

The Psychological Effect of Cultic Beliefs about Music

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Introduction

- It is estimated that, depending on how one defines cult, there are anywhere from 3000-5000 cults in the United States. In these abusive religious groups, an authoritarian leader sets rules that govern the lives of the followers down to the last detail (Singer, 2003).
- Cult survivors face a unique set of challenges. Research has found that religious abuse has similarities to emotional and psychological abuse, resulting in damaged emotional regulation and a stunted ability to enjoy relationships (Burns, Jackson, & Harding, 2010; Simonič, Mandelj & Novsak, 2013).
- One group that may fit the criteria of a cult is the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP), an organization founded by Bill Gothard in 1961. Gothard's teachings emphasize obedience of authority and "a new way of life" (IBLP, 2013). One of the main teachings involves listening to what Gothard considers proper music and rejecting rock music due to its ties with voodoo worship and rebellion. These music-related principles revolve around the beliefs that music is not amoral; only certain types of music are acceptable; rock music is harmful/satanic; and music choices are of vital importance to their spiritual, physical, and/or moral wellbeing ("How to conquer," 1993).
- Although the literature on music-related beliefs published by the Institute in Basic Life Principles states that it was written by students in Gothard's Advanced Training Institute program ("How to conquer," 1993), there have been allegations by a former member stating that the surveys that support the literature were taken under duress (K. Holloway, personal communication, February 17, 2014).
- This study sought to explore the extent to which music beliefs held by Bill Gothard were taught to the people in his organizations as well as investigating the self-reported effects of these beliefs.

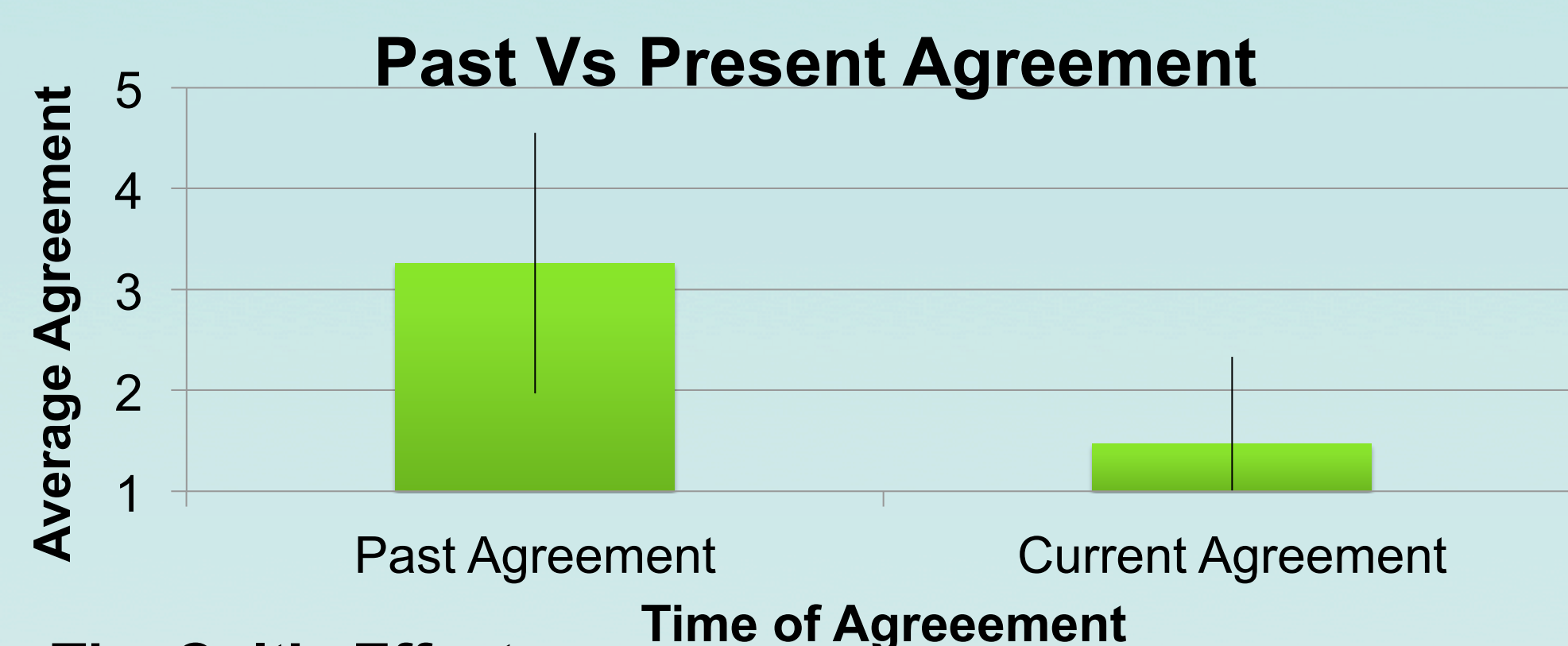
Method

- Participants:** $N = 196$, Male: 60 (31%), Female: 134 (69%). Ages ranged from 19 to 74 years ($M=32$, $SD=7.6$). Most participants (182, 93.3%) identified as White/Caucasian. Participants indicated involvement with one or more of Gothard's organizations for up to 36 years ($M = 12$; $SD = 5.3$).
- Measures:** The participants indicated on a Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) their agreement/disagreement that they were taught that music was amoral and that only certain types of music were acceptable.
- The survey also asked the participants to indicate on a Likert scale their agreement or disagreement with Gothard's teachings on music in the past while involved in his organization(s) and their current level of agreement with those teachings. Finally, the participants were asked whether they felt they were positively or negatively affected by Gothard's teachings on music. Depending on which answer they indicated, each participant also indicated on a Likert scale (ranging from very insignificant to very significant) the impact of those positive or negative effects.
- Procedure:** Participants were recruited from specific Facebook groups dedicated to people who are or were involved in one or more of Gothard's organizations: "ATI or ATIA Participants and Survivors," "ATI Student Survivors," and "ATI Apostates and Friends." After permission was granted from the various group administrators, a link to the survey and a statement of intent was posted to each of the Facebook groups.

Results

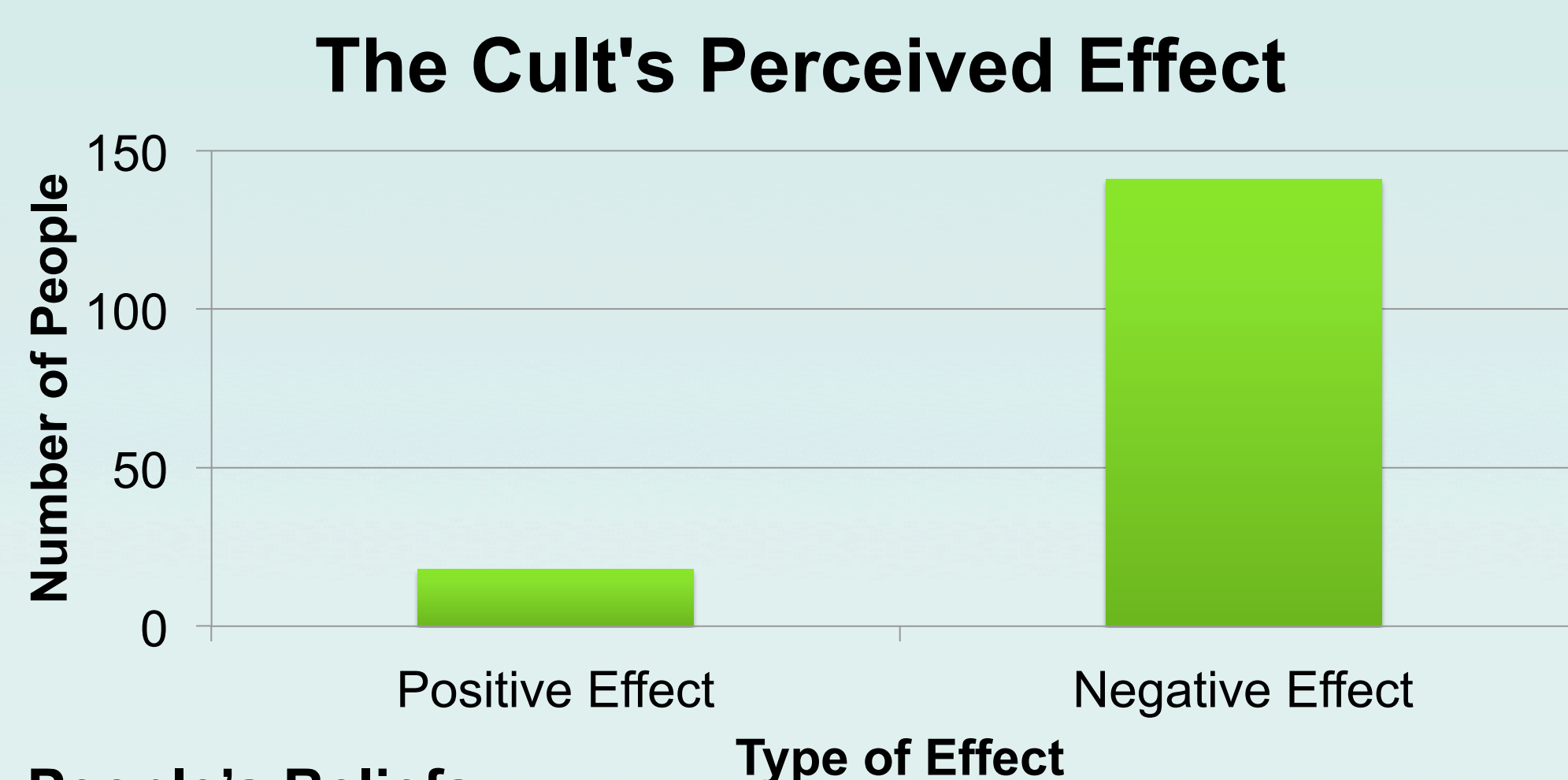
Past Vs. Present

- These respondents agreed with the teachings in the past ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.29$) but currently disagree with the teachings ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .86$), $t(190) = 18.02$, $p < .001$.



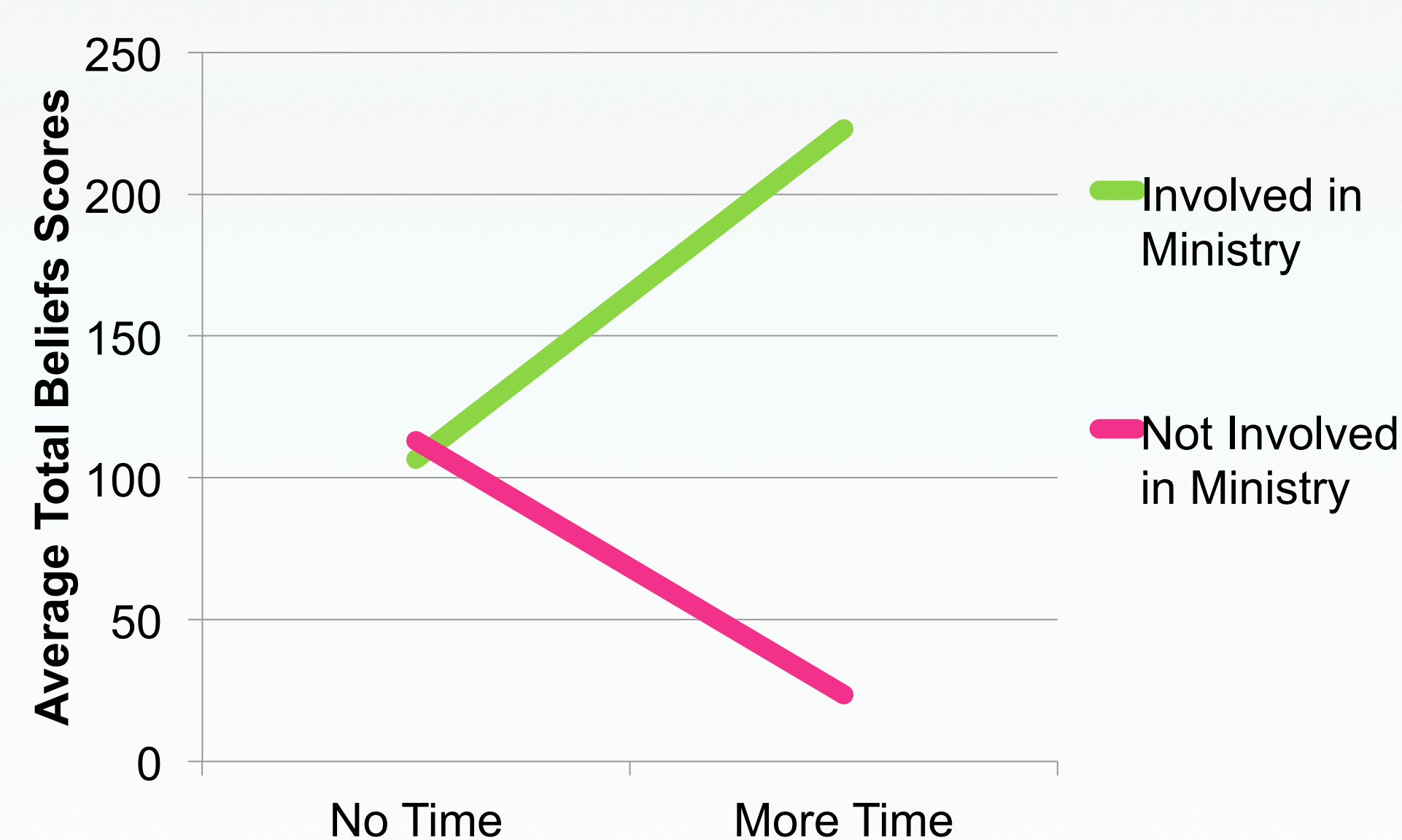
The Cult's Effect

- More participants stated that the cult affected them negatively (141 people) than not at all (29 people) or positively (18 people), $\chi^2(2) = 147.84$, $p < .001$.



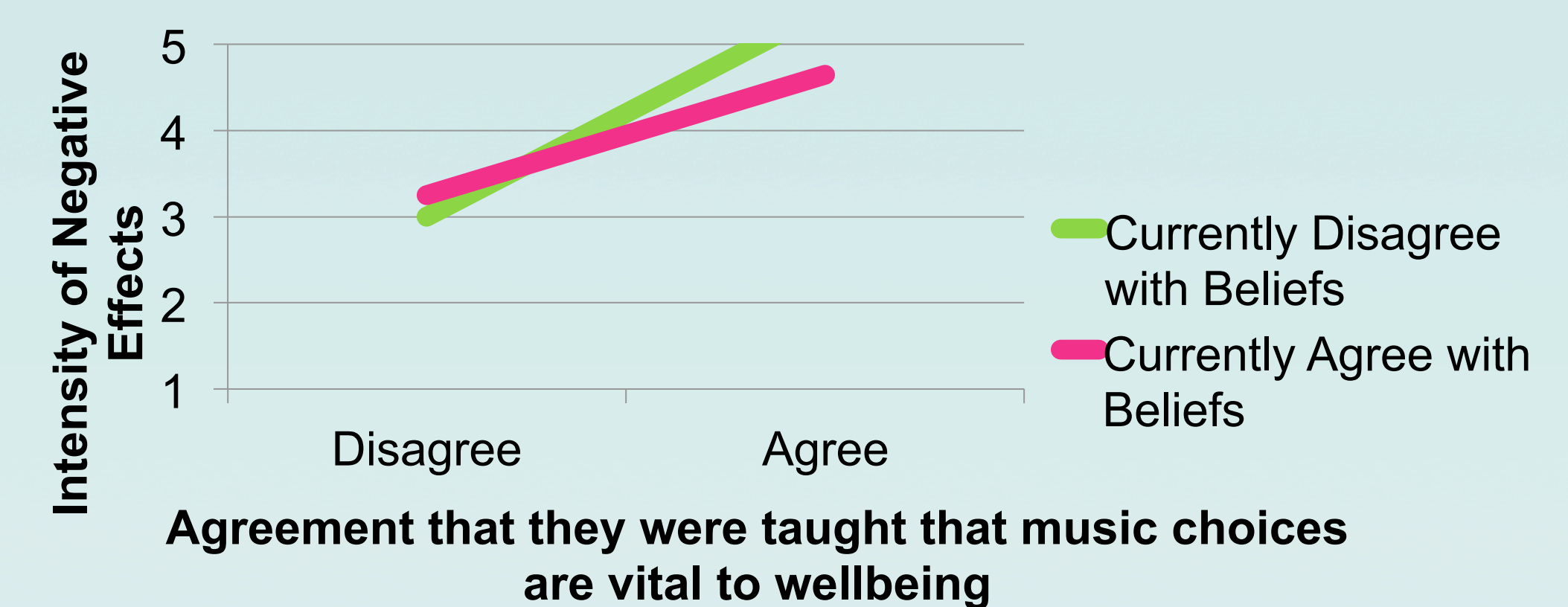
People's Beliefs

- We developed a Total Beliefs variable by combining four different variables (Music is NOT Amoral, Some Music is Acceptable, Rock Music is Harmful, and Importance of Choices in Music) into one variable. A Factor Analysis showed these four were one factor that explained 58.92% of the variance.
- Whether the people went on IBLP ministry trips or not did not predict agreement with the Total Beliefs ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .19$). How many years they were involved in Gothard's organization also did not predict Total Beliefs, $\beta = -.89$, $p = .38$). They significantly explained 23% of the variance, $p = .02$. The strength of Total Beliefs in Gothard's teachings on music, however, depended on how many years the participant was involved in the cult and whether they were part of IBLP's international ministry programs. The people who were not part of the international ministry programs believed less of the music teachings over time ($b = -.79$, $p = .03$), but people who were part of the ministry programs marginally increased the strength of their beliefs over time, $b = 1.10$, $p = .07$. This interaction explained another 4% of the variance, $p = .009$.



Negative Effects

- After removing three outliers, the more participants agreed that IBLP taught about acceptable choices to music, the stronger they perceived IBLP music teachings to have negative effects, $\beta = .38$, $p < .001$. The more they currently agree with these teachings, the weaker they rated the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .001$. They significantly explained 51% of the data, $p < .001$.
- The interaction between agreement to being taught that there are appropriate music choices and currently believing the teachings significantly predicted the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = -.28$, $p = .01$. People who expressed that they currently disagreed with Gothard's teachings reported increased intensity of negative effects the most as agreement of being taught about acceptable music choices increased, $b = .80$, $p < .001$. People who currently believe the teachings also increased their negative effects as agreement that they were taught about acceptable music choice increased, $b = .43$, $p = .006$.



Discussion

Negative Effects

- The participants with the strongest negative effects indicated a strong agreement that they were taught that music choices are vital to spiritual, physical, and/or moral wellbeing and currently disagreed with his teachings in general.
- This may be due to the real-life implication of the music choices teaching. If someone is taught that music can affect him/her in so many ways, that person may feel distress while going about everyday life. This distress may be compounded by cognitive dissonance due to not currently agreeing with Gothard's teachings while still combating the effects of the teachings.
- Due to the closed format, survey answers are general and lack depth. Additional studies may provide more insight. Case studies would be helpful in addressing some of the unanswered questions, such as what is meant by the "positive" or "negative" effects of Gothard's teachings. Right now, it is unclear what the participants are indicating besides general positive or negative perceptions of how they were influenced by Gothard's ideas about music.

Application to Music Therapy

- If a client has beliefs such as those taught by IBLP, he or she may believe that certain genres of music have negative supernatural influence. If the music therapist is unaware of this background, the music he or she chooses for a clinical need area may not achieve his or her goal; in fact, it may be emotionally upsetting for the client. Professional responsibility requires clinicians to be as aware and informed as possible of clients' backgrounds and preferences.
- Considering the unique viewpoint represented by this population, it is highly important that music therapists take personal histories and current beliefs about music into account when choosing music for sessions whenever possible. Clients from cultic backgrounds similar to the one studied may have strong negative emotional responses to certain genres of music. These results further support the idea that it is in the clinician's and client's best interest for the professional to take special considerations when providing music therapy services to this and similar populations.