Cultural sensitivity or cultural stereotyping? Positive and negative effects of a cultural psychology class

Emma E. Buchtel *

Department of Psychological Studies, Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, N.T., Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Cultural psychology ultimately aims to increase intercultural understanding, but it has also been accused of reifying stereotypes. Can learning about cultural psychology research cause students to increase their cultural sensitivity, or does it increase stereotyped and rigid thinking about cultural others? Students in an undergraduate cultural psychology course ($N = 34$) were compared to students in control psychology courses ($N = 20$) in pre- and post-course measures of cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, essentialistic thinking, prejudice, moral relativism, and endorsement of stereotypes and sociotypes. Compared to students in the control courses, cultural psychology students increased in cultural awareness, moral relativism, and meta-cognitive cultural intelligence, but students who received lower grades in the course also increased their endorsement of stereotypes that were not endorsed by cultural psychology research. Implications for intercultural training and the communication of research on cultural differences are discussed.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Knowledge of cultural differences is one of the basic requirements for achieving cultural sensitivity, and discovering cultural differences is fundamental to cultural psychology research (e.g. Fouad & Arredondo, 2007; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). But teaching about cultural differences is rife with potential dangers: Might it encourage rigid thinking about cultures or individuals? What if it is misinterpreted as legitimizing cultural stereotypes? Could it even increase prejudice, at least in some people?

With few exceptions (e.g. Fischer, 2011; see also Mendenhall et al., 2004), past research on intercultural training has not empirically assessed the potential negative effects of learning about culture nor has it explored individual differences in reactions to cultural training, though these effects are often a concern of trainers (e.g. Coleman & Raider, 2006; Jenks, 2011). In this paper, I first outline some of the controversies around teaching and learning about cultural difference, and illustrate the controversy with a longitudinal study of students taking cultural versus other psychology courses. The results indicate that learning about cultural psychology can increase skills and attitudes that are precursors of intercultural competence; however, it can also have problematic effects on some students.

* Tel.: +852 2948 8756.
E-mail addresses: buchtel@ied.edu.hk, emma.buchtel@gmail.com

1.1. The controversy: is knowledge of cultural differences helpful or harmful?

In general, to research and teach about cultural differences is to face head-on some of the most complex questions about multiculturalism. How can one emphasize cultural differences and yet avoid the usual attendant features of social categorization: stereotyping and prejudice?

The potential dangers of increasing knowledge of cultural differences has led to conflicted advice about its usefulness. Cultural competence trainers frequently wrestle with how, or even whether, to teach about cultural differences. For example, intercultural conflict resolution trainers Coleman and Raider (2006) admit to often skipping the cultural component of conflict resolution training because of possible misuse. Similarly, in the area of mental and physical health services, a number of authors (e.g. Eiser & Ellis, 2007; Jenks, 2011; Whaley & Davis, 2007) suggest that while teaching specific cultural differences may be a necessary first step towards cultural competence, it can lead to overreliance on and legitimization of cultural stereotypes.

On the other hand, recent research has suggested that acknowledgement of group differences can be associated with positive effects. Multicultural ideologies among majority group members are associated with more felt warmth and less bias against minorities (Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). Conversely, colour-blind ideologies by majority group members have been associated with worse outcomes for minorities in the workplace (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009), lower multicultural counselling competence (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006), and lower awareness of societal racism (Steinfeldt & Wong, 2010).

Among cultural psychologists, revealing cultural differences is seen as a necessary corrective for mainstream psychology research's overwhelming dependence on white, educated, and American participants (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Cultural psychology researchers may also have an unstated goal to increase "understanding and appreciation of cultural differences" (Heine, 2012, p. 26). Nevertheless, cultural psychology has been criticized as encouraging stereotyped and essentialistic thinking about group differences (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006).

1.2. Question 1: Does cultural psychology encourage students to become more culturally aware and open-minded?

One of the first questions about cultural psychology, then, is whether or not learning about cultural psychology research can have positive effects on intercultural interactions. The need to acknowledge and know about group differences, as well as acquire non-judgmental attitudes towards these differences, is emphasized in most theoretical models of intercultural competence. In an evaluation of more than 22 models of intercultural competence, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) found that knowledge (mainly of culture-specific information) and attitudes such as flexibility, respect, and open-mindedness were among the most common themes. For example, Sue's model of Multicultural Counselling Competence—the basis of many counselling psychology training programmes—emphasizes cultural knowledge as one of the three key components, along with appropriate beliefs/attitudes and interpersonal skills (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Similarly, Bennett (1993) theorized that in order to develop intercultural sensitivity, one must pass beyond an ethnocentric stage—in which cultural differences are either unknown or dismissed—to more advanced stages where cultural differences are acknowledged, accepted, and integrated into behaviour. Finally, the popular Cultural Intelligence scale (Ang et al., 2007) emphasizes four different elements, which include knowledge of other cultures (cognitive cultural intelligence [CQ]) and awareness of cultural aspects of interactions (meta-cognitive CQ).

These models suggest that learning about cultural psychology could be a first step in acquiring cultural competence. Cultural psychology's focus on cultural differences could support initial steps in the "knowledge" aspect of cultural competence: sensitivity to the cultural elements of interpersonal interactions. Additionally, the attitude of neutral, scientific objectivity of cultural psychology research could encourage readers to be non-judgmental about the practices of other cultures. For example, cultural psychologists assume that differences in psychological tendencies emerge because they have practical value: in different cultural environments, different thought patterns are more useful (e.g. Buchtel & Norenzayan, 2008). Though a cultural psychology course may not be explicitly designed to increase cultural competence, cultural competence training programmes often have similar goals of moving students to an intermediate stage of cultural sensitivity, typified by accurately identifying cultural influences and developing an appreciation of other cultural worldviews (as a first step towards a future goal of full behavioural fluency in another culture; e.g. Bhawuk, 1998; Crandall, George, Marion, & Davis, 2003). Positive results of a cultural psychology course, then, might be seen in greater awareness of cultural dimensions to intercultural interactions and less judgmental attitudes towards cultural differences.

1.3. Question 2: Does cultural psychology increase essentialism, group entitativity, and prejudice?

However, there are also dangers to learning about cultural differences. Cultural psychology research often shows that there are group differences, but not that these cultural differences are unchangeable or that they exert an equal influence on every individual identified with that group. Nevertheless, students of cultural psychology necessarily increase their awareness of group differences, which may reify or exaggerate group boundaries and characteristics (Rosenthal & Crisp, 2006). Such thinking may result in *essentialistic* or *entitative* thinking about cultures and individuals: thinking about groups as if they have an "essence" that is immutably characteristic of group members, thus making individual group members seem more similar to one another and categorically different from members of other groups.