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The State of Multiculturalism and Diversity in Undergraduate Psychology Training

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, diversity and multiculturalism have received considerable attention in the field of psychology. While there have been notable efforts to ensure these important areas are addressed in undergraduate psychology training, little is known about this undertaking. The present study examined how diversity and multiculturalism were addressed in the course titles and course descriptions of 200 undergraduate, psychology programs across North America and their corresponding general education programs. Analyses revealed that while most undergraduate psychology programs offered diversity or multicultural courses, very few programs required these courses. Moreover, when these courses were offered, they typically examined diversity or multiculturalism in a singular fashion, giving very little attention to the intersectionality that exists among cultural factors. With respect to the institutions' general education programs, we found that while some institutions had a multicultural awareness requirement, few offered or required psychology-based diversity or multicultural courses of their psychology students. Implications of these findings are considered, and several recommendations and resources for improving undergraduate psychology programs are provided.

Keywords

diversity, general education, multiculturalism, psychology major, teaching, undergraduate

A growing emphasis has been placed on the importance of multiculturalism in the field of psychology. Multicultural psychology involves the process of systematically studying culture and the role that culture plays in behavior (Hall, 2014). Varying definitions are commonly applied to the terms multiculturalism and diversity. For the purposes of the present study, these terms are used interchangeably and are broadly defined to include aspects of personal identity stemming from a variety of cultural dimensions (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation). This definition aligns with prominent perspectives in the field, recognizing the need for multicultural psychology to encompass more than simply singular aspects such as race and ethnicity (e.g., Bingham, Porche-Burke, James, Sue, & Vasquez, 2002; Silverstein, 2006). Given the timely and evolving emphasis on the need for multicultural education to address these efforts and the changing demographics throughout the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and in higher education (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2008), knowledge of how undergraduate psychology programs teach diversity is warranted.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), "within the profession of psychology, attention to culture as a variable in clinical practice was first mentioned at the Vail Conference of 1973" (Korman, 1974, as cited in APA 2002). Since then, the field of psychology has made continual and increasing efforts to address the importance of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills in the areas of research, training, and applied practice. Approaches to doing so have

differed at the graduate and undergraduate levels. When discussing these differences, the term *education* refers to learning in all areas of psychology, whereas the term *training* refers to, "the application of that education to the development of applied research and skills" (APA, 2002, p. 1).

Prior to formal standards with a specific focus on cultural diversity, APA principles historically recognized the importance of trainees' awareness of the societal implications of their work and developed to include a focus on increasing the cultural diversity of the student body (Altmaier, 2003; Korman, 1974). Beginning in 1979, specific diversity-related criteria were included as a required component of accreditation at the graduate level (Altmaier, 2003) and continues to be a current requirement for program accreditation at the doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral levels to promote quality and consistency in training standards in professional psychology (APA, 2013a). Conversely, guidelines or recommendations continue

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to be used to inform curricular decisions at the undergraduate level and it wasn't until The St. Mary's Conference, held in 1991, that "attention to human diversity" was recommended among six curricular goals for undergraduate psychology (Brewer, 2006). Perhaps as a result of this difference, greater emphasis has been placed on the importance of multicultural education at the graduate level than within the psychology major at the undergraduate level. Consequently, research exploring pedagogical approaches to discussing issues of race, teaching cultural competence, and the experiences of doing so are primarily focused on graduate-level training.

Efforts to outline and assess the features of high-quality undergraduate psychology programs are ongoing (Brewer, 2006) and reflect the recommendations of key scholars, national conferences, and resulting guidelines. For example, in 2007, a series of performance benchmarks were proposed as a rubric to assist with program review in undergraduate psychology programs (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, & Hill, 2007). Among others, cultural diversity was recognized as one of several important elements of the undergraduate curriculum. The most recent *Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major, Version 2.0*, listed "Ethical and Social Responsibility in a Diverse World," as one of five recommended learning goals (APA, 2013b), urging academicians to train students to be responsive to multicultural concerns. Furthermore, the guidelines note that the optimal approach to diversity education includes the integration of diversity issues throughout the curriculum in addition to stand-alone course options. However, few studies have systematically reviewed how diversity is taught in undergraduate psychology programs.

Perlman and McCann's (1999) review of required courses support the notion that there is little consensus on a core curriculum at the undergraduate level. Their findings revealed that commonly required courses in the undergraduate major include an introductory course, statistics, and a capstone; however, there was little consensus among the remaining courses required for the major. Research methods and experimental psychology were also among those courses most commonly required; however, their analysis did not reveal any required courses with a diversity focus, with the exception of abnormal. Similarly, others (Simoni, Sexton-Radek, Yescavage, Richard, & Lundquist, 1999) have surveyed members of APA's Division 2, regarding their experiences teaching diversity. Although half of respondents had taught a general psychology or research design course, and as many as 30% had experience teaching statistics courses in the 5 years previously, only 15% indicated having taught a multicultural course; those who had were more likely to teach at a university that required students to complete a course focused on diversity (Simoni et al., 1999). These findings suggest that while there may be agreement in the field toward greater inclusion of diversity education, in practice, course requirements and courses taught continue to align with traditional values in the field, which placed emphasis on statistics and research methodology.

Various approaches are used when teaching multiculturalism. These include a singular focus on a specific element of

diversity, such as race, ethnicity, or gender. For example, members of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity (Division 51 of APA) were surveyed to better understand the national status of teaching the psychology of men. Of 972 members, 183 responded, of which 64 indicated having taught a course on the psychology of men. These courses were taught with a general focus on topics such as theories about men and masculinity, problems experienced by men, and diverse aspects of masculinity (O'Neil & Renzulli, 2013). Similar surveys have examined the status of teaching about the psychology of women, again, demonstrating course content with a primary focus on gender (Matlin, 1989). Four approaches, specifically, the separate course model, the area of concentration model, the interdisciplinary model, and the integration model, have been supported in counselor education (Copeland, 1982). At the undergraduate level, Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, Halonen, and Hill's (2007) benchmarking criteria in the area of cultural diversity listed *underdeveloped* programming as that which failed to address diversity issues, *developing* referred to programs offering a "stand-alone" experience in diversity such as a single course requirement, programs offering multiple diversity experiences, with at least one required course identified as *effective*, and at the *distinguished* level diversity issues were considered to be integrated into multiple levels of the curriculum (p. 655). Similarly, the most recent version of the undergraduate guidelines recommends immersion across all course content (APA, 2013b). Other approaches include an intersectionality approach, thereby giving simultaneous consideration to the interconnectedness of cultural dimensions, including identity, difference, and disadvantage (Cole, 2009). Intersectionality, originally coined by Crenshaw (1989), "refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Such an approach ensures that the complexity, multidimensionality, and synergy of identity is accurately captured and understood. It ensures that certain aspects of identity are not undermined or overshadowed by other aspects of identity. This pedagogical approach prevents the continued exclusion of marginalized groups from the curriculum (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Case, 2013; Pliner & Banks, 2012). Furthermore, it supports not only a focus on understanding the experience of oppression but the importance of examining the role of power and privilege (Berger & Guidroz, 2009) as a means for deconstructing and understanding racism and discrimination.

Relatedly, APA's multicultural guidelines urge psychologists to adopt a culture-centered approach, meaning that psychologists should "use a 'cultural lens' as a central focus of professional behavior" (APA, 2002, p. 11). In this practice, "psychologists recognize that all individuals including themselves are influenced by different contexts, including the historical, ecological, sociopolitical, and disciplinary" (p. 11). Given all these intricacies, information about the ways in which undergraduate psychology programs teach diversity is needed.

To this end, the present study aimed to identify undergraduate psychology programs that required or offered courses in multiculturalism or diversity and assess how these topics were addressed in course titles or course descriptions (e.g., focus on race and ethnicity, a cross-cultural perspective, or an intersectionality approach).

Method

Sample

The research team reviewed the online websites and catalogs of 200 colleges and universities in North America, who are members of the College Board, a not-for-profit association that was originally established to cultivate access to higher education and is now committed to fostering excellence and equity in higher education. The College Board was established in 1900 and includes over 3,000 colleges and universities. Of the 200 institutions examined in this study, 167 (84%) were 4-year colleges or universities, while 33 (16%) were 2-year institutions. Additionally, 109 (55%) identified as private institutions, while 91 (45%) were public institutions. With respect to geographic representation, 64 (32%) institutions were from the Southern United States, 56 (28%) were from the Midwest, 42 (21%) were from the Northeast, 35 (17.5%) were from the West, and 3 (1.5%) were from Canada.

Variables Studied

The variables studied included multicultural awareness/diversity requirement in the core curriculum or general education program; course status in the psychology program (i.e., required or an elective); course focus (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation); and demographic characteristics (e.g., private or public, 2-year or 4-year, geographic region).

Procedure

The study sample was randomly selected using a computerized random number generator that generated 200 numbers, which were then paired with an identification number assigned by the research team to institutions from the College Board. To explore how diversity was addressed in different programs and classes, three graduate students reviewed course titles and descriptions for each institution by accessing online work programs, curricular guides, or undergraduate catalogues for the respective psychology programs. Course titles or descriptions that referenced elements of diversity (i.e., race/racism/prejudice/stereotyping, ethnicity, gender, class, or sexual orientation/human sexuality) were included in the analysis. Moreover, courses whose primary focus was multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, or diversity (e.g., multicultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology) were also included in the analysis. Descriptions of a random selection of excluded courses from each institution were subsequently reviewed to evaluate whether the program had adopted a culture-centered approach by infusing diversity into the overall curriculum; that is, aspects

of multiculturalism or diversity were discussed in all of the program's courses. The interrater agreement between the three graduate students was 85%. Four other graduate students reviewed the general education or core curriculum requirements of the sample institutions to determine whether a multicultural awareness or diversity component was required of students. The interrater agreement between these graduate students was 97%.

Results

Of the 200 undergraduate programs reviewed, the majority of the programs (68%) offered diversity courses as electives, a very small minority (6%) required a diversity course as part of the psychology major, and 26% had neither electives nor a requirement. When diversity was addressed in the course descriptions, it was typically depicted in a singular fashion, focusing on one aspect (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality), while only 4% of the courses described more than one aspect of diversity. Of the 359 diversity courses offered by the psychology programs across the 200 institutions, the majority of the courses focused on gender (28%) or sexuality (21%), while 13% of the courses examined race or ethnicity-related topics, and the remaining courses focused on other aspects of diversity (e.g., cross-cultural psychology or multicultural psychology). Lastly, the review of the random selection of remaining nondiversity-focused psychology courses ($n = 89$) offered across the institutions revealed that only 25 (28%) of the course titles or course descriptions referenced an aspect of diversity as a possible topic in the course, with one course referencing race and ethnicity, 5 including the word "culture," and the remaining 17 referencing another aspect of diversity (e.g., age, class, gender). However, the diversity reference did not appear to be a prominent focus of the course.

With respect to regional differences, we found that Southern and Mid-Western institutions offered the majority of multicultural or diversity courses (45%), while Northeast institutions offered the most elective courses (32%) and Mid-West institutions offered the most required courses (33%).

Since many institutions often expect students to fulfill a multicultural awareness or diversity requirement in their general education program or core curriculum, the research team also studied these components to determine whether this was a requirement and whether it could be fulfilled by a psychology course. We found that 84 (42%) institutions required a multicultural awareness or diversity component of their psychology students, with 39 (20%) of these institutions allowing a psychology course to fulfill this requirement. The remaining institutions either did not have this requirement or allowed students to fulfill this requirement through a number of nonpsychology courses.

Lastly, χ^2 tests were performed to determine whether there were any significant differences between the 2-year and 4-year institutions and the private and public institutions and their multicultural or diversity course offerings. No relationships were found, respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 2.13, p = .14$; $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = .00, p = .99$.

Discussion

The results established that while most institutions offered diversity courses, only a few of them had a diversity requirement in their psychology programs. Moreover, when diversity was addressed, it was typically done in a narrow fashion, focusing on a singular aspect, such as gender or sexuality. Additionally, diversity-focused psychology courses were not a common requirement in the respective general education or core curriculum programs. Lastly, the finding related to the random sample of nondiversity courses suggested that the programs had not adopted a culture-centered approach, as the majority of the course titles or course descriptions did not include a diversity reference.

These findings suggest the need for curriculum restructuring at the undergraduate level that is aligned more closely with the growing emphasis on multiculturalism in the field of psychology as a whole and as indicated in the current guidelines for psychology education. Considering this emphasis, we support the recommendation that diversity issues be infused within and across psychology courses supplemented by stand-alone course options that allow for more intensive study surrounding particular cultural dimensions. Regardless of the pedagogical approach, attention to the intersectionality that exists among these cultural elements remains warranted. Failure to address the multiple and overlapping identifications associated with individuals increases the potential for certain groups to remain invisible, whereas an intersectional approach facilitates the inclusion of individuals and groups who may otherwise be excluded from the discussion. To that end, several resources exist to more closely examine intersectionality, such as race and sexual orientation (McCready, 2012), race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989) as well as gender and disability (Wates & Byles, 2015).

Additionally, just as statistics and experimental psychology courses are often required by undergraduate psychology programs (Messer, Griggs, & Jackson, 1999), we recommend that a specific diversity or multicultural course also be required within each psychology program to ensure that the discipline addresses this important area and moves toward cultural excellence. As noted earlier, this recommendation is corroborated by research, which established that psychology faculty were more likely to teach a diversity course when it is required by the institution's general education program (Simoni et al., 1999). In our case, we assert that more psychology faculty may be inclined to teach diversity courses if psychology programs required it as well.

There are many points and nuances for institutions to consider, as they contemplate including or infusing multiculturalism or diversity into their undergraduate psychology programs. In this next section, we provide some helpful strategies and resources.

- It is important to recognize that faculty, students, and course work all coexist in larger contexts. Adames, Fuentes, Rosa, and Chaves-Duanes (2013) recommend that diversity be referenced in a department's mission

statement to ensure that it be adequately addressed in course work. Moreover, Sue et al. (1998) stress that having a clear vision related to multiculturalism ensures that an institution embraces culture-centered pedagogical goals and corresponding training strategies. We recommend that departments examine their mission statements and consider adding a reference of diversity, as it is bound to influence the curriculum and teaching practices of their psychology programs.

- Addressing issues of diversity in the classroom requires properly trained instructors, as the content and process can be complex, emotionally laden, and psychologically taxing, especially as higher education becomes increasingly diverse. First, we recommend that instructors secure formal training at local, regional, and national teaching conventions (e.g., Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) Conferences on Teaching, the Annual Diversify Challenge, or the National Multicultural Conference and Summit). Also, many specialized conferences (e.g., Association of Women in Psychology; Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues) offer relevant teaching sessions that may be helpful to instructors. Second, we suggest that faculty continually engage in their own cultural self-assessment, examining their own values, power, and privilege as well as engaging in individually oriented work to gain greater self-awareness and cultural competence (Hays, 2008). Third, we recommend that instructors make use of the growing body of resources that are available to assist in becoming more culturally competent, such as Pederson's (2004) *110 Experiences for Multicultural Learning*; the APA's (2002) *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists*, which are currently being revised, and *the APA Task Force on Diversity Education Resources* (Society for the Teaching of Psychology, 2012).
- Students' personal perspectives and encounters with terms such as culture and diversity play a role in their attitudes and beliefs. Given the multitude of worldviews possible among a group of college students, Dunn and Hammer (2014) recommend that faculty ask students to formulate and share their own ideas and definitions pursuant to multicultural psychology, before providing formal discipline-based definitions. To this end, Velasquez et al. (2012) developed the Speed Diversity Dialogue activity, which allows students to identify and discuss the many elements of diversity in an interesting, safe, and respectful manner.
- Many undergraduate students complete introductory or general psychology courses, without continuing on in the psychology major (Dunn & Hammer, 2014). Given this, introducing elements of diversity in these courses is recommended. Doing so may initiate student awareness of differences and possibly serve as a catalyst for further interest or study.

- Oftentimes individuals avoid discussing issues of diversity due to discomfort, fear, and/or inexperience with the topic and process (Steele, 2011), causing faculty and students to engage in a similar dynamic. Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) provide some useful guidelines for managing difficult dialogues on race in the classroom, and Adames and Fuentes (2011) have a helpful exercise that allows students to give voice to hurtful stereotypes.
- Given the changing demographics of students in the classroom, it is important to consider how stereotype threat or identity threat will affect the general dynamics of the classroom and the specific performance of particular students. Steele (2011) has written considerably about stereotype threat and identity threat and has clearly established that when an aspect of one's identity is highlighted, it could negatively affect the individual's performance. For example, if women are reminded of their gender, they may perform poorly in science and math or if African American students are reminded of their race, they may perform poorly academically. Steele provides a number of strategies to safeguard against these pernicious effects. Instructors are encouraged to carefully review and adopt these strategies to cultivate and maintain a safe and thriving academic environment.
- Lastly, as emphasized throughout this article, intersectionality is central to diversity (Davis, 2008). Instructors are reminded that intersectionality is not simply addressing a number of diversity factors in a course in a singular manner (e.g., 3 weeks on race, 3 weeks on gender, and 3 weeks on class), rather an intersectional approach helps students recognize that identity consists of a number of social-cultural factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) and that these factors often intersect to enhance, compromise, or neutralize one's identity as it relates to power, privilege, and oppression (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Case, 2013; Pliner & Banks, 2012). Fuentes and Adames (2011) offer a useful teaching tool for exploring and appreciating the intersectionality of diversity factors. They also have a helpful case study that more closely examines the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender (Fuentes & Adames, 2014). Hay's (2008) ADDRESSING model also provides meaningful insights in this area.

Limitations

While this study reveals several useful findings, there are a few limitations that need to be enumerated. For instance, it is possible that the online curriculum guides or catalogs that were reviewed for this study were outdated, as the most current content may not have been online. Additionally, given that curriculum review processes often involve multiple levels of review and are time intensive, perhaps culturally relevant curricular changes were making their way through the review pipelines and had not been displayed yet. Furthermore, this study only examined

aspects of diversity that were present in the course titles and course descriptions. It is possible that diversity was covered in lectures, course discussions, course readings, and other course activities. However, the opposite may be true, as the course titles or descriptions may exaggerate what is actually covered in the related courses. Lastly, this study only identified some aspects of diversity in the course offerings and did not include all aspects such as age, class, and disability.

Future Directions

As the *Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major, Version 2.0* begin to be implemented, future research should examine how diversity is being infused into individual course content by reviewing course syllabi and surveying faculty about how they address multicultural content in their courses. Also, students could be surveyed to consider their experiences in more culture-centered programs and measure changes in their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Additionally, research can be conducted that includes a more comprehensive review of other aspects of diversity. Lastly, research could examine the differences that emerge across the possible permutations (i.e., programs that require a diversity course, programs that infuse diversity, programs that do both, and programs that consider intersectionality).

In closing, we assert that undergraduate psychology programs can serve an influential role in preparing culturally competent students early on by creating and maintaining a psychology curriculum that is truly culture centered. Moreover, if students acquire a foundational understanding of diversity at the undergraduate level, then graduate programs can foster an even deeper understanding, possibly leading to more culturally competent researchers, academicians, and practitioners.

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