

# **Substance Abuse Rehabilitation in a Therapeutic Community: A Multiwave, Cross-Sequential, Mixed Methods Study of Christian Zheng Sheng College**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

The proposed research project examined the longer-term positive changes in youth who are part of Zheng Sheng's program. Community psychologists advocate for a holistic approach to tackle youth substance abuse (e.g., Jason, Davis, Ferrari, & Bishop, 2001). This study seeks to contribute to the literature by elucidating some of the underlying mechanisms of Zheng Sheng as a therapeutic community that help bring upon psychosocial transformation in the youth they serve.

This project had four main objectives: 1) replicate the results of the pilot study with a larger sample size and, thus, statistical power, 2) examine the longer-term effectiveness of the Zheng Sheng therapeutic community (TC) program, and 3) elucidate the processes underlying positive changes, and 4) develop causal models between different psychosocial factors and identify potential mediators (i.e., "how does it work") and moderators ("for whom does it work") in the models. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to address these objectives.

### **Results**

Over the course of two years, we have collected quantitative data 12 times, across a total of 96 participants. In order to examine the longer-term effectiveness of the Zheng Sheng TC program, we took a closer look at the variables that had data for four or more waves.

Through a mixed ANOVA models, we found the duration of stay at Zheng Sheng was a predictor of change in the delayed gratification, self-control, the presence of meaning in life, consideration of future and immediate consequences, religiousness, and psychological grit.

Through cross-lagged analysis, we established that positive changes do occur among troubled youth during their time at Zheng Sheng. We also found that many (but not all) of our proposed variables of interest were temporally associated; some variables were associated with the *change* of other variables. Some of such relationships were bi-directional/reciprocal.

### **Understanding Success in Zheng Sheng**

19 interviews were conducted to understand how Zheng Sheng members viewed success in Zheng Sheng. Subsequently, 80 questionnaires were administered to understand the factors contributing to success in Zheng Sheng, as well as their relative importance to (i) self, and (ii) to the institution on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 10 (very important).

Our quantitative questionnaire results indicated that both students and staff viewed academic performance as relatively low in importance in their definition of success. We found discrepancies between teachers and students on the importance of religiousness items. "Going to church" was considered of having a relatively low importance among student's self-ratings. Moreover, "have faith" showed high medians for all three datasets but a strangely low mode of 5

for student general ratings.

Some other interesting considerations were found relating to variables within the theme of criminality and changing habits. For student's self-ratings, "won't commit crime" seemed particularly important with it being the only factor with a range of 3 within this subset (median = 10, mode = 10, SD = .88). For teachers, the only item with a median of 10 (and mode of 10) was "quit drugs" thus highlighting it as a particularly important indicator of success. Both factors are related to transformation from one's previous self.

### Effectiveness of Punishments at Zheng Sheng

43 student interviews were conducted to examine the punishments in Zheng Sheng, of which 24 focused on timeout/silence as a form of punishment.

From our interviews it was revealed that a range of punishments were routinely implemented at Zheng Sheng, including (1) suspension of specific extracurricular activities, (2) taking up extra chores, (3) copying segments from the Bible, (4) engaged with police and further court engagement, and (5) silence punishment.

A thematic analysis revealed that the silence punishment facilitated (1) better life attitudes, (2) goal-setting, (3) better self-control, (4) increase in consideration of future consequences, (5) increased sense of personal responsibility, (6) increase in perspective-taking, (7) self-concept clarity, and (8) motivation to change.

A follow-up quantitative analysis revealed that meaningfulness of punishment led to an increase in consideration of future consequences ( $\beta = 0.19, p = .029$ ), but not in consideration of immediate consequences ( $\beta = -0.09, p = .385$ ). Furthermore, we found that the form of punishment was a moderator between meaningfulness of punishment and consideration of future consequences ( $\beta = 0.28, p = .05$ ). In solitude, meaningfulness of punishment predicted the increase in future consequences, but not in other punishments.

### Conclusion

In this study, we examined the longer-term positive changes in the youth participating in Zheng Sheng's program and found that positive changes occurred among troubled youth during their time at Zheng Sheng. Through this study, we solidified the effectiveness and further analyzed the form of punishment that contributed to the therapeutic effect on the positive changes in the youth. This gives Zheng Sheng constructive feedback and evaluation on their efforts in supporting the youth in the community, and allows Zheng Sheng to continue with their vision with more confidence in their work. We compared Zheng Sheng to other residential programs, local and overseas. We found that Zheng Sheng's treatment model is unique in its approach. Upon the insight brought about by the literature, we might consider further investigation on the effect of religious belief and religious coping with different therapeutic communities (TCs), not only Zheng Sheng, that incorporate religious components in the treatment programs, for example, Barnabas Charitable Service Association, Christian New Being Fellowship, Operation Dawn, St Stephen's Society, Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, and so forth.