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Changing intercultural attitudes over time

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ABSTRACT

Diversity is increasing within the Europe, and in Portugal in particular, and higher education will likely play a key role in preparing people to function in this new environment. This study assessed the effectiveness of an Intercultural Relations course at changing student levels of attitudes towards diversity and feelings of self-worth. The results indicated that the course had a positive impact on the multicultural ideology and increased ethnic tolerance and self-esteem, but it had no impact on gender-role ideology and ageism.

Key-words: multicultural ideology, ethnic tolerance, prejudice, self-esteem.

Introduction

Major demographic and economic changes occurring within Portugal (Neto, 2006) and worldwide are increasing the diversity of interpersonal and intergroup relations. Understanding and valuing this diversity is essential for sociological, economic and psychosocial reasons. As societies become more pluralistic and global, acquiring an understanding of other cultures becomes increasingly important, and cross-cultural training is one way to provide this understanding (Landis & Brislin, 1983).

It is very important for higher education to play a key role in preparing people to function in a more diverse world. As Perotti (1992, p. 16) stated: "Education for cultural plurality should not be conceived of as a temporary measure but as an attitude, a state of mind, with regard to a situation that is going to endure. Intercultural situations are not transitory but permanent systems of thought confronted with situations of permanent change".

In response to this public awareness of the importance of diversity, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are instituting course requirements that encourage students to take a closer look at diversity issues. Despite this increase, there has been little empirical assessment of the extent to which such courses actually change student attitudes and behaviours (Chang, 1999; Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 1999; Probst, 2003; Korhonen, 2004). Given that the primary purpose of these courses is to change attitudes, it is crucial to assess longitudinally the extent of any attitude change over time among students who enrol in these courses.

Changing attitudes is difficult because they fulfil important cognitive and sociological functions (Sousa, Neto, & Mullet, 2005). At the cognitive level, attitudes help organize the world around us by making immediate sense of many inputs the organism receives from other persons (e.g. by close contact) or indirectly (e.g. through the media). At the sociological level, attitudes also help organize the world around us by making sense of the many differences and inequalities that surround us (e.g. the lower economic status of some minorities).

In a review of the limited research that has been published, Hill and Agoustinis (2001) found the effects of prejudice reduction intervention programmes to be mixed. "While it is usually found that participants' knowledge about the target group and related social issues increases, there is scant evidence that the programmes produce a change in attitudes or behaviour (Hill & Augoustinis, 2001, p. 247).

This study examined the effectiveness of a master level intercultural relations course in altering attitudes towards cultural diversity and towards oneself. Two constructs of cultural diversity were examined: multicultural ideology and ethnic tolerance. At the same time, we remain aware of the methodological difficulties associated with conducting and reporting such an evaluation.

The concept of "multicultural ideology was introduced by Berry, Kalin, & Taylor (1977). This concept refers to the general orientation individuals may have towards living in a culturally plural society. If for some people diversity is the spice of life, for others it is the major irritant in their daily lives.

Ethnic tolerance is a critical issue in all societies, and this is no different in Portugal. Ethnocentrism was related to increases in anxiety as a consequence of outgroup contact (Stephan & Stephan, 1992). Thus, it appears that individuals who are highly ethnocentric anticipate and then experience anxiety when interacting with outgroup members.

Another theme addressed in studies about attitude change has been self-esteem. For example, several studies addressed the effect that women's study courses have on women's self-esteem (Harris *et al.*, 1999). Stake and Gerner (1987) reported increased performance self-esteem among female participants in this study. However, two studies found less pronounced effects upon perceptions of the self (Brush, Gold, & White, 1978; Shueman & Sedlacek, 1977). In a recent study about change in ethnic tolerance following the use of a Complex Instruction unit on the Holocaust in Latvia results showed no change in self-esteem (Sebre & Gundare, 2003).

A positive relationship has frequently been found between prejudice against different out-groups; those who are prejudiced against one group are likely to be prejudiced against others (Allport, 1954; Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993).

Taking into account that in a research (Neto, in prelo) statistically significant intercorrelations ($>.40$) have been found among the constructs of multicultural ideology, ethnic tolerance, gender-role ideology, and ageism, in the case of designing intervention programs to reduce the ethnic prejudice, will other forms of prejudice, such as those related to gender and age be automatically reduced? We will also research an answer to this question.

The term ageism was first used to describe prejudice and discrimination directed toward older persons by Butler (1969). Ageism has been referred to as the third great *ism* of our society (following racism and sexism; Butler, 1995). Gender stereotypes and gender-role ideology are conceptually distinct (Kalin & Tilby, 1978). Stereotypes are descriptive beliefs about gender characteristics and differences. Gender-role ideology consists of prescriptive beliefs about behaviours appropriate for men and women.

Our hypothesis was that participants exposed to the course (programme), that is, participants who attended regular classes on intercultural relations, would show more evidence of more positive multicultural ideology, ethnic tolerance, and self-esteem. In addition to this global hypothesis, we wondered whether the effect of the programme would also have an effect on other facets of prejudice, such as ageism and gender role ideology. Would the participants in the programme show evidence of less ageism and more egalitarian gender-role ideology?

Method

Overview

Fifteen women students were enrolled in the "Intercultural Relations Master", in Open University, Porto, ranging from 23 to 52 years ($M=32.93$; $SD=9.15$). These participants comprised the experimental group.

Eighteen women students were enrolled in a course about musical expression in schools that did not emphasize cultural diversity. These participants comprised the control group. Their ages ranged from 25 to 56 years ($M=38.67$; $SD=10.14$). The mean age scores were not significantly different between experimental group and control group, $F(1, 31)=2.86$, $p > .05$. Our course selection was aimed at one goal: to minimize potentially confounding effects stemming from nonrandom assignment to groups by constructing a control group as similar as possible to the experimental group with regard to size, age, professional experience.

As this was an educational programme, it was not possible to conduct a randomized experiment. The study design was a quasi-experimental pre-post design. While there are obvious weaknesses to this pre-post design, it remains one of the most popular designs for conducting evaluation research (Mohr, 1988).

Intercultural Relations Course Description

Since 1991, the Portuguese Ministry of Education has been awarding Master level degrees in Intercultural Relations to students who have already earned a bachelor's degree. Degree requirements call for two modules including 199 hours of lectures.

The first module, lectured in first semester, called "Societies and Cultures" includes the following topics: cultural diversities; the great diasporas; ideologies, conflicts, and tensions; identity and collective memory. The second module, called "Intercultural Outlooks" ("Vertentes do intercultural") includes the following four topics; cross-cultural social psychology, intercultural communication; migrants and migration; citizenship and political participation. During the second module students should also choose one of the following topics: visual anthropology; education; Portuguese language and culture; or cross-cultural politics. Finally, during both semesters there is a topic about research methodology. A different person lectures each topic.

In school year 2003-2004 the 13th course was lectured simultaneously in Lisbon and Porto at Open University. This study was done in Porto's course. The goals of the course included: (a) to supply to the students a qualification in conceptual and theoretical domains related to cultural diversity, contact of cultures and interethnic relations, rights of the minorities and tensions and conflicts in multicultural contexts; (b) to promote and to develop studies in these areas; (c) to supply to the students the instruments that allow them: to apply the knowledge acquired to the Portuguese case; to establish strategies and methods adjusted to the solution or the prevention of social maladjustments with multicultural root. The first requirement of this qualification constitutes therefore, the understanding of the relations between cultures, in order to exceed a social trend for the ethnocentrism and the cultural closing.

The evaluation questionnaire

In addition to the demographic assessment, the survey contained several scales, and qualitative – personal documents.

Multicultural Ideology Scale

The Multicultural Ideology Scale was developed by Berry and Kalin (1995) for the Canadian context and assesses support for having a culturally diverse society, in which ethnocultural groups maintain and share their cultures with others. The scale was adapted to the Portuguese context (Neto, no prelo) and there are ten items, with five in a negative direction (hence it is a balanced scale). Of these negative five, two advocate "assimilation" ideology, one advocates "segregation", and two claim that diversity "weakens unity". Sample items included, "Ethnic minorities should be helped to preserve their cultural heritage in Portugal", and "People who come to live in Portugal should change their behaviour to be more like the Portuguese". In this study the internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (Time 1 $\alpha = .71$; Time 2 $\alpha = .78$).

Ethnic Tolerance Scale

The tolerance scale is an ethnocentrism scale developed by Berry and Kalin (1995) for the Canadian context and is based on the classic ethnocentrism scale. The scale was adapted to the Portuguese context (Neto, no prelo) and consists of seven items that assess one's willingness to accept individuals or groups that are culturally or racially

different from oneself. There are five items phrased positively (i. e. indicating tolerance) and two items phrased negatively (i. e. indicating prejudice). Sample items included, "It is bad idea for people of different ethnies to marry one another" and "I am uncomfortable in a room full of people from different cultures acting in a different way, speaking with strong accents". A high score is indicative of tolerance. In this study the internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (Time 1 $\alpha = .79$; Time 2 $\alpha = .78$).

Self-esteem Scale

The Self-esteem questionnaire (Neto, 2002, 2003; Rosenberg, 1986) was composed of ten questions expressing the value the person attributes him/herself. Sample items were "On the whole I am satisfied with myself", and "I have a positive attitude toward myself". Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from "Disagree completely" to "Completely agree". In this study the internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (Time 1 $\alpha = .71$; Time 2 $\alpha = .82$).

Sex-Role Ideology Scale

The Portuguese short form of this scale (Neto, 1998) was composed of fourteen statements expressing the people's prescriptions of gender role, or their attitudes about what traits and behaviours are appropriate for men and women (Kalin & Tilby, 1978). An example of an item is "A woman should have exactly the same freedom of action as a man". The correlation between the longer scale and this short form was .89. Responses were given on a seven-point response. A high score is indicative of egalitarian sex-role ideology. In this study the internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (Time 1 $\alpha = .84$; Time 2 $\alpha = .83$).

The Ageism Scale

The original scale is composed of 29 items (Fraboni et al., 1990) designed to assess both cognitive and affective components of ageism. The scale has been found to have adequate construct validity and high internal reliability. Relationships to other constructs measured supported the uniqueness of the scale and revealed a lack of influence from social desirability (Fraboni et al., 1990). The Portuguese adaptation of this scale is composed of 25 items (Neto, 2004). Sample items included, "Old people deserve the same rights and freedoms as do other members of our societies"; "I would prefer not to go to an open house at a senior's club, if invited". Response choices were presented in a 7-point Likert format (1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree). A high score is indicative of ageism. In this study the internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's alpha (Time 1 $\alpha = .82$; Time 2 $\alpha = .87$).

Participants were also told at the close of the course that they could write a page outlining if the course had contributed to changing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, including any criticisms or comments they felt were relevant. They were strongly encouraged to be completely honest and open in order to obtain credible data. However, these qualitative data will not be presented in the current paper.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the participants of both groups during the first week (pre-test), and during the last week of classes (post-test). Both classes met on a two semesters basis, thus the pre- and post-tests were separated by 30 weeks. Survey responses were anonymous. However, to track responses over the course, students chose a password to use for both surveys.

Results

If the intercultural modules had the intended effect of improving intercultural relations in the students, and if the diversity instruments measure those psychological constructs, then we would expect an increase in multicultural ideology and ethnic tolerance scores in the intercultural relations master participants. Because several dependent variables were being assessed, a multivariate test was first conducted to control for Type I error. Although there were no significant differences by groups, $F(1, 31) = .01$, *ns*, there were significant differences across time, $F(9, 23) = 31.63$, $p < .05$, and the interaction between the groups across time, $F(9, 23) = 2.76$, $p < .05$. This interaction indicated significant change in attitudes over time in the experimental group, but not in the control group. Thus, univariate analyses were next examined (see Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and F statistics from these analyses).

As Table 1 shows, over the intercultural relations course, (a) multicultural ideology became more positive ($\eta^2 = .36$), (b) ethnic tolerance became more positive ($\eta^2 = .31$), (c) self-esteem became more positive ($\eta^2 = .33$), (d) no significant changes were observed for gender role attitudes, and (e) ageism had not changed. All these measures were unchanged in the control group.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables Over Time by Course

Dependent Variable	Time 1		Time 2		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> <
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Intercultural Relations						
Course ^a						
Multicultural Ideology	5.33	.80	5.77	.79	8.09	.05
Tolerance	5.93	.85	6.44	.49	6.37	.05
Self-esteem	4.49	.32	4.72	.43	6.75	.05
Gender Role Ideology	5.46	.84	5.64	.86	1.88	<i>ns</i>
Ageism	2.41	.51	2.24	.51	.95	<i>ns</i>
Musical Expression						

Course ^b						
Multicultural Ideology	5.63	.76	5.72	.82	.34	<i>ns</i>
Tolerance	5.69	1.21	5.73	.99	.07	<i>ns</i>
Self-esteem	4.28	.39	4.28	.54	.00	<i>ns</i>
Gender Role Ideology	5.77	.68	5.82	.65	.14	<i>ns</i>
Ageism	2.74	.59	2.63	.68	1.61	<i>ns</i>

^aF(1,14). ^bF(1, 17).

Because students could enrol voluntary in the intercultural relations and musical expression courses, it was also important to assess whether self-selection bias was a factor in these results. Thus a MANOVA was conducted to determine whether the classes differed at the start of the year in any of the dependent variables of interest. The a MANOVA was non significant, $F(1,31) = .50$, *ns*, as were the univariate statistics. Thus, when the year began, students in the intercultural relations course did not have significantly different attitudes toward diversity, gender-role ideology and ageism from the students in musical expression in schools.

Discussion

Results of this study confirmed that, aside from educational benefits deriving from the content of an intercultural relations course, students further experienced change on a more personal level. This conclusion is consistent with the broader literature on college impact, which indicates that college experience offers great potential for change on both intellectual and personal levels (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1996). It also reports the position of proponents that multicultural courses offer a forum to induce personal change.

The results of this study indicate that there were several positive outcomes attained by students taking the intercultural relations course, as compared to students enrolled in a control group. Although attitudes between students in the two courses were not significantly different at the beginning of the first semester, over the two semesters student attitudes in the intercultural relations course became significantly higher in multicultural ideology, and significantly more tolerant of different cultures. The effect sizes were small (above .20). However attitudes toward gender roles and old people did not change significantly. Among control students, attitudes did not change significantly over the two semesters.

Another form of personal growth presumed to be the byproduct of multicultural education is an increased self-esteem. The present study detected a significant increase in self-esteem among individuals completing an intercultural relations course.

These results are encouraging because they indicate that topics focusing on ethnic diversity can have a positive impact on student attitudes toward multicultural ideology, ethnic tolerance, and self-worth. However this positive impact can not be generalized to

other topics related to diversity, such as gender role ideology and ageism. For example, even if recent research has found that sexism (Harris *et al.*, 1999) and ageism can be reduced (Braithwaite, 2002), the current study, however, points out that a programme designed to improve attitudes toward cultural diversity, did not improve automatically attitudes toward gender-roles and towards old people.

Future research on the effectiveness of this course should attempt to reduce some limitations of this study. First, the sample was very small, although it included all students enrolled in the intercultural relations course in the year of the study. Second, this research was also limited in that it assessed change only between two points in time. Although changes were positive and significant, it is perhaps more important to know if such changes persist. Thus, future research might include a follow-up survey after the completion of an intercultural relations course. Third, another concern is social response bias on the cultural diversity measures; however, because our main interest is in changes to the level of the score and not the score per se, this problem is less relevant in this study. Nevertheless, these findings tend to support that cultural diversity can be promoted effectively through training.

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