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Byron L. Zamboanga
Smith College

Lindsay S. Ham
University of Arkansas

Cara C. Tomaso
Smith College

Shannon Audley
Smith College, saudley@smith.edu

Nnamdi Pole
Smith College, npole@smith.edu

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“Try Walking in Our Shoes”: Teaching Acculturation and Related Cultural Adjustment Processes Through Role-Play

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Byron L. Zamboanga¹, Lindsay S. Ham², Cara C. Tomaso¹,
Shannon Audley¹, and Nnamdi Pole¹

Abstract

In this article, we describe several role-playing exercises on acculturation and relevant cultural adjustment processes that we incorporated into Tomcho and Foel's classroom activity on acculturation, and we report data that examine subsequent changes in students' responses on pretest and posttest measures shortly after the activity and present qualitative themes derived from students' reflections taken from an assignment at the end of the semester. We found no increases in students' perceptions that role-playing can help them gain a better understanding of acculturation. However, there were increases in students' awareness that acculturation is a real-world phenomenon, their understanding of how acculturation can impact people's lives, and their sensitivity and empathy for people who face some of the challenges associated with acculturation, even after controlling for students' pretest level of interest in cultural issues. Furthermore, thematic analyses indicated that students learned some of the challenges associated with acculturation and were able to label personal experiences associated with acculturation. They also gained concrete knowledge about and in-depth realization of the concept of acculturation. Instructors who teach psychology classes can use this exercise to complement traditional methods of teaching.

Keywords

acculturation, teaching, psychology, role-play, culture

Given the current challenges regarding ethnic and cultural relations in the United States (Bannon, 2015; Dan, 2014), active learning activities designed to facilitate a rich and more nuanced understanding of ethnocultural concepts and relevant cultural experiences could prove useful in today's psychology classes. Role-playing is one type of active learning activity (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997; Kilgour, Reynaud, Northcote, & Shields, 2015; Westrup & Planander, 2013) that can be used to enhance students' understanding of course materials (Rao & Stupans, 2012; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012). Specifically, it can help facilitate student learning in psychology (e.g., Lawson, McDonough, & Bodle, 2010; Plous, 2000) and other academic disciplines (e.g., Rao & Stupans, 2012; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012; Westrup & Planander, 2013). Role-playing exercises can serve a valuable teaching purpose because they allow students to experience an activity that resembles a real-world phenomenon and view such a phenomenon from different perspectives (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997; Kilgour et al., 2015; Rao & Stupans, 2012; Sogunro, 2004; Westrup & Planander, 2013). It therefore stands to reason that this exercise may be particularly useful in cultural psychology classes because it enables students to view a cultural phenomenon from a different perspective, enhancing students' cultural competence and their understanding of how

cultural forces can impact people's lives (cf. Shearer & Davidhizar, 2003).

Acculturation refers to the process of cultural, psychological, and social change and adaptation that occurs when people from different cultural groups come in contact (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocnik, 2010; Zamboanga, Tomaso, Kondo, & Schwartz, 2014). Moreover, the process of acculturation can encompass the extent to which individuals balance acquisition of the host society's culture with retention of their heritage culture(s) (e.g., see Table 1; Zamboanga et al., 2014). Acculturation has been a topic of discussion within the psychology literature (Ozer, 2013). Class discussions on acculturation in psychology courses may also become increasingly important, given the rising number of international students on college campuses (Haynie, 2013) and the increasing prevalence of immigrant students in community colleges (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Because the

¹Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA

²University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, USA

Corresponding Author:

Byron L. Zamboanga, Department of Psychology, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, USA.

Email: bzamboan@smith.edu

Table 1. Examples of Role-Playing Simulation Activities and Their Pedagogical Utility.

Cultural Feature	Role-Play Simulation Activity	Pedagogical Utility
Cultural practice (e.g., language)	Culture A's language (which consists of verbal and hand gestures) differs from Culture B's language (which is comprised of handwritten text on a pad of paper); however, Culture C's language is similar to Culture A's language (which consists of verbal communication but with no hand gestures).	Language match and mismatch between two cultural groups can be used to illustrate the significance of premigration factors on immigrants' acculturation experiences and the receiving society's experiences with the new group.
Dimensions and cultural aspects of acculturation: identifications and values (Schwartz et al., 2010)	The unique color and design of each culture's identification badge and hat can be used to symbolize their heritage culture identity and heritage values, respectively.	The hat and identification badge can be used to illustrate acculturation as a bidimensional process, whereby a member from Culture A can identify with the host society (Culture B) and also acquire its value systems without discarding their heritage identity and values by "wearing both hats" and badges during the activity, respectively.
Language brokering (Weisskirch & Alva, 2002)	Two parents plus their child from Culture B visit a medical facility in Culture A. The child, who is proficient in Culture A's language (i.e., verbal and hand gestures), serves as a language broker for one or both parents.	This exercise can illustrate some of the challenges associated with parent-child mismatch in levels of acculturation (e.g., differences in language proficiency). This exercise can also evoke discussions around child language brokering and immigrant parent's sense of authority.
Parent-child acculturation gap (Telzer, 2011)	Two parents and a child from Culture B live in Culture A. They send their child to school wearing the heritage culture's hat and identification badge. The child comes home wearing the host society's (Culture A) hat and identification badge. The parents object to their child identifying with the host society and endorsing its cultural values. Therefore, the parents rip the host society's hat and identification badge off their child's head and chest and insist that their child wear their heritage culture's hat and identification badge.	This activity can be used to illustrate the "in-between" of cultural worlds (e.g., heritage culture at home; host society culture in school) that some children of immigrant parents might endure and the cultural stressors associated with this experience. This exercise can also be used to demonstrate cultural challenges that some immigrant parents might experience when raising their child in a society that is culturally different from their heritage culture.

Note. These exercises were incorporated into the acculturation activity described in Tomcho and Foels (2002).

acculturation process can include a number of cultural experiences (e.g., acculturative stressors such as language challenges), one could argue that role-playing exercises can facilitate unfamiliar college students' understanding, sensitivity, and empathy toward these groups.

To our knowledge, Tomcho and Foels (2002) conducted the first study examining the effectiveness of role-playing in teaching about acculturation. They devised an activity in which students were divided into two different cultural groups. Each group followed a cultural script with room for "ad-libbing." These groups then engaged in a number of cultural exchanges with respect to food, fun and entertainment, and medical assistance. Posttest-only evaluation indicated that students found the exercise enjoyable and that it helped them understand how acculturation affects people's lives. Students also reported a heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity to the challenges that individuals face when changing cultures.

Paper Aims

The present article advances Tomcho and Foels's (2002) work in four important ways. The first is a pedagogical advancement:

We expanded Tomcho and Foels's role-playing activity by incorporating original exercises that we designed to enhance students' understanding of the complexities of acculturation and related cultural adjustments (e.g., acculturative stressors such as language barriers; parent-child acculturation gaps; see Table 1). Second, we conducted pretest and posttest assessments in order to examine whether this activity would improve students' awareness and understanding of how acculturation and relevant cultural adjustment processes might affect people's lives. Third, we explored whether students believed that they would better learn acculturation through role-playing in addition to completing the assigned readings and attending lecture. Finally, to account for self-selection biases, we controlled for students' interest in culture and ethnicity in our follow-up analyses.

Hypotheses

This role-playing exercise was designed to simulate the process of acculturation and some of the cultural adjustment challenges associated with it. As such, we expected students to report increases from pretest to posttest on measures of

awareness, understanding, sensitivity, and empathy. Although a study by DeNeve and Heppner (1997) indicated that when it comes to preparation for other college courses, students found lectures to be more useful than role-playing simulations, the insufficient literature pertaining to role-playing exercises on acculturation makes it difficult to advance any specific hypotheses. Therefore, we took an exploratory approach with respect to students' pretest and posttest responses in their perceived ability to better learn acculturation by participating in a role-playing activity in addition to the assigned readings and lecture.

Acculturation Exercise

Given the aforementioned pedagogical aims, the acculturation exercise encompassed three learning objectives: (1) to enhance students' understanding of the concept of acculturation and its cultural components, (2) to increase students' awareness of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon, and (3) to generate sensitivity and empathy toward immigrant groups who experience some of the cultural challenges associated with acculturation.

Two of the authors implemented the acculturation activity during an 80-min class period of an undergraduate psychology course on culture and ethnicity. Our acculturation exercise followed the basic components outlined by Tomcho and Foels (2002). Before beginning the activity, one of the instructors gave a brief lecture on acculturation. This lecture covered the unidimensional/bidimensional aspects of acculturation and the different cultural components of acculturation, such as cultural values, identifications, and practices (Schwartz et al., 2010). After the lecture, the instructor randomly assigned students into one of the three cultural groups; each group congregated into separate corners of the classroom. The instructor supplied each group with different colored paper (i.e., Culture A, B, and C received black, blue, and white paper, respectively). Each group used their assigned colored paper to design hats that were unique to their culture. The instructor also supplied each group with their own cultural script. These cultural scripts outlined each groups' cultural customs, such as the type of food consumed in that culture (i.e., Culture A only ate meat, Culture B only ate vegetables, and Culture C ate meat and vegetables), primary entertainment activities (Culture A watched movies on Netflix, Culture B participated in bowling activities, and Culture C watched movies at the cinema), and their language (Culture A communicated verbally with hand gestures, Culture B communicated through handwritten means using a note pad, and Culture C communicated verbally with no hand gestures). Finally, the instructor asked each group to come up with one or two additional cultural customs and a name for their culture. These steps were taken in order to facilitate in-group identification and enculturation as outlined by Tomcho and Foels.

The instructor took additional steps to facilitate in-group identification and enculturation beyond those described by

Tomcho and Foels (2002). The instructor asked each group to design a flag that symbolized their culture. Moreover, the instructor supplied each group with a unique colored paper design and an adhesive name badge to attach to it. The instructor told the students to write the name of their culture on the name badge and to wear it during the class activity. Additionally, instead of assigning students into two groups (as Tomcho and Foels did in their activity), the instructor assigned students into three groups: Culture Group A, Culture Group B, and Culture Group C. The instructor purposefully designed Culture B (an immigrant group) to be dissimilar to Culture A (the receiving society) and Culture C (another immigrant group) to be similar to Culture A with respect to the following: language, entertainment activities, and type of food consumed. This was done in order to illustrate for students how premigration factors can affect the acculturation experiences of immigrant groups who migrate into a society that is culturally similar or dissimilar from theirs.

The instructor gave students approximately 30 min to experience the in-group identification and enculturation process in their respective cultural groups. Then, the instructor proceeded to the acculturation aspect of this learning activity by asking students to participate in several cultural contact/exchanges with respect to food, entertainment activity, and a medical emergency, as outlined in Tomcho and Foels (2002). For example, some members from Culture B visited Culture A and experienced difficulties finding food that they could eat and an entertainment activity in which they could participate.

The instructor also incorporated other activities that were not described in Tomcho and Foels (2002). For instance, language barriers posed challenges for members from Culture B (who communicated by writing on a note pad) and Culture A (who communicated verbally with hand gestures). Members of Culture B had to rely on a language translator (someone was assigned to role-play as the child of an immigrant parent who did not speak the host society's language; see Weisskirch & Alva, 2002) from their culture (i.e., the child from Culture B could verbally communicate with members of Culture A) to assist them with a medical emergency. Several other role-playing activities (also not included in Tomcho and Foels) and their pedagogical utilities are outlined in Table 1. At the conclusion of the exercise, the instructor briefly reiterated some of the real-world applications of the role-playing activity and highlighted the complexities of acculturation and the cultural adjustment challenges that some immigrant groups have in common.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants consisted of 39 female students ($M = 20.3$; $SD = 1.22$; range = 18–24; 36% Whites, 28% Asians, 10% Blacks, 10% Hispanics, 16% multiethnic) who were enrolled in an undergraduate course on culture at a women's college in the

Table 2. Pretest and Posttest Analyses on Content and Application Questions.

Question Items	Pretest		Posttest		t-Test	df	p Value	η_p^2
	M	SD	M	SD				
<i>Content questions^a</i>								
In addition to the readings/lecture, role-playing some of the cultural processes of acculturation can help me better learn this concept	3.55	0.89	3.84	1.00	-1.92	37	.06	.09
Role-playing the cultural processes of acculturation is not necessary, I can learn acculturation through the assigned readings and lecture	3.08	0.97	2.97	1.22	0.61	37	.54	.01
I understand how acculturation can directly affect people's lives in the world	3.97	0.78	4.56	0.55	-4.33	38	.001	.33
<i>Application questions^b</i>								
Awareness of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon	6.79	1.69	8.46	1.45	-7.86	38	.001	.62
Empathy for immigrant groups who face some of the challenges associated with acculturation	8.33	1.53	9.08	1.20	-3.99	38	.001	.30
Sensitivity for immigrant groups who face some of the challenges associated with acculturation	7.54	1.86	8.51	1.47	-5.59	38	.001	.45

Note. *n*'s range from 38 to 39. Numbers in boldface indicate significant increases in mean pretest and posttest scores.

^aStudents indicated their responses to these questions using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*).

^bStudents reported their responses to these questions using a scale from 1 (lowest: *unaware, no empathy, no sensitivity*) to 10 (highest: *extremely aware, high empathy, high sensitivity*).

northeastern United States. This course was cotaught by two instructors, one of whom administered anonymous questionnaires that took approximately 4 min to complete at the beginning (pretest) and at the end (posttest) of class, respectively (75% participation rate; 40 surveys were returned but one questionnaire was excluded from our analyses because it did not contain any responses to our key study questions). The instructor gave students a study debriefing form at the end of the class. The principal investigators' college Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study procedures and granted them a waiver of written consent.

Measures

Students provided information pertaining to their demographic background (see Table 2 for primary study measures.). They also reported the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I enrolled in this course because of my interest in culture and ethnicity issues" ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 0.84$; 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), and whether they agreed or disagreed that role-playing some of the cultural processes of acculturation would help them better learn this concept in addition to the assigned readings and lecture. Finally, students reported their level of awareness of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon and the extent of their sensitivity and empathy toward immigrant groups who face challenges associated with acculturation.

Results

To examine changes in students' responses on our pretest and posttest measures, we conducted paired samples *t*-test analyses in SPSS 22.0. As shown in Table 2, with respect to learning about the "contents" of acculturation, there were no statistically significant increases in students' perceptions that role-playing some of the cultural processes associated with

acculturation could help them better learn this concept. However, with regard to students' perceptions of the societal relevance of acculturation, there were increases in their awareness of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon. Finally, when it came to students' affective perceptions of acculturation, their understanding of how acculturation can directly affect people's lives, as well as their sensitivity and empathy for immigrant groups who face challenges associated with this concept, also increased.

Given that our sample consisted of students enrolled in a course pertaining to culture, we examined the effect that one's level of interest in cultural issues might have on our study variables. As such, we conducted follow-up repeated-measures analyses of covariance using pretest cultural interest as a covariate. The pattern of results was similar, and the covariate did not have a significant effect on the dependent variables ($ps > .32$; η_p^2 ranged from $<.001$ to $.03$). Pretest and posttest scores did not differ for 2 items assessing students' perceptions that role-playing some of the cultural processes associated with acculturation could help them better learn this concept, $F(1, 36) = 3.60$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$; $F(1, 36) = .36$, $p = .55$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Scores increased from pretest to posttest for students' reported understanding of how acculturation can affect people's lives, $F(1, 37) = 18.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$, and students' reported awareness of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon, $F(1, 37) = 62.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .63$. In addition, students' reported sensitivity, $F(1, 37) = 30.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$, and empathy, $F(1, 37) = 15.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$, for immigrant groups facing acculturation challenges increased from pretest to posttest.

Follow-Up Analyses

We conducted follow-up thematic analyses to examine the effects of the acculturation exercise beyond the 80-min class period, using a required course assignment that was unrelated

to the study. Students completed this assignment at the end of the semester (a little over 10 weeks after the acculturation activity). This assignment asked students to write down and describe three things (from the lecture, readings, and/or in-class activities) that they took away from the course. The IRB approved our request to conduct these thematic analyses.

All in all, 23 of the 46 students who handed this work sheet in (6 students did not turn in this assignment) commented on the acculturation activity. To further understand what students took away from this activity, a researcher who was not involved in the teaching of the class analyzed the 23 acculturation responses (which were deidentified) using thematic analytic techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four themes emerged from students' responses:

Theme 1: *Understanding and empathizing with some of the difficulties associated with acculturation and its nuances.* In particular, students highlighted language barriers and between-group cultural similarities as important factors in determining the difficulty of a particular acculturative experience (see earlier discussion of how cultural similarities and dissimilarities between the groups were simulated in the activity). Students also described gaining empathy for immigrants and a better understanding of the difficulties that immigrants face in the real world.

Theme 2: *Ability to label personal experiences associated with acculturation.* This theme focuses on students' reinterpretation of their own (including family and friends') experiences as immigrants. Students reported that the activity provided them with language that they could use to label and understand their personal experiences in the context of acculturation. In addition, they could now identify that a friend or family member had experienced acculturation and more so were able to put that person's experience into perspective.

Theme 3: *In-depth realization of the concept of acculturation.* This theme encompasses how students' previous knowledge and understanding about the process of acculturation was deepened. Many students expressed awareness that their previous knowledge about acculturation was incomplete and that the class activity provided them with a new view of what it means to be an immigrant and what the process of acculturation entails.

Theme 4: *Knowledge gained about the topic of acculturation.* This theme embodies the specific knowledge that students gained, including definitions and dimensions of acculturation.

Discussion

In this article, we describe a role-playing activity (see Table 1) designed to enhance students' understanding of acculturation and relevant cultural adjustment processes and report data highlighting changes in students' responses on pretest and posttest measures. Our evaluation data indicated that students'

scores increased from pretest to posttest with respect to their awareness that acculturation is a real-world phenomenon, their understanding of how acculturation can impact people's lives, and their sensitivity and empathy for people who face some of the challenges associated with acculturation. Because our sample consisted of students enrolled in a course pertaining to culture and ethnicity, we also conducted analyses controlling for students' level of interest in cultural issues. Our findings indicated that students' interest in cultural issues did not have any effect on our initial results. Thus, role-playing activities like the one described in this article could potentially complement conventional methods of instruction (e.g., lecture and readings) in psychology classes. Instructors might also consider using this type of role-play activity as a "warm up" exercise before launching into class discussions about highly sensitive ethnic and cultural topics (e.g., bilingual education, immigration reform).

There are a few teaching recommendations worth noting, given our findings. For example, a cultural role-playing activity like the one described in this article could help prepare students for intercultural interactions that are increasingly taking place on many college campuses. Instructors could have students engage in deep reflection on the thoughts and behaviors they experienced during the activity, consider what they did well and areas that may benefit from improvement, and process how these lessons learned might carry over in their interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds who are adjusting to a new cultural environment (see Theme 3). Additionally, this activity not only allows students to experience for themselves another cultural perspective but also encourages them to be mindful of another group's cultural viewpoint (see Theme 1). Instructors could therefore highlight this feature of the activity in class and emphasize the importance of taking into account multiple perspectives. Doing so has the potential to help students become better skilled at articulating both sides of a complex issue (e.g., immigration and related programming). Finally, and as highlighted by Theme 2, instructors could use this exercise to demonstrate how students can begin using psychological concepts to describe their cultural life experiences. For example, students who have developed a bicultural identity (i.e., one that has cultural elements from one's heritage culture *and* the host society) can then use acculturative vocabulary to help them make sense of their cultural experiences.

Despite reported changes in awareness, sensitivity, and empathy regarding acculturation following the role-play activity, students' perceptions that role-playing would help them better learn acculturation and some of the cultural processes associated with this construct remained similar from pretest to posttest. Perhaps role-playing, at least from the students' perspective, may not play much of a role in facilitating their content knowledge of this concept. However, overall, caution must be used when interpreting our findings because we relied on self-report measures of students' perceptions of their learning regarding this class exercise and did not assess students'

content knowledge of acculturation (e.g., on an exam). Future research could shed light on this issue.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several study limitations worth noting. First, we acknowledge that there are different forms of empathy (e.g., cognitive vs. affective forms of empathy) that were not examined in our investigation (see Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Future research could examine how role-playing exercises on acculturation and related cultural experiences impact different empathic responses. In addition, because our sample consisted entirely of women, caution must be used when generalizing to other populations of interest. Although we found reasonable pre- to post-effect sizes in our analyses, it is possible that larger or smaller changes between pretest and posttest scores may have been observed had students learned the information using a lecture format. As such, follow-up research that utilizes an experimental study design and comparison groups are needed to generate between-group effect sizes. Because our findings suggest that students reported forming an affective connection to issues related to acculturation (e.g., empathy for immigrant groups; see also Theme 1), it is possible that the affective experiences derived from this activity strengthened their understanding of this concept and its real-world applications. However, because our posttest measure and self-reflection work sheet were administered shortly after the role-playing activity and at the end of the semester, respectively, the long-term effects of this exercise are not clear and thus warrant further examination.

Conclusion

Active learning activities such as role-playing cultural exercises that are designed to facilitate a rich and more nuanced understanding of ethnocultural issues are a promising teaching strategy, especially given the current state of ethnic and cultural relations in the United States. The present article brings to light both the pedagogical utility of this role-play activity and its short-term effects on (a) promoting college students' awareness and understanding of acculturation as a real-world phenomenon and (b) increasing their positive attitudes toward immigrant groups who may be experiencing some of the cultural adjustment challenges associated with this construct. We hope that instructors who teach psychology classes and/or cultural diversity workshops will consider implementing this role-playing exercise or at least some versions of it. Exercise activities designed to foster understanding, sensitivity, and empathy toward others not only have the potential to bring people of different backgrounds together but also to engender positive change when it comes to ethnic and cultural relations in our society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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