

# Diversity Topics Covered in Teaching of Psychology Courses

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## Abstract

Teaching of psychology courses trains graduate students in pedagogy, but little is known about how diversity is addressed in these courses. A survey of instructors in teaching of psychology courses assessed their coverage of diversity and classroom bias, as well as the instructional methods used to cover them. Results indicated that 87% of instructors covered diversity issues, and 78% covered bias that occurs in the classroom. Instructors who covered diversity and bias devoted 3 to 5 hr to the topics and primarily used traditional instructional methods, such as discussion, readings, and lectures. Older instructors tended to cover fewer topics than younger instructors. Although diversity topics are part of teaching of psychology courses, it is unlikely that the time devoted to the topics is sufficient preparation for teaching in diverse classrooms.

## Keywords

diversity, teaching, graduate education, prejudice

Diversity, including differences in race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation, religion, and ability (among others), has become a major concern in higher education. In fact, most universities now include diversity in their mission and goals (McTighe Musil, Hudgins, Nettles, Sedlacek, & Smith, 1999). Accordingly, the majority of faculty members believe that appreciation for diversity is an important learning goal, and they attempt to address diversity in their teaching (DeAngelo, Hurtado, Pryor, Kelly, & Santos, 2009; Sciamé-Gieseche, Roden, & Parkinson, 2009). Psychologists are part of this larger trend; one survey of more than 700 psychologists indicated that 73% devoted at least one full class period of every course to diversity content (Simoni, Sexton-Radeck, Yescavage, Richard, & Lundquist, 1999). Despite these encouraging trends, multicultural experts point out that the overall curricular content devoted to diversity is limited, and they suggest that one reason for this is lack of faculty expertise (Sue, Bingham, Porché-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). Indeed, teachers who are responsible for infusing diversity into college programs indicate that one barrier they face is the lack of faculty development and training on the issue (Alvarez McHatton, Keller, Schircliff, & Zalaquett, 2009). Specifically, teachers who address diversity express concern about how to effectively handle hostility, student discomfort, their own discomfort, and the maintenance of respect in the classroom (Alvarez McHatton et al., 2009; Elicker, Thompson, Snell, & O'Malley, 2009). In general, college teachers need to possess multicultural competency, and the purpose of this study is to expand knowledge about how teaching of psychology courses address that need.

To achieve multicultural competency, a teacher must possess knowledge, awareness, and skill (Diller & Moule, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2003). Multicultural knowledge consists of factual understanding of cultural differences and the experiences of diverse groups. Awareness includes recognition of oneself as a product of a culture and how that culture affects personal values and biases. Finally, skill refers to the ability to work effectively with people from various cultural backgrounds. These types of multicultural competencies have become standard components of teacher education programs at the undergraduate level (Smith, 2009; Weinstein, Curran, & Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003), and college teachers need to master them as well.

Previous research indicates that diversity is covered in the majority (73%) of teaching of psychology courses (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002), but it is unknown to what extent these courses address essential content related to multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skill. Multicultural competence includes knowledge about diverse groups, but diversity is a concept with fuzzy boundaries that are difficult to define (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 1999). As such, the forms of diversity that are covered in teaching of psychology courses are a basic concern because teachers must consider

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both visible (e.g., race) and nonvisible (e.g., learning disabilities) forms of diversity. Multicultural awareness is especially important in teaching of psychology courses, considering students' reports that teachers are a source of bias in college classrooms (Boysen, Vogel, Cope, & Hubbard, 2009; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). However, there is no indication that teaching of psychology courses addresses the ways in which teachers can be biased against students. Conversely, college teachers often encounter situations in which students express bias during class, and it is common for the teachers to be unsure about the effectiveness of their responses to these incidents (Boysen & Vogel, 2009; Boysen et al., 2009). One way to improve responses to bias in the classroom would be to specifically address this skill in teaching of psychology courses, but again, it is unknown to what extent teaching of psychology courses focus on the skills needed for handling cultural diversity and conflict.

The purpose of the current study is to answer questions about how teaching of psychology courses address diversity topics. A survey of instructors assessed the types of diversity and bias topics covered in teaching of psychology courses and the instructional methods used for the topics. In addition, this study included an exploration of instructors' demographic characteristics as potential predictors of covering diversity. Research indicates that being older and male is associated with increased prejudice (e.g., Herek, 2000; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002) and decreased likelihood of perceiving bias in the classroom (Boysen & Vogel, 2009). As such, exploratory analyses examined the relation of course content to instructors' age and gender. Overall, there are many unanswered questions about how graduate coursework prepares teachers of psychology to be multiculturally competent, and the results of this study may help answer some of those questions.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of instructors of teaching of psychology courses associated with doctoral psychology programs listed in the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Graduate Study in Psychology* (APA, 2008). Of the 325 programs, 175 offered a teaching of psychology courses for academic credit (excluding supervision and internships), according to university websites, department websites, or department personnel (e.g., chairs, training directors). Among these courses, e-mail addresses for 161 instructors of record could be identified using the aforementioned websites or direct contact with department personnel. The sample for the first survey consisted of 97 participants who responded to an e-mail solicitation for participation (61% response rate). The average age of participants was 52 ( $SD = 12$ ), and the majority of respondents was female (57%) and White (92%; Latino/Latina = 3%, multiethnic = 2%, African American, 1%, other = 2%). Participants had an average of 22 ( $SD = 11$ ) years of teaching experience and had instructed an average of 12 ( $SD = 16$ ) sections of

teaching of psychology. I also conducted a follow-up survey 1 year after the initial survey using the same pool of instructors. From the initial list of instructors, 146 remained valid, and 85 of the contacted instructors replied to the survey (58% response rate).

### Materials and Procedure

A human subjects review board approved all of the procedures before commencement of the study, and subsequent treatment of participant was consistent with APA's (2002) ethical guidelines. Participants received an informational e-mail asking for their participation in a brief survey about teaching of psychology courses. Those who were interested in participating followed a link and completed the survey online. On the first survey, participants began by describing their demographic characteristics. Next, the survey asked the *yes/no* question "Do you address diversity issues as part of your teaching of psychology course?" Participants who responded *yes* selected the types of diversity covered in their courses from a list including *age, disability, nationality, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and other*. Then, participants answered the *yes/no* question "As part of your teaching of psychology course do you address methods of dealing with bias in the classroom?"

A second, follow-up survey asked participants for more detailed information about the topics taught, methods of instruction, and time spent on each topic. For each diversity topic covered, participants indicated the time spent on it using a 5-point scale ranging from *1 to 15 minutes* to *more than 60 minutes*, and they selected the methods used to teach the topic from a list including *discussion, guest speaker, journaling/self-reflection, lecture, readings, formal papers, and other*. Participants then selected the bias topics they covered from a list including "Prejudice and discrimination teachers direct at students during grading and evaluation," "Stereotypes teachers direct at students," "Prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes students direct at teachers," "Discriminatory behavior (e.g., refusing to work in a group, ignoring, avoidance) students direct at other students," "Offensive or inappropriate comments students make during class," and "Other bias." Before the analyses I excluded participants who indicated that they only supervised teachers or whose courses were not offered for credit; this led to 1 participant being removed from the first survey and 3 from the second.

## Results

The first analysis examined how frequently issues of diversity and bias are covered in teaching of psychology courses, as well as the specific topics included in that coverage. The results indicated that 87% of instructors addressed diversity; race was most common form of diversity covered (92%), followed by disability (83%), gender (80%), sexual orientation (71%), socioeconomic status (59%), age (55%), nationality (50%), religion (49%), and other (2%). In addition, 78% of instructors

addressed bias; inappropriate classroom comments by students (85%) was most commonly covered topic, followed by teacher stereotypes about students (79%), teacher bias in grading (70%), student bias toward other students (63%), student bias toward teachers (58%), and other (22%). Bias topics reported more than once in the other category included political beliefs and academic preparedness. Additional topics mentioned only once included academically unmotivated students, appropriate use of examples and humor, handling difficult dialogs in class, and stereotype threat.

The next analysis focused on teaching methods and the amount of time spent on diversity and bias topics. Methods of instruction were consistent across all diversity and bias topics. Discussion was always the most frequently reported method of instruction (44%). Assigned readings (25%) and lecture (15%) were also common instructional methods, but other methods were relatively uncommon (journaling/self-reflection, 5%; guest speaker, 4%; formal papers, 2%; other, 6%). Participants' indication of the time spent on each topic was also consistent. Instructors reported an average of 16 to 30 min spent on each diversity and bias topic, with the exception of race/ethnicity, which received an average of 31 to 45 min of class time. Considering the average time participants reported spending on each topic and the average number of diversity topics ( $M = 6$ ,  $SD = 3$ ) and bias topics ( $M = 4$ ,  $SD = 2$ ) covered, instructors, on average, spend an estimated 2 to 3 hr on diversity topics and 1 to 2 hr on bias topics.

A final analysis examined gender and age as predictors of covering diversity and bias. To begin, I used the total number of diversity topics and bias topics covered as dependent variables in independent samples *t* tests, with gender serving as the independent variable in both tests. The results indicated that women and men were not significantly different in the number of diversity topics covered (men:  $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 3.20$ ; women:  $M = 5.98$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) or bias topics covered (men:  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ; women:  $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ), all *t* values  $< 0.88$ , all *p* values  $> .384$ , all *d* values  $< .22$ . Next, I conducted Pearson's correlations among age and number of diversity and bias topics covered. A significant negative correlation emerged between age and number of diversity topics covered,  $r = -.31$ ,  $p = .012$ , but the negative correlation between age and bias topics covered did not reach significance,  $r = -.22$ ,  $p = .075$ . These results suggest that older faculty members provide less coverage of diversity than younger faculty members.

## Discussion

This study's results indicate that diversity issues are addressed in 87% of teaching of psychology courses; this is a substantial increase from the 73% documented in previous research (Buskist et al., 2002). The increased frequency suggests greater awareness among instructors of the importance of multicultural issues. Although there is no previous research on the coverage of specific diversity topics, instructors' tendency to go beyond race in defining diversity is a positive indicator of multicultural

knowledge. In fact, instructors appear to define diversity quite broadly; several visible (e.g., race, gender, age) and nonvisible (e.g., disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) characteristics received coverage from over 50% of instructors. Although these estimates are based on a large sample of the extant population of teaching of psychology instructors, it is important to note that the estimates provided by this study must be interpreted cautiously because the sample was self-selected and because instructional practices were self-reported.

The results of this study also suggest several areas for improvement for coverage of diversity issues. One area for improvement is the overall time devoted to diversity issues. Instructors in this study reported spending 3 to 5 hr of class time on diversity and bias topics. The implication seems to be that teaching of psychology courses do not produce culturally competent teachers. Multiculturally competent teachers have knowledge of their students' cultures and backgrounds, awareness of their own culture and biases, and skill in effectively interacting with and teaching individuals of various cultures (Diller & Moule, 2005). Engendering these competencies requires more than a few hours of coverage in one course. The simplest solution to this problem is to increase the time spent on diversity topics, but it is always difficult to add content to courses without cutting other crucial material. However, Elicker et al. (2009) suggested that diversity topics can be integrated into teaching courses by connecting them with other core content. For example, the topic of ethics can include the ethical responsibility to treat all students equitably. Coverage of active learning techniques can emphasize making all students contributors to classroom dialogs and skills for ensuring respect for the diverse perspectives that arise. Diversity can also be integrated into course assignments. One example would be requiring students to infuse diversity content into all practice lectures and lesson plans. Overall, diversity warrants increased coverage in teaching courses, and one solution is to creatively integrate it with existing course content in addition to treating it as a standalone topic.

In addition to a general increase in the time devoted to diversity issues, the results also suggest that some specific issues necessitate greater attention in teaching courses. The most obviously neglected area of diversity is disability. Nearly one-fifth of instructors did not include topics related to disability; this means a large proportion of future teachers may enter the classroom unprepared to address student differences in physical and mental abilities or the services available to them by mandate of federal law. The general topic of bias in the classroom was also neglected in comparison to other diversity issues, and this is problematic considering recent research on the topic. For example, a survey of college teachers indicated that almost 40% of them encountered an incident of bias in their classrooms in the last year (Boysen & Vogel, 2009). Students perceive an even higher rate of bias than teachers, and importantly, they also perceive teachers as sources of classroom bias (Boysen et al., 2009). Furthermore, when difficult issues such as an incident of bias arise in class, students have specific beliefs about how teachers should respond and the

effectiveness of various responses (Boysen et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2009). Such results indicate that multiculturally competent teachers should possess knowledge that students can face bias in the classroom, awareness of how their own biases might emerge while teaching, and skills in handling incidents of bias.

The results of this study also suggest that specific instructors need encouragement to devote class time to diversity. Older instructors in this study provided less coverage of diversity topics than younger instructors. Two factors stand out as potential explanations for this trend. From a purely demographic standpoint, older individuals are more likely to be prejudiced than younger individuals (e.g., Herek, 2000; Nosek et al., 2002), and it seems likely that instructors with higher prejudice would spend less time on diversity than instructors with lower prejudice. Another factor may be the relatively recent development of multiculturalism. Compared with younger faculty members, older faculty members may be less aware or less accepting of the multicultural paradigm shift. Although this study points to older individuals specifically, teachers of all ages and backgrounds can be resistant to the inclusion of diversity topics in course content. Resistance constitutes an extremely difficult problem to solve because there is no obvious way to ensure that specific topics receive coverage in teaching of psychology courses. However, addressing diversity content throughout an educational program is one solution to the problem of training multiculturally competent teachers.

The call for multicultural competence is clear; the APA's (2003) multicultural education guidelines state that "As educators, psychologists are encouraged to employ the constructs of multiculturalism and diversity in psychological education" (p. 386). How can this be accomplished when only about half of graduate programs in psychology offer formal courses on pedagogy, and the content of those courses focuses primarily on basic teaching skills (Boysen, 2011; Buskist et al., 2002; Myers & Prieto, 2000)? One solution is to be sure that multicultural issues are addressed at the organizational level. Educators in counseling and teacher preparation programs no longer view development of multicultural competency as the responsibility of a single course (Fouad, 2006; Hill, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); rather, they assert that diversity content should be infused across organizations and curriculums.

Instructors of teaching of psychology courses should continue including diversity in course content, but that should only be part of larger efforts. Fouad (2006) has made several practical suggestions about incorporating diversity into graduate programs as a whole. For example, the mission and goals of programs should include multicultural objectives. Programs should include diverse students and faculty. Multicultural content should be included across the entire curriculum, and students' multicultural competency should be regularly assessed. One major advantage of a program-level approach to diversity is that it better ensures that individuals who might otherwise avoid diversity content—the current study suggests that older individuals might be especially prevalent in this group—are still included in broader efforts to develop multicultural competency. Although such tasks provide challenges, they are part of

the ethical responsibility psychologists face as educators, researchers, and practitioners in an increasingly diverse society (American Psychological Association, 2003).

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### Bio

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