My research interests are primarily focused on the relationship between social structures and personal characteristics. This includes major sociological areas such as status and inequalities, culture, emotions, and health. My goals as a researcher are twofold. I first seek to refine theories regarding how people perceive their world and are influenced by other people’s perceptions. Second, I use theories to develop methods by which individuals can overcome the negative effects of social structures.

**Status and Inequalities**

Within small groups we can observe how status inequalities form and influence behavior. In my dissertation I examine the effects of future interaction on inequalities in groups. I hypothesized that short term groups are inherently more inequitable than long term groups (Clark Manuscript a). In other words, if individuals believe that their long term success hinges on maintaining positive working relationships with other group members then group members will act more equitably toward one another.

I began by elaborating status characteristics theory (Berger, Norman, Balkwell, and Smith 1977). This included expanding the formal theory and mathematical models. For my dissertation, I am testing the hypothesis that when group members recognize that their individual success is related to treating people fairly then group members will act more equitably regardless of their expectation of competence. This research is particularly important to businesses and organizations where task groups are routinely created. Typically, research places the burden of overcoming inequitable treatment on the disadvantaged group members. My elaboration of status characteristics theory, however, suggests that organizations have the power to either encourage or discourage inequalities depending on which types of work groups they chose to create.

Some social structures, such as gender, create inequalities that persist even when individuals are alone. When people are not interacting together in groups, they interact with themselves. Using affect control theory, I hypothesized that men and women experience self-helping and self-harming behaviors differently (Clark and James Manuscript). Using mathematical modeling I demonstrated that women’s self-harming behaviors are more effective at producing negative self-impressions than similar behaviors by men. Because the results are from simulations, in the future I will compare these results with empirical research to validate the models and examine why women’s self-harming behaviors are more damaging to women but men have higher rates of suicide.

**Culture and Emotion**

During my master’s program I began researching status and inequalities within culture using affect control theory (Heise 1979). I focused on understanding how reflexive behaviors (i.e., people’s interactions with themselves) changed self-impressions and emotional or affective states. I expanded affect control theory beyond previous work (Britt and Heise 1992) by generating new theoretical and mathematical models. I measured shared attitudes of identities and behaviors and generated predictions about how behaviors focused at the self will change self-impressions. I found that reflexive behaviors almost always produce more negative self-
impressions than social behaviors (Clark Manuscript b). These results suggest that individuals with frequent social interaction will have more success maintaining a positive self-image compared to people who have less social interactions (i.e., engage in more reflexive behaviors).

I later compared my models of self-change created by reflexive behaviors with other models of self-change created by social interaction. Since reflexive behaviors tended to create negative self-impressions, I hypothesized that reflexive behaviors would produce more negative emotions than social behaviors. By comparing the models I found that social behaviors tend to produce positive emotions while reflexive behaviors tend to produce negative emotions (Clark Manuscript c). Based on affect control theory, I concluded that people may use social or reflexive behaviors strategically to either raise their self-impressions or lower their self-impressions to match an expected state. My results also show that when individuals are feeling depressed, social interaction is the most effective way to expel negative emotions and rebuild positive self-impressions.

Inequalities in Healthcare

I have also researched racial inequalities in healthcare. Ongoing research projects at the Center for Research on Behavioral Health and Human Services Delivery include nationally representative samples of drug and alcohol treatment centers. I have examined multiple waves of data and discovered racial disparities in availability of an alcohol treatment drug known as antabuse. Preliminary analysis has indicated that the proportion of African American clients is related to antabuse availability suggesting that African Americans are more likely to take antabuse to treat alcoholism rather than more expensive and effective treatments such as acamprosate or naltrexone. This disparity may exist because of a mistrust by African Americans of the medical field or because many drug and alcohol centers in areas with high African American populations may not have adequate funding to provide more effective and costly treatments.

Research Agenda

As I progress beyond my dissertation I intend to extend my previous work in the areas of status and inequalities, culture, and emotions. To follow my research on status and inequalities I will examine how membership in long term groups affects perceptions of competence over time. I anticipate that long term membership in groups may be an additional avenue for addressing widespread inequality. Also, I intend to further my research on reflexive behaviors by testing the implications of simulations. One test would be on the hypothesis that people perform social behaviors to increase self-impressions and perform reflexive behaviors to decrease self-impressions. I will also examine the effects that gender discrepancies in emotions produced by reflexive behaviors have on mental health and social networks.
References


Clark, Jesse K. Manuscript. “Actors’ Perceptions of Reflexive Behaviors with Affect Control Theory.”

