Evidence-Based Interventions for Cultural Competency Development within Public Institutions

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Introduction

As our society becomes more diverse, the need to respect and understand diverse cultural groups is essential (Bush, 2000). Related to this, cultural competency is important as it is a characteristic of good government (Norman-Major and Gooden, 2012) that impacts the responsiveness of public services (Hewins-Maroney and Williams, 2007). However, cultural competency goes beyond understanding, tolerating, and accommodating diversity: it requires embracing and harnessing the power of differences to address community challenges (Koliba, 2013). The expectation is that culturally competent managers and organizations are more relevant and effective (Rice, 2007). As Wilson (2015) notes, municipalities now recognize that culturally competent practices “are essential to local governance in the 21st century.”

Service-oriented fields such as health care and social work have given considerable attention to the conceptualization and measurement of cultural competency while public administration is still building this foundation (Carrizales, 2010). While this area of inquiry is developing, we know that there are several factors to consider, including: individual desire to engage with this concept, critical awareness/knowledge, skill development, and organizational support (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar, 2014). This paper examines this framework together with Longoria and Rangarajan’s (2015) cultural competency assessment tool developed specifically for public administration audiences.

Given the importance of cultural competency for public administration scholars, practitioners, and communities at large, this paper seeks to address the following questions. First, how can we develop cultural competency in a meaningful way? Second, and related to this, which interventions are most effective in enhancing individual measures of cultural competency? And, finally, how can this information be used by organizations to “nudge” cultural competency development? Bartel-Radic and Giannelloni (2017) contend that despite the broad and burgeoning work on cultural competency, it remains a fuzzy concept that requires additional empirical evidence. This study is offered as a response to that call.

This study assesses the cultural competency of two samples of public employees before and after intervention. For the first sample, this study examines the impact of individual treatments designed to reflect recommended activities for enhancing cultural competency awareness, knowledge, and skills (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar, 2014). The analysis examines the impact of these targeted efforts, using a control group for comparison. For the second sample, this study examines the cultural competency of individuals before and after participation in a two-day diversity training session. To our knowledge, this is the first study to compare cultural competency interventions and also the first to apply the Longoria and Rangarajan (2015) measure of cultural competency to groups of experienced public employees (rather than public administration students).

Defining and Framing Cultural Competency

Cultural competency has numerous definitions and interpretations, each of them applicable organizations in varying contexts. Fernandopulle (2007) refers to cultural competency as the “ability of organizations and individuals to work effectively in cross-cultural or multicultural interactions” (p. 16) and represents a spectrum of developmental stages (Fernandopulle, 2007). Lonner (2007) outlines cultural competency as a continuum “with no absolute fixed endpoints;
that is, there is neither an exact bottom for total cultural incompetence nor an exact top measure” (p. 6). The National Center for Cultural Competence defines cultural competency as “having the knowledge, skills, and values to work effectively with diverse populations and to adapt institutional policies and professional practices to meet the unique needs of client populations” (Satterwhite & Teng, 2007, p. 2). Cultural competency implies that an individual appreciates or respects people from other cultures and is capable of applying effective behaviors and considerations in cross-cultural situations (Borrega & Johnson, 2012; Rice, 2010).

One key takeaway from extant research on cultural competency is that it is neither static nor innate. Individuals are not, from this perspective, “born” with those traits associated with cultural competence; rather developing cultural competence is a process. This means that cultural competence is an “ongoing, contextual, dynamic, experiential process that impacts one’s ability to understand, communicate, with, serve, and meet the needs of individuals who look, think, and/or behave differently from oneself” (Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, Willis, & Alvorado, 2010). The developmental nature of cultural competence reflects a progress oriented continuum - from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency (Cross et al., 1989) – as well as suggests that the attributes associated with ‘competence’ are, or can be, delineated by stages: unconsciously incompetent, consciously incompetent, consciously competent and unconsciously competent (Purnell, 2002).

Diversity is more broadly defined as cultural and demographic differences and how they are structured within a given society or institution (Norman-Major & Gooden, 2012). Social equity emphasizes fairness and justice in the formation of public policy, public management, and public service delivery. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), through the accreditation of public administration degree programs, recognizes the impact of cultural competence in public service with ideas like “respect, equity, and fairness with citizens and fellow public servants” (Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, 2009, p. 2). It is important to note that cultural competence represents more than ensuring that federally protected groups (REGARDS) are free from discrimination. It means that there may be visible and invisible constructs of culture that have to be acknowledged. Moreover, cultural competence recognizes that intersectionality is alive and relevant. Diversity reflects distinct differences, cultural competence reflects that multiple constructs that contribute one’s identity. Cultural competence therefore represents the intersection of individual knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and application to organizational mission.

Cross et al. (1989) argues that cultural competence is not developed overnight, but “is a developmental process for the individual and the system. It is not something that happens because one reads a book, or attends a workshop, or happens to be a member of a minority group” (p. 21: see also Wittman & Velde, 2002). Thus, cultural competence will only occur when specific learning experiences are designed, supervised, and implemented to foster the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Wittman & Velde, 2002). Mere encouragement is not adequate (Rivera & Miller, 2009); for learning to take place across the curriculum, deliberate action to create structured and semi-structured experiences must take place. Our study builds on these empirically based assumptions to identify specific interventions to coax along cultural competence. The intent of our study is to examine how targeted interventions instill and develop specific domains of cultural competence among public administrators.
Cultural competency has been explored in numerous disciplines and academic domains, including health professions (Smedley, Stith & Nelson, 2003; Beach et. al. 2005), social work education (Ronnau, 1994), medical and nursing education (Anderson, Calvillo, & Fongwa, 2007; Kripalani et al., 2006; Rapp, 2006). Public administration education has more recently begun to address cultural competency, and emphasize greater exposure to diversity themes and issues (Johnson and Rivera, 2007). Rapp (2006) adapted a cultural competence framework for public affairs curricula that includes knowledge-based, attitude-based, skills-based, and community-based concepts. Carrizales (2010) offers pedagogical examples of each of these concepts for public administration education (p. 598). Even though cultural competence is interrelated with diversity and social equity, it holds a distinct definition and operationalization (Norman-Major & Gooden, 2012).

Much of the emphasis on cultural competence in public administration has focused on educational tools and pedagogies. In other words, the emphasis has been on preparing individuals to meet cultural competency expectations and expanding the public administration curriculum to include cultural competence concepts. Ronnau (1994; see also Carrizales, 2010) outlines three objectives for educators in moving students toward cultural competence: (a) raise the students’ awareness about the importance of being culturally competent; (b) create an atmosphere in which students and teachers can ask questions and share their knowledge about cultures; and (c) increase the amount of information the students have about cultures, including their own (p. 31). Moreover, Ronnau (1994, p. 33; see also, Carrizales, 2010) asserts the value of a “culturally competent professional” with which students should be familiar, including acknowledging a lack of knowledge about other cultures and a commitment to learn about them, accepting the differences among people from different cultures, a self-awareness, an awareness of the different meanings that actions may have among different cultures; and that the professional recognizes the ongoing acquisition process of knowledge. Cross and colleagues (1989) also discussed “five essential elements for becoming a culturally competent helping professional” (p. 32; see also, Wittman & Velde, 2002).

There has been limited research on developing cultural competence for practicing public administrators and evaluating cultural competence of individuals. This may be because unlike the disciplines of social work, nursing, and other health professions that rely on certification and licensing processes, the profession of public administration broadly has recognized cultural competency on a more ad hoc basis. The former professions have explicitly included cultural competency with their licensing guidelines. For example, The National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health and Health Care (the National CLAS Standards) are intended to advance health equity, improve quality, and help eliminate health care disparities by providing a blueprint for individuals and health care organizations to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services. This is not to say that cultural competency is unimportant to public administration practitioners and students. On the contrary, both NASPAA accreditation standards and the ASPA Code of Ethics echo the importance of valuing diversity and acting in ways that demonstrate justice, fairness, and equity.

**Methodology and Study Context**
This study examined the impact of interventions on cultural competency scores. Individual responses to a 24-item cultural competency scale (Longoria and Rangarajan 2015) served as the dependent variable. All study participants were given a pre-test to establish a baseline measure, participated in an intervention (either a randomly-assigned individual reflective activity for Emerging Leaders Academy participants, or, for Certified Public Manager Program participants, a 2-day diversity training program), and then completed a repeat cultural competency post-test.

The survey was based on an instrument developed by Longoria and Rangarajan (2015) that measures public administrator cultural competence (PACC) at the individual level. The PACC instrument (Longoria and Rangarajan 2015) demonstrated the reliability of the survey statements to measure cultural competence knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Their instrument confirmed that these four factors could be extracted from the instrument:

- **Cultural attitudes** are defined as personal dispositions or orientations about cultural aspects as they relate to public service.
- **Cultural knowledge** is defined as the extent that information about different cultures in the jurisdiction where a public manager serves has been sought and retained.
- **Cultural skill** is defined as the ability to collect relevant cultural data and develop programs that accurately utilize this information.
- **Cultural behavior** is defined as those behaviors that increase and refine one’s cultural sensitivity such as seeking out information, openness, and adaptability.

Longoria and Rangarajan adapted the survey instrument from existing surveys of cultural competence in other fields (primarily healthcare, nursing, social work). However, the survey is distinctly for public administrators because many public managers do not have direct contact with culturally diverse clients; rather, cultural competence is more relevant for the development of public programs and policies. Moreover, the PACC instrument reflects the emphasis of public service values embedded in NASPAA competencies.

Participants in this study were drawn from professional education programs at the University of Kansas Public Management Center at the University of Kansas. Nested in the School of Public Affairs & Administration, the Center offers educational opportunities in the areas of public leadership and public management to current and prospective public service professionals. This study draws participants from two programs in particular, the Kansas Certified Public Manager program (CPM) and the Emerging Leaders Academy (ELA).

Established in 1993, the Certified Public Manager program at the University of Kansas (KU CPM) is a nationally accredited public management program and certification process for individuals who are currently, or are seeking, supervisory or managerial roles in public and third sector organizations. Offered annually in three locations across Kansas, enrollees in KU CPM interact with program directors and facilitators, experienced public management professionals, academicians, as well as their peers, and engage with a competency based curriculum: managing work, leading people, and developing the self. Based on a competency model predicated on personal & organizational integrity, KU CPM programming highlights various perspectives of public leadership and emphasizes the exigencies of, and excellence in, contemporary public service.
The second program is the Emerging Leaders Academy (ELA), which is a talent management program for non-supervisory and non-managerial staff of public sector and and non-profit agencies. “Developed by practitioners for practitioners”, participants in ELA meet in various locations around the state and engage with program facilitators, academicians, guest lecturers, and their peers, for the purpose of gaining insight, knowledge, and skills in leadership practices, organizational dynamics, communication, and career planning. A similar, competency based, curriculum is provided, though somewhat less programmatically. The curriculum touches on various topics relevant to public service professionals, including: effective communication; dynamics of conflict; ethics; budgeting; networking; organizational culture; other topical and temporally relevant areas.

For this study, we developed three (3) distinct individual interventions aimed at building cultural competency attitude, knowledge and skills. In addition, we developed a control intervention that broadly dealt with culture in public service. The adaptations were designed so that participants could complete the “assignment” individually. Each had a reflective component, so that participants could respond in writing to guided statements or questions. The three interventions were adapted from the following teaching and training material.

**Attitudes:** Social Identity Mapping (SIM) is a technique that “engages participants in the process of simultaneously representing a suite of social identity constructs in a way that allows for their systematic comparison and assessment… the procedure serves to create a visual representation of a person's social world that captures key features of relevant social identities and their interrelationship. As we argue below, this has the potential to advance social identity theorizing and also to facilitate interventions in a range of applied contexts.”¹ The intent for the Attitude intervention was become aware of there their personal orientations to identity. The assignment modified an existing SIM worksheet to include reflective statements and questions that related to public administration.

1. Describe how your own cultural background influences how you interact with people of different cultures.
2. Describe how your assumptions about different cultures may impact building relationships in your community.
3. When you hear the term “cultural competence” what comes to mind?²

**Knowledge:** Adapted from Cultural Competence Planning Guidance Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. The worksheet introduces participants to key

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constructs of culture, \(^3\) defines how culture is developed, defines what is cultural competence. Rivera, Johnson, and Ward (2010) define *knowledge* in this context as an acute understanding of self and awareness for the attributes of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Additionally, that cognitive recognition would include comprehension of the sociopolitical, historical, and economic realities that form those groups. Tilford Initiative at Kansas State University prepared a summary of Multicultural Competency Development: Preparing Students to Live and Work in a Diverse World.\(^4\)

The reflective responses encourages participants to reflect on how various cultural constructs are relevant to their organizational context:

1. Using the diagram describe the different cultures your organization serves.
2. Give an example of cultural competence in your organization.
3. Describe how culture may influence interpersonal communication.

**Skills.** Training and teaching techniques that build skills in cultural competence use a variety of methods to represent the ability to put skills into practice. As compared to abilities, skills are observable and can be developed through reflection and practice. We prompted individuals to recall a specific instance in which they engaged with an individual whose culture that was different than their own. The reflective questions were intended to focus on their individual, specific actions in that scenario:

1. In this scenario, what actions did you take to understand a culture different from yours?
2. What would you have done differently?
3. What did you learn from the interaction that you can apply to the future?

The first set of participants, the 44 individuals in the KU Emerging Leaders Academy, enrolled in the program in two geographically dispersed locations. All enrollees received the pre-test survey in March (Group 1: March 15; Group 2: March 17). Participants were randomly assigned to four intervention groups: 1) skills, 2) attitudes, 3) knowledge, and 4) control. Participants then completed a reflective exercise on the specific intervention topic (Group 1: March 29; Group 2: March 31). Finally, participants completed the post-test survey in April (Group 1: April 12; Group 2: April 14). A total of 35 usable responses were received (i.e., participants who completed both pre- and post- surveys and also the randomly-assigned intervention exercise).

The second set, the 67 participants in the KU Certified Public Manager Program, enrolled in the program in three geographically dispersed locations. All enrollees received the pre-test survey before the start of the program’s 2-day diversity training sessions in March (Group 1: March 7; Group 2: March 14; Group 3: March 21). All enrollees completed the post-test at the end of the

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diversity training sessions (Group 1: March 8; Group 2: March 15; Group 3: March 22). A total of 60 usable responses were received (i.e., participants who completed both pre- and post-surveys and the diversity training).

As Table 1 notes both programs had a slightly higher proportion of male participants, at least 75 percent of the participants identified as white, and less than 10 percent identified as Hispanic. There were some differences between the two groups in terms of demographics and professional experience. The CPM group had a higher proportion of individuals who identified as Black/African American (16.3%) compared the ELA group (3.3%). The ELA participants had a greater age range, 94 percent of the ELA participants were between 30 and 59 years old, compared to 93 percent of CPM participants were between 30-49 years old. In terms of professional experience, 78 percent of the ELA group had supervisory experience compared to 50 percent of the CPM groups. Additionally, the ELA participants yielded slightly higher number of years of experience than the CPM participants.

**Findings**

To explore the effect of targeted individual interventions on the ordinal dependent variable (cultural competency scores of ELA program participants), a Kruskal-Wallis H Test was conducted. The Kruskal-Wallis H test is a nonparametric alternative to the one-way ANOVA for a between-subjects study design with small sample sizes. The test compares distributions around the median (rather than the mean) and is recommended in instances when treatment group sizes are less than 15. The usable number of responses for each ELA treatment group met this standard (Skills, n=10; Attitudes, n=9; Knowledge, n=8; Control, n=8).

The Kruskal-Wallis H test (Figure 1) determined that the distribution of cultural competency scores is similar across intervention categories: no individual treatment can be said to make a meaningful impact on cultural competency scores. While this test is designed to examine differences in medians, descriptive statistical analysis reveals that the ELA mean cultural competency score (126) remained unchanged from the pre-test measure to the post-test measure. Together, these findings indicate that we cannot reject the null hypothesis.

To explore the effect of participation in diversity training on the dependent variable (cultural competency scores of CPM program participants), a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted. The Wilcoxon test is designed for a repeated measures study that uses an ordinal dependent variable. It is a nonparametric alternative to the paired samples t-test. A Wilcoxon test determined that there was a statistically significant median increase in cultural competency scores following participation in the diversity training. More specifically, 44 of the 60 participants demonstrated positive differences in their cultural competency scores (Figure 2).

When specific elements of the cultural competency scale are examined pre- and post- training, it is revealed that training has a significant and positive impact on behavior (Figure 3), knowledge (Figure 4), and skills (Figure 5). The only element that training does not have a statistically significant impact on is attitudes (Figure 6). Further, descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the post-test mean score (127) reflects enhanced cultural competency when compared to the pre-
test mean score (119) for CPM participants. These findings offer evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Discussion

Together, these findings underscore the importance of participation in training to develop cultural competency. One-time individual interventions focused on a single element of cultural competency do not enhance cultural competency assessments in meaningful ways. Rather, for our experimental group participants (ELA program) cultural competency measures remained stable and unchanged following the completion of a reflective exercise, regardless of whether the exercise focused on skills, attitudes, knowledge, or broader cultural competency in public service (control group). Even though the interventions prompted participants to respond individually to reflective guided prompts, the interventions did not require reflective sharing among the participants. This finding suggests that organizations should not address cultural competency in a piecemeal fashion. Nor should organizations presume that individual, independent development efforts will have notable effects on cultural competency. Instead, organizations should recognize that cultural competency is a multi-dimensional construct and invest in training programs that seek to develop it with those multiple elements in mind.

The findings acknowledge the disparate movement through the development stages of cultural competency that intersect knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes. In applying the definitions provided by Longoria and Rangarajan (2015), only in the intensive, interactive diversity-training intervention (CPM) were there changes in individuals’ perception of 1) cultural knowledge - defined as the extent that information about different cultures in the jurisdiction where a public manager serves has been sought and retained was only showed change; 2) cultural skill - defined as the ability to collect relevant cultural data and develop programs that accurately utilize this information; and 3) cultural behavior - defined as those behaviors that increase and refine one’s cultural sensitivity such as seeking out information, openness, and adaptability. There was no evidence of change in individuals’ perception of cultural attitudes, defined as personal dispositions or orientations about cultural aspects as they relate to public service.

Based on the findings, we offer three specific recommendations in moving individuals through the cultural competency developmental stages in the public administration context.

First, we recommend that cultural competency cannot be nudged along, it must be pushed along with structured iterative and interactive interventions. The study findings suggest that individualized and one-shot interventions have no impact on moving individuals through cultural competency stages. The interventions with the ELA group were completed individually and relied on their personal experiences to reflect on the application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to implement cultural competence. The more extensive and interactive intervention yielded shifts in individual perceptions about their skills, knowledge, and behaviors to promote cultural competence in the public sector. To further highlight this suggestion, this study finds that participation in a diversity-training program (CPM group) positively impacts all elements of cultural competency with one exception: attitude change.
Second, we recommend that organizations invest in cultural competency training that not only offers supplemental guidance on developing specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors to achieve cultural competence, but also opportunities for reflective practice. This is evident in findings from the CPM group that engaged in a two-day diversity training session. Even though participants increased their knowledge, skills and behaviors related to cultural competence, the attitudes remain inelastic. This suggests that cultural attitudes, defined as personal dispositions or orientations about cultural aspects as they relate to public service, are the slowest to alter. Opportunities that increase greater exploration about the development of personal dispositions (even biases) are critical to move the needle on this aspect of cultural competence.

Third, we recommend that more studies explore the application of cultural competency knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes with diverse public sector contexts. This limited exploration of the impact of interventions on individual cultural competence is first step in application of cultural competence in public sector organizations. Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar (2014) provide a framework for enhancing cultural competency in public service agencies that reflect three components of cultural competence. First, a cognitive component that emphasizes critical awareness (i.e. awareness of one’s biases) and knowledge (i.e. understanding of a specific cultural group’s history, religion, historical context, or beliefs). Second, a behavioral component that emphasizes the ability to put skills into practice to build trust and effectively communicate with and serve diverse individuals. Third, an organizational component that emphasizes contextual issues and support for cultural competent practices from an organization that is committed to diversity and innovation to meet the needs of diverse individuals. As a next step, we plan to explore the relationship between individual and organizational cultural competency efforts.

Together, these findings and recommendations speak to the importance of understanding cultural competency as a process that requires attention to the multi-dimensional aspects of this concept and also an investment in training that reflects these realities. The scholarly work on learning can be instructive in applying these findings and highlighting areas for future work. For example, Kolb’s (1984) research identified four elements that together maximize learning: 1) concrete experience, 2) observation and reflection, 3) abstract conceptualization, and 4) active experimentation. Using Kolb’s framework and these findings as a guide for the future, additional studies might consider long-term evaluations that examine the ways in which training participants apply cultural competency lessons learned to their work in the months and years to come.
References


### Table 1: Study Participant Demographics

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<td>78.3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

- Positive Differences (N=34)
- Negative Differences (N=19)
  (Number of Ties = 7)

Figure 4

Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test

- Positive Differences (N=46)
- Negative Differences (N=10)
  (Number of Ties = 4)
Figure 5

![Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test](image)

- Positive Differences (N=45)
- Negative Differences (N=7)
(Number of Ties = 8)

Figure 6

![Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test](image)

- Positive Differences (N=22)
- Negative Differences (N=18)
(Number of Ties = 20)