

Finding a Place: Involvement in College Social Justice Organizations and its Impacts

By

Mika Abe, Megan Imai, Judith Li and Brooke Rose

ABSTRACT. In this research, we aim to answer the question: How does being involved in social justice organizations at SCU impact students' experience in higher education? We were interested in this because we are also students at SCU, and we wanted to be able to provide knowledge to our peers about the benefits of being involved. Involvement in student groups is often encouraged in college, and we wanted to learn more about the specific benefits of participation. We conducted eight interviews and eight observations at Santa Clara University using convenience sampling to collect the data. We find that being involved in social justice organizations has a positive impact on students' experience in higher education by developing their sense of identity and a sense of community. We also find that our results correspond to the sociological theories of Robert Merton's theory of manifest and latent functions, Emile Durkheim's social solidarity, and Pierre Bourdieu's social capital. This study is not only important to understand the direct benefits that students attain but also implies that institutions of higher education should invest in student organizations for the improvement of their communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, we present an overview of some modern studies which have researched similar or related topics to ours. Cantor and the co-authors (2002) explored the relationship between college students' involvement in student groups and their exploration of self-identity. For one component of the study, the researchers interviewed 165 leaders of student organizations at University of Michigan (Cantor et al. 2002). This is a data collection process similar to what we will be doing, but on a larger scale. While they utilize mixed methods and it is a technically and conceptually complex psychology study, their results inform our hypothesis of positive influence on personal experience of "self-definition" which "enables personal exploration within the context of a network of stable social relationships" (Cantor et al. 2002:177). They also find that "individual goals interact with group structure in shaping the nature and extent of group engagement" and conclude that "successful resilience of self is a reflection of balance in life task participation, in which individuals integrate personal self-development with maintaining social connections" (Cantor et al. 2002:177). Echoing the results of this study, we

hypothesize that student leaders in social justice groups gain a better sense of their identity, including shaping career interest and development. Additionally, this study identifies different types of student groups and the different reasons for joining these different types of groups, including “intrinsic interest groups”, those we might consider defined by a shared passion which we analyze in our results, “instrumental groups” which have to do with career and social life and have a strong sense of personal identification and group cohesion, and “identity groups” which include shared experiences (Cantor et al. 2002:180). This demonstrates that our investigation is adding to the existing literature on involvement in student groups.

Another study researches an activist student organization, Local to Global Justice (LTGJ) and finds that involvement with LTGJ benefits students “in the development of scholar-activism, critical thinking, applied learning, career and professional development, leadership development, and community engagement and activism” (Farago et al. 2018:154). The sample they choose, LTGJ, is located at a large, public university in a historically politically conservative state in the southwestern U.S. LTGJ pays attention to multi-issues ranging from “Justice for Women, Justice for All,” “Food Justice,” “Water Justice,” to “Racial Justice.” These organizations work on specific areas and social justice initiatives respectively. The samples we chose are at a small, private university in a historically politically liberal state (Farago et al. 2018). By comparing our findings to theirs, we can understand whether there are some generalized themes in college social justice organizations regardless of their differently concerned issues and political background (Farago et al. 2018). Though we are researching a similar topic to these studies, by employing a different lens and conducting our research in a different population, we are able to contribute to the evidence for the benefits of involvement in student groups.

Somewhat similarly, Cintron and colleagues studied how living and learning communities (LLCs) impacted Black male achievement at a Primarily White Institution (PWI). These LLCs provided academic resources and experiential activities that promoted success during higher education as well as post-secondary opportunities. The researchers used latent growth curve analysis to evaluate the change in GPA over two years between the groups they studied: Black males who participated in the LLC and those who did not. Their results were consistent with other studies that those who are involved in these kinds of communities have positive outcomes related to academic achievement and career success when compared to those who are uninvolved (Cintron et al. 2020). This is important because our study was also conducted at a PWI, and while we did not interview black men in particular, a lot of our participants were people of color. Although we did not ask about academic achievement and the direct purpose of the organizations, we studied is different, our study adds to the literature on how being involved, including as a minority student at a PWI, is beneficial in many ways. Related to motivations for joining activist organizations, Winston’s (2013) research finds that school and work commitments, career goals, and friends and faculty influence students’ decisions on attending which activist group. The role of efficacy is a dominant theme when students make decisions. They consider resources and social network factors, choosing to “participate in activist groups with measurable, concrete goals and

those that allow for individual contributions to meaningfully affect organizational objectives” (2013:425). In this research, students tend to have a clear understanding about what they want to gain from the experience of participating in social justice organizations (i.e., efficacy). However, it does not address whether there are members in these organizations who do not have a clear plan before they join, and whether the experiences in social justice organizations bring them any new changes.

Another journal article that addresses a more distantly related topic used qualitative methods (an interview and focus groups) to investigate how National Health Insurance is implemented in South Africa. It observes the roles of social solidarity, collective action, and understanding of human rights in how groups were able to mobilize to pressure the government. Social solidarity and collective action are important concepts for us to understand in connection to groups, and since this study has to do with human rights, it is informative on findings for outcomes in social justice context related to groups. This study focuses on reaching a goal of the movement for human rights and healthcare, but with a focus on the perceived role of trust, altruism, and reciprocity in collective action. Though this particular study is not closely related to our research question, these key concepts are interesting and informative and can to some extent be applied to our analysis of the function of student groups (Douwes, Stuttaford, and London 2018).

One of the things we were initially curious about was whether the COVID-19 pandemic would negatively affect students’ experiences with their groups in terms of how connected they felt, or whether these groups would help them feel more connected during the pandemic. In our early thoughts about this, we also linked the importance of feeling connected with Durkheim’s concepts of social solidarity and anomie. A recent article explored this topic, arguing that social solidarity, especially mechanical solidarity, is necessary in the pandemic to create collective conscience which contributes to bridging social distance and mitigating health risks (Mishra and Rath 2020). Although the pandemic’s effects did not become one of the primary focuses of our research findings, this study was interesting and helps to indicate the significance of our research on social groups and communities especially during this time. As mentioned previously, the connection to Durkheim’s theories - whether related to the pandemic or not also provides a sociological frame or significance of our findings. For example, involvement in student organizations can be framed as a way to foster social solidarity (largely mechanical in this case) to prevent anomie for students who have a hard time transitioning into new social norms at SCU, and according to this article, modern collective effervescence can form despite geographical distance (Mishra and Rath 2020).

We have looked at a range of sociological and other social scientific research to gain background knowledge and understanding about student groups, social justice, extracurricular involvements, and social solidarity, among other things. Through this literature review, we illustrate that our study confirms, specifies, and furthers existing findings and ideas about the effects of being involved in social groups, specifically social justice groups on college campuses. Additionally, we used our preliminary research to help us write our interview protocol addressing themes we thought would be important

based upon our intuition and our reading of some of the above sources. While we did this background research, we engaged in an inductive approach, allowing our findings and conclusions to emerge from the data we collected. Read on to find out our methods, findings, and the implications of our research.

METHODS

To collect qualitative data to answer our research question, each team member interviewed two people and conducted two observations, for a total of eight interviews and eight observations. All interviews and observations took place over Zoom, as the majority of organized social justice discourse at SCU is currently being held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling

Our research population for the interviews was current SCU students who hold a leadership position in a social justice initiative at SCU, with the intent of gathering “people who, taken together, display what happens within a population affected by a situation or event” (Weiss 1994:17). We got access to our research population through convenience sampling. Brooke, one of our researchers, had the most connections to those involved in social justice organizations so she created an anonymous list of potential respondents, from which team members chose which respondents they were most interested in interviewing. All introductions and scheduling of interviews took place over text or email. Each of our respondents held at least one current leadership position in a social justice organization, though the majority held multiple. There was a great variety in the kinds of organizations they were involved in, including cultural organizations, service organizations, student government, and SCU centers of distinction. We chose to use convenience sampling because we wanted to utilize the connections we already had in order to save time on sending cold emails and a predicted lack of responsiveness. Since Brooke had personal connections with the respondents, it was highly likely that the respondents would either agree to be interviewed or reply with a quick no. One downside to our convenience sampling is that it is not as diverse as a random sample would have been. For example, only one of our respondents identifies as a man and there was considerable overlap between some organizations (four of our respondents are involved in one of the centers of distinction, and three are in leadership for the same social justice organization).

Data Collection

During the interviews themselves, rapport was built by talking to the respondents before the recording started, generally saying hello, asking how they are doing, or catching up if the interviewer and respondent had an existing relationship. Smiling and nodding to demonstrate attentive listening during the interview helped to keep up the relationship

comfortable and natural. We also expressed gratitude at the end of the interviews for their time and for sharing their experiences with us. Establishing good rapport paid off for us because it made it easier for us to gain access to their group meetings for our observations. To ensure validity in our interviews, we made the protocol as clear as possible by asking questions that were jargon-free, single-barreled, and open-ended.

Regarding observations, the majority of our team members chose to observe club meetings. Four of the observations were normal general meetings, one was a guest speaker event, one was a town hall, and one was a board meeting. The one observation that was not a club meeting was held by a center of distinction and had various professors discussing environmental justice and spirituality. Brooke chose to observe this event to get a perspective on how social justice spaces led by faculty members are different from those led by students, to attend an event that was not centered around identity-based social justice (since almost all organizations of our respondents had this focus), and to get more data on this center that four of our eight respondents are involved with. Some of the events attended were publicly available through emails sent to students by the school or on the Get Connected webpage. Most observations were more private, and we had to ask our respondents for permission to observe the meeting and to obtain the Zoom link. For the observations where we disclosed our identity, we established field relationships by giving a brief introduction of our research to the participants. After that, the observation continued based on the desires of those facilitating the meetings. For example, Megan was an active participant in both of her observations, participating in break-out rooms and keeping her camera on for the duration of the meetings. In contrast, Brooke was asked by the facilitators of one of her observations to keep her camera off after introducing herself in order to have minimal impact on the flow of the meeting.

Ethical Considerations

One of the biggest ethical challenges we were confronted with was confidentiality and anonymity. Because all of our respondents belong to very specific organizations, we had to figure out how to anonymize the organizations without losing what the organization itself was about. For example, if we were researching intramural sports it would be easy to substitute volleyball for basketball. However, changing an organization from being centered around the black experience to the Asian experience brings about challenges because the kinds of issues that black students are concerned with may be different than what an Asian cultural group focuses on. In writing this paper, in cases where we did include the names of the organizations, we omitted the specific position they held. In other places where the organization was not named, leadership positions may be named. All of the names used for respondents are pseudonyms. Another ethical challenge we faced occurred during our observations. Mika had to make ethical considerations when doing her observations, as one of her respondents asked her to send an observation request form and a brief summary of the research objective. She sent over a short description of the research topic and one or two points that she would be looking at during the observation, also stating that she will be taking notes

throughout the meeting. Though she was initially worried that this disclosure before the observation would impact student behavior, it ended up being easier for her to be part of the meeting because the members knew she would be there beforehand.

In our research project, reflexivity, or reflecting on our own subjectivity, was important because it allowed us to recognize how our personal experiences and attitudes can influence our approach to the project at every step (Peshkin 1988:17). This includes how the research question is framed, how our interview questions are phrased, what each of us takes notice of during observations, and how we analyze our data. Our research topic is looking at how being involved in student groups for social justice affects students' college experiences overall. In this case, we are insiders to the community we are observing. Being an insider can be beneficial in some ways because it is easy to gain access to and relate to your respondents, and you have a deeper understanding of the subject already (Lofland et al. 2006:41). For this particular study, because we the interviewers are the same age and status (students) as our correspondents, building a mutually respectful relationship and connecting with each other did not pose a problem. This was beneficial to our data collection because we were able to build a casual and comfortable interviewing environment which allowed us to have access to the respondents' honest thoughts. On the other hand, there are also drawbacks to the insider perspective. The main issue is that since we are college students with our own current college experience, we already had preconceived ideas about the topic before we started the research. Because of this, we had to ask questions in our interview protocol that sought to uncover perspectives that were different from our own. We also made considerations about demonstrating our competence in the subject matter (SCU and social justice), as presenting a certain degree of incompetence benefitted the data because it helped us avoid projecting our preconceived ideas or expectations about answers (Lofland et al. 2006:69-70). Another potential benefit of being insiders is that we will have similar worldviews because we are the same age and have the same educational background. This fact coupled with good rapport helped us gather authentic data from our participants that researchers in outside groups (ex. administrators, students from other universities, etc.) may not have been able to receive (Collins 1986:25).

Data Analysis

After we conducted our interviews, we transcribed them using Zoom software and personal editing. We each uploaded our transcripts to Taguette and began the process of open coding individually. This first round of open coding was especially important because our research question was fairly broad and qualitative research itself demands an inductive process. We did our open coding independently, and did so in a way that was "without regard for how or whether ideas and categories will ultimately be used, whether other relevant observations have been made, or how they will fit together" (Emerson et al. 2011). Doing so allowed us to let the data speak to us, focusing on themes and processes that were emerging, rather than going in with fixed ideas and trying to make it fit into causal explanations. Once we completed our open coding, we created a team codebook with six shared focus codes that helped guide us into what

were the most important themes that arose from our data. In our focused coding, we wanted to decide on the core themes that we found in our interviews and begin connecting data and subthemes that would be important for our analysis. After creating the team codebook, we individually re-coded our transcripts with the team codes in mind.

A similar process occurred with the fieldnotes. We all conducted our observations between February 24 and March 3, 2021 and wrote our field notes separately, and then used the team codebook to code our notes for the most important themes. We discussed the findings of our observations and if there were any new themes that emerged or any data that supported what we found in our interviews. After conducting our interviews and observations, we found very similar data across both processes which supports the validity of our data through triangulation. For both our interviews and observations, we engaged in the process of memoing. In these memos, team members began to develop theories, reflect on their own subjectivity and responses during data collection, and write down any new questions or ideas they wanted to bring to the team. Memoing was a very helpful component of this research project, as it aided us in getting us from our data, topics, and questions to our final findings and conclusions (Lofland et al. 2006:211).

RESULTS

We will focus on two primary themes that emerged in the data to organize our discussion of the effects of being involved in social justice groups in college: a sense of identity and sense of community.

Sense of Identity

One pattern of being involved in social justice organizations is the development of the sense of identity. Personal transition, driving forces, and career preparedness are three embodiments of the development of the sense of identity. Although it is too early for participants to say that their experiences in social justice organizations are a turning point in their life, their narratives display their personal transition of gains and growth, challenge, and rewards as being involved in the organizations. One respondent, Lily, from Undocumented Students & Allies Association (USAA) said, “I’ve always been scared to jump into activism, and stand up for things because (of) a lot of fear of not knowing enough... That summit was my first challenge to just jump into the process.”¹ This migration justice summit was her starting point of joining USAA. Feeling supported in this organization, she began to trust herself, getting the confidence to speak to the public and stand up for things she cared about: “being involved with them has helped me at some points to be like ‘whoa I need to just be quiet and listen right now, but at other points to say just like standing up and just saying something and trusting myself and my knowledge, and just knowing that this community is so supportive and they will catch you when you fall.” Her personal transition comes from inclusion in the

¹ Quotes from respondent interviews are edited for clarity and readability.

community, which helps her become a better self, brave enough to express her passion and care. Another respondent, Alicia, explained her gaining of confidence from a different perspective. In addition to not “feeling judged” in the community, the position she took encourages and requires her to reach out and speak in public:

“I think being on ASG (Associated Student Government) has given me a little more confidence in terms of approaching people because you're forced to speak in public. If you're taking on certain positions, you kind of have to be accountable for your actions, so I think it's giving me confidence in the sense that I can, I feel more comfortable approaching people. Even if I don't know them too well, regardless of the issue, I think it's just given me more confidence to reach out to people, and to really, you know, feel free to share my thoughts without feeling judged.”

Not only did being involved in these organizations provide Lily and Alicia a comfortable space to be accepted and recognized by other members, which gave them the confidence to speak in public, it also encouraged them to go beyond their comfort zone and cognition about their abilities.

The experiences in the social justice organizations do not merely bring them progress in abilities, but also give them opportunities to understand social issues from a new perspective. For Miranda, the transition of cognition came from her self-reflection. From her high school, she learned about how students could also make an impact on social justice, which gave her faith in love and care for the community. Working with other minority ethnic groups, experiences in the Multicultural Center became a window of opportunities for her to reflect on the privilege she had and what she could do to help raise the voice of underrepresented student groups. She gradually realized that raising the voice of underrepresented student groups is not only about speaking for them. The privileged people should “step up” for them, but also “stand back and ensure that I am not taking up all of this space.” Her understanding of social justice evolved from awareness and helping others to reflect on herself and then leaving space for underrepresented groups. Her experiences in the Multicultural Center (MCC) expanded her recognition boundary and constructed her knowledge of racial justice through her reflection. Personal transition implies a dynamic process of the sense of identity that our respondents experienced in the organizations. Through this process, they have a different cognition about their abilities and themselves.

In addition to personal transition, the driving forces that our respondents speak of in the interviews also help us understand how they view themselves, their passion, and the work they are doing as they participate in the organizations. The starting points of being interested in a particular aspect of social justice vary among respondents. Some just give it a try and then find their people and their communities after joining an activity of the organizations. Some are passionate about certain issues long before attending college, and being involved in these organizations gives them an opportunity to continue their interest. For example, in the interview with Jess, she related why she felt connected to the people and groups she works with as a volunteer to her own identity

through her family history and hometown, and upbringing. However, it was also clear that the groups she worked with were linked to her career interest in teaching. A passion for social justice and a need to find her people in a new place freshman year also make up some of her driving forces.

Respondents' driving forces are strengthened as they stay longer in organizations, which motivates them to apply for leadership positions to contribute to the positive aspects of the organizations for others. Andrew said, "The friendships, the conversations, the stories that I had in MCC definitely encouraged me the most to be a leader for the MCC. Because I saw what it did for me, and I saw the special thing, the wonderful things that the MCC could do. And just as I had that feeling, I want to ensure that other people also have the ability to get that same feeling out of MCC" His identity within the MCC community transformed from a recipient who received support and benefits to a participant and leader who wants to pass down warmth to others.

Becoming a leader also means more responsibilities and more challenges, whereas these responsibilities and challenges do not weaken their driving forces but confirm their belief in the meaning of their work. One common challenge throughout organizations is getting funding. Miranda and Andrew both described the process in that they tried to convince the college administration to pay more attention to the students of color. They felt upset and "demoralized" when the administration did not directly answer their needs, but this challenge did not halt their efforts to make the organization a better place.

Miranda said:

"They (cultural centers) are supposed to be serving more than half of the student body and it's supposed to be a place where they feel safe and yet, we barely have the support necessary to make that happen, and of course they're always putting the onus on students to create the diversity...for example with Unity Night, that's something that they put on the students specifically within the Multicultural Center to show off what Santa Clara is like to admitted high school students, and I feel that's the only time that they really care is because they might be making a profit, and it's so sad to see that."

Similarly, Andrew used "hit a wall" to describe the conversations with the administration, feeling that they were not heard. However, their negative moods did not last long. They then turned to new work that could address this problem. Miranda expressed her commitment in "finishing the work that needs to be done instead of prolonging it" and Andrew began a project of collecting stories from students of color to prove the usefulness of more funding.

Under the context of COVID-19, our respondents face more difficulties in innovating the types of activities, drawing attention, and maintaining attendance of their activities. However, they do not give up facing these difficulties; on the contrary, successfully overcoming these difficulties reinforces their driving forces and makes them value their friends and community much more. One difficulty for Clara was that regular events such as service placements could not be held in person. She also needed to find new ideas

on how to attract people, since the old method of free food for college students was not feasible virtually. But she and her teammates were not stuck in these challenges. They came up with a social media campaign, reaching out to people personally. Clara supposed that they received such a high turnout because “people realized that they were not involved enough, and something was missing.” Their social media campaign bridges people who want more college involvement and their goals of promoting feminist justice. Overcoming this challenge is one of Clara’s fulfilling moments that strengthen her driving force. A lot of the positive emotions have to do with the feeling of purpose or pride that comes with making a difference through involvement in these groups. Many times, positive feelings are accompanied by negative emotions such as stress and disappointment. Clara found it so “overwhelming” to work on Zoom because she needed to organize and coordinate everything online and answer questions in the emails. But at the same time, she felt she was learning and growing: “they count on me to do that, and know I’m trustworthy to do that, so I guess it’s also kind of rewarding, having so much more stuff to do is also like... I’m becoming an adult. I do think, you know?” Her feelings resonate with our other respondents’ answers. Mixed emotions are present here because rewards and accomplishments always come after overcoming a challenge. COVID-19 brings them unexpected challenges but also opportunities for them to discover a more capable self.

We also find a pattern that these driving forces not only motivate them to participate within the college boundary but also inspire them to explore or confirm their career interests. Our respondents expressed their willingness to continue pursuing social justice after graduation. Some respondents have a clear plan for future careers, and experiences in social justice organizations help them confirm where their passions are. Gained from the MCC community, the abilities to listen and be empathetic were internalized into Andrew’s experiences and helped him qualify for his dream job:

“Being [a leadership position in the MCC] has definitely, not so much shifted me to what I want to do in the future, but kind of confirmed what I want to do in the future... I want to work in a nonprofit organization that is focused on economic inclusion... (In the MCC,) we focus a lot on hearing people’s stories. I’m advocating and amplifying. I would say amplifying people’s voices. I’m providing the resources needed for people to thrive and again fostering community as well.”

Being involved in the MCC helps him find his passion, and being a leader in the MCC helps him confirm his commitment to helping others, by providing a platform to foster the community.

For some respondents who have not decided on their career path, their experiences in social justice organizations also shape their considerations. Sarah wanted to take some time off after graduation and become a volunteer or teach English to people in Ecuador or somewhere else in South America. One thing she was sure about was “whatever I do in order for it to be meaningful to me. It has to be not just for myself, but for my community and for other people, and through USAA I really have found joy in helping

others and educating others.” Similar to Sarah, Clara also saw service as her “sole focus”:

“I’ve always said when I was looking at careers. I want to do something to help others. I’ve looked at different possibilities of how can I, if I go in this path, how can I help others... I wouldn’t feel fulfilled if I didn’t do that and I wouldn’t be happy in my career. So, I think it’s going to be the center of my decisions when looking at future careers.”

Their commitments to service in their future careers reflect their strong driving forces, as well as their inside explorations of what they truly love and where they want to contribute to their life.

Sense of Community

The other main theme we will be addressing is the sense of community, mostly through the sub-themes of shared passion and creating a safe space. We observed that a lot of students developed a sense of community in the social justice groups they were a part of, which for many students was intertwined with their identities as well, whether that be a shared passion for similar issues or a shared cultural identity or experiential background. This became clear through our interviews, especially for students who identified with ethnic minorities. It is important to have a shared passion and be able to socialize and interact with those who share this passion. Jess put it well: “I think our club is just very like people, especially in this difficult year, like people have just been really kind to each other, and I think people are really looking for that sort of connection while also feeling they were doing something that was meaningful for them in their life path and mission.” It is a combination of a safe space through kindness, connection through a shared passion, and feeling a sense of purpose that creates a sense of community for Jess. The themes she articulates here came up throughout our interviews and observations.

Gaining a sense of belonging through these groups was a crucial part of some respondents’ transitions into college: “I think my first year I was kind of struggling with finding my place on campus, just coming into a new environment. It was definitely challenging to like find your people, I think we all kind of experience that, but when I first got involved with them that’s when I felt like I belonged at Santa Clara and I felt like I’ve found my place in my role and everything.”(Lily). The idea of “finding one’s people” also came up in many of the interviews we conducted, indicating that a sense of belonging and connection with group members through some shared experience or passion was important to reaping the social/mental/emotional benefits of being in one of these groups. Involvement in community groups helped a few of our respondents overcome feelings of isolation in their first year of college. Multiple students referred to their first-year selves as having a difficult time, but “finding their people”, in other words gaining a sense of community significantly improved their overall mental wellbeing and college experience. Another quote which demonstrates this exceptionally well is: “I think my sense of community, just like skyrocketed. I felt like super super comfortable with who I was and empowered that other people wanted to do some of the same things that

I wanted to.” Sharing a passion with others “skyrocketed” both Jess’s sense of self and sense of community.

It is also worth noting that some of our data suggest that the social justice agenda itself was part of how people created a sense of community as well as why this was important. For example, one respondent reported:

“And during that week we just got a bond a lot and to me being able to meet other folks through our love of helping others and being able to come together, because we want to in some way just make the world a better place, I know that sounds really cheesy and very broad but that’s really what was like our driving force, and it was that love, love for others and love and care for community and so for me that experience just showed me how powerful we as students are really because we were tackling some really challenging topics.”

This quote illustrates shared passion through a determination to change the world as well as highlighting the power of addressing challenging topics that come with social justice as a group. Additionally, in one of our observations, a guest speaker who has worked in immigration justice at the US-Mexico border for many years described how he would not be able to do what he did without a community behind him. The difficult nature of social justice work necessitates a sense of community in order to continue doing the work.

Another component we found was important in developing a sense of community was how the groups created a safe space or environment in their meetings. Using a combination of activities that allowed socialization or getting to know other group members, self-care activities like mindfulness, and just generally putting effort into trying to foster a place where people could feel safe were common descriptions in our interviews. We could see this in our observations in the form of having peer-led meditation or reflection sessions, icebreaker conversations in breakout rooms, and reactions on Zoom, such as clapping emojis and supportive comments in the chat during group meetings and events. It seemed that this helped make people feel supported and connected with others. Although this could have been a result of members knowing each other well or already having a strong relationship or bond in the group, this was also observed in a very new group on campus which has only been active for a few months. This exemplifies strategies that groups or group members use to create or foster a sense of community, as well as make sure it remains a safe space for its members over time. Another of our respondents highlighted this as well, saying “So for me, community space is a place where I could be 100% myself, a place where I could enjoy and have conversations, and hear people’s stories. I think that’s a very special part as well. And lastly, just a place where I feel supported, where I feel safe.” This feeling of safety and the ability to be oneself while connecting with others embodies how students with a strong sense of community feel. In an observation of a meeting which included members of two different ethnic or cultural clubs, Judith observed that participants trusted each other. They spoke out their personal experiences without scruple, because they knew other community members understood them or even shared similar feelings or experiences. Opportunities to express their

emotions and feel resonated with and supported did not happen often in their daily lives, especially at a predominantly white institution. Such communities provided them a place and time to release and be fully themselves. Again, this demonstrates the importance and positive effects of creating a sense of community through safe spaces.

Another notable finding of creating safe community space is the role leaders play in it. In multiple of our observations, we noted the way leaders interacted with the other group members to make them feel comfortable. For example, one instance of this was one leader in a group complimenting, agreeing with, and adding on to another club member's comment during a breakout room activity. In another observation, the president of the group showed a strong effort in making comforting and uplifting comments to the members, and the other members would also agree and make their own positive comments to each other. This helps the students express their emotions and thoughts more easily, comfortably, and freely. Since they were all very open and evidently enjoying their meeting, they seemed to have no hesitation when asking questions or addressing their concerns and issues and were receptive to feedback from other members. This openness facilitated by the president and echoed by the rest of the group contributes not only to the sense of community, but also allows more tasks for the club to get done and includes more members in the action because people are more comfortable raising their concerns. Additionally, when one respondent was asked about what drew her to become a leader in her community, she responded:

“...being a good leader is like showing people how important they are to the organization and like to whatever group they're a part of. That's, that's the part I really enjoy about leadership, I think, like if I get in any kind of position of leadership I have, like... just want to be there to uplift people, and show them how good they are. Because I think a lot of people don't see that, in themselves, which is really upsetting. So I kind of want to like, undo that, and show people like 'hey you're doing a really great job! I think you're doing amazing,' and could say 'I want you to take on leadership, because you have the potential for it and stuff.' So yeah.”

To this respondent, her favorite part of leadership was playing a role in building a community where people felt supported and personally encouraging others to see their self-worth and take on leadership roles themselves. Again, this demonstrates the importance of having a safe space. This is one way that leaders ensure the continuation of the group that is important to them while also making sure people are nurtured by their experiences within the group. This ties back to the theme discussed with connection to sense of identity, that participants in student social justice organizations experience the reciprocal process of benefitting from the group and helping others, whether that be other club members or the recipients of their service efforts.

Finally, it is important to consider as well that our research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We suspected that the pandemic and having to move academic and extracurricular interactions online would have a negative effect on students' experiences in their social justice groups including their sense of community. However,

overwhelmingly, our respondents reported that they were still able to feel connected with their groups. While they certainly acknowledged both logistical and social challenges that the pandemic brought on, even their negative experiences were described with mixed emotions as they were grateful for what they were able to do during this time. Some respondents even described that if anything, the pandemic had brought them closer together with other members of their group and made them even more productive. One example from a respondent is: “at first, I thought the pandemic was going to be very difficult... well it has been difficult, but I was just scared to see how the different organizations on campus were going to overcome this. But I'm surprised to see how resilient everyone has been and really, I think people with the pandemic they're just putting in a little more effort than we would have in-person”. This is definitely an area that warrants further research. We suspect that because our respondents were leaders in their groups, they are more committed or attached to them than other members may be. It would be interesting to take a larger sample of students who are both leaders and general participants to test this hypothesis. Additionally, there has been a big push for social justice this year which could be a contributing factor to the increased or steady involvement in social justice groups. Regardless, this was an interesting finding because we were expecting different results related to the pandemic's effects.

DISCUSSION

Our research showed that students' participation in social justice organizations at SCU plays a significant role in their personal transitions and cultivating their sense of belonging. The student-led organizations provide an environment for students to find peers with similar passions, enhancing their communication and cooperation skills that lead to career readiness, influencing their post-graduate plans, and fostering social solidarity among students in and outside of the organization. All of the respondents in our research expressed strong commitments to their organizations and to pursue social justice activism after graduation by continuing their academic journey in law, education, or social work-related career paths.

In relation to existing sociological theory, we introduce the following possible framings for our findings in the literature review: Robert Merton's manifest and latent functions (Merton 1949/1968), Durkheim's social solidarity (Mishra and Rath 2020), and Bourdieu's social capital (Portes 1998). One lens is through Robert Merton's manifest and latent functions, exploring that students joining social justice organizations have both expected and unexpected gains and rewards. Manifest functions are “those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by participants in the system,” while latent functions are those objective consequences that “are neither intended nor recognized” (Merton 1949 1968: 105). The importance of applying manifest and latent functions in our research is that it helps us see how interactions between participants and organizations and interactions among participants influence themselves and their views on their experiences. First, our findings can be presented as an exploration of the functions of social justice organizations on college campuses. While the manifest functions may

include working with other communities through service to advance certain social justice issues and creating a place where students with similar interests can come together, latent functions may include gaining a greater sense of one's own identity, gaining career related skills and connections, and developing friendships. However, in groups which center around a certain ethnic or other identity, we suggest that strengthening identity and community are more manifest functions.

Another is through a Durkheimian lens, viewing campus social justice groups as a way to foster social solidarity. Durkheim's theory of social solidarity is used to essentially explain what holds society together. In his work, *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim differentiates mechanical solidarity, which comes from sameness and is generally associated with more traditional societies, from organic solidarity, which comes from interdependence in modern societies with a focus on difference with the division of labor. The importance of social solidarity to Durkheim was that it prevented individuals from anomie, or normative disconnect from society (Mishra and Rath 2020). Our study suggests that being a part of a social justice group is one way to create social solidarity on college campuses. Durkheim's work is especially helpful in explaining why joining these groups helped many of our respondents overcome a sense of isolation and discomfort, or anomie, when they first arrived on campus. We saw more evidence of mechanical solidarity through the prominence of shared passions and experiences among group members, but organic solidarity is also present, such as in specific tasks connected to leadership roles and group members relying on one another to get things done.

The third sociological concept we recognized as being related to our research is that of social capital. Originating with Pierre Bourdieu and widely used in sociology today, social capital is an idea that calls attention to the tangible advantages that come with social ties. Bourdieu highlights the interplay of social capital, cultural capital (special knowledge and skills), and economic capital (monetary), how each can be used to gain the others (Portes 1998). This relates particularly well to our investigation of how being involved in social justice groups can contribute to career preparedness and other opportunities through social networking. Respondents reported gaining cultural capital through learning new skills in their organizations, as well as social capital in the form of relationships with other students and career networking opportunities. Building career preparedness through social and cultural capital subsequently leads to opportunities to gain economic capital, through securing a job (whether immediately or after gaining more social and cultural capital in graduate school). These theories display that colleges as a micro-society also share the patterns of the macro-society that sociologists have distilled. These three concepts provide different ways for us to analyze our results and apply them to existing sociological theory.

The findings from this study are not only important to understand the direct benefits that students attain, but to understand how participating in social justice organizations further influences individuals, institutions (colleges), and communities. The data we retrieved from the students involved in social justice organizations at SCU can be thoroughly examined using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological theory. The

respondents found improvement in their social atmospheres, their personal transitions, and mental well-being while simultaneously stimulating personal flourishing in other members as a group. Following these breakthroughs of each individual student, the higher confidence and motivation will increase their engagement in more organizational and outside activities. This is the initial ecological transition from the individual to the microsystem (interpersonal), which brings the student's (individual) leadership skills into classrooms, constructs rigorous learning environments in and outside of the organization, and creates more opportunities through networking for themselves and their peers (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The more students are active and succeed in their social justice organization and outside activities, the higher the possibility of attracting more students to participate, potentially resulting in increases in institutional funding for student activities. We believe that the activeness of students and the benefits that come along with it, encourages improvement in the mesosystem (organizational)—regardless of whether those changes are direct or indirect. When higher education institutions recognize the significance of students' participation in social justice organizations, they will foster a better relationship between the school and organizations through increased funding or collaborative events. We suggest that not only will the students benefit from more academic or networking opportunities, but students' social justice organizations and institutions could advance their partnerships or exchange knowledge with communities of their serving population. Building off the extensive work among student organizations and institutions, the longitudinal effects of their advocacy, social service, and commitment to social justice activism would influence changes in the macrosystem (society). This may include policy changes, an increase in government funding for education, social welfare, and human service organizations. Closely paralleling Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human development theory, our research confirms the long-term and comprehensive impact of involvement in social justice organizations. Furthermore, we find that students can continue to evolve personally, academically, and spiritually, whilst uplifting peers outside of their organizations, their institutions, and to the greater society. Most importantly, students can provide more support and knowledge to those in need.

We have recognized the positive impacts and significance of students' involvement in social justice organizations on individuals, micro, meso, and macrosystems throughout our research. Although these organizations can be time-consuming and students oftentimes grapple with balancing schoolwork and extracurricular activities, most, if not all, college students participating in any student organization hypothetically undergo a similar experience as our respondents. We suggest that our research outcomes are reliable because they illustrate a strong connection between students' self-development and group engagement, which has been similarly seen in the previously mentioned psychology study at University of Michigan (Cantor et al. 2002), among others. These consistent positive outcomes on students can be generally understood that students who partake in student organizations will be highly likely to experience personal development and build a solid sense of community, along with better career preparedness and interpersonal skills. These inferences can guide future research to explore deeper on this current research and gather extensive data on the different behaviors that students have depending on their organization's objectives (e.g.,

intramural sports, arts, Greek life, etc.). Our findings demonstrated the trends of students in social justice organizations. It would be intriguing to investigate the similarities and differences in self-transformation and social connectedness among students that participate in non-social justice organizations. Our research also raises the question on how students' distinct identities within an organization will be more likely to construct an individualistic or collectivist identity, or the combination of the two (Becker et al. 2012). We understand that social groups build social solidarity among students. It would then be important to continue a further analysis on whether the individualistic or collectivist sense of identity and community within an organization will lead to different outcomes. In other words, how might the operations and effectiveness of an organization be different if students had a stronger motive to achieve personal transitions for their own sake, than for their peers and group, or vice versa. Are students involved in organizations more self-conscious of their identities they present or the actions they take? To conclude, our current study and findings have shown the various ways in which it could be further tested in future research topics. Above all, our research has greatly demonstrated the significance of student-led social justice organizations and their powerful influences on participating students and beyond.

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