

Infusing Personal Discernment into PSYC 200 – Orientation to the Major

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The School of Psychology at Xavier University serve the following mission: “In keeping with the Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts tradition, the School of Psychology educates students in the science of behavior and mental processes with sensitivity toward the diversity of all people so students may use psychological knowledge and insight to address human concerns” (School of Psychology, 2016). As part of this mission, students who major in psychology are required to complete a one-credit hour course called “Orientation to the Major.” The primary aims of this course are to expose students to career options in psychology and encourage students to begin building a network of professional relationships in the field. As a part of the Orientation to the Major course, student are asked to meaningfully reflect on psychology as their chosen major and identify possible (and, potentially the “best”) career paths for their abilities, strengths, values, and experiences. Given the nature of the course, teaching students about Personal Discernment from the Ignation tradition should enhance their ability to make important career choices, as a reflection of their strengths and weaknesses, emotions, and desires – thereby promoting Xavier’s mission in the hearts, minds, and actions of the students.

Making a career decision may be one of the most important yet daunting decisions in one’s lifetime (Jiang, 2014). The Ignation Tradition offers (at least) one exercise that may meaningfully enhance individuals’ confidence in their career-related decisions: personal discernment. Personal discernment involves being open to God’s spirit as individuals examine their thoughts and feelings to, ultimately, make decisions that are good for themselves and the world around them (Peck & Stick, 2008). Therefore, teaching students about personal discernment should increase their confidence to competently and successfully make career decisions (i.e., engage in self-appraisals of abilities/skills, collect occupational information, solve

problems, identify career goals, and appropriately plan for the future; Betz et al., 1996; Jiang, 2014).

Personal discernment, from the Ignation tradition, was identified to infuse into *Psyc 200 – Orientation to the Major* (here forward referred to as Psyc 200) because students likely do not understand nor use (and may, subsequently, benefit from) personal discernment when making career-related decisions, and they should be intentionally instructed on this process. The two goals associated with infusing personal discernment into Psyc 200 included promoting students' achievement of "Ignation Indifference" (i.e., a state of inner freedom, openness, and balance that allows individuals to openly and equally consider all options) as they explore their careers options and interests, and to help students achieve "Ignation Consolation" (i.e., peace between *cognitions* [pros and cons of choices] and *emotions* [feelings accompany our cognitions]) when making decisions about their career options and interests. The Ignation tradition suggests that when cognitions and emotions are concordant, individuals will experience "peace" with a (career-related) decision, and can meaningfully act on the decision. Whereas, when cognitions and emotions are disconcordant, individuals feel uneasy, agitated, or even anxious (i.e., *desolation*) about a decision and should continue to reflect. Given that Ignation Indifference and Ignation Consolation may aid students in their search for, or pursuit of, psychology-related careers, respectively, the current project attempted to infuse personal discernment into students' career considerations. Psychology majors, enrolled in one section of Psyc 200, were invited to learn about and engage in personal discernment from the Ignation tradition. Students in two control conditions, a second section of Psyc 200 (a course-relevant control) and a section of Psyc 221 – Research Methods and Design I (a course-irrelevant control) did not learn about or engage in personal discernment.

Method and Procedure

Using a short-term, mixed-methods, longitudinal design, 41 undergraduate students (n = 18 Personal Discernment condition) were invited to complete an online questionnaire near the beginning and end of the spring 2016 semester. This questionnaire assessed the students' Xavier Identity (End, 2012), Jesuit Identity (End, 2012), Understanding of the Psychology Major (Adapted from Dillinger & Landrum, 2002 and Thomas & McDaniel, 2004), and Career Decision Self-Efficacy/Self-Confidence (Betz et al., 1996). Students were asked to rate each item on the questionnaire using a scale that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*).

Throughout the spring semester, students in the personal discernment section of Psyc 200 engaged in six activities that attempted to infuse personal discernment into the course to, ultimately, promote Ignatian Indifference and Ignatian Consolation in students' decision making about their career options and pursuits. The activities included short reading and writing assignments, small group or partner discussions, lecture information, guest speakers (e.g., Angela Gray-Girton, Center for Faith and Justice), and a "speed networking" activity. Specifically, one reading and writing assignment asked students to read the "Seven Attitudes or Qualities Required for an Authentic Discernment Process" (see <http://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/understanding-our-heritage/Seven-Attitudes-or-Qualities-Required.cfm>) and then respond to five questions (e.g., What aspects of Ignatian decision-making most resonate with your approach to making career-related decisions?; Why would the seven qualities contribute to authentic discernment concerning your career-related decisions?). A second activity asked students to begin building their network of professional relationships, with their peers, by engage in a "speed networking" task. In pairs, students introduced themselves and engaged in 6-8 minutes of discussion focused on how Xavier's Jesuit values influence their

pursuit of a career in psychology (e.g., What Xavier value [i.e., Reflection, Discernment, Solidarity and Kinship, Service Rooted in Justice and Love, Cura Personlis, Magis] is important to your career development and success?). Every student discussed each Jesuit value at least once with a different peer colleague and were asked to briefly provide a written summary of their discussion. A small sampling of students' responses to these two activities is provided below. Students' offered positive feedback on the "Seven Attitudes or Qualities Required for an Authentic Discernment Process" activity, and students' energy during and excitement for the "speed networking about Jesuit values" activity was inspiring.

Results

Qualitative Results

Students' responses to the "seven attitudes for an authentic discernment process"

Below is a sampling of students' responses to the reading and writing assignment concerning the seven qualities and attitudes for an authentic discernment process.

"A key contribution of the qualities is to not confuse ends with means.

Ignatius points to the idea that people often only think of God as a secondary factor that God is only relevant once their own individual desires are fulfilled. In relation to career-related decisions this would mean that one would need to consider God's presence in the short- and long-term consequences of a decision. This could include making decisions that serve others through using one's own strengths. This could also include putting others' needs first before pursue one's own riches."

"The seven qualities definitely contribute to authentic discernment because they require a person to take a step back and think about what decision

they are making. The choice of career is a big one and a decision that takes a lot of time to make a good whole-hearted decision. Through examining the seven qualities of authentic discernment one is able to make a good decision for his or her own person and will be able to know that they have chosen a path that God would want for him or her. For example, when thinking about my career at this point in my life it is incredibly essential that I take the quality of openness to heart. The amount of career options in today's society is so great and I feel as though closing myself off to all of the possibilities would be detrimental in my career development process."

"The aspect of Ignatian decision making that I resonate with the best is ensuring the harmony between thoughts and feelings. I have a lot of grand ideas in my head about what I will do in my future career, however I have never tested out whether or not I want to do any of the careers I think I will be good at. I have never tested the feelings I actually feel while having to complete these jobs. I feel as though before I can make a good decision, I need to create harmony among these two aspects, finding something I truly love that I am also good at."

"An aspect of Ignatian decision-making that resonates with me is to not come into a decision making process with attachments. I think it's good to always be open to new information and ideas regarding career-related decisions. If we think we have all the answers, we will never be able to learn anything new or grow. If we don't listen to and consider what our opposition has to say, we can't form a well-rounded or informed opinion."

“Courage is one of the qualities that I believe contributes a lot to my career path. Throughout these past few semesters there has been a lot of work and tough classes, but these challenges are put in front of me as Gods way of pushing me to be a better student and person. Beyond courage, I think that the seven qualities are telling me to be open-minded with my future, really consider the decision I’m going to make, and they’re telling me that it’s good to have goals, but not to forget about all of the help that God is giving me along the way.”

Students’ responses to the “speed networking” focused on Xavier values

Below is a sampling of students’ responses to the in-class speed networking activity focused on Xavier’s Jesuit values.

“I want a career I love. I think engaging in personal discernment can help me achieve this feeling. Discernment requires me to give conscious attention to my feelings and thoughts, and discernment may help me find how my passion for psychology fits in the world.”

“Love is important to me as a psychology major because it is at the core of why I believe psyc is the right major for me – to give back to my community through my vocation. When we nourish ourselves with love, it inspires others. Spread the love.”

“Discernment is very important to my career development and success because the ability to openly consider my own feelings and thoughts allows me to understand my role in helping others.”

“Cura personalis is important to my career because trying to understand the whole person, and that each person is unique, shows how differences among people should be appreciated and celebrated.”

Quantitative Results

Students’ responses to the online questionnaire were analyzed using a series of 2 (Time) x 3 (Course) mixed-design ANOVAs, with Time as a repeated-measures variable. Although students experienced no change in their Xavier Student Identity as a result of learning about personal discernment in Psyc 200, $F(2, 38) = 1.03, p = .27$, they experienced a significant increase in their Jesuit Identity (see Figure 1) compared to the course control conditions, $F(2, 38) = 3.84, p < .05$. This finding reveals that infusing personal discernment into Psyc 200 promoted Xavier’s mission in the hearts and minds of the students, as students who learned about personal discernment expressed a stronger Jesuit identity near the end of the spring 2016 semester (than near the beginning of the semester).

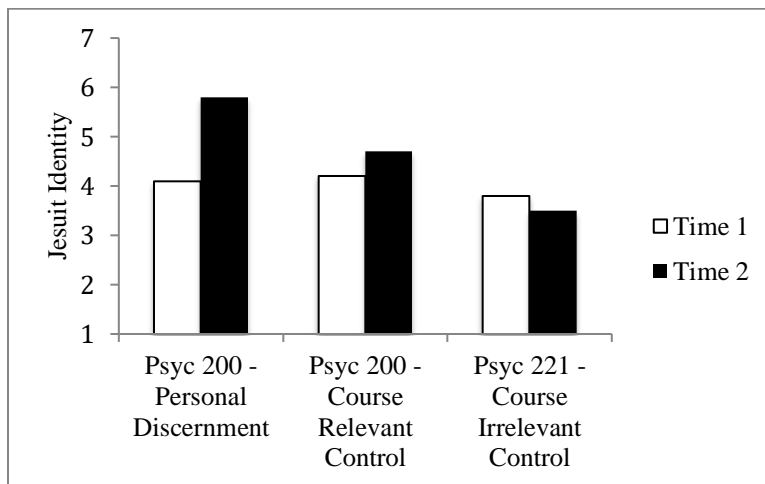


Figure 1. Infusing Personal Discernment into Psyc 200 resulted in a significant increase in participants’ expressed Jesuit Identity.

Students enrolled in Psyc 200, *regardless* of the infusion of personal discernment in to the course, experienced a significant increase in their Understanding of a Psychology Major, $F(2,$

38) = 3.08, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2), and Career Decision Self-Efficacy $F(2, 38) = 4.27, p < .05$, than students in Psyc 221 (course irrelevant control).

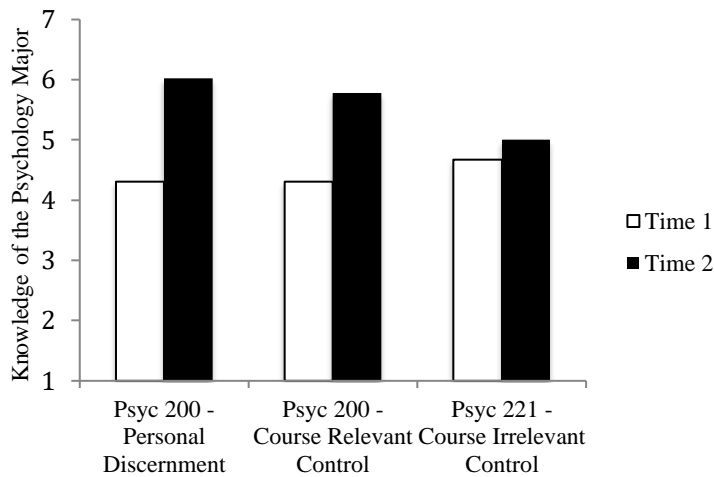


Figure 2. Regardless of the infusion of personal discernment in to the course, Psyc 200 students experienced an increase in their Understanding of the Psychology Major (a pattern of results consistent with their Career Decision Self-Efficacy).

Discussion

The current project attempted to infuse personal discernment into Psyc 200 to increase students' career-decision confidence (i.e., engage in self-appraisals of abilities/skills, collect occupational information, solve problems, identify career goals, and appropriately plan for the future; Betz et al., 1996; Jiang, 2014). Overall, students seemed to appreciate the activities and appeared to benefit from using personal discernment when making career-related decisions. However, it should be noted that students in *both sections* of Psyc 200 (personal discernment and course-relevant control) experienced increases on the critical dependent variables in this project (i.e., Understanding of the Psychology Major *and* Career Decision Self-Efficacy). The increase in students' Understanding of the Psychology Major and Career Decision Self-Efficacy suggests that the objectives of Psyc 200, with or without infusing personal discernment into the course, promote students' critical thinking about and confidence in their chosen major and potential careers. Because the School of Psychology at Xavier University instructs students in a manner

consistent with the Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts tradition, it is not surprising that content in Psyc 200 already promotes Xavier's mission in the hearts, minds, and actions of the students.

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