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Influence of Alternative Break Program Participation on College Students' Development of Moral Reasoning

By

Danny N. Glassmann, Merrily S. Dunn, and Michelle M. Espino

Abstract

Although an ample amount of research on college students' moral reasoning exists, little has been written about the degree to which participation in community service and alternative break programs results in growth of moral reasoning. This study investigated the extent to which participation in alternative break programs resulted in the development of college students' moral reasoning. Results of pre- and post-Defining Issues Tests showed statistically significant differences between males and females and between White and non-White students. Implications regarding the influence of gender and ethnicity on alternative break programs outcomes and further research are discussed.

Introduction

There are many moral dilemmas that college students face, such as cheating, underage drinking, and hazing. A common expectation of the college experience is that it should help students not only grow cognitively, but also develop effective moral reasoning. To address these expectations, universities have historically articulated a clear focus on the development of citizens who think and act morally (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It is easy to see the importance postsecondary education places on the moral dimension of development with phrases in mission statements such as *preparation of citizens*, *civic engagement*, *character development*, *moral leadership*, *service-learning*, and *responsibility to participate in a diverse democracy* (King & Mayhew, 2004).

Universities have attempted to meet their espoused learning outcome of increasing moral reasoning by offering "educational experiences for students to develop their moral capacities" (King & Mayhew, 2004, p. 376). From academic courses that include a focus on critical thinking, ethics, and multiculturalism to co-curricular activities such as study abroad and student government, many institutions of higher education offer opportunities for the development of students' moral reasoning; many of which have increased growth in this area (King & Mayhew, 2004).

Although various researchers have investigated the effects of curricular and co-curricular experiences on college students' moral reasoning, there has been limited research in the area of community service and alternative break programs. Studies that have investigated the influence of community service participation on moral reasoning have found mixed results in the amount of growth that occurs and differences between gender and ethnicity (Boss, 1994; Cram, 1998; Pratt, 2001; Wright, 2001). Further study is needed to assess the effectiveness of community service and alternative break programs on students' moral reasoning.

To fill this gap, this article focuses on a community service-based, Alternative Spring Break (ASB) Program at a research-extensive university in the Southeast. This program was

started in 1994 by students interested in spending a week engaged in community service. Students travel across the East Coast and Southeast to participate in community service projects benefitting a variety of communities and encouraging an understanding of pressing social issues such as poverty, racism, homelessness, healthcare, and the environment.

For this study, the authors focused on the extent to which community service influences moral reasoning. The main research question was: Does participation in an alternative spring break program result in an increase in college students' moral reasoning? Additional questions were: (1) Does gender influence college students' growth in moral reasoning?; (2) Does ethnicity influence college students' growth in moral reasoning?; (3) Does the type of program (children's issues, homelessness, poverty, housing, environmental, HIV/AIDS, cultural, and disability awareness) influence college students' growth in moral reasoning?; and (4) Does self-reported previous community service experience influence college students' growth in moral reasoning? This study offers insights regarding growth in moral reasoning through alternative break programs in an effort to more effectively create, administer, and assess programs that have an emphasis on influencing moral reasoning.

Literature Review

There are several approaches to studying moral reasoning (for a full explanation of these approaches, see Killen and Smetana, 2006), but the most widely known theory of moral development is Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) conceptualization of moral reasoning. Kohlberg's (1976) research and theory of moral development built upon Piaget's (1932/1977) study of the moral reasoning of children and provided the foundation for later work by Gilligan (1982) and Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999, 2000). In Kohlberg's levels of moral development, there are six distinctive stages, of which only the first three share similar features with Piaget's stages. The stages represent a different relationship between the self and society's rules and expectations at each level of development. A person passes through these stages without skipping one or reversing their order, although not everyone progresses through all six stages.

In the Preconventional level (Stages 1 and 2), an individual is self-focused and disregards the rights and concerns of others. Good citizenship is important and others' opinions are a priority in decision-making in the Conventional level (Stages 3 and 4). At this level, "conventions, rules, obligations, and expectations are experienced as being part of the self" (Gielen, 1991, p. 30). In the Postconventional level (Stages 5 and 6), reasoning is based on principles and values that are determined by self instead of others. General principles, such as freedom, equality, and solidarity, guide moral and ethical decision-making during this level.

Although Kohlberg's theory has undergone extensive research by others (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Rest, 1986), his work has not been without criticism, including bias against woman (Gilligan, 1977, 1982), lack of consideration of cultural differences, lack of real-life situations rather than hypothetical dilemmas, and emphasis on rational aspects of reasoning while neglecting emotional factors (Arnold, 2000; Rest et al., 1999). Despite the concerns that Kohlberg's theory of moral development has many potential flaws, it remains as the foundation for subsequent research on moral reasoning (Daeg de Mott, 2001).

As a protégé of Larry Kohlberg's, James Rest evaluated and responded to the criticisms directed towards Kohlberg's theory. His work on the Defining Issues Test (DIT, Rest, 1979) was a departure from the Kohlbergian approach to assessment, known as the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI, Colby, Kohlberg, Biggs, & Lieberman, 1983), and provided a means for

addressing the underlying issues of Kohlberg's approach that were of issue (e.g., simple stage theory and its description of development as step-like and hierarchical) (King & Mayhew, 2004).

Rest's approach not only created a new evaluation tool, but also evolved into its own theory. In this new approach, cognitive schemas rather than stages are used to describe how individuals organize new information and "envision[s] development as shifting distributions rather than as a staircase" (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 2000, p. 384). Schemas were defined as "general knowledge structures residing in long-term memory" that develop as individuals "notice similarities and recurrences in experiences" (p. 389).

In response to how a person interprets and responds to societal obligations, Rest et al. (2000) theorized three structures in moral reasoning: the Personal Interest Schema, the Maintaining Norms Schema, and the Postconventional Schema. Komives and Woodard (2004) summarized the schemas as follows:

The Personal Interest Schema involves analysis of what each individual has to gain or lose. The emphasis in this schema is on the individual and those closest to this person. This schema includes elements of Kohlberg's second and third stages. The Maintaining Norms Schema is characterized by an individual recognizing and abiding by established social norms above all else. Kohlberg's fourth stage most resembles this schema. The Postconventional Schema contains elements of Kohlberg's fifth and sixth stages in which an individual interprets moral obligations in terms of shared ideals. (p. 192)

The available evidence for the impact of the collegiate environment on the moral reasoning of students is based on the findings from these two major instruments, the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI, Colby, Kohlberg, Biggs, & Lieberman, 1983), and the more recent Defining Issues Test (DIT, Rest, 1979, 1986; Rest et al., 1999). Each instrument presents a series of moral dilemmas and attempts to determine the extent to which an individual uses principled moral reasoning in making a judgment or decision about each dilemma.

Community Service and Service-Learning

A review of the literature shows solid evidence that the college experience has a positive influence on the growth of moral reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Multiple studies have shown that student participation in service-learning programs helps meet community needs; facilitates learning of course content; and enhances students' personal, interpersonal, cognitive, and moral development (Cram, 1998; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Johnson & Bozeman, 1998; Myers-Lipton, 1998; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998; Payne, 2000; Rhodes, 1999). Little research documents a similar impact of community service on moral development.

In one example, Boss (1994) compared two similar sections of the same ethics course; one with and one without a service component. Students in the service-learning section completed 20 hours of community service and kept a journal. The students in the course that included service-learning demonstrated higher levels of moral reasoning than those in the section who did not, even after controlling for class size, instructor, class activities, and texts used across the two sections. As evidenced by this study, the community service component of the class served as the critical factor in facilitating growth in moral reasoning. However, a similar study conducted by Cram (1998) reported that growth in moral reasoning was almost identical between the experimental and control sections.

In two other studies, Wright (2001) and Pratt (2001) found no significant difference in levels of moral reasoning for students who participated in community service and those who did

not. They did find that there were differential effects for participation in community service by gender. Male students' levels of moral reasoning increased dramatically as a result of participating in these experiential learning opportunities, while female students' levels either slightly increased or stayed the same. These gender effects are consistent with results reported for Boss's (1994) and Abdolmohammadi, Gabhart, and Reeve's (1997) samples.

Methods

To understand to what extent participation in an Alternative Spring Break (ASB) Program at a research-extensive university in the Southeast affects moral reasoning of college students, this study employed a quantitative, pre- and post-questionnaire design utilizing the Defining Issues Test (DIT) as the research instrument. The DIT has become the most widely used measure of moral reasoning in studies of college students (King & Mayhew, 2004). The instrument (known as DIT-1) presents a series of moral dilemmas and attempts to determine the extent to which an individual uses moral reasoning in making a judgment about each dilemma. A revised version, referred to as DIT-2, contains updated dilemmas and items, new indices, slightly more powerful validity criteria, and purges fewer subjects for bogus data. The reliability and validity of the DIT has been well established (Davison, 1979; Davison & Robbins, 1978; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Recognizing the utilization of the DIT in most studies of moral reasoning and its well tested design, the DIT-2 was chosen as the instrument in this study to measure the development of moral reasoning for college students participating in alternative break programs.

To determine the sample for this study, the authors received permission from the office that coordinates the ASB Program to administer the DIT-2 to approximately 275 students who had applied and were selected to participate in the ASB Program in the spring of 2010. The students were randomly separated into 18 groups focused on children's issues, homelessness and poverty, poverty and children, affordable housing and construction, environmental awareness, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, cultural exploration, and disability awareness. Of these groups, 15 ASB trips participated in the study. Trips that had no or very few paired DIT-2 pre- and post-tests were taken out of the sample. Participant DIT-2 pre- and post-tests from nine trips were used in the analysis. In addition, matched DIT-2 tests that were rejected for consistency and reliability errors were not used in the analysis of this study.

The DIT-2 pre-test was given to student participants a few days before or on the first day of their trips and the DIT-2 post-test was given to student participants on the last day of their trips. Each trip had a Site Leader who distributed pre-test and post-test information packets to students. Prior to the trips, a meeting took place with the Site Leaders to discuss the study and their responsibilities. The pre-test packets included an information sheet about the study, demographic sheet, and DIT-2 tests. The post-test packets included an information sheet about the study and DIT-2 tests. The incentive for the students to complete the DIT-2 pre- and post-tests was a drawing of two trip waivers valued at $140 dollars each.

Sample

Of the 142 students who participated in the nine trips used in this sample, 80 completed both the DIT pre- and post-tests for a response rate of 56%. The demographic information for the sample is summarized in Table 1. In the sample, a larger percentage of participants were

female (86.3%). The mean age of participants was 19.98 and ranged from 18 to 28. White (40%) was the highest self-reported ethnicity followed by Asian (31.3%), Black (12.5%), Bi-racial (6.3%), Hispanic (3.8%), no answer (3.8), and other (2.5%). A majority of students self-reported their academic class standing to be junior (35%), sophomore (28.8%), or freshmen (22.5%), with smaller percentages classifying themselves as seniors (12.5%) or other (1.3%).

Analysis

In order to answer the research questions of this study, multiple quantitative methods were utilized to determine correlations, differences, and significance. Pearson product moment correlation analysis was used to study the relationships between the DIT-2 pre- and post-tests and demographic information. Independent and paired samples t-tests were employed to measure differences between scores and demographic variables. Repeated-measures ANOVAs were conducted to analyze differences between means and test for significance.

Results

The main research question of this study focused on whether participation in an Alternative Spring Break (ASB) Program would result in growth of college students' moral reasoning. As Table 2 shows, the DIT-2 pre- and post-test results were found to be positively correlated ($r=.683$; $p<.01$). Comparison of the means indicated a slight increase in scores from DIT-2 pre-test (M=39.64, SD=15.16) to DIT-2 post-test (M=40, SD=16.34) with a mean difference of 1.65 points (Table 3). However, a paired samples t-test of DIT-2 pre- and post-test scores did not show any statistical significance for the different schema scores (Table 4). The normative mean for college students ranged from 32.32 for freshmen to 37.84 for seniors (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003).

From the main research question, four supporting research questions were asked in this study. The first of the supporting research questions was whether gender influences college students' growth of moral reasoning. The results of a repeated measures ANOVA (Table 5) showed that there was no significant effect of gender on growth of moral reasoning as measured by the DIT-2 pre- and post-test scores, $F_{(1,78)} = 2.106$, $p=.151$. There was also no correlation between DIT-2 pre-test and gender ($r=-.008$; $p<.05$), although there was a correlation between DIT-2 post-test and gender ($r=.294$; $p<.01$) (Table 2). As shown in Table 6, comparison of the means showed almost no difference between males (M=39.93, SD=13.66) and females (M=39.59, SD=15.48) in the DIT-2 pre-test scores, but there was a noticeable decrease for males (M=28.04, SD=11.53) and a slight increase for females (M=41.91, SD=16.25) in the DIT-2 post-test scores (Figure 1). Placing the results in a larger context, the normative mean for male college students ranges from 29.66 for freshmen to 34.58 for seniors, whereas female college students ranged from 34.02 for freshmen to 40.03 for seniors (Bebeau & Thoma, 2003).

In terms of determining whether ethnicity was an influence on college students' growth of moral reasoning, the ethnicity categories were collapsed into White and non-White groups because of the small number of different ethnic group individuals represented in the study. Thirty-two or 41.5% were in the White group and 45 or 58.5% were in the non-White group. We found that ethnicity and DIT test scores were moderately correlated for both the DIT-2 pre-test ($r=-.426$; $p<.01$) and post-test ($r=-.415$; $p<.01$) (Table 2). The repeated measures ANOVA results shown in Table 5 demonstrate that there was a significant effect of ethnicity on growth of

moral reasoning as measured by the DIT-2 pre- and post-test scores, $F_{(1,75)} = 19.743$, p<.001. The results indicate that the White students (M=47.883, 95% CI [43.249, 52.516]) scored significantly higher on the DIT-2 tests than non-White students (M=34.264, 95% CI [30.457, 38.271]). Bebeau and Thoma (2003) do not provide any normative data based on ethnicity to compare with the results, but it is important to note that the means for both White and non-White increased slightly, although not at a level that was statistically significant (Table 6).

The final supporting research questions asked whether the type of program or self-reported previous community service experience influenced college students' growth of moral reasoning. Although there was a positive correlation found between community service experience and gender (r=.255; p<.05) as shown in Table 2, no statistically significant differences were found between community service experience, F(1,72)=1.507, p=.224, location of trips, F(8,71)=1.532, p=.162, or type of service, F(5,74)=.375, p=.865.

Discussion

Similar to findings by Wright (2001) and Pratt (2001), this study found that there is no overall difference between DIT-2 pre- and post-test scores of participants in the Alternative Spring Break (ASB) Program. This study did, however, find different results than Wright (2001), Pratt (2001), Boss (1994), and Abdolmohammadi, Gabhart, and Reeves (1997) with regard to the effect of community service on male participants. Those studies found that P-scores for males increased dramatically as a result of participating in experiential learning opportunities, while P-scores for females either slightly increased or stayed the same. In this study, males and females were found to have relatively similar scores on the DIT before they participated in the program and strikingly different scores after the program. Consistent with prior studies, females' scores increased slightly after the program. However, males' scores decreased drastically after the program. This finding should be kept in context of the very small sample size (n=11) for males in this study, which may have skewed the results.

This study also found different results than Gongre (1981) and Locke and Tucker (1988) who found no difference between DIT scores and ethnicity. In this study, White students were found to have higher DIT scores than non-White students. Both ethnic groups did show a slight increase in their DIT pre- and post-test scores, although this change was not found to be statistically significant for either group. Like the previous finding for gender, this finding should also be considered within the limited sample size of these groups. In addition, little research has been conducted to explore whether moral reasoning differs by race or ethnicity (Gongre, 1981; Johnson, Insley, Motwani, & Zbib, 1993; Locke & Tucker, 1988; Loviscky, 2000; Murk & Addleman, 1992) and this finding may suggest that further research needs to occur to determine if the DIT is biased for different ethnicity groups.

Limitations

The generalizability of this study is limited because it was only conducted on one university campus and with one alternative break program. In addition, the small sample size of 9 of the 18 ASB Programs used in this study is also another limitation. The overrepresentation of White and female participants is important to note. To account for this, we collapsed the non-White groups into one group for better comparison. The duration of this study may have limited the study, as well. The timing of the DIT pre- and post-tests could have been too soon before or

after to adequately capture the program's influence on students' moral reasoning. Lastly, it may have been useful to ask participants whether or not they had previous community service experience in a similar setting as the service trip they were assigned, instead of asking whether they had community service experience in general. Previous community service experience in a similar setting may make a difference in the amount of growth in students' moral reasoning.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study is useful in adding to the relatively sparse research on the influence of community service on moral reasoning, especially with regard to gender and ethnicity. Consistent with past research (Pratt, 2001; Wright, 2001), the lack of a statistically significant difference between participants' DIT pre- and post-tests is noteworthy because it shows that programs such as Alternative Spring Break (ASB) do not necessarily influence students' moral reasoning. This study did not investigate the length of time of community service trips and further studies should be conducted to test if longer community service experiences have a greater influence on moral reasoning. In addition, the indication from the data that the influence of community service on moral reasoning differs between ethnic groups and males and females is an important outcome that differs from past research (Gongre, 1981; Locke & Tucker, 1988). Future research should look further at reasons why females and White students participate more than males and other individual ethnic groups and why different ethnic groups and genders may be influenced differently by community service. Another consideration is including student interviews to determine any qualitative factors that may account for an increase or decline in student DIT pre- and post-test scores.

In light of the finding of this study and others (Pratt, 2001; Wright, 2001), there does not seem to be a significant growth in moral reasoning for students who participate in community service programs. As a result, faculty and staff must examine the purpose and intended outcomes for these types of experiences. Perhaps other benefits of community service, such as enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues or increased civic engagement, are being more effectively met than the influence of these experiences on moral reasoning. Student affairs staff and faculty should also take into account the various experiences students may have from different backgrounds, including ethnicity and gender, when designing and recruiting for community service programs. The low number of certain ethnic groups and males who participated in the ASB Program calls for better recruitment efforts directed at these populations to participate in community service. Despite the small number of males in this sample and in light of the decrease in moral reasoning scores for these males, a tentative recommendation may be for greater attention paid to the experiences of males who participate in community service programs. Only through continued research and assessment of community service programs can we understand better their true impact on student development.

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Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	11	13.8
Female	69	86.3
Age		
18	9	11.3
19	20	25
20	30	37.5
21	12	15
22	7	8.8
23	1	1.3
28	1	1.3
Ethnicity		
Black or African American	10	12.5
Hispanic, Latino, or Mexican-American	3	3.8
Asian American or Pacific Islander	25	31.3
White or Caucasian	32	40
Bi-racial or Multiracial	5	6.3
Other	2	2.5
No Answer	3	3.8
Academic Class Standing		
Freshman	18	22.5
Sophomore	23	28.8
Junior	28	35
Senior	10	12.5
Other	1	1.3

Table 2 *Pearson Correlations of Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Pre-DIT Test (P-Score)	...				
2. Post-DIT Test (P-Score)	.683**				
3. Gender[a]	-.008	.294**			
4. Racial/Cultural	-.426**	-.415**	-.091		
5. Community Service	.099	-.018	.255*	.019	
6. Trip	-.093	-.053	-.074	-.046	-.078

[a]1=Male; 2=Female; *p<.05. **p<.01.

Table 3 *DIT2 Pre-Post Tests Means and Standard Deviations for Schema Scores and N2 Score*

	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
Schema Scores	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Personal Interest	25.83	11.59	24.63	13.22
Maintain Norms	28.63	12.04	29.43	11.94
Post Conventional	39.64	15.16	40.00	16.34
N2Score	37.83	14.98	39.60	16.09

Table 4 *Paired Samples T-tests of DIT2 Pre-Post Tests Schema Scores and N2 Score*

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-test	df	p
Personal Interest	1.193	11.51	.927	79	.357
Maintain Norms	-.803	12.20	-.589	79	.558
Post Conventional	-.365	12.59	-.259	79	.796
N2Score	-1.77	11.53	-1.37	79	.173

*p<.05

Table 5 *Repeated Measures ANOVA for Gender, Ethnicity, Location and Type of Service, and Community Service*

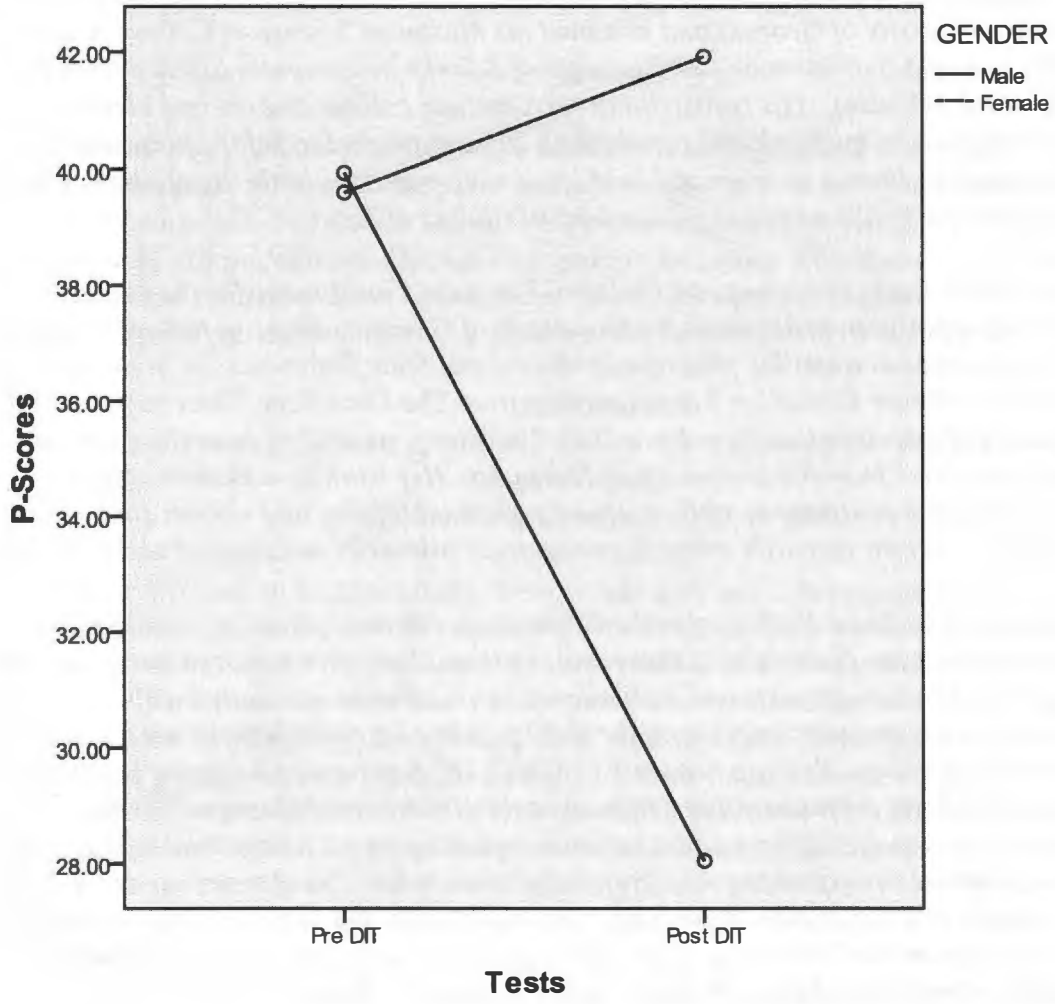
Variable	df	F	p
Gender (n=80)	1	2.106	.151
Ethnicity (n=77)	1	19.743	.000**
Location (n=80)	8	.900	.521
Type of Service (n=80)	5	.375	.865
Community Service (n=74)	1	.123	.727

**p<.01

Table 6 *DIT-2 Pre-Post Tests Means and Standard Deviations for Gender and Ethnicity*

		Pre-Test		Post-Test	
Schema Scores	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Gender					
Male	11	39.93	13.66	28.04	11.53
Female	69	39.59	15.48	41.91	16.25
Ethnicity					
White	32	47.32	14.04	48.43	14.303
Non-White	45	34.13	13.97	34.58	15.75

Figure 1. DIT-2 P-scores Means for Pre- and Post-Tests by Gender.



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