Students' Perceptions of their Attitudes and Behaviors toward Different Cultures/Ethnicities Before and After a Diversity Training Program

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Teaching students to engage in appropriate cultural attitudes and behaviors is critical to help them understand, accept, and open-up to different cultures. Diversity training help students to work efficiently in a diverse environment. This paper aims to examine students' attitudes and behavior toward different cultures/ethnicities before and after the implementation of a diversity training program. An exploratory study was conducted with 38 students from a Midwest university enrolled in a course entitled "Managing Diversity in Organizations". The survey was administered at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Results are presented and discussed in the paper. The potential theoretical and practical implications of the study are also addressed.

INTRODUCTION

To address the increasing demand for managing workplace diversity successfully, students from business and management majors must be aware of individual and group differences and learn to embrace those differences. Students must be equipped to appreciate diversity and to face effectively its challenges. Diversity is defined as any characteristics based on which people may differ. Some characteristics are visible such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, and physical attributes, whereas other characteristics are invisible attributes, such as work experience, income, geographic location, marital status, educational background, parental status, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs and affiliations. As people spend more time in the workplace, it is important to establish positive interpersonal relationships with all individuals to create a harmonious workflow that leads to further positive intercultural behavior and relationships in the workplace. In order to prepare students for the reality of the workplace, it is important to offer them the opportunity to engage in positive attitudes and behaviors toward diversity. Positive attitudes and behaviors are defined as welcoming and inclusive attitudes and behaviors that build healthy relationship among different others. Since students are representing future generations, it is crucial for them to be capable of accepting others' differences and be able to positively interact with people of different perspectives and backgrounds. When students have a positive attitudes and behaviors toward

different others, they are more likely to understand and adapt to the goals and expectations of diverse organizations. By having the opportunity to engage in a diversity training program, it helps students to learn to adopt the positive attitudes and behavior toward diversity and its challenges. By being exposed to different others' identities, students learn to relate to their own identities, and others' ethnicity or cultural background and become able to develop and enhance skills in communicating and accepting differences among fellow individuals. As students are entering the workforce, cooperation and adapting to diversity is crucial for the success of the business and their development in the business sphere. Understanding cultural differences and being able to use appropriate behaviors when dealing with situations of diversity is beneficial in the longevity of individual and organizational success.

This paper aims to examine students' individual perceptions of their attitudes and behaviors toward cultural diversity at the beginning and at the end of an academic course about managing diversity in organizations. The eventual contribution of this study is to pay a close attention to the positive effects of a diversity training program on possible change in students' attitudes and behaviors toward different others and their identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Implementing Effective Diversity Training Programs
One of the greatest challenges in the educational system is to how to make course curriculum more relevant to the needs of a diverse workforce. As our society moves toward a more multicultural environment, it becomes necessary to address cultural diversity and other diversity issues (i.e., gender, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental health and abilities) in order to help students to become more adapted and positively responsive to a diverse society. Some researchers suggest that biases, prejudices, and stereotypes are deeply rooted in a person's psyche and are difficult to change (Sue 1991). The question addressed in this paper is whether it is possible to change people's attitudes and behaviors toward different others' cultural identities through the implementation of diversity training programs?

Research suggests that diversity training programs aim to influence participants to increase their positive – or decrease their negative – intergroup attitudes and behaviors, so less prejudice and discrimination is displayed toward others perceived as different from their group of affiliation(s) (Pendry, Driscoll, & Field 2010). Diversity training programs are expected to help to create environments in which all people have the opportunity to advance and succeed in a fair and equal way (Naff & Kellough, 2003). Research suggests that effective diversity training programs can improve cross-cultural communication and interpersonal relationships among coworkers, as well as organizational development (Plummer 1998). Effective diversity training programs mobilize the energy of all participants in ways that are collaborative and nonviolent. Through effective diversity training programs, individuals may develop adapted skills, attitudes and behavioral changes that improve group dynamics and team functioning (Plummer 1998). Such training is directed toward increasing awareness of personal biases and destructive attitudes, and changing them for adopting appropriate cultural attitudes and behaviors that will promote a positive diversity work climate (Plummer 1998).

Studies have shown that positive interracial interactions result in essential components of students' democratic dispositions, which refer to personal attributes such as caring for the others, speaking truth to abuse of power, and respecting cultural differences (Ahmad 2003), including higher levels of cultural awareness and higher levels of pluralistic orientations. Recognizing racial inequality is critical to the awareness of racial issues with the appreciation of cultural similarities and differences (Spanierman, Neville, Liao, Hammer, & Wang, 2008). Increased engagement in curricular diversity experiences is linked to enhance openness to, and appreciation of cultural diversity (Spanierman et al., 2008). Greater diversity engagement is associated with a global cultural awareness and understanding of related issues that can often interfere with performance. Findings also indicate that other extra-curricular activities (such as workshops or cultural programs) increase students' understanding of cultural similarities and differences (Fouad, 2006; Spanierman et al., 2008).

Encouraging student to engage themselves in appropriate cultural attitudes and behaviors is critical to help them understand, accept, and open-up to different cultures. Implementing diversity training programs provide students with the ability to work efficiently in a diverse environment. Students' individual perceptions of themselves and their cultural attitudes and behaviors before the implementation of a diversity training program is important to be examined in the literature in order to verify if positive attitudes and behavioral changes are possible following the implementation of a diversity training program. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The completion of an effective diversity training program will positively influence attitudinal and behavioral change toward different others' cultural identities.

METHOD
Participants

The participants of this study were students from a multicultural university in the Midwest region of the United States. All students, part of the sample, were enrolled in a 16 weeks course entitled "Managing Diversity in Organizations". In total, 38 students participated in the study in which 66% were females. Their ages ranged from 21 and up: 58% were between 21-25 years old, 38% were between 26 -30 years old, and 7% were over 31 years old. They were born all over the world: 50% were born in the USA, 13% were born in Latin America, 16% were born in Europe, 13% were born in the Middle East and India, and 3% were born in Africa, the Caribbean, and Australia. In terms of their marital status, 74% of our participants were single, 21% were married, and 5% were divorced. Their levels of education were also recorded: 87% have been in college for more than 2 years, and 13% already have obtained bachelor a degree.

Design

The study was exploratory. A survey was administered at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The course entitled "Managing Diversity in Organizations" and addresses the issues, knowledge, theories, and applications related to managing diversity in organizations. This course is experiential based and its purpose is to develop awareness and knowledge about individual and group differences and to learn how to create a work environment in which diverse people work harmoniously together. It closely examines several diversity indicators (i.e. culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, physical and mental dis/abilities). Its aims students to gain knowledge and analytical skills that will equip them with the necessary tools to deal appropriately with a diverse workforce. This course helps students to learn how to appreciate diversity, to embrace thinking from different perspectives, and to be capable of applying theoretical concepts to resolve conflicts related to managing diversity in organizations.

A Critical Incident during the Diversity Training Program: The Cultural Kiosk Activity

During the fifth week of the semester, a cultural kiosk activity was conducted with the students. A cultural kiosk activity provides to students the opportunity to engage themselves in experiential learning. Experiential learning is defined as the process of making meaningful connections from direct experience, by engaging individuals into specific actions and reflecting on those activities (Illeris, K., 2007; Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 1975). More specifically, the kiosk activity consists of asking groups of students to organize a kiosk that displays information related to cultural or diversity issues (Roberge & Amoroso, 2010). Prior to the kiosk activity, each team must conduct research on a theme related to diversity, and create a kiosk that displays pictures, knowledge and information, or concrete examples. For example, when the theme of the kiosk activity is multiculturalism, students are encouraged to bring symbolic objects, clothing, food, art, and music from different cultures to provide more concrete examples of the uniqueness of each culture. In other words, a kiosk activity resembles a mini-conference organized by students during class time. A kiosk could be focusing on Cuban, Chinese, Indian, or Arabic culture, but it could also address religious diversity such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, or Catholicism etc. These are just a few ideas. A kiosk can present anything about cultural diversity or any

other indicators of diversity, such as sexual orientation, as well as diverse personality in teams or health and disabilities at work and in society. During the activity, students are encouraged to visit other students' kiosks to learn and understand each other's identity and learning experience. Throughout the activity, students have the opportunity to share their knowledge with others about what they have learned from conducting their search on a specific diversity-related theme.

Sometimes students may identify themselves to the culture of interest. The kiosk becomes an opportunity for them to disclose to and share with others their identities, their cultural or religious heritages and teach other students about their differences. Self-disclosure is therefore a critical part of the learning process at an individual and group level.

Thus, the kiosk activity is an experiential project-based learning that encourages students to engage themselves into intercultural communication and therefore to learn from one another's identity. By being exposed to different backgrounds (ethnical, cultural, religious, lifestyle) students may change their perceptions, level of tolerance and attitude toward others' cultural identities. We believe that the kiosk activity may even deactivate stereotyping and reduce prejudices by being informative and by occurring in a psychological safe environment influencing people sense of psychological closeness from others.

Measures

The administered survey asked students how diverse they perceive to be, their level of comfort working with their diverse coworkers, their likelihood of being friends with a person from a different culture/ethnicity, and their likelihood of dating a person from a different culture/ethnicity. Also, the survey asked them to determine the likelihood for them to experience a conflict when working with a person from a different culture, and the likelihood for them to try a new ethnic restaurant. Finally, students were also asked to identify their attitudes (i.e., their sense of psychological closeness) toward the following cultures/ethnicities: Arabic, African, Asian, American, European, Indian, Hispanic, and Native American.

RESULTS

The results to the question referring to how diverse students perceived to be: 37% reported to perceive been very diverse, 44% somewhat diverse, 16% are neutral, and 3% stated that they are not really diverse at the current time (see Figure 1). After completing the course, the results show that 51% reported to perceive been very diverse, 36% somewhat diverse, and 13% are neutral.

The students were asked to indicate how comfortable they feel when working with diverse coworkers: 71% stated that they are very comfortable, 21% are somewhat comfortable, 5% are neutral, and only 3% stated that they are not really comfortable working with diverse coworkers (see Figure 2). After completing the course, the results show that 72% stated that they are very comfortable, 23% are somewhat comfortable, and 5% are neutral when working with diverse coworkers.

Students were asked to indicate how likely they are to be friend with a person from a different culture/ethnicity: 74% of the students indicated that they are very likely to be friends with a person from a different culture/ethnicity, 24% are somewhat likely to be friends, and only 2% are neutral (see Figure 3). After completing the course, 82% of the students indicated that they are very likely to be friends with a person from a different culture/ethnicity, 13% are somewhat likely to be friends, 3% are neutral and 3% are not really likely to be friends.

The students were asked to indicate how likely they would be to date a person from a different culture/ethnicity than their own: 37% stated that they would be very likely to date a person from a different culture, 39% are somewhat likely, 8% are neutral, 13% stated that they are not really likely to date a person from a different culture/ethnicity, and 3% stated that they are not likely at all to date someone different from themselves (see Figure 4). After completing the course, 36% stated that they would be very likely to date a person from a different culture, 23% are somewhat likely, 21% are neutral, 15% stated that they are not really likely to date a person from a different culture/ethnicity, and 5% stated that they are not likely at all to date someone different from themselves

FIGURE 1
**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR DIVERSITY LEVEL
BEFORE AND AFTER A DIVERSITY TRAINING PROGRAM**
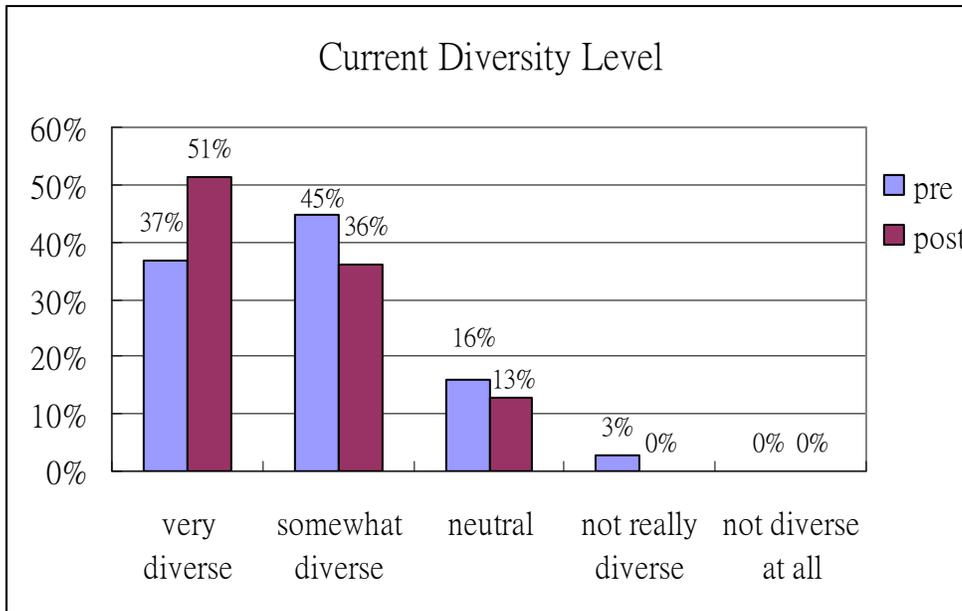

Current Diversity Level

FIGURE 2
**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LEVEL OF COMFORT
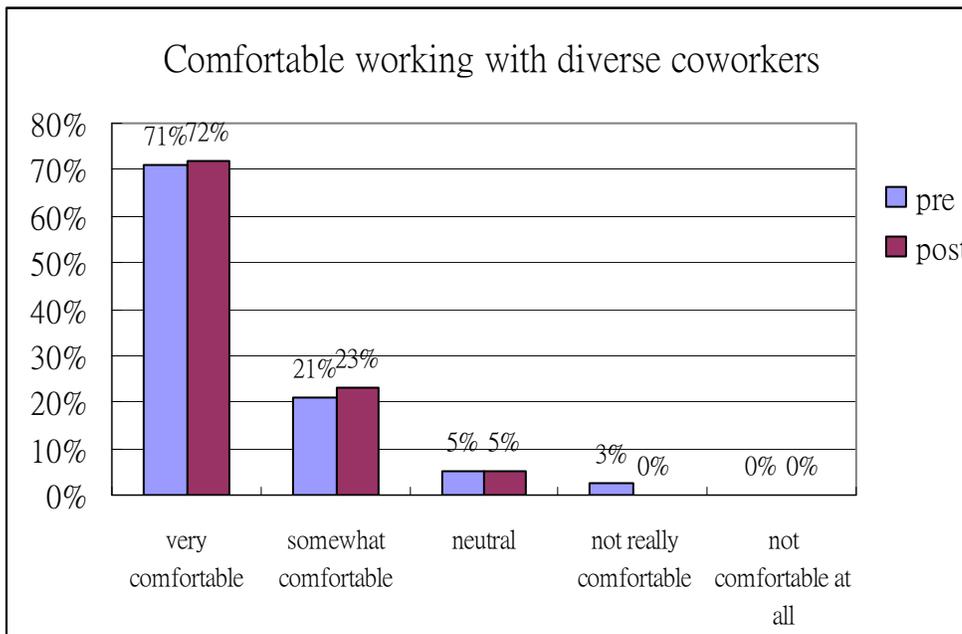WHEN WORKING WITH DIVERSE COWORKERS BEFORE AND AFTER A DIVERSITY
TRAINING PROGRAM**

Comfortable working with diverse coworkers

FIGURE 3
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF BEING FRIENDS WITH A PERSON FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE/ETHNICITY BEFORE AND AFTER A DIVERSITY TRAINING PROGRAM
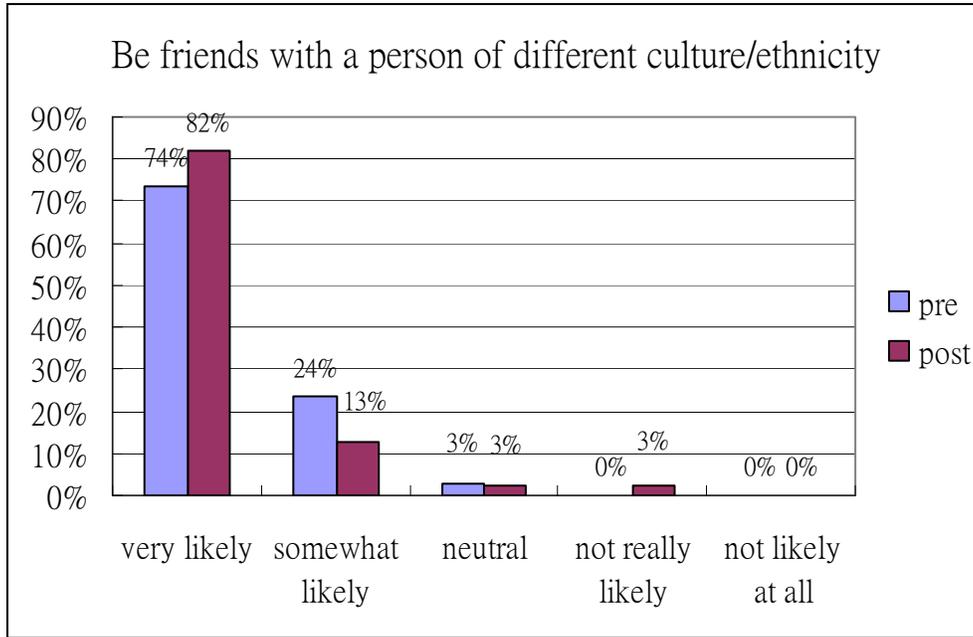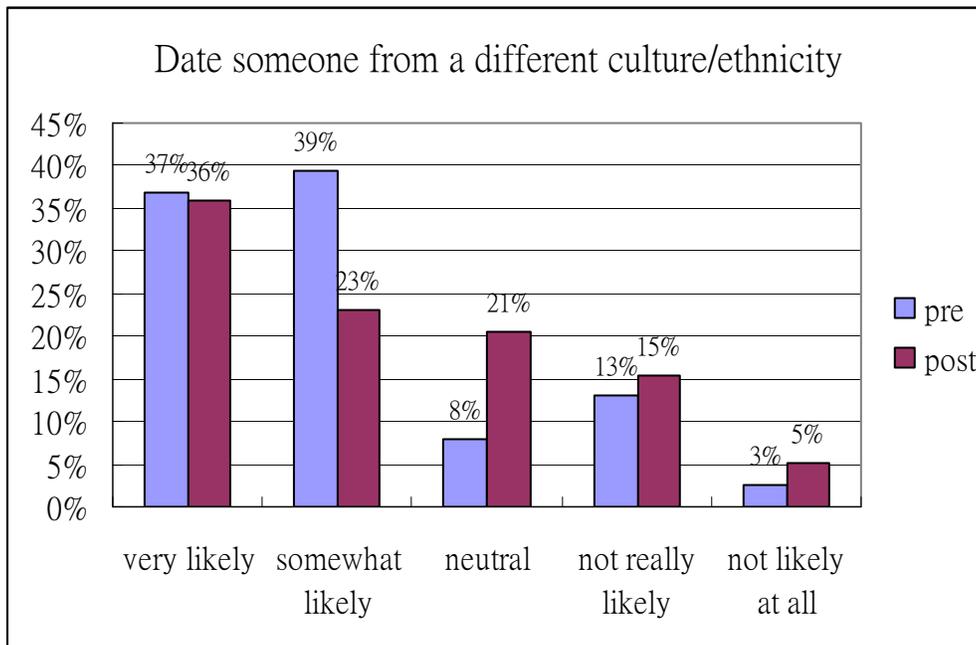

Be friends with a person of different culture/ethnicity

FIGURE 4
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF DATING SOMEONE FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE/ETHNICITY BEFORE AND AFTER A DIVERSITY TRAINING PROGRAM

Date someone from a different culture/ethnicity

Students were asked to indicate how likely they would experience conflicts when working with a person from a different culture/ethnicity: 3% stated that they are very likely to experience conflicts when working with individuals from a different culture, 10% reported being somewhat likely to experience conflicts, 32% are neutral, 45% stated that they are not really likely to experience conflicts when working with a person from a different culture/ethnicity, and 10% stated that they are not likely at all to experience conflicts with anybody that is different from themselves (see Figure5). After completing the course, 3% stated that they are very likely to experience conflicts when working with individuals from a different culture, 13% reported being somewhat likely to experience conflicts, 33% are neutral, 26% stated that they are not really likely to experience conflicts when working with a person from a different culture/ethnicity, and 26% stated that they are not likely at all to experience conflicts with anybody that is different from themselves.

FIGURE 5
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF EXPERIENCING CONFLICT WHEN WORKING WITH A PERSON FROM A DIFFERENT CULTURE/ETHNICITY BEFORE AND AFTER A DTP
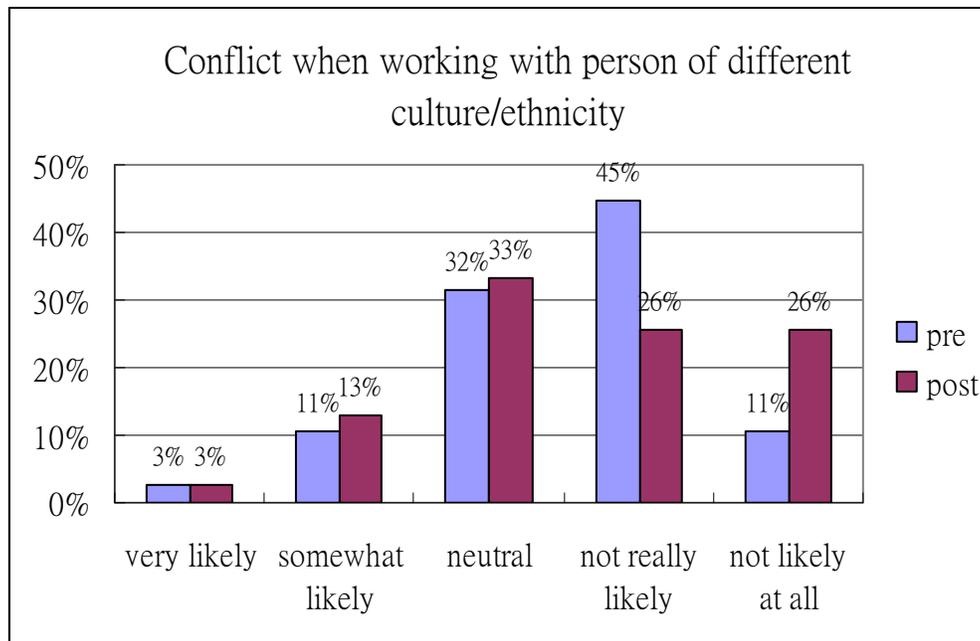
Students were asked to indicate how likely they would be trying a new ethnic restaurant: 55% stated that they are very likely to try a new ethnic restaurant, 21% are somewhat likely, 13% are neutral, 8% stated that they are not really likely to try a new ethnic restaurant, and only 3% stated that they are not likely at all to try a new ethnic restaurant (see Table 6). After completing the course, 64% stated that they are very likely to try a new ethnic restaurant, 28% are somewhat likely, 5% are neutral, and only 3% stated that they are not really likely to try a new ethnic restaurant.

The students were asked to indicate their level of perception of their psychological closeness to different cultures. The results are represented below in Table 1.

FIGURE 6
DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF TRYING A NEW ETHNIC RESTAURANT BEFORE AND AFTER A DTP
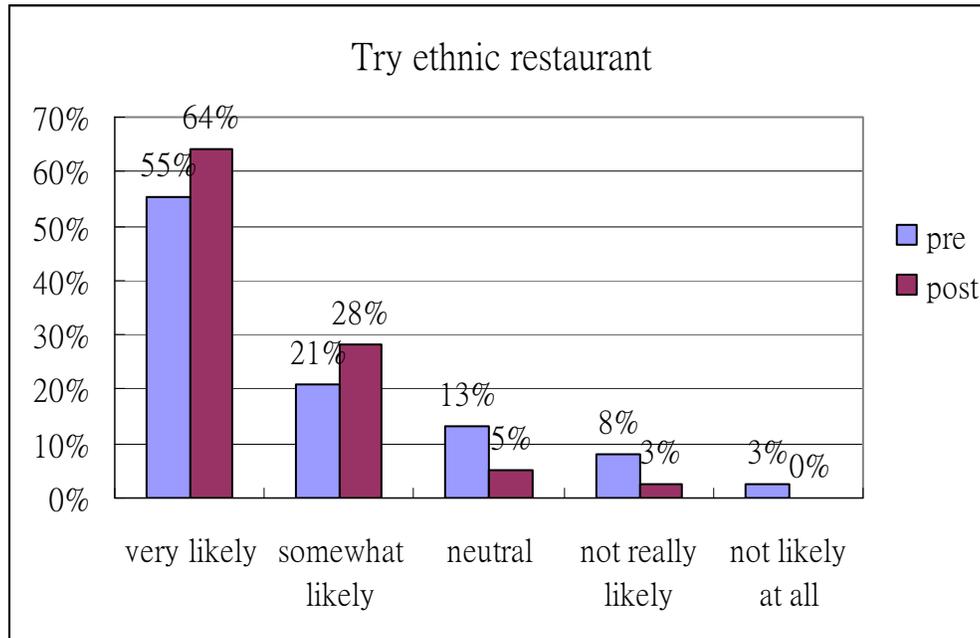

TABLE 1
DIFFERENCES IN STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR FEELINGS OF PSYCHOLOGICALLY CLOSENESS TO DIFFERENT CULTURES BEFORE AND AFTER DTP

"I feel closely to…"	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Arabic	5%	8%	8%	18%	26%	33%	42%	28%	19%	13%
Asian	16%	15%	13%	21%	24%	33%	34%	18%	13%	13%
African	10%	13%	21%	26%	24%	41%	32%	13%	13%	8%
American	37%	46%	40%	38%	18%	10%	5%	5%	0%	0%
European	26%	28%	21%	28%	32%	28%	18%	13%	3%	3%
Indian	3%	3%	16%	31%	24%	33%	31%	23%	26%	10%
Hispanic	37%	33%	16%	33%	21%	15%	21%	5%	5%	13%
Native American	3%	3%	5%	18%	34%	44%	37%	23%	21%	13%

DISCUSSION

The results found have shown that the completion of the diversity training program has improved their perception of themselves of being diverse and open to diversity. It has also opened the door to possible changes in attitudes and behavior. For example, participants reported a positive change as to becoming friend with people from a different culture/ethnicity. However, the results also suggest that students have predetermined attitudes toward people from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds even though most of them consider themselves to be open to diversity. Even though the data has shown that most students feel that they are diverse and open to diversity to a certain extent, there is room for attitudinal and behavioral changes toward embracing diversity even after the completion of a diversity training program.

For example, according to the data, 13% of the students expect to have conflict when working with a diverse individual once they participated in the diversity training program, while 32% were neutral to whether they will experience conflict when working in a diverse setting. This is quite a meaningful percentage that suggests that there are needs for helping students to work on being educated and able to embrace diversity rather than anticipating conflicts. Having a better understanding of different cultures and ethnic identities may lead to better acceptance and cooperation with different others. The world is becoming more globalized and, in the future, becoming comfortable and feeling closer to different cultural/ethnic backgrounds will be the key to a successful career.

On the other hand, some results are pretty optimistic, according to the data, 98% of the students surveyed are likely to be friends with an individual from a different culture or ethnicity, 76% are willing to date a person of a different culture or ethnicity, and 76% are willing to try an ethnic restaurant. These results seem very promising in terms of cultural integration.

Finally, the data also show that even though students from that class are very diverse and perceive themselves being very diverse, they have different attitudes and sense of psychological closeness toward different cultures/ethnicities. Looking at the psychological level of closeness for each cultural group, we conclude that most of the students felt that they feel close to American culture to some extent but they do not necessary psychologically feel close to certain cultural/ethnic groups such as Arabic, Asian, African, Indian, Hispanic and Native American. Despite, such obvious in-group biases toward the American culture, data after the diversity training shows an increased in feeling closer toward those cultural groups.

The Limitations of the Study

This study is explanatory and relies only on answers provided by students on a survey that was administered prior to, and after the implementation of a diversity training program. Also, while our sample is diverse, it is very small as it is composed of only 38 individuals. Moreover, we surveyed students and not actual workers from an organization. Our samples of participants are younger and therefore do not show a representative sample of the working population. Also, the study was conducted in a very diverse university which may have affected the results. Different results could have been found if the data would have been collected in a homogenous university.

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

Based on the preliminary data, it is important to pursue this research stream to demonstrate the effects of the diversity training program on students' perceptions of their attitudes and behavior toward different cultural identities. We are interested in observing the differences in levels of psychological closeness toward people from different cultural/ethnic groups that students are experiencing upon the completion of a diversity training program. We hope that by collecting more data from our students we will be able to show the positive effects of diversity training on students feeling of psychologically closeness toward people from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds and their behavior as a reflection of such a change.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct a study verifying the effects of a diversity training program in an organizational setting. It would also be interesting to examine whether the diversity training

program may help employees to develop intercultural competences, adapted cultural behavior, and shared cultural identities which may ultimately help them to effectively manage a diverse workforce.

Practical Implications

According to the literature, effective diversity training programs help to develop a stronger sense of ethnic or cultural identity, and to develop more positive attitudes and behaviors toward peers from different ethnic or cultural groups (Phinney, 1993; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997). Research suggests that experiential learning enhance students' sense of ethnic and cultural identity and their openness to people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Teranishi, 2007). We hope that by being exposed to a diversity training program, students will learn to display positive intercultural attitudes and manifest positive behaviors that go beyond the classroom setting. Developing and maintaining positive intercultural relationships within the workplace and the global community is the positive change we hope to achieve (Gudykunst, 2005).

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that diversity awareness is an issue all over the world, but especially in the United States. By educating students about cultural differences via the implementation of diversity training programs, negative conflicts may be avoided and positive confrontations may arise leading to innovation and creativity. Diversity training programs benefit students in terms of providing a real-life diversity interaction opportunity which may help them to acquire appropriate and integrative diversity attitudes and behavior. We hope that by implementing a diversity training program that provides frequent interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, participants will improve their feelings of psychological closeness toward different cultural/ethnic groups.

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