

Differences in Fraternal Organization Members' Self-perceived Leadership Growth Levels

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Abstract

This purpose of this research was to examine fraternal members' self-perceived leadership skill levels prior to and after enrolling in a land-grant university. A descriptive design using the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale—Revised Version Two was used to gather data from a proportional stratified random sample of all students who were members of a fraternal organization during 2009-2010 at Texas A&M University. Results showed statistically significant differences existed in each leadership skills construct (Change, Citizenship, Collaboration, Commitment, Common Purpose, Congruence, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility), when compared by respondents' self-perceived leadership skills before versus their current college levels. Significant differences existed in each construct when analyzed by academic majors (Arts vs. Sciences). Also, significant differences existed in each construct when analyzed by classification status (Underclassmen vs. Upperclassmen).

What types of leadership skills should be taught to students? In this study, leadership skill growth occurred in each construct and each sub-group comparison, indicating a growing process. Beyond the constructs of Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility, more emphasis is needed in developing Citizenship skills among fraternity members, and more efforts are needed in developing Common Purpose and Congruence skills for sorority members. Fraternal members did not make practical significant progress in the constructs of Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy. Additional research may shed light on why male college students do not make greater progress in the leadership skills that would most likely help them become better leaders in their communities, state, and nation.

Keywords: Leadership, Growth, Land-grant University, Fraternal Organizations

INTRODUCTION

Student membership in traditional college and university student organizations such as student government, fraternities, or sororities, purportedly builds leadership skills over the course of a student's participation in such organizations. These opportunities help students develop friendships, negotiate conflicts, and participate in group projects or other kinds of living/learning activities (Astin & Astin, 2000). However, Astin and Astin stressed that "leadership involves considerably more than holding some kind of formal student office, earning academic honors, or being a star athlete. Rather, leadership occurs when people become concerned about something and work to engage others in bringing about positive change" (p. 23). Based on this premise, the purpose of this study was to assess self-perceived leadership skill development among Texas A&M University students who were members in traditional fraternities or sororities during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Fraternal Organizations

Organizations such as service groups, spirit associations, sports clubs and student government provide many opportunities for students to involve themselves with each other, the institution, and their community. Each of these activities and programs provide students with increased opportunities for integrating their academic learning with life outside the classroom (Astin & Astin, 2000). For more than 100 years, college fraternities and sororities have promoted the idea that membership enhances students' personal and professional networks, commitment to community service and philanthropy, and contributes to the development of life-long leadership skills. While insufficient empirical data exists to validate these claims, research has shown that these organizations do provide numerous opportunities for leadership development and volunteerism (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1982).

Astin's (1993) *Theory of Involvement* is often cited (Astin, 1998; Dugan, 2006, 2008; Ewing, Bruce, & Ricketts, 2009; Pascarella et al., 1996) specifically in fraternity and sorority studies, as "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development in the undergraduate years" (p. 398). More recent research revealed that fraternity and sorority membership had a positive effect on the development of career-related proficiency, interpersonal skills, community orientation, and civic engagement (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005).

In a longitudinal study of more than 6,000 seniors, Pike and Askew (1990) found that "Greek students reported higher levels of academic effort, involvement in organizations, and interaction with other students" (p. 369). Years later, Pike (2003) found that fraternity and sorority members were at least as engaged as their non-Greek counterparts. Haber and Komives (2009) explored the extent to which co-curricular involvement, holding formal leadership roles, and participating in leadership programs contributed to female and male college students' capacity for socially responsible leadership. Haber and Komives found that membership in a fraternity or sorority emerged as a significant variable and reflected specific types of co-curricular involvement. In addition, fraternity and sorority membership was one of several significant variables that contributed to the development of leadership skills and ability (Haber & Komives).

Today, incoming college freshman are introduced to the opportunity of fraternal membership with promises of personal development, leadership development, and life-long

friendships. Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity promotes its history of helping young men become better leaders and citizens through its “Building Better Men” campaign (Delta Sigma Phi, 2009, “About the Fraternity,” p. 1). Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for women has adopted a four-year member development program, “Leading with Values” (Pi Beta Phi, 2009, “Friends & Leaders for Life,” subject number six). And, one of the oldest African American male fraternities, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., is committed to preparing its members “for the greatest usefulness in the causes of humanity, freedom, and dignity of the individual...” (Alpha Phi Alpha, 2009, “About Alpha,” para. 3).

Gender, Major, Classification and Student Leadership

The relationship between gender and leadership has been studied for decades. Research indicated that in general, women and men have different styles of leadership skills (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). In 2000, using Astin’s input-environment-output (I-E-O) model of assessing college outcomes, Kezar and Moriarty conducted a case study on gender and leadership among college men and women. They found that men rated themselves with more leadership ability (as opposed to women having less ability) when entering college as well as when graduating.

However, Dugan’s research (2006), using the Social Change Model (SCM), with randomly selected undergraduate students showed that except for the constructs of Controversy and Collaboration, female students scored significantly higher leadership ability scores than did male students. Dugan’s research also found that regardless of gender, students performed least well in the constructs of Civility, Citizenship, and Change.

Leadership is a developing process. As we discussed, fraternal organizations are considered as incubators of promising leadership. Under such environments, do college fraternity and sorority members perceive their levels of leadership growth from fraternal membership differently? Do fraternal members majoring in the sciences differ in their self-perceived levels of leadership skill growth from fraternal members majoring in the arts? Do fraternal members who are upper-classmen have higher self-perceived leadership skills’ growth levels than do under-classmen fraternal members? These questions became the guiding forces of inquiry for the authors.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to assess college students’ self-perceived leadership skill development among Texas A&M University students who were members of traditional fraternities or sororities during 2009-2010. Specific objectives were to 1) Determine if significant differences existed in leadership growth levels between student organization types (also gender types); 2) Determine if significant differences existed in leadership growth levels based on academic major; and 3) Determine if significant differences existed in leadership growth levels based on classification.

A descriptive design (Field, 2000) using the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale—Revised Version Two (SRLS-R2), was used to achieve the purpose of this study. The target population ($N = 4,200$) of interest for the study was all male and female students, ages 19-25, who were members of a fraternal organization during 2009-2010 at Texas A&M University. The accessible population was all fraternity or sorority members with valid email addresses in the Greek Life Members’ Database.

A proportional stratified random sample ensured that all students from the accessible population of interest had an equal and independent chance of being selected for this study. Proportional stratified random sampling techniques ensure that each subgroup will be representative of the population of interest (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). Using Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) equation for sample size and assuming maximum heterogeneity (a 50/50 split), the sample size was derived for a 95% confidence level with a +/- 5% margin of error (Dillman et al., 2009). The sample ($n = 360$) was proportionally represented by 66% females ($n = 238$) and 34% males ($n = 122$).

The Social Change Model of Leadership, grounded in social responsibility and change for the common good (HERI, 1996), was used to produce the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale – Revised Version Two (SRLS-R2), which is designed for use with college students and advocates for leadership development (Appel-Silbaugh, 2005). The SRLS-R2 measures self-perception of leadership skills within eight constructs (Consciousness of Self, Congruence, Commitment, Common Purpose, Collaboration, Controversy with Civility, Citizenship, and Change). The SRLS-R2 has six to eleven statements about leadership skills for each construct. Individual statements are answered using Likert-type scales (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, 4 = *Strongly Agree*); statements for each construct were summed to determine respondents' overall perceptions of leadership skill levels for each of the eight constructs. Previous studies (Haber & Komives, 2009; Tyree, 1998) determined all eight leadership construct subscales on the SRLS-R2 instrument as valid and reliable for measuring college students' perceptions of leadership skill growth. In total, 68 statements about respondents' self-perceived leadership skills growth comprised the SRLS-R2. Leadership skill statement examples for each construct are presented in Table 1 (Appendix).

The SRLS-R2 instrument was presented using a modified Borich (1980) model of needs assessment. The modified Borich model was used to determine gaps between respondents' perceived levels of leadership skill development before and after college entry. This post-then-pre method of assessment has shown to reduce response shift typically resulting in pre-post test assessments by reducing the tendency of respondents to over-estimate their original skill levels. The post-then-pre method offers a reflective perspective that shows a more accurate self-assessment of skill development by giving an opportunity for comparison (Rohs, 1999). However, Colosi and Dunifon (2006) listed several threats to validity when using the post-then-pre method, which included

- *Recall*: the inability to accurately recall attitudes and behaviors held in the past;
- *Social desirability bias*: the need for people to report change or improvement to fit program expectations or to inflate perceived improvement on those items that are most important to them personally;
- *Effort justification bias*: occurs when respondents report improvement (many times subconsciously) to justify the time and energy they have invested in program attendance; and
- *Cognitive dissonance*: occurs when respondents report improvement even if it did not occur, to meet their own expectation that they *should have* changed. In other words, if parents expected to change as a result of participation, but did not, they will report a change to resolve an internal conflict and put their mind at ease. (p. 3)

Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) Tailored Design Method was used to collect data for this study. An online survey was created to facilitate expedient data collection. A

personalized e-mail was sent to respondents two days before the survey, notifying them of the online questionnaire and its stipulations. A second personalized e-mail was sent two days after the pre-notice with a hyperlink to the actual study, and with a personalized unique password for entering the survey after respondents read the Information and Consent Page. Follow up personalized emails with respondents' unique passwords were sent to non-respondents every three days after the initial distribution for two weeks.

The Dillman et al. (2009) data collection method and a compressed time schedule produced a response rate of 23.48%. Of the 360 accessible members randomly selected from the Texas A&M University Greek Life directory, 26 respondents did not participate in the study because of invalid email addresses ($n = 7$), because they chose not to participate ($n = 16$), or had graduated or were no longer members of a fraternal organization ($n = 3$). Six members opted out of the study after repeated survey reminders, which further reduced the sample to 328, of which 77 respondents provided usable data.

Several authors (Ary et al., 1996; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Tuckman, 1999) recommended that if less than a 75-80% response rate were achieved, then contacting a portion of the non-respondents is necessary to test for nonresponse bias. To check for nonresponse bias, a proportionally stratified random sample (10%) of non-respondents ($n = 251$) from the original sample was drawn, totaling 8 fraternity and 17 sorority members. The researchers chose two skill statements from each of the eight SCM constructs. Researchers contacted the double-dip sample via telephone to record students' responses to the 16 SCM skill statements.

Non-respondents were compared statistically to respondents by scores for each of the 16 selected SLRS-R2 statements. Statistical differences existed between non-respondents and respondents for one statement each in the "Change" and "Citizenship" constructs, therefore the results of this study cannot be generalized to the population of interest for those two constructs; all other results for the remaining six constructs may be generalized to the target population.

Descriptive analyses were used to describe the data. Analysis of variance was used to determine if significant differences existed in respondents' perceived levels of leadership skills growth when compared by student organization type and selected demographics (classification and academic major type).

FINDINGS

Data were analyzed from online questionnaires completed by 77 student organization members in fall semester 2009, among which 68% were female. Respondents were represented by 60% upperclassmen, and 53.4% studied academic majors in the arts. The majority were Caucasians (84%) as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix).

Respondents' self-perceived leadership skill growth levels for each of the SCM constructs were determined by calculating grand means from the individual statement means for each construct (see Table 3; Appendix) and analyzed by each level (prior to and current college levels) for organization type (fraternity vs. sorority). Paired-samples *t*-tests revealed statistically significant differences existed in each construct, when compared by respondents' self-perceived leadership skill levels before college entry versus their current college levels (Table 3).

Practical differences (from "agree" to "strongly agree") occurred for both fraternity and sorority members in the constructs Common Purpose and Congruence with respect to their prior ($M = 19-36_{\text{Common Purpose}}$, and $M = 14-28_{\text{Congruence}}$) and current ($M = 26-36_{\text{Common Purpose}}$, and $M = 20-28_{\text{Congruence}}$) self-perceived leadership skill levels. Similar practical differences were observed

for fraternity members in the constructs Collaboration ($M = 13-30_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 20-32_{\text{current}}$) and Commitment ($M = 15-24_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 18-24_{\text{current}}$), and for sorority members in the construct Citizenship ($M = 16-32_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 20-32_{\text{current}}$).

Significant differences existed in each construct between the self-perceived leadership skill levels prior to and currently when analyzed by academic major types (Arts vs. Sciences) (Table 4). Practical differences (from “agree” to “strongly agree”) occurred for students majoring in both the arts and sciences for the constructs Citizenship, Common Purpose and Congruence with respect to their prior ($M = 16-32_{\text{Citizenship}}$, $M = 19-36_{\text{Common Purpose}}$, and $M = 14-28_{\text{Congruence}}$) and current ($M = 20-32_{\text{Citizenship}}$, $M = 18-24_{\text{Commitment}}$, $M = 26-36_{\text{Common Purpose}}$, and $M = 20-28_{\text{Congruence}}$) self-perceived leadership skill levels. Similar practical differences were observed in the construct Commitment ($M = 15-24_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 18-24_{\text{current}}$), and for science major students in the construct of Collaboration ($M = 20-32_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 20-32_{\text{current}}$).

Finally, significant differences existed in each construct between the self-perceived leadership skill levels prior to and currently when analyzed by classification status (underclassmen vs. upperclassmen) (Table 5). Practical differences (from “agree” to “strongly agree”) occurred for both underclassmen and upperclassmen in the construct Congruence with respect to their prior ($M = 14-28$) and current ($M = 20-28$) self-perceived leadership skills levels. Same practical differences happened for upperclassmen in the constructs Collaboration ($M = 13-32_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 23-32_{\text{current}}$), Commitment ($M = 15-24_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 18-24_{\text{current}}$), Citizenship ($M = 16-32_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 20-32_{\text{current}}$), and Common Purpose ($M = 19-36_{\text{prior}}$ vs. $M = 27-36_{\text{current}}$).

CONCLUSIONS

Much of what is written about leadership would suggest that leadership potential exists in every individual, every student. Kouzes and Posner (1995, preface) answered the proverbial question “can leadership be taught?” with an unequivocal “yes.” Taken as a truism, it becomes clear that leadership development or at the least, leadership education, has a place in our schools, workplace, and society. But what types of leadership skills should be taught to students?

As shown in the results, there were signs of leadership skill growth in each construct and each sub-group comparison, indicating that leadership was a growing process. In terms of different fraternal organization types, practical progress was observed in the constructs of Common Purpose and Congruence. It also appeared that fraternity members had made more progress in Collaboration, while sorority members perceived greater achievement in developing Citizenship among their members. This result is slightly different from Dugan’s (2006). The results also indicated that beyond the common constructs of Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility, more emphasis should be added to the development of Citizenship among fraternity members, and more efforts are needed in developing Common Purpose and Congruence skills for sorority members.

For fraternal students majoring in either the arts or sciences, practical progress was made in Citizenship, Common Purpose and Congruence. Science majors made significant practical progress in Collaboration. This might indicate that more collaboration and cooperation are required in the sciences than are required in the arts. However, all of the members needed improvement in Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility.

Comparison between underclassmen and upperclassmen showed that Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility were the areas that needed most emphasis in fraternal activities. However, this comparison also showed very clearly that leadership was a growing

process, and the growth in Citizenship, Collaboration, Commitment and Common Purpose only accumulated to practical significance after members reached their upper-class status. This result indicated that additional efforts aimed at improving those skills should be made among underclassmen in fraternal organizations.

In this research, fraternal organizations (male and female) in Texas A&M University did a good job in developing Common Purpose, Congruence, and Citizenship skills. However, most of the fraternal members did not make practical significant progress in the constructs of Change, Conscious of Self, and Controversy with Civility. These findings were consistent with Dugan's (2006) results that Change, Controversy with Civility, and Citizenship were common constructs with which all students struggle. Additional research may shed light on why male college students do not make greater progress in the leadership skills that would most likely help them become better leaders in their communities, state, and nation.

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Table 1

Social Change Model Leadership Constructs and Sample Statements

Leadership Construct	Skill Statements
Consciousness of Self	I am able to articulate my priorities. I am usually self-confident. I know myself pretty well.
Congruence	My behaviors are congruent with my beliefs. It is important to me to act on my beliefs. My actions are consistent with my values.
Commitment	I stick with others through the difficult times. I am focused on my responsibilities. I can be counted on to do my part.
Collaboration	I can make a difference when I work with others on task. I actively listen to what others have to say. I enjoy working with others toward common goals.
Common Purpose	I contribute to the goals of the group. I have helped to shape the mission of the group. Common values drive an organization.
Controversy with Civility	I am open to others' ideas. Creativity can come from conflict. I value differences in others.
Citizenship	I have the power to make a difference in my community. I am willing to act for the rights of others. I participate in activities that contribute to the common good.
Change	I work well in changing environments. I am open to new ideas. I look for new ways to do something.

Table 2

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 77)

Variable	Category	<i>f</i>	% ^e
Organization	Sorority ^a	52	67.5
	Fraternity ^b	24	31.2
Major	Arts ^c	39	50.6
	Sciences ^d	34	44.2
Class	Upperclassmen	46	59.7
	Underclassmen	29	37.7
Race	Caucasian	65	84.4
	Hispanic	6	7.8
	African American	2	2.6
	Multiracial	1	1.3
	Race not included	1	1.3

Note. ^aSororities included Alpha Chi Omega, Delta Gamma, Kappa Delta, etc.; ^bFraternities included Alpha Gamma Rho, Sigma Phi Epsilon, Delta Sigma Phi, etc.; ^cArts included Accounting, Economics, Education, etc.; ^dSciences included Animal Science, Geology, Nutrition, etc.; ^eFrequencies may not total 100% because of missing responses.

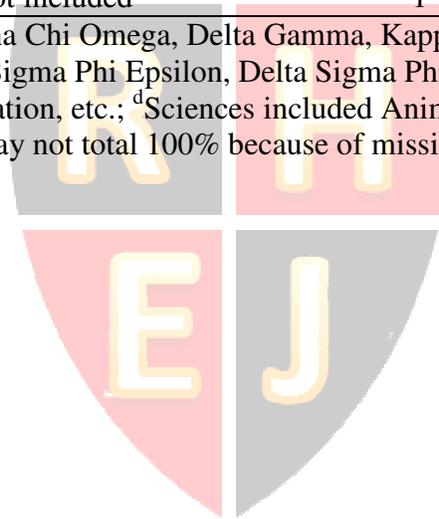


Table 3

Differences in Students' Self-perceived Leadership Growth Levels by Organization Type

Constructs	Organization Type	df	Grand Means		t
			Prior	Current	
Change ^a	Fraternity	23	26.54	28.50	-3.88*
	Sorority	51	27.85	29.25	-4.89*
Citizenship ^b	Fraternity	19	22.10	27.90	-5.51*
	Sorority	46	25.74	28.15	-4.49*
Collaboration ^c	Fraternity	21	24.27	28.68	-4.68*
	Sorority	47	26.40	27.62	-3.45*
Commitment ^d	Fraternity	20	20.43	23.10	-5.50*
	Sorority	49	21.06	22.16	-4.01*
Common Purpose ^e	Fraternity	19	27.80	32.70	-5.71*
	Sorority	44	29.56	31.78	-5.23*
Congruence ^f	Fraternity	21	22.05	25.32	-4.74*
	Sorority	46	23.87	25.47	-4.52*
Conscious of Self ^g	Fraternity	20	24.33	28.86	-6.81*
	Sorority	48	26.22	27.92	-5.07*
Controversy with Civility ^h	Fraternity	19	29.75	33.75	-5.66*
	Sorority	46	31.15	33.06	-5.06*

Note. ^a*Change* (10 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-36; ^b*Citizenship* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-34; ^c*Collaboration* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-32; ^d*Commitment* (6 statements) summed scores ranged from 15-24; ^e*Common Purpose* (9 statements) summed scores ranged from 18-36; ^f*Congruence* (7 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-28; ^g*Conscious of Self* (9 statements) summed scores range from 20-34; ^h*Controversy with Civility* (11 statements) summed scores ranged from 22-40.

* $p < 0.05$.

Table 4

Differences in Students' Self-perceived Leadership Growth Levels by Academic Major Type

Constructs	Academic Major	df	Grand Means		<i>t</i>
			Prior	Current	
Change ^a	Arts	38	26.85	28.44	-3.97*
	Sciences	33	27.88	29.41	-4.71*
Citizenship ^b	Arts	33	24.88	28.06	-4.86*
	Sciences	29	24.53	28.47	-4.44*
Collaboration ^c	Arts	35	25.11	27.61	-3.51*
	Sciences	30	26.45	28.45	-4.52*
Commitment ^d	Arts	36	20.46	22.16	-4.47*
	Sciences	31	21.25	22.75	-4.31*
Common Purpose ^e	Arts	30	28.71	31.81	-4.34*
	Sciences	30	29.42	32.39	-5.86*
Congruence ^f	Arts	34	23.06	24.97	-4.26*
	Sciences	30	23.48	26.00	-4.64*
Conscious of Self ^g	Arts	34	25.83	28.17	-5.13*
	Sciences	32	25.42	28.42	-5.56*
Controversy with Civility ^h	Arts	33	30.94	33.00	-4.81*
	Sciences	30	30.39	33.61	-5.50*

Note. ^a*Change* (10 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-36; ^b*Citizenship* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-34; ^c*Collaboration* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-32; ^d*Commitment* (6 statements) summed scores ranged from 15-24; ^e*Common Purpose* (9 statements) summed scores ranged from 18-36; ^f*Congruence* (7 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-28; ^g*Conscious of Self* (9 statements) summed scores range from 20-34; ^h*Controversy with Civility* (11 statements) summed scores ranged from 22-40.

**p* < 0.05.

Table 5

Differences in Students' Self-perceived Leadership Growth Levels by Classification Type

Constructs	Classification Type	df	Grand Means		<i>t</i>
			Prior	Current	
Change ^a	Underclassmen	28	28.38	29.52	-3.19*
	Upperclassmen	45	27.41	29.30	-5.46*
Citizenship ^b	Underclassmen	27	25.07	27.61	-3.53*
	Upperclassmen	39	24.30	28.32	-5.70*
Collaboration ^c	Underclassmen	27	26.29	27.68	-2.33*
	Upperclassmen	42	25.33	28.07	-4.98*
Commitment ^d	Underclassmen	27	21.29	22.29	-3.04*
	Upperclassmen	43	20.57	22.45	-5.45*
Common Purpose ^e	Underclassmen	26	29.70	29.70	-3.85*
	Upperclassmen	38	28.54	32.18	-6.25*
Congruence ^f	Underclassmen	27	23.93	25.25	-4.06*
	Upperclassmen	41	22.90	25.57	-5.39*
Conscious of Self ^g	Underclassmen	27	26.32	27.93	-3.07*
	Upperclassmen	42	25.16	28.40	-7.61*
Controversy with Civility ^h	Underclassmen	25	31.35	32.65	-2.98*
	Upperclassmen	41	30.29	33.60	-7.13*

Note. ^a*Change* (10 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-36; ^b*Citizenship* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-34; ^c*Collaboration* (8 statements) summed scores ranged from 13-32; ^d*Commitment* (6 statements) summed scores ranged from 15-24; ^e*Common Purpose* (9 statements) summed scores ranged from 18-36; ^f*Congruence* (7 statements) summed scores ranged from 14-28; ^g*Conscious of Self* (9 statements) summed scores range from 20-34; ^h*Controversy with Civility* (11 statements) summed scores ranged from 22-40.

**p* < 0.05.