

What Are the Long-Term Effects of Learning About Racism?

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What happens when a diversity class is over? How does awareness change during the course of the subsequent year? Only a handful of studies have addressed this question, and none has done so by examining the same participants before the class starts, when it is finished, and 1 year later. Our findings showed that although students' awareness and attitudes shifted during a diversity course in psychology (as has been previously shown), some of the changes appear to plateau or even wane in the intervening year. Encouragingly, this is balanced by increased feelings of comfort with racial issues and an apparent increase in interaction with those of other races.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities identifies diversity as a learning goal for all students (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007), and many colleges and universities offer courses and cocurricular activities that focus on diversity awareness, presumably in an attempt to give students the skills they will need to work and live in increasingly diverse environments. But do these courses deliver?

Research has suggested that students often feel positively about diversity classes and cocurricular experiences (e.g., Kiselica, Maben, & Locke, 1999; McCauley, Wright, & Harris, 2000), and that they might experience racial identity development as a result of diversity courses (Lawrence, 1997; Lawrence & Bunche, 1996; Tatum 1992, 1994). Furthermore, Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) showed that students taking courses focused on race and ethnicity felt less negatively toward groups of color and were more likely to understand that racism is a problem in our society. Rudman, Ashmore, and Gary (2001) reported that students

in a prejudice and conflict seminar decreased in both implicit and explicit racist attitudes and stereotyping. Both Probst (2003) and Case (2007) documented increases in students' awareness of racism and more positive racial attitudes from the beginning to the end of their courses. Finally, Chick, Karis, and Kernahan (2009) and Kernahan and Davis (2007) demonstrated that courses exclusively focused on the psychology of prejudice and racism led to increases in students' awareness of racism and White privilege, racial guilt, and responsibility for taking action. In sum, these prior studies suggest that students generally feel positively about diversity education and that their racial attitudes generally improve as a result of diversity education (e.g., decreases in stereotypic attitudes and prejudice).

In this study, we aim to replicate previous findings of increased awareness and responsibility for action, and we include new assessments of students' comfort with race and their levels of interracial interaction. We chose these measures deliberately to examine the notion that diversity courses can help students be more successful in increasingly diverse environments (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). We made these assessments both during the course (pre and post) and after it ended (1 year later), attempting to fill a gap in this research literature, the lack of long-term data on the effectiveness of diversity education.

Few studies have examined how diversity courses influence long-term attitudes. Lawrence (1997) provided one exception with a case analysis of three education students, showing that the more fully students' racial identities developed during a diversity course, the more likely they were to incorporate diversity content into

their later teaching. Hogan and Mallott (2005) surveyed large groups of students and showed that some components of prejudice declined during and after a diversity course (i.e., denial of racism), whereas others (i.e., feelings of racial antagonism) were more transient and returned after the course concluded (i.e., within 1 year). We expand on this work to assess the same group of students from pre- to postcourse and again 1 year later. We expected, both postcourse and after 1 year, to see increases in awareness of racism and racial privilege, in the desire for taking action, and in feelings of comfort with racial issues and interracial interaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 55 undergraduates of the same midsize Midwestern university, 26 in behavioral statistics and 29 in the psychology of prejudice and racism. Forty-seven students completed both pre- and posttests, and we used only their data in the Time 1 to Time 2 analysis: Twenty statistics students (15 women; 6 Asian, 13 White) and 27 prejudice and racism students (20 women; 1 Black, 26 White). Only 17 (12 women; 1 Black, 16 White) students in the prejudice and racism course completed the 1-year follow-up survey; thus only their data were compared from Time 2 to Time 3. Different White, female instructors taught both courses.

Procedure

Pretesting occurred during the first week of classes, and posttesting took place during the last week. The 1-year follow-up survey occurred about 1 year after the class ended with a research assistant contacting students via Facebook, e-mail, or telephone and sending the survey via mail or e-mail. All three surveys contained roughly the same measures (some wording changed from present to past tense). Prior to the testing, the experimenter told participants that the study involved assessing attitudes toward diversity in a variety of psychology courses, including diversity courses. The experimenter did not explain why we were studying such attitudes or that any particular change was expected, and assured participants of complete anonymity. Participants did not use their names, but created anonymous codes. Students also

provided their contact information separately (for possible follow-up) and this sheet was destroyed after data collection. We obtained institutional review board approval.

Measures

Quantitative measures. The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000) subscales measure awareness of racism and racial privilege using a scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*); Racial Privilege $\alpha = .69$, Institutional Discrimination $\alpha = .76$, and Blatant Racial Issues $\alpha = .66$; see Neville et al., 2000, for specific items). We included the statements “I tend to notice racism on a regular basis” and “Racism is usually apparent in everyday life,” also answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*definitely*), $\alpha = .77$, to further assess racial awareness and understanding. We assessed action and responsibility using the statements: “Action should be taken to correct problems of racism”; “I am interested in taking action against racism”; “I am currently taking action against racism”; and “Generally, I feel it is my responsibility to take action against racism” with a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*definitely*), $\alpha = .82$. Finally, we included these items to assess comfort and interaction: “I generally feel comfortable discussing race-related issues”; “Generally, I feel comfortable with those outside of my own racial group”; and “I have regular, day-to-day interaction with people (i.e., friends, family) outside of my racial group” again answered on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*definitely*), $\alpha = .79$.

Results

First, we completed multivariate analyses of the Time 1 data to check for differences between classes using all of our scales and found none, $F(6, 37) = 1.16$, $p = .35$.

We performed repeated-measures ANOVAs on the CoBRAS subscales and our scales of awareness and understanding, action and responsibility, and comfort and interaction. We then completed focused *t* test analyses to examine our hypotheses concerning the Time 1 to Time 2 data. Finally, we performed similar *t* test comparisons of the Time 2 to Time 3 data for those in the prejudice and racism class (the statistics class was not

Table 1. *t*-Test Comparisons From Time 1 to Time 2 and Time 2 to Time 3

Dependent Variable	Time 1		Time 2		Time 1 to Time 2		Time 3		Time 2 to Time 3	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> =
Racism course ^{a,b}										
Racial privilege	3.25	0.70	4.05	0.62	-9.02	.001	3.83	0.83	1.30	.21
Institutional discrimination	3.35	0.61	3.86	0.60	-4.12	.001	3.64	0.56	1.83	.09
Blatant racial issues	4.29	0.48	4.61	0.44	-3.57	.001	4.51	0.43	1.34	.20
Awareness and understanding	3.92	1.18	5.29	1.22	-4.92	.001	4.88	1.40	2.42	.03
Action and responsibility	5.19	1.05	6.09	0.86	-4.65	.001	5.84	0.68	2.03	.06
Comfort and interaction	5.32	1.46	5.13	1.19	0.82	.42	5.90	1.10	-4.71	.00
Statistics course ^c										
Racial privilege	3.06	0.61	3.18	0.78	-0.86	.40				
Institutional discrimination	3.71	0.77	3.69	0.85	0.09	.93				
Blatant racial issues	4.20	0.54	4.33	0.58	-1.71	.10				
Awareness and understanding	3.93	1.34	4.10	1.23	-0.68	.50				
Action and responsibility	5.23	1.28	5.25	1.23	-0.19	.85				
Comfort and interaction	5.82	1.03	5.50	1.12	2.55	.02				

^a*t*(23) Time 1 and Time 2. ^b*t*(16) Time 3. ^c*t*(19).

contacted a year later as a result of their lack of change at Time 2 and our limited resources).

Awareness and Understanding

The interactions between class and time were significant with only one exception (CoBRAs blatant racial issues subscale); *F*s(1, 43) ranged from 2.21 to 16.91, *p*s ranged from < .01 to .14. More important, planned *t* test comparisons of these scales revealed that, as Table 1 shows, compared to those in the statistics course, those in the racism course became more aware of racism and White racial privilege by the end of the semester on all measures. Interestingly, however, these same students (1 year later) appeared to stay at the same level for awareness of racial privilege and blatant racial issues while becoming marginally less aware of institutional discrimination (*p* < .09) and of racism generally (our subscale, *p* < .03) from Time 2 to Time 3.

Action and Responsibility

The interaction between class and time was significant, *F*(1, 42) = 12.78, *p* < .01. More importantly, planned *t* test comparisons of this scale revealed that as compared to those in the statistics course, those in the racism course became more responsible and action-oriented by the end of the semester; at Time 3, however, these same students appeared marginally less responsible and action-oriented (*p* < .06) than at Time 2.

Comfort and Interaction

The interaction between class and time was not significant, *F*(1, 42) = 0.19, *p* < .67. Planned *t* test comparisons of this scale revealed that as compared to students in the statistics course, students in the racism course became no more comfortable or likely to interact with others (*p* < .42) by the end of the semester. But 1 year later this shifted and these same students reported feeling more comfortable and interacting more with others (*p* < .01).

Discussion

Our findings replicate and extend the work of previous research (e.g., Case, 2007; Chick et al., 2009; Kernahan & Davis, 2007; Probst, 2003; Rudman et al., 2001). We showed that students taking a prejudice and racism course (and as compared to another course) became more aware of racism and white privilege over the course of the semester as well as more action-oriented. We also found that students' feelings of comfort with race and their interaction level with racial "others" did not change over the course of the semester, but increased after 1 year. This increase was accompanied by either no change or slight drops in racial awareness and action orientation.

These findings, the first to show such long-term effects, also confirm previous research. For example, Case (2007) showed that diversity coursework led to

decreased cross-racial friendships, thus indicating that although diversity courses might immediately increase racial awareness, they might not immediately change students' comfort levels as they grapple with new-found awareness. This is also entirely consistent with racial identity theory (Tatum, 1992), which shows that strong feelings of discomfort and defensiveness can be the first steps in becoming more racially aware. In short, without the class as a reminder of the problems of racism, students' awareness seems to drop off or flatten out (as noted), but this might allow them to feel more comfortable and less guilty, ultimately allowing for new behaviors (e.g., discussing race more, interacting with others).

Before this conclusion can be definitively stated, however, more research is needed, especially as it overcomes the limitations of this study. First, long-term data need to be collected for both a diversity course as well as for its comparison group. It was difficult to gain long-term data in this study for the comparison course (statistics). Because the statistics students did not change between Time 1 and Time 2, we decided to focus our limited resources only on the racism course at Time 3. Obviously, the study would be stronger with those data included, and future work should include it.

A second possible problem concerns the potential for selection bias on the part of the students taking a diversity course. Although it is impossible to randomly assign students to classes, it is usually possible to have a comparison group (our results showed similarity across measures at Time 1 for both courses). Such controls are vital for guarding against selection bias. Future work might also investigate other variables at the beginning of the course to check for important differences (e.g., number of cross-racial friendships reported).

Third, there may be issues of demand as students taking a course on prejudice and racism could guess the nature of the hypotheses during the surveys. One possible solution is to administer the surveys using outside experimenters (students or faculty) who let the students know they are collecting data from a variety of courses (as we did). Another good solution might be to embed measures concerning race within other kinds of measures (more general evaluations of the course, other personality or attitude measures).

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Notes

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