

The Psychological Effect of Cultic Beliefs about Music

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the self-reported effect of music beliefs taught within a cult. We analyzed Bill Gothard's music-related teachings within his organizations, including the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP). Literature published by IBLP and Gothard indicates that music is not amoral and that only certain types of music are acceptable. We conducted a survey with 196 participants (93.3% Caucasian, 69% female, 31% male, Average Age = 32) who indicated past or present involvement with at least one of Gothard's organizations.

- The majority of participants stated that they agreed with Gothard's teachings on music in the past but currently disagree with them now and currently consider the teachings to be a negative influence. The strength of this negative influence depended on current disagreement with Gothard's teachings and agreement that he taught that music choices are vital to wellbeing.
- Those who currently disagreed with Gothard's teachings reported increasing negative effects the more they agreed that he taught that only certain types of music was acceptable.
- People who currently believe Gothard's teachings saw the teachings as increasingly negative as they moved from disagreeing to agreeing that they were taught that about acceptable music choices.
- The positive effects of Gothard's teachings were rated the highest when participants expressed low agreement that they were taught that music is not amoral and also held a strong current belief in the teachings in general.

Music therapists must take their client's background into account when choosing music for sessions. Clients may have strong emotional responses to certain genres of music. It is in the clinician's and client's best interest for the professional to be as knowledgeable of the client's background when dealing with populations such as this one.

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INTRODUCTION

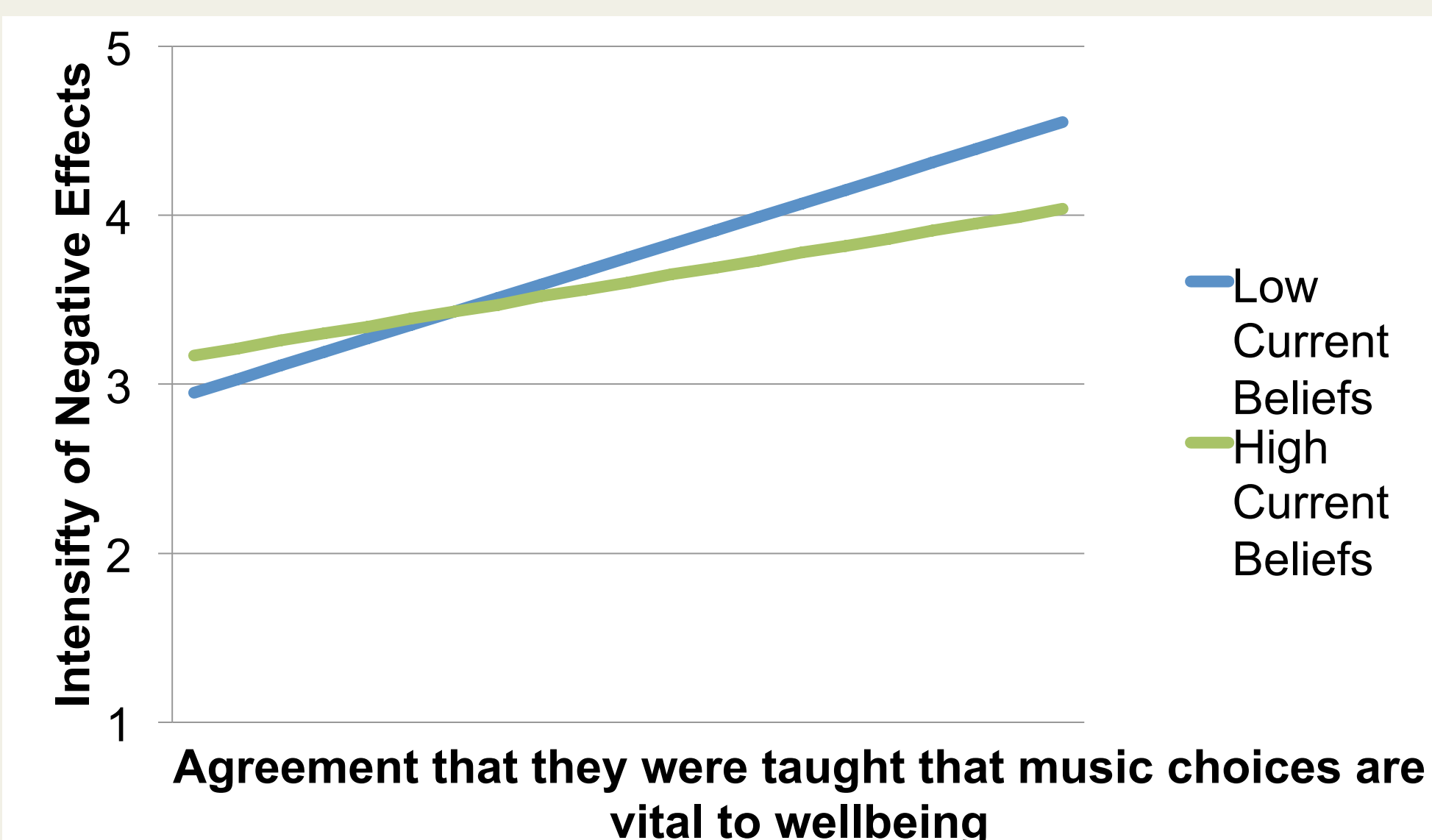
- It is estimated that, depending on how one defines cult, there are anywhere from 3000-5000 cults in the United States. In these abusive religious groups, an authoritarian leader sets rules that govern the lives of the followers down to the last detail (Singer, 2003).
- Cult survivors face a unique 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 ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .86$), $t(190) = 18.02$, $p < .001$.

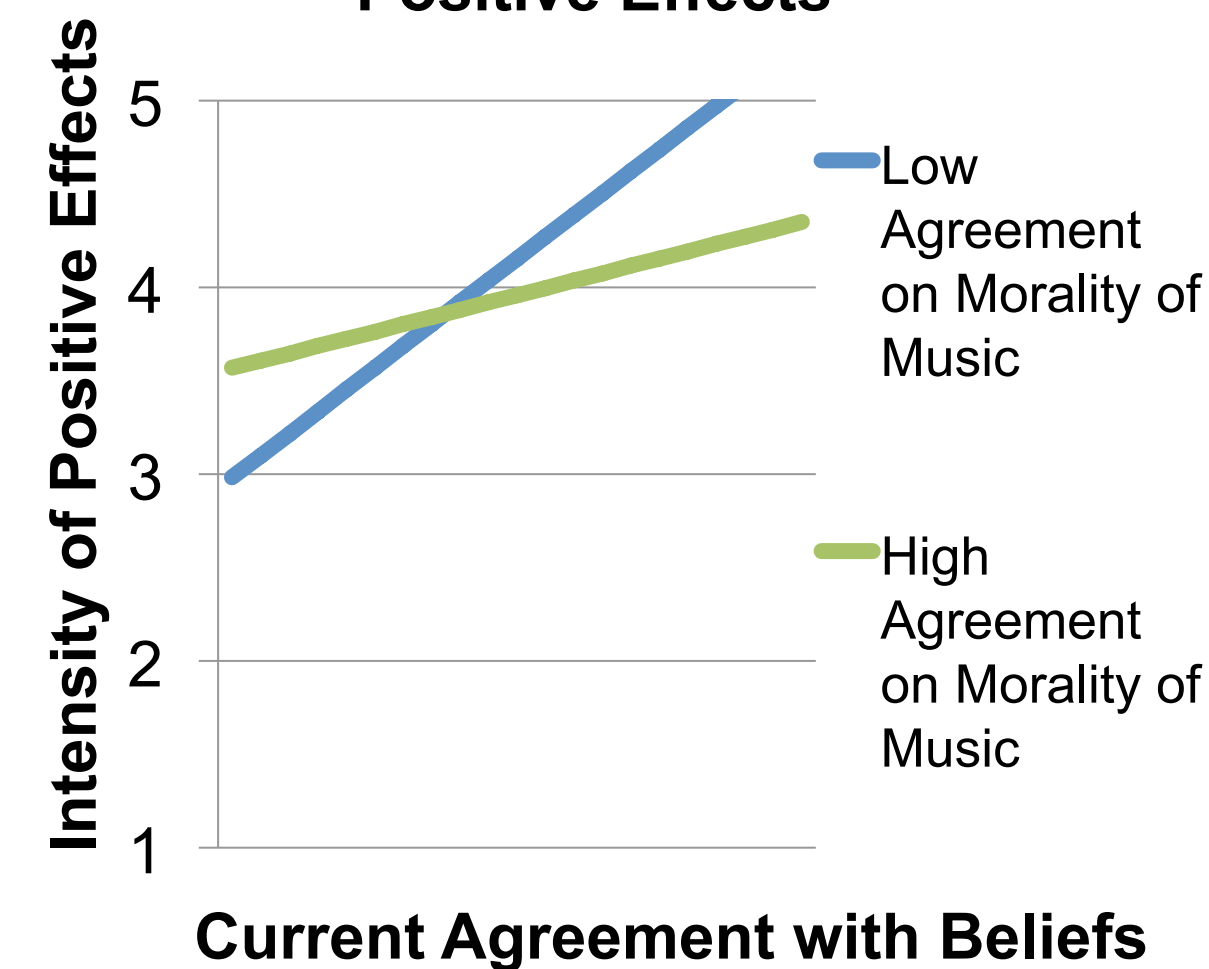
The Cult's Effect

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

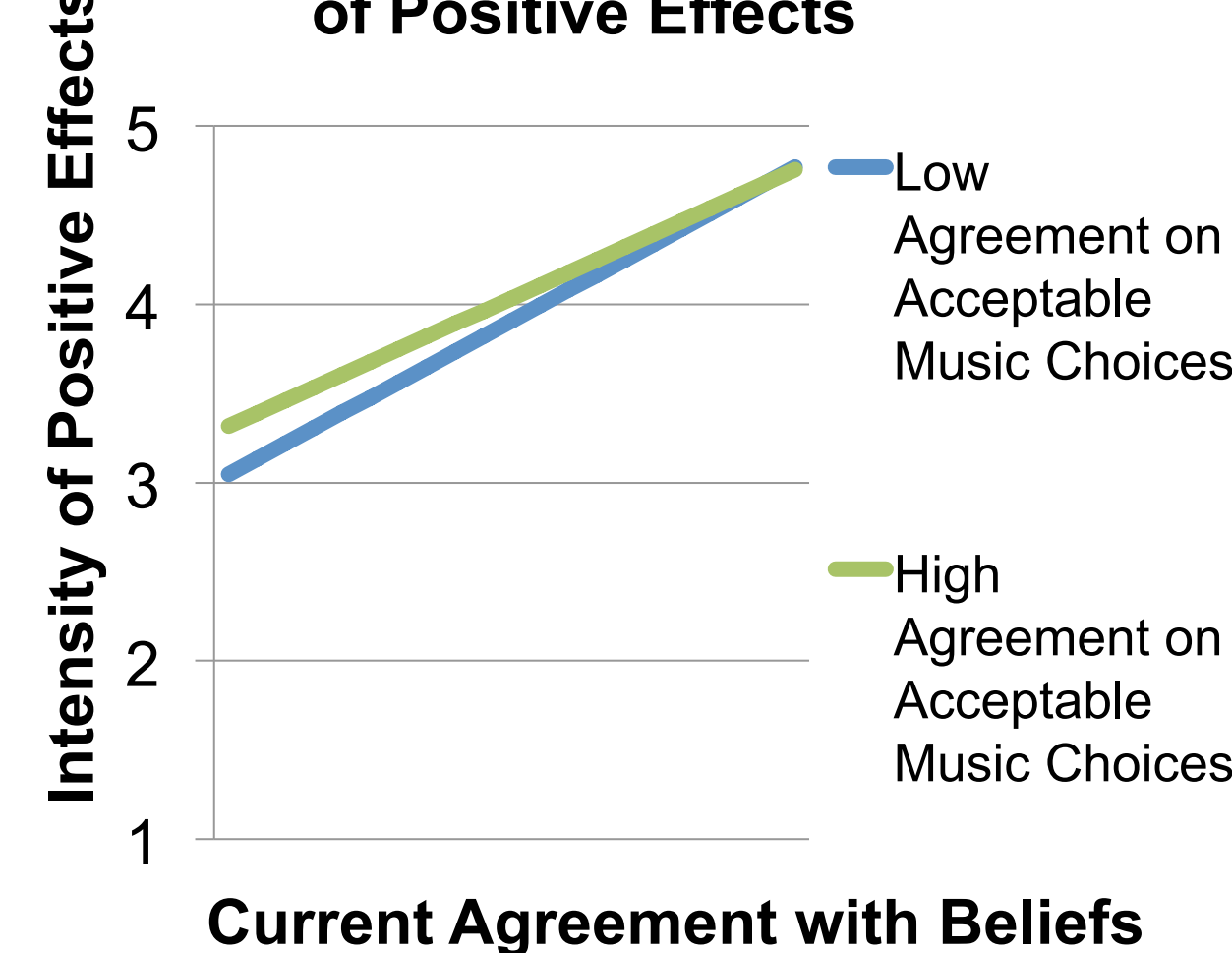
Positive Effects

- Being taught that music was not amoral ($\beta = .33$, $p = .16$) and that there are acceptable choices to music ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .64$) did not significantly predict strength of positive effects. The more they currently agree with these teachings, however, the stronger they rated the positive effects, ($\beta = .53$, $p = .01$). These variables significantly explained 49% of the data, $p = .005$.
- In Step 2, the 2-way interactions between these variables were entered. Amorality and music choice significantly predicted the strength of the cult's positive effects, $\beta = .81$, $p = .04$. People disagreeing that they were taught about acceptable music choices marginally increased their intensity of positive effects, $b = .41$, $p = .09$. People agreeing that they had been taught about acceptable music choices did not significantly increase the intensity of their positive effects as agreement on the morality of music increased, $b = .76$, $p = .22$. Agreeing that music is not amoral and currently believing the teachings interacted to significantly predict the strength of the positive effects, $b = -.63$, $p = .005$. People disagreeing that they were taught the morality of music ($b = .58$, $p = .004$) increased the intensity of their positive effects as they increased the current agreement with the teachings. People agreeing with acceptable music choices did not significantly change the intensity of their positive effects as they increased their current agreement with the cult's teachings, $b = .19$, $p = .14$. Also, how strongly they agreed with being taught about appropriate choices in music and currently believing the teachings interacted to significantly predict the strength of the positive effects, $\beta = .98$, $p = .02$. Disagreement ($b = .43$, $p = .03$) and agreement ($b = .36$, $p = .02$) increased the intensity of the positive effects as current agreement with the cult's beliefs increased. Disagreement, though, started lower than agreement but rose to match agreement on intensity of positive effects scores.

Being Taught that Music is not Amoral and Current Beliefs on Positive Effects

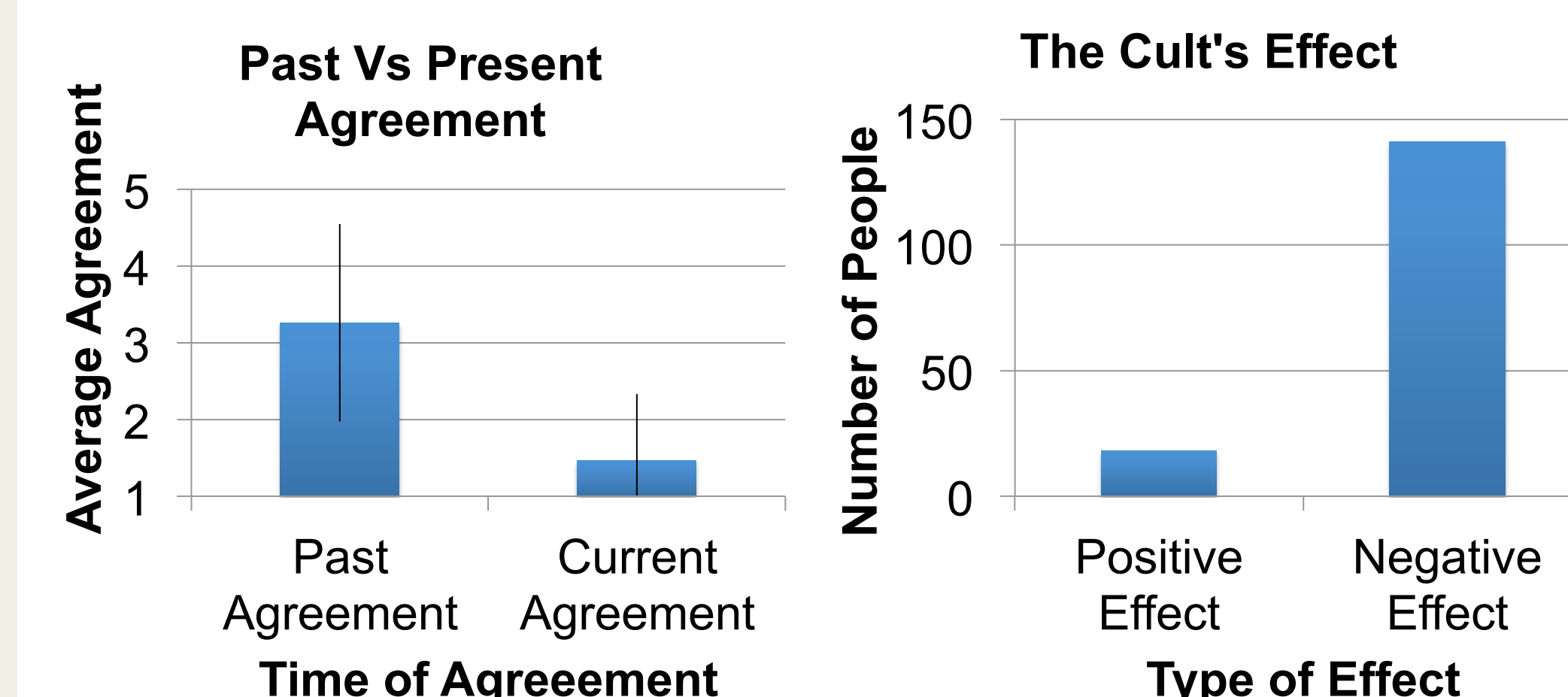


Being Taught Only Certain Music Choices are Acceptable by Current Beliefs on Intensity of Positive Effects



Negative Effects

- Three outliers were removed from this test to satisfy assumptions. Being taught that music was not amoral did not significantly predict the strength of the negative effects ($\beta = .09$, $p = .23$), but the more they agreed that there are acceptable choices to music, the stronger their negative effects were, $\beta = .38$, $p < .001$. The more they currently agree with these teachings, however, the weaker they rated the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .001$. They significantly explained 51% of the data, $p < .001$.
- Agreement to being taught that music is not amoral and agreement that there are appropriate music choices did not interact to predict the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = .16$, $p = .15$. The interaction between being taught that music was not amoral and currently agreeing with the teachings was also not significant in predicting the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = .29$, $p = .06$. The interaction between agreement to being taught that there are appropriate music choices and currently believing the teachings did significantly predict the strength of the negative effects, $\beta = -.28$, $p = .01$. People who expressed that they currently disagreed with Gothard's teachings increased their intensity of negative effects the most as agreement of being taught about acceptable music choices increased, $b = .80$, $p < .001$. People agreeing with currently believing the teachings also increased their negative effects as agreement on acceptable music choice increased but not as much as the other two, $b = .43$, $p = .006$. The three-way interaction did not explain a significant portion of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p = .06$.



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.

Positive Effects

- The positive effects of Gothard's teachings were rated the highest when participants expressed disagreement that they were taught that music is not amoral and also held a strong current belief in the teachings in general. Participants who strongly hold the beliefs Gothard taught them are likely to see them as beneficial, and so would rate them as a highly positive influence. Also, not feeling that music is in God's moral domain (Gothard's teaching that music is not amoral) could mean that these participants may not feel apprehension concerning their music listening choices.
- Of the people who currently disagree with Gothard's teachings on music, those who agreed that music was taught as not being amoral rated the positive effects of these teachings higher than those who did not agree being taught that particular teaching. Although both groups no longer believed in Gothard's teachings, it is interesting to see that those who felt that music's moral implications were emphasized saw greater positive influence than those who did not. More in-depth study would be helpful in ascertaining the reasons for this.
- 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.

CONCLUSIONS

- If a client has beliefs such as those taught by Bill Gothard, 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.
- In general, mental health professionals should try to be aware of the possible repercussions of involvement in abusive, restrictive religious groups. Due to the psychological and emotional needs of cult survivors, clinicians should expect that they may be involved in the treatment of someone from that background. The effects of such an experience will most likely have deep, far-reaching effects on the individual.