

What's hard work got to do with it? Diversity course impact on meritocracy beliefs and dialogue about race

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Abstract

Objectives: Diversity courses aim to help students navigate a pluralistic society, and meritocracy beliefs are thought to be central to this effort. The purpose of this study was thus to explore the impact of diversity course enrollment on both meritocracy beliefs and interracial dialogue attitudes.

Methods: Both at the beginning and end of the semester, quantitative survey data were collected from 435 student respondents: 274 were enrolled in one of two non-diversity courses, 147 participated in one section of an Intercultural Communication course, and 14 were cross-enrolled. The survey included measures of prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy, as well as two measures of dialogue assessed in relation to testimonies of social suffering provided by two African-American students: speaker trust and imagined dialogue receptivity.

Results: Data confirmed that, among racial outgroup participants, descriptive and prescriptive meritocracy are connected to racial dialogue measures in antagonistic ways. In addition, the diversity class succeeded in decreasing student beliefs in descriptive meritocracy, increasing meritocracy discrepancy, expanding speaker trust, and engendering greater dialogue receptivity relative to the control classes. Lastly, changes in both meritocracy discrepancy and diversity course enrollment independently predicted changes in the racial dialogue measures.

Conclusion: Meritocracy is a multidimensional, ideological belief that appears linked to racial dialogue engagement in its prescriptive form and avoidance in its descriptive form. Findings underscore the need to distinguish between these forms of meritocracy, encourage the use of meritocracy discrepancy scores, and confirm the promise of diversity course enrollment.

Keywords: Ideology, Meritocracy, Dialogue, Race, Interracial, Diversity Course

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With each polarizing racial incident in the United States—those involving Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, or Keith Scott, for example—politicians and other leaders regularly call for a national conversation about race. Among the many forums in which U.S. Americans engage the subject, college classrooms serve as a meaningful space to raise young adults’ awareness of white privilege and blatant racism (e.g., Simpson, 2003). However, despite experience and training, many educators find that facilitating such conversations remains a challenge (Johnson, Rich, & Cargile, 2008; Sue, 2015), particularly because participants often start with incommensurable assumptions about the role of race in contemporary society. Specifically, different ideologies often frame how they come to, participate in, and even resist dialogue about race.

Ideologies are complex, latent systems of meaning that “have the function of organizing or legitimating the actions of [the dominant] group” (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, & Guskin, 1996, p. 575). As such, there are a number of different beliefs that can be labeled as ideological, including beliefs about country (e.g., nationalism), leadership (e.g., authoritarianism), or social welfare (e.g., noblesse oblige). Although many of these legitimizing beliefs have been tied to negative interracial attitudes (e.g., Dru, 2007) and anti-dialogic standings (e.g., Cargile, 2015a), one belief is especially relevant to dialogue about race: meritocracy.

Meritocracy is an ideological belief widely endorsed by both dominant and non-dominant group members alike (Pew, 2014). At heart, meritocracy is a justice principle stipulating that outcomes should be fairly distributed on the basis of relevant criteria (e.g., effort or ability) and, simultaneously, not on the basis of irrelevant criteria (e.g., race or gender). Meritocracy is not a singular construct linked only to socially intolerant reactions (Son Hing, Bobocel, Zanna, Garcia, Gee, & Oraziatti, 2011), but instead may be linked to both tolerance and intolerance in either its

prescriptive or descriptive form (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). Prescriptive meritocracy dictates that outcomes *should* be fairly distributed among different groups in a social system, while descriptive meritocracy is the belief that such outcomes *are* (already) fairly distributed. As such, prescriptive meritocracy is likely to promote equity, while descriptive meritocracy—a belief justifying the status quo—may engender intolerance and prejudice. In light of this distinction, the present study sought to investigate how prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy may be differentially linked to dialogue about race. In addition, this study also aimed to contribute to the diversity training literature by examining how enrollment in a diversity course could possibly serve as an intervention to change college students' meritocracy beliefs and interracial dialogue attitudes.

Literature Review

Meritocracy: An Ideological Belief Linked to Prejudice

In the U.S., meritocracy is typically described as a myth (e.g., McNamee & Miller, 2009) and without distinction to type. Proponents of meritocracy are often characterized as aversively racist (e.g., Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005) because the belief that success is determined by hard work alone refutes claims of institutional racism and “camouflages... [the racial] self-interest of powerful entities of society” (Williams, 2012, p. 43). Indeed, studies demonstrate a significant connection between meritocracy and bigotry. Considering five measures of meritocracy collectively (i.e., belief in a just world, Lipkus, 1991; individual mobility, Major et al., 2007; status permeability, Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998; belief in meritocracy ideology, Lalonde, Doan, & Patterson, 2000; and the Protestant Work Ethic, Levy, West, Ramirez, & Karafantis, 2006), higher levels of endorsement are regularly linked to increased intergroup prejudice and discrimination. For example, individuals reporting

higher levels of either old-fashioned or modern racism are more likely to endorse meritocracy than those reporting lower levels of racism (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Siy, 2013).

Similarly, individuals who believe in meritocracy are more likely to denigrate a wide variety of non-dominant group members (e.g., the mentally ill, women, homosexuals, the poor, and racial minorities; Christopher & Mull, 2006; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Dudley & Mulvey, 2009; Glover, 1994; Katz & Hass, 1988; M. A. Morrison & T. G. Morrison, 2011; Rüsçh, Todd, Bodenhausen, & Corrigan, 2010) and are more likely to discriminate against—and behave antisocially towards—them as well (Butz, Klik, & Plant, 2013; Castilla & Benard, 2010). A meta-analysis of 53 studies employing the most common measure of meritocracy—Protestant Work Ethic (PWE)—found that “as PWE increased, prejudice also increased significantly... [as well as] negative attitudes toward policies aimed at helping [a variety of] disadvantaged members of society” (Rosenthal, Levy, & Moyer, 2011, p. 880).

If meritocracy is a justice principle, why then is it so tied to prejudice and discrimination? Careful study reveals an ideologically palliative function of the belief. As Jost and Hunyady (2003) argue, meritocracy can “ease [the] conscience... of those who are privileged” (p. 136) and thus help sustain support for an inequitable system. For example, despite beliefs to the contrary, the use of SAT test scores in college admissions actually reinforces the status quo (Zwick, 2004) as a result of students’ unequal access to resources (e.g., test tutoring; Buchmann, Condrón, & Roscigno, 2010). Because centuries of legally-sanctioned racial oppression, disenfranchisement, and segregation have diminished assets in communities of color in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016), SAT scores reflect—rather than disrupt—racial and class divides (Jencks, 1998). In this manner, the endorsement of ostensibly meritocratic criteria can serve to protect

extant inequalities while placating the conscious of the advantaged by obfuscating the impact of their privilege (see Khan, 2011).

Despite a robust theoretical and empirical link between meritocracy, prejudice, and inequality, inconsistent findings have nevertheless surfaced. Specifically, several studies have found PWE to be irregularly related (e.g., Katz & Hass, 1988), negatively related (e.g., Schmader, Johns, & Barquissau, 2004), or unrelated (e.g., Monteith & Walters, 1998) to prejudicial outcome measures. For example, Levy et al. (2006) observed that while a pro-PWE message increased egalitarianism among a 10-12-year-old sample, it decreased egalitarianism among a 18-25-year-old sample. The study's authors argue that unlike other ideological beliefs with a unitary relationship to intolerance (e.g., symbolic racism), the idea of meritocracy confounds two different—and opposed—meanings. On the one hand, meritocracy is associated with tolerance because equality is privileged in a system where everyone has the opportunity to succeed through hard work. On the other hand, meritocracy is associated with intolerance because an ostensibly fair system that disproportionately rewards one group suggests that Others are undeserving and “less than”. In response to these divergent views on meritocracy, scholars have recently engaged efforts to unpack this complex construct more fully.

Prescriptive versus Descriptive Meritocracy

One year after Levy et al. (2006) pointed to the confounding impact of PWE, Major et al.'s (2007) work with a meritocracy measure led them to suggest a distinction between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy. As already described, prescriptive meritocracy is a justice principle stipulating that outcomes *should be* fairly distributed on the basis of relevant criteria. In contrast, descriptive meritocracy is a belief about the status of such fairly distributed outcomes. When people believe that outcomes *are* (rather than merely *should be*) fairly

distributed, such a view upholds the system as legitimate and justifies (other) people's poor outcomes (i.e., "they deserve it!"). Prescriptive and descriptive meritocratic beliefs thus serve opposed ideological functions whereby the former challenge—and the latter sustain—extant inequalities.

Despite the critical importance of differentiating meritocracy types, researchers have not regularly done this, not even recently (e.g., Goode & Keefer, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015). Post-hoc consideration of the wide variety of instruments used to operationalize meritocracy suggests that nearly all of them measure some form of *descriptive* meritocracy (however cf., preference for the merit principle, Davey, Bobocel, Hing, & Zanna, 1999). Thus, the robust link between meritocracy and prejudice reported earlier is consistent with the assertion that descriptive merit beliefs legitimate the system and engender the derogation of Others. Among the few studies that have measured both constructs, prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy have been found to be unrelated, or only weakly related (Davey et al., 1999; Major et al., 2007). Moreover, a confirmatory factor analysis suggests that they are most appropriately treated as distinct constructs (Son Hing et al., 2011). However, do the two forms of meritocracy actually function in opposed ideological fashions, as proposed?

To begin, Son Hing et al. (study 1, 2011) found that while descriptive meritocracy was positively correlated with numerous measures of prejudice and system-justifying ideologies (i.e., political conservatism, support for authority figures, right wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and old-fashioned racism), prescriptive meritocracy was not—except in study 3 when a negative association was found with social dominance orientation. Likewise, Davey et al (1999) found that prescriptive meritocracy was negatively tied to sexism, but that descriptive meritocracy positively correlated with right wing authoritarianism. Although

extremely limited, these data do indeed support the idea that descriptive meritocracy is linked to sustaining inequity, while prescriptive meritocracy may engender its erosion. Despite this, it may not be the case that prescriptive meritocracy is completely benign.

Consider, for example, that Knowles and Lowery (2012) found prescriptive meritocracy linked to the denial of white privilege. In addition, the connection between prescriptive meritocracy and equity restoring policies (e.g., affirmative action) has been found to depend upon other attributions, such as the dismissal of descriptive meritocracy (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002; Son Hing et al., 2011) or the belief that such policies themselves do not violate the merit principle (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Son Hing et al., 2002). The picture painted here is thus one in which the impact of prescriptive meritocracy is likely moderated by other beliefs, particularly beliefs in descriptive meritocracy. For this reason, researchers have recently found it fruitful to measure the gap between—or discrepancy in—an individual's endorsement of prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy.

As philosophers have argued (Habermas, 1979; Moore, 1978), human behavior can best be understood when an actor's prescriptive and descriptive beliefs are considered *simultaneously*. For example, if an individual agrees with a given social goal (i.e., prescriptive belief), but doesn't see progress toward that goal (i.e., descriptive belief), s/he may delegitimize and resist the system (Scott, 1985). However, if the goal is not endorsed, the system won't be critiqued for lack of progress. In this manner, the significance of a descriptive belief is revealed only in relation to a corresponding prescriptive belief. For this reason, Zimmerman and Reyna (2013) advocate use of a discrepancy index (i.e., prescriptive score – descriptive score) when assessing meritocracy beliefs.

As suggested above, prescriptive beliefs can be viewed as moderating descriptive ones. While this characterization allows for all possible relationships, the normative tendency is for prescriptive goals to equal or exceed descriptive achievements, not vice-versa. Consequently, we agree with Zimmerman and Reyna (2013) that the relationship between prescriptive and descriptive beliefs is best described in terms of correspondence. Individuals content with the status quo will report corresponding beliefs (i.e., those with little to no discrepancy between them), whether they desire a given goal or not. In contrast, disillusioned individuals—those motivated to change the status quo—will report a discrepancy between (higher) prescriptive and (lower) descriptive beliefs. Despite the importance of assessing meritocracy in this manner, Zimmerman and Reyna (2013) were the first and, to date, only ones to do so. Consequently, we sought to investigate meritocracy discrepancy in the context of interracial dialogue and diversity course enrollment. More specifically, we designed an experiment to test whether enrollment in a diversity course could impact meritocracy discrepancy scores, as well as individuals' attitudes toward interracial dialogue.

Meritocracy, Dialogue about Race, and Pedagogy

It is no secret that conversations about race in the United States remain difficult and that meritocracy is both text and subtext in many of these discussions (e.g., deKoven, 2011; Rich & Cargile, 2004). Consequently, meritocracy beliefs are often cited as key to diversity education efforts (e.g., Solomona et al., 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Scholars expect that if such beliefs can be impacted, so too can other important outcomes. Indeed, diversity education has already shown success in changing meritocracy beliefs (Cole, Case, Rios, & Curtin, 2011), as well as producing other outcomes (e.g., decreasing race-based prejudice, Hogan & Mallott, 2005; increasing race-related perspective taking, Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; and support for

affirmative action, Case, 2007). Even so, studies documenting a simultaneous change in meritocracy beliefs and other outcomes as a result of diversity education are rare. We know of only one: in 2011, Cole et al. found diversity course enrollment tied to both a decrease in descriptive meritocracy and an increase in intersectional consciousness among White students. Clearly, much more study is needed.

Not only is more study needed, but a study that attends to possible interactions between diversity education, meritocracy, and racial identity is important. As mentioned earlier, meritocracy is widely endorsed by both dominant and non-dominant group members alike, yet—as just reported—diversity course enrollment has been found to impact the beliefs and consciousness of only White students. Meritocracy beliefs simultaneously serve dominant group interests while also offering hope to non-dominant group members (Boudon, 1994), thus they may be adopted or changed independent of one's racial identity. Indeed, the basic premise of system justification theory is that “individuals from *all segments of society* are, at least to some extent, motivated—for psychological reasons—to legitimize the social systems on which they depend” (emphasis added, van der Toorn & Jost, 2014, p. 413). At the same time, however, phenomena such as ideological asymmetry (i.e., more hierarchy maintaining beliefs among high-status group members; Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto, 1998) and the qualifying phrase just quoted above—“to some extent”—suggest possible variation in ideological processes based on racial identity. Consequently, we aimed to investigate not only simultaneous changes in meritocracy beliefs and diversity education outcomes, but also document these changes with respect to participant racial identity.

In the present case, we were interested in the impact of a communication diversity course on both meritocracy beliefs and interracial dialogue attitudes. Like Cole et al. (2011), we

expected that the course could decrease descriptive merit beliefs, and that this impact might correlate with an improved outlook for interracial dialogue. We reasoned that because these beliefs justify a racist system (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), their minimization should decrease resistance to a socially progressive activity like interracial dialogue. In addition, because prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy serve opposed ideological functions, we also anticipated that each form would be divergently related to interracial dialogue attitudes, as well as be divergently impacted by diversity course enrollment. Lastly, we anticipated that use of the meritocracy discrepancy index—instead of simple descriptive or prescriptive scores alone—would be an empirical advance, in addition to a conceptual one. As indicated above, we assessed these expectancies in light of uncertainties regarding the potential impacts of participant racial/ethnic identity. Thus, in an effort to explore the relationships between racial identity, diversity education, meritocracy, and interracial dialogue attitudes, we conducted a study designed to test the following hypotheses among racial outgroup participants (i.e., those for whom interaction with study confederates would constitute an instance of interracial dialogue):

H1: Among racial outgroup participants, prescriptive meritocracy will positively correlate, and descriptive meritocracy will negatively correlate with measures favorable to interracial dialogue at the outset of the semester.

H2a: Among racial outgroup participants, enrollment in a required diversity course will either decrease participant descriptive meritocracy belief or increase their prescriptive belief relative to enrollment in a required non-diversity course. H2b: Such enrollment will improve interracial dialogue attitudes.

H3: Among racial outgroup participants, changes in interracial dialogue attitudes will be predicted by changes in meritocracy belief and by course enrollment.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Data were collected from students at a large urban university on the West coast of the United States—one with an ethnically and racially diverse population. Following Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited on a volunteer basis, in exchange for extra course credit. They completed the survey instrument (described below) via Qualtrics at two points during the Spring 2016 term: during the first and last two weeks of a sixteen-week semester. Informed consent was obtained at the outset of each online data collection period. During the semester, participants were enrolled in at least one of three major-required courses: “Gateway to Communication Studies,” “Interpersonal Communication,” and “Intercultural Communication,” the last of which is considered herein as the diversity course (i.e., treatment group). Whereas the control courses addressed communication phenomena very broadly, the diversity course focused, in part, on “co-cultures: diversity in the United States” (Communication Studies Faculty, 2018). As a result, the diversity course textbook did discuss the concept of meritocracy directly, if briefly. Additionally, the course spent considerable time discussing issues (e.g., “Black lives matter”) and concepts (e.g., white privilege) germane to racial co-cultural diversity—which, in turn, implicated meritocracy. Neither control course included the concept of meritocracy or the topic of racial co-cultural diversity in its curriculum.

Besides differences in course content, the quasi-experimental control and treatment courses differed by division standing (i.e., the two control courses were lower-division classes, while the treatment course was an upper-division class). Although the courses did indeed represent the same student population—because all Communication Studies majors are compelled to take all three courses—they unavoidably confounded participant age and treatment. In

addition, the control courses were each taught as a single-section, large lecture class, whereas the diversity course was taught by four different instructors as a multi-section, large lecture class¹. Throughout the first survey period, a total of 730 surveys were initiated and 679 were completed. Throughout the second survey period, 666 surveys were initiated and 623 were completed. A minimum completion time cutoff was established and some participants were excluded a-priori as a result of either not exceeding this value or producing content non-responsivity patterns (Nichols, Greene, & Schmolck, 1989). This resulted in a pretest sample of 663 participants in the first survey and a post-test sample of 582 participants in the second survey. When the two data sets were merged on the basis of reported ID numbers, a final total of 466 participants remained (i.e., those who completed both the pre-test and the post-test). Because this study centered on race-relations and beliefs about meritocracy within the United States—and because we hope to provisionally generalize these findings to other U.S. college students—foreign national students ($n = 31$) were excluded a-priori. Thus, all of the analyses reported below pertain to a final sample of 435 participants.

Among these 435 students were included 105 men and 328 women (2 unreported), 87 White, 142 Latino/a, 148 Asian, 19 Black, and 39 Other (i.e., 31 “multiracial/multiethnic,” 1 “Native American Indian,” 2 “Middle Eastern,” 1 “unknown,” 2 “other,” and 1 unreported) participants, with a mean age of 19.95 years ($SD = 3.37$). 274 were enrolled in one of the two non-diversity courses, while 147 participated in one section of the diversity course (14 were cross-enrolled and excluded from relevant analyses). During the first survey period, all participants heard two audio recordings of an African American speaker (described below), presented in random order, and completed a variety of “trait” and “state” measures (described

¹ Excluding one section, which was a standard course with an enrollment of 27 students.

below). During the second survey period, all participants again heard the same two audio recordings, presented in random order, and completed the same “state” measures as before.

Survey Instrument: Materials and Measures

Audio Stimuli. Although behavioral dialogue outcomes cannot be measured using self-report survey instruments, the measurement of behavioral intentions in imagined interaction is nevertheless a useful and valid method for the investigation of intergroup communication (Miles & Crisp, 2013). In this instance, we measured behavioral intentions vis-a-vis two genuine testimonies of social suffering (see Cargile & Salazar, 2016) from two African-American students that were spontaneously provided (and audio-recorded) in the context of a class discussion about race and racism. Two speakers were used here (one male, one female) in order to assess the potential generalizability of any found effects.

Qualitative research has revealed that among the many patterned behaviors of interracial dialogue, one of the most common includes people of color offering testimony of their own oppressive experiences (e.g., Drew, 2012) in a discursive attempt to interrupt prevalent ‘master’ narratives (Anderson, Reimer Kirkham, Browne, & Lynam, 2007). Because they challenge the dominant cultural ideology, such testimonies serve as rich fodder for imagined intercultural interactions (i.e., “In a continued conversation with this woman, I would...”), thus two such testimonies were employed here as stimuli for the measures of trust and imagined dialogue receptivity (IDR). Both testimonies are comparable in both tone (i.e., sad) and length (female recording is 57 seconds, male recording is 61 seconds). A transcript of each recording can be found in Appendix A.

Study Measures. Because several constructs employed in this study were viewed as “trait” measures (i.e., answers were not anticipated to change over the course of the semester),

they were assessed only with the pretest survey in an effort to minimize the post-test survey length and possible fatigue. In addition to the traditional demographic variables of participant age and gender, this also included number of diversity courses taken (single-item, 7-point scale, “among the college courses you have taken, how many have focused substantially on issues of national/ cultural/ racial/ ethnic diversity?”) and socio-economic status (single-item, 7-point ladder; Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000). This last item was added because previous research suggested a potential link between meritocracy and subjective SES (McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013).

All remaining study measures were assessed across both surveys, including prescriptive (six-item short form, Time 1 $\alpha = .81$, Time 2 $\alpha = .82$; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013) and descriptive meritocracy (six-item short form, Time 1 $\alpha = .88$, Time 2 $\alpha = .89$; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013), as well as ethnic identity strength (i.e., importance to identity subscale of the collective self esteem scale; four-items, Time 1 $\alpha = .83$, Time 2 $\alpha = .82$; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), which has been found associated with meritocracy beliefs (Wiley, Deaux, & Hagelskamp, 2012). In addition, two dialogue measures were assessed in relation to the two audio stimuli: speaker trust (three items—un/trustworthy, dis/honest, un/reliable—from the Individualized Trust Scale, Time 1 woman $\alpha = .88$, Time 2 woman $\alpha = .90$, Time 1 man $\alpha = .88$, Time 2 man $\alpha = .90$; Wheelless & Grotz, 1977), and IDR vis-a-vis each speaker (Time 1 woman $\alpha = .83$, Time 2 woman $\alpha = .86$, Time 1 man $\alpha = .83$, Time 2 man $\alpha = .85$; sample items: “I would really pay attention to everything this person said”, “I would ‘keep it real’ and be honest about my own thoughts and feelings”; Cargile, 2015b). IDR is defined as an orienting attitude toward dialogic engagement and has been found to depend directly upon interlocutor trust (Cargile, 2017). Trust has also elsewhere been identified as a central and mediating variable with respect to intergroup

contact and conflict (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002).

Results

To begin, means and standard deviations for each measure were calculated and are presented for each group of participants, for each survey period, in Table 1. As the table illustrates, there were no—or only minimal—differences between evaluations of the male and female speakers within each group (i.e., control and diversity), for each survey period (i.e., pre and post). Indeed, a MANOVA confirmed no significant differences between evaluations of the man and the woman in a variate of dialogue receptivity and trust scores when controlling for class type and time, $F(2,1656) = 0.96, p = .38, Wilk's \Lambda = 0.99, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$. Consequently, male and female scores were combined in all subsequent analyses.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, correlation coefficients were calculated among both measures of meritocracy and other study variables (see Table 2). As indicated by the table, descriptive meritocracy was significantly, but weakly correlated with socioeconomic status, whereas neither prescriptive meritocracy, nor meritocracy discrepancy was correlated with any other presented variable. In order to explore meritocracy differences across racial/ethnic group lines, three one-way ANOVAs were conducted. No significant difference was found among prescriptive meritocracy scores, Welch $F(4, 85.67) = .583, p = .68$, or meritocracy discrepancy scores Welch $F(4, 87.01) = 1.63, p = .17$, but such a difference was indicated for descriptive meritocracy scores, Welch $F(4, 88.65) = 3.35, p = .013$. Post-hoc tests pointed to African-American students as having significantly lower levels of descriptive meritocracy compared to Asian-American students (see Table 3). Subsequent to this, a potential interaction between race/ethnicity and participant's reported strength of identity on pretest levels of meritocracy was

investigated using PROCESS analysis (Model 1; Hayes, 2013). For prescriptive, descriptive, and meritocracy discrepancy scores, no overall model was found to be significant [prescriptive meritocracy model, $R^2 = .063$, $F(3,428) = .57$, $p = .63$; descriptive meritocracy model, $R^2 = .008$, $F(3,428) = .21$, $p = .89$; meritocracy discrepancy model, $R^2 = .003$, $F(3,428) = .45$, $p = .72$].

These models, as well as all data presented thus far, pertain to all participants regardless of self-reported race/ethnicity. However, in an effort to focus on *inter*-cultural attitudes with respect to two African-American speakers, all the data and analyses that follow are restricted to European-, Latin-, and Asian-American (i.e., outgroup) respondents.

Hypothesis One (H1)

In order to address the first hypothesis, correlation coefficients were calculated among three meritocracy measures (i.e., prescriptive, descriptive, and discrepancy scores) and the two dialogue measures (i.e., IDR and trust; see Table 4). As the table indicates, prescriptive meritocracy was significantly positively correlated, and descriptive meritocracy was significantly negatively correlated with both measures. Two mixed MANOVA analyses found no significant interaction between either form of meritocracy and participant racial/ethnic identity when predicting a variate of the two dialogue measures (prescriptive meritocracy: $F(4,736) = 1.17$, $p = .32$, *Wilk's A* = 0.99, partial $\eta^2 = .006$; descriptive meritocracy: $F(4,736) = 1.03$, $p = .39$, *Wilk's A* = 0.99, partial $\eta^2 = .006$). Following Zimmerman and Reyna (2013), meritocracy discrepancy scores were calculated, resulting in an index of the gap between where participants thought the U.S. should be and where the U.S. is with respect to meritocracy; the larger the number, the larger the perceived gap. As the table indicates, this perceived gap was found positively related to both greater trust in and greater dialogue receptivity towards the African-American speakers. Moreover, a test of dependent correlation coefficient differences (Meng, Rosenthal, & Rubin,

1992) indicated that meritocracy discrepancy scores produced significantly larger (absolute value) correlation coefficients compared to descriptive scores alone (see Table 5).

Hypothesis Two (H2a and H2b)

Before addressing the second hypothesis by evaluating the impact of diversity course enrollment on meritocracy beliefs and interracial dialogue attitudes, it is worth remembering that the control and diversity courses differed by division standing and were thus expected to confound participant age and treatment. Indeed, when demographic differences between the groups were tested for statistical significance, the diversity course group was found to be both significantly older ($N = 123$, $M = 22.24$, $SD = 4.50$; $N = 242$, $M = 18.62$, $SD = 1.65$; $t(363) = 11.13$, $p = .000$, 95% $CI [2.98, 4.26]$, $Hedges' g = 1.23$), and to have taken more diversity courses ($N = 118$, $M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.43$), than the control group ($N = 199$, $M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.25$; $t(315) = 1.08$, $p = .000$, 95% $CI [.78, 1.38]$, $Hedges' g = .82$). More importantly, such differences were found to matter with respect to interracial dialogue attitudes: age was negatively related to speaker trust (time 1, $r(373) = -.17$, $p = .001$), and number of diversity courses was positively related to IDR (time 1, $r(326) = .17$, $p = .003$). Consequently, these variables were controlled for in all analyses reported below.

In order to address H2a, three mixed repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to compare the effect of class type on all forms of meritocracy, measured both at the beginning and the end of the semester. For prescriptive meritocracy scores, there were no significant differences to be found (time, $F(1, 307) = .68$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .41, $\eta p^2 = .002$; time and class type, $F(1, 307) = .104$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .75, $\eta p^2 = .000$; time and race, $F(2, 307) = .095$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .91, $\eta p^2 = .001$; three-way interaction, $F(2, 307) = .57$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .57, $\eta p^2 = .004$). Regarding descriptive meritocracy scores, although there was no

significant main effect for time, $F(1, 308) = 1.37$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .24, $\eta p^2 = .004$, there was a significant interaction between time and class type, $F(1, 308) = 5.24$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .02, $\eta p^2 = .017$ (also, time and race, $F(2, 308) = .002$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .99, $\eta p^2 = .000$; three-way interaction, $F(2, 308) = .52$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .59, $\eta p^2 = .003$). The same pattern also held for meritocracy discrepancy scores—a significant interaction between time and class type, $F(1, 307) = 4.10$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .04, $\eta p^2 = .013$, but no other significant effects (time, $F(1, 307) = .56$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .45, $\eta p^2 = .002$; time and race, $F(2, 307) = .035$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .97, $\eta p^2 = .000$; three-way interaction, $F(2, 307) = .50$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .61, $\eta p^2 = .003$). As depicted in Figure 1, the diversity course group reported post-semester descriptive merit beliefs, $M = 3.29$, 95% *CI* [3.01, 3.57], that were significantly less than both their pre-semester scores, $M = 3.99$, $F(1, 308) = 23.10$, $p < .001$, 95% *CI* [3.69, 4.28], as well control group post-semester scores, $M = 3.72$, $F(1, 308) = 4.98$, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* [3.50, 3.94]. In addition, diversity course participants reported post-semester meritocracy discrepancy scores, $M = 3.18$, 95% *CI* [2.86, 3.51], that were significantly greater than both their pre-semester scores, $M = 2.49$, $F(1, 307) = 19.19$, $p < .001$, 95% *CI* [2.17, 2.80], as well control group post-semester scores, $M = 2.68$, $F(1, 307) = 5.02$, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* [2.43, 2.93] (see Figure 2). Together, these results in the context of this nonequivalent control group design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) suggest that the course experience—and not history or maturation—was responsible for significantly decreasing students' descriptive meritocracy beliefs and increasing meritocracy discrepancy scores over the semester.

Next, the impact of the diversity course experience on interracial dialogue attitudes was investigated (H2b). Table 1 already suggests that participants in the diversity course experienced increasing trust in, and greater IDR toward, the African-American speakers. As noted earlier, we

combined scores for the male and female speaker and this resulted in significant differences for the diversity course participants both over time and relative to those in the control group (see Figures 3 and 4). Two mixed repeated measures ANOVAs indicated a significant interaction between time and class type on both trust, $F(1, 304) = 4.46$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .04, $\eta p^2 = .014$, and IDR, $F(1, 304) = 5.52$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .02, $\eta p^2 = .018$. All other interaction terms were found to be non-significant (Trust: time by race, $F(2, 304) = .27$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .77, $\eta p^2 = .002$, time by race by class type, $F(2, 304) = 1.07$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .35, $\eta p^2 = .007$; IDR: time by race, $F(2, 304) = .02$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .98, $\eta p^2 = .000$, time by race by class type, $F(2, 304) = 1.69$, Greenhouse-Geisser = .19, $\eta p^2 = .01$). For speaker trust, the diversity course group reported post-semester scores, $M = 5.83$, 95% *CI* [5.62, 6.04], that were significantly different from their pre-semester scores, $M = 5.59$, $F(1, 304) = 5.15$, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* [5.41, 5.77], and were significantly different from the control group post-semester scores as well, $M = 5.51$, $F(1, 304) = 4.79$, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* [5.36, 5.68]. Regarding changes in IDR scores, the diversity course group reported post-semester scores, $M = 5.87$, 95% *CI* [5.69, 6.04], that were the same as their pre-semester scores, $M = 5.74$, $F(1, 304) = 2.79$, $p = .09$, 95% *CI* [5.58, 5.89], but were significantly different from the control group post-semester scores, $M = 5.63$, $F(1, 304) = 3.90$, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* [5.50, 5.77]. Thus, among Anglo-, Latin-, and Asian-American students, the diversity course experience significantly improved their trust in the African-American speakers and increased their IDR relative to control students.

Hypothesis Three (H3)

Finally, in order to assess whether course enrollment or changes in meritocracy belief would predict changes in interracial dialogue attitudes, regression analysis was employed. This approach requires the use of change scores as dependent variables, and although concerns have

been raised about this, it is appropriate with reliable measurement when applied to naturally occurring groups (Allison, 1990). Consequently, difference score reliabilities were calculated (following Watkins, 2008) for all tested variables (prescriptive meritocracy $\alpha = .69$, descriptive meritocracy $\alpha = .77$; trust man $\alpha = .80$, trust woman $\alpha = .78$; IDR man $\alpha = .61$, IDR woman $\alpha = .68$). Unfortunately, the difference score reliability was unacceptably low (Murphy & Davidshofer, 1988) in the case of the IDR man measure, thus IDR change scores reported below represent changes in reaction to the woman only. Moreover, because the combined trust measure was robustly correlated with this IDR change score ($r = .54, p < .01$), we averaged all three measures to create a single index of interracial dialogue change (i.e., trust man, trust woman, IDR woman). Subsequently, regression analysis was employed to test whether changes in this index could be predicted by changes in meritocracy belief or by course enrollment.

To begin, changes in the interracial dialogue index were successfully predicted in a regression equation comprised of descriptive meritocracy difference scores and course type, $R^2 = .038$, adjusted $R^2 = .026$, $F(4, 308) = 3.07, p < .05$. However, only course type was found to be a significant predictor ($\beta = .25, p < .05$), whereas descriptive meritocracy change was not ($\beta = .04, p = .23$). When meritocracy discrepancy score change was substituted, the amount of variance explained increased ($R^2 = .049$, adjusted $R^2 = .037$, $F(4, 307) = 3.98, p < .01$), and both predictors were found to be statistically significant (course type, $\beta = .24, p = .05$; meritocracy discrepancy, $\beta = .08, p < .05$). Interaction terms were added to both equations and were not found to be significant (course type x descriptive meritocracy change, $\beta = .04, p = .59$; course type x meritocracy discrepancy change, $\beta = .03, p = .63$). In sum, meritocracy discrepancy change was found here to significantly predict changes when descriptive meritocracy change did not. This result again highlights the extended ability of meritocracy discrepancy to explain more interracial

dialogue variance than descriptive meritocracy alone. Moreover, it confirms H3—changes in both meritocracy belief and diversity course enrollment independently predicted changes in interracial dialogue attitudes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this project was to explore the impact of diversity course enrollment on both meritocracy beliefs and interracial dialogue attitudes. Specifically, this study investigated prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy simultaneous to self-reported interracial dialogue attitudes, both initially and at semester's end. Consistent with previous research (Davey et al., 1999; Major et al., 2007; Son Hing et al., 2011), results confirmed that the two forms of meritocracy were unrelated. Additionally, neither form was correlated with age, gender, or previous diversity course experience, but descriptive meritocracy—consistent with the expectation that it serves to reinforce current inequities—was correlated with socio-economic status and racial/ethnic identity. Higher status participants demonstrated a slightly greater tendency to endorse this system-justifying belief and African-American students believed far less in this form of meritocracy than Asian-American students. Overall, these results broadly confirm a pattern of ideological asymmetry for initial meritocracy beliefs, if Asian-Americans are treated as a high-status group (Los Angeles Urban League, 2005; Zhou & Lee, 2017).

Turning to interracial dialogue attitudes among racial outgroup participants, prescriptive meritocracy demonstrated a significant, positive correlation—and descriptive meritocracy a significant, negative correlation—to each measure favorable to racial interaction at the outset of the semester (H1). No mark of ideological asymmetry was present here (i.e., no differences among the responses of Anglo-, Latin-, and Asian-American participants)—or in subsequent belief and attitude changes—suggesting that the diversity course related ideological processes did

not vary based on a student's racial/ethnic identity. In addition, we found that meritocracy discrepancy scores produced significantly larger correlation coefficients—with respect to dialogue attitudes—compared to one prescriptive and one descriptive score alone. This result, together with the finding that discrepancy score change predicted a variate of interracial dialogue change—when descriptive score changes alone did not (H3)—suggest that use of a meritocracy discrepancy index is an empirical advance, in addition to a conceptual one.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this study examined whether enrollment in a required diversity course either decreased participants' descriptive meritocracy beliefs or increased their prescriptive meritocracy beliefs (H2a). Results indicated that among Anglo-, Latin-, and Asian-American students, diversity course enrollment significantly decreased descriptive meritocracy, while widening the gap in meritocracy discrepancy, both over time and relative to non-diversity course enrollment. In addition, it improved their trust in the African-American speakers and increased their IDR relative to control students (H2b).

Taken together, these findings point to important considerations for educators and scholars alike. First, although meritocracy has been linked to prejudice in the past, this study confirmed that only descriptive meritocracy has ties to anti-dialogic attitudes; prescriptive meritocracy was found positively associated with trust and IDR. For educators, this suggests that a meritocracy intake assessment may provide a sketch of students' ideological assumptions and may thus aid in more effective facilitation of interracial dialogue. Secondly, students in a required diversity course experienced favorable changes in their meritocracy beliefs and this finding should engender discussion among faculty and administrators about the role such courses play in their curriculum. Finally, although the results of this assessment did not uncover uniform improvement in interracial dialogue attitudes among diversity course students, by the end of the

semester, students enrolled in this course did improve their trust in the African-American speakers and increased their IDR relative to control students. This demonstrates at least one benefit to diversity course enrollment—engendering (or sustaining) openness to culturally challenging conversations. As prior research has demonstrated, such conversations are critical to enhance student learning (Pitman, Broomhall, McEwan, & Majocha, 2010) and to prepare students for a diverse workforce (Amoroso, Loyd, & Hoobler, 2010).

Despite this study's successes, several limitations are worth noting. First, for reasons discussed earlier, we analyzed the relationship between prescriptive and descriptive meritocracy as meritocracy discrepancy scores. Even so, some researchers may prefer a moderation strategy to this relationship, instead of the meritocracy discrepancy approach promoted here. With regard to measurement, it is important to acknowledge that this study was comprised entirely of self-report measures. Although the employed measures of speaker trust and IDR (relative to recordings of genuine monologues about race) are useful proxies, they are not direct assessments of interracial dialogue. Additionally, the quasi-experimental design used here does not allow for a causal interpretation of the results. We cannot claim that diversity course enrollment directly influenced meritocracy beliefs. Even so, this project revealed changes in beliefs from Time 1 to Time 2, and these changes were unique relative to a non-equivalent control group. Lastly, the IDR measure used here did not demonstrate sufficient reliability over time to be used as a difference measure in the case of the male speaker. Together, these points suggest continued methodological improvements are needed in this line of research.

With regard to the interpretation of results, although this manuscript has referred singularly to diversity course enrollment, it is important to remember that enrollment was comprised here by four different sections, taught by four different instructors. A brief inspection

of some unreported analyses reveals that the impact of diversity course enrollment varied significantly across both curriculum and instructors. The results presented herein thus represent a particular matrix of people and ideas, which may not replicate across all so-called diversity courses. Likewise, it is important to note that participants—especially those enrolled in diversity courses—may have experienced demand characteristics, which could have shaped their responses and biased the results of the project. Lastly, the student population observed here may be relatively unique—it is ethnically diverse and frequently exposed to multicultural experiences, both on and off campus. These students began the semester with relatively diminished descriptive meritocracy beliefs (cf., Son Hing et al., 2011) and an already-high mean level of trust in both speakers (i.e., 5.5 and 5.6 on a 7-point scale). Consequently, the effect of taking a diversity course observed here might not generalize to other samples; in all likelihood, the effect should be larger.

Meritocracy is a multidimensional, ideological belief linked to racial tolerance in its prescriptive form and intolerance in its descriptive form. Because it leads in opposed directions, this study's findings highlight the power of using a comprehensive measure such as meritocracy discrepancy. Moreover, they confirm the promise of diversity course enrollment to—among other things—likely improve our capacity to listen and receive one another in the context of conversations about race.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables, All Participants

Variable	Pre Control <i>M (SD)</i>	Pre Diversity <i>M (SD)</i>	Post Control <i>M (SD)</i>	Post Diversity <i>M (SD)</i>
Descriptive Meritocracy	3.99 (1.40)	3.82 (1.51)	3.73 (1.40)	3.27 (1.39)
Prescriptive Meritocracy	6.35 (.61)	6.44 (.58)	6.43 (.68)	6.44 (.75)
Meritocracy Discrepancy	2.37 (1.53)	2.59 (1.58)	2.70 (1.56)	3.17 (1.64)
Trust Man	5.60 (.95)	5.59 (1.06)	5.52 (1.07)	5.85 (1.03)
Trust Woman	5.53 (1.02)	5.51 (1.02)	5.47 (1.12)	5.80 (1.02)
Dialogue Receptivity Man	5.72 (.80)	5.85 (.84)	5.62 (.88)	5.91 (.88)
Dialogue Receptivity Woman	5.71 (.80)	5.77 (.87)	5.62 (.90)	5.85 (.91)
Ethnic Identity Strength	4.69 (1.46)	4.70 (1.46)	4.88 (1.48)	4.83 (1.54)
Socioeconomic Status	3.70 (.96)	3.65 (1.06)	n/a	n/a
Diversity Courses Taken	1.39 (1.24)	2.52 (1.46)	n/a	n/a
Gender	.78 (.42)	.71 (.45)	n/a	n/a
Age	18.62 (1.58)	22.30 (4.37)	n/a	n/a

Notes. *N*'s range from 271 to 274 for the control group due to occasional missing data (however, only 239 participants provided socioeconomic status data). *N*'s range from 145 to 147 for the diversity group due to occasional missing data (however, only 128 participants provided socioeconomic status data). Gender (0 = male; 1 = female). n/a = data was not collected at this time.

Table 2

Correlations Among and Descriptive Statistics for Variables Measured at Time 1, All

Participants

	<i>M (SD)</i> Range	PRE	DS	SES	DIV	ID	AGE	GEN
DES	3.92 (1.44) 1.00-7.00	.02	-.91**	.11*	-.07	-.03	-.02	-.05
PRE	6.38 (.59) 3.17-7.00		.37**	.04	.02	.05	-.02	.09
DS	2.45 (1.55) -3.33-5.83			-.09	.07	.05	.01	.09
SES	3.69 (.99) 1.00-7.00				-.06	-.14**	-.04	.00
DIV	1.85 (1.45) 0.00-9.00					.10	.30**	.05
ID	4.71 (1.45) 1.00-7.00						-.01	.08
AGE	19.95 (3.37) 17-60							-.06
GEN	.76 (.43) 0.00-1.00							

Notes. *N* for SES = 369. *N*'s for remaining variables range from 430 to 435 due to occasional

missing data. DES = descriptive meritocracy. PRE = prescriptive meritocracy. DS =

meritocracy discrepancy scores. SES = socioeconomic status. DIV = number of diversity

courses taken. ID = strength of identity. AGE = age. GEN = gender (0 = male; 1 = female). *

p < .05. ** *p* < .01.

Table 3

Pairwise Comparisons Among Descriptive Meritocracy Scores at Time 1, All Participants

(I)	(J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^a	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^a	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
White	Black	1.01	.38	.084	-.094	2.11
Latina/o	Black	1.06	.36	.055	-.017	2.14
Asian	Black	1.23	.36	.020	.155	2.30
Other	Black	.749	.41	.375	-.433	1.93

Notes. a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Games-Howell.

Table 4

Correlations Among and Descriptive Statistics for Variables Measured at Time 1, Outgroup

Participants

	<i>M (SD)</i> Range	DES	PRE	DS	TRUST	IDR
DES	3.99 (1.42) 1.00-7.00		.03	-.93**	-.20**	-.24**
PRE	6.39 (.57) 3.67-7.00			.35**	.23**	.26**
DS	2.39 (1.51) -1.00-5.83				.27**	.33**
TRUST	5.54 (.92) 1.67-7.00					.58**
IDR	5.72 (.77) 3.15-7.00					

Notes. *N*'s range from 374 to 377 due to occasional missing data. DES = descriptive meritocracy. PRE = prescriptive meritocracy. DS = meritocracy discrepancy scores. TRUST = mean trust. IDR = mean imagined dialogue receptivity. ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 5

Pairwise Comparisons Among Correlation Coefficients at Time 1

	(I)	(J)	Coefficient Difference i-j	z	p (1-tail)
Trust	DS	DES	.07	3.73	.000
	DS	PRE	.04	.71	.239
IDR	DS	DES	.09	4.86	.000
	DS	PRE	.07	1.26	.103

Notes. DES = descriptive meritocracy. PRE = prescriptive meritocracy. DS = meritocracy discrepancy scores.

Figure 1

Descriptive Meritocracy Score Changes

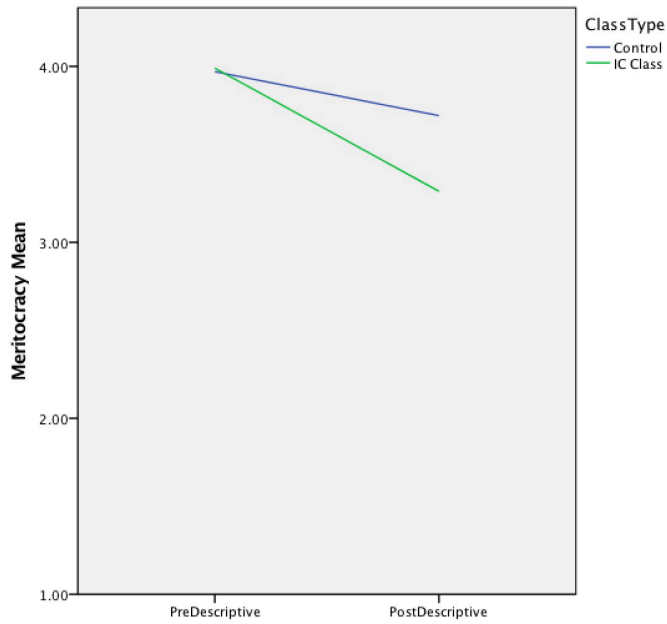


Figure 2

Meritocracy Discrepancy Score Changes

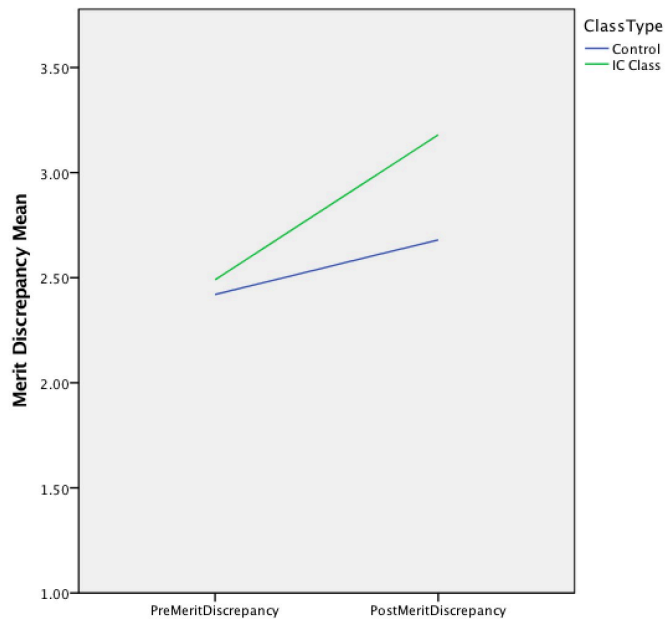


Figure 3

Trust Score Changes

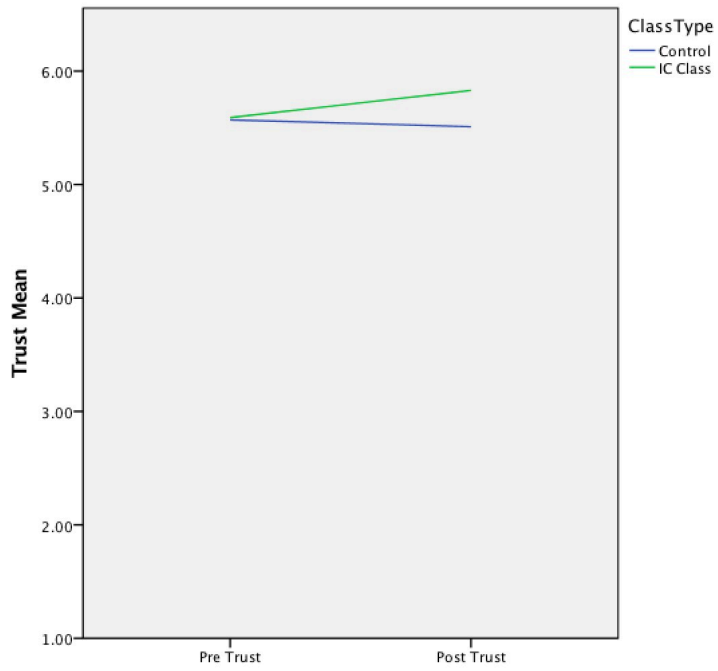
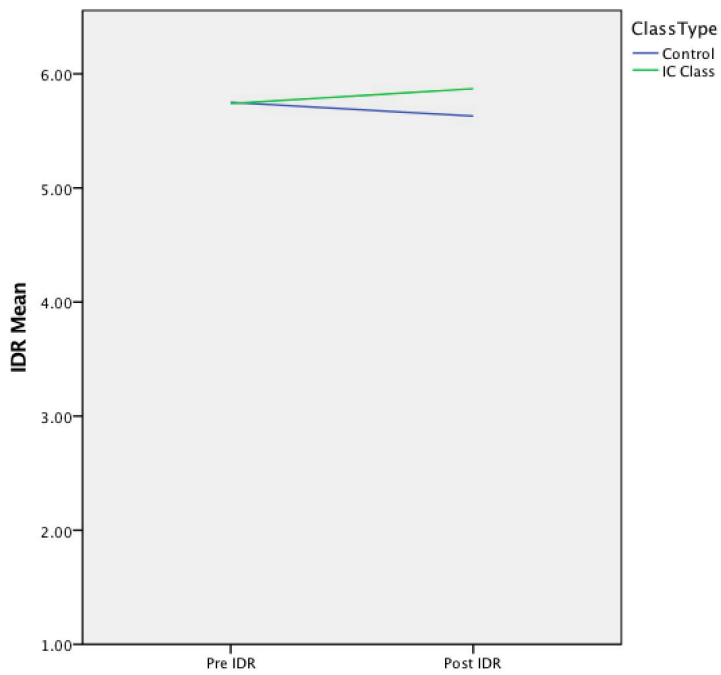


Figure 4

Imagined Dialogue Receptivity Score Changes



DIVERSITY COURSE AND RACE DIALOGUE

Appendix A

Female Speaker Testimony

Um, a lot of you in this room don't know what it feels like to be considered less than. The word minority is infused in our society and we're called minorities all the time and it means less than. It means inferior. It means, you know, you're not good enough. And that's infused in society and like she just said, little kids understand that. When you're darker you're less than. There are images of it in the media all over- it's everywhere. These stereotypes are everywhere. Like, for example, all black people like grape soda. I don't like grape soda! I don't. Like, I, it's, you know, like it's just weird that these things are known everywhere and it's not true for everyone. Like I went to Cabo Cantina for happy hour on Monday and, um, I ordered a *melon* margarita and the waiter automatically said "watermelon?". It's just weird to be in this position, like, we want so much but we're put in this box and, yeah, it kinds makes me feel hopeless.

Male Speaker Testimony

Growing up, my mom used to tell me as a kid that there would be certain obstacles that I would have to face in life - just because of the color of my skin, just because I was black. Growing up, you don't understand those things when they're being said to you sometimes. You think that it's just something that your parents are telling you, or just saying. But to actually grow up and start to experience these things, and to read about these things, and to learn about the discrimination and the racist acts that take place against black people- even *still*, you know - it's a little mind boggling. It's sad to think that for me as a black man, you know, I could have been wrongfully arrested. And a lot of people don't think about those type of things, but these things are happening. I know that everyone is not like that, you know, everyone is not racist or

discriminatory - I completely understand that. But we have to be open to that fact that there are still people that think this way, and that still *act* in that manner.