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Original Research

Personality Traits as Predictors of Leadership Style Preferences: Investigating the Relationship Between Social Dominance Orientation and Attitudes Towards Authentic Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to assess the degree to which followers view authentic leadership as viable. Prior research has suggested that authentic leaders are multiculturally competent and effective in the workplace. For authentic leadership to thrive, it will help to better understand followers' attitudes towards it. We investigated followers' attitudes towards authentic leaders along with other influential leadership styles. Additionally, we sought to further an individual difference perspective concerning how followers view their leaders. We examined the relationship between followers' level of social dominance orientation and their attitudes towards authentic leaders.

Materials and Methods

We recruited 117 United States participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants read three prototypical descriptions of alpha male, Daoist (an Eastern style), and authentic leaders. They provided likability and competence ratings for each leader and then completed a measure of social dominance orientation.

Results

We assessed whether participants found the authentic leader viable compared to the Daoist and alpha male leaders. The data indicated that the authentic leader was more preferred than the alpha male leader but less preferred than the Daoist leader. We found that authentic leaders were rated most competent and more likable than alpha male leaders, but just as likable as Daoist leaders. Additionally, the higher a participant's level of social dominance orientation the less positive their attitudes towards communal leaders.

Conclusions

Our results suggest that followers view authentic leadership as a viable alternative to existing paradigms of leadership. Followers appear to find authentic leadership and Daoist leadership, both communal styles, more preferable than alpha male leadership. We argue that followers with a general desire for inequality between social groups will tend to have more negative attitudes towards authentic and Daoist leadership. Our results contribute to the field of leadership psychology by expanding our knowledge of the personal characteristics predicting leadership preferences.

Keywords

Authentic leadership; Daoist leadership; Alpha male leadership; Social dominance orientation; Multiculturalism.

INTRODUCTION

What makes for a good leader? At one level of discourse, it may appear to be a simple question, yet the literature on the subject suggests it has not been an easy one to answer. Indeed, there continue to be competing perspectives on what constitutes an effective leader. The prototypical alpha male leader is often the first leadership style that stands out—such a person is often a man who leads with an emphasis on a top-down hierarchy, independent action, and self-centeredness.¹ Schein's^{2,3} “think manager—think male” stereotype illuminates the tendency for people to think of masculine, agentic males when considering candidates for leadership positions. However, due to public outcry after highly publicized ethical breaches by leaders who fit the alpha male stereotype (e.g., Enron's Kenneth Lay and Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski), many leadership theorists are now focusing on ethical and communal styles of leadership.^{4,5}

One influential perspective, especially in organizational psychology, is the transformational leadership theory and model.^{6,7} A transformational leader is one who inspires their followers to realize their fullest potential.⁸ While admirable in its intentions, a transformational theory of leadership has important limitations. Researchers developed the theory based upon Eurocentric notions of a charismatic leader. In fact, transformational leadership is associated with higher levels of extraversion.⁹ One of the problems with the theory and model is that its effectiveness depends heavily on a cultural context.¹⁰ The authors note that researchers have studied transformational leadership across cultures, and the behaviors which define it are different depending upon the cultural background of the leaders and followers. For example, they cite Bass's¹¹ study which demonstrates that a leader being prideful and vocal about their accomplishments is beneficial in Indonesia but looked down upon in Japan. Furthermore, transformational leadership is not only culturally specific, but it also has mixed results in multicultural environments. Even in the United States where extraversion and charisma are valued, members of ethnic minority groups may not endorse this style.¹²

The concern with multiculturally competent leadership is important as we strive to develop leadership ideals and practices for the future. The world will experience drastic population diversification and thus multicultural changes in the coming decades. According to Schwartz,¹³ humanity is now entering its third Great Transformation, the rise of revolutionary science and technology which will radically change the way our world functions and how humans exist together. The author argues that these changes are occurring because of a multitude of societal shifts happening simultaneously, such as changes in human migration patterns, advances in technological capability by orders of magnitude, and the willingness of countries to work together in solving global issues.¹³ He argues that these factors will render our society unrecognizable in the span of thirty years.

Population demographics will drastically change as we undergo the transformation proposed by Schwartz. The United States Census Bureau (USCB)¹⁴ predicts that by 2044 the United States population will exceed 600 million and current ethnic mi-

norities such as Latinos, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders will comprise the majority population at just over 50%. This shift will mark the end of the centuries-long tradition of white, Eurocentric individuals representing the majority demographic in America, and contexts in which leadership occurs will look very different than they have in past generations.

As this change occurs, the effectiveness of homogeneous styles of leadership will continue to decline. Connerley and Pederson¹⁵ address the dangers of multiculturally incompetent leadership within such diverse populations. They explain that when a leader cannot understand the varying viewpoints of their followers, they tend to misattribute the intentions of their followers. These false assumptions cause defensive disengagement on the part of both the leader and the follower, which leads to negative workplace outcomes. Indeed, it would seem multiculturally competent leadership will be necessary to adapt and be successful in a 21st century work environment.

Avolio¹⁶ explains that authentic leadership was developed to address the multicultural limitations of promising communal leadership models like transformational leadership. According to Walumbwa and colleagues,¹⁷ authentic leadership consists of four dimensions: self-awareness, balanced information processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective. This style takes into consideration the dynamic relationships between the leaders, their followers, and the cultural situation in which the leadership is taking place.¹⁶ Researchers have found a positive relationship between authentic leadership and positive workplace outcomes around the world.¹⁸⁻²⁰ For example, Olaniyan and Hystad²¹ found that employees with authentic leaders tended to be more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to quit. These results indicate that authentic leadership may be a strong option for future leaders and successful organizations in our rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, as countries become more diversified than in previous generations, it may be time to seriously consider assessing leadership styles from different parts of the world. Daoist leadership, for example, is one prime example of an Eastern leadership style that is highly communal and ethical. According to Ma and Tsui,²² Daoist leadership originates from the traditional Chinese philosophy, *Dao De Jing*, written by Laozi, a contemporary of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. The authors explain that while there is no explicit leadership training defined in Daoism, the *Dao De Jing* advises a leader to only act when necessary in positions of leadership.²² The logic behind this mandate is that people are inherently good and moral workers, but when they are ruled by an authoritative power rather than left in peace they can become “cunning thieves.”²²

Leadership scholars have different ideas about the applicability of Daoist leadership in Western settings. Some have linked Daoist leadership with contemporary leadership styles, such as the laissez-faire style of leadership.²² Originally defined by Bass,²³ leaders who adopt a laissez-faire style tend to be passive and avoid making important decisions in their role as a leader. Research has shown that laissez-faire leadership is ineffective in Western Eu-

ro-American societies as it is negatively correlated with follower satisfaction and the perceived effectiveness of leaders.²⁴ Daoist leadership resembles laissez-faire leadership because the leader allows their followers to have more autonomy in decision-making, preferring to remain in the background and avoiding the use of punishment. Because of this similarity, those who view the world as a competitive and hierarchical place may discount Daoist leadership as impractical in the Western world, as they have done with laissez-faire leadership.

Lee²⁵ proposes an alternate way of viewing Daoist Leadership by describing such leaders as highly altruistic. He argues that the teachings of Daoism encourage leaders to be “water-like,” allowing them to flexibly adapt to the needs of the situation while maintaining humility.²⁵ Given Schwartz’s¹³ claims about the Great Transition humanity will undergo in the next 30 years, this type of flexible leadership seems to hold a lot of promise, as their flexibility may allow them to be more well-liked and effective in their positions. However, the characteristics and behaviors of leaders are not the only relevant factors for successful leadership. Leadership has often been defined by prevailing cultural norms, much in the same way that, as Winston Churchill allegedly claimed, history is written by the victors.²⁶

While people commonly refer to the United States as a “melting pot,” the zeitgeist of the 20th century privileged homogeneity and “whiteness” at the expense of genuine cultural diversity.¹⁰ This pattern extended to positions of leadership, as leaders often emerge because of privileged status within society. Traditional ideals in the Western world prescribe the Eurocentric, white, heterosexual male as a beacon of what leadership should be. According to Zaccaro,²⁷ much of this stereotype may be due to ideas put forth by late-19th century authors such as Thomas Carlyle and Francis Galton. Galton’s²⁸ *Hereditary Genius* and Carlyle’s²⁹ *On Heroes and Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, depict the ideal leader as a “Great Man” who is divinely-appointed and displays stereotypically masculine traits such as aggressiveness, dominance, and assertiveness. These authors based their books’ themes on extenuated observations of history told through a masculine lens rather than empirically supported research. Nevertheless, researchers through the mid-20th century continued to study leadership by examining those who already held leadership positions, and the theories developed from this research affirmed the masculine “Great Man” stereotype of leadership.³⁰

However, there is a disconnect between the pervasiveness of the “Great Man” stereotype of leadership and its effectiveness in practice. Research has shown that top-down authoritarian styles of leadership are much less effective than other styles.³¹⁻³² Given the lack of support for the effectiveness of top-down authoritarian styles, we are interested in why these leadership styles remain so pervasive. Avolio¹⁶ provides a possible explanation by arguing that leadership theories often focus on the leader at the expense of the people they are leading. He uses Triandis³³ description of the difference between allocentric and idiocentric followers to illustrate the difference that a follower’s personality can make in shaping their attitudes towards leaders. He describes allocentric followers as those who are focused on the good of the group above the

good of the individual.³³ These followers tend to prefer leaders who make decisions that are in the best interest of the group. Idiocentric followers, by contrast, are more interested in the good of the individual (themselves) over the good of the group. These followers tend to prefer leaders who make decisions that are in their own best interest.

Considering that followers rate leaders differently based on their idiocentric-allocentric orientation, our ongoing research activities have given attention to the personal characteristics of followers and how they relate to leadership style preferences. To promote effective multicultural leadership theories, we will need to better understand American citizens’ attitudes towards different leadership styles. We have chosen to focus on individual differences in follower social dominance orientation and their relationship to attitudes towards alpha male, authentic, and Daoist leaders.

Social dominance orientation refers to a person’s general desire for hierarchy between social groups and is in many ways at odds with trait agreeableness.³⁴⁻³⁶ Agreeable people tend to have lower levels of social dominance orientation and endorse communal values rather than competition.³⁴ Disagreeable people, in contrast, are oriented towards social stratification and hierarchy. Interestingly, a meta-analytic literature review found that transformational leadership is closely related to authentic leadership and positively correlated with agreeableness.⁹ Authentic leadership and Daoist leadership both emphasize diversity and treating every member of a group equally. As people adopt more egalitarian modes of leadership (e.g., authentic, transformational, and Daoist) they seem to exhibit higher levels of agreeableness. When a disagreeable person who is high in social dominance orientation is exposed to authentic or Daoist leadership, they are confronted with a leadership style that contradicts their temperament in a manner that may not be well received. For this reason, the current study tests the ability of social dominance orientation to predict attitudes towards communal leaders.

We hypothesize that participants who are low in social dominance orientation will most prefer authentic leadership and Daoist leadership, while participants high in social dominance orientation will most prefer alpha male leadership. Furthermore, we expect that participants will prefer authentic and Daoist styles of leadership over alpha male leadership. Our aim is to contribute to the field of leadership psychology by furthering our understanding of how follower characteristics relate to attitudes towards influential leadership styles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Western Washington University (Protocol #: EX17-075). Using an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample, we collected 117 participants, each of whom we paid 80 cents for taking part in our study. The mean age of participants was 33.41, with a range from 20 to 77. Sixty-three percent of the sample identified as male, and 37% identified as female. Eighty percent of the sample identified as white, 9.4% identified as Asian-American, 7.7% identified as African-American, 2.6% identified as either mixed ethnicity or other, and

0.9% identified as Native American. Seventy-five percent (75.2%) of the sample were paid employees, 13.7% were self-employed, 6.0% were looking for work, 1.7% were retired, and 3.4% of identified as not working (other) and listed such responses as “student,” “homemaker,” and “stay-at-home parent.” Seven percent (7.7%) of the sample were high school graduates, 24.8% had some college but no degree, 14.5% had their Associate’s degree, 41.9% had their Bachelor’s degree, 7.7% had their Master’s degree, and 3.4% indicated having a Doctoral or professional degree.

To be eligible to take part in our study, participants had to be from the United States and have a Human Intelligence Task (HIT) acceptance rate of at least 90%. The HIT acceptance rate refers to the percentage of online tasks a worker has completed with the approval of the requester. This selection criteria assists in assuring the reliability of the survey responses. Research has shown that participants with higher HIT acceptance rates tend to pass attention check questions more frequently than participants with lower rates, and they generally provide higher quality data.³⁷ We excluded five participants from our analyses because they took less than 2 minutes to complete the study.

We administered the survey *via* Qualtrics surveying site, and each participant read an informed consent form which indicated that by continuing with the survey they were giving consent for participation. After giving informed consent, each participant read a paragraph which described either a Daoist leader, an alpha male leader, or an authentic leader. We counterbalanced the order in which the descriptions were presented to participants so that each would read all three leader profiles in a randomized sequence to reduce possible order effects. Descriptions were a paragraph long and had no identifying demographic information to minimize bias towards gendered descriptions.

After reading the profile, we asked participants to rate 12 different adjectives on a 5-point Likert-type scale regarding how well each adjective described the leader whose profile they had just read relative to the other adjectives. The response options ranged from 1 (*One of the best*) to 5 (*One of the worst*). Next, participants rated how likable and competent they found the leader from the profile they had just read. The likability scale ranged from 1 (*Very Unlikable*) to 5 (*Very Likable*), while the competence scale ranged from 1 (*Very Incompetent*) to 5 (*Very Competent*). After reading the first leader description and rating the adjectives as well as the likability and competence of that leader, participants repeated those steps for

the other two leadership styles.

Next, we presented participants with all three of the leader descriptions and prompted them to rank the leaders based on who they would most want to follow. We then asked participants two open-ended questions about why they chose the profiles they most preferred and least preferred respectively. After this, participants completed the Social Dominance Orientation Scale Short Form ($\alpha=0.93$).³⁵ This scale measures a person’s general endorsement of inequality between social groups. The scale prompts participants to rate the degree to which they favor or oppose eight different statements. A representative scale item states, “We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.” Response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly Oppose*) to 7 (*Strongly Favor*). Finally, participants answered demographic questions and read a debriefing statement.

RESULTS

We examined whether followers view authentic leadership as viable. Furthermore, we investigated the relationship between attitudes towards communal leaders and follower characteristics. Unfortunately, our sample lacked variability with regard to ethnicity such that any analyses we conducted using ethnicity were generally uninformative. However, we were able to conduct several exploratory analyses. These analyses provide insight into the relationship between gender, social dominance orientation, and leader preferences.

What is the relationship between follower’s level of social dominance orientation and their attitudes towards communal leaders?

Using SPSS 24, we examined the bivariate correlations among social dominance orientation and the reported likability and competence of each leader. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations and Table 2 for bivariate correlations. Social dominance orientation had a negative relationship with ratings of the authentic leader’s competence. Participants’ ratings of the Daoist leader’s competence had a near statistically significant negative relationship with social dominance orientation. Also, we found a positive correlation between social dominance orientation and competence ratings of the alpha male leader. The data indicate that high social dominance orientation is linked to perceiving communal leaders as less competent than alpha male leaders.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Social Dominance Orientation and Leader Likability and Competence Ratings (N=117)

Variable	M	SD
1. Social dominance orientation	2.59	1.56
2. Authentic leader likability	4.11	0.84
3. Authentic leader competence	4.15	0.72
4. Daoist leader likability	4.07	0.83
5. Daoist leader competence	3.68	0.90
6. Alpha male leader likability	2.63	1.19
7. Alpha male leader competence	3.68	1.06

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Between Social Dominance Orientation and Leader Likability and Competence Ratings (N=117)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social dominance orientation	-						
2. Authentic leader likability	-.15	-					
3. Authentic leader competence	-.29**	.60***	-				
4. Daoist leader likability	-.19*	.29**	.28**	-			
5. Daoist leader competence	-.18*	.14	.27**	.49***	-		
6. Alpha male leader likability	.44***	-.07	-.16*	-.19*	-.19*	-	
7. Alpha male leader competence	.20*	.17*	.12	-.03	-.10	.48***	-

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$; two-tailed.

Daoist leader likability was negatively related to social dominance orientation and unrelated to reports of authentic leader likability. Social dominance orientation was positively related to alpha male leader likability. In fact, social dominance orientation explains nearly 20% of the variance in alpha male leader likability. Those with high social dominance orientation seem to find alpha male leaders more likable than communal leaders. In sum, participant's level of social dominance orientation tended to be negatively associated with their perceptions of communal leader's likability and competence.

Do followers view authentic leadership as viable when compared to other prevalent leadership styles?

We asked participants to rank the three leadership styles from most preferred to least preferred. Using this ranking system, we were able to assess participants' preferences for authentic leaders relative to other prevalent leadership styles. We conducted a one-way chi-square test comparing the frequency with which each leadership style was ranked most preferred. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in participants' ranking of each leadership style as most preferred, $X^2(2)=28.62, p < .001$. The Daoist leader was ranked number one most frequently ($n=57$), followed by the authentic leader ($n=38$), and the alpha male leader ($n=12$). Having assessed which leadership styles are most preferred, we then examined the ones that are *least* preferred.

We performed a one-way chi-square on the frequency with which participants ranked each leadership style least preferred. The data indicated a statistically significant difference regarding the leadership style participants least preferred, $X^2(2)=34.11, p < .001$. Alpha male leaders were ranked least preferred most often ($n=64$), followed by authentic leaders ($n=24$), and finally Daoist leaders ($n=19$). Both chi-square tests converge on the idea that authentic leadership is more preferred than alpha male leadership but less preferred than Daoist leadership.

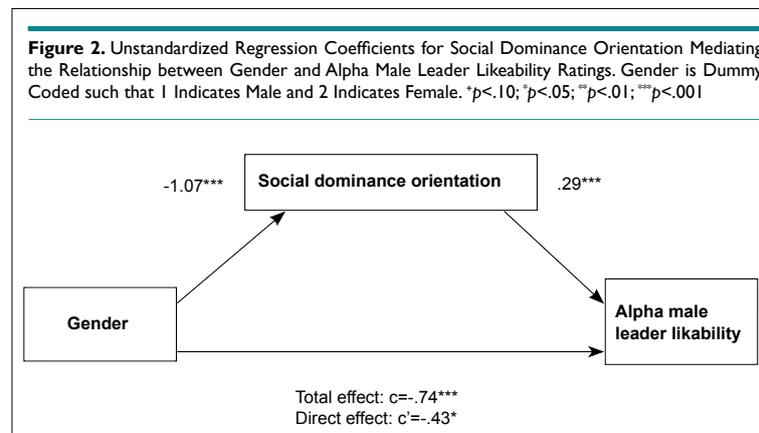
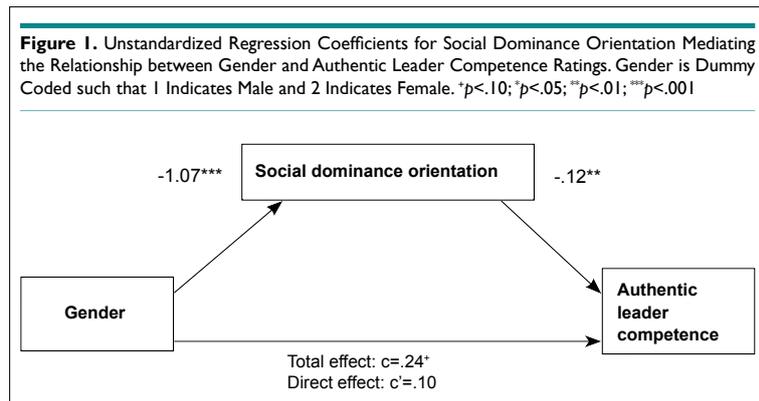
To examine participants' attitudes towards multiculturally competent leaders, we compared the likability and competence ratings of authentic leaders to the other leadership styles. A within-subjects *t*-test revealed that the mean likability of authentic leaders was greater than the mean likability of alpha male leaders, $t(116)=10.66, p < .001, d=.99$. There was no difference between the mean likability of authentic leaders and the mean likability of Dao-

ist leaders, $t(116)=.47, p > .05, d=.04$. The mean competence rating of authentic leaders was greater than the mean competence rating of Daoist leaders, $t(116)=5.24, p < .001, d=.48$, and alpha male leaders, $t(116)=4.21, p < .001, d=.39$. Authentic leaders were rated as most competent when compared to Daoist and alpha male leadership styles. Participants viewed authentic leaders as more likable than alpha male leaders, but not Daoist leaders.

What is the relationship between social dominance orientation, gender, and attitudes toward communal leaders/ alpha male leaders?

In a series of exploratory analyses, we investigated the role of social dominance orientation as a mediator of the relationship between gender and attitudes towards alpha male/ communal leaders. We conducted our analyses using the Hayes' ³⁸ PROCESS macros (Model 4). We chose to have indirect effects bootstrapped 5000 times and dummy coded gender such that a score of 1 indicated male and 2 indicated female. In our first model, the independent variable was gender, the mediator was social dominance orientation, and the dependent variable was authentic leader competence ratings. That is, we tested whether gender exerts its effect on authentic leader competence ratings through social dominance orientation. Figures 1 and 2 depict the mediation models that follow using unstandardized regression coefficients.

Gender was a positive predictor of social dominance orientation, $b=-1.07, SE=.28, p < .001$. Furthermore, gender was a near statistically significant positive predictor of authentic leader competence ratings, $b=.24, SE=.14, p < .10$. That is, participants identified as female tended to find the authentic leader more competent when compared to men. When we controlled for social dominance orientation, gender was no longer a near statistically significant predictor of authentic leader competence ratings, $b=.10, SE=.14, p > .40$. These findings are consistent with the idea that social dominance orientation fully mediates the relationship between gender and perceptions of authentic leader's competence. The combination of gender and social dominance orientation explained 9% of the variance in authentic leader competence ratings, $F(2,114)=5.54, MSE=.47, p < .01, R^2=.09$. A Sobel test indicated a small positive indirect effect of gender on authentic leader competence ratings, $b=.13, SE=.06, Z=2.21, p < .05$. Identifying as female predicted lower levels of social dominance orientation when compared to identifying as male which, in turn, predicted perceiving authentic leaders as more competent.



In our second model, we tested whether social dominance orientation mediated the relationship between gender and ratings of alpha male leader's likability. Gender had a statistically significant negative effect on alpha male leader likability ratings such that women tended to dislike alpha male leaders more than men, $b = -.74$, $SE = .22$, $p < .001$. When we controlled for social dominance orientation, gender remained a statistically significant predictor of alpha male leader likability, $b = -.43$, $SE = .22$, $p < .05$. These findings suggest that social dominance orientation partially mediates the relationship between gender and alpha male leader likability. The combination of gender and social dominance orientation explained 22% of the variance in alpha male leader likability, $F(2,114) = 16.25$, $MSE = 1.11$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$. Using a Sobel test we found that gender had a small negative indirect effect on alpha male leader likability, $b = -.31$, $SE = .11$, $Z = -2.81$, $p < .01$. In other words, identifying as female predicted lower levels of social dominance orientation when compared to identifying as male which, in turn, predicted perceiving alpha male leaders as less likable.

Finally, we noticed that some participants displayed a gender bias in their qualitative responses; they assumed the leaders they read about were male despite the profiles being genderless. For example, when asked why they chose the leader that they ranked #1, one participant said, "He inspires people to do well. He is open-minded and strong and respectful of differences." When asked why they chose the leader they ranked #3, another participant said, "I think this leader would put succeeding in a competition over his group members." These gender-biased responses

were present in 19 out of 117 participants (16.24%). Interestingly, no participant displayed a gender bias in the opposite direction by assuming that the leader was female.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to further our understanding of American citizens' leadership preferences and how those preferences relate to the personal characteristics of followers. We hypothesized that participants would prefer communal leaders to alpha male leaders due to their emphasis on diversity and relationship-building. We further hypothesized that authentic leadership would be the most preferred style because of its unique strengths when compared with Daoist leaders and alpha male leaders. While prior research tended to focus on the personal characteristics of leaders,³⁹⁻⁴⁰ the current study focused on the personal characteristics of followers. That is, we adopted an individual difference perspective regarding how followers perceive leaders.⁴¹

The data support our hypothesis that participants prefer communal leaders to alpha male leaders. The greatest number of participants ranked the alpha male leader as least preferred, and the least participants ranked the alpha male leader as most preferred. Furthermore, participants ranked the alpha male leader statistically significantly lower than the authentic leader in likability and competence. Surprisingly, the Daoist leader was the most preferred style according to participant rankings, receiving the most preferred ranking by the most participants and the least preferred

ranking by the least participants.

One possibility is that participants prefer the Daoist leaders because of their ability to promote trust and cooperation.⁴² However, participants rated authentic leaders as statistically significantly higher than both Daoist leaders and alpha male leaders on competence. These ratings suggest that participants notice the unique competencies of authentic leaders such that authentic leadership may still be most beneficial overall. This perception of authentic leaders as highly competent may be due to their effectiveness in leader-member exchanges, which predict positive leadership outcomes.⁴³ Furthermore, authentic leaders express multicultural competence by creating inclusive environments where employees feel comfortable expressing their opinions.⁴⁴ Finally, authentic leaders display a great deal of emotional intelligence, especially in the dimension of self-awareness.⁴⁵ A combination of these factors may be contributing to the competence of authentic leaders above Daoist leaders.

We examined how social dominance orientation relates to evaluations of alpha male, Daoist, and authentic leaders. In accordance with our hypotheses, individuals with dominant and anti-egalitarian tendencies,³⁵ were less likely to rate authentic leaders as competent. Followers with higher levels of social dominance orientation may be less likely to appreciate the multicultural competencies of authentic leaders. In subsequent exploratory analyses, we found that identifying as female predicted lower levels of social dominance orientation which, in turn, predicted more positive attitudes towards authentic leaders and more negative attitudes towards alpha male leaders. The gender difference in social dominance orientation is consistent with some prior research⁴⁶; however, there remains debate regarding why such gender differences exist.⁴⁷ Our analyses indicate that gender differences in social dominance orientation are important predictors of follower's attitudes towards alpha male and authentic leaders.

CONCLUSION

One limitation of the current study is that it was correlational such that we are unable to make causal claims. Future research should consider experimentally manipulating social dominance orientation (see Huang & Liu⁴⁸ for priming paradigm) and then assess its impact on follower's attitudes towards authentic leaders. Given that some participants exhibited a gender bias in their qualitative responses, the effect of adding gender to hypothetical leadership profiles would constitute a valuable contribution to existing literature.

Our sample was unrepresentative of the population in terms of gender, ethnicity, and education. For example, our sample over-represented men and was more educated when compared to the national average.^{49,50} Future research may utilize quota sampling techniques to ensure a representative sample on these dimensions. A study investigating the influence of follower ethnicity on leadership preferences seems essential given the importance of multiculturally competent leadership. However, it is important not to conflate ethnicity with cultural identity when surveying members of a single population with different ethnicities. Given our research

questions, an analysis of ethnicity went beyond the scope of our study. Future studies exploring the relationship between leadership preferences and ethnicity would benefit from asking participants questions about their cultural identity.

Additionally, we used single-item measures for the likability and competence of each leader that may have questionable reliability. Future research may use multi-item measures of likability and competence that more fully capture people's attitudes towards communal leaders.

Ultimately, the potential of authentic leadership will only be realized if followers view communal leadership as viable. The current study advanced an individual difference approach to understanding follower's attitudes towards leaders. Understanding *why* certain members of society are reluctant to endorse authentic leadership is a pivotal part of breaking down barriers for communal leaders in the coming years.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors further declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Editorial

Towards a United Front against Weight Bias

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Obesity is considered as one of the most alarming contemporary health issues.¹ Paradoxically, as the prevalence of obesity increases, discrimination against individuals that are considered as overweight is also on the rise.² Weight bias associates overweight with negative personal attributes, such as laziness, lack of intelligence and self-discipline, unsuccessfulness and unattractiveness.³ These biases lead to discrimination, which affects a wide range of the targeted individual's life dimensions, including education, work and healthcare, as well as interpersonal relationships.⁴ The pervasive effect of weight bias is so strong that even average-weight individuals who were formerly obese are rated less favorably by their peers in terms of mate value and personality.⁵

As such, weight bias has a direct impact on the psychological and physical well-being of targeted individuals. Amongst others, the above-mentioned negative associations with overweight perceptions and beliefs can lead to counterproductive behaviours for weight loss goals, such as binge eating,⁶ demotivation and avoidance to exercise,⁷ and fleeing medical help,⁴ especially when bias is internalized by targeted individuals themselves.⁸ This problem highlights the necessity to take into account weight bias in efforts to decrease overweight health issues.⁹

Beyond the impact on the targeted population, weight bias is also detrimental to other individuals, all across the weight-spectrum. The ambient discourse about the necessity to maintain a healthy weight may reinforce efforts to distance oneself from overweight stereotypes, widening the gap between overweight and what is considered healthy or acceptable,¹⁰ and can contribute to the adoption of risky or disordered eating behaviors.¹¹

Being deeply rooted in western individualistic values, weight bias has been suggested to be one of the last socially acceptable forms of prejudice.⁴ A recent study by our group com-

pared weight bias with the less socially acceptable race bias against black individuals in a French Canadian sample. Results suggested that participants had less motivation to control their implicit weight biases, which may have led to greater explicit bias towards individuals considered as overweight, compared to explicit race bias towards black individuals, even though implicit bias towards the targeted populations was equivalent across weight and race biases (Marquis, Leblanc, Blais, Fiset, Gagnon-Girouard & Brisson, in preparation).¹²

The widely held assumption that weight is controllable and a personal responsibility can also contribute to such discrimination.^{13,14} Even more problematic, these beliefs are reinforced by public health interventions that can inadvertently worsen weight bias by associating overweight with something to avoid at any costs.^{15,16}

The assumption of controllability and personal responsibility, in conjunction with the model of thinness that feeds several industries, such as the diet industry, and which transpires through several medias and politics, can possibly explain why weight bias is particularly resistant to change and that most strategies have yet failed to show lasting effect on explicit and implicit weight bias; for example among health professionals.¹⁵ Furthermore, these social messages seem to affect individuals' body image and the tendency to compare oneself to others, both factors being associated to weight bias.¹⁷

All of the above, and the fact that weight bias affects women and men differently,¹¹ suggests that weight bias is a complex phenomenon that is built on social messages and social acceptability, which can be internalised and expressed differently according to biological and psychological traits. Given the complex social and psychological interactions that influence the expression of weight

bias, future research in the field would benefit from collegial multidisciplinary research that focuses on the impact of social messages that promote negative weight stereotypes, social acceptability and their interaction with psychological traits in different ethnic groups, cultures, age groups, sex and gender, for which the socio-psycho-biological interactions could potentially differ.

It will also be beneficial to incorporate new methods and tools to precisely objectify the social acceptability of weight bias and test innovative ways to reduce its expression. For example, neuroscience methods and techniques have been very useful in refining knowledge of race bias.¹⁸ Such efforts will bring further data to help guide political decisions that could help in decreasing implicit weight bias. As mentioned above, reducing social acceptability is not sufficient to prevent negative stereotypes to be internalized in the form of implicit biases.¹² It will therefore be important to investigate new avenues to reduce implicit bias in order to obtain long-term effects that are not subject to motivation to control biases, which can be quite volatile.

In summary, we propose that to reduce weight bias and its negative social and personal impact, a united effort must be deployed to refine our knowledge of the complex web of factors underlying implicit and explicit weight bias within distinct socio-psycho-biological realities. This knowledge will benefit focused strategies regarding prevention of obesity and eating disorders as well as the promotion of healthy habits and that of a healthy weight-neutral body image, from political decisions to personalised interventions.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Original Research

A Qualitative Approach to Exploring Short-Term Service Learning and Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

A growing number of universities and colleges across the United States have committed to civic engagement activities, particularly short-term service-learning (SL). Limited research, however, is available about the effects of short-term SL experiences on student development.

Objectives

The current study attempts to address research gaps in our understanding of this pedagogical technique by conducting qualitative interviews with students involved in a short-term SL project.

Methods

In this qualitative study, five students ($N=5$) reported on their short-term SL experience as they related to the following outcomes: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes (such as personal responsibility, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship).

Results

Students reported changes in their beliefs about the ability to create positive social change in communities, as well as their perceptions of marginalized groups. In addition, spending time with and directly hearing the perspective of individuals who have been marginalized in society helped to reduce intergroup anxiety and motivate students to be involved formally and informally in civic activities that can help to improve community-level outcomes.

Conclusion

Findings suggest that well-designed short-term SL experiences have the potential to shape important student perceptions and intentions regarding civic engagement. This finding is particularly valuable because this pedagogical technique is growing in popularity in higher education. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of promoting best practices in SL and other community-engaged learning experiences.

Keywords

Service-learning (SL); Community-engaged learning; Student development; Qualitative research.

Abbreviations

SL: Service-Learning; CEL: Community-Engaged Learning; CSSE: Community Service Self Efficacy; CSGE: Community Service Group Efficacy; POP: Power, Oppression and Privilege; TVRS: Trenton Violence Reduction Strategy; RAs: Research Assistants; TCNJ: The College of New Jersey; GED: General Educational Development.

INTRODUCTION

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) and Service-Learning (SL) – important pedagogical techniques in which students learn by engaging in organized service activities – have gained in popularity within higher education curricula.^{1,2} For the purpose of this article, SL includes community engagement, civic engagement, and other terms used on across campuses. Although, various definitions of SL have been proposed, most have agreed that these forms of experiential learning involve three critical components: addressing the needs of the local community through service activities, relevant academic material, and critical reflection that allows students to make connections between the service they are doing and the material they have learned.^{3,4} Through exposure to communities, oftentimes different from those of the student participants, SL aims to produce civically-minded graduates who view themselves as active citizens with a collective responsibility in resolving community-identified issue areas.⁵⁻⁷ One of the most common forms of service-learning is short-term SL activities embedded in a regular course (from those that last a few hours to those that last a full semester). Currently, it is unclear whether short-term SL contributes to positive outcomes for the students involved; in fact, some researchers have argued that, if not implemented well, it has the potential to cause more harm than good.⁸ To better understand how to promote positive short-term SL outcomes, this study examined the experiences of five students who engaged in short-term direct service, indirect service, and reflection activities. We focused on five outcomes identified as important outcomes in SL research, in general, but have been understudied in the context of short-term SL, specifically: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes. By taking a qualitative research approach, this article provides a nuanced preliminary understanding of how to promote positive outcomes for students involved with short-term SL experiences.

Opportunities and Challenges Involved with Short-Term Service

Generally, SL and CEL experiences are considered high-impact educational practices that contribute to improved student engagement, as well as a variety of other positive academic, social, and civic student outcomes.⁹⁻¹² Kolb, as well as Yates and Youniss, argue that SL experiences are likely to have a significant impact on student development to the extent that they involve the following key processes: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.^{13,14} These high-impact experiences then provide students opportunities to develop the skills and values necessary in democratic building and full civic participation.¹¹

A summary of SL research findings in higher education suggests that, overall, participation in SL experiences can foster these valued outcomes. Few studies, however, have examined them in the context of short-term SL.¹⁰ Short-term SL, the most com-

mon model of community-engaged learning within institutions of higher education, is defined as SL that requires less than forty hours of service per week and/or takes place across fewer than fifteen weeks.^{9,12} Some research suggests that short-term SL can have positive effects on student development – for example, increased social responsibility, meaningfulness of collegiate experiences, and likelihood to enter a service-oriented career.¹⁵ A 2010 study compared the effects of single-credit sustained immersion courses (short-term SL experiences) to 3-4 credit long-term SL courses on students' social responsibility and found that similar positive effects can be achieved across SL types.¹⁶ Conversely, a meta-analysis of SL effects on student outcomes observed mixed results for valued short-term SL outcomes.⁹

Some researchers have argued that, in order for SL to have a significant impact on student outcomes, the experience must occur over a considerable time span.¹⁷ It may be, however, that particularly meaningful short-term SL experiences can have a significant impact on student development, especially if these experiences involve key processes for high-impact SL experiences: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.^{13,14} The following section identifies five outcomes that, based on previous research, may help students engage in these key processes when involved with short-term SL. While these outcomes have been established as important indicators of civic engagement, they have received little empirical attention in the study of short-term SL: students' attitudes towards marginalized populations, specifically the population being served by the SL activities; students' conceptualizations of privilege (special advantages, benefits, or favors as a result of belonging to certain social groups) and oppression (certain social groups benefiting at the expense of other groups through institutional use of power and privilege);^{11,18} students' sense of community service self-efficacy (CSSE, belief that students can make meaningful contributions to their community through service);¹⁹⁻²¹ and students' sense of community service group efficacy (CSGE, the belief that groups of individuals can make meaningful changes within communities).^{22,23}

Outcomes of Short-Term Service-Learning (SL)

With respect to Community Service Self-efficacy (CSSE) – an individual's confidence in their ability to make meaningful changes within a community – student CSSE in SL "...could increase, decrease, or remain stable during a semester of service-learning, depending in part upon the degree of success or failure during service provision."²¹ Students with high-levels of CSSE are more likely to pursue other SL activities and opportunities, which may create a feedback loop that promotes further civic engagement. Among the few studies that have examined CSSE as a short-term SL outcome, Weiler et al found that students who participated in the Campus Corps at-risk youth mentoring program (N=390) had significantly higher post-SL CSSE scores than peers who did not participate in the SL course (N=258), thus, illustrating a potential relationship between short-term SL student participation and the development of student CSSE.⁵ What remains unclear in the

research literature is which aspects of SL promote student CSSE during these short-term experiences.

In addition to CSSE, Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE) – the individual belief that groups of people can make meaningful changes within communities – may also be an important short-term SL student outcome. General group efficacy consists of three components: (1) the perception of the group meeting its own standards of productivity; (2) the ability of the group members to be able to work together cohesively; and (3) the individual well-being and personal growth of each member as a result of their experiences in the group.²⁴ In the context of higher education, research on general group efficacy has mostly focused on students in traditional academic courses.^{25,26} No research has yet explored relations between short-term SL experiences and community service group efficacy.

SL experiences also have the potential to influence student attitudes towards marginalized groups they serve. In one study, students who participated in a short-term SL course demonstrated higher levels of empathy and compassion towards people of dissimilar social identities. Students identified direct service as the primary reason for the increases.²⁷ Another SL case study demonstrated the transformative nature of SL experiences in challenging students' stereotypes about minority populations.²⁸ In this study, college students participated in a class on feminism alongside female inmates. The SL experience helped students connect with the inmates and reduce the negative stereotypes students held about prison populations. Furthermore, reflections of students participating in SL have revealed complex relations between the race/ethnicity of students, socioeconomic status of students, and the impact of the SL experiences on stereotypes. For instance, students who shared the same ethnic identity as the SL group served struggled with existing stereotypes (e.g., upper-middle-class Hispanic student distancing themselves from lower-class Hispanics).²⁹ In other cases, students reported resistance to challenging their biases and prejudices towards marginalized groups.²⁷⁻²⁹ If SL aims to influence students' perceptions of underserved and under-represented communities – or to help students connect with the community members and understand how communities empower themselves – it is critical to examine what components of short-term SL experiences contribute to these changes.

Research evidence also suggests that participating in SL can influence student conceptualizations of power, oppression, and privilege (POP). Social justice related components of SL can help students learn about, reflect upon, and directly address societal disparities. This can be achieved when SL experiences mobilize students to work with populations where the consequences of inequitable resource distribution are evident.³⁰ Student who participated in the Einfeld and Collins study indicated that aspects of SL provided them opportunities to analyze how oppression works within their local community by promoting critical analysis of complex social issues within an academic framework.³¹ Additionally, professors of SL courses have observed that their students increased their understanding of societal systems of advantage and disadvantage after the completion of the SL course.³² As an example, students in the Jones and Abes study revealed how the short-

term SL course aided in unearthing their privilege in relationship to others, often citing this increased awareness of their own privilege as a result of an increase in their understanding of societal systems of oppression.²⁷ Conversely, student reflections in the Espino and Lee study showed the complex ways SL can influence student consciousness of oppression and privilege.²⁹ While some students reported an improved sense of racial and class consciousness after their SL-course, others (and sometimes the same) students found themselves defensive of their own privilege and advantage.²⁹ Further research may help to explain these contradictory findings regarding the effects of short-term SL on students' understanding of POP concepts.

Finally, service-learning aims to develop civically engaged student populations. Conway et al noted that short-term SL has limited impacts on citizenship outcomes, illustrating the importance of further investigating what types of SL experiences and components may lead to a civically-minded graduate.⁹ In this study, we considered the three citizenship outcomes described by Westheimer and Kahne: personal responsibility (e.g., obeying laws, being a good citizen), participatory citizenship (e.g., voting, active involvement in community improvement), and justice-oriented citizenship (e.g., active involvement in activities that address injustice and/or oppression in society).³³

Current Study

The use of service-learning (SL) as a pedagogical strategy, particularly short-term SL experiences, continues to grow across campuses.² It is unclear, however, whether short-term SL contributes to positive outcomes for the students involved; in fact, some researchers have argued that, if not implemented well, it has the potential to cause more harm than good.⁸ The current study focused on the following five outcomes in the area of short-term SL research: (1) Community Service Self Efficacy (CSSE); (2) Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE); (3) conceptualizations about power, oppression and privilege (POP); (4) attitudes towards marginalized populations being served and (5) citizenship outcomes. We selected these outcomes because they have received little empirical attention in short-term SL research, and yet have the potential to engage students in high impact processes that can result in significant, positive changes in student development. This study used a qualitative research approach which lends itself to exploring the fine-grained details found in students' perceptions about their unique, value-laden transformational experiences.³⁴

METHODS

The Trenton Violence Reduction Strategy (TVRS) is a collaborative program located in Trenton, NJ, USA funded by the Office of the Attorney General and run by the Trenton Police Department, local social service providers, and The College of New Jersey (Center for Community Engaged Learning & Research). Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, is home to nearly 85,000 residents with a median household income of \$35,647. More than one-quarter of its residents (28.4%) have incomes below the poverty level, and poverty is particularly concentrated in female-headed family households with dependent children (45.7% of households with children under 5).

The city predominantly consists of ethnic minorities with over half of its residents (52.0%) identifying as African American and 33.7% identify as Latinx.³⁵ Two of the most significant challenges residents face are in the areas of education and public health. In 2015, Trenton reported the lowest high school graduation rate in the state (68.6%), and the city has a history of battling high rates of non-violent and violent crimes, particularly gang- and drug-related violence.³⁶

TVRS is dedicated to reducing violence in the Trenton community by changing the criminogenic behavior of individuals who were previously incarcerated or have been identified as at-risk of being incarcerated by the Trenton Police Department. This is done by mobilizing social service and outreach workers into neighborhoods experiencing high-levels of criminal activity, working with individuals and families to reduce violence, and providing job training, life skills, and other aid to young adults and families as an alternative to engaging in criminal behavior. Upon attending a “Call-in” and choosing to enter the program, participants and family members complete a 60-minute baseline assessment to establish initial information about their attitudes and behaviors across various life domains. Based on these baseline assessments, the program provides appropriate social services, including life skills, job training, and overall case management of participants.

Participants

The TVRS project involved service-learning (SL) opportunities during the Spring 2016 semester for three types of students: graduate-level counseling students (N=12), undergraduate criminology students (N=3), and undergraduate students from the The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Bonner Community Scholars program (N=5). Graduate counseling students had opportunities to participate in the Call-in meetings and conduct the baseline assessments. The undergraduate Criminology students were mostly involved with the assessment of program data collected (e.g., analyzing attendance and participant outcomes of the program). Undergraduate Bonner students were the most heavily involved in the three cohorts, as they facilitated life skills training (including general educational development (GED) tutoring, resume preparation, and job readiness sessions).

Among the twenty students recruited to participate, five agreed to take part in this study. The remaining students did not respond to the invitation. This number (N=5) is lower than the recommended six participants needed to examine specific topics in qualitative data analysis with accuracy. Despite this limitation, these students’ perspectives are likely to offer valuable insight, as the constructs under investigation in the current study have received limited empirical attention in short-term service-learning research.³⁷ The majority of participants identified as women (60%), and the average age of the participants was 21.8-years-old. Additional demographic data are presented in Table 1. With respect to previous experience with volunteer work, 40% of participants reported limited to some previous experience (e.g., served when opportunities were presented), 40% reported a lot of previous experience (e.g., served on a regular basis), and 20% of participants reported a lot of previous experience with related leadership roles. The participant pool was drawn from three TCNJ student groups involved in the TVRS project: undergraduate Bonner Community Scholars with TVRS as their primary service site; undergraduate Criminology students in a service-learning/community-engaged learning course; and graduate-level counseling students in a service-learning/community-engaged learning course.

Participation in the SL activities varied across students during the fall 2016 semester. Bonner students committed about 13 hours per week across the semester, Criminology student committed about 20 hours total during the semester, and Counseling students committed about 20 hours for 1-2 weeks. The nature of involvement varied as well, with Bonner and Counseling students having direct interactions with TVRS participants, while one Criminology student served indirectly *via* program data assessment. Finally, participants reported engaging in a range of formal and informal reflection activities. All participants reported reflecting informally on their SL experiences alone, with peers, and/or with relatives. Among the three student groups, Bonner Community Scholars engaged in formal reflection most frequently (before and after their service activities as well as regularly scheduled reflection meetings). Counseling students reflected formally at three main points during the semester *via* class discussions (pre-reflection, reflection during service, and post-reflection). The Criminology student engaged in a single formal reflection activity during her first and only visit to the TVRS site.

Undergraduate student	60%
Graduate student	40%
Age (M, SD)	21.8, 1.9
Male	40%
Female	60%
Hispanic/Latino	60%
Caucasian	40%
Socioeconomic status (M, SD)	5.7, 1.6

Note: M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation
 *SES data was collected using the Scale of Subjective Status.⁴⁶ Scores ranged from 1 to 10, 1 indicating participant SES status perceived as lower than 90% of population and 10 indicating participant SES status perceived as higher than 90% of population.

Procedure

Prior to collecting data, this study received approval from The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants signed up for this study *via* email by setting up a one-on-one, confidential semi-structured interview with one of two research assistants (RAs). The RAs were TCNJ undergraduate students, and neither interviewed a participant with whom they were familiar. To prepare for data collection, both RAs completed interviewer training prior to conducting this study, and data were collected during the spring 2017 semester. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. Participants started the process by reviewing and signing an informed consent form. The interview asked general questions about participants’ experiences with community service and service-learning, as well as specific questions about students’ participation in the TVRS project. Upon completion of the interview, participants filled out a separate demographics questionnaire. Participants were paid \$35 compensation.

For the semi-structured interview, researchers used an interview guide, formed around global questions with accompanying probe questions (Table 2). Semi-structured interviews began by discussing memories of and involvement within the TVRS program. Given the time gap between students’ participation and the research interview itself, the interview asked specific questions about program involvement to help students orient their memory to the project timeframe and aid with information recall. First, participants were asked to discuss the frequency of their involvement with TVRS. Next, they reviewed and discussed a list of program activities in which they participated (e.g., administering interviews, participating in program call-ins, implementing life skills classes). Interviews then continued with discussions regarding student participant outcomes of interest: Community Service Self-Efficacy (CSSE), Community Service Group-Efficacy (CSGE), attitudes towards incarceration and incarcerated individuals, conceptualizations of power, oppression and privilege (POP), and citizenship outcomes. In contrast to a grounded theory inductive approach – where the researcher allows for the emergence of conceptual

categories – we asked participants to reflect upon and discuss our specific outcomes of interest. We chose this strategy to ensure that we explored participants’ perspectives about significant outcomes already identified in research on service-learning. Table 2 summarizes the global interview questions and probe questions.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, reviewed, and prepared for analysis. All data analyses were conducted with MAXQDA (version 12), a software package commonly used to conduct qualitative data analysis. Three researchers (faculty member and two research assistants who conducted the interviews) used a line-by-line microanalysis to identify thematic codes based on the outcomes of interest. All three researchers reviewed the coded texts and generated consensus concerning emergent themes.

RESULTS

Emergent themes identified from the collected data are presented according to student outcome variables of interest.

Community Service Self-Efficacy (CSSE)

Students who perceived their service work as a means for TVRS to achieve its program goals felt that they can make meaningful changes within the community they served. Students also noted connection building between themselves and TVRS participants as important in establishing their self-confidence in making meaningful communal changes. Specifically, the nature of face-to-face interactions with TVRS participants allowed some students to easily perceive the impact of instilling positivity within members of the community. Students commonly referred to physical signals (e.g., smiling, laughing, and or “openness” of participants) and social signals (e.g., verbal demonstrations of gratitude, having participants start “closed off” then “open up” and become more honest as their relationship developed) as critical in validating their feelings of CSSE. One student attributed her increased sense of CSSE to:

Table 2. Examples of Qualitative Interview Questions	
Sample Global Interview Questions	Sample Probe Interview Questions
Now, I want you to think about creating positive changes in our community through the kind of community-engaged work you did with the TVRS Project.	Can you walk me through the example?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did the project influence your belief that you (personally) can create positive change through community-engaged work? Did the project influence your belief that other people can create positive change through community-engaged work? 	<p>When was it?</p> <p>Where did it take place?</p> <p>Who was involved?</p>
After being involved with the TVRS project, have your views about incarcerated individuals changed? If yes, how have your views changed?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your views changed, what about the TVRS program contributed to these changes? 	
In society, we sometimes use words like “power” and “privilege” when discussing community-engaged learning projects.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do these words mean to you? Has your involvement in TVRS affected your understanding of power and privilege? If yes, what about the TVRS program contributed to these changes? 	

“...seeing the guy that I interviewed. Seeing him smile, and laughing, and joking with me. When we first started the interview, he was pretty quiet and a little mellow. It seemed like he really opened up to me. I don’t know if it was me or was his mood but it made me feel good that ... It made me feel like me being nice to him and asking him questions, just being personable with him made him feel a little bit better and feel more comfortable.”

In addition, students reported that having feelings of positive emotion – as a result of witnessing positivity in the TVRS participants – reinforced their sense of CSSE. Bonner students, in particular, noted the perceived sustainability of the connections made with TVRS participants (e.g., building long-lasting relationships, being recognized in the Trenton community for their work) as especially validating of their sense of CSSE. One Bonner student reported:

“That’s the education and the change that I want to create within the [two years involved with] project. I don’t want it just to be, “Here’s math, okay get in, get out,” like GED. I want to develop special relationships with these people, so they can really get a sense of what it is to really be a part of society, be a part of life, and have someone there who has their support. And through that, I think, along with education, I think we can create a positive change. Not only in the Trenton community, but I think if we use this in other locations, we can create a big impact.”

Community Service Group Efficacy (CSGE)

In regard to students’ beliefs that other individuals can make meaningful changes within communities, students reported that having the support of their team assisted in overcoming previous anxiety felt towards working with individuals from marginalized populations. This reduction in service-related anxiety was connected to students’ reported elevated levels of comfort serving within an at-risk environment, reinforcing their CSGE. In addition, working with an effective group gave students a sense of competence towards service work. One student reported:

“We all kind of lined up to get going. The person next to me was halfway to having a panic attack. She was very, very nervous. She was someone who I knew very well so I was comfortable grabbing her, so I grabbed her hand, I said, “You’re going to be my partner. Let’s go, let’s do this.” ... I think people’s fears exacerbated other people’s fears, but once we really got going, we all helped each other to feel more comfortable and know what we were doing.”

Students also noted that seeing collective efforts between the stakeholders involved in the program reinforced their sense of CSGE. Another student reported:

“Yeah, going to the call and I realized that people in the community themselves are invested and trying to help the people that come in. I know the grad students that I was there with as well, they were very impacted by what they do there. I think it’s a very good program.... Then combined with the community and business staff who were there who were talking about the job readiness program with the individuals. Just seeing the organization between all three of those groups along with the Trenton Police were there, too.”

Conceptualizations of Power, Oppression, and Privilege (POP)

Students reported applying the framework of POP in US society to understand: their daily life interactions (e.g., with police), their own social position (by using TVRS participants as a reference point to gauge their own privilege), and contradictions in societal narratives (by using TVRS-related experiences to challenge progressive narratives that claim a just society for all). Among Counseling and Criminology students who learned about POP concepts in the academic portion of their SL experience, students reported that participating in TVRS exposed them to the oppressive forces illustrated in academic material *via* interactions with people directly affected by these forces. Commenting on racial profiling, one student reported:

“I don’t know how to explain it. You realize and you look around. You can get such different ideas about what’s really going on but at the end of the day it’s like, white people commit crimes and they do bad things but do they get caught as often? Are they profiled as often? Are they treated as harshly?”

As such, most students noted an emotional transformation towards the injustice observed within the population they served. This transformation was described by Bonner students as a transformation from feeling pity and anger towards TVRS participants’ life circumstances to impassioned motivation to make a communal change, which stemmed from understanding that situations of injustice regarding the criminal justice system are connected to societal and systemic factors – and not always individual failings. One Bonner commented:

“That’s when I broke down, I was like ... I cannot believe that this [overt racism] is still going on, in our present-day society. You don’t know what’s he’s [our President is] going to do next. And looking at that, it just changed me to feel even worse. It actually changed my tragedy to commitment. It committed me. It forced myself, inside my head, to go and attempt to at least personally change these [systems].”

Attitudes about Incarceration and Towards Incarcerated Individuals

Moreover, students noted that being exposed to this population, as well as hearing participants’ testimonies of the adversity they face, resulted in an attitude change towards these individuals (e.g., original feelings of apprehensiveness to sympathetic understanding). Most students felt a deeper connection towards the population, using phrases such as “they are human too” to reduce the emotional gap between themselves and participants. One student reported:

“It’s like a stigma against them, I guess. A lot of people think they’re not human you know, they’re not treated like humans. They’re locked up in a cage all day. That’s not how you treat humans, that’s how you treat animals... I guess working with TVRS reinforced that view because these people are neglected basically, by every institution out there.”

This humanizing change in attitude was connected to students’ seeing these individuals as more than just their criminal identity.

Students described being able to conceptualize these individuals as multifaceted people with different, relatable societal roles (e.g., student, father, son). Another student reported:

“...the man I was speaking... we were talking. He was talking about his kids. He had a couple children. He had been incarcerated for a while and he had just gotten out of the system. He had children and he was talking about Halloween, it must have been right after Halloween then. He wanted to take his kids out trick-or-treating and how it was hard because of the area that they lived in. Because he was a known drug dealer he didn't want his kids anywhere near that. So he was desperately trying to move out. He's trying to find a new place to live so that he can move his kids away from all this bad stuff going on. He talked about how selling drugs was his source of income. He started talking about trying to find a job. Wanting to turn it around and how that opportunity isn't really available anywhere else.”

Citizenship Outcomes

Overall, students reported that serving this population better prepared them to address societal issues regarding systematic oppression (e.g., racism, classism, and other “isms”). Students reported feeling an increased level of comfort addressing these issues because of their increased knowledge of institutional systems gained through their work with TVRS. Interestingly, students felt responsible for the outcomes of individuals like those they served in the TVRS program due to this increase in knowledge, which influenced their heightened desire to increase their participatory citizenship (e.g., voting for policy changes, electing representatives, pro prison-reform). To illustrate, one student reported:

“As far as participatory citizenship, I kind of fell off voting, but when I realized I'm in a program that is funded through the AG's office, and we could end up having an administration that does not value helping marginalized individuals and people who have committed crimes become citizens, like productive citizens back into society, it kind of scared me, so I did vote this year and really took an active role in trying to promote everyone else to vote.”

On an informal level, students also noted the need to share their experiences and knowledge with their peers, family members and others.

“And I think that through just mentioning it ... even if you just mention it to one person, one of these people are going to go out and go to their friends and just be like, “You, my friend had to go do this today, he solved this today... Maybe we should look more into it.” Maybe just create that one spark of change.”

DISCUSSION

Short-term service-learning (SL), in which students learn by engaging in organized service activities, is an important pedagogical technique increasing in implementation within higher education curricula.^{1,2} The findings of this qualitative study suggest that these experiences have the potential to shape: students' beliefs about the ability to create positive social change in communities; how students perceive and interact with individuals from marginalized groups; and the likelihood that students will get involved in social

change efforts in the future. Specifically, undergraduate and graduate students in this study noted how their participation in the TVRS project has strengthened the belief that they themselves, as well as the collective efforts of others, can create positive changes in the community. The TVRS project exposed students to life experiences different than their own, which seemed to help students better understand how societal structures and forces, such as power and oppression, can impact an individual's life outcomes for the better and worse. In addition, spending time with and directly hearing the perspective of individuals who have been marginalized in society seemed to reduce intergroup anxiety experienced – ambiguous feelings of discomfort or anxiety when interacting with members of other groups – and motivate students to be involved formally and informally in civic activities that can help to improve community-level outcomes.³⁸

Despite the benefits reported by students, it is critical to consider whether an SL experience is a good fit for all stakeholders involved, including students, community partners, and community residents. Previous research indicates that it is difficult to complete a meaningful project in one semester or shorter period.^{8,39} Based on interviews conducted with 67 community organizations, Stoecker and Tryon found that a common concern among agency staff is that students are unable to prepare, carry out, and meaningfully reflect on a project all within a one-semester time frame.⁸ In addition, the community agencies noted that the quality of student performance varies from individual to individual, and without careful monitoring and oversight, community partners may receive substandard performance or products, the amount of service provided by students may not produce enough benefits for either the community partner or the student to justify the effort, especially because short-term projects tend to generate less commitment on the part of the student.⁸ Also, short-term commitments may not be a good fit for organizations that provide direct services where developing trust with clients is an important component of the work (e.g., group counseling with homeless youth); one of the main challenges is that college/university students likely leave the organization before (or just as) they establish important bonds with clients.⁸ Finally, the mismatch between campus and community calendars is a general problem, even for projects that continue beyond a semester. Breaks in the academic calendar (e.g., winter break, summer break) can place burdens on organizations, and agencies have to find additional resources when students are not obligated to work during these “break” periods. The mismatch between the campus and community calendars is especially problematic when projects are not completed or input from the community organization cannot be integrated before a break occurs. Given these concerns, it is critical that SL projects evaluate the fit for all stakeholders involved before, as well as during, the experience.^{8,40}

Previous researchers have argued that SL experiences are likely to have a significant impact on student development to the extent that they involve the following key processes: construction of knowledge *via* student reflection on their experiences, the development of new conceptualizations, and experimenting with these new conceptualizations.^{13,14} A critical aspect of this study's short-term SL experience seemed to be students' exposure to significant social problems in the local community, in conjunction with

a promising intervention program that involved community stakeholders. Providing exposure to both components allowed students opportunities to reflect on the depth and complexity of social problems, as well as learn about positive solutions generated and implemented by community members. In this way, the TVRS project could demonstrate to students the interplay between societal structures, individual outcomes, and the role that citizens can play in promoting positive outcomes at the individual- and community-levels. As noted by one student, being involved in the TVRS project allowed him to change “tragedy to commitment” and motivated him to contribute on a deeper, personal level. This type of change is the critical shift that Stoecker has described as important for moving students from an orientation of anger (about social injustices) to action (to create social change).³⁹

Another key process that likely contributed to changes in student outcomes involved participants’ experience of intergroup anxiety. Collected interviews revealed that students serving the TVRS population commonly experienced intergroup anxiety during the start of their service; however, students also reported developing an increased sense of comfort interacting with participants and, in turn, attributed a strengthened sense of CSSE and CSGE to these enhanced interpersonal skills. Intergroup contact theory suggests feelings of prejudice and intergroup anxiety felt towards marginalized populations can be reduced *via* TVRS and other short-term SL experiences because students and program participants collaborate to achieve the common goal of the program and are further supported by stakeholders within the campus and outside community.^{41,42} Consistent with recent research, these findings suggest that SL experiences that align with tenets of intergroup contact theory – specifically promoting cooperation between students and the people they serve and providing institutional support for their service – facilitate the greatest attitude changes towards marginalized populations.⁴³

The primary strength of this study was the use of a qualitative approach to examine under-examined research constructs in short-term SL. Qualitative data collection and analysis strategies allowed us to discover nuances not identified in previous reports. The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size. McCracken suggests that at least six cases are needed to accurately examine specific topics in qualitative data analysis.³⁷ Thus, a larger sample size (as was originally targeted) would have increased our confidence that we reached saturation of themes across interviews; in addition, a larger sample would have allowed for the study of potential moderators of findings, such as gender, ethnicity, type of service conducted. Despite this limitation, these students’ perspectives lay important groundwork for future studies, as the constructs under investigation in the current study have received limited empirical attention in short-term service-learning research.³⁷ Another limitation of this study is that participants reported about program activities that took place in the past (i.e., recall gap). The interviewers asked specific questions to orient participants’ memory to the timeframe of program activities, but a more effective technique, but future research might consider using a life calendar approach. Life calendars are used to collect data about different domains of an individual’s life and helps to increase data quality by improving people’s memory of retrospective events.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

The study limitations notwithstanding, the findings suggest that short-term SL has the potential to be a high-impact experience that helps students construct knowledge, develop new conceptualizations, and experiment with these new conceptualizations.^{13,14} Consistent with previous findings about service-learning, in general, student reflection appears to represent a key process. Indeed, Bowman et al argue that SL reflection opportunities and academic integration play a larger role in determining student gains than the duration of SL experiences.¹⁶ Thus, when designing short-term SL experiences, it is critical to consider the desired learning outcomes, as well as the specific reflection activities.^{7,18} Previous research offers valuable guidance in this area, particularly regarding the conceptualization of reflection and critical learning, as well as critical time points to engage in reflection during service-learning.^{45,46}

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Original Research

The Utility of Criminal History Questions in Community Psychology Program Applications

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ABSTRACT

Aim

Access to higher education is a valuable protective factor against recidivism. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles criminal justice involved individuals need to overcome to further their education. This study examined universities with community psychology programs in order to assess: a) the extent of requests for an applicant's criminal history, and b) whether asking these questions had any effect on rates of crimes.

Method

We compared the crime rates for institutions that did and did not ask about an applicant's past involvement with the criminal justice system.

Results

No statistically significant differences in reported crimes were observed between those academic settings that asked or did not ask for this information.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that criminal background checks do not support safety concerns as the reason for continuing to request this personal information on applications. These types of stigma-inducing and intrusive questions conflict with the values of community psychology.

Keywords

Ban the Box; Criminal justice involved individual reentry; Community psychology; Policy reform; Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately 65 million Americans have a criminal record,¹ which can interfere with chances of seeking and obtaining employment, higher education, and ultimately reintegrating back into society. It is unfortunate that 60-75% of released prisoners cannot find employment within a year of their release from prison.² In addition, these poor employment options are exacerbated when criminal justice involved individuals belong to minority groups.³ Inmates who can secure gainful employment after incarceration are 50% less likely to recidivate than those inmates that do not.¹

Despite the importance of employment, many em-

ployers remain reluctant to hire individuals with criminal histories. Employers are sometimes concerned that criminal justice involved individuals lack relevant job skills and that their past criminal behavior could endanger their business as well as the customers that patronize them.⁴ However, Barling et al⁴ review of the relevant literature indicates that many violent crimes committed in the workplace are perpetrated by non-employees. In fact, criminal justice involved individuals are less likely to commit crimes in the workplace than employees without a criminal record.⁵

As a result of school shootings and acts of terrorism, background checks have been enacted in academic institutions. The subsequent use of background checks in college admission

applications has increased the difficulty of criminal justice involved individuals' attainment of college degrees.⁶ These admission standards may be even more burdensome when the applicant is from a lower socioeconomic and/or minority background. Further, criminal justice involved individuals are oftentimes ineligible to receive many forms of financial assistance intended to help them in requiring economic assistance to pursue their education.⁷ In fact, the Pell grant was restructured to be less accessible to students with a criminal record, despite evidence that education is inversely related to recidivism.⁸ Clearly, reintegration into society is influenced by the rising cost of education, difficulty gaining admission into higher education with criminal records, and difficulty of maintaining gainful employment with criminal records.^{7,8} These are important considerations as higher educational attainment is an important predictor of earning potential. For criminally justice involved individuals, possessing a postsecondary education may help to alleviate the impact of criminal records on employment, as well as reduce feelings of disenfranchisement that may have internalized during, or even before, incarceration.⁹

The stigma attached to individuals with criminal records can have a profound impact on a criminal justice involved individual's self-esteem and subsequent success.¹⁰ Some applicants, upon seeing a question pertaining to criminal history, might abandon the application process, fearing rejection because of a prior conviction.¹¹ Oser¹² has described inmates experiencing clinically significant difficulties with self-esteem due to this application process. A qualitative study showed that all criminally justice involved participants had unique struggles in succeeding academically in addition to the stigma they dealt with from both their peers as well as faculty and staff.¹³ Custer¹⁴ found that students with prior involvement in the criminal justice system felt particularly distressed by the additional screening they had to go through before their acceptance. This study also found that none of the admitted students had violated university policy while enrolled. As suggested above, employment is a major predictor in regards to recidivism, and education increases the employability of criminal justice involved individuals. Several studies have examined the benefits of education that occur in correctional settings. A study on prisoners enrolled in educational programs while incarcerated in North Carolina found that inmates who received an associate's or bachelor's degree in comparison to those that had not, were less likely to recidivate three years after their release than inmates.¹⁵ In fact, the results of this study indicated that the level of education plays an important role in recidivism. Stevens and Ward¹⁵ found that all offenders who completed a four-year degree did not recidivate during a three-year follow-up. Nally and colleagues¹⁶ found that offenders who did not participate in a correctional education program were 370% more likely to recidivate than those who did attend such programs. This study also indicated that those who attained a higher education level while incarcerated earned higher wages if employed post-release. Employment and better wages result in economic stability for these individuals, allowing them to successfully reintegrate into the community. To summarize, there is a general consensus is that correctional education plays a pivotal role in rehabilitation, and is a predictor of post-incarceration behavior, as those who seek to receive an education are less likely to continue with a criminal agenda.

Clearly, there is a need to address discriminatory practices that act as hurdles in furthering education so that candidates are not rejected solely because of their criminal history. The Ban the Box movement addresses this need by not having questions regarding past criminal involvement on hiring forms. Started in 2004 by the civil rights organization All of Us or None, which is a group of formerly incarcerated individuals, this movement calls for policy reform during the hiring process.¹ The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission endorsed this movement in 2012, publishing a mandate suggesting that generally disqualifying applicants based on criminal history alone may violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.² Laws passed due to this movement govern at what point in the hiring process employers are allowed to inquire about a potential applicant's criminal history.² Hawaii was the first state to pass this Ban the Box legislation, and their criminal justice involved individuals population has shown a dramatic decrease in recidivism. Many counties, cities, and states have since enacted Ban the Box laws, hoping to help reduce high rates of recidivism and unemployment.¹⁷

Concerns about the safety of college campuses rose in 1989 after a student at Lehigh University, Jeanne Clery, was sexually assaulted and murdered by another student. Although the perpetrator had no criminal record, the victim's parents found that the school failed to report 38 violent crimes that occurred on that campus. After campaigning for a national crime-reporting procedure at college and university campuses, the Clery Act was added to the Higher Education Act of 1968 in 1991.¹⁸ This act requires all US colleges and universities who receive federal funding to report campus crime data that occurred during the previous calendar year. These data can be accessed online through the school's website or on the Department of Education's web page. It should be noted that although this may reflect the level of crime on a particular school's campus, the statistics do not mandate schools to indicate if the perpetrators or victims were students. After the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University shooting in 2007, school officials and parents became more vigilant over campus safety. That same year, the Common Application, a standard application used by approximately 300 universities, added questions inquiring about an applicant's high school disciplinary record and criminal background.¹⁹ Other schools adopted similar questions to their personal applications shortly thereafter. Institutions believed that this information would help assure parents and potential students that all due diligence was being taken during the admissions process to protect students from violent activity.

Critics of allowing criminal justice involved individuals into universities have made claims about liability of negligent admission. Jurisprudence thus far, however, has not held universities liable for such decisions.¹⁴ In fact, Olszewska²⁰ found no statistically significant differences between the crime rates of universities that did or did not screen for criminal history during the application process. This indicates that a student's criminal background has no significant impact on the safety of college campuses. However, this study is 10 years old, and campus crime trends may have changed over time.

The current study was similar to Olszewska's²⁰ investiga-

tion. A notable difference is that the present study only examined universities with Community Psychology programs. Community Psychology is built on a foundation of social justice, community action, and policy reform.²¹ Therefore, it would be worthwhile to assess if universities with such programs ask stigmatizing questions about an applicant’s criminal history. We first wanted to assess the extent that these universities asked applicants about their past criminal involvement. We hypothesized that there would be no statistically significant differences in crime rates between universities that did and did not inquire into an applicant’s criminal history.

METHODS

Data Collection

The sample included universities the authors could locate in the US, using several sources, including the website of the Society for Community Research and Action.²¹ The criminal data used in the current study were downloaded from the United States Department of Education Campus Safety and Security website.²² Two universities in the database did not adequately report their crime data according to the Clery act and were subsequently excluded from analyses.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions²³ defined very small institutions as those with a student body of fewer than 1,000 students, small institutions as those with student bodies ranging from 1,000 to 2,999 students, medium institutions as those with 3,000 to 9,999 students, and large institutions as those with 10,000 or more students. The United States Census Bureau²⁴ defined a rural area as one with fewer than 2,500 people, an urban cluster area as one with 2,500 to 50,000 people, and an urban area as one with a population of 50,000 or more people.

Procedure

All study procedures were conducted according to the APA’s

guidelines for ethical research. No identifiable information was retained about the institution’s included in analyses. Data were collected from the Campus Safety and Security website and coded into SPSS.²² This website collects reported crime statistics and fire statistics of all postsecondary institutions that receive Title IV, i.e. federal, funding. The relevant crime statistics collected from 2014, the most recent year that data were available. The types of crime were demarcated into four categories: sex crimes, property crimes, violent crimes, and total number of reported crimes. Sex crimes were defined as any crime classified as sexual assault, fondling, and statutory rape. Property crimes included arson, vandalism, robbery, theft, and burglary; violent crimes contained murder, manslaughter, and aggravated assault. Mann-Whitney U-tests were used to assess for statistically significant differences between the crime rates of schools that did and did not ask about criminal history.

RESULTS

Fifty-six percent (N = 14) of the schools did not ask whereas 44% (N=11) of the schools did about criminal history. The current study’s sample consisted primarily of large institutions with a few smaller sized universities. A majority of schools were located in urban settings, with some present in urban cluster areas. There were no rural institutions in the sample. A majority of the institutions samples were private. Table 1 provides demographic information on our sample, grouped by presence or absence of criminal inquiry in admissions applications. Table 2 indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in the proportions of criminal inquiry (asked or not asked) as a function of school type (private *versus* public). There are neither statistically significant differences between the median populations of schools that did or did not inquire into an applicant’s criminal history (see Table 3) nor statistically significant differences between the proportions of criminal inquiry (asked or not asked) as a function of urban type (clusters *vs.* areas) school as shown in Table 4.

Table 5 presents overall outcome data for this study. Regarding the total number of crimes reported on and around university campuses, there are no statistically significant differences

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Inquiry		No Inquiry		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Funding Type						
Public	4	36.4%	6	42.9%	10	40.0%
Private	7	63.6%	8	57.1%	15	60.0%
Institution Size						
Very Small	0	0.00%	1	7.1%	1	4.0%
Small	2	18.2%	2	14.3%	4	16.0%
Medium	1	9.1%	2	14.3%	3	12.0%
Large	8	72.7%	9	64.3%	17	68.0%
Setting						
Urban Clusters	4	36.4%	3	21.4%	7	28.0%
Urban	7	63.6%	11	78.6%	18	72.0%

Table 2. University Type as a Function of Criminal Inquiry

	Public	Private	Marginal Row Freq.	X ²	p
Criminal Inquiry	4(4.4)	7(6.6)	11		
No Inquiry	6(5.6)	8(8.4)	14		
Marginal Column Freq.	10	15	25		

Note: Parenthetical values are expected frequencies.

Table 3. Median Enrollment Size as a Function of Criminal Inquiry

	N	Median	U	P
Criminal Inquiry	4(4.4)	7(6.6)	66	0.79
No Inquiry	6(5.6)	8(8.4)		

Table 4. University Type Institution Setting as a Function of Criminal Inquiry

	Urban Cluster	Urban	Marginal Row Freq.	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Criminal Inquiry	4(3.1)	7(7.9)	11		
No Inquiry	3(3.9)	11(10.1)	14	0.682	0.409
Marginal Column Freq.	7	18	25		

Note: Parenthetical values are expected frequencies.

Table 5. Types of Crime as a Function of Criminal Inquiry

	Inquiry (Median)	No Inquiry (Median)	<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
Violent Crimes	8	0.5	43.5	0.07
Sex Crimes	17	13.5	63.5	0.47
Property Crimes	54	20	67.0	0.61
Total Crimes	90	35.5	62.5	0.43

between the universities that asked for versus those that did not ask for criminal information regarding the total number of crimes reported on and around university campuses, the amount of violent crimes committed on and around the universities' campuses, whether they indicated committing sexual crimes on their applications, and whether committing property crimes.

DISCUSSION

The current study's major finding is that 44% of schools offering community psychology graduate programs do request criminal history from applicants, but there were no significant differences in the reported crime rates of schools that requested criminal history *versus* those that did not. Our study therefore corroborates the findings of a previous study²⁰ that was conducted approximately 10 years ago. These findings raise questions regarding the practice of universities asking these types of stigmatizing questions as part of their application process.

Inquiries into criminal history act as a barrier for reentry into the community, especially at institutions of higher learning. Those with past experience in the criminal justice system already struggle with the stigma of their criminal history.¹³ Those with prior criminal backgrounds confront unique institutional barriers that compound the difficulties they face attempting to reintegrate into society.^{14,25} When considering poor outcomes already associated with incarceration (e.g. low self-esteem, illiteracy, emotional maladjustment), institutional discrimination makes it more difficult to gain entrance into educational settings for criminal justice involved individuals.^{12,13} Institutions of higher learning need to accommodate rather than stigmatize these students, to increase the chances that they can become productive members of society after serving time in jail or prison. In fact, there are also clear benefits of having individuals with such unique life experiences in institutions of higher learning.²⁵ The presence of these life experiences on college campuses could very well improve the quality of intellectual discourse in the classroom.

Community psychology is a field that tries to promote competence and well-being as well as reduce stigma and discriminatory practices.²¹ Yet, 44% of these institutions unwittingly support stigmatizing practices regarding criminal history questions on admissions applications, which could discourage students from applying to them, and/or make students self-conscious and fearful of studying within institutions that endorse such barriers in the application process. These practices represent non-negligible risks of further marginalizing criminal justice involved individuals. There is a pressing need for such settings to reconsider these types of

questions being part of their admissions process to better reflect the principles and core values of community psychology.

LIMITATIONS

This study had a number of limitations. For example, there may be other factors not accounted for in the current analysis that contribute to campus crime rates, beyond questions about a student's criminal history (e.g., unemployment rates, poverty, etc). In addition, a causal inference would be hard to establish given the small sample size, and the reductions in power.

Another limitation is that this study was cross-sectional in nature, and more longitudinal studies are needed. In addition, future studies might include different sources for crime statistics to produce a clearer understanding of university crime rates in relation to the criminal justice involved individual population. For example, the Clery act does not require universities to report whether the crimes committed on campus were by students or non-students. Further, a more ambitious, comprehensive study of a larger number of universities in the United States may provide more insight into predictive factors of an institution's crime rate. Finally, unreported crimes would not have been considered in our analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study corroborates the findings of Olszewska,²⁰ and suggests that criminal history questions do not have an effect on crime rates. It was surprising to find that these questions are currently being asked at 44% of institutions that have Community Psychology graduate training programs. Such questions may unfairly discriminate against people with criminal justice involvement. It is not enough for members of this field to develop community interventions for groups outside their academic settings, but it is critical for the field to be self-reflective and examine whether their institutional practices match the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of their field, and to take action remove these types of stigmatizing questions from their admissions forms.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Commentary

Behavioral Couples Therapy for Substance Use Disorders

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ABSTRACT

The results of numerous studies over the past four decades have consistently revealed the effectiveness of couple and family-based approaches for drug and alcohol abuse. Behavioral couples therapy (BCT) is a conjoint approach which has been consistently shown to produce fewer substance-related issues, greater abstinence, and improved dyadic functioning compared to individual-based treatments for married and cohabitating couples. The purpose of the present review is to (a) provide the theoretical rationale for the use of couple's therapy for substance-abusing patients and (b) describe theoretical and practical underpinnings of Behavioral couples therapy for substance use disorders (BCT-SUD) along with key components of this intervention.

Keywords

Couples therapy; Disorders; Treatment, BCT.

Abbreviations

BCT: Behavioral Couples Therapy; SUD: Substance Use Disorder; G-BCT: Group BCT; S-BCT: Standard BCT.

BEHAVIORAL COUPLES THERAPY FOR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

It is now widely accepted among scholars and clinicians that families play an important part in the development and maintenance of substance misuse problems. In fact, greater numbers of providers at a variety of levels of care (e.g., outpatient, in-patient) have begun incorporating non substance-abusing family members into treatment planning to help support the substance abusers attempts at sobriety. The results of numerous studies have revealed the effectiveness of couple and family-based approaches for drug and alcohol abuse. Behavioral couples therapy (BCT) is a conjoint approach which has been consistently shown to produce fewer substance-related issues, greater abstinence, and improved dyadic functioning compared to individual-based treatments for married and cohabitating couples.¹ This finding has also been supported by the results of several meta-analyses, which found medium effect sizes favoring the use of family and/or couples therapy relative to other forms of treatment.¹

When taken as a whole, these findings seem to support the idea that partner-involved treatments are the most broadly efficacious in treating substance use disorders. There is not only substantial empirical support for the use of couple-based treatments in terms of improvements in primary targeted outcomes (e.g., substance use, relationship and family adjustment), but also in other areas that are of clear public health significance (e.g., intimate partner violence, cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness).

Behavioral couples therapy for substance use disorders (BCT-SUD) is a theoretically-based, manualized, and empirically supported treatment based on social learning theory, which suggests that substance abusing couples engage in reciprocal interactional patterns characterized by punishment rather than mutual positive reinforcement of relationship benefitting behaviors.^{2,3} The purpose of this commentary is to provide a rationale for the use of couples therapy for treating substance use disorders and describe the main components of this intervention.

BEHAVIORAL COUPLES THERAPY FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The link between substance use and relationship distress may be best conceptualized as “reciprocal causality”.⁴ Alcoholism and drug abuse by one partner often contributes to relationship problems (e.g., high-levels of relationship dissatisfaction, instability, conflict, sexual dissatisfaction, psychological distress, partner violence). Simultaneously, relationship problems are strongly linked to substance use and may serve as a trigger for lapse or (or relapse) among clients—both during and after treatment.⁵⁻⁷ Thus, substance use and relationship problems seem to reinforce one another in reciprocal patterns which can be difficult to disengage from.

BCT-SUD has two primary objectives that are based on the areas discussed above: (a) eliminate (or reduce) substance use and (b) alter dyadic and family interaction patterns to create healthier relationships, which can support the client’s recovery efforts and is more conducive to long-term recovery. Simply stated, the goal of BCT is to strengthen the relationship by teaching the partners skills for re-introducing caring behaviors, improving communication and conflict resolution skills, and engaging in continuing recovery activities as a way to promote long-term stability and relapse prevention. The therapist enlists the partner’s support in the client’s recovery and encourages the partners to engage in healthier behaviors as a unit (improved communication, conflict resolution, etc.).

PRIMARY BEHAVIORAL COUPLES THERAPY TREATMENT ELEMENTS

As discussed by Geel,⁸ historically BCT-SUD was divided into various treatment phases each concurrently addressing substance use and relationship dysfunction. In the first phase, the engagement phase, the therapist determines whether the couple as a unit is a viable candidate for BCT by assessing the couple’s motivation, commitment, and goals by inquiring about each of these areas in initial sessions to help the therapist and each partner understand the current state of the relationship. It’s not uncommon for partners to have discrepant levels of motivation. In such situations, partners are encouraged to follow-through with BCT activities (in-session and in between) and to consider using the first three sessions as a chance to determine if BCT is a good fit and if relationship satisfaction is improving or not. Following this is the first “active” phase of treatment, during which the therapist assists the substance-abusing patient with managing the substance. Subsequently, treatment moves on to improving the couple’s relationship *via* analysis of and skill-building within the relationship (e.g., re-introduction of caring behaviors [Catch your partner doing something nice, shared rewarding activities, caring days], communication skills training [verbal, non-verbal communication, use of “I” statements], conflict resolution skills [Time-out, solve problem-solving method]), which is then followed by the ongoing recovery stage. More recently, there has been a shift to recognizing that these stages are not mutually exclusive, and that the treatment and joining process likely begins with first client contact.

The primary method for addressing problematic substance use involves the use of a recovery contract (RC) in which the couple, with the help of the therapist, identifies positive and supportive activities, which are conducive to both short- and long-term recovery and may include self-help activities, church groups, and other positive, abstinence-related activities that the client (and partner) may find helpful. The trust discussion is one of the central activities of the RC and involves the partners engaging in a daily trust discussion in which the client states his or her intent to not use drugs or alcohol and the partner thanking the client for his or her efforts and offering positive support as needed. For example, a simple trust discussion script might include the following statements:

Client: I've been sober for the past 24 hours and plan to be sober for the next 24 hours. Thanks for all your help and support.

Partner: Thanks for being sober for the past 24 hours and plans to be sober for the next 24 hours; let me know how I can help and support.

The trust discussion is meant to be short and positive and serve as a way to begin rebuilding trust between partners. Although clients may initially believe the trust discussion to be exclusively about their drinking, it also can be very powerful for partners who have endured a great deal of lying about substance use and worry about future use, despite not explicitly talking about it. As partners become more comfortable with this daily ritual, they are encouraged to personalize the language to make the content more meaningful for them. Urine tests are also often used to provide objective evidence to support the client’s claims. In addition, the couple is asked to agree to four promises during their participation in BCT which include: 1) agreement to focus on the present instead of the past, 2) participate in home practice between sessions, 3) engage in role-plays and other in-session activities, and 4) not engage in “angry touching” (partner violence). These four areas have been identified as trouble spots for many couples so agreeing to these promises at the beginning of BCT can be helpful in keeping the couple on track. Clients are also asked each week about urges and urges to use and how he or she managed these feelings. Self-help and other positive supportive activities are also encouraged as part of the RC.

Given the consequences of long-term substance abuse on relationships, many partners have stopped engaging in caring behaviors toward one another and may not be communicating at all, especially with emotionally-charged topics. In an effort to address these concerns, partners are encouraged to re-introduce caring behaviors back into the relationship through activities such as caring days and shared rewarding activities. Partners are also taught basic communication skills to begin to communicate more efficiently and effectively with one another. Relatedly, these skills are then used as a foundation for managing and discussing conflict and how to ensure each partner feels heard and understood by the other.

Given that group therapy is the most frequently used treatment modality in substance abuse treatment,¹ compared a

rolling admission Group BCT (G-BCT) format the Standard BCT (S-BCT) approach. Unfortunately, results of this study indicated that in the last 6-9 months of the 12-month follow-up period, G-BCT produced significantly worse substance and relationship outcomes as opposed to S-BCT. More specifically, there was a decrease in days abstinent over time, as well as lower relationship satisfaction over time. It is important to note that in some instances, the aforementioned outcomes were comparable upon immediate completion of S-BCT and G-BCT, but that differences arose once more time elapsed.¹ These results are not exactly ideal, but this type of research concerning G-BCT is still in its beginning phases.

CONCLUSION

Couples therapy as an intervention for alcoholism and drug abuse has made substantial strides since its inception in the 1970s. From a clinical vantage point, a fundamental goal for BCT-SUD researchers and clinicians continues to be the transfer of this well-established treatment technology to substance abuse treatment providers such that BCT will be more available to drug- and alcohol-abusing couples who are likely to benefit from participating in the program. Group formats of BCT could potentially aid in dissemination, but research in this area is still in infancy.¹ McGovern et al⁹ concluded that in order for treatments to be successfully disseminated, investigators must clearly demonstrate the relevance of the treatment to clinicians and staff, even if empirical support is already established.⁹ Other factors to consider include degree of difficulty in implementation, how closely (or not) the treatment is aligned with the therapist's preferred theoretical orientation or agency counseling approach, cost of providing treatment, and whether or not the treatment fills a perceived area of need for the clinic. Along these lines, development of web-based BCT-SUD training materials has the potential to reach a much wider audience and be a more cost-effective option. Each of these areas may serve as a potential barrier to successful dissemination of the treatment.

Moreover, substance abuse treatment research is beginning to shift away from a "one-size-fits-all" perspective and move toward adaptive interventions which call for different dosages of treatment to be employed strategically with patients across time dependent on severity of presenting issues and concerns. Given the heterogeneity in patient characteristics and response to treatment, future studies are needed to develop a tailored BCT intervention based on treatment algorithms that dictate treatment modifications triggered by the patient's initial response and changes in symptom severity.¹⁰

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