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An Investigation on the Role of Positive Psychological Constructs on Educational Outcomes in Business Schools

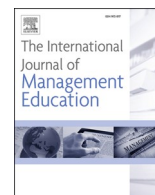Eileen Kwesiga

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An investigation on the role of positive psychological constructs on educational outcomes in business schools

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ABSTRACT

Business schools are increasingly interested in empowering students to be more competent and driven for social changes through service learning. However, studies examining the role of positive traits and cross-cultural differences of service-learning education are limited. As a result, we leveraged positive psychology reasoning to explore the relationship between positive behavior as indicated by compassion, ethical leadership, perceived supervisory support and service-learning benefits for students (N = 272; n = 59 teams) in the United States of America (U.S.) and Germany. We used hierarchical linear modeling (2-Level model) to find main effects of relational compassion, ethical leadership, perceived supervisory support, on judgements of service-learning benefits by students. We also observed differences between U.S. and German students on evaluations of ethical leadership, supervisory support, perceived community benefits, and service-learning benefits. The findings offer insight on the role of positively oriented education effects in two countries. We discuss implications for theory and research on service-learning benefits.

1. Introduction

Service-learning education (SLE) continues to be popular as universities seek to offer students a practical application to theories while making a difference in communities (Bringle et al., 2010; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). The nonprofit organization Campus Compact (2020) is considered a leader in the U.S. SLE movement, counting over 1000 college and university members, all of whom are major proponents of community and service-learning initiatives. This mode of teaching contributes to students' (academic) learning in higher education by offering opportunities for deeper introspection, as well as learning of complex challenges in the real world (Brooks & Schramm, 2007; Dyllick, 2015; Markus et al., 1993). SLE can motivate students toward volunteerism, particularly in the nonprofit or public sector (Astin et al., 2000; Reinke, 2003; Tomkovick et al., 2008). It can further help students to develop increased awareness and involvement in their local and global communities, while at the same time, enhancing their moral values and integrity (Furco, 2002; Raman & Pashupati, 2002).

In business schools, SLE has slowly made inroads as both educators and administrators seek to increase the legitimacy of management education. In the past, business schools suffered criticism for playing a part in churning out graduates whose sole focus was depleting resources from communities and the environment (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). This is slowly changing as many schools increase

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the concern for community and the environment by adapting their curricula to reflect as such (Patriotta & Starkey, 2008). With the recent global push towards sustainable education that is community- and environmentally focused (UN, 2017), SLE can serve to increase awareness towards sustainability-related issues affecting communities. SLE can motivate students to be globally minded (Tyran, 2017) and at the same time to volunteer or seek employment in the nonprofit and public sectors (Reinke, 2003; Tomkovick et al., 2008; UN, 2017). As the impact of SLE projects can extend beyond the individual student gains and positively affect society, the implied expectation, particularly in business-related courses, is that they should ultimately improve organizational effectiveness, while also encouraging compassion for others in work environments and communities (Moely et al., 2002).

In spite of the alluded benefits of service-learning pedagogy, its assessment has been declared problematic due to the variation of experiences (Furco, 2002). Service learning in one country is unlikely to be the same in another country because of cultural differences such that some students report negative experiences while others report positive experiences. Managing these variations has not been well-addressed in the literature. As a result, we argue that positive traits such as compassion, ethical leadership and perceived supervisory support can streamline and enhance service-learning benefit outcomes for students. While these constructs have been studied extensively and individually, we are not aware of any studies that explored the three aspects mentioned (compassion, ethical leadership and perceived supervisory support) and their specific influences on benefits gained from service-learning. We, therefore, sought to fill the gap.

Embedded in service-learning is caring, compassion, and ethicality (Park et al., 2004). As a result, we draw from positive psychology to argue that positive, psychological traits are likely to manifest in service-learning through caring, compassionate environments, and ethical leadership (Park et al., 2004; Seligman et al., 2009). Positive traits (both at individual and group level) can motivate individuals toward better civic duties and responsible global citizenship (Salimbene et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2009). This, in our opinion, aligns with the mission of SLE which caters to place student learning and development at the center of the experience, with the aim that the student will contribute positively to society.

We focus on compassion and ethical leadership because previous research has highlighted the benefits of these constructs in fostering a positive learning environment that equips students with valuable coping skills in the workplace (Boyd & Grant, 2019; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Starratt, 2005; Van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Viera-Armas, 2019). We emphasize the importance of the role of teachers and other role models in facilitating the learning process by also studying the role of the perceived supervisory support. Perceived supervisory support has been a focus of previous studies due to its influence on performance outcomes of individuals based on its abundance or lack thereof. In comparing students who participated in service-learning in Germany and the U.S., we investigate cross-cultural effects in SLE. This approach contrasts with most service-learning studies, which have focused on student populations from the U.S. only. With globalization of education on the rise, enriching the discussion on whether there are similarities and differences, as well as how we can share knowledge with other regions is imperative. The model (see Fig. 1) guides our discussion. It shows the relationship between relational compassion, ethical leadership and perceived supervisory support and students' evaluations of service-learning benefits.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Intersections of service learning and positive psychology traits

Service-learning is defined as the carrying out of "needed tasks in the community with intentional learning goals and with conscious reflection and critical analysis'' (Kendall, 1990, p. 20). Steiner and Watson (2006) suggested that service-learning has a personal reflection component, prompting students to ponder on the impact of their participation. According to Kaye (2004), service-learning differs from community service or volunteerism in that student learning is the focus, coupled with concerns for one's community. In most instances, a service-learning class is a community activity or project that links hands-on experience to course
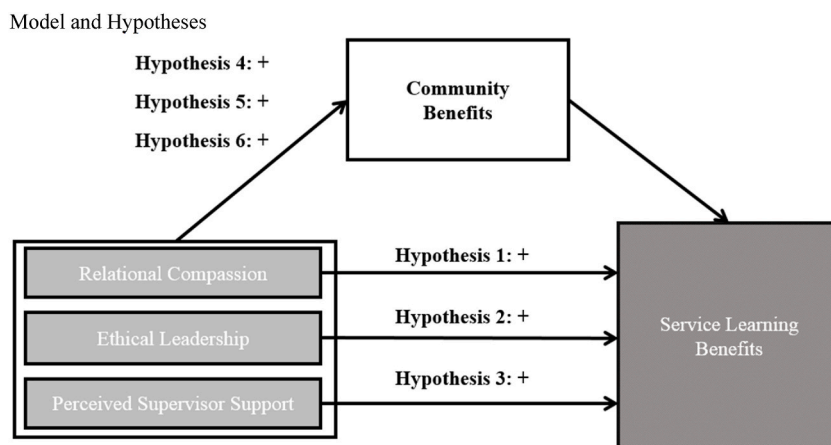

Fig. 1. Model and hypotheses.

concepts being taught, establishing a link between curriculum and service (Colby et al., 2003). Service-learning stands out from community service endeavors; while the latter is associated with 'charity,' the former adds 'change' in the sense of active engagement for political or social transformation (Furco, 2002; Ward, 1997). Thus, service-learning goes beyond case studies, project-oriented learning, and volunteer internships (Colby et al., 2003; Godfrey et al., 2005; Popik, 2009), with intentions of equipping students to transform their environment. SLE is regarded as an effective means of guiding students to explore and push their emotional comfort zones due to the nature of projects which usually entail working with underserved populations.

Whereas earlier research has focused more on the role of motivational factors that spur volunteer behaviors (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Davis et al., 1999; Davis et al., 2003; Omoto & Snyder, 1995), the role of positive psychological constructs in student learning experiences has yet to be explored in depth (Dahms, 1994; Gehlbach et al., 2022). Further, there is a renewed interest in positive organizational scholarship (e.g., positive psychology, positive organizational behavior) evidenced by academic conferences, such as the *Dare To Care theme of the 2010 annual meeting of the* Academy of Management and special issues on compassion in The Academy of Management Review journal. The outcome of such efforts are calls to practicing managers and scholars to integrate constructs originating from positive scholarship in their delivery of goods and services for better business practices (Tsui, 2010). The premise behind this movement has been that positive psychology constructs, such as optimism and compassion for others can create immense value to the various stakeholders with possibilities of resolving a myriad of issues (organizational, environmental, and social) that will support the building of a sustainable future. The gap is being filled by a growing body of research in the educational domain empirically investigating the effects of interventions of positive psychology (e.g., Shankland & Rosset, 2017).

Against this background, we suggest that positive psychology constructs are well-suited to assist in the service-learning goals of building a caring and responsible student. Positive psychology constructs focus on traits that develop the individual and at group level promote civic virtues while encouraging citizenship (Seligman et al., 2009). The essence of the field of positive psychology constructs is to focus on strength and virtue, as opposed to the study of pathology, which has been the norm in psychology for many years. In the quest for what is best, positive psychology attempts to adapt to and determine the most appropriate scientific method(s) to address the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity. Proponents of positive psychology research are of the mindset that an increase of what propels well-being will promote creative learning and excitement for learning, which has been a goal of institutional education (Bolte et al., 2003; Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Rowe et al., 2007), hence the fit with service-learning. Therefore, integrating positive psychology constructs such as compassion, ethical leadership and perceived supervisory support can positively streamline experiences of service-learning outcomes.

2.2. Compassion and service learning

Compassion dates to the Aristotle era, and prior, with multiple disciplines researching its role in relation to individuals and societies. In the managerial context, Boyatzis et al. (2006) conceptualize compassion as having three components: understanding the feelings of others (empathy), caring for others, and acting in response to other persons' feelings without expecting benefits from it. While compassion is another oriented emotion, it can also provide personal benefits, such as intrinsic satisfaction for doing well. Therefore, being compassionate goes beyond the response to the suffering of others and extends to decisions and actions after the emotional response.

In spite of compassion's long tenure in academia, it is a relatively new phenomenon in business studies, but is perceived as of growing importance for work-related studies and organizing, against the background of the growing focus on relational perspectives (Dutton et al., 2006, 2014). However, the concept of compassion is relatively understudied compared to other emotions in the service-learning arena (Langstraat & Bowdon, 2011). Studies of compassion are timely, especially those focused on positively impacting students who are the future workforce. In cultures with high individualistic and capitalistic orientation, such as the U.S. and Germany, cultivating altruistic, compassionate environments is an increasing challenge. According to studies focused on the role of empathy in cultivating social action, dispositional empathic concern can influence initial decisions to engage in civic engagements and affects the experiences of those involved (Bekkers, 2005; Davis et al., 1999).

To date, most attention to the emotionality of service-learning pedagogies remains undertheorized or only implicitly addressed in associated literature, and when emotions are discussed in some details, rarely are they understood in light of enhancing service-learning. For example, Felten et al. (2006) make a persuasive case that emotion should be taken seriously in the reflection process: "Integrating emotion into the service-learning literature would mean we re-define effective reflection in service-learning as a process involving the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people (students, teachers, and community partners) intentionally connect service experiences with academic learning objectives" (p. 42, emphasis in original). In this article, we suggest that in genuinely reciprocal, sustainable service-learning efforts, we cannot expect students to be caring, compassionate and ethical in organizations if those behaviors are not being emulated in the classroom, given that compassion is generally shaped by structure and quality of relationships in organizational settings (Dutton et al., 2014). Therefore, as service-learning researchers, we must consciously engage in an analysis of emotional hegemony, as well as possible influences on the scholarship of the field and the impact on communities served. Studies of compassion in the workplace suggest that there is a link between performance and the compassionate environment existing in the workplace (Kalleberg, 2009). Recent empirical evidence shows that for individuals in the workplace self-compassion may improve outcomes both within and outside of work (Jennings et al., 2022). Therefore, some have suggested that training employees in positive behaviors, such as compassion and meditation training can facilitate positive behaviors (Good et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2009). Langstraat and Bowdon (2011) further argue that the value of SLE is often implicitly contingent on compassion. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1. Relational compassion of students is positively associated with service-learning benefits.

2.3. Ethical leadership and service-learning benefits

Leadership is one of the most widely researched topics due to the critical role it plays in organizational success (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Research widely shows that leaders determine either the proliferation or lack of ethical climate in organizations (Schminke et al., 2005; Sinclair, 1993). Many business schools' missions and goals include the expectation to transform their students into business leaders (Baden & Parkes, 2013; Patriotta & Starkey, 2008). However, it seems that business schools are falling short as they are often criticized for not achieving this objective in terms of ethical behavior of graduates and other attributes such as wisdom and interpersonal skills (Fleischman et al., 2019; Starkey & Tempest, 2008). Some argue that ethical leadership training is important for equipping globally responsible future leaders (Muff, 2013), who will go beyond *business as usual* to practice sustainability and create social impact (Parris & McInnis-Bowers, 2017). It is important to examine ethical leadership and how it transforms and influences behaviors in organizations by motivating individuals to consistently engage in ethical conduct (Grojean et al., 2004).

Ethical leadership is traditionally defined in the context of other leadership styles, such as transformational and charismatic leadership, in addition to moral obligations (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Additionally, ethical leadership is described and defined by juxtaposing it to constructs such as trust, justice, honesty, and abusive supervision (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership has some similarities and overlaps with these constructs but still differs in its distinctiveness. In this study, we adopt the Brown et al. (2005) definition: "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120).

While we could not find many studies on the influences of ethical leadership on service-learning, we did find some focusing on leaders in education and how their leadership characteristics influence pedagogy (Arar, 2019; Branson & Gross, 2014). The connection of these studies to ours is that they focus on the "ethics of care," a dimension coined by Starratt (1991) which delves into aspects of receptivity, relatedness, and engrossment between a leader in a learning setting and a student. The premise is that a leader operating from ethical leadership puts emotions of caring for others at the forefront. The leader operating from an ethics of care or ethical leadership standpoint is more likely to consider the wellbeing of others, especially students, and cultivating relationships. A leader exuding "ethics of care" engages in authentic leadership with others and strives to respect them (Starratt, 1991). Thus, in regard to service-learning, we see the role of ethically oriented leadership for the purpose of transforming students, specifically in business education towards ethical behavior. Muff (2013) asserts that for learning to be transformative; it has to engage the whole person's mind, heart, body and soul. Therefore, in the service-learning educational setting, we expect ethical leadership to engage and influence students.

Individuals considered to be ethical leaders must model behavior that is perceived to be ethically appropriate and provide a vehicle for their followers with an opportunity to respond (Bagyo, 2013; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Ethical leaders in organizations are responsible for the establishment and enforcement of ethical standards (Bass & Avolio, 2000; Brown & Treviño, 2003). Some have argued that the environment determines the extent to which followers rely on ethical guidance from leaders. In environments rife with challenging, ethical dilemmas, guidance of an ethical leader is more likely to be required (Brown et al., 2005). Similarly, in service-learning situations in which students are novices attempting to grapple with complicated social issues, the ethical guidance from those in charge may be integral in ensuring that students meet outlined expectations and that they acquire intended service-learning benefits. We, therefore, expect ethical leadership of service-learning instructors or the leaders of student teams to relate to service-learning benefits. As a result, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2. Ethical leadership of faculty and team leaders positively influences service-learning benefits.

2.4. Perceived supervisor support and service-learning benefits

Building on perceived organizational support, Kottke and Sharafinski (1988) developed the construct of perceived supervisor support, which reflects the relationship between individuals and their supervisor instead of the organization as a global entity. Perceived supervisor support explores employees, or in our case, students' perceptions on the support they feel they are receiving from their leader in the context of their learning/work environment (Maertz et al., 2007; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003). It also measures the extent to which individuals perceive organizations to value their contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2002). It is argued, however, that perceived supervisory support is more proximal than perceived organizational support since supervisors represent organizations as their agents (Baran et al., 2012). Social exchange theory and social identity theory argue that perceived organizational support is reciprocated by employees with individual behavior that is in favor of organizational goals (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Therefore, the likelihood of positive work outcomes is contingent upon the extent to which employees are content with the support from their supervisors (Dyllick, 2015).

Other evidence suggests that supervisory support can affect adherence to work policies and opinion of work conditions (Perry et al., 2010; Puah et al., 2016; Rosen et al., 2011). As has been shown for the context of environmental citizenship behavior, the interplay between individual motivations and supervisory support is complex (Raineri & Paillé, 2016). From an educational perspective, empirical research of work teams has shown that team-learning behavior is positively affected by supportive behavior of the team leader (Edmondson, 1999; Lin & Wu, 2022). Individuals assigned positions of responsibility in SLE play a critical role in facilitating academic growth. Students participating in SLE benefit more from instructors and team leaders who adopt hands-on approaches and provide more guidance compared to those that use traditional lectures (Lu & Lambright, 2010). Facilitating further learning by

providing opportunities for reflection in SLE can assist students in processing service-learning experiences and applying lessons learned in future endeavors. We expect SLE to be positively affected by perceived supervisory behavior. Thus, perceived supervisory support will be positively related to service-learning benefits. So, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3. Perceived supervisory support of faculty and team leaders positively relates to service-learning benefits.

2.5. Mediation of community benefits

It goes without mention that it is important to have committed community partners to have positive service-learning experiences for students. However, many scholars have noted that there are many challenges to overcome when building these relations (Block & Bartkus, 2019; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). Linking student learning to a quality project within the community is one of the cornerstones of service-learning pedagogy, thereby providing students with "reality "(Godfrey et al., 2005, p. 315), and the opportunity to interact with the beneficiaries of the service they provide (Lambright & Lu, 2009, p. 427). There is evidence that community involvement "helps students understand the difference they can make" (Steiner & Watson, 2006, p. 425), which increases their learning and contributes to their self-efficacy (Gerholz et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2022). Lester et al. (2005) suggests that the perceived value of service-learning by students is a function of the design of the service-learning experience, and the context or community where the service-learning experience occurs.

Service-learning projects that clearly highlight the importance of their work for its corresponding community are likely to positively influence their perceived value to the community for students, and consequently increase the perceived value of the overall service-learning experience. In cases where this aspect is missing, students may perceive their service as "useless"; their sense of learning and empowerment is therefore likely to decrease (Furco, 2002). Additionally, students' awareness of the impact they have on community partners is an important indicator of their perceived value of service-learning benefits they derive (Lester et al., 2005).

Consistent with Kolb's (1986) experiential learning cycle, it is likely that community benefit functions as a basis of reflection which links the actual experience to learning. Since service-learning aids students to experience the impact they make in the lives of others, it is likely perceived that community benefits serve as a mechanism that links compassion, ethical leadership, and perceived supervisory support to service-learning benefits. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4. Perceived community benefits mediate the positive relationship between perceived relational compassion and perceived service-learning benefits.

Hypothesis 5. Perceived community benefits mediate the positive relationship between perceived ethical leadership and perceived service-learning benefits.

Hypothesis 6. Perceived community benefits mediate the positive relation between perceived supervisory support and service-learning benefits.

2.6. Cross country service-learning comparisons

Beliefs, values and norms regarding society and democracy are likely to manifest in different behavioral orientations towards service to communities. Substantial evidence shows important differences in behavior and attitude among workers coming from varying cultural backgrounds (Child, 1981; Laurent, 1983). A great outcome in schools, especially higher education institutions, has been an increase in civic and ethics-based courses which provide opportunities to participate in community building activities such as service-learning (Campus Compact, 2013; Liu et al., 2009), it is likely perceptions of service-learning will differ between students with different social or cultural backgrounds.

Beginning in the 1970s, first attempts to "export" the service-learning method from the U.S. via establishing partnerships with other countries, proved successful and led to the existence of service-learning in 23 countries (Berry & Chisholm, 1999). Nevertheless, there is a dearth in literature that examines service-learning education in other countries outside of the U.S., despite its prevalence in many areas around the world, including Latin America, Middle East, Asia (Thomson et al., 2011). Our research found one large-scale comparative study undertaken in 14 countries, assessing the interrelation between service-learning and volunteering (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010), and one study investigating service-learning integration in the economic, political, and educational context in the United States in comparison to two African countries (Thomson et al., 2011).

Overall, while the idea of using experiential learning as a form of educating students is becoming common in the U.S., it is relatively new for the traditional European university system and thus seems scarce (Ortiz-Fernández & Tarifa-Fernández, 2022). Hofstede (1980; 2011) provides foundational research for cross-cultural comparison across multiple dimensions, including the dimension of individualism, which is particularly relevant to this study. We posit that learning outcomes can be affected depending on how different countries score on cultural dimensions. The U.S. is ranked much higher (score of 91) in individualism compared to Germany (score of 67) (Hofste de Insights, 2022). However other cross-cultural studies such as Schwartz (2006) show that, while differing in their exact respective 'brand' of individualism, Western European countries such as Germany and Anglo-Saxon countries such as the U.S. are both far more individualistic on the individualism-collectivism continuum than Eastern European countries. Another paradox is that social welfare is anchored in the German system of government and its social programs (Brodbeck et al., 2002). But when considering individual service for others, such as charitable donations or volunteer work, the U.S. consistently ranks among the top countries in the world. The current World Giving Index (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022) has the U.S. at an overall ranking of #3 and Germany at an overall ranking of #55, which, interestingly, is distorted by a relatively high score for monetary giving (rank #28), while

underperforming in the categories of helping strangers (#91) and time donation (#72).

According to the *Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness* (GLOBE) program, the German work environment scores low on humane orientation and compassion and yet has many humane-oriented institutions and legal practices (Brodbeck et al., 2002). Even though Germany's approach may be more formal in interpersonal interactions, there is a prevailing institutionalized system of societal caring, especially for those disadvantaged in their communities (Brodbeck et al., 2002). While we cannot state explicit hypotheses on the direction of differences between students' experience of SLE in U.S. versus German institutions, we are assuming differences based on the cultural and institutional differences analyzed in the existing literature (Brodbeck et al., 2002; Hofste de Insights, 2022) and note the likelihood that:

Hypothesis 7.   German students will differ from U.S. students in perception of (a) service-learning benefits, (b) relational compassion, (c) ethical leadership, and (d) supervisor support.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and data sources

Data sources were collected by means of an online questionnaire distributed to students and team leaders in U.S. and German institutions in 2011. The U.S. sample in our study is drawn from a university in the northeast which integrates service-learning education in business courses. Given the small number of service-learning courses in Germany during the year 2011, we collected data from four German universities. We asked faculty members who were teaching service-learning courses to provide their (current and former) service-learning students with the link to the online questionnaire. As an incentive, twenty books were put into a lottery for participants. The students in the U.S. were offered extra credit as an incentive to participate. Even though the students worked in teams (n = 59) across two countries, we used only the teams from the U.S. for the multilevel analysis because of our inability to determine team leadership in the German sample.

3.2. Measures

For the German sample, all measures were translated by native speakers into German and tested for understandability by students. We minimized potential item translation bias by using translated scales that had been used by others (Van de Vijver & Hambleton, 1996). All measures used a five-point scale with 5 as "strongly agree" and 1 as an equivalent to "strongly disagree," except service-learning benefits, which is usually measured on a seven-point scale. The two survey versions for service-learning team leaders (who could be students or student assistants) and for regular service-learning team members (students) differed only in minor points.

3.2.1. Dependent variables

To measure perceived benefits of the service-learning experience, the **SErvice LEarning Benefit Scale (SELEB)**, consisting of 20 items (Toncar et al., 2006) was used. The SELEB scale consists of four factors, i.e., practical skills, interpersonal skills, citizenship, and personal responsibility (Toncar et al., 2006). In our questionnaire, students and team leaders were asked, *"How does service-learning affect your individual skills in each of the following areas?"* on a 7 Likert scale with a range of "not at all" to "very much" (e.g., "Personal Growth", "Ability to Work with Others").

Community benefits were measured using three items established by Lester et al. (2005: 288) assessing the perceived value of service-learning to the community partner: *"During your service-learning project, you collaborated with a (nonprofit) community partner. 1. To what extent does the community partner benefit from the work of your service-learning team? 2. To what extent do the clients that the community partner serves benefit from the work of your service-learning team? 3. To what extent does the work of your service-learning team meet the goals and objectives of the community partner?"* (5-point scale from 1 = "To no extent" to 5 = "To a great extent").

3.2.2. Independent variables

To measure compassion in this study, we used a scale specifically aimed at measuring **relational compassion** (Hacker, 2008). This scale consists of four dimensions, including self-to-self (sample item: *"When I am upset, I try to be warm, sensitive and sympathetic to myself,"* other-to-self (e.g., *Other people I know tend to be sensitive to my wellbeing*), self-to-other (e.g., *I like to listen to other people's experiences*), and other-to-other (e.g., *Other people tend to be understanding*) (Hacker, 2008).

To capture the effects of **ethical leadership** of both team leaders and faculty members on students, we relied on the ten items developed for measuring ethical leadership of direct supervisors (Brown et al., 2005). Students answered this question twice, once for team leaders and once for faculty members. Team leaders answered this question for faculty members only. The wording of those items using "employees" was adjusted to students (e.g., *My Service- Learning Team Leader listens to what students have to say*). We used the team leader metric.

The **perceptions of** support that students formulated during their course were measured using a perceived supervisor support scale (Eisenberger et al., 2002). The six items selected were applied to team leaders and faculty members, so students answered these questions twice (e.g., *My Service-Learning Faculty Member/Professor is available when I have a problem*). Team leaders answered these questions twice, once for the faculty members' support towards themselves and once for the support towards the students (e.g., My *Service-Learning Faculty Member/Professor is willing to extend himself/herself in order to help students perform in Service-Learning to the best of their ability*). We used the team leader metric.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Overall service learning benefits (SELEB)	272	5.63	0.85	1											
2	Perceived community benefits	272	3.98	0.75	0.38 0.00	1.00										
3	Relational compassion	285	2.69	0.33	0.22 0.00	0.04 0.56	1.00									
4	Ethical leadership of faculty	273	3.95	0.66	0.27 0.00	0.21 0.00	0.13 0.04	1.00								
5	Perceived supervisor support of faculty	271	3.94	0.69	0.29 0.00	0.19 0.00	0.12 0.04	0.79 0.00	1.00							
6	Gender	271	1.58	0.49	0.1 0.12	−0.02 0.69	0.26 0.00	−0.07 0.25	−0.08 0.17	1.00						
7	Age	268	7.43	10.82	−0.23 0.00	−0.44 0.00	0.24 0.00	−0.16 0.01	−0.10 0.12	0.31 0.00	1.00					
8	Ethnicity	267	1.27	0.84	0.14 0.02	0.03 0.69	−0.05 0.44	0.08 0.18	0.08 0.17	−0.02 0.70	−0.14 0.02	1.00				
9	Education	272	2.36	0.68	−0.08 0.17	−0.23 0.00	0.17 0.00	0.01 0.83	0.03 0.65	0.20 0.00	0.65 0.00	−0.06 0.33	1.00			
10	Tolerance of ambiguity – positive	268	4.25	0.87	0.10 0.11	−0.02 0.86	−0.02 0.71	−0.04 0.54	−0.20 0.00	−0.19 0.00	0.03 0.67	0.03 0.11	−0.10	1.00		
11	Tolerance of ambiguity – negative	268	4.60	0.86	0.18 0.00	0.06 0.32	0.16 0.01	0.11 0.07	0.13 0.04	−0.05 0.46	−0.03 0.61	0.03 0.62	0.04 0.50	0.68 0.00	1.00	
12	Emotional coping	268	2.82	0.62	0.37 0.00	0.14 0.02	0.31 0.00	0.07 0.24	0.08 0.20	0.18 0.00	−0.02 0.75	0.08 0.22	−0.02 0.77	0.13 0.03	0.20 0.00	1.00

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3.2.3. Control variables

In addition to collecting data to analyze the perceived benefits of service-learning experiences, we asked participants about their general behavior when faced with stressful situations to reveal different approaches to emotional coping. Eight items are based on the **emotional approach to coping** (Stanton et al., 2000) and are conceptualized into two dimensions, i.e., Emotional Processing (e.g., *I take time to figure out what I'm really feeling*) and Emotional Expression (e.g., *I allow myself to express my emotions*). These eight items were measured on a 4-point scale from "I usually don't do this at all" to "I usually do this a lot." Two additional dimensions were measured based on the COPE scales (Carver et al., 1989): **Seeking social** support for instrumental reasons (e.g., *I ask people, who have had similar experiences, what they did*) and seeking social support for emotional reasons (e.g., *I get sympathy and understanding from someone*). These eight items were also measured on a 4-point scale from "I usually don't do this at all" to "I usually do this a lot." In addition, we measured **Tolerance-Intolerance Ambiguity** framed in the questionnaire as "Understanding of your Environment" (Budner, 1962) with the original sixteen items (positive sample item: *I would like to live in a foreign country for a while*). Control variables measured were gender, age, ethnicity and highest level of education completed.

3.3. Analytic technique

Two major techniques were used to test our hypotheses. First, we adopted multilevel techniques to test our hypotheses 1–6. Only the U.S. data was used in this analysis for two reasons. First, we could not determine team leaders from all collected German data. Second, the size of the German sample did not meet the recommended ratio of 10:1 for multilevel analysis. Extant literature suggests multilevel theory as one way to promote the development of a more expansive management paradigm for understanding organizational systems (Hitt et al., 2007). We used the XTMIXED command of STATA to examine the effect of team attributes on individual level outcomes – service-learning benefits and perception of community benefits.

Multilevel analysis, often termed hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), has four major forms: unconditional or null model, which we used to examine variation in individual outcomes between individuals; random coefficient model, which focused on individual level predictors (e.g., age) on individual outcomes; means-as-outcomes model, which focuses on team level predictors (e.g., commitment) on individual outcomes; and intercepts-and-slopes-as-outcomes model, which focuses on both individual- and team-level predictors on individual outcomes. The latter is sometimes referred to as a cross-level model and examines the extent to which higher-level factors interact with lower-level factors in determining lower-level outcomes. In addition, we used the bootstrap (1000) technique and robust function of STATA v.12 to compute the coefficients. We were, therefore, confident that the results we obtained were unlikely to be due to chance.

Second, to test the cross-country differences in perception of community benefits, service-learning, relational compassion, ethical leadership and supervisory support (Hypothesis 7), we conducted a T-Test to compare the students at German and U.S. institutions.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables in the study. Overall, the correlations ranged from small to medium suggesting low probability of multicollinearity. Most of the team-level variables correlate with the criterion, service-learning benefits at a moderate level (see Table 2).

4.2. Substantive results

We used HLM to analyze the data because individual students (level-1) were nested within 59 teams (level-2). Of specific interest, was the relation between service-learning benefits (level-1) and team attributes (level-2). Model testing proceeded in four phases: intercept-only model, random-regression coefficient model, means-as-outcome model, and the intercepts- and slopes-as-outcomes model.

The intercept-only model (Table 3) which does not include explanatory variables suggests that 11% of the variance in service-

Table 2
Results of *t*-test and Descriptive Statistics by Country.

Factors	Country						95% CI for Mean Difference	T	Df	Effect Size (Cohen's *d*)
	United States			Germany						
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n				
Ethical Leadership of leaders	4.02	.68	200	3.77	.55	73	.08–.43	2.82*	271	.39
Relational Compassion	2.63	.30	199	2.80	.36	86	−.25–−.09	−4.15***	283	−.54
Community Benefits	4.18	.63	199	3.42	.76	73	.58–.94	8.32***	270	1.14
Service Learning Benefits	5.75	.85	199	5.32	.76	73	.21–.66	3.85**	270	.53
Perceived Supervisor support of faculty	3.99	.70	198	3.79	.63	73	.02–.39	2.14*	269	.29

***p < .001; **p < 01; *p < .05.

learning benefits is attributed to differences in teams while 89% is due to individual differences. To test the significance of team effects, we carried out a likelihood ratio test by comparing the null multilevel model with a null single-level model (Leckie, 2010). The null multilevel model seemed most suitable given the significant results.

In the random coefficient model, we included individual controls as a block (Table 3). The change in model fit (Δdeviance = 64.78) suggests improvement over the null model as a function of the control variables. Age (*coef. = -0.02, BSE = 0.01; Z = -2.37, p < .05; 95% CI = -0.03, -0.003*) relates to service-learning benefits negatively suggesting that older students were less likely to perceive benefits from service-learning. However, emotional coping (*coef. = 0.39, BSE = 0.10, z = 3.84, p < .001, 95% CI = .19 - 0.59*), and tolerance of ambiguity (*coef. = 0.19, BSE = 0.07, z = 2.62, p < .01; 95% CI = .05 - 0.34*) relate positively to service-learning benefits. Students with high emotional restoration and the high tolerance for ambiguity are more likely to perceive service-learning as beneficial.

In the means-as-outcomes model, we added team level variables (see Table 3). The top part of the table shows that community benefits (*coef. = 0.39, BSE = 0.06, z = 6.33, p < .001; 95% CI = .27 - 0.51*) relate positively to service-learning benefits. The bottom part also shows that ethical leadership of faculty (*coef. = 0.28, BSE = 0.09, z = 3.07, p < .01; 95% CI = .10 - 0.46*) and relational

Table 3
Multilevel results of determinants of service learning benefits.

(A) Unconditional Model - Service Learning				
Fixed Effects	Coef.	BSE	Z	95% CI
Intercept	5.55	0.05	104***	5.44, 5.66
Random Effects				
sd(_cons)	0.27	0.05		.20, .38
sd(Residual)	0.77	0.06		.67, .90
ICC	0.11	0.04		.05, .21
Log likelihood	476.04			
AIC	482.04			
BIC	491.87			
(B) Conditional Model - Service Learning				
Fixed Effects	Coef.	BSE	z	95% CI
Intercept	3.29	0.47	6.94***	2.36, 4.22
Ethnicity	0.07	0.05	1.41	−.03, 0.16
Age	−0.02	0.01	−2.37*	−0.03, - .003,
Gender	0.13	0.11	1.13	−.09, .34
Education	0.05	0.10	0.49	−.14, .24
Emotional Coping	0.39	0.10	3.84***	.19, .59
Tolerance of Ambiguity	0.19	0.07	2.62**	.05, .34
Random Effects				
sd(_cons)	0.09	0.03		.05, .15
sd(Residual)	0.71	0.09		.56, .90
ICC	0.02	0.01		.004, .06
Log likelihood	411.26			
AIC	429.25			
BIC	458.48			
$\Delta\chi2$	64.78			
(C) Conditional Model - Service Learning				
Fixed Effects	Coef.	BSE	Z	95% CI
Intercept	4.00	0.25	16.21***	3.51, 4.48
Perceived Community Benefits	0.39	0.06	6.33***	.27, .51
Random Effects				
sd(_cons)	0.23	0.03		.17, .31
sd(Residual)	0.73	0.06		.62, .87
ICC	0.09	0.02		.05, .16
Log likelihood	451.2			
AIC	459.30			
BIC	472.41			
(D) Conditional Model - Service Learning				
Fixed Effects	Coef.	BSE	z	95% CI
Intercept	1.65	0.74	2.23*	.20, 3.10
Ethical leadership (faculty)	0.28	0.09	3.07**	.10, .46
Relational compassion	0.83	0.13	6.31***	.57, 1.09
POS faculty	0.28	0.08	3.55***	.13, .44
Random Effects				
sd(_cons)	0.13	0.03		.08, .20
sd(Residual)	0.68	0.06		.57, .80
ICC	0.04	0.02		.014, 086
Log likelihood	406.42			
AIC	422.41			
BIC	448.55			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

compassion (*coef. = 0.83, BSE = 0.13, z = 6.31, p < .001; 95% CI = .57 - 1.09*) relate positively to service-learning benefits.

Thus, there seems to be support for hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 on the main effects of relational compassion, ethical leadership of faculty, and perceived supervisory support of faculty on **service-learning benefits.** In addition to the above, main effects we also examined included the extent to which perceived community benefits mediate the relationship between determinants (ethical leadership, perceived supervisory support of faculty and relational compassion) and service-learning benefits. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Perceived community benefits also partially mediate the relationship between relational compassion and service-learning benefits. Relational compassion relates positively to service-learning benefits (*coef. = .83, SE = .12; Z = 6.81, p < .001; 95% CI = .59 – 1.07*) and perceived community benefits (*coef. = .35, SE = .11; Z = 3.08, p < .01; 95% CI = .13 – 0.57*), both of which are significant in the third equation (see Table 4a). The results suggest that 13% of the total effect is mediated, which indicate partial mediation. As a result, there is support for hypothesis 4 that perceived community benefits mediate the positive relation between relational compassion and perceived service-learning benefits.

Perceived community benefits also partially mediate the relationship between ethical leadership of faculty and service-learning benefits. Ethical leadership relates positively to service-learning benefits (*coef. = .28, SE = .09; Z = 3.19, p < .01; 95% CI = .11 – 0.45*) and perceived community benefits (*coef. = .20, SE = .08; Z = 2.57, p < .05; 95% CI = .05 – 0.55*). Both are significant in the third equation (see Table 4b). The results suggest that 25% of the total effect is mediated, which indicates partial mediation. There seems to be support for hypothesis 5 that perceived community benefits mediate the positive relationship between ethical leadership and perceived service-learning benefits.

Hypothesis 6 proposed that perceived community benefits mediate the positive relation between POS and perceived service-learning benefits. The results show that perceived community benefits partially mediate the relationship between PSS and service-learning benefits. PSS relates positively to service-learning benefits (*coef. = .28, SE = .08; Z = 3.39, p < .01; 95% CI = .12 – 0.45*) but not perceived community benefits (*coef. = .13, SE = .07; ns; 95% CI = -0.01–0.27*). However, both are significant in the third equation (see Table 4c). The results suggest that 17% of the total effect is mediated, which indicates partial mediation. There is, therefore, support for Hypothesis 6.

4.3. Cross-country comparisons

To test for differences in the perception of service-learning benefits, relational compassion, ethical leadership, and supervisory support, we conducted a T-Test. We found that there is a statistically significant mean difference in ethical leadership of faculty, supervisory support, perceived community benefits, and service-learning benefits between students in U.S. and German institutions. Results show that the mean ratings of U.S. students in ethical leadership of faculty, supervisory support, perceived community benefits, and service-learning benefits are greater than those of Germany. However, the mean ratings of relational compassion are lower in the U.S. sample than in the German sample. In sum, there seems to be evidence of differences in perception of service-learning outcomes (service-learning benefits and community benefits) and drivers (ethical leadership and supervisory support) between U.S. and German samples. Thus, there is support for Hypothesis 7.

Table 4a
Results of multilevel mediation.

Step	(A) Relational Compassion	Service Learning Benefits			
		Coef.	SE	Z	95% CI
1	Intercept	3.08	0.37	8.34***	2.35, 3.80
	Relational compassion	0.83	0.12	6.81***	.59, 1.07
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.29	0.07		.18, .48
	sd(Residual)	0.69	0.04		.61, .77
		Perceived Community Benefits			
2	Intercept	2.96	0.34	8.64***	2.28, 3.63
	Relational compassion	0.35	0.11	3.08**	.13, .57
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.42	0.07		.30, .59
	sd(Residual)	0.61	0.04		.54, .69
		Service Learning Benefits			
3	Intercept	2.15	0.42	5.18***	1.34, 2.97
	Relational compassion	0.73	0.12	6.10***	.50, .97
	Perceived Community Benefits	0.31	0.07	4.28***	.17, .44
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.24	0.08		.13, .45
	sd(Residual)	0.67	0.04		.60, .75
	Proportion of total effect mediated:	0.13			
	Ratio of indirect to direct effect:	0.14			
	Ratio of total to direct effect:	1.14			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 4b
Results of multilevel mediation.

Step		Service Learning Benefits			
		Coef.	SE	Z	95% CI
1	Intercept	4.43	0.36	12.40***	3.73, 5.13
	Ethical Leadership (Faculty)	0.28	0.09	3.19**	.11, 45
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.23	0.09		.11, .51
	sd(Residual)	0.77	0.05		.69, .86
	Perceived Community Benefits				
2	Intercept	3.21	0.31	10.29***	2.60, 3.82
	Ethical Leadership (Faculty)	0.2	0.08	2.57*	.05, .35
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.38	0.07		.26, .56
	sd(Residual)	0.63	0.04		.56, .71
	Service Learning Benefits				
3	Intercept	3.32	0.42	7.97***	2.50, 4.41
	Ethical Leadership (Faculty)	0.21	0.09	2.42*	.04, .37
	Perceived Community Benefits	0.35	0.08	4.59***	.20,.50
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.21	0.09		.08, .49
	sd(Residual)	0.73	0.04		.65, .82
	Proportion of total effect mediated:	0.25			
	Ratio of indirect to direct effect:	0.33			
	Ratio of total to direct effect:	1.33			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 4c
Results of multilevel mediation.

Step		Service Learning Benefits			
		Coef.	SE	Z	95% CI
1	Intercept	4.43	0.34	13.24***	3.78, 5.09
	POS (Faculty)	0.28	0.08	3.39**	.12, .45
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.23	0.09		.10, .51
	sd(Residual)	0.77	0.05		.69, .86
	Perceived Community Benefits				
2	Intercept	3.48	0.29	11.84***	2.90, 4.05
	POS (Faculty)	0.13	0.07	1.81	−.01, .27
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.39	0.08		.26, .57
	sd(Residual)	0.63	0.04		.56, .72
	Service Learning Benefits				
3	Intercept	3.22	0.41	7.86***	2.41, 4.02
	POS (Faculty)	0.23	0.08	2.88**	.07, .39
	Comben	0.36	0.08	4.73***	.21, .51
	Random effects				
	sd(_cons)	0.21	0.09		.08, .50
	sd(Residual)	0.73	0.04		.65, .82
	Proportion of total effect mediated:	0.17			
	Ratio of indirect to direct effect:	0.2			
	Ratio of total to direct effect:	1.2			

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

5. Discussion

A new challenge in higher education is to develop globally minded, ethical and compassionate leaders who can navigate numerous challenges presented by their constantly changing environment. Our aim in this study was to investigate the influence of positive behavioral constructs such as relational compassion, ethical leadership, and perceived supervisory support on students' evaluations of service-learning education benefits. Research supports that engagement that is well facilitated by organizational leadership is a determinant of employee performance (Bagyo, 2013). Much support also exists in many literatures beyond management, on the importance of quality training as an important predictor of performance, positive mental states, retention etc. (Amin et al., 2013; Elnaga & Imran, 2013; Kiweewa & Asiimwe, 2014). Business education is criticized for failing to adequately prepare students for the leadership and ethical challenges present in an increasingly complex world (Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone & Thompson, 2006; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). SLE is seen as a conduit of effectively teaching and training students to be purposeful, motivated, committed to important

issues germane in their communities and beyond (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Nevertheless, there is still a void on the antecedents that facilitate service-learning outcomes.

We further explored the mediating role of students' perceptions of community benefits in the above relationships. We found evidence that students are aware of the difference they can make in society. This perceived impact affects their evaluations of their individual service-learning benefits. We hereby establish a very important finding that service-learning links individual learning, faculty members who are perceived as supervisors and the community which provides real-life learning situations to students. We expect this finding to gain momentum in newer forms of service-learning based on new digital opportunities, which will allow individual students to make and experience a significant impact for global, social change (Karakas & Kavas, 2009).

Our findings show that there was a difference between U.S. and German students in their evaluations of ethical leadership of faculty, supervisory support, perceived community benefits, and service-learning benefits. This is an important outcome since service-learning pedagogy has deep roots in the U.S. (Bringle et al., 2010; Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Brooks & Schramm, 2007; Dyllick, 2015; Markus et al., 1993). Additionally, it is just as important to understand how it unfolds in other countries. The mean ratings of students from the U.S. were significantly higher in ethical leadership of faculty, supervisory support, perceived community benefits, and service-learning benefits than those for German students. This was not unexpected, especially since service-learning has deeper roots in the U.S., where there has been a progressive improvement in service-learning programs to ensure that students receive intended benefits from the service-learning experience (Eyler et al., 2001). Business schools in the U.S. are constantly exploring ways to increase their legitimacy and societal impact in terms of their educational impact (Starkey & Tempest, 2008). Students in German institutions tend to rate the service learning benefits significantly lower than their counterparts in U.S. institutions - which may reflect their awareness of Germany's higher level of law-embedded and state-provided social justice system (Brodbeck et al., 2002). It was interesting that German students averaged higher in their evaluations of the relational compassion during their SLE experiences. As the German work environment is generally considered to have a low level of compassion (Brodbeck et al., 2002), students in German institutions might perceive SLE as an opportunity to live out compassion. This result also suggests that the differences found may not only be due to the deeper roots of service learning in U.S. institutions, but also due to differences in cultural attitude towards service for others, especially at the individual level.

6. Practical implications and limitations

There are several theoretical and practical implications derived from our research and findings. Theoretically, our study shows that constructs which are established in the field of positive organizational scholarship can and should also be used in the study of service-learning. Our findings here offer several practical implications that can be of benefit to instructors of service-learning to ensure that students receive the intended benefits from such programs. Since service-learning is shown to have a wide variety of benefits for students (Eyler et al., 2001), it is important to identify the antecedents that can facilitate service-learning. This study suggests that faculty or team leaders should mindfully consider the aforementioned antecedents (relational compassion, ethical leadership, and perceived supervisor support) while designing service-learning programs. However, it is important to note that SLE is an educational model derived and deeply rooted in western/American values towards community service. This model might not be applicable or might unfold differently in cultures and contexts that differ significantly from the west or America. Nevertheless, the premise of SLE is to expose students to the ambiguity, difficulty or "messiness" of social problems locally or internationally and therefore can be improved by the constructs that we suggest.

It seems that our study is the only of its kind, that we are aware of, that has been able to compare some key measures between two countries even though we were unable to test the main effects of the antecedents of service-learning benefits on German students. Service-learning is still in its infancy in other countries such as Germany, compared to the U.S. (Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung, 2022). Therefore, the implementation and numbers are significantly less even though service learning is picking up momentum (e.g., Gerholz et al., 2018). There is some evidence that the number of institutions implementing service-learning education both locally and overseas is increasing based on our searches. As more research is conducted to demonstrate that students see service-learning as beneficial to them, others will be further motivated to join this movement.

Another limitation to the study was that the data was conducted over the course of one semester. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students sometimes do realize the benefits of the service-learning experience when they have long left the course and are applying their learned skills in a career or related opportunity. Future studies may consider longitudinal studies where students who took service-learning courses are monitored to ascertain if the antecedents affected their retention of service-learning benefits.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the role of compassion, ethical leadership and perceived supervisory support in fostering community-oriented values and reinforcing service-learning benefits for students' teams in the U.S. and Germany. Findings suggest that the above-mentioned antecedents, when introduced in a student learning environment, can facilitate positive evaluations of the intended outcomes. We also found evidence that evaluations of the antecedents may be evaluated differently in different countries. Nevertheless, this study further supports the premise that service-learning is an important instructional tool, especially as we seek to prepare students to be global, ethical leaders who will continue to face increasingly complex problems in a global and interconnected world.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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