

A Pilot Assessment of a Spiritual Retreat Program for Homeless Adults in Recovery: Finding One's Self in a Safe, Sober, and Sacred Place

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ABSTRACT

Many adults engage in annual spiritual retreats, where they explore their relationship with a higher power. However, few homeless adults (especially those recovering from substance abuse) enjoy this personal service. In the present study, 66 homeless adults (45 women, 20 men; M age = 47.16 years old; SD = 9.98), who reported a history of substance abuse, engaged in a weekend long spiritual retreat program and completed at the end of the weekend reliable and valid measures on self-esteem, loneliness, and hope. Results indicated that there was significant gender difference on loneliness and hope/agency, such that women compared to men reported less loneliness and higher hope-agency (the belief that one has the willpower to change). There were no significant differences for marital status, religion, or housing residence. Taken together, these results suggest that spiritual retreats may impact differently for homeless adults in recovery based on their gender and their race, but not in comparison of other demographic variables. Implications for recovery programs for homeless adults are discussed.

Keywords

Homelessness, Spiritual Retreat, Self-esteem, Loneliness, Hope.

According to contemporary psychological scholars [1,2], conceptualizing spirituality (i.e., searching for the sacred through religious affiliation, religious beliefs, and religious service attendance) is multi-dimensional and complex. Tsang and McCollough stated that research on spirituality must focus on both works and worship practices [2]. Oman proposed that spirituality focuses on seeking of something held sacred as an end, and religion as the broader set of ways that sacredness may enter into a search [1]. In the present brief, exploratory study we examined a spiritual retreat program that included prayer and silent meditation practices reflecting on a higher power with a small sample of homeless women and men in recovery from substance abuse. This study is exploratory and as far as we can ascertain the first systematic assessment of a spiritual retreat program on the personality of homeless adults.

The practice of religious belief mostly happens in congregations

with others at a place of worship [3]. The experience of community seems essential to most religious practices. Congregations bring people together who, though sharing a religion or belief, may be from very different walks of life and backgrounds. Many religions focus on the commonality of man, the idea that we are all born equal and share the same traits, possibilities, and failures [4]. Furthermore, to be accepted by a community without prejudice as an equal is a very real comfort [5].

Spiritual retreats remove one from daily routines for an extended period (typically, a weekend) to focus on oneself and one's relationship with a higher power (aka, God), is also common to many religions [3,4]. Spiritual retreats allow people to create distance between their problems and their abilities to address those issues. Consequently, retreats create opportunities for individuals to enter into communal prayer in safe and secure settings promoting well-being and personal spirituality.

We believe, particularly by homeless people, acceptance by others of one's faith beliefs and sharing life stories are essential to persons

in recovery from substance abuse. Among the homeless, the sense of order, meaning and purpose that religion may give must be emphasized given their history of social neglect and ostracism [6]. Given the chance to mediate, pray, worship, and share one's life may boost one's self-esteem, provide hope and optimism for future, and reduce a sense of loneliness among homeless adults. For homeless men and women, communal life sharing (common experiences in spiritual retreats) may not produce miraculous and immediate material benefits, but they may provide momentary relief from hopelessness and despair. Unfortunately, homeless people are hardly ever asked about faith and spirituality by service providers, let alone encouraged to engage with their religion and worship if they desire (Gravell). Secular service provider models do not provide these faith-based activities.

For the last few years we worked with a non-profit agency headquartered in Chicago, IL, called Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP). ISP essentially runs for homeless adults a weekend length spiritual retreat program (Friday evening until Sunday afternoon). During monthly Saturday gatherings, however, ISP holds day long reflection days for retreatants who previously engaged in a weekend retreat [7]. ISP developed a retreat model that includes interior and spiritual lives of those living with homelessness and suffering from addiction. By offering a safe space in which to share their stories, retreatants come to see that they are not alone in their struggles - that they are loved by a higher power (God) and by those on retreat with them [8].

In the present study, we focused on the perceptions of retreat participants on their personality change through weekend retreat program. Retreat participants were provided a safe and secure setting with a private bedroom and bath for sleeping and three hot, freshly cooked meals. The goal of ISP is not to provide case management or housing and employment skills for homeless adults, but to provide them a service that most other people choose and enjoy – a chance to grow personally and spirituality with other women or men in recovery who are homeless. ISP's mission is an optional spiritual growth program provided to homeless women and men with similar struggles in recovery and who are sober for about two months, willing and able to share their story, and to listen to life narratives of others on their retreat.

We had no expected results; this study with homeless adults in recovery experiencing a spiritual retreat is the first systematic study with this population. Instead of any specific hypotheses, we assessed (at the end of the weekend) each participant's self-esteem, levels of loneliness, and hopefulness about their future. We compared women and men retreatants of varied races, marital status, self-identified religious affiliations, and in different living arrangements.

Method

Participants

A total of 66 homeless adults (45 women, 20 men; M age = 47.16 years old; SD = 9.98), who reported a history of substance abuse, engaged in a weekend long spiritual retreat program and

volunteered to participant in the present study. Most participants (74.2%) self-identified as African-Americans, and claimed to be unmarried/single (77.3%). Most participants stated they currently were residing in a halfway or recovery home (63.6%).

Psychometric Scales

Self-esteem scale: All participants completed the well-known 10-item Self-esteem Scale by Rosenberg [9]. Each item is rated along a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), with sample items including "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself." With the current sample, coefficient alpha was 0.84.

Loneliness scale: Participants also completed the 3-item brief UCLA Loneliness Scale by Russel, Peplau, and Ferguson [10]. For this measure, individuals rate each of the three items along a 3-point scale (1 = hardly ever; 3 = often), on items such as "How often do you feel left out?" and "How often do you feel that you lack companionship?" With the current sample, coefficient alpha was 0.82.

Hope scale: In addition, all participants completed the 8-item Adult Dispositional Hope Scale by Snyder, Harris, Anderson, Holleran, Irving, Sigmon, et al. [11]. This measure asks respondents to rate along an 8-point scale (1 = definitely false; 8 = definitely true) each item, with 4-items assessing agency thinking (the belief that one has the desire to accomplish tasks; sample item, "I have the desire to meet life's demands") and 4-items assessing pathway thinking (the belief that one has the skills to accomplish tasks; sample item, "I don't feel limited by the opportunities that are available.") With the present sample, coefficient alpha for the agency subscale was 0.83, and for the pathway subscale was 0.70).

Procedure

ISP holds several retreats separately for women and for men [12]. Annually, they service around 2,000 adults (through 800 volunteers) in 29 US cities: the present study focused on a sample of retreatants within the Chicago area. Each retreat served about 12 homeless adults (same-sex groups) with four volunteer retreat facilitators who engaged in the same rites and practices with the homeless participants. Retreats begin on Friday evening after a warm dinner and end after a warm lunch on Sunday. During this time, participants engage in self-reflections on their life stories, sharing of their personal experiences, as well as singing and spiritual reflections.

We surveyed 91 homeless retreatants across the 2016 year in the Chicago area. From this sample, 66 individuals reported they were persons in recovery and these persons were the target of this study. On Sunday afternoon, at the end of the weekend retreat, each participant completed the set of reliable and valid self-report measures cited above, as well as demographic items assessing their age, gender, race/ethnic identity, religious affiliation, marital status, employment status, and length of time in recovery and in substance abuse use.

Results and Discussion

Initially, we compared the 66 retreat participants in recovery with the remaining 25 persons on the retreats but who indicated they were not in recovery on each of the sum scores for the three personality variables. Independent t-tests indicated no significant differences between these two groups on these measures. Therefore, we felt that our 66 retreat participants included in this study were not significantly different from those persons excluded from further analysis.

Next, a series of one-way MANOVA tests assessed the influence of five factors: gender (women vs men); race (African-Americans vs other races); religion (Baptists vs other Christians); marital status (single vs. previously married); housing type (shelter/halfway house vs. other housing types) on the four survey scales (self-worth, loneliness, hope: agency and hope: pathways). Pillai's trace was used over Wilks' Lambda, because of unequal n sizes.

Table 1 presents the mean sum scores by demographic item on the four measures. We choose these demographic variables and to simply compare the highest frequency of a demographic with other combined levels to provide an overall, standard insight to the profile of participants who engaged in these retreats with sample sizes large enough for comparison. We did not enter into the project with specific hypotheses, but focused on assessing this program in order to provide future research directions.

		Self-esteem	Loneliness	Hope/Agency	Hope/Pathway
GENDER	Women	33.14	5.09	29.14	28.30
	(n = 45)	(5.10)	(1.43)	(3.83)	(3.74)
	Men	33.06	7.00	26.00	26.10
	(n = 20)	(3.56)	(2.03)	(5.41)	(5.50)
RACE	African-American	32.55	5.70	29.42	28.67
	(n = 49)	(4.21)	(1.83)	(3.12)	(3.16)
	Other races	34.69	5.59	25.24	25.29
	(n = 17)	(5.50)	(1.91)	(6.20)	(6.11)
MARITAL STATUS	Single	33.01	5.57	28.85	28.13
	(n = 48)	(4.87)	(1.78)	(3.96)	(3.92)
	Was married	33.54	5.92	25.62	25.69
	(n = 13)	(4.22)	(2.10)	(5.74)	(5.84)
RELIGION	Baptist	32.31	5.10	29.55	28.57
	(n = 33)	(4.89)	(1.58)	(3.04)	(3.47)
	Christian (other)	33.93	6.09	27.13	27.00
	(n = 30)	(4.39)	(1.88)	(5.45)	(5.13)
HOUSING TYPE	halfway/recovery house	33.24	5.20	28.52	27.80
	(n = 42)	(5.10)	(1.63)	(4.51)	(4.13)
	Other options	32.91	6.52	27.81	27.62
	(n = 23)	(3.82)	(1.90)	(4.62)	(4.97)

Table 1: Mean Sum Scores on Survey Scales across Demographic Comparison Groups. Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviation.

Results from this analysis indicated only two main effects, for gender and for race. For the MANOVA analysis focused on gender, there was a significant main effect, $F(4, 51) = 3.765, p = 0.009; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .228, \eta^2 = .228, \text{power} = .859$, reflecting that women and men reported different perceptions of the retreat's impact. Univariate testing revealed a significant difference between women and men on two scales, namely: loneliness $F(1, 54) = 14.417, p < .0005; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .228, \eta^2 = .211, \text{power} = .962$; and hope-agency, $F(1, 54) = 6.986, p = 0.011; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .228, \eta^2 = .115, \text{power} = .783$. Follow-up independent t-tests were conducted to determine the directions of the mean difference for the loneliness and hope-agency scales. Table 1 reports mean sum scores by gender. For the loneliness scale, women compared to men reported less loneliness, $t(24) = 3.651, p = .001$. On the hope-agency scale, women compared to men reported more hope-agency, $t(60) = -2.584, p = .012$ (Table 1).

The second MANOVA analysis on race found a significant main effect, $F(4, 52) = 4.699, p = .003; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .265, \eta^2 = .265, \text{power} = .931$, such that African-American and other race participants reported differences on the four scales. Univariate testing revealed a significant difference between African-Americans and other race participants on only two scales: hope-agency, $F(1, 55) = 12.567, p = .001; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .265, \eta^2 = .186, \text{power} = .936$; and hope-pathways, $F(1, 55) = 7.246, p = 0.009; \lambda_{\text{Pillai}} = .265, \eta^2 = .116, \text{power} = .753$. Two follow-up independent t-tests determined the directions of the mean difference for the hope-agency and hope-pathway scales. On the hope-agency scale, African-Americans compared to other races reported higher hope-agency, $t(19) = 2.657, p = .016$, and hope-pathways, $t(19) = 2.168, p = .043$ (Table 1). There were no other significant differences based on race on the self-reported inventories, nor on any other demographic variables.

Taken together, these results indicate that the spiritual retreat through ISP impacted women more than men and African-Americans more than persons of other races. At the end of the retreat weekend, women compared to men reported they felt less lonely and more empowered by the program of sharing and self-reflection. In addition, persons of color (African-Americans) compared to other persons reported greater hopefulness for their life at the end of the retreat weekend, that they believed they had both the willpower and the way-power now to improve their life. Furthermore, the weekend retreat did not seem to impact persons of varied religions, marital status, or dwelling for residence. These results, collectively, are impressive and suggest future investigation into the dynamics of the weekend. That is, it does not seem that a spiritual retreat impacts differently for neither single or married (or once married) persons, nor (even more interesting to us) persons of different faith traditions. Perhaps, it is the nature of the retreat – to be open, to share your struggles, to spend time with similar others – that prompts these favorable outcomes which were anecdotally expressed to the volunteer retreat coordinators [8].

The present study's gender and race differences might have been because of the composition of the number of participants. We had more women than men, and more African-Americans than other

racers involved in the retreats. While the results might reflect a biased sample, it is important to note that these are two groups of homeless persons in recovery that often are not focused for intervention – marginalized persons who do not have a voice. The present study, then, adds to our understanding of the recovery process for women and persons of color.

Of course, the present study has limitations. We used a small sample of convenient participants surveyed once, and who all resided in the same urban U.S. city (Chicago, IL). Our gender, race, and other demographic variables included small, uneven sample sizes. Future studies need to be longitudinal over months after the end of the weekend to capture long-term impacts of the retreat, and these studies must include larger sample sizes from each target demographic assessed in the present study. We also believe we need other psycho-social inventories to capture the process of change by retreat attendees, from across varied cities in the U.S. Still, this study was the first systematic assessment of a service provided to adults in recovery and who are homeless. We think the program by ISP is promising and clearly needs more follow-up evaluation. Homeless adults in recovery are a sample of the population who deserve dignity and respect, just like all other persons. It seems the ISP program offers humanity and regard.

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