

Ending Stereotypes on College Campus – An “Un” ending Journey

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Abstract: The present study examines if college students’ negative perceptions of Latino people and culture can be reduced or *neutralized* through the use of a recorded play that reveals Latino students’ everyday struggles with negative cultural and racial stereotypes. Grounded on the theories of social prejudice, influence of stereotype threat, and ways of neutralizing stereotype, this paper strives to offer valuable insights and practical implications that can contribute to the effective elimination of varying forms of social prejudices caused by negative stereotypes. The result shows that the fight for eliminating stereotypes will be a long, complicated, and unpredictable journey. The future scholars need to continue using and testing multiple research methods that can produce effective counter-stereotype results, which will ultimately lead to a productive learning and communication environment for students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: Latino; stereotype; neutralizing

1. Introduction

“In 1954 people were not asking whether schools would welcome and nurture African American children and adapt the curriculum to be inclusive, but were only starting to open the doors. Today, the doors must not only swing wide open, but all children must be welcomed with acceptance, celebration of differences and acknowledgement of contributions of diversity, for the benefit of everyone”

- Adrienne Dessel 2010, p. 421

There is an increasing necessity and context for evidence-based prejudice reduction strategies in education. According to the US census, Latinas/os are and going to be the largest ethnic minority in the United States. Representing over 16% of the population, they are also the fastest growing ethnic minority. The percentage of students of color being represented at the University level is continually increasing. Yet one of the issues, as Dessel (2010) has noted, concerns the retention of non-traditional students, students of color and student from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Despite this, little research has focused on their relative college experience and success. Those Latina/o students who start at a 4-year university are more likely to graduate than those who begin at a community college; yet there is little research on improving the retention rates of Latina/o students (Arbona and Nora 2007; Nora et al. 2006; Nuñez 2009).

There has been a lack of empirical research that focused on “preventative conflict resolution on multicultural education” (Dessel 2010, p. 409). In particular, Dessel noted a dearth of research on reducing prejudice within educational contexts. While prejudice and stereotyping have been extensively studied (Devine et al. 2000; Oskamp 2000; Ramasubramanian 2007; Stroessner and Good 2011); the focus on how educational and pedagogical situations can reduce prejudice has not (Giroux 2003; Martin et al. 2010). Perceived and actual discrimination are major contributing factors to the academic status of ethnic minorities, such as Latino/a students and African American students (Brown and Bigler 2005; Dessel 2010; Stone and Han 2005). Prejudice reduction in schools could enhance the social and learning environments for children from non-dominant groups (Dessel 2010). According to Nuñez (2009), the prevalence of negative cross-racial interactions is negatively associated with academic self-confidence. School is a primary location for socialization about difference, social change,

conflict resolution, and identity management. As such, there is a need for research that seeks to *neutralize* negative stereotypes as part of the interventions seeking to create inclusive and welcoming environment for the students of color.

An example of one such intervention is the play *Las Memorias*. It was created and produced through a performance outreach program at a land-grant University located in the state of Washington, which will be referred to as X University in the following part of the study. The play was co-written by 21 High School students and X University's vice president for Student Affairs and Enrollment (Hensley 2011). Combining reflections based on their personal experiences, the students created a play that focused on expressing various aspects of their identities. One of the central themes discussed and openly disrupted within the scenes of the play is the influence of negative stereotypes on Latina/o identity. The play *Las Memorias*, and the larger program *Performance as Education*, have been lauded as emotional and inspiring (Von Lunen 2011). One review highlighted the sense of identity and empowerment that the students had found over the course of their involvement (Craker 2011). As one student explained, "We come from a poor community. We don't see a lot of (theater). And this (play) is something that is real, that we understand" (Chavez, as cited in Von Lunen 2011). Seeking to build upon the success of the *Las Memorias* project, this research project focused on using a video recording of the play as a textual intervention among at-risk college students who are still learning about multicultural education. Would showing a video focused on disconfirming stereotypes about Latina/o identity and the self-empowerment of the students have an influence on the perceptions of the college students? As Bless et al. (2011) have argued, the process of disconfirming stereotypes can have inverse influences on both the *exception* and the *category* itself. Following this line of thinking, would students watching the video view the participants as a 'credit' to their ethnic identity; thus upholding Bless, et al.'s findings that the stereotype-disrupting individuals are interpreted as exceptions to the dominant view of a particular ethnic identity? First, let me discuss the theoretical framework used to conceptualize stereotypes and their cause, "prejudice."

2. Prejudice

Stuart Oskamp (2000) pointed out that prejudice is one of the most frequently studied areas in social scientific research. According to Duckitt (1992), prejudiced attitude—with its potential for periodic eruption in overt intergroup conflict—has now become an extremely serious threat to the continued survival of human race and civilization.

In order to better understand the cause and effect of social prejudices, Walter Stephan and Cookie Stephan (2000) propose four types of threat mentalities as key components leading to the development and maintenance of prejudice attitude—a. realistic threats posed by out-groups to not only challenge the political and economic stability but also damage the physical and material well-being of in-group members; b. symbolic threats involving perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs and attitudes; c. intergroup anxiety, which refers to the fact that people feel personally threatened in intergroup interactions because they are concerned about negative outcomes for cross-group communication and exchange; d. negative stereotypes, which create both unpleasant interactions and negative expectations toward out-group members. In the integrated threat theory, prejudice is defined as negative affect which includes both emotions and evaluations associated with out-groups. And the four threats raised above are used to predict attitudes of in-groups toward out-groups.

Devine, Plant and Buswell (2000) analyzed the nature of contemporary prejudice by firstly introducing two conceptual frameworks—automatic processes that occur unintentionally and spontaneously; and the

controlled processes created by people's historicized and socialized experiences. With a particular emphasis on unpacking the complexity of second processes, Devine and her colleagues argued that the controlled processes require relatively longer period of time and sufficient cognitive capacity to support the construction of one's stereotypical perception and identification of the other-ed groups and individuals.

According to the results of relevant experiments, Devine et al. found that under certain circumstances, those identified as low-prejudice are not significantly different from those performing high prejudiced behavioral patterns. As a matter of fact, low-prejudice people exhibit greater level of self-internalization of socially-constructed realities than high-prejudiced when both are being situated in specific selective moments of communicative interactions (Devine et al. 2000). However, when coming across the discrepancies between "I should do" and "I would do" (failure to commit to the non-stereotypical norms and beliefs), low-prejudice people displayed much higher levels of guilt and self-criticism than high-prejudice people (Devine et al. 2000).

The aforementioned findings triggered a heated discussion on the role that guilt works in the process of helping low-prejudice people overcome unwanted prejudiced responses; Monteith (1993) asserted that the discrepancies model could result in two consequences—in the first scenario, people may become highly self-focused. Another possibility is the emergence of a set of self-regulated processes. Therefore, at this point, it is crucial to recognize that there are overall three steps involved in reducing prejudice; 1, realizing and deciding for themselves that prejudice is an inappropriate attitude; 2, internalizing new non-prejudiced beliefs; 3, learning to inhibit automatic (negative) stereotypes. Based upon the previous research on prejudice, I predict the following:

H₁: Students who watch a video clip depicting positive exemplars of Latina/o high school students will be less prejudiced after watching the video clip compared to students who do not watch the video clip.

3. Stereotype Threat

As systematically surveyed by prior scholarly investigations in prejudice prevention, reduction, and management, stereotype plays a key part in fostering prejudicial perceptions and practices. More specifically, stereotype threat (ST) exemplifies how stereotypical assumptions of those culturally and geographically "distant" from us and one's own cultural identity can further impede productive intercultural dialogues of varying forms and degrees. According to Steele and Aronson (1995), ST refers to being at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group. Generally speaking, situations that increase the salience of the stereotyped group identity can increase one's vulnerability to the effect of stereotype threat.

Further, Steele and Aronson (1995) pointed out that ST might occur when stereotyped group status is placed "under the spotlight." In such a situation, stereotypical perceptions are invoked, evaluative and judgmental scrutiny occurs. Although ST effects appear to be robust, the specific mechanism by which the stereotype threat harms performance is still not entirely clear. Nevertheless, research has offered explanation of possible factors affecting stereotype threats across various socio-cultural contexts, which include, but not limited to, anxiety, negative cognitions, lowered performance expectations, physiological arousal, reduced effort, self-control, memory capacity, creativity, flexibility, and speed. Steele and Aronson did not draw a conclusion on the effects of ST because of these factors. Despite this it is quite likely that these factors work together to undermine an individual's normal social functions when he or she is under the influence of ST. It is also possible that certain consequences are more likely to occur in some contexts (and among some groups) than in others.

Another foundational model of ST is created by Schmader, Johns, and Forbe (2008). In their detailed illustration, there are three primary reasons explaining how task performance could be impaired through an

experience with stigmatization. These three reasons are a direct physiological impairment of prefrontal processing caused by activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, increased vigilance toward endogenous or exogenous cues to assess the self within the situation, and the active efforts to suppress and avoid stereotypical thoughts and anxious feelings. In addition, there are a couple of potential consequences caused by ST: decreased performance in academic and non-academic domain, increased use of self-defeating behaviors, social disengagement, and declining professional aspirations.

In their continued examination of reducing ST, Steele and Aronson listed a group of feasible strategies to combat ST, such as consider moving standard demographic inquiries about ethnicity and gender to the end of a test, motivating individuals to think of themselves as complex and multi-faceted individuals, highlighting social identities that are not linked to underperformance in a domain can attenuate stereotype threat. Further, encouraging self-affirmation, emphasizing high standards with assurances about the capability for meeting them, providing Role Models, offering individuals explanations about why anxiety and distraction are occurring that do not implicate the self or validate the stereotype, and emphasizing the importance of effort and motivation in performance while de-emphasizing the inherent talent or genius can also reduce stereotype threat. All in all, these solutions generally focus on reducing the salience of identities that are tied to poor performance in various social, cultural, even professional and academic domains by raising ones' awareness of his or her idiosyncratic valued characteristics, personalities, and skills.

4. Neutralizing Negative Stereotypes

Grounded on Steele and Aronson's model of stereotype threat reduction, existing studies on stereotype effects and threat have tried extensively to both unfold the broader relationship between the stereotype and prejudice and uncover the specific strategies to "manage" the stereotypical perceptions. For example, Devine's (1989) research on prejudice and stereotypes exposed the relationship between the prejudice against a group of people and the stereotypes that were presumably targeting them. Perhaps the most interesting finding from Devine's research was that even though people may perceive themselves as having low-prejudice toward African Americans, cultural stereotypes could still be activated pre-cognitively within them.

Kawakami et al. (2000) stated that, "Stereotype activation is determined in part by the accessibility of information stored in memory and its fit to the target object" (p. 871). To fight the automatic stereotype that has been well learned they must create a cognitive structure that is representative of their new beliefs (Devine 1989). In addition, Blair (2002) found that stereotypes are much more malleable than most research would lead people to believe. Rather than just declaring that stereotypes are fixed and difficult to change, Blair examined the two most prevalent ways to "neutralize" the negative stereotypes: suppression and the creation of counter-stereotypes. Blair's first suggested tactic for neutralizing stereotypes is suppression. The concept behind it is relatively simple: when an individual has a negative thought that is stereotypical about someone or a group that person belongs to, they merely "banish such thoughts from their minds" (p. 248). Kawakami et al. (2000) conducted research that tested the efficacy of active suppression of automatic stereotypes. Their research encompassed the results from three studies which examined how effective training in negating stereotypes actually can be for individuals (Kawakami et al. 2000). The results of this study showed that there were signs of automatic activation of skinhead stereotypes in the pre-test, but after the negation training, the participants did show a decrease in automatic stereotype activation.

The second tactic for neutralizing stereotypes that Blair discussed was counter-stereotyping. Counter-stereotyping occurs when a person is not told to suppress feelings or assumptions about a specific group of people, but rather is given examples of disconfirming behaviors by individuals within that group to help counter the stereotype. When studying automatic stereotyping, Blair found that using both words and mental images of counter-stereotypes helped participants counter automatic stereotypes. Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001) tested whether automatic negative attitudes can be temporarily modified using a different technique that focuses on changing the social context that people inhabit rather than by directly manipulating their thoughts. What is important to note about Dasgupta and Greenwald's experiment, however, is that while the activation of automatic stereotypes showed a decrease, the actual self-reported evaluations of both African Americans and old people did not change—participants reported as they had the same level of prejudiced attitudes as before the test.

Johnston and Hewstone (1992) also conducted research on counter-stereotyping. Their research found that cognitive schemata for stereotypes were more likely to be changed if the disconfirming behaviors were dispersed throughout all members of the group. They also found that in order for the schemata to be challenged, each member of the stereotyped group still had to possess some typical traits associated with that group. If a group member only had disconfirming traits, they would be discounted as atypical and the stereotype schemata would not be challenged.

Ramasubramanian's study (2007) found that when participants had been trained to use counter-stereotypical behavior, they were slower at activating stereotypes. She further examined the ways mass media could be used to reduce the racial stereotypes that individuals held about African Americans and Asian Americans after watching the news. Tan et al. (2009, 2010) also have examined how American media affected the stereotypes held about African Americans by people from other countries (Tan et al. 2009; Tan et al. 2010). As shown through all these studies, the more reliable a media source is seen, the more likely the audience is going to internalize the information provided by that media source.

Because the news is something that is mostly seen as being impartial and accurate, it is important to find techniques to neutralize negative stereotypes created by the news media—specifically those caused by the mainstream media. To do this, Ramasubramanian used two techniques; the first was to train individuals to think critically about how media help create certain social realities and whether this caused appropriate assumptions to be formed about the minorities—thereby increasing media literacy and cognition about the creation of racial stereotypes (Ramasubramanian 2007). The other technique was to provide audience members with counter-stereotypes about African Americans and Asian Americans.

It has also been studied that stereotyping and prejudice are not conditions that stay at a consistent level, but rather, they are contextual. Blair's research implied that since the context of a situation is important, if one aspect of a person's characteristics is highlighted over something that would negatively stereotype them (like race or religion), then individuals would be less likely to base their perceptions of the person on said negative stereotypes. Blair likened this process to a Gestalt shift—by shifting the focus from one aspect of an individual to the context where this person is involved. It was found that contextualizing one's experience and identity insofar can also maximize the effects of neutralizing the negative stereotypes that could be otherwise associated with a particular "fixed" and presumed dimension and aspect of an individual or group (Blair 2002). Based upon the previous research on neutralizing negative stereotypes, the following predictions are made:

H₂: Students who watch a video clip depicting positive exemplars of Latina/o high school students will have more

positive views of Latinas/os than college students who do not watch the video clip.

Thus, to continue this line of study to think about the effects of neutralizing negative stereotype, and the larger impact of intervention program that serves to battle the negative cultural stereotype and bring positive change to the current intercultural communication in a culturally diverse learning environment, I posit the following research question:

RQ: What effect do intervention programs have on improving college students' experiences with, and understanding of intercultural communication?

5. Method

The experiment was officially conducted in X University, its main campus. A questionnaire was designed to collect basic information from research participants and their opinions regarding the video recording that was showed to them. The participants were all undergraduate students enrolled in a general education course at X University. The percentage of self-identified demographic make-up of participants in this study closely resembles the general demographic report released by the X University, Enrollment and Registration Office in 2018, which includes 68.9% Caucasian, 5.7% Asian, 2.2% Black or African American, 6.4% Latina/o, 6.3% International, 0.4 Native Hawaiian and Pacific, 2.6% mixed race, 1.1% American Indian, and 6.4% unknown ethnicity.

In order to guarantee the video's quality and maximize the engagement of audiences during the process of playing the video, I carefully divided participants into several different groups and showed the video to each group in different times and classrooms where a larger size of video screen and well-equipped DVD player were prepared in advance. The assignment of students to the different groups was random; as was the way in which students were assigned to watch the video. Before the video was played, I explained to the participants about the general background of *Las Memorias* and offered detailed instruction on how to fill out the questionnaires. In the control groups, participants were asked to provide their demographic information and perspectives on a few racially-related social issues before viewing the video. In the experimental groups, participants were not given the surveys until they finished watching the video. A 27-minute selection of the video recording of *Las Memorias* was played for the participants.

The video that I showed them is titled *Las Memorias*, a recorded play performed by high school Latino students from Warden, Mabton, and Pateros, in the state of Washington. In *Las Memorias*, Latino students expressed their complex feelings and life experiences with schools, families, and friends. It is through the emotional display of their happiness and frustration with varying forms of social encounters, important social issues and topics regarding racial stereotypes and its influences on minority members emerge. Research participants were expected to reflect on these important points when they filled out the questionnaires. After students completed the questionnaires, I collected them and coded them for data analysis. SPSS was used for coding and data analysis.

4.1. Measurements

4.1.1. Prejudice:

Color-Blind Attitude Scale (CoBRAS) is a conceptually grounded scale to assess cognitive aspects of color-blind racial attitudes. Five studies on CoBRAS conducted by Neville et al. (2000) provided initial reliability and validity data. A 3-factor solution was suggested and derived from an exploratory factor analysis: Unawareness

of Racial Privilege, Institutional Discrimination, and Blatant Racial Issues. The CoBRAS was also positively related to other indexes of racial attitudes and two measures of belief in a just world (Neville et al. 2000)

Students were asked to respond to twelve items about their perceptions of racial and ethnic problems in the United States. A 6-point ordinal scale measurement was applied to each item (1=strongly disagree, 6=strongly agree). These items included: a. whether hard-working is a decisive factor for people to become rich regardless of different races; b. whether race plays a major role in the type of social services that people receive in the U.S.; c. whether it is important for people to think of themselves as Americans instead of other racial groups in the U.S.; d. whether programs such as affirmative action are necessary to help create equality; e. whether racism is still a problem in the U.S.; f. whether white people have advantages/privileges over racial and ethnic minorities because of their color; g. whether immigrants should adopt American values; h. whether English should be the only official language in the U.S.. There is a proportional relationship between the score and the degree of prejudice, because of which, item b, d, e, f need to be reversely scored.

Stereotype scale:

In this paper we use a 7-point rating scale to test people's stereotype. C. Neil et al. (1996) have illustrated the reliability and validity by generalizing that rating scales could represent stereotypes as consensual characterizations of the group, which provided the empirical support of using this scale.

Participants were asked about their perceptions towards the different racial and ethnic groups as a test of their stereotypes. The scale is formed with 8 items (hard-working, not motivated to get ahead in life, beautiful, not deserving of respect, to be admired, complains too much about discrimination, intelligent, and not competent), concerning 5 racial groups (African Americans, native Americans, Latina/o Americans, White Americans and Asian Americans). Students were asked to rate each item from 1 (not at all descriptive) to 7 (very descriptive) for each racial group. In addition, since the items "not motivated to get ahead in life, not deserving of respect, complains too much about discrimination, and not competent" are described in a negative or "stereotyped" way, they would be reverse coded as a result.

6. Analysis

Both of the hypotheses were tested using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The first hypothesis predicted that students who watched a clip of the stage performance *Las Memorias* would have lower prejudice against Latinas/os than students who did not watch the video clip. The results of our research showed that while there was a relationship between prejudice reduction and exposure to the video clip $\{F(1,73) = .055, p > .05\}$, there was not a significant reduction in colorblindness and prejudice reduction ($p = .816$) after exposure to the video clip of *Las Memorias*.

The second hypothesis predicted that students who watched a clip of the stage performance *Las Memorias* would hold more positive views of Latinas/os than students who did not watch the video clip. The results of our research indicated that while there was a relationship between increasing positive views of Latinas/os and exposure to the video clip $\{F(1, 61) = .681, p > .05\}$, there was not a significant change in positive Latina/o perception ($p = .412$) after exposure to the video clip *Las Memorias*.

7. Discussion

The analysis shows there are some areas that need further development. In regard to the research by Devine et al. who discussed prejudice as an automatic versus controlled process, the analysis shows positive

results for prejudice as a controlled process. Devine et al. argued that the controlled processes require more time and ability (in the form of cognitive capacity) to create a new stereotype perception. Although the results from ANOVA did not produce significant evidence, they did show a positive progression towards H_1 , which stated that the students who watch a video clip depicting positive exemplars of Latina/o high school students will be less prejudiced after watching the clip compared to students who do not watch the video. With a larger sample size, there is a good chance the results could have been significant, lending support to H_1 .

In regard to the existing research surrounding stereotypes and stereotype threat, the research conducted by Blair showed the specific tactics for neutralizing stereotypes, which are suppression and counter-stereotyping. Suppression refers to the negation of the negative stereotype. Counter-stereotype refers to the use or display of examples or behaviors that can challenge the negative stereotypes. The culmination of this line of research concerning the ability to neutralize negative stereotypes led to H_2 : Students who watch a video clip depicting positive exemplars of Latina/o high school students will have more positive views of Latinas/os than college students who do not watch the video clip. The analysis did not show a strong significance supporting this hypothesis. However, the data does show a trend going towards the right direction which means there is a support for the second hypothesis. With a larger sample, I am confident a significance would be identified.

8. Conclusion

From a larger theoretical level of consideration, current study strives to uncover if neutralization of negative stereotype can be enabled through counter-stereotyping techniques. Grounded on the existing scholarly investigations of social prejudice, influence of stereotype threat, and ways of neutralizing stereotype, this paper ultimately is aimed at offering valuable insights and practical implications that can contribute to the effective elimination of varying forms of social prejudices caused by negative stereotypical perceptions and assumptions.

Having a diverse cultural environment is crucial to one's exposure to and acceptance of other cultures, but in the meantime, preexisting stereotypical understanding of the individuals and groups can also be reinforced or rendered "unimportant" if the so-called "intercultural communication" between those from differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds only stays at the "superficial level of interpersonal communication" (Martin, Trego and Nakayama 2010). Critical issues such as how people come to understand and respect each other's cultural traditions and practices need to be examined. Particularly, due to the ideological influence of neo-liberalism, people tend to turn themselves away from sensitive topics such as race and ethnicity (Giroux 2003). This kind of color-blind mentality fails to resolve the real problems central to intercultural communication. In many cases, it only serves to perpetuate the stereotypical judgments and practices that the dominant group holds for the marginalized cultural groups (Giroux 2003; Martin, Trego and Nakayama 2010).

Thus, to bring a positive change to intercultural communication as the ultimate purpose, and reduce the prejudice caused by stereotype as the specific objective in light of this study, I used counter-stereotyping strategies to neutralize negative stereotypical perceptions that target Latina/o students. It was expected that there be a "significant drop" in research participants' stereotypical views of Latina/o students. And theoretically, the result would lead to the reduction of prejudiced view. As emphasized in the discussion and analysis section, although the results indicated a positive direction leaning towards the hypotheses, the hypotheses were not strongly supported. The results might be attributed to several possible methodological and theoretical limitations. For one, X University is located in a rural college town. Students studying here generally do not have an extensive contact with people or cultures outside of their own. Therefore, it might be hard for them to understand the deeper

meaning embedded in the video program. Secondly, the video is a recording of a dramatic and theatrical play, so it could be challenging for the participants to become emotionally involved given they were not actually in the audience. More importantly, a dramatic representation of minority students' complex cultural experiences might be interpreted as "too complicated" and "abstract" by young college students. These three hypothetical arguments are not only made to explain the results produced by this study, but more importantly, I do hope they can be taken seriously by scholars for a further inquiry down the road. Reducing prejudice, eliminating negative stereotype, and creating an equal intercultural communication platform will still be the goal for us to pursue in the future!

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