostility toward and resisting requests of an instructor of a course (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Generally speaking, student resistance is associated with negative actions, as opposition to teachers' requests. Power in the Classroom researchers describe resistance as either constructive or destructive

oppositional behavior, as misbehaviors that reduce time on task and, therefore, student learning.

Communication scholars who explore the implications of critical and feminist pedagogy for communication studies offer a different view of student resistance. Cooks and Sun (2002), for example, offer the following about resistance:

Thus, resistance to alternative to the binaries (male/female) or to the concept of gender itself, implies a force or action (power) not *against*, but *through* which one is acting-both a turning toward and turning away from this power for the latter cannot be accomplished without the former. Resistance, therefore, is never outside of power and the act of resisting necessarily refers back to that force against which one is fighting. (p. 296).

Cooks and Sun suggest resistance can be empowering in a sense that there is a meaning behind someone's resistance, and we can learn from this. This is similar to recent discussions in our field regarding "queering" discussions or incorporating queer examples or situations in certain discussion topics. Students can assume that their professor is straight, or resist the heteronormative common assumption and maybe assume that their professor is gay. Resistance challenges power, but not always in a threatening way. It may even be helpful as resistance can sometimes serve as a different outlook on certain concepts. Resistance challenges and destabilizes the idea of the norm. For instance, in a feminism class, one student may be resistant to homophobic talk; in essence, bearing witness to such resistance in the classroom may be a powerful learning moment for students.

Students who show resistance may engage power in a constructive way. One example of constructive resistance is challenging the instructor's opinions. For instance, if a teacher thinks one way on an issue, a student may disagree and express why s/he

disagrees. This type of resistance is effective in that it also challenges students to learn even if it does not necessarily or uncritically support what the instructor believes. It invites students to learn about different opinions, and it is not necessary to always agree with the teacher's opinions. In fact, some teachers even encourage students to argue why they disagree on certain matters. This type of resistance is useful, as it may even make resistance seem empowering for the students.

Resistance as misbehavior implies that students are not "complying" with what the teacher demands for the classroom. For instance, students may talk out of turn, or simply may not pay attention. As communication scholars, we sometimes wonder if the reason for these "misbehaviors" is that the teacher is not setting a very good example her or himself. Student misbehaviors are defined as student actions that interfere with learning (Kearney et al., 1991). Instructional communication scholars (Kearney et al., 1991) have attempted to solve these so-called student misbehaviors by exploring "teacher misbehaviors." These are similarly defined as those misbehaviors that interfere with instruction and negatively affect learning. Some teacher misbehaviors (Kearney et al., 1991) are as follows: letting students out of class early, not keeping office hours, returning papers late, providing nonspecific evaluations on homework, making tests too easy or too hard, or delivering humorless, monotonous lectures. Kearney et al. (1991) argue that teacher misbehaviors can influence the way students think and act. This makes sense, as teachers are often significant role models for their students. Instructional communication scholars see student resistance as misbehavior, and when the teacher

resists and shows signs of incompetence, the students will resist and will show signs of incompetence.

Instructional communication scholars articulate resistance in the classroom as non-compliance (Kearney et al., 1991); of note is the language they use, which casts the student-teacher relationship in a uni-directional, hierarchal sense. This suggests that instructional communication scholars feel the teacher does or should have total power in the classroom (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Student misbehaviors need to be managed and dealt with, according to the communication scholars who would most likely believe student resistance to be student misbehavior. Therefore, these student misbehaviors require various behavior alteration techniques (BATs) and behavior alteration messages (BAMs) (Kearney et al., 1988). Specifically, BATs are strategies teachers use to manage students' behavior in the classroom (Paulsel, 2004). There is problematic language here: "If a particular BAT does not work, you might try using it again in a subsequent attempt to control students' behavior" (Paulsel, 2004, p. 46). We as teachers, experienced and new, should not think of trying to control any student's behavior, but instead encourage good work. Metaphorically speaking, BATs and BAMs are noises—aggressive and forceful; this is similar to how using the word "misbehavior" creates a parent-child relationship since scolding often characterizes these relationships. Moreover, students who resist these so-called BATs and BAMs are seen to support the idea that resistance is understood as "misbehavior" since the student does not "comply" with class guidelines or try to be a model student by participating. The general idea for these communication scholars is that it is important for teachers to develop an

understanding of what students are like, how they behave, and what kinds of problems to expect so they can find ways to manage discipline. This type of relationship with the students seems to treat the students as more juvenile and less entitled to respect in the classroom. This raises an interesting question for the present study: How influential are instructional communication scholars' views on power in the classroom? Do students and teachers see themselves as resisting or complying with teachers' attempts to control? How safe is the teacher making them feel? Such an exploration will be integral to our field's burgeoning discussion of power as fluid, complex and relevant beyond the questions of compliance in the classroom (Sprague, 1993; Wood & Fassett, 2003).

Power and resistance work together in an interesting way. Instructional communication scholars view resistance as zero sum: either the students or teacher has power. Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004), in a more recent article, call attention to the fact that current research exploring student resistance focuses more on the relationship between instructor immediacy and use of behavior alteration techniques and students' likelihood to resist instructors (p. 260). But they also stress that the resistant student intends to not comply with the teacher. Whether or not these BATs and BAMs actually work, it is as though the teacher has more power in the student-teacher relationship, rather than the relationship being a more equal component of the classroom environment. This acknowledgment helps start the conversation about how teachers and students have a more reciprocal relationship, where the students sometimes teach the teacher.

Some teachers may feel comfortable having power over the students they teach. But, perhaps the word "power" is not the best word to use as it can place students in a

submissive relationship to authority. Wood and Fassett (2003) mention that “power is messy; it is the result of human negotiation on the basis of conflicting narratives” (pp. 291-292). Teachers and students should not really compete for power but instead hold the same level of respect. If a student is resistant in the classroom, instead of trying to confront resistance with BATs and BAMs to try to change the student, the teacher should try to understand the reasoning behind a particular student’s resistance. Moreover, the resistance itself might make for meaningful classroom discussion; for instance, a student who doesn’t necessarily agree with the teacher might make a profound argument in the class.

Resistance, especially in regard to complex issues of social oppression and justice, cannot be cast aside as a mere misbehavior. Such a perspective assumes an incomplete and monolithic understanding of power in the classroom (Kearney et al., 1985; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983a; McCroskey et al., 1985b; Richmond et al., 1987). For example, Kearney et al. (1991) suggest that, “experienced teachers recognize that students often fail to concede the teacher’s right to assume a power role” (p. 311), implying a top-down, authoritarian understanding of the teacher-student relationship. However, critical communication scholars do not see that it is necessary or possible for the teacher to assume full power in the classroom. These scholars, influenced by their reading of critical pedagogy, focus instead on working with their students to create more equitable and sometimes, though not always, comfortable learning climates. The presence of resistance means students are not being “compliant” so we should remind

ourselves that we can have a better environment, where resistance might not be a mere misbehavior but empowering for students, helping create a “resistive space.”

Resistive Space

Another tension in the literature regarding “safety” involves comfort. Safety is often equated with comfort; this is valuable to the extent that comfort also implies empathy, engagement and risk taking. However, where comfort implies ease, disengagement and freedom from examining our own deeply held assumptions, it is problematic. An understanding of safety as comfort stands at odds with other, more current and critical understandings of safety as “resistive space” (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). Johnson and Bhatt’s understanding of “resistive space” relies on helping students learn to build alliances and encourages teachers to explore explicitly with students how power binds and divides people. Johnson and Bhatt (2003) describe their purposeful efforts to create resistive spaces in the classroom by calling out their own sexual and racial identities; “In order to form alliances that lead to social change, we must collaboratively create resistive spaces in/through which we can examine the dynamics of power that binds and divide us” (Johnson & Bhatt, 2002, p. 231).

One area of the field where students engage sensitive topics through structured risk-taking is performance studies. Performing requires not only an empathetic audience but also one that encourages performers not only to open up to controversial topics but to interrogate them. “The fact that ideals of racism and white supremacy persist in this class demonstrates how pervasive whiteness really is...if we can combine the magic of performance with the critical insight gained by this performative way of seeing human

action, then we might find hope” (Warren, 2003, p. 161). Performances that take on such issues indeed need a safe space for their work. Warren and Fassett (2004) stress that “performative pedagogy is an approach to education that moves meaning to the body, asking students to engage in meaning-making through their own living and experiencing bodies” (p. 414). I think performance challenges students in communication to be less afraid of expressing their own views. They are able to perform in front of their peers and can contribute to a provocative and substantive dialogue.

Johnson and Bhatt (2003) describe creating “resistive space” as an opportunity to build alliances. They say that teaching communication from a critical, cultural perspective is a resistive act and creating “resistive space” allows them to examine power that binds and divides people. One point that they stress is that “because the majority of research in instructional communication and communication education has treated power as a tool for teacher control, oppression has been conspicuously absent from our disciplinary conversations about education” (p. 232). This relates to the above analysis of BATs and BAMs and treating students like controlled subjects. This relationship is very similar to a parent-child relationship, where the teacher has authority over their students, similar to parents. Key to Johnson and Bhatt’s understanding of alliance building is accepting pain and conflict as part of making connections with others. This is where resistance to difficult dialogues plays a role. Resistive space is a way of creating understanding a classroom environment as both supportive and challenging, as appropriately precariously safe.

One important factor is that the teacher, in an open and supportive climate, cares for and values his or her students. Some scholars (Rosenfeld & Jerrard, 1985) stress that climate has been found to influence student cognitive and affective behavior as well as personal growth. This resistive space that Johnson and Bhatt advocate will definitely encounter resistance of its own, but this resistance should be understood as not always something that is necessarily counterproductive. We, as teachers should try to understand what lies beneath certain students' and teachers' feelings on and understandings of "safety." This leads me to my research questions:

RQ1: What do teachers consider "safety" in the classroom?

RQ2" What do students consider "safety" in the classroom?

Do teachers and students embrace the same understandings of safety that researchers express in their published work? How do teachers and students live through and make choices within the tensions they experience in the conflicting and potentially highly individualized understandings of safety?

Final Thoughts

In the tensions between "safe place" and "safe space," comfort and discomfort, resistance and resistive space, communication scholars tend to focus more in their published work on how teachers establish safe places, free from physical violence, comfortable classrooms where students feel free to speak, and student resistance (whether to difficult discussions or to even addressing the question of their responsibility in creating the classroom climate) as misbehavior. Nevertheless, these tendencies do not

obscure the tensions that inform our understandings of safety. That these tensions exist help to illuminate how classroom safety is complex, contradictory and in flux.

In what follows, I will explore my use of focus groups methodology to address the aforementioned research questions. In chapter four, I will address how the participants in this study experienced the contradictory tensions that characterize discussions of safety, and in chapter five, I will offer recommendation for researchers, teachers and students regarding how to understand, address and co-create safety in the classroom.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will describe the methodology of my study. After revisiting my research questions, I will describe focus group interviewing as a research method, including its strengths and limitations and why it is appropriate for my study. I will also address the role of “safety” in the focus group interviews, comparing the climate of these interviews to classroom climates in general. Focus group interviews surfaced valuable data regarding participants’ understandings of safety; these were especially rich for analysis since focus groups typically present a broad array of dialogue in a brief amount of time.

Focus group interviewing involves asking a series of questions to a group of roughly six to twelve participants for a set amount of time, for example an hour or an hour and a half. Focus group interviews were particularly appropriate for my study as they helped contribute to the burgeoning conversation about safety I hope to engender in the field of communication studies. If only for the length of time of the interview, participants explicitly questioned and explored their heretofore little examined understandings of classroom safety. In particular, I sought to learn:

RQ1: What do teachers consider “safety” in the classroom?

RQ2: What do students consider “safety” in the classroom?

Participants in four groups gathered to discuss what they feel is “safe” and “unsafe” in the classroom; while this chapter addresses focus group interviewing as a research method, chapter four shares my findings—the themes and patterns that emerge from analyzing the interview data.

Focus Group Interviewing

Given these research questions, focus group interviews were an ideal method for my study. Earlier I addressed what many scholars experience as paradigmatic tensions in the field of communication studies, and how instructional communication scholars constitute the student-teacher relationship differently from critical communication pedagogy scholars. Positivistic research has left us with an undertheorized understanding of safety. Focus group interviews have the capacity to give rise to and engage the voices of students and teachers. By putting many different participant experiences together and by asking participants to grapple with what “safety” means, the focus group interview has best accomplished my task of understanding what constitutes “safety” in the classroom, at least for these groups of students and teachers.

Focus group interviews are an efficient way of gathering an abundance of information about participants’ experiences and perspectives. Focus groups have been used in academic social sciences for decades (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) as well as for the media and in advertising products to consumers. In employing this method, the researcher studies interpretations, perceptions, and personal experiences of the group participants (and moderator). Focus group interviews are an especially effective means of learning about how people come to meanings in community (in reflective and unreflective ways); as Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe, “in the group context, the members are stimulated by the ideas and experiences expressed by each other” (p. 182). This method was appropriate for my study because it gave rise to discussions as yet unrecognized by power in the classroom researchers. Also, I like to think of the group

interaction as trying to create a “safe space” within the group interview. Moreover, the focus group setting created a more intimate meeting of a smaller to moderately sized group. In a study on success and failure in higher education, Fassett and Warren (2004) conducted several focus groups interviews to gather data on students’ own experiences. They observe that “the focus group interview format allowed participants to work together to build meaning, negotiate understandings, and demonstrate how educational norms readily manifest” (p. 26). Working together is key in my study as I was curious to see if everyone thought of “safety” in the same way. Having recruited graduate teaching associates (GTAs) and undergraduate students who were enrolled in introductory communication courses, I was able to analyze their stories and ideas for this study.

Strengths of Focus Group Interviewing

Experiences, perceptions, and personal experiences of group participants were presented in the focus group interview, which was crucial, in order for the method to be successful. For instance, Morgan (1997) mentions observing interaction between participants on a topic in a focus group interview. I could not observe any interaction on my topic if I had conducted individual interviews, other than between myself and the interviewee. Also, because silence sometimes creates an awkward tension, I felt that participants would be more inclined to converse with each other, which allowed me to obtain rich data for my analysis. I designed my interview protocol (See Appendix C) to invite the participants to become more comfortable with each other from the start. I provided food such as pizza to make sure the participants were not worried about their appetites and they were able to relax. Since I was trying to explore this safe space

myself, through the focus group method, it was critical that the participants were somewhat familiar with one another or came to know each other even just a little. This allowed for a strong group dynamic. I did recruit some of the student participants from my own classroom, which could be a limitation in that my students may possibly feel the need to discuss particular topics simply because they feel this is what I would like to hear as their teacher. But recruiting students from my own classroom also serves as a strength to this study because my students are already familiar with me and have established a rapport with me and may be more willing to share in discussions. I acted as moderator and tried to make sure everyone had a chance to voice her or his opinions. I did not make the participants answer any questions in any particular order as it may have caused awkward feelings, especially if the participants felt as though they did not desire to respond to certain questions. I only called on people if I felt like I hadn't heard from them very much but did not ever force them to speak.

Limitations of Focus Group Interviewing

There are a few limitations to my method, which I considered first before collecting data. First, as Morgan (1997) observes, focus group interviews rely on the interaction within the groups. I was concerned that the group might not interact well with each other, and this did happen in some instances. Second, I chose this topic, and I was concerned that might pose a limitation simply because the interview protocol goes along with my research interests, which may or may not interest the participants in certain groups. I was particularly concerned about the undergraduate student focus groups because there may have been a lack of interest in the topics. Although I have conducted

two meaningful interviews with undergraduate students, I still do not know for sure if these participants were particularly interested in the topic of safety. Morgan (1997) also raised the concern that this method is less naturalistic than participant observation. In participant observation, participants are not prompted to act a certain way. In focus group interviews, however, the participants must answer questions from my interview protocol, whereas in participant observation, the researcher observes people's behavior in certain situations.

I am mindful that certain paradigmatic tensions I discussed earlier may have affected the outcome of discussion in my focus group interviews. I know that we all have different research interests, and I may not necessarily always get what I am looking for in my interviews. I understand that I had to lead as many focus group interview sessions as needed to analyze enough data, and I knew I had enough data after the fourth interview since certain themes had emerged. As moderator, I had to choose to take a less vocal role in the group (Morgan, 1997), as I did not want to unduly control the data. I needed to be mindful that I was studying the data of the participants and did not contribute any of my own experiences. It was difficult to take on a non-vocal role as moderator, and, although this was a limitation, I remained only as moderator so as not to influence the dialogue. I invited the participants to speak freely about their experiences. I asked them to elaborate but did not expect that I would hear what I wanted to hear.

Procedures

All participants were informed of their privacy and rights (please see Appendix A for my IRB approval, and Appendix B for participants' letter of consent). After the consent letters were read and signed, I made sure everyone had a copy of their signed consent letter. I also made sure each person had a nametag with their chosen pseudonym and let everyone know they were being audio recorded. We introduced ourselves with our pseudonyms, and I acted as moderator for all interviews. I asked interview questions from my protocol and also asked follow-up questions to clarify any answers. I kept track of time and made sure the interviews ended in one hour, and gave the participants time at the end for any questions or final thoughts. At the end of each interview, I thanked my participants and reviewed my contact information as well as Dr. Jaehne's and Dr. Stacks's contact information. I informed them I would also share any tentative findings if they were interested. They were invited to contact me for any concerns or questions they might have about the focus group interview or the study.

The participants chose to share or not share their own personal experiences with others. I acted as an effective moderator, making sure the interviews moved along smoothly and meaningfully. I audiotaped all the focus group interviews, as well as took interview notes. Shortly thereafter, I transcribed all interviews verbatim. Once I had transcribed all recorded interviews, I erased all recordings and labeled all interviews with the participants' chosen pseudonyms. I will keep all interview transcripts for two years total in a personal filing cabinet that will be locked, where I will be the only one to have

access to these files. I will keep participants' letters of consent in my filing cabinet for three years after the completion of this study.

These focus group interviews were key to exploring what safety means to the university students and teachers I interviewed. I found out how these students and teachers responded to questions regarding issues such as race, class, and sexuality. I conducted four focus group interviews that each consisted of four to six participants. Two groups consisted of undergraduate students who were (at the time of the interview) currently taking introductory courses in the Communication Studies Department at San José State University, a diverse metropolitan public university. Two other groups consisted of current and former graduate teaching associates (GTAs) in the same department. In general, the first GTA group had two White women and two women of color, one Asian and the other of mixed race. The second GTA group was predominantly White, with three White participants and one Asian participant. Both student groups had one White person in each group and the rest of the participants were of color.

The interview protocol followed a funnel design (Morgan, 1997), moving from general to specific questions (See Appendix C). I transcribed each interview and then coded data into various categories (using a grounded theory approach), found themes within the transcripts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I analyzed these recurring themes with respect to my research questions across the group, exploring specifically participants' metaphors (i.e., how they describe and render meaningful) "safety" in complex, politically and ideologically charged classroom discussions.

I felt the participants were willing and open since they shared their thoughts about safety. I specifically recruited students by : (1) Sending an e-mail invitation to the GTAs with my contact information to let them know the focus group will be about difficult dialogues in the classroom, (2) Seeking participants from graduate and undergraduate communication classes and handed them an invitation with my contact information and (3), Inviting the students who have received invitations to inform other SJSU students to contact me if they were interested in participating in this study. The participants were able to converse with other peers in a relaxed setting and share each other's experiences in and out of the communication classroom. To this end, instructors and their students did not participate in the same interview.

For coding my data, I used the metaphorical strategy Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note, "a metaphor creates new meaning by fusing two concepts that are dissimilar in ordinary usage" (p. 235). I think that under specific categories, I found patterns that were metaphorical, especially when all participants discussed "safety." This was similar to how my research pointed to metaphors of safety and resistance. Moreover, metaphors started a conversation of seeing these concepts as similar to something else, creating analogies, so that researchers, like myself, can make sense of them. The metaphors strategy was an effective way to interpret the experiences of the participants and resulted in the series of tensions that characterize this project.

Safety and Resistance in the Focus Group Interviews

Throughout the first chapters, I grapple with the meaning of “safety” and explore finding a more complex but concrete understanding in the field of communication. However, I cannot help but to lightly delve into the topic of “safety” and “resistance” in the focus group interview. The fact that these two concepts were seen as different among study participants may already pose an immediate limitation. Overall, the group had the same ideas about safety as well as resistance. However, I was mindful that we needed safety and some resistance in order to have successful focus group interviews to display how the two ideas work together. Hence, in order to have safety, participants should not be afraid to share personal experiences and their own thoughts and feelings about broaching sensitive topics in the classroom, and, in these particular groups, they weren’t at all afraid in disclosing such stories. The participants’ resistance may cause tension, but again, this tension may be intellectually productive. In the group interviews, I didn’t notice that resistance, where the participants felt they could not express their feelings; I also noticed that everyone had some similar metaphors on what resistance meant in the classroom. Fassett and Warren (2007) note that “tension” is a misleading word. “We take it to mean uncomfortable, conflicted, or awkward. Instead, it would be fruitful to think of tension as relationship, as community, as cooperation” (p. 134). The “tension” may not necessarily be bad in the “safe space” we create.

Concluding Thoughts

Having touched on the procedures, strengths, and limitations of the focus group method, I am confident that this particular method was well suited for this study. Not only did the participants of the study answer questions by providing insightful experiences, I was privy to “safety” in the making, in the focus group interviews themselves. In what follows, I will describe the tensions that characterized participants’ understandings of classroom safety. Specifically, participants tended to define safety as a matter of individual responsibility, generally that of the teacher, and as comfortable, rather than a space for respectful conflict.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

“Safety” is constituted in various ways according to the participants in this study. There are some conflicting notions as to what safety entails as well as the responsibility people are said to have in trying to create “safety” in the classroom environment. People’s roles are always different depending on the particular context, and so “safety” then changes with circumstance, as seen in the data. In some instances, “safety” is a social comfort and the feeling of acceptance and freedom to express emotions. One of the emerging themes I found was that participants felt it was the teacher’s responsibility to create a “safe” environment in the classroom. It seemed as though both Graduate Teaching Associates (GTAs) and students alike thought that the teacher had the responsibility to use her/his authority as teacher to control the classroom environment. Among all four focus groups, there wasn’t a direct mention of students’ responsibility for a “safe” classroom; instead participants tended to assume that students should establish respect for each other in order for there to be “safety.”

In this chapter, I will discuss the rapport I found within the focus groups and the extent to which it may have influenced participants’ discussion of safety. Also, I will discuss how understandings of safety are individualized and how teachers and students see “safety.” Particularly, participants’ responses suggest they feel the teacher is responsible for “safety.” I will address the role of power (or participants’ understandings of power) in shaping this sense of ownership or responsibility for safety. Finally, I will discuss comfort and discomfort with respect to safety.

Effective Focus Group Rapport in a “Safe” Space

Each focus group built effective rapport. Everyone respected each other in the space we were in, which was a small boardroom. As moderator for all four groups, I felt we were in a “safe” place and “safe” space: “safe” place because the location was familiar, well-lit, clean and safe from any physical harm. The door was locked. Blinds were drawn so no passersby could peek in on our interviews. The participants did not appear to feel threatened by any prospective harmful occurrences. I felt this was also a “safe” space in that everyone appeared to feel the need to participate and, although at times I felt an uncomfortable tension, people still appeared eager to listen to each other’s stories. All participants engaged in discussion, often conversing directly with one another, asking questions and making eye contact. Individuals took turns at talk without my instruction or prompts. Everyone had a chance to speak. Facial expressions appeared intrigued and thoughtful. I would not operationally define feeling “safe” or safety as willingness to participate with no feeling of consequence but as, instead, an uncomfortable tension tempered by an interest in listening to what others want to share can be part of how participants can understand this notion of “safety.” And as moderator, in a more authoritative role, I felt I had the most observant attitude of the group, a constant awareness that everyone had some say on each matter and that their viewpoints might not agree. While the participants were more concerned with their responses, I was in a position to observe the verbal and nonverbal communication, particular dynamics that made our environment a “safe” space, in my opinion. In what follows, I’ll describe each group of participants.

Group One

I met with the first student group near Christmas break and finals, and the students appeared both anxious and excited. In this first student group, there were four females and one male. The students appeared very comfortable; the majority of them were familiar with each other, since they were all taking a public speaking class I was teaching that semester. They were all participating simply for their own enrichment. One student participant was my colleague's student and was receiving extra credit for participating; she appeared confident discussing questions with other students very similar in age and in the same class. Part of what led me to believe participants felt safe was their calm demeanor; they seemed as though they enjoyed being there by displaying various nonverbal cues such as smiling at the other participants, gesturing in their talk and eating food in a not so bashful manner. I could feel the rapport as the students shared stories of their personal experiences in classrooms throughout their lives and laughed with each other. They also shared their frustrations about other students with one another. Each group was, to some extent, characterized by this sense of community.

Group Two

In the second student focus group, there were three females and two males. One female, Loo, was a former student of mine and one male, Columbo, was a current student of mine; neither was in need of extra credit. Each was there to support me in my study and be involved in a compelling discussion. The remaining two females and one male of the group were all in classes my colleagues taught. Two of the females, Star and Eye, knew each other, and so not surprisingly, they sat together and occasionally exchanged knowing

looks as if to acknowledge the familiarity of the class they shared. My student Columbo did not know anyone in the group but acted as though he was very comfortable as he immediately grabbed some pizza after he entered the room and started self disclosing personal feelings. Cyclops, the other male student, did not know anyone in the group but did share the same teacher as Star and Eye and so immediately connected with the two females. Participants, though from different public speaking classes and backgrounds, quickly engaged one another in response to interview questions and found common ground.

Groups Three and Four

In the GTA focus groups, there was already rapport because these participants all know each other and are a part of the GTA program, where they learn as a community of student teachers, meeting frequently to talk about teaching-related experiences. As a GTA myself, I also felt a strong connection with my participants, making it difficult to keep many thoughts to myself in several instances throughout both focus group interviews. For both interviews, I made notes to myself to discuss certain issues later with those groups after I was done taping the interviews so as to avoid becoming a participant myself. In the first GTA focus group, I interviewed four females, and in the second GTA focus group, I interviewed two females and two males. In part because of their pre-existing relationships with one another, and in part because GTAs could choose whether or not to participate, both groups appeared comfortable with each other. This was especially in the second group, where one of the participants praised two other participants as scholars and teachers:

Franie: ... I think you two, Ruby and Elroy, are frickin' brilliant and it just killed me that you even think you're not cut out for this scholarship because you guys are, and gal (giggles), are so smart, and I feel so privileged to be here with you. And I think that you're interpretive scholars. I think ... with a little bit of critical mixed in, that you're more interested in the back story. And I think that that's amazing. And you're a good listener, Elroy, and so are you Ruby.

I really appreciated Franie's observation that Ruby and Elroy wanted to know the "back story" as she called it. I agreed with Franie, that Ruby and Elroy were interpretive scholars. This comment definitely created camaraderie within the group. Franie then compared the fields of psychology and communication and how the "back story" and vulnerability are important. The "back story" she is referring to involves people's own life experiences as well as what it means to be vulnerable in sharing those particular experiences.

Franie: I think you two are excellent scholars in communication studies and I think that lots more people should be concerned about the back story, about vulnerability about those kinds of things.

Ruby: Thank you.

Elroy: Thank you.

In response to Franie's compliments, Ruby and Elroy appeared a bit embarrassed; they were trying to hide awkward half-smiles to Franie's comments. Nonetheless, I could tell they were pleased with their colleague's compliments. Participants appeared invested in the conversation, sharing frequently and at length, with each other and not just the moderator.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I tried my best to create a friendly, supportive, environment and to invite all participants to open up as much as they possibly

could. I did provide food for all groups not only as thanks to all of them for participating but also to put everyone at ease with each other. I feel the pizza helped to achieve a more relaxed atmosphere, and everyone's appetites appeared satisfied. Looking back at all four groups, I feel everyone was pretty comfortable with each other from the start. If the group did not get along, I know I would feel an awkward tension and participants might not want to participate as much as these groups did. As I moderated each group, I took notes and observed key communication patterns such as moment of silence, which happened very few times, or if any of the participants joined in laughter, which happened often. Focus group methodologists (e.g., Kitzinger, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) argue laughter and even the pleasantness of the interview makes for strong research design since it builds community. I was very aware that some of the participants, especially in the student focus groups, were not familiar with each other but yet they appeared confident in sharing their own views pertaining to the interview questions; further, their stories disclosed very detailed information that only intimate groups would typically hear. I cannot for know for certain whether they personally felt "safe," but I do not feel the participants would share these personal stories if they did not feel somewhat safe. Since in this study I am trying to understand what "safety" means, looks and feels like to students and to teachers, in the next sections, I elicit and compare students' and teachers' understandings of safety. Lastly, I present some emerging themes and considerations I have found in the data. Two key sources of tension regarding safety emerged in the analysis: (1) Safety is both an individual's responsibility and something we collectively co-create, and (2) safety is both comfortable and uncomfortable.

Safety as an Individual's Responsibility

Most participants foregrounded emotional and social aspects of safety. In my interview protocol. I did not have a precise question about safety but a series of questions that touch lightly on the issue:

What do you do to create an environment where student feel they can participate?

What role do students play in this process? What would the ideal environment look/feel like? What comes to mind when you hear the words "safe classroom?"

There was some mention of physical safety, where everyone is free from physical harm, but most seemed to think of safety as a social comfort. It seems as though people have their own notion of "safety." "Safety," in essence, is what an individual considers as "safe" to her/him. Not everyone's notion of "safety" is the same. What makes me feel "safe" may make another individual feel differently. For example, it is possible that steps I took as moderator (such as asking each participant to speak or structuring the conversation in light of interview questions to create a sense of order) felt safe to me but perhaps unduly restrictive to my participants. Similarly, as a teacher, I might challenge a student's or an author's troubling remarks, making some students feel soothed or empowered and other anxious or fearful. However, it is important to note that most participants, students and GTAs, alike associated responsibility for establishing safety within the classroom with a single individual: the teacher.

Both GTAs and students seemed to come to the notion that teachers were responsible for creating "safety" in the classroom. For example, GTAs often cited students' willingness to disclose personal experiences or perspectives as an indication of a

safe classroom environment, giving credit for this environment to the teacher. In one of the GTA interviews, Franie explained how she's helped to create a safe space in her classroom—an environment where one of her students could identify as lesbian.

Franie: I agree, I felt very, um, I felt very honored actually, that she came out to the class. And that we had built up this environment where she felt safe enough to do that. And I think it goes beyond the students, I think that the teacher has so much to do with that. And that she knew that I was not going to, that she trusted everybody enough not to, even if they disagreed with it, not to be mean about it, but she also trusted me enough to know that I wasn't going to let anything like that happen, that I was not going to allow people to be ridiculed or hurt. I mean, because it doesn't always happen because they mean to hurt someone's feelings.

Key to Franie's understanding of safety was her belief that she could not only shape an environment of respect, but that she could control that environment and protect this student. Although students contribute to the classroom climate, it would seem Franie, as did other GTAs, felt they needed the teacher's permission (and perhaps support or protection) to be able to express themselves in the classroom. In the focus group interviews, I think the participants felt it was their responsibility to create this "safe" space for their students—that yes, the students also helped create the environment, but the teachers are ultimately responsible.

Similarly, the students saw the teacher as responsible for creating a kind of "safety"—one that might not necessarily be comfortable at first, but rather where they support risks. While students felt building casual classroom rapport or "relationships" between students was positive, all of the students agreed that the teacher made the class what they thought was "safe." In this sense, students described the teacher as almost

forcing the group or controlling interaction, so the students would talk to each other; otherwise they might not even talk to each other at all.

Amber: I think it's the way the class is structured. Like in high school, I had a class like that too. Like, one of my English classes, my teacher encouraged us to do a lot of group work and you kind of get forced to talk to people that you would never talk to. But then, once you start talking, you see that you have a lot to say and stuff, and I think if you're forced to talk to people, then you have a relationship with them.

Another way the students expressed this was by sharing their appreciation for the teacher for involving all the students in discussion, associating this involvement with her/his efforts.

Stacey: I think that it has a lot to do with the teacher, if they make the class more comfortable, then the students feel more open to discuss certain topics and issues, and I understand, like bigger classrooms it's harder to get everyone involved. Yeah I think the teacher is a big part of it.

To the extent that participants addressed the role of students in creating a safe classroom space, they most often associated that responsibility in individual reflection and action. For example, as Abby observes, "you still need to be careful how you're presenting your information. It's OK to have your opinion so long as you're not blaming or putting others under scrutiny ... it's OK to have your opinion. It's OK to have your own voice so long as you're still respecting the other voices in the classroom." Each student must reflect on her/his communication so that it does not disrespectfully confront others. GTAs explored safety in terms of individual choices and responsibility as well, by locating safety in passion for topics, ideas and issues. For example:

Ruby: It's just a matter of creating a safe enough environment for the students to actually choose topics that they really are passionate about, that they don't just pick the second runner up because it's a little safer. I feel like if they're safe and they're confident, and

you're encouraging them, to talk about what you want to, damn it. And people aren't gonna agree, but if they do that, the more debatable or argumentative, or um, you know, high intensity it is, then I feel like they feel safe and they can actually talk about that. It's pretty sweet, when you get some of the speeches at the end, they actually talk about something pretty heavy. I feel like that's identifying the safe classroom.

As Ruby said, when students discuss what they are passionate about, their own sense of "safety" emerges. That might seem a bit contradictory since some passions might be controversial, for instance those regarding sexual orientation or race. In this sense, someone's "safety" is her/his power to control her/his own individual choices in the classroom.

Participant responses tended to locate responsibility for safety in individual actions, for example, that teachers are responsible for setting up and controlling the classroom environment in order for the students to feel safe, or that students can feel safer by engaging subjects about which they feel passionate. This understanding is misleading since it is the classroom as a whole that should be responsible for discussing and co-creating their own sense of "safety." Perhaps the teacher feel responsible for creating that particular environment where students can say anything they want but within reason. However, there is a problem with the "say anything you want" understanding of safety; it is incomplete and perhaps an enabling fiction. We need to understand that "safety" does not always feel comfortable but should give people a sense that they will not be physically harmed. To suggest that safety can be isolated to individuals' power to control their or others' actions relies on a limited understanding of power. As Foucault (1976) argues, we cannot possess or wield power as a tool; power is not a contest of possession between the teacher and her/his students. Because power is fluid and exercised in our communication,

safety, and our understandings of it, are necessarily emergent in and through our discussion with another: teachers and students, teacher and teachers, and students and students.

“Safety” in this respect, is extremely complex.

Safety as Everyone's Responsibility

Stephanie: I think it's really important that the teacher...tries to bring everyone together. We're like family, and it's really nice. I know everybody. We're all friends. We talk about everything, we work together.

While Stephanie still roots classroom safety in the teacher's actions, her use of “family” as a metaphor sheds some insight into who is ultimately responsible for safety: “We work together.” “Safety,” in other words, should be built collectively rather than individualistically: “safety” is not the teacher's responsibility but everyone's. Stephanie's use of “family” to explain safety is a helpful reminder of the paternal roles students often ascribe to their teachers even as adults. However, families as social systems function as interdependent—not isolated or independent—parts. For children to feel safe, their parent(s) must establish a sense of order and consistency; however, for this to be successful, parents, siblings, neighborhoods, the children themselves and so forth, must contribute. If students continue to assume that teachers bear the burden of establishing and sustaining safety in the classroom (whether in a physical or intellectual or emotional sense), they may fail to recognize their own roles in shaping the classroom climate for better or for worse. If teachers regularly assume the burden for safety themselves, then they risk holding themselves to an impossibly high standard: That they can control a classroom such that they can protect every student from physical, intellectual or emotional harm. In any event, both teachers and students risk an underdeveloped or incomplete

understanding of power, of how their actions, collectively, build the classroom climate. As Abby observes,

It's OK to have your opinion so long as you're not blaming or putting other under scrutiny, and I think that having that balance—you know we've had the discussion of ethics, morals, and values. How do we incorporate that in public speaking? Well, we have a responsibility as audience members, and so it's OK to have your opinion. It's OK to have your own voice so long as you're still respecting the other voices in the classroom.

In effect, we all—students and teachers—share the responsibility for a functioning, supportive and meaningful classroom environment.

Safety as Comfort

One emerging theme among the students was that “safety” meant having a comfortable classroom. When I asked them to describe what came to mind when they thought of the phrase “safe classroom,” Loo said that it must be a comfortable environment, and that you should respect everyone around you. Amber said, “I think it means everyone's comfortable talking. They're not scared that people are gonna make fun of them or laugh at them or anything like that.”

What seems comfortable may vary, depending on the person. For example, some students might be comfortable if they sit on the floor. In my undergraduate and graduate years, I was most comfortable in the classroom when I sat off to the right side, in the middle of the row. I felt nobody looked at the back of my head, and I was able to see the teacher well. Some students may think of comfortable as being able to speak without being called on or having to raise hands. Yet, other students may feel the need for structure. Students felt as though the teacher must share or give back to the students in a way that is comfortable, that creates camaraderie. Kathryn observed, “I love the teacher,

everyone will discuss with him, I sass him all the time. He'd be telling a story and I'd be like, you did what? Why the heck would you do that?" By self-disclosing, this teacher created a space where students felt they could share their experiences. Students tended to visualize a utopian classroom where "people aren't jumping everyone's throats," as Columbo put it; one where students follows the rules and do their homework on time, one where "everyone respects each other." (Eye). The students seemed to come up with a peaceful and caring environment, where the teacher invites students to be who they are, but stresses they should respect each other and share with one another their own stories and experiences. In this sense, students conflated safety with comfort: They tended to feel safe when they could be physically comfortable, intellectually valued but not unfairly scrutinized, and invited, but not forced, to reveal or draw upon their emotions.

For example, Sydney describes safety as:

Sydney: ...letting students be themselves. And communicate in the way that they know how as long as it's not disrespecting other students or hurting anybody and not trying to make them perform to some standard of communication that we have.

GTAs engaged in a similar process of conflation, associating students' sense of safety in the classroom with comfort, kindness and absence of anxiety or fear. For example, Sydney described safety as feeling "free to say what's on your mind, without worrying about being judged or punished for making maybe an unpopular statement."

While creating a climate where an exchange of ideas may be possible, this understanding of safety fails to recognize the ways in which "free speech" may invite consequence and dissent. GTAs were especially interested in and open in letting their students be who they are, to the extent possible with respect to class guidelines. For instance, Sydney felt it was

fine that here students spoke in their own vernacular, since it's a way they know how to communicate and share their experiences; Reagan didn't see anything wrong with her students sitting on the floor, as long as she could see them. Reagan specifically calls a comfortable classroom into question when she observes,

... recently, I started challenging what I think a safe classroom is and my own concept of that. Because I used to think that a safe classroom is where everyone can be themselves and say what they wish and everyone else would just listen and be respectful. But now, I'm really challenging that. Not because I don't think those things are good. I think those things are good but I would like to incorporate responsibility...What is the point of communicating if there's no consequence? Right?

While perhaps comfortable, a classroom devoid of conflict is not necessarily safe: In assuming s/he can control safety, an instructor may fail to adequately prepare her/his students for the effects or consequences of their communication.

Instructors might find ways to invite discomfort in the classroom, the discussions working toward class "safe" spaces. For instance, ground rules might be discussed as a class and then, as the semester or year progresses, students would feel more at ease with one another. Responsibility is key for everyone. Without responsibility as a whole classroom, there would not be "safety." Although "safety" may not always feel "safe," it is always a collaborative effort.

Classroom Discomfort as Safety

While students and GTAs both associated safety with feeling protected and comfortable, they also noted that this need not always be the case. As a teacher and a mother, this made immediate sense to me: Let's say I am in the labor delivery room about to give birth to my first child. I am obviously not comfortable, but having my mother there

may help me feel “safe.” In a classroom, heated discussions might not be so comfortable either.

As a teacher, I am frequently amazed at how open students can be in their classrooms with their own experiences. Their words touch my life and inspire me to share my own stories. Even as a student, I felt safe to share my own pains and pleasures. In the past, I cried in front of other GTAs because I was emotional about being called a “Chinky Bitch and Fucking Nip” as a sixth grader. Perhaps it was because I was hormonal since I was pregnant, or perhaps I needed a good cry and felt I could share in this “safe” space. Whatever it was, I felt “safe” enough. That didn’t mean my colleagues felt comfortable, they probably felt awkward and unclear on what to do, but perhaps I intrigued them with my situation. Maybe they learned a little because of my openness. Students in the focus group interviews reported a similar desire to disclose, to be open with their classmates. For example, Cyclops shared he was part of a heated discussion in a class about Christianity. He told everyone in the group that he feels his religion is misunderstood, and it makes him feel both frustrated and uncomfortable. Nonetheless, he is compelled to speak up in class to defend his beliefs. Even though he speaks up and knows he is risking making the class feel uncomfortable, he feels his participation is necessary for others and for himself, to learn. When students disagree, sometimes conflict arises, whether or not it is apparent. In one of the student focus groups, Star spoke of her frustration about people using the word “ghetto.” Today, when someone refers to something as “ghetto,” it may mean run-down or dirty, but as she pointed out, many people are ignorant to the meaning of the word “ghetto.” According to a recent definition from *Oxford English Dictionary*

Online, it means “a thickly populated slum area, inhabited by a minority group or groups, usu. as a result of economic or social pressures; an area, etc., occupied by an isolated group; an isolated segregated group, community or area.” In my personal experience, “ghetto” is used in informal conversations very loosely but usually, nobody seems to mind the use of the word or acknowledge that using the word may be irritating or even racist. Star did mention her frustration in the interview but did not mention her confronting other students in class when this would occur. While Star’s remarks may have created an uncomfortable tension or cognitive dissonance in the other interview participants who may use this term, she felt empowered to share these insights and her listeners may appear to accept (as happened) or push-back those insights.

GTAs also articulated a feeling of discomfort or tension in “safe” classrooms. For example, Sydney describes working to create a “safe” classroom that is socially just:

Sydney: I try to be all inclusive, without um, making race difficult... I feel like, who am I as this sort of White female educated, somewhat privileged person to try to even bring up any of their life, you know, issues? Like, who am I to even try to talk about that? And I don’t feel as uncomfortable with other, it’s weird, it’s African American. There’s something there. I don’t know what is, I get uncomfortable. I get like, I don’t want you to feel like I’m minimizing your experience and I’m not.

Many teachers can relate to Sydney’s experience of discomfort. We all come from different backgrounds and will always, at least in some ways, be different from our students. Some teachers might feel entitled to touch upon certain issues because they are people of color, and some teachers may not feel entitled at all. Nonetheless, of color or not, teachers ultimately have the responsibility to work with their students to explore what safety means with respect to race or other controversial or sensitive issues/subjects. If we’re aware as teachers, then we will sometimes feel uncomfortable as to how to respond

to student experiences; we just have to do our best to learn together. It may help to think of this tension as “pushing back.” As Reagan observes, “I’m encouraging people to push back. And, there are safe ways to do it. I just don’t know what that looks like. It’s respectful but we can respect each other’s ideas and still push back. And still take ownership. But I don’t want them to feel, not that I don’t want them to feel safe. But I want them to feel tension, I think. Or a little bit of discomfort. So safe, to be uncomfortable, maybe.” If teachers and students are to learn from each other, they cannot let ideas stand alone, untouched or unexamined. “Pushing back” may suggest resistance, but it may also suggest connection and relationship, what Johnson and Bhatt (2003) articulate as “resistive space.”

Final Thoughts on “Safety”

I always try to be open with my students, whether that’s about being a mother or a wife or a fan of Harry Potter and Jack Black. Then I wonder sometimes while I am telling them little stories about my life if they are even listening. From Kathryn, I gathered, though, that she appreciated when her philosophy teacher told occasional stories about his ex-wife. Perhaps it shows humanness in the teacher, and takes away from the top down authoritarian, parent-child-like relationship that sometimes students might feel towards their teachers. As I mentioned earlier, students tend to want to impress their teachers. In order to get grades, they must be good students and work hard. In order for us to get the rewards and privileges our parents give us, we must be good children and also work hard. Teachers might share their personal lives, as it is relevant, to try to show how they are students—they are learning—too.

I hope to engage my readers in a more complex discussion of “safety.” We are so quick to assume, as communication scholars, that safety is a feeling of comfort and respect in the classroom. But it may be much more. Safety is communicatively constituted, in our collaborative sense-making as well as self-disclosure. It is not as simple as knowing what to do in the classroom should a huge earthquake occur. No single person is responsible for a safe classroom, or, rather, though teachers are tasked with creating a safe environment for learning, students must also participate in this process. A classroom is safe where teacher and students make safety—emotions and consequences—an issue for investigation and discussion. In the next chapter, I would like to discuss the meaningfulness of this study as well as its implications for researchers, teachers and students.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Through communication, we build what is safe to us. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5); the words, the language, we associate with “safety” necessarily shape our experience of safety. As a teacher, I like to think of my classroom as a “safe” space. But, safety changes with each classroom. I will need to engage in a discussion with my students about what this “safety” entails and what it means for all of us. The same set of guidelines for each classroom will not guarantee a safe space for everyone. Operationally defined, a safe classroom is a space where a productive sense of comfort and discomfort is created by the teacher and the students to collaboratively transform the class into a dialogic and shared learning environment.

Why is Everyone Laughing?

I am teaching a public speaking class, and I decide to have a circle discussion about race. I wanted to start a meaningful conversation with my students to incorporate diversity in their learning. Many of the students participate by taking turns following the circle. One student who is Filipino and White says she is frustrated because people think she’s Mexican or Latina. Another student who is Latino talks about being followed in a department store. One young White man says, “I don’t have anything to share.” He gives a shy smile and shrugs his shoulders, looking down. Most everyone in the class start to laugh, and I ask the class, “Why is everyone laughing? What’s so funny?” I look around and the laughter fades. There is a long awkward pause and then the next student shares.

“Safety” is, therefore, very complex, as are the conditions and the communication through which we build it. I feel we cannot say any classroom is “safe” until we explain fully what we mean. What may seem safe to one, may feel threatening to another; it is through sharing, exploring, comparing and adjusting our understandings of safety as researchers, teachers, and students, that we learn what constitutes safety and for whom. We articulate and shape safety in and through the many metaphors we associate with it; participants in this study, for instance, explained safety as comfort, passion, respect, freedom of speech, and responsibility. Patterns in their understandings point to three key findings that I would like to review here: safety as individualized, safety as teacher’s responsibility, and safety as dis/comfort. I will also consider the implications of these findings and offer recommendations for students, teachers, and researchers regarding safety in the classroom. First, I would like to discuss the limitations and strengths of my study.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of my study that I would like to address. Two out of the four focus groups were fifty percent or more White. I could have interviewed more from historically marginalized groups to get a different perspective; it is important to remember that people’s sense of what is or is not safe is mediated by their experiences of power, privilege and oppression. I do not know for sure whether the focus group interviews experienced a halo effect, or participants saying what they think people (or the researcher) might want to hear. I do know that people appeared very candid in sharing their experiences by the content of their remarks. A lot of what they shared was very

profound and compelling. Moreover, if I were to conduct my interviews again, I would ask specifically about students' experiences with performance, to further probe what safety means for that specific academic context. Also, although I felt "safe" in all of the focus group interviews, there is no way to tell if the participants felt "safe" as well; it would have been an important complement to this study to ask participants, perhaps through a simple survey or exit individual interview, about their experiences with "safety" in the focus group interview process.

Strengths

The focus group interviews were, nevertheless, a rich source of data about participant understandings of safety. Further, these findings illuminate what has heretofore been a relatively unreflective disciplinary conversation regarding the role of communication in the development and maintenance of "safe" or supportive classroom climates.

Understandings of Safety

Safety as Individualized

The teacher walks out. I was taking an intercultural communication class in junior college, and the class wasn't going so well. We were supposed to be sharing experiences about race, about uncomfortable moments in our lives. The classroom was full: thirty students, the instructor, and TA (Teacher's assistant). I could feel an awkward tension in the classroom, and the instructor appeared very frustrated. His forehead wrinkled and his eyes squinted; he surveyed the classroom as the students, one by one, did not participate. The instructor stood up abruptly and said, "I'm leaving. Just do what

you want.” He walked quickly through the classroom, through the students sitting on the floor and out the door. Many of the students were very surprised by this gesture and talked about it as he left. “What was that about?” one student asked. “Maybe he did this for a reason. We need to talk to each other more.” Minutes after the incident, the students started talking with each other, and some of the students moved to the floor, as if to create a more intimate space within the classroom. I felt “safe” even though the teacher wasn’t there, but I did feel a bit uneasy as to why he walked out of his own classroom. Everyone in the room started sharing experiences as though the teacher was there but it almost seemed as though the exit was a way for the students to feel “safer” in disclosing experiences from their lives. He returned about fifteen minutes later, and the class was very quiet. We talked about what had happened in the class after he left; he said he wanted us to talk with each other and felt if he left, that would happen.

“Safety” is individualized and often understood by different people in a variety of ways. Someone may feel “safe” in a classroom, feeling it is warm and supportive, but someone else in the very same classroom may feel less safe because s/he thinks of “safety” as being something different, for example, orderly and consistently rule-governed. In the focus group interviews, a “safe” classroom was seen as comfortable or a space where teachers simply encouraged the students to talk about their passions or be themselves in the class. While participants acknowledged the importance of protection from physical harm, most were concerned with classroom environments that achieved a sense of support and guided risk-taking. Most of the participants, both students and

teachers, said that “safety” was the teacher’s responsibility. Even where participants indicated that students shared in this responsibility, they located safety in individual student actions, in complying with or resisting a teacher’s efforts, not with collective social construction of safety.

“Safety” as Teacher’s Responsibility

Talking about war in my classroom. I am with my students in a public speaking course, and we are having a good conversation. Suddenly, the topic of war comes up, and I start to talk about being a mother and how I would hate if there were ever a draft. “Gosh, I have two sons and I couldn’t imagine them being drafted. Think of this classroom. Some of you might have to go to war if there were a draft.” Some students shift in their desks a bit and one looks at me with a strained facial expression. I decide I need to stop talking about what I think. I feel like it is my responsibility to make this space a safe one so I need to not be so opinionated. They know I am a mother so there’s no need to preach my feelings on the issue of war. “I am going to stop there. I shouldn’t get into this too much.” So we go on to the next topic. I tell myself to put a lid on it and let the students speak to each other.

In all focus groups, most of the participants identified the teacher as responsible for creating a “safe” classroom. In this sense, participants left unquestioned the teacher’s power to control the classroom, citing the teacher’s authoritative role. However, this assumption stems from an incomplete understanding of power as hierarchical, as

something people with authority and status hold and others do not. If, however, we understand power as fluid, as exercised in communication and constituted by all participants in all interactions, then the teacher is not solely responsible for creating a “safe” classroom. Rather, everyone in that classroom participates in creating that particular space, safe or otherwise. It is also important to remember that “safe” spaces are not necessarily comfortable or easy.

“Safety” as Discomfort

Stereotype overlooked in my classroom. I am in my public speaking course, and my students are engaged in an activity. One of the students is presenting and says, “Everyone knows Chinese people are rich.” And everyone laughs. I don’t know how to respond to this. I am stuck and don’t say a word. Most of the students seem to let this comment slip but I see a few students look at me as if to see what my plan of action is. I don’t know what to say. I am uncomfortable in this situation and wish I could rewind time. I could have asked the class if they agreed with this comment and maybe have a discussion about stereotypes. I know a few of the Asian students seem comfortable because I can see it in their face, but I know I feel discomfort as well—from them, behind their smiles, and from myself. But what do I do now? It’s too late to address the comment and everyone seems to have forgotten it ever happened. I want those uncomfortable students to know that I can take a stand and speak up against generalizations and stereotypes. I want those uncomfortable students to know they can take a stand and speak up against generalizations and stereotypes, too. But it’s just too late. I will just have to remember that for next time.

Many of the participants discussed the importance of surfacing students' difficult or painful experiences with respect to topics like racism, homophobia, or other forms of social injustice; they observed that in order for there to be classroom discussion of these difficult topics, so the class might learn from one another, everyone needs to have mutual respect in the classroom. Participants experienced a tension between the assumption or desire for safety to be comfortable and the reasons for creating that sense of safety in the first place: so learners can engage in structured risk-taking and sustained analysis and challenge of beliefs, values, and knowledge.

Implications and Recommendations

What Does this Mean for Students?

My own "safety." When I feel compelled to tell a story, I must feel "safe" in my environment. I am so passionate about topics that surround racism, and I want to speak out on them in class sometimes. Sometimes I need to feel "safe" enough. "Safety" is going to my happy place, a place where I know that I can speak my voice in the classroom. I ask myself a couple questions. Will the teacher be OK with what I am about to share? Will my fellow students be OK with what I am about to share? I have to feel that if I say something wrong, then it is my responsibility to pay the consequences. For instance, if I share an experience I had with racism, some people may feel uncomfortable. I do not know if they feel "safe" but I have to feel this "safety" in order to share. I need to trust that whatever I share will do some good for the people in that

class. I have experienced some racism and have shared these stories in classes but it was because I felt “safe” enough to do so.

Students should remember “safety” is individualized. Not everyone thinks of “safety” in the same way, and so this is why safety is complex. “Safety” is built up by communication. The way we talk about “safety” does more than hints at how we understand it, it helps us build and negotiate the classroom climate as “safe” (e.g., supportive, comfortable, structured, intimate, impersonal, or however else we might define what that means). When someone mentions “safety” (as in, “you’re playing it too safe” or “you should feel safe in my classroom”), I think it is wise to ask this person what s/he means. Anyone’s “safe” will always be at least a little different from someone else’s “safe.” To some extent, students’ individual actions matter; “safety” involves risk, and so students should take these risks in the classroom as they are able to and as they see fit. Taking these risks often means sharing pieces of their personal lives in order to get more out of the class. It is important for students to remember that if their own individual actions don’t totally create safety; their teachers cannot be totally responsible for creating safe classroom climates either. What counts as “safe” is necessarily collaborative, contested, and changing.

Students should remember that the teacher is not be solely responsible for creating safety in the classroom. The way participants in this study and people in general tend to understand teacher power is a limited understanding of power. Commonly participants observed that since the teacher has power to “control” the classroom, then s/he should make it safe for everyone. This is, in a sense, an enabling fiction: Teachers, because they believe this responsibility is theirs, work diligently to create supportive classroom climates. However, this understanding may come at a cost: If teachers fully assume this responsibility, then what role do students play in this process? Power is fluid and not controllable like a commodity or possession (Foucault, 1976). Power does not and cannot reside entirely with teachers; students should know that they too have power. Since they have power, there is a responsibility for all to discuss and to create “safety” in the classroom.

Students should also remember that “safety” may involve discomfort. When someone discloses a story that is personal to her/him, taking a risk since where this is an uncomfortable topic, students should try to co-create a “safe” space to tell that story. Perhaps students should be open to their immediate reactions of their peers’ stories and not be afraid to share these reactions. Students should remind themselves that they too can teach others and cannot rely on the teacher to do all of the teaching. Students should also empathize with each other as well as respect each other. In doing so, “safety” can be present for everyone.

What Does This Mean for Teachers?

Discussing racism in my own classroom. I had a discussion about racism in my classroom. I felt the need to do this because I knew the students would get so much learning from each other's experiences. I told the students to please remember to respect each other and remember that we are all coming from different backgrounds. One student talked about how he and his friend would shoplift together as a team. He happened to be African American and his friend Caucasian. He said he would purchase a few small items while his Caucasian friend would shoplift at a liquor store. He made us laugh even though the underlying message might have been painful. We laughed but were shocked that the store owner would not assume that the Caucasian boy would steal. More students shared their own experiences and their peers seemed intrigued. I dreamed about this day. I wanted to make sure the students felt "safe." We sat in a big circle and took turns. Everyone seemed to want to participate. We ran out of time and I could not stop thinking about how much this meant to me. I do remember though, one student asked: "Why should we talk about racism? It seems like we are making things worse by talking about it." I didn't answer him right away. Instead I prompted the other students to answer, and one student talked about how learning from each other's experiences was a good thing, and that racism still exists so it helps to talk about it. I still wonder why I feel so passionate to talk about racism. I constantly wonder about my future classes and how I can help create a "safe" space with my students so we can tackle the issue of race.

Teachers would do well to explore multiple possible definitions of “safety” operating in their classrooms. Further, teachers should encourage students to understand “safety” is their responsibility too. To the extent they feel comfortable doing so, instructors might discuss students’ power—and, therefore, responsibility in the classroom. Students’ communication with the teacher and with each other—when they speak, their tone, their word choice or gestures—creates a classroom climate as supportive or hostile. Teachers can work with students to create guidelines for respectful communication in the classroom, especially when discussing difficult topics. Teachers also need to remember that they too need to respect their students. Teachers should tell their students that the whole class should co-create a “safe” environment collaboratively. Any time a difficult situation arises, teachers should challenge that situation by calling out how all class members might work together to address the situation. Teachers should try to share, as appropriate, some personal experiences to encourage their students to do the same. If a student asks the teacher a question that might serve the classroom as a whole, the teacher should be willing to ask the class for feedback to help establish a more cohesive or collaborative environment. “Safety” should be discussed, and all class members should consider how it may come with uncomfortable tension, which creates a deeper learning for the students in the sense that they work through difficult topics together.

What Does This Mean for Researchers?

Hood safety. I was taking a graduate course on communication education with my advisor Dr. Fassett. A couple students had on their sweatshirt hoods. I decided I

would pull my hood over my head as well, to feel more comfortable at the moment, maybe even “safe.” Dr. Fassett took notice and mentioned, nodding her head and smiling in a friendly manner, “OK, I see a few of you have your hoods on. That’s interesting.” No hoods came off but I felt a comfortable feeling after she mentioned the hoods. Perhaps putting our hoods on made us feel “safe” for the moment. For me personally, I did not feel like I was protecting myself from harm but instead from other students’ eyes on my head. I tend to cover myself with a hood for a few reasons. Perhaps I was having a bad hair day and didn’t want anyone to see my hair. Maybe I felt unprepared to participate in class so I decided to cover my head with a hood, almost like a turtle’s shell. Perhaps I wanted to follow along with the trend. I do not know why the other students put their hoods on, and I never asked them. But for the moment, we all felt “safe” enough to use our hoods for whatever reason, and Dr. Fassett noticed but did not raise a stink about our sudden change in dress. She could have nicely asked us to remove our hoods from our heads, but she did not as the hoods did not bother her. Would I have felt “safe” if she asked me to remove my hood? I do not know. But I do know that the hoods could have been a bigger issue for some professors. The environment was a “safe” one in that Dr. Fassett allowed us, for a moment, to be comfortable with being ourselves. We could learn in her classroom, with our hoods on. I think about that experience and I think about the research I’ve done. When I research on “safety,” I may find so many different meanings so I wonder if there should be concreteness to the concept in the research.

Researchers interested in learning more about what constitutes classroom safety should know that there is no consensus, disciplinarily, about what we—whether researchers, teachers or students—mean when we use the term “safety.” For instance, “safety” is constituted variously in the metaphors we use (such as comfort). Research needs to explore and illustrate how “safety” is collectively created in the classroom. This might also include how this process varies across contexts (age groups, disciplines, etc.) as well as both successful and unsuccessful accounts of this process. Another option would be for researchers to study how teachers and students engage in self-disclosure with respect to difficult or uncomfortable topics, noting whether/when and how “safety” considerations emerge. Similarly, it is important to more closely examine what we mean as instructional communication researchers, by resistance. Rather than assuming students resistance is “misbehavior” or “non-compliance,” we might consider the ways students’ communication influences and is influenced by their sense of classroom climate. Perhaps by exploring our own experiences of “safety” and fear-in classrooms and other institutional settings like hospitals or courtrooms—would afford heuristic insight into this phenomenon.

Concluding Thoughts

“Safety” is very complex because everyone may think of it differently. Whether we’re looking to be “safe” from physical harm or to build a sense of emotional “safety,” as communication scholars, we need to work towards a more nuanced discussion of this concept. When someone says something is “safe,” we need to question why that is so. Where we assume “safety” is rooted in the individual, we should consider who else plays

a role. Where we assume safety is comfortable, we should consider why that's so and whether we sacrifice something important in that equation (for instance, a more engaged and accepting attitude towards conflict as healthy and meaningful). I hope that this study has helped my readers understand "safety" in a new light, one that acknowledges that "safety" has many different understandings but that each understanding shapes our work together—whether as researchers and participants, students and teachers, or students and students.

Jolly Brown Giant

I called her the "Jolly Brown Giant" because of the color of her skin and she frowned at me. I didn't understand why Keisha was so upset. I thought it was hilarious. The "Jolly Green Giant" happened to be on the can of my green beans at home. Perhaps I felt entitled to call her this because I was Filipino, after all. Keisha happened to be really tall so I thought this would make her laugh. Matt said something else to her that made her cry. It was because she was Black. She was made fun of a lot in the fifth grade. She was one of my best friends but I could not connect with her in that way. I didn't really ever feel racist tension and if I did, I ignored it. One time in the first grade, my friend told me I had an accent, and I didn't believe her. I knew of my Filipino roots but I never felt any racism.

Everything changed the next year. I was in the sixth grade and popularity was a must. I wanted so much to be one of the popular kids. I wore my bangs about six inches high and wore 49ers jackets to match all my girlfriends. I even got myself a boyfriend. He was Mexican and very cute until one day... I saw Jaime after school, and he looked mad. I didn't know why he was there but it looked like he wanted to attack me. The students gathered around to see what would happen. I slapped Jaime across the face to see what he would do. He slapped me about ten times until I pushed him away and then walked off. My face felt hot and I could feel the stinging on both cheeks. I ran to my bus and as I ran away, I heard him yell out, "You fucking nip! Go back to where you came from, you fucking nip!" I had heard of this before but never knew I would actually be called such a derogatory word. My heart felt broken, but now I know why Keisha frowned at me when I called her the "Jolly Brown Giant."

I never told this story to anyone but felt I wanted to tell it in a class on intercultural communication. I did not share this story for fear that I would be judged. Although I felt safe in this classroom, I didn't feel safe enough to share this story. Perhaps if I were in a different classroom where I felt more "safe" and told it in a way that would benefit my peers, then perhaps I could share. As a teacher, I am not so sure I could share this story for fear that some of my students might feel uncomfortable. It is important to learn how we get to a certain point of feeling "safe" enough to disclose stories that would create empathy, connection and learning. I hope to some day share with my students how painful racism is and, of course, how far we've come today

regarding racism. But in order to do so, “safety” must be established, and I hope students, teachers, and researchers strive to make their classrooms or workplaces “safer.”

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Appendix A- Approval Letter

San José State
UNIVERSITY

Office of the Provost
Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies & Research

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-924-2427
Fax: 408-924-2477

E-mail: gradstudies@sjsu.edu
<http://www.sjsu.edu>

To: Leslie Luck

From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research

Date: July 10, 2006

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

"Exploring Resistance in the Classroom: Student Perceptions of Resistance to Difficult Dialogues"

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject's portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond July 10, 2007 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

cc. Deanna Fassett HGH 211-0112

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Dominguez Hills, East Bay, Fresno,
Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Appendix B-Letter of Consent

**College of Social Sciences
Department of Communication
Studies**

One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0112
Voice: 408-924-5360
Fax: 408-924-5396
E-mail: commstud@email.sjsu.edu
www.sjsu.edu/depts/commstudies

Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: Leslie L. Luck

Title of Protocol: Exploring Resistance in the Classroom: Student Perceptions of Resistance to Difficult Dialogues

You have been asked to participate in a thesis project investigating resistance in the classroom to difficult dialogues such as race, class, and sexual orientation.

You will be asked to participate in one focus group interview with fellow students (about one hour long) with Leslie Luck, consisting of six to twelve people at a time and place that is convenient for you. While you are a participant in this study, you may choose to share personal experiences as you see fit. Please know that interviews will be audio taped.

Although the thesis project results may be published, no information that could identify you will be included in the writing of this study.

Questions about this research may be addressed to Dr. Deanna L. Fassett, (408) 924-5511, <dfassett@email.sjsu.edu>. Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. Dennis Jaehne, Department Chair, Department of Communication Studies, (408) 924-5360. Questions about research subjects' rights, or a research-related injury, may be presented to Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President, Graduate Admissions and Program Evaluations, (408) 924-2480.

No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose to "not participate" in the study. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with San José State University or with any other participating institutions or agencies. You will receive a copy of this letter of consent for your records.

The signature of a participant on this document indicates agreement to participate in this study.

The signature of a researcher on this document indicates agreement to include the above named participant in the research and attestation that the participant has been fully informed of his or her rights.

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Dominguez Hills, Fresno, Fullerton,
Hayward, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

Appendix C-Interview Protocol

For students:

1. What is your name (pseudonym) and what do you plan to do after graduation?
2. What discussion topics interest you this semester?
3. What sorts of topics are difficult for you and why?
4. How do you respond in class when these topics are mentioned?
5. How do you respond when your instructors introduce talks about racism or homophobia? How do you feel when the class engages in these types of conversations?
6. Do you remember a time you didn't want to talk about a difficult issue but your instructor encouraged you to talk about it anyway? Why do you think the instructor was able to get you to participate in this instance?
7. How important is it for you to feel comfortable or safe in the classroom? What does that sort of environment look/feel like?

For GTAs:

1. What is your name (pseudonym) and what do you plan to do after graduation?
2. What conversation topics interest you as a student and as a teacher this semester?
3. What sorts of topics are difficult for you to teach or talk about in class and why? Describe a time when you did not want to discuss an issue with your students, but had to anyway. Why didn't you want to discuss this? How did you approach this issue with your students?
4. How do your students respond to topics they do not want to discuss? How do you respond to this?
5. What do you do to create an environment where students feel they can participate? What role do students play in the process? What would the ideal environment look/feel like?