

Reducing Ethnocentrism in U.S. College Students by Completing a Cross-Cultural Psychology Course

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Abstract: Students enrolled in Cross-Cultural and Introductory Psychology courses completed measures of ethnocentrism at the beginning and end of the term. We predicted that those who took part in the Cross-Cultural Psychology class would have significantly reduced ethnocentric attitudes as a result of the course experience. We also predicted that the Introductory Psychology students would show a minimal decrease in ethnocentrism. As predicted, students in the cross-cultural class showed significant decreases in U.S. and generalized ethnocentrism, while the introductory psychology students did not. Course involvement was related to greater ethnocentrism reduction, but course grade was not related to ethnocentrism reduction. We discuss the implications for ethnocentrism reduction through cross-cultural class activities and education.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, cross-cultural psychology, attitude change, patriotism.

INTRODUCTION

While the United States of America has often been called the “melting pot” of the world, where people from many cultural backgrounds are mixed, the acceptance and understanding of diverse cultural beliefs and practices in the U.S. is not always readily apparent. Many Americans are ignorant of the various cultural differences and similarities that exist within our society and in the rest of the world. In addition to this lack of knowledge, Americans also possess varying degrees of beliefs of cultural superiority, otherwise referred to as ethnocentrism. One way to combat the limited cross-cultural knowledge and ethnocentric attitudes would be to offer specific cross-cultural content classes at colleges across the country. American college campuses are experiencing significant increases in diversity and some researchers speculate that by 2020, 46% of the students on college campuses will be of color, including low income and students who do not speak English as their first language [1]. While college environments are changing and becoming more diverse, so is the business world. Therefore, it is especially crucial for colleges to prepare students to enter into an ever expanding global and diverse multicultural workforce, where business and industry workers interact with citizens from other cultures on a regular basis. Increased understanding, sensitivity, and reduced ethnocentric attitudes are necessary for future professional and personal success.

Ethnocentrism

The topic of ethnocentrism is not new to the social sciences, as it has been studied scientifically for more than a

century. In 1906, Sumner [2] defined ethnocentrism as “the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (p. 13). While Sumner’s definition of ethnocentrism was widely accepted, the concept of ethnocentrism has evolved since its introduction. In 1950, Levinson [3] stated that ethnocentrism is “based on a pervasive and rigid ingroup-outgroup distinction; it involves stereotyped, negative imagery and hostile attitudes regarding outgroups, stereotyped positive imagery and submissive attitudes regarding ingroups, and a hierarchical, authoritarian view of group interaction in which ingroups are rightly dominant, outgroups subordinate” (p. 150). This definition clearly divulged more about the concept of ethnocentrism than previous definitions and linked it with prejudice and stereotypes. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford [4] conducted a program of research focusing on anti-Semitism, fascism, and the “antidemocratic” personality. Prejudice was believed to be part of a general personality scheme and Adorno *et al.* [4] developed the E scale to measure this collective cognitive system of negative attitudes concerning different ethnic groups (i.e., ethnocentrism). While the E scale has become outdated, it was an important measure of the time and demonstrated how minority attitudes and patriotism were part of ethnocentrism.

More recent research has expanded our understanding of ethnocentrism and the manner in which it develops. Neuliep and McCroskey [5] argue that ethnocentrism is universal and embedded within communication systems and value orientations of cultures [6, 7]. The entire process of becoming ethnocentric is generally unconscious and often begins in childhood [8], simultaneously with the development of a cultural or racial identity. According to the Hardiman [9] model, a child goes through several stages in the development of a racial identity, which can also be applied to cultural identity. The first stage is the naïveté

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stage, when a lack of social consciousness occurs and the child does not identify racial differences in the world. The second stage is the acceptance stage, where racial differences are identified but an individual continues to believe that all people are created equal. The last three stages of the Hardiman [9] model include how an individual begins to learn about the different culture and eventually commits to forming an identity not solely based on race or culture.

While a racial versus a cultural identity may be very different concepts, both are identities formed as a subconscious result of developmental experiences. In both cases, education and experience are necessary in order to avoid racism and cultural biases along with the limited acceptance of ingroup members. Some schools and workplaces recognize the importance of culture and have designed a curriculum to address these social concerns and assess the outcomes of such educational activities.

Cultural Diversity Courses and Outcomes

Several research studies have investigated the effects of general diversity courses on student outcomes over the past several years. In one study, students who completed a diversity course reported less racism and greater intergroup tolerance than those students who did not take the course [10]. Pettijohn and Walzer [11] reported a decrease in student racism, sexism, and negative homosexual attitudes after completing a psychology of prejudice course. Kernahan and Davis [12] demonstrated that a diversity course can change the awareness of racism in students, resulting in racial guilt and consequently a reduction in racism. Case [13] found that students enrolled in a psychology of race and gender course reported raised awareness of white privilege and racism and increased support for affirmative action by the end of the term. In addition, white students expressed more white guilt after completing the course. In another study, students who completed an international psychology course reported more positive attitudes toward studying international psychology, a better understanding of issues in the field and within certain countries, and could identify more countries on a map compared to their pre-test scores [14]. While general courses appear to change knowledge and attitudes, specific exercises have also been investigated.

Cross-cultural simulations have also been found to help students gain cultural knowledge and understand cultural diversity and outgroup similarities and differences [15-17]. While some role-playing games and simulations are general, others focus on specific aspects of cultural awareness. Tomcho and Foels [18] designed a classroom exercise focusing on the process of acculturation. The students who participated reported the event was helpful in understanding acculturation and they also developed empathy for those adjusting to new cultures. Cross-cultural simulations can also be very beneficial to individuals training to be counselors, cross-cultural educators, and anyone engaged in intercultural relations [19, 20]. Similarly, multicultural education and diversity appreciation training has been effective in reducing prejudice among counseling trainees [21, 22].

Because the field of psychology explores the science of human behavior, thought, and emotion, understanding the challenges of diversity is a topic that must be wholeheartedly

addressed. Indeed, Matsumoto and Juang [23] argue that “No field is better equipped to meet the challenge of cultural diversity than psychology” (p. 3). There has been an increase in the popularity and research in the field of cross-cultural psychology in the past couple decades. Cross-cultural psychology is defined as “a research method that tests the cultural parameters of psychological knowledge” [23] (p. 4). Cross-cultural psychology examines specific behaviors across cultures to make comparisons and identify universals of human behavior. A course on cross-cultural psychology can provide a cultural view on every aspect of life [19] and increase our “globalized consciousness” [24].

The Current Study

Previous research has not addressed the specific outcomes of a content-specific course in cross-cultural psychology on ethnocentrism. We were interested in studying the effects of offering a Cross-Cultural Psychology course to students and monitoring the outcomes. We were also interested in observing an Introduction to Psychology class as a comparison class that was not directly exposed to the cross-cultural information and learning environment provided in the specialty course. We hypothesized that the students enrolled in the Cross-Cultural Psychology course would show a significant reduction in their ethnocentric attitudes after having completed the course. Students who completed Introductory Psychology courses were also expected to show a decrease in ethnocentrism, although the reduction was predicted to be greater for the students in the Cross-Cultural Psychology course that deals more directly with issues of cultural differences. Student involvement within Cross-Cultural Psychology was also an important consideration. We were interested in investigating whether the grade the student earned, along with the amount of involvement the student reported with the course, influenced the final outcome of the course. We predicted that those students who reported more involvement with the course material and who earned high scores in the Cross-Cultural Psychology class would report less ethnocentrism at the end of the term.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Participants

As a class exercise, 31 undergraduate students enrolled in one section of Cross-Cultural Psychology (taught by the first author) and 28 students in one section of Introductory Psychology (taught by a different instructor) participated. Students attended a small, liberal arts college and all participants were Caucasian. The average age of the students in Cross-Cultural Psychology was 21.26 years ($SD = 2.93$, range = 18-32) while the average age of the students in Introductory Psychology was 19.04 years ($SD = .92$, range = 18-22). The students in Cross-Cultural Psychology were primarily Psychology majors (67.7%), whereas only 10.7% of the students in the Introductory Psychology course were Psychology majors. The majority of students in the Cross-Cultural Psychology class were women (87.1%), as were the majority of students in Introductory Psychology (64.3%). Cross-Cultural Psychology had a varied distribution of class

ranks (freshman = 19.4%, sophomore = 16.1%, junior = 25.8%, and senior = 38.7%) whereas Introductory Psychology was comprised mainly of freshman (freshman = 75%, sophomore = 21.4%, junior = 0%, and senior = 3.6%). All but one student in the Cross-Cultural Psychology class (96.8%) and all but one student in Introductory Psychology (96.4%) reported a heterosexual sexual orientation.

Courses

The Cross-Cultural Psychology course examined how elements of culture influenced cross-cultural examinations of major psychological theories (a course syllabus is available from the first author). Students reconsidered major psychological theories and research findings and determined the extent to which these principles generalized across cultures or failed to generalize across cultures and the implications of each. The class was assigned to read Shireav and Levy's [25] textbook *Cross-Cultural Psychology* (3rd ed.), as well as readings for class discussion from Price and Crapo's [26] *Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (4th ed.). Students also completed numerous activities from Goldstein's [27] *Cross-Cultural Explorations*. By reading, discussing, and completing activities about cross-cultural psychology, students were expected to acquire a greater understanding and appreciation of the similarities and differences of people around the world, and ultimately a deeper understand of the self.

The Introductory Psychology class was a survey of the entire field of psychology. Although some elements of culture were covered in the context of the Introductory Psychology course, cultural influence was not the main topic. The Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Introductory Psychology courses met three times a week, 80 minutes each session, for the standard 10-week period on the term system used at the college.

Materials and Procedure

Students completed standardized questionnaires measuring U.S. ethnocentrism (U.S. Ethnocentrism Scale, USE) [5] and generalized ethnocentrism (revised Generalized Ethnocentrism Scale, GENE) [5, 28] the first day of class. The USE is a 16 item scale developed to measure U.S. ethnocentrism, although investigations have determined it also taps into U.S. patriotism. The GENE (revised version) [28] is a 22 item scale designed to measure generalized ethnocentrism. Students answered all ethnocentrism scale questions using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *disagree*, and 5 = *strongly disagree*). After completing the measures, students placed their responses in an envelope, sealed it, and submitted the envelope to the instructor. The instructor kept the sealed envelopes in a locked filing drawer in his office. We chose these questionnaires because they are previously used measures of ethnocentrism, particularly the GENE, with documented reliability and validity [5, 6, 28].

At the end of the term, students completed the identical questionnaires and a brief demographic form. When students were finished with these measures, the instructor returned the envelopes with the pre-course questionnaires. Next, the

instructor explained the intention of the current study and all students agreed, by signing a written consent form, to have their responses included in this study. We assessed participant race, age, sexual orientation, and perceived involvement in class on a demographic questionnaire at the end of the term. We asked students "How involved were you in learning the material in this course" and we instructed them to circle a number on a 10 point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all involved* to 10 = *Extremely involved*. We also used final earned course percentages of the students in Cross-Cultural Psychology to investigate how course performance and ethnocentric attitude reduction were related.

RESULTS

We calculated scores for each measure of ethnocentrism (USE and GENE). Consistent with previous investigations [5, 6, 28], the USE and GENE measures demonstrated acceptable reliabilities (all Cronbach's alphas > .80). For each measure, we conducted a dependent means *t* test to determine whether ethnocentrism had decreased from the beginning to the end of the term. Students in the Cross-Cultural Psychology course showed a significant reduction in U.S. ethnocentrism (USE), $t(30) = 5.37, p < .001, d = 1.96, M_{pre} = 2.68$ and $M_{post} = 2.40$ ($SDs = .35$ and $.39$, respectively). Students also reported a significant decrease in generalized ethnocentrism (GENE), $t(30) = 3.59, p < .001, d = 1.31, M_{pre} = 2.10$ and $M_{post} = 1.88$ ($SDs = .40$ and $.36$, respectively). See Fig. (1) for results.

To assess the impact of earned course grade and course involvement on ethnocentrism reduction for the Cross-Cultural Psychology students, we computed correlations between the ethnocentrism change scores on each measure (post-course minus pre-course) and final course percentage and self-rated course involvement. Course grade was not related to USE, $r(28) = .11, p = .56$, or GENE reduction $r(28) = -.17, p = .37$. Self-rated involvement in the course was significantly related to greater USE reduction, $r(29) = -.38, p = .03$. Although in the predicted direction, course involvement was not significantly related to GENE reduction, $r(29) = -.29, p = .12$.

Students in the Introductory Psychology course did not show statistically significant reductions in USE, $t(27) = .13, p = .89$, or GENE, $t(27) = 1.47, p = .15$, from the beginning of the term to the end of the term. In Introductory Psychology, 35.7% reduced their USE score and 42.8% of the students reduced their GENE score from the beginning to the end of the term. In Cross-Cultural Psychology, 77.4% reduced their USE score and 61.3% of the students reduced their GENE score from the beginning to the end of the term.

When we compared the classes at the beginning of the term, the students in Introductory Psychology reported marginally greater USE scores, $t(57) = 1.65, p = .10$, and marginally greater GENE scores, $t(57) = 1.71, p = .09$, than the students in Cross-Cultural Psychology. When we compared the change from pre- to post-course measures between the classes, we found that the Cross-Cultural Psychology students reported a significantly greater decrease in USE scores, $t(57) = 3.80, p < .001, d = 1.0$, and a significantly greater decrease in GENE scores, $t(57) = 2.01$,

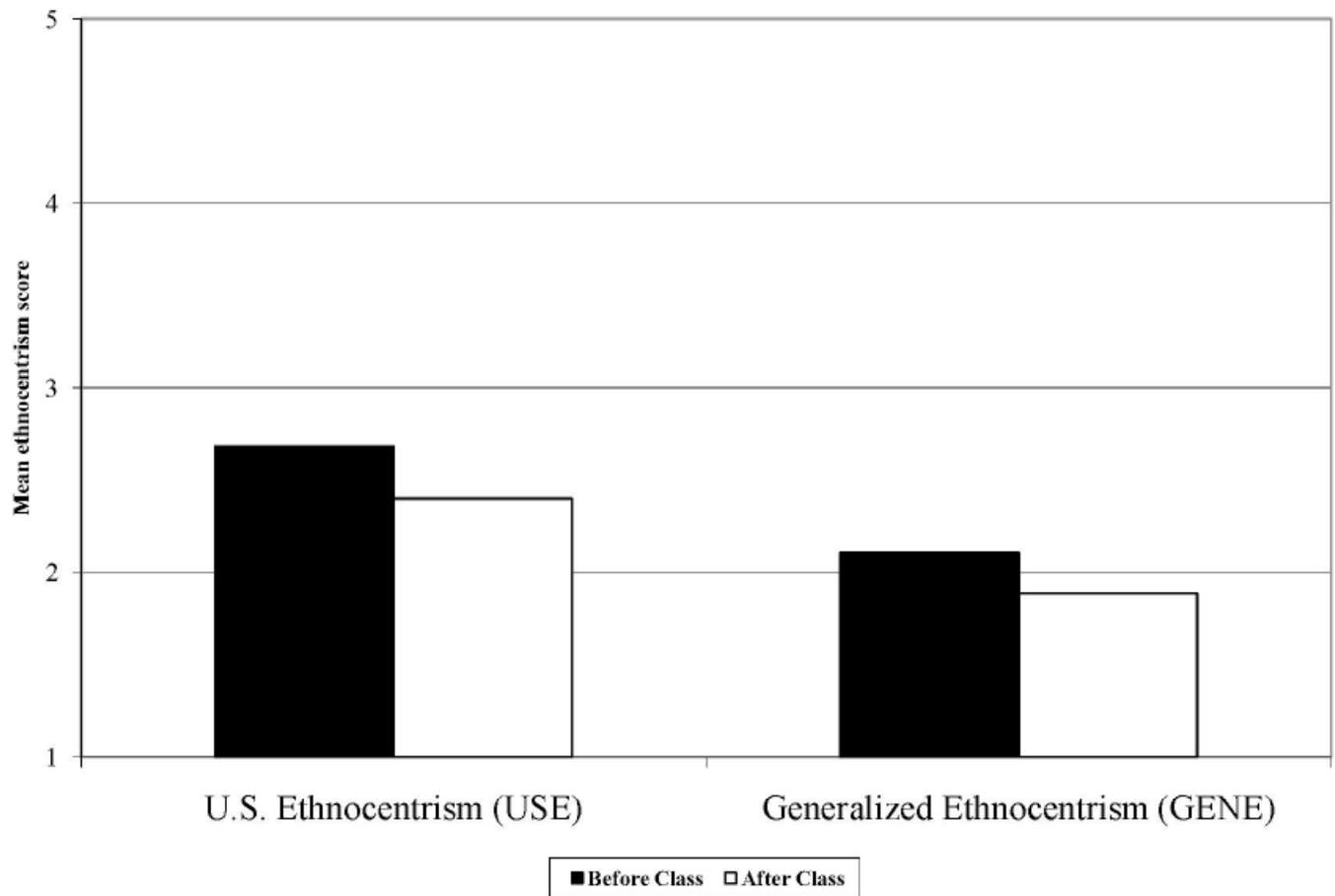


Fig. (1). Mean pre- and post-course USE and GENE scores. Scale statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where larger values indicate greater ethnocentrism.

$p = .05$, $d = .53$, compared to the Introductory Psychology students.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, students who completed a Cross-Cultural Psychology class did reduce their generalized and U.S. ethnocentric attitudes in this study. Although we hypothesized that students who earned higher grades and who were more involved in the class would show greater ethnocentric attitude reduction, we found that students who earned higher grades did not experience greater reductions in ethnocentrism. However, students who indicated more involvement in the cross-cultural course did experience more ethnocentric attitude reduction. Also as hypothesized, students enrolled in Cross-Cultural Psychology reported greater reduction in ethnocentrism than students enrolled in a comparison Introductory Psychology class. The students enrolled in Introductory Psychology showed very little change in ethnocentrism overall.

Although we generally found support for our predictions, there are some interesting findings that deserve additional discussion. The grades students earned in our study were not related to ethnocentric attitude changes. Learning facts and research outcomes and performing well on cross-cultural psychology course content alone is not sufficient to decrease ethnocentric attitudes in college students. However, active

engagement with course material and course involvement was related to a decrease in ethnocentric attitudes, particularly for USE. Ethnocentric attitudes specifically related to the U.S. might have been more salient to a class which was exploring how their own culture was similar and different compared to other cultures. Our results suggest that in order to experience the positive effects of ethnocentrism reduction, students are not required to earn high grades in the course, however, being involved in the material is a necessity. This supports previous research which demonstrates how fact-based cognitive changes are not always equivalent to behavioral and affective changes [29]. More specifically, Pettijohn and Walzer [11] investigated the outcomes of completing a Psychology of Prejudice class and found that changes in prejudice were not related to student earned course grade, but changes in prejudice were related to student course involvement.

Students in Introductory Psychology reported somewhat greater ethnocentrism than the Cross-Cultural Psychology students at the beginning of the term. The pre-course difference could be explained by the demographics and experiences of the selected students. Introduction to Psychology was a pre-requisite for the Cross-Cultural Psychology class. In addition, many of the students in Cross-Cultural Psychology were psychology majors who had completed other psychology courses and who were somewhat older and less likely to be freshman compared to

the Introduction to Psychology students. The additional course exposure and life experiences may have led to a greater appreciation for cultural differences. However, these varying background characteristics and experiences do not explain the significant *changes* in ethnocentrism reported by the Cross-Cultural Psychology students. In fact, given that the Cross-Cultural Psychology student ethnocentrism scores were relatively low to begin with, our findings could be considered stronger since there was less potential room for the students to decrease their ethnocentric attitudes.

It is also important to note the average ethnocentrism change scores reported by the students enrolled in the Cross-Cultural Psychology class were less than half a point on a 5-point scale. While students were not reporting extensive shifts in their ethnocentric attitudes from the beginning of the term to the end, these differences were statistically significant with large effect sizes. In addition, the vast majority of the students reduced their ethnocentric attitude scores overall. As previously mentioned, it is important to draw attention to the students' rather low to moderate initial ethnocentric attitudes when considering the current study results. We might expect even larger ethnocentric reductions in participants with stronger initial ethnocentric attitudes, although we recognize we are only accounting for a portion of the variation in ethnocentrism change. Future studies may target individuals with particularly strong initial ethnocentrism and determine additional methods to further reduce ethnocentric attitudes and explain variability.

Despite our significant findings, we recognize there are certain limitations with our study and several areas for future investigation. One limitation of our study was that the majority of participants were heterosexual, Caucasian, college students, making the generalization of results limited. If this research was conducted with other more diverse groups, or in different cultures, we may have found different results. For example, Neuliep, Chaudoir, and McCrosky [6] found differences in reported ethnocentrism between Japanese and U.S. college students. Cultural differences and socialization are important factors determining ethnocentrism and these results suggest that ethnocentric views are not a standard cultural universal. In addition, the current study only investigated changes in ethnocentrism after 10 weeks. Although we believe the Cross-Cultural Psychology course would continue to influence ethnocentrism months and years following the class, we do not have data to determine what happens after students are removed from their relatively safe college environment and enter the real world. Future research may address the long term effects of ethnocentrism reduction.

We also recognize that certain elements of being ethnocentric may serve a valuable function when a group is threatened or attacked [5]. Patriotism and willingness to sacrifice are important positive elements demonstrating group loyalty and cohesion. While these positive elements may increase ingroup morale and solidarity, these same elements may also increase outgroup bias and discrimination. Extreme feelings of patriotism, for example, can also lead to derogation of other cultural beliefs as different, strange, and wrong. Therefore, other measures of ethnocentrism and cultural views could be used to separate out the subcomponents of ethnocentrism and how these

factors vary with cross-cultural psychology course involvement and completion.

Does cross-cultural training translate into real life advantages? Cushner [20] compared high-school students from several countries in an international exchange program who experienced cultural assimilation training to those who received traditional orientation. Those who received the cultural assimilation training were better equipped to handle the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction and apply concepts in intercultural interactions. Those with the training were also better adjusted and more efficient in interpersonal problem-solving ability. Furthermore, Varner and Beamer [30] explain how successful businesses use ethnocentric views when setting up businesses in other cultures. When companies and individuals see their own ways as the only right ways, little value is placed on cultural understanding, which can lead to confrontations, complacency, and failure.

When teaching diversity classes, Gloria, Rieckman, and Rush [31] provide concerns and strategies for instructors who teach ethnic/culture-based courses in psychology. They recommend that professors consider 1) student comfort with ambiguity, 2) varying degrees of student ethnic/cultural identity development, 3) student fears regarding their personal biases and assumptions, and 4) the emotions of students as they gain new and potentially value-incongruent knowledge. Titus [32] also explains how it is important for teachers to serve as positive role models when trying to reduce prejudice. Teachers must believe in what they are teaching and they can encourage students to develop and expand their abstract thinking and flexible viewpoints, encompassing different cultural practices and beliefs, to help reduce prejudice.

Diversity courses could also incorporate field experiences into the class curriculum to strengthen learning outcomes. Parameswaran [33] found that students who participated in short term site visits to community organizations serving diverse populations resulted in higher teaching efficacy ratings and greater sensitivity to diversity within an educational psychology class. Hamon and Fernsler [34] had students travel to many different countries in order to increase their exposure to other cultures and gain experience working with different populations. They were able to see how such an interactive course may help decrease the ethnocentric views of the students. While they were able to actually travel with the students to see other cultures around the world, incorporating a component such as this in our course may have strengthened ethnocentric attitude changes. Field trips and cultural experiences can make psychological information more personally meaningful and therefore increase knowledge and understanding of cultural differences and similarities. Specific course content of different areas could also be used in future investigations.

CONCLUSION

Our results suggest that completing and actively participating in a specific Cross-Cultural Psychology course reduces ethnocentric attitudes of college students. Discussions, activities, readings, and writing assignments allowed students to explore their cultural beliefs and develop an appreciation for those who are different. Doing well on

assignments and exams was not sufficient to change ethnocentric attitudes. Students also had to actively engage in the cross-cultural material and participate in class exercises, discussions, and required readings to change their views of ethnocentrism. We recognize there are many activities and experiences beyond completing a cross-cultural psychology course that may also contribute to variations in ethnocentrism reduction. Other colleges may consider adding cross-cultural psychology and general diversity classes in the future based on these encouraging results, paying close attention to how the course is taught, who teaches it, and how the curriculum is organized for the maximum impact. In addition to their positive educational and attitudinal outcomes, courses concerning diversity are often reported as interesting and enjoyable by the students who take these offerings [35].

NOTES

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