The Impact of Service-Learning on Ethnocentrism in an Intercultural Communication Course

Amanda Welch Borden

This study analyzes a project involving students enrolled in an intercultural communication class that employs service-learning. Participants were given the Generalized Ethnocentrism (GENE) scale developed by Neuliep and McCroskey at the beginning and conclusion of a semester of service-learning with a cultural group different than their own. Results indicate a significant decrease in ethnocentrism from the beginning to the end of the semester. Analysis of students’ written reflections about their service experiences reinforces the conclusion that service-learning played a part in reducing ethnocentrism. Although further research is needed to provide a control for the manipulation, there is a preliminary indication that service-learning with diverse cultures may provide a type of consistent, deep, and meaningful contact that leads to lower levels of ethnocentrism.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Ethnocentrism, Intercultural Communication

Amanda Welch Borden is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, USA. E-mail: awborden@samford.edu
Service-learning has grown and developed over the past two decades as a means of engaging students and as a tool for increasing students’ sense of civic responsibility (Battistoni, 2002). Applegate and Morreale (1999) define service-learning as “what happens when students are afforded the opportunity to practice what they are learning in their disciplines, in community settings where their work benefits others” (p. x). Service-learning is distinct from other forms of experiential learning, such as volunteerism, community service, internships, and field education, by its “intention to benefit the provider and the recipient of the service equally, as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (Furco, 2003, p. 14). The following reports on a project in which service-learning was employed as an instructional strategy in an intercultural communication course. The intention in utilizing this teaching approach was to enhance learning and engage students with a different culture. At the forefront of this experiential project was the hope of providing valued services for community partners and an authentic learning process for students. This report will offer a rationale for the use of service-learning in the intercultural communication course, a review of the literature on ethnocentrism, and a description and explanation of the course itself.

**Review of Literature**

**Service-Learning**

Service-learning provides a means for students to go beyond the strictly academic environment to better understand those who diverge from mainstream cultural conceptions in the U.S., as well as to appreciate the structures of power and privilege that function in the dominant society (Dunlap, 2000). Moreover, Dunlap (2000) posits “hands-on work in economically and otherwise challenged communities can help [students] develop a better understanding of the forces outside of people, such as poverty, discrimination, and glass ceilings, that act to hinder and sometimes prevent advancement,” leading to greater awareness of one’s own position of privilege and vulnerability (p. 134). A host of studies demonstrate the potential of service-learning to increase cultural sensitivity and/or reduce stereotyping (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Boyle-Baise, 1998; Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Dunlap, 1997; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fenzel & Leary, 1997;
Giles & Eyler, 1994; Keen & Keen, 1998; Myers-Lipton, 1996a; Myers-Lipton, 1996b; Potthoff, Dinsmore, Eifler, Stirtz, Walsh, & Ziebarth, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). However, none of this research has focused on the relationship between service-learning and ethnocentrism. Based on previous research findings, one can expect service-learning to lead to higher levels of such dispositions as tolerance (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997), empathy, appreciation of diversity issues (Potthoff, Dinsmore, Eifler, Stirtz, Walsh, & Ziebarth, 2000), and awareness of differential resources available to different community cultural settings (Rauner, 1995).

**Ethnocentrism**

According to Neuliep, Hintz, and McCroskey (2005), ethnocentrism was introduced to the field of social science in 1906 by Sumner in his book *Folkways*, in which he defined the term as a “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” (Sumner, p. 13). Since then, Neuliep et al. have traced the development and conceptualization of ethnocentrism and have developed and refined a valid and reliable method of assessing a view of centricity. Neuliep et al. referred to this measure of attitudes as the Generalized Ethnocentrism (GENE) scale (Neuliep, 2002; Neuliep, Hintz, & McCroskey, 2005; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The attitudes of ethnocentric persons toward ingroup and outgroup members differ, revealing a positive bias toward one’s ingroup and a negative bias toward outgroups, therefore leading members to perceive their own values and worldviews as more legitimate than those of other cultures (Taylor & Jaggi, 1974). According to Nanda and Warms (1998), ethnocentrism embodies “the notion that one’s own culture is superior to any other,” and such a view implies that individuals measure other cultures “by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards” (p. 6). The unquestioned nature of the beliefs received through primary socialization leads to ethnocentrism, which reflects a lower level of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004).

However, Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) have argued that ethnocentrism occurs along a continuum in that all persons have some degree of ethnocentrism. The process of socialization within a circle of relationships, a community, and ultimately a culture, results in enculturation and ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism as a descriptive and not necessarily pejorative construct may function positively in circumstances when one’s cultural group is under attack or threat of attack, and it forms the basis for patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for the group (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) conceptualize ethnocentrism on three levels: positive; negative; and extremely negative. The positive level is seen as natural in that persons prefer their own
culture over others; inherently this presents no problem. Unfortunately, ethnocentrism too often takes on evaluative forms. At the negative level individuals view their own culture as central and the standard by which to measure all other cultures, and at the extremely negative level individuals view their culture as the most powerful and desire other cultures to adopt its values and beliefs.

Further, there is evidence that ethnocentrism influences intercultural communication in that people bring to any interaction culturally conditioned values, emotional dispositions, and behaviors (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001). Therefore, an instructional goal for the intercultural communication course was to structure course assignments and activities that would lead to lower levels of ethnocentrism among students at the conclusion of the semester. However, following Neuliep and McCroskey (1997), it was unclear whether facilitating contact with members of another culture (or co-culture) would positively or negatively affect ethnocentrism levels. By researching this issue, positive correlations were found between ethnocentrism and the frequency of contact with people from different cultures and countries, indicating that increased interaction with culturally diverse persons relates to higher levels of ethnocentrism. Given that ethnocentrism leads us to view other cultures from the perspective of our own culture and, thus, negatively (Neuliep, Hintz, & McCroskey, 2005), it is reasonable to assume that reducing ethnocentrism would be a legitimate goal for a course in intercultural communication. The question remained, however, as to how incorporating actual cross-cultural interactions would impact this goal.

**Course Description**

The same instructor taught two sections of a 300-level course in intercultural communication in sequential semesters (fall and spring) at a medium-sized private religiously affiliated university in the Southeastern United States. As a new course, these were the only sections offered for the academic year. The fall class consisted of 12 males and 10 females, all European Americans; the spring class was made up of 17 females, two of whom were African-American, and one male, also African-American.

The fall class worked with two community partners, but because of changes in strategy the spring class worked with only one. At the outset of both semesters, representatives from the community organizations addressed the class, providing them with background information about the agency and informing students of the types of activities in which they would be involved. The fall semester students were allowed to select the partner of their choice after having heard the representatives speak. Thirteen fall students selected an inner-city United Methodist church whose mission is to minister to a multicultural, primarily indigent and minority
population. All 18 of the spring semester students were required to work with the inner-city church. Volunteer options included after-school tutoring, computer and website assistance, assisting in weekday programs, participation in Bible study or recovery groups, meal service, and assistance with Sunday programs. The remaining nine fall semester students chose to partner with the campus International Club to assist them in refurbishing a space dedicated to developing and sustaining community among international and other students. Both community partnerships offered students opportunities to interact with those from cultures different than their own, in one case predominantly urban African-Americans living in poverty and, in the other, foreign exchange students. For both semesters, the service requirement was a minimum of 15 hours from the second to the 13th week of the semester.

At the end of the fourth week of class, students were required to submit to the instructor an information report that would later be revised and included in a final ethnography project (S. King, personal communication, April 5, 2005; Hashemipour, 1999). In the first section of the report, students were to include the name, address, and location of the service organization, the name of their supervisor, a listing of the mission and goals of the organization, the services it provides, and the profile of its clientele (gender, ethnicity, age, etc.). In the second section, students were to list the activities in which they would be involved and discuss their significance. In the third section, students were to list the responsibilities and requirements the community organization had defined for them. In the fourth section, students were to submit a general schedule of when they planned to be present at their community site. In the final section, students were to list their learning objectives/goals for the class.

Students periodically wrote one-page reflection essays in which they answered four basic questions: What did you do, observe, read, and hear?; How did the experience feel?; What did the experience make you think?; and What will you do differently next time? In addition, the ethnography project papers required final reflections. The fall group did four of the one-page reflections, but the requirement was trimmed back to three for the spring semester class due to time constraints, and this latter model seemed to provide ample opportunity for reflection as well as continuous feedback from the instructor.

At the conclusion of the semester, students presented in oral and written form the results of their ethnographic studies of the culture with which they had worked all semester. Students were required to prepare a literature review about communication concepts related to the culture of their community partner and to compare and contrast these academic findings with their own experiences within the culture. They were to conclude in a final reflection with a summary of what they had learned
about intercultural competence from their service-learning experience.

One of the course objectives was to develop skills in intercultural competence, of which a key component is motivation. One factor that interferes with such motivation is ethnocentrism (Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2001; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007). Therefore, reducing ethnocentrism became a course goal to be accomplished through the experiential teaching method as well as by content coverage.

The critical nature of having students engage another culture as a course component grew out of the thinking of Geertz (1988) and Gonzalez (1998) that understanding another culture necessitates “being there,” that is, studying the cultural community from within. Specifically, intercultural research benefits from grounding curriculum, not just in the classroom but by being in the community and living the curriculum so that the learning experience is “simply more interesting” (Gonzalez, 1998, p. 381). Service-learning provides one way for students to access a culture, at least for short periods of time. In addition, to echo Gonzalez’ point, there is evidence that students find service-learning “more interesting” than traditional learning models, therefore leading to higher levels of learning and development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Root, & Giles, 1998; Foreman, 1996; Strage, 2000).

In addition to the benefits ensuing from the experiential nature of service-learning, there was also a good fit with the course objective of developing intercultural competence. Following Taylor and Jaggi’s (1994) research on ethnocentric attributional bias toward outgroup members, any activity that serves to increase tolerance and empathy toward, and awareness of, other cultural groups would seem to foster a decrease in ethnocentrism. Service-learning qualified as such an activity.

An additional criterion for selecting service-learning to diminish ethnocentrism was the potential for going beyond the level of mere exposure to those from a nondominant culture by engaging students with and immersing them in community. Recall Neuliep and McCroskey’s (1997) troubling finding that ethnocentrism related positively to reported frequency of contact with persons from other cultures and countries. Unfortunately, there is no information about the nature of these contacts. If contact occurs on a superficial basis only, absent the interpersonal relationship with someone from another culture, stereotypes could actually be reinforced. On the other hand, if there is genuine exploration of and interest in those from other cultures, the result could be just the opposite. Dunlap (2000) suggests service-learning as a means of combating the touristic model of intercultural interactions. Following Shujaa (1994) and Thompson and Tyagi (1993), Dunlap (2000) characterizes a touristic encounter as one that merely “scratches the surface of other cultures by focusing on traditional foods and regalia while overlooking important age-appropriate versions of the structural issues
of privilege and oppression that impact cultures” (p. 133). Dunlap (2000) goes on to offer service-learning, “when accompanied by critical reflection in courses,” as one way to venture beyond superficial contact with others as well as beyond book knowledge alone—discovering other ways of knowing through service learning” (p. 134).

Hence, the following research question was offered: After having completed a course involving service-learning within a cultural group of which they were not members, would students exhibit lower levels of ethnocentrism than they did at the beginning of the course?

**Methodology**

Participants included 40 traditional day students enrolled in the fall and spring intercultural communication class whose ages ranged from 19 to 24. At the beginning of the semester students completed the Generalized Ethnocentrism (GENE) scale as a pretest of ethnocentrism (McCroskey, 2001). The GENE scale consists of 22 statements for which participants are asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they believe each statement applies to them. Fifteen of the 22 items are actually used to measure ethnocentrism; the remainder are distracters (Neuliep, 2002). Scores range from 15 to 75, with the higher score representing higher levels of ethnocentrism. At the conclusion of the semester, students once again completed the GENE scale, which served as the posttest. All 40 students completed the pretest, but three students failed to complete the posttest, so their pretest scores were eliminated from the analysis.

**Results**

In order to capture changes in ethnocentrism in either direction, a two-tailed, paired comparison t test was used to analyze the data. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and t test results of pretest and posttest GENE scores. Posttest scores reveal a significantly lower mean ($M = 24.24$, $SD = 6.84$) than do pretest scores ($M = 27.43$, $SD = 6.93$), $t = 2.44$, $p < .05$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENE Scores</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
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<td>27.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24.24</td>
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*Note. $p < .05$. 

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t Test Results of Paired Comparison of GENE Scale Scores*
Discussion

This study compares pre- and postcourse scores on the GENE scale for students in an intercultural communication course. The data indicated a significant difference in scores and that the mean level of ethnocentrism in students decreased during the course of the semester of service-learning. Therefore the research question can be answered in the affirmative. After having completed a course involving service-learning within a cultural group of which they are not members, students exhibited lower levels of ethnocentrism than they did at the beginning of the course. It is possible that the students’ consistent contact and engagement with a diverse culture for several months led to the decrease in ethnocentrism. Certainly, such a conclusion would be consistent with Dunlap’s (2000) analysis. However, we must exercise caution when interpreting the results of the present investigation for two reasons. First, the lower ethnocentrism scores were clearly based on means; not every student’s individual score changed in the same direction. Analysis of frequency data showed that 45.9% of students experienced either no change in score or an increase in ethnocentrism. Therefore, barely over half the students accounted for the declines in ethnocentrism measured by the posttest. A second reason for caution derives from an obvious but unavoidable omission: there was no control group. There was no comparable non-service-learning intercultural course with which to compare this group of students. A prior commitment to partnering with the inner-city church required continuation of the service-learning model throughout both semesters. Fortunately, a non-service-learning version of the course is presently under design, so in the future we should be able to run a control group while holding other course content constant.

In interpreting the results of the study, the instructor turned to the students’ written reflections of their service for clues. Students were required to provide written reflections of their service experiences, as recommended by Dunlap (2000). Reflection is a dynamic and essential component of experiential learning. Both process and product, the reflective thinking embodied in service-learning reflection is “an organic component in the learning cycle” and is “simultaneously the very ground from which both knowledge and belief spring” (Cooper, 2003, p. 94). As such, reflection not only provides a vehicle for students to process their attitudes toward their service within the context of course content but is in itself a behavior subject to observation. Hence, by examining their reflection essays, we may find some indication as to the role service-learning played in changing students’ attitudes.

Several students stated explicitly the role the service experience had played in their learning. One student working with the inner-city church put it this way:
As I have been able to learn the valuable things in class about intercultural communication skills ... I have been able to apply them and see them at work in this real setting. One of the important skills that I have learned in conversing with those from a different way of life than me is to simply listen. Listening is such a vital step, because many of the men that I have talked to are not used to people taking the time to stop and listen to what they have to say. So, when someone finally stops and cares to hear what they have to say, they begin to open up.

Another student remarked:

The rest of the children taught me more than I ever could teach them. This whole experience has taught me so much about cultures and myself. I was very surprised that an area just a few miles away could have such a different culture. These cultural differences include ... language dialects, verbal and nonverbal differences, communication styles, and cultural expectations.

Yet another observed:

Throughout the tutoring experience I’ve had a chance to help some pretty amazing kids ... [who] don’t have the advantages, opportunities, and luxuries that others have and ... still strive to reach their goals. Others might quit if they had to face what these children face on a day-to-day basis. The end of the year party was open for parents and guardians to attend but only one guardian showed up. This action confirmed the importance of the tutoring program. If I had ever doubted our need and reason for being there, I didn’t any longer. Not only was this experience educational, but I also had a lot of fun. I enjoyed this opportunity and will take the lessons learned with me forever. These children have impacted my life far beyond my expectations. I am a better, more well-rounded person because of them and this whole experience.

Students also reflected on their negative experiences, but most of them showed evidence that such encounters aided in their personal growth and ability to entertain other points of view. This example, written following a day of tutoring particularly unruly children, is representative:
As I drove away, I could not understand why I was so tense. It was probably because I knew I did not have control of the situation and there was not much I could do about it. The children had eaten way too much sugar and they knew [their leaders] did not have much control. I felt like I was a failure because I could not even maintain order with twelve children. I quickly learned that the way I would discipline a child I usually baby sit does not work with the kids at the [inner-city church]. I learned that the kids down there are used to a little harsher discipline than what I am used to giving. I began to think that the culture down there is a lot rougher and they have to fight a lot. They must fight to be noticed, fight to be successful, fight to rise above the poverty where they now live. I think the toughness can give them an edge to rise above. I think I really learned a lot. I know that I am not supposed to be a teacher…. The kids down there are searching for love and acceptance. I think it would be helpful to know that they are tougher down there. That is how they can survive.

In this reflection, the student revealed her sense of vulnerability and confusion over what had occurred on a particularly frustrating day with the children at the inner-city church. However, even this negative experience facilitated learning about perspectives and behaviors prevalent in a culture different than her own.

Conclusion

This study makes invaluable connections between service-learning and the development of intercultural competence. As such, it provides an essential link for service-learning practitioners who partner with agencies that serve predominantly minority populations. The research confirms the value of establishing relationships with those from different cultures in reducing ethnocentrism, thereby leading to the development of intercultural competence. It is crucial that sojourners into other cultures go beyond the tourist phase in their interactions. For example, a visitor who remains in what Dunlap (2000) refers to as the touristic model is unlikely to venture beyond surface impressions and may well increase in ethnocentrism as Neuliep and McCroskey’s (1997) data suggests. The results of this study suggest that immersion experiences should be expected to decrease ethnocentrism, as in the case of students who do internships or service abroad or reside with members of the host culture. Ultimately, students who have experienced service-learning should be tracked longitudinally to determine how ethnocentrism levels and other predispositions shift over time. Most importantly, because the true value of service-learning
is found in ongoing behaviors and stable, persistent lifestyle choices, researchers must also find ways of linking higher educational experiences with later adult actions. This researcher hopes that these and similar investigations will enhance continued efforts to elucidate the role of service-learning in reducing ethnocentric views, thereby improving intercultural competence.

References


