Student Development During the Occupy SLU Movement Through the Lens of Perry

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Whitney Linsenmeyer is an Instructor in Nutrition and Dietetics at Saint Louis University (SLU). During the events of Occupy SLU she was a doctoral student in the School of Education. Tommy Lucas is a SLU doctoral candidate in the School of Education. Lucas worked closely with students during the events of Occupy SLU, but was not an active participant. His primary research focuses on impact and outcome assessments of higher education institutions and longitudinal assessments after crisis incidents. Linsenmeyer and Lucas have published work related to Occupy SLU in the Western Journal of Black Studies, *the* Journal of College Admission, *and the* International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Linsenmeyer and Lucas' work explores the experiences of 19 students during Occupy SLU in order to better understand how higher education professionals may leverage social justice movements and periods of civil unrest to advance student development.

Abstract

Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development serves as a seminal theory on student development. The civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri during the 2014-2015 school year resulted in demonstrations on college campuses throughout the country, including the Occupy SLU movement at Saint Louis University. In this mixed-methods phenomenological study, 19 students were interviewed about their experiences during the movement. The research questions underlying this study include: How were SLU students impacted by the events in Ferguson, Missouri during the 2014-2015 school year? How can Perry's theory be applied to student development during this historic time? How can these findings be utilized to better understand and support student development during periods of civil unrest? The participants' stories are analyzed through the lens of Perry's theory using the constant comparative method. Evidence of Perry's four stages of development emerged from the data, including dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment to relativism, as well as evidence of his three deflections from growth, including temporizing, escape, and retreat. The findings of this research serve to capture the student experiences on campus during Occupy SLU, inform higher education professionals on the impact of this social movement, and provide further validation for Perry's theory.

Introduction: Perry's Theory

William Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development serves as a seminal theory on student development.[1] Since its inception in 1968, Perry's theory has been applied to students in a wide range of disciplines and settings, such as counseling, academic advising, student affairs, teacher education, medical education, music education, education of international students, and athletics.[2]

Perry's original theory was based upon nine positions that were considered to be on a continuum of development: Basic duality, full dualism, early multiplicity, late multiplicity, contextual relativism, pre-commitment, commitment, challenges to

commitment, and post-commitment. The nine positions have since been condensed into four concepts: duality, represented by dichotomous thinking and an absolute right or wrong; multiplicity, characterized by an ability to accept diverse viewpoints; relativism, wherein all opinions are not equally valid and must be substantiated; and commitment to relativism, represented by a shift away from cognitive development and the beginning of ethical development as decisions are made contextually. Perry considered each position to be a static point of view and development as occurring during transition between two positions.[3]

In addition, Perry's theory includes three deflections from growth. Temporizing is characterized by a pause in development to allow for a rest period or growth within one position. Escape refers to a withdrawal from responsibility second to feelings of alienation. Retreat is a temporary return to the position of dualism second to feelings of being overwhelmed. Thus, development is not considered a linear process, but rather a continuum marked by possible deviations.[4]

Perry's theory has been applied to a wide variety of students. For instance, theorists Howard-Hamilton and Sina suggested that college athletes may remain in the dualistic stage throughout their educational careers given the "absolute rules and regulations of behavior" imbued by coaches and emphasized within their sport.[5] Meanwhile, Jennifer James applied Perry's theory to education students in a methods class both to identify students' developmental stage and as a reminder that teaching should be "aimed at meeting students in their current cognitive position, nudging them into the next."[6] In his work with music education students, Michael Palmer noted the need for "exposure to diverse points of view, critical thinking, and experience" to assist students in reaching the stage of commitment to relativism, where they can then appreciate context-based teaching methods in different types of music classrooms.[7] Perry's theory has also been applied to medical students, international students, and within academic advising.[8] As evidenced by existing research, the application of Perry's theory to various student groups demonstrates its

versatility and relevance in various education settings.

Occupy SLU

One historic event that has influenced the development of college and university students nationally is the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson. This incident accelerated the social movement widely known as Black Lives Matter.[9] In St. Louis, tensions in the city escalated up to and following the release of the grand jury decision not to indict Wilson, resulting in Governor Jay Nixon twice declaring a state of emergency.[10] Throughout the nation, colleges and universities witnessed student protests of the Black Lives Matter movement.[11]

At Saint Louis University, a Jesuit institution located in midtown St. Louis, the demonstrations were termed "Occupy SLU." The movement was characterized by the peaceful gathering of over 1,000 stakeholders around the university's clock tower over the course of six days.[12] The university remained open, though faculty were permitted to cancel their classes or accommodate students as they saw fit.[13] A 13-point agreement known as the Clock Tower Accords marked the end of the protests, outlining a commitment to various initiatives such as attracting more students and faculty of color and advancing opportunities in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the metropolitan area.[14]

A student teach-in during Occupy SLU. Photo by Saint Louis University

Purpose

Participation in a social movement may be a significant factor in the development of college and university students.[15] As such, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the Occupy SLU movement on Saint Louis University students by applying Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development. The research questions underlying this study were: How were Saint Louis University students impacted by the events in Ferguson during the 2014-2015 school year? How can Perry's theory be applied to student development during this historic time? How can these findings be utilized to better understand and support student development during periods of civil unrest? This research serves to capture the student experiences on campus during Occupy SLU, inform higher education professionals on the impact of this social movement, and provide further validation for Perry's theory.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods phenomenological design. Participants were recruited from the Saint Louis University student body of approximately 12,900 students through various means including departmental emails, flyers, and word-of-mouth. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample that was diverse in terms of demographic information, including gender, ethnicity, enrollment status, and student status. The study was approved by the Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board.

The initial data collection involved a brief 11-question survey, which asked basic demographic information and an interview opt-in question. The survey instrument was administered online via Qualtrics Survey Software to collect basic demographic information regarding gender, ethnicity, enrollment status, and classification as an undergraduate, graduate, or professional student.[16] Student participants who "opted-in" to the study interview were then contacted and scheduled for a semi-structured interview with a member of the research team.

Interviews with the student participants took place between March and April of 2016 and were limited to 90 minutes each. The research team continued to interview participants until both members agreed saturation of the data had been reached. Both research team members used a semi-structured interview guide to interview the student participants and understand their perceptions of various aspects of experience during the unrest. The interview guide included questions pertaining to students' overall reactions, the campus, use of social media, experience in the classroom, and communication with friends and family off campus.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a member of the research team using Microsoft Word. Upon completion of the transcription, the research team analyzed the data using the constant comparative method, an inductive method used to develop themes by continually comparing incidents within the same set of data.[17] The four stages of Perry's theory (dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment to relativism) and the three deflections from growth (temporizing, escape, retreat) were used as a priori themes when analyzing the data. Thus, the results are organized into demographic data obtained through the initial survey, followed by emergent themes from the interviews as they fell within the four stages and three deflections from growth outlined in Perry's theory.

Results

Demographics

The initial survey population (n=37) included student participants identifying as undergraduate, graduate, and professional studies students. A total of 22 student participants opted-in to the semi-structured interviews. However, three student participants (13%) did not matriculate through to the end of the interviews. The final interview population (n=19) consisted of student participants from multiple institutions, although 95% of the respondents identified as attending Saint Louis University during the unrest in Ferguson in 2014 and 2015. At the time of the interviews 10% of the student participants had graduated from the university and were working outside of the university or were attending a different institution during the academic year 2015-2016.

Student participant statuses were characterized as 10% part-time and 90% full-time, 63% undergraduate and 32% graduate. Sixty-three percent of the student participants identified as female and 36% identified as male. The racial and ethnic breakdown of the student participants in the study is reflective of the population of the university with 73% of the respondents identifying as white or Caucasian, 9% as African American, 9% as Asian, 5% self-identified as Hispanic, and 5% choosing not to disclose the information. Student participants were also asked to identify their socioeconomic status (SES) as being low (18%), medium (68%) or high (9%), and 5% chose not to indicate their SES. Although not a question within our survey, 14% of the student participants self-identified as being actively affiliated with the military or having a military veteran status.

Emergent Themes: Four Stages of Perry's Theory

The following section provides a brief characterization of each stage of Perry's theory, followed by emergent themes from student experiences during the Occupy SLU movement. The number of students who exhibited each stage is expressed as a percentage of the total sample size. Note that participants may have exhibited different stages at various points throughout the interview. For instance, a given participant may have demonstrated dualistic thinking regarding their communication with other students and multiplistic thinking regarding their perceptions of the university's executive communications. Sample quotes are used to illustrate each theme and are documented verbatim from the student interviews. The four stages include dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment to relativism.

Dualism

The stage of dualism is characterized by "black and white" thinking in which there is an absolute right or wrong answer. In a college or university setting, professors are viewed as the keepers of knowledge, and students are the receivers. Evidence of dualistic thinking emerged among 42% of participants as students described a right or wrong side to the controversies occurring on

campus and in the surrounding area, or discretely "anti-cop" versus "pro-police" positions. For instance, one student described, "There are so many people who I would consider to be on the wrong side of this argument."[18] When asked about conversations with friends or family off campus, another student reported, "Some had good opinions, some had bad opinions."

Evidence of dualism also emerged as students felt the need to pick one side over another. When asked what the atmosphere was like on campus, one student recalled, "It was definitely tense — like, you had to pick sides." This dichotomy was exacerbated on social media. One student described, "I defriended a few people just who were too one-sided and got out of control." Thus, dualistic thinking emerged both from students' own thinking, as well as their observance of the opinions voiced by those around them.

Multiplicity

Next, the stage of multiplicity is evident when students are able to accept diverse and conflicting viewpoints. Students may accept that there is no right or wrong answer, and view all opinions as holding equal weight. In this stage, peers become a legitimate source of knowledge. Evidence of multiplicity emerged among 63% of participants as students described how they did not know what it was like to live life as a different race or gender. As a result, they felt compelled to accept the feelings of those different from themselves as truth. One participant commented, "As a Caucasian female, there is no way I can understand how it feels to walk in any African American's shoes… I'm seeing things I'm upset by, but I can't discredit them because I don't understand." Another student questioned, "Can we really understand people's experiences until they tell us?"

Similarly, several participants commented on how much they learned about their community during the Occupy SLU movement. Participants reported having their "horizons widened" by talking to other students, faculty, and the protestors on campus. Students recalled these experiences in a generally positive light, and were grateful for how it challenged them personally. One student

described, "It was, for me, a period of growth and understanding."

Multiplicity was also characterized by student reports of seeing both sides of the argument, yet feeling neutral themselves. Contrary to dualistic thinking, students did not feel compelled to pick one side. For instance, one student described, "I'm generally a level-headed person… I was fine not taking either side." Several students who were able to have productive conversations felt empowered by the ability to dialogue with those different from them. In response to a question about conversations with others on campus, one student said:

> I like being able to talk about it with people who had — not necessarily similar opinions — but those who respected my opinion and were able to talk about theirs and have a dialogue without any kind of hate being spread with either sides.

Overall, multiplicity was characterized by learning from others' experiences, holding a neutral viewpoint while understanding both sides of the controversy, and appreciation for the opportunity to engage in productive conversation.

Relativism

The stage of relativism is distinguished from multiplicity in that some opinions hold more weight than others. Viewpoints are no longer accepted without question, but must be substantiated with facts and evidence. During the Occupy SLU movement, evidence of relativism emerged among 58% of participants primarily from frustration with others who did not provide sound logic for their arguments. For instance, one student recalled his frustration with how social media was used: "You could have just this crazy website that's just pumping out propaganda-like material for whatever your political leaning is, and people would just share it… they didn't even really think about the issue. They just wanted to state their opinion." Other students discounted those who were voicing opinions on the situation without understanding the true climate on campus. One student mused, "I'm sorry you [random social media user] feel that way… you

live in California. You don't know what you are talking about. I'm here."

Other evidence of relativism emerged as participants cited examples of evidence they felt was indeed valid. One student described, "All the good arguments that I saw were based on factual evidence, whether it was lack of training by the police officer or the way the ballistics interpreted whether he was charging him or not…" Whereas the stage of multiplicity was characterized by all opinions holding equal weight, relativist thinking was displayed when students voiced the expectation that others substantiate their opinions with fact, and discounted those who failed to do so.

Commitment to Relativism

Lastly, the stage of commitment to relativism is a movement away from strictly intellectual development and towards moral development. Decisions must be made contextually and within students' own moral framework. Evidence of this final stage emerged among 53% of participants. Students exemplified this stage in two ways: first, by endorsing the Saint Louis University mission and second, by defending the tenet of academic freedom within higher education. Several students commented on their satisfaction with how the university handled the protests due to the Saint Louis University mission as a Catholic, Jesuit, institution and its commitment to social justice. In response to a question about the administration's leadership during the movement, one student recalled, "I remember reading the emails and being, um, grateful and impressed by how they were handling it, especially being a Catholic and Jesuit institution in the middle of the city where this is a very real issue."

Others welcomed the controversial discussions by citing the principle of academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) defends academic freedom as the "free search for truth" and as essential to teaching and research.[19] Evidence of this concept emerged from student comments on their acceptance of the controversy, especially given its place on a college campus. One participant described:

I remember thinking, actually, the role of a college is to create a certain amount of discourse to create a learning environment, which is exactly what SLU is doing. So I remember being really proud and honored to be affiliated with SLU.

Thus, Perry's stage of commitment to relativism was captured from student recollections both endorsing SLU's approach and adherence to their mission, as well as in defense of the principle of academic freedom.

Deflections from Growth

In addition to the four stages of intellectual and ethical development, Perry's theory includes three deflections from growth that students may experience during or between the stages. The number of students who exhibited each deflection from growth is expressed as a percentage of the total sample size. Evidence of each of the three deflections (temporizing, escape, retreat) is reported in the following sections.

Temporizing

Perry's theory characterizes temporizing as a "time-out" period in which development is halted in order to allow for growth or rest within a position or a respite. Temporizing was exhibited by 32% of the participants. Students who recalled strong emotions of shock and disbelief likely experienced this type of deflection to some degree. One student compared the protests to an apocalypse and mused, "How could these things be happening in the U.S.?" Another described feeling "stuck and not knowing what to think and if I should take any action, which is essentially what I did. I didn't take any action…" The feeling of shock seemed to halt students' ability to process information as they normally would, and thereby propelled them into a "time-out" period.

Others took refuge in their classes that continued uninterrupted. When asked how his classroom instructors addressed the movement on campus, one student described, "They mentioned it, they gave safety advice, but they kept with the schooling. That was nice because it gave something to go back to and fall back on." Similarly, when asked how her instructor's

reactions in the classroom made her feel, one participant explained, "I think that it was professional of them to continue and not allow the unrest to affect education and affect the degree I was pursuing." Thus, students found their "time-out" period as their courses continued without interruption.

Escape

Next, the deflection of escape is characterized by an abandonment of responsibility due to alienation or isolation. Escape was exhibited by 47% of participants. This theme primarily emerged from recollections of highly divisive arguments. Many participants described a withdrawal from discussions if they did not expect to have a productive dialogue. For instance, one participant noted, "I had drawn in and closed myself off from opening up to these people because they were so fierce about their opinions, so headstrong that they were correct." Another participant explained, "Sometimes I just didn't participate because I knew the people I was sitting at the table with… I remember like, just being frustrated at some things I was hearing and knowing when to be engaged and not be engaged." A third participant articulated the sense of responsibility she felt, coupled with a withdrawal from conversations: "There was an instinct to educate and show people a different perspective, then it was also like, I'm going to retreat and not respond to this." Therefore, the deflection of escape emerged as participants felt they were capable of having productive conversations, but that those around them were not able to do so.

Others felt alienated when nobody was available with whom they could share their viewpoints. After the protestors displayed the American flag upside-down, one student recalled feeling particularly isolated from her roommates when their opinions dissented. She explained, "One of the reasons I had been alienated from the people on my floor was because I brought that up…" In reference to the same incident, another student lamented, "No one would sit down and talk to me about it." Thus, the deflection of escape also emerged as students felt they did not have anyone in their lives to share an honest and productive

conversation over a particularly sensitive and controversial issue.

Retreat

Lastly, Perry's theory defines a retreat from growth as a temporary return to dualism due to being overwhelmed or overly challenged. Retreat was exhibited by 21% of participants. Evidence of this deflection emerged from student recollections of being highly stressed due to midterms, which coincided in part with the duration of the Occupy SLU movement. Several students recalled protestors with megaphones in the library during mid-terms week. One student recalled:

> Every student I saw, no matter what color the skin, was like, "What the hell is going on? Why are you doing this?" Yeah, we know it's an issue. It's been brought up, but now you're just taking it too far.

Another student admitted, "It just became a huge annoyance after a certain time." Others felt frustrated with the seeming fruitlessness of discussions on campus. One student expressed, "No matter what you do nowadays, people get offended somehow." Thus, retreat was characterized by reports of high stress levels due to mid-terms and the disruption in a typically quiet space on campus, as well as frustration with unproductive conversations.

Discussion

Evidence emerged to support all four stages of Perry's theory: 42% of participants exhibited duality; 63% exhibited multiplicity; 58% exhibited relativism; 53% exhibited commitment to relativism. Regarding the deflections from growth: 32% exhibited temporizing; 47% exhibited escape; 21% exhibited retreat. Therefore, it is evident that a given student may have expressed multiple developmental stages, yet at different points throughout the interview and in relation to different topics. This is perhaps a new finding given that most existing research has applied Perry's theory by placing students in just one developmental stage.[20]

These findings further add to the substantiation of Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development and its relevance on college campuses. They also demonstrate the breadth of student experiences and developmental stages students underwent during this historic period, despite the relatively shared experience of the Occupy SLU movement. Thus, consistent with existing research, these findings may simply be a reminder to all professionals in contact with students, including faculty, staff, and administration, not to assume the position of their constituents, rather, to appreciate the breadth and fluidity of developmental stages they may be experiencing. [21]

Furthermore, a social justice movement such as Occupy SLU may be viewed as an opportunity to engage students and guide them towards a higher stage of intellectual and ethical development, especially given the Jesuit education values of critical thinking and service to others.[22] Previous research suggests the responsibility of faculty members to draw students into a higher level of development.[23] Given the number of students who expressed appreciation for how Occupy SLU challenged them personally, higher education professionals at Jesuit institutions may harness the discourse occurring on their campuses in order to further student learning and development.

Though a weakness of this study may have been that participants were interviewed approximately one year after the Occupy SLU events ended, this may also be a strength in that students were able to reflect on their personal growth from a distance. Interestingly, reflections from SLU students were overwhelmingly positive, especially for those in the higher stages of development. Thus, given Perry's theory, which holds that growth occurs between two stages of development, it is likely that students were able to describe their own growth from one stage to the next given the retrospective nature of this study.

Alternatively, higher education professionals can be attuned to students who are experiencing a deflection from growth, especially those struggling with feelings of isolation or alienation. As several of the participants in this study described a deflection from growth despite a desire to engage in conversation and further learning, this finding supports that highly divisive issues may increase feelings of isolation. Higher education professionals can give focused effort towards

establishing a climate of non-judgment and respect for one another's opinions, and towards identifying students who may be isolated from their peers.

What's more, given that some students exhibiting temporizing found a comforting "time-out" period in their courses that continued unchanged, faculty members may be attuned to the consistency that their classrooms provide. Depending on the classroom dynamic and relevance of the course content, it may in fact be in the students' best interests for faculty members to leave current events outside the classroom, or perhaps offer to discuss events outside of class for those so inclined. Thus, while the classroom may at times be a place for productive and non-judgmental dialogue, it may also be a relief from the stresses of the world outside.

Lastly, as evidenced by student reports in the stage of commitment to relativism, highly divisive issues can also be an opportunity to examine the principle of academic freedom, which is built on the first amendment right to freedom of speech. Given the sometimes provocative nature of social justice movements, such as testimonies of the desecration of the American flag in this study, these real-life examples may be harnessed to examine principles of the American society, such as freedom of speech, as well as principles of the institution's mission. This practice may be used to usher students into a higher stage of intellectual and ethical development, as well as draw in students who may be experiencing a deflection from growth.

Conclusion

The Occupy SLU movement was a historic and powerful force on Saint Louis University's campus. Findings of this mixed-methods phenomenological design support that Saint Louis University students resided in all four stages of Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development, including multiplicity, dualism, relativism, and commitment to relativism, as well as the three deflections from growth, including, temporizing, escape, and retreat. While previous research has applied Perry's theory to different types of students, such as music education or medical students, the findings of this study

support its application in a situation of civil unrest on a college or university campus.

Higher education professionals may heed the possibility that students cannot always be categorized into just one of Perry's developmental stages, but instead may be experiencing multiple stages. Particularly when a social justice movement is compounded by multiple controversial issues, such as the treatment of the American flag, students may express one stage regarding one issue, and a different stage regarding a second or third issue. College personnel must take the time to communicate openly and thoroughly with students in order to understand the intricacies of their experiences.

What's more, higher education professionals may harness social justice movements on their campuses to draw students into a higher stage of development, an approach that other scholars believe to be a responsibility of faculty members in particular.[24] Faculty members, academic advisers, and counselors should be especially attuned to students experiencing a deflection from growth, or those with feelings of isolation or alienation. In turn, they may intervene to support students, establish a line of non-judgmental communication, and ultimately use the experience to further their growth.

Further research is needed to investigate the application of Perry's theory during other types of challenges facing college campuses, such as a divisive political climate or environmental disaster. Research is also needed to investigate students' perceptions of their personal growth at various points following each challenge, such as six months, one year, or several years following an event. The findings of this study, in addition to the body of existing research that has applied Perry's theory, will continue to support higher education professionals' understanding of and contribution to student growth and development.

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Notes

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