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Personal and Educational Differences in College Students' Attitudes Toward Social Justice

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Abstract

Many colleges and universities encourage students to engage with social justice issues in their education and career discernment. However, a variety of individual attributes and life experiences may predict how college students develop an awareness of and attitudes toward social justice, perhaps including ways in which students relate to their own challenging life experiences and encounter others' experiences of injustice. This study explored the relationship between individual attributes, educational experiences and social justice attitudes among a sample of 347 college students who completed self-report surveys. Specifically, this study examined a) help-seeking attitudes, b) self-compassion, c) prior experience receiving mental health support, and d) prior experience participating in service activities as predictors of social justice attitudes. As hypothesized, higher willingness to seek help in times of personal distress and higher levels of self-compassion were positively correlated with awareness and concern for social justice issues, with help-seeking attitudes being the stronger predictor. Significant differences were also observed across gender, help-seeking history, and service experience. Furthermore, the association between help-seeking attitudes and social justice attitudes was moderated by gender and by prior service experience and mental health support. Implications of these findings for social justice education and college student well-being are discussed.

Introduction

While the focus on social justice varies across colleges and universities, Jesuit institutions consider social justice to be central to their mission, and face the challenge of engaging students in social justice education in personally meaningful and transformative ways.¹ This is relevant not only to the formation of socially-conscious graduates, but also has vital implications for college students and communities, as students belonging to marginalized groups are at increased risk for social exclusion, psychological distress, and physical harm.² Therefore, in order to promote individual student well-being and academic success, colleges must address social

injustice in campus communities, in part by encouraging awareness and solidarity. Students also face high risk for psychological stressors and mental health problems, which may be influenced in different ways by one's social identities.³ Learning to cope with these stressful experiences (whether academic, interpersonal, emotional, or psychological) is a significant part of college students' development, as is the process of becoming aware of injustice.

Many universities that value social justice education also encourage their students to discern their roles in addressing issues of social injustice at a deeply personal level. Consider Rev. Kolvenbach, S.J.'s call for students at Jesuit

universities to “let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively... learn to perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.”⁴ The success of this educational mission depends on students’ active openness to and engagement in these formative experiences. However, individual students’ receptivity to social justice education may vary greatly, with some enthusiastically engaging while others may resist doing so.⁵ Therefore, an examination of how individual students’ personal and educational experiences are associated with differences in social justice attitudes is needed. To that end, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between how students relate to their own personal experiences and their attitudes toward social justice issues.

Social Justice Education

Social justice education in college can increase students’ awareness of privilege, improve critical thinking, and foster support for justice and equality. Research shows several such benefits of social justice education. For example, diversity-focused coursework has been positively associated with students’ moral development, which Parker and colleagues define as “discernment regarding fundamental matters of human dignity and respectful conduct across a range of differences.”⁶ Service-learning experiences in particular have shown positive outcomes for college students, such as increased awareness of poverty-related prejudices and increased levels of empathy.⁷ Furthermore, a course on gender-related oppression increased students’ awareness of heterosexual privilege and support for same-sex marriage.⁸

However, despite such positive empirical outcomes of diversity education and service learning, not all students are receptive to this process of social justice education. Compared to students in marginalized groups, members of dominant groups may perceive issues of social injustice differently, hold different beliefs about working toward social justice, and resist diversity education.⁹ Goodman argues that motivating members of dominant groups to promote equity is

largely dependent on individuals’ empathy and values, rather than simply on their participation in social justice programs.¹⁰ Individual well-being may also influence the capacity for social justice-related concern: college students reporting a lack of social support have also been shown to report prejudicial attitudes such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia.¹¹ These findings suggest a relationship between how college students relate to their own lives and their attitudes toward others.

Self-Compassion and Help-Seeking

An association between how students relate to their own problems and problems of social injustice may be explained by the concept of self-compassion, defined as being “kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical” and “perceiving one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience.”¹² Higher levels of self-compassion are associated with increased mindfulness, feelings of worthiness, self-efficacy, and skills for coping with depression and homesickness.¹³ Furthermore, self-compassion can enhance an individual’s capacity for other-oriented concerns, such as perspective-taking or forgiveness.¹⁴ Neff explained that part of self-compassion “acknowledges that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the human condition, and that all people – oneself included – are worthy of compassion.”¹⁵ These findings suggest that individuals’ attitudes toward others are closely linked to how they relate to their own self and personal challenges.

An integral part of how college students relate to their own challenges is help-seeking, which Rickwood and colleagues define as “communicating with other people to obtain help in terms of understanding, advice, information, treatment, and general support in response to a problem or distressing experience.”¹⁶ College students can experience many challenges to mental health and well-being, including anxiety, depression and suicidality, substance abuse, eating disorders, loss, low self-esteem, partner-based violence, and identity-related marginalization or victimization.¹⁷ However, despite the availability of free on-campus counseling services, a variety of barriers prevent college students from seeking

needed help, including stigma around mental health services, a lack of awareness about the severity of distress, gender social norms, and other stigma around aspects of identity or culture.¹⁸ Research on self-compassion suggests that students whose needs for help are unmet may also be less likely to recognize the needs of others.¹⁹

Empathy: A Theoretical Framework

Empathy, defined as “feeling what another person feels because something happens to them,” provides a theoretical basis for the relationship between how individuals cope with personal problems and how they respond to problems of social injustice.²⁰ Hoffman’s theory of moral development explains how individuals can experience an empathic response when they observe or learn about another person going through something that they had experienced themselves.²¹ In addition, the empathy-altruism hypothesis holds that empathy causes a prosocial motivation to help others in need.²² Empathy can be influenced by self-awareness, maturity, nonjudgmental positive regard for others, modeled behaviors, and appreciation for human commonalities and differences; but can also be limited by negative feelings and attitudes, such as low self-esteem or prejudice.²³ Based on these associations, college students’ willingness to learn about social justice and empathize with related issues may be influenced by how individuals respond and relate to their own personal problems.

The purpose of the present study was to explore whether there is an association between how college students relate to their own struggles and their attitudes toward the struggles of others due to social injustice. Help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and other individual differences and experiences were examined as predictors of college students’ awareness of and concern about

issues of social injustice. Help-seeking likelihood was examined in order to measure how participants respond to personal problems, whereas self-compassion was examined in order to measure how participants privately relate to problems. It is important to note that this study did not examine specific personal experiences of suffering, but rather the likelihood of seeking help and showing self-compassion. Our primary hypothesis was that college students’ help-seeking likelihood and self-compassion would be positively associated with awareness of and concern for social justice issues. Furthermore, levels of help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes were expected to vary according to gender, help-seeking history, and prior experiences with social justice education. Finally, gender, prior experience with social justice education, and prior mental health treatment were examined as moderators of the association between help-seeking, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate student body of a Jesuit university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. All 4,100 undergraduates enrolled at the sampled university received an email invitation to participate; 468 students responded, although only 386 completed all measures, of which 347 indicated at the end of the survey that their responses should be used based on their attentiveness and honesty, for a final response rate of 8.5%. Of this final sample of 347 students, 75.8% of participants identified as female, and participants represented all class years (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Demographic	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender		
Female	263	75.8
Male	83	23.9
Prefer to self-describe	1	<1
Cisgender	346	99.7
Transgender	1	<1
Class Year		
First-Year	129	37.2
Sophomore	81	23.3
Junior	49	14.1
Senior	85	24.5
Fifth-Year/Other	3	0.9
Field of Study		
Arts & Sciences	221	63.7
Business & Management	110	31.7
Education	8	2.3
Undecided	15	4.3
High School Education		
Jesuit high school	43	12.4
Non-Jesuit high school	300	86.5
Past Participation in Service		
Yes	305	87.9
No	39	11.2
Past Help-Seeking		
Yes	194	55.9
No	150	43.2

Note: 7 participants reported more than 1 field of study.

Measures

Help-seeking likelihood

The General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ) was used to assess how likely participants would be to seek help from various sources (e.g. intimate partner, friend, parent, mental health professional, doctor, religious leader, other) if they were experiencing “a personal or emotional problem.”²⁴ Participants provided their responses to nine items on a Likert-type scale ranging from one (extremely unlikely) to seven (extremely likely). One of the items of the GHSQ (“I would not seek help from anyone”) was not included so

that the total score reflected solely the likelihood of seeking help. Although the GHSQ also examines the likelihood of seeking help in the case of suicidal ideation, for the purposes of this study, only the scale asking about personal or emotional problems was administered. When applied to a sample of high school students, support was found for the GHSQ’s internal and test-retest reliability ($\alpha = .86$, $r = .92$) and for predictive validity of actual help-seeking ($r = .51$).²⁵ For the current study, a total help-seeking likelihood score was created by averaging the responses to the nine items.

Self-compassion

The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) was used to measure self-compassion across five domains: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification.²⁶ The SCS consists of 26 items, such as “I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain” and “I’m tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.” Items are scored on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from one (almost never) to five (almost always). The SCS has been shown to have strong internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .93$), predictive validity for mental health through negative correlations with anxiety ($r = -.65$), depression ($r = -.51$), and perfectionism inventories ($r = -.57$), as well as convergent validity when compared to therapists’ ratings of individuals’ self-compassion.²⁷ For the current study, an overall self-compassion score was created by averaging the responses to the 26 items.

Social justice attitudes

The Social Justice Scale (SJS) was used to assess participants’ values and attitudes related to social justice.²⁸ The SJS consists of 24 items, such as “I believe that it is important to respect and appreciate people’s diverse social identities” and “I believe that it is important to talk to others about societal systems of power, privilege, and oppression.” There are four subscales: 1) attitudes towards social justice, 2) perceived behavioral control, 3) subjective norms, and 4) behavioral intentions. Participants respond to each item on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). The SJS was shown to have excellent internal consistency (α for subscales ranged from .82 to .95), as well as strong discriminant validity compared to external measures of racism, sexism, and belief in a just world.²⁹ For the current study, a total social justice score was created by averaging the responses to the 24 items.

Demographics and life experiences

Participants reported their gender identity, class year, intended field of study, whether they had attended a Jesuit high school or participated in service activities in high school, and whether they

had ever spoken to a mental health professional for help.

Procedure

This study used a cross-sectional, correlational design to examine associations between and demographic differences in help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes. Prior to data collection, this study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. The self-report survey was delivered via Qualtrics software to all undergraduate students via email containing a link to the survey. In an effort to recruit an academically-diverse sample, students in select courses (Psychology, Theology, and Economics) were offered extra credit from their professors for completing the survey. Participants who agreed to the terms of consent and met the criteria for participation were asked to complete the online survey once. The order of the GHSQ, SCS, and SJS in the survey was randomized to minimize any order effects. Personal demographics were assessed at the end of the survey. No identifying information was recorded. Upon completion of the survey, all participants had the opportunity to enter into a drawing to win one of two \$25 Amazon gift cards. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 22.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics were examined for the three key variables of help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes. The items of the GHSQ, SCS, and SJS all had acceptable levels of internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.71$, $\alpha = 0.92$, and $\alpha = 0.95$, respectively). A moderately significant positive correlation was found between help-seeking and social justice attitudes ($r = .28$, $p < .01$) and a small but significant positive correlation was found between self-compassion and social justice attitudes ($r = .14$, $p < .01$). A multiple regression was then conducted to examine the significance of help-seeking likelihood and self-compassion as predictors of social justice attitudes. These two variables accounted for 8.4% of the variance in social justice scores ($R^2 = 0.084$, $F(2,344) = 16.93$, $p < .001$). Both help-seeking ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) and

self-compassion ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) were significant predictors of social justice attitudes; however, help-seeking was the stronger predictor.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes across gender, field of study, high school experience, and past help-seeking history (see Table 2). Students who had previously participated in service reported significantly higher help-seeking scores than those who had not. However, no significant differences in help-seeking likelihood were found across gender, help-seeking history, or type of high school attended. Students who had previously sought help from a mental health professional reported lower self-compassion than those who had not. Furthermore, students who had participated in service reported higher self-compassion than those who had not. No significant differences in self-compassion scores were observed across gender or type of high school attended. Lastly, significant differences in social justice attitudes were found between male-identifying students and female-identifying students, between students who had previously sought mental health support and those who had not, and between students who had participated in service and those who had not. No significant differences in social justice attitudes were observed across type of high school attended.

Finally, a series of multiple regressions were conducted to examine whether gender, type of high school, and prior experiences with service and mental health services moderated the associations between help-seeking attitudes, self-compassion, and social justice attitudes. For these analyses, having attended a Jesuit high school and reporting prior service experience were combined into one variable that indicated the student had been exposed to some level of social justice education. These moderation analyses revealed that none of these three variables moderated the association between self-compassion and social justice attitudes; in other words, the association between self-compassion and social justice attitudes remained positive and significant regardless of gender, prior service experience, and prior receipt of mental health services. In contrast, all three variables moderated the association between help-seeking likelihood and social justice attitudes. Specifically, that association was positive ($r = .24$) for females but negative for males ($r = -.76$; $b_{interaction} = -.21, p = .03$); positive for those with prior service or social justice experience ($r = .11$) but negative for those without ($r = -.89$; $b_{interaction} = -.39, p = .01$); and positive for those with prior mental health treatment ($r = .44$) but negative for those who have not received treatment ($r = -.56$; $b_{interaction} = -.21, p = .02$).

Table 2. Demographic Differences in Help-Seeking, Self-Compassion, and Social Justice Attitudes

Variable	GHSQ				SCS			SJS		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Gender										
Men	83	4.10	.98	-.80	3.00	.55	.17	5.73	.86	3.2**
Women	263	3.99	.80		2.88	.62		6.06	.68	
Past Help-Seeking										
Yes	194	4.08	.79	.175	2.79	.59	-3.86***	6.04	.74	2.00*
No	150	3.92	.94		3.04	.59		5.87	.81	
Jesuit High School										
Yes	43	4.09	.99	.716	2.89	.55	-.17	5.73	1.02	-1.68
No	300	4.00	.82		2.91	.62		6.00	.73	
Past Service										
Yes	305	4.03	.83	2.43*	2.94	.61	2.43*	6.03	.73	3.27**
No	39	3.70	.84		2.68	.62		5.52	.94	

n = number of participants, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the relationship between college students' help-seeking likelihood, self-compassion, and attitudes toward social justice issues. As hypothesized, students reporting a higher likelihood of seeking help in times of need and reporting more self-compassion in times of personal distress reported significantly higher levels of awareness and concern for social justice issues. Correlations were small but significant, suggesting that other factors not examined here are also important predictors of social justice attitudes.³⁰ Demographic differences in these variables were also observed, such that students who had participated in prior service reported higher help-seeking likelihood, and more positive attitudes toward social justice were reported by women, those who had sought help in the past, and those who had participated in service. Unexpectedly, students who had not previously sought help reported higher levels of self-compassion, suggesting perhaps that students without self-compassion are more in need of professional support. These differences warrant closer examination with more comparable group sizes and across a more heterogeneous group of students.

Moderation analyses further revealed that the positive association between help-seeking likelihood and social justice attitudes was concentrated among female students, those with prior service experience, and those who had received prior mental health treatment. To some extent these patterns may reflect unequal sample size issues, such that more students in the sample were female, had participated in service, and (slightly more) had received mental health treatment. At the same time, these results suggest that these smaller groups of students may be important targets for outreach efforts designed to increase students' willingness to seek help, as well as their awareness of and attitudes toward social justice issues.

This study was a preliminary exploration of the relationship between college students' personal and educational experiences and their social justice attitudes. Our findings suggest that students' personal and educational experiences are relevant factors in their attitudes toward social justice.

However, the direction of effects remains unknown. Therefore, future research should further explore the processes by which students' individual experiences may influence their development of social justice attitudes. Furthermore, with regards to the small amount of variance in social justice attitudes that our model accounted for, future studies should also examine other personal, demographic, or environmental factors not examined in this study that may be relevant to students' attitudes toward help-seeking and social justice issues.

This study had several limitations. First, all measures relied on self-report, and social desirability may have influenced responses, particularly given the stigma surrounding mental health topics and social injustice. Second, a convenience sample was used, such that all participants were drawn from the same Jesuit university, which may limit the generalizability of these results to other Jesuit universities that have different implementations of social justice education, or different student cultures in general. Relatedly, the majority of participants reported having engaged in service activities, a factor which may have contributed to more favorable social justice attitudes than is typical among college students. Finally, data were collected at one point in time, so that any variations in these variables across the academic year were not examined. A longitudinal design that examined the relationships between variables over time would be ideal, perhaps by measuring participants' levels of help-seeking and social justice attitudes at multiple points in time throughout college. Broader sampling could increase external validity of future findings and could also reveal important between-group differences in universities with diverse student bodies and missions.

Implications for Jesuit Education

Despite these limitations, the present study identified several important factors related to college students' attitudes toward social justice, and has noteworthy implications for college student well-being, campus climate, and social justice education. Specifically, efforts to improve students' self-compassion and willingness to seek help may not only benefit them personally, but may also improve their attitudes toward issues of

social injustice. Colleges and universities may wish to be more explicit about linkages between personal experiences and well-being, campus community climate, and broader social issues all as important parts of social justice education. Furthermore, based on the results of this study, programs to increase students' awareness of, and concern for, social injustice may require unique efforts to engage male students, those who have not previously participated in service-related activities, or those who are not receiving support that they need (whether from their peer community or professional staff). While diversity

education and service learning are effective and formative educational experiences that increase college students' awareness of social injustice and empathy, it cannot be ignored that some students remain closed-off to this learning process.³¹ A deeper understanding of how college students relate to their own problems and experiences, and how this influences how they empathize with others could help educational institutions to better promote students' formation as social-justice oriented individuals. ■■

Notes

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