From Anticipation to Activism:
Study Abroad & the Process of Sociopolitical Development

Background

- Sociopolitical development (SPD) describes the process of acquiring critical awareness, skills, motivation, and efficacy to engage in social and political systems that resist injustice or promote human rights (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).
- Human Rights in Argentina is a short-term study abroad course. Students learn about the history and aftermath of an oppressive military dictatorship in Argentina.

Purpose

- This ongoing qualitative study seeks to understand how study abroad experiences impact students’ SPD.
- We examine written reflection papers from students to extract the most salient themes across 3 stages of their experience:
  - Anticipation (pre-departure)
  - Awareness (during the trip)
  - Analysis of Experience (after the trip)

Method

- Participants: 21 students in 2013 and 2014 cohorts
  - Gender: 76% female
  - Majors Represented: Psychology, Spanish, Political Science, Journalism, and others.
- Procedure:
  - We randomly chose 5 reflection papers from each stage to examine.
  - Two coders read 5 papers from each stage to identify the most salient themes.
- Analysis of Experience:

  - Expectations about cultural experience
  - Expectations for learning about human rights
  - Acknowledging prior lack of knowledge

  - Shift in perspectives
  - Understanding self
  - Connections to home country
  - Emotional connection to the experience
  - Importance of physical experience
  - Shift from intellectual emotional

  - Personal responsibility for sharing knowledge about human rights
  - Broadening perspectives to identify oppression around the world

Discussion

Can a short-term human rights study abroad program promote sociopolitical development in college students?

- Overall, the results suggest that the Human Rights in Argentina program promotes certain aspects of sociopolitical development. The program facilitates students’ critical awareness and motivation. Efficacy to engage may emerge as a salient theme after a more formal analysis.
- Some themes are present across multiple stages, but manifest in different ways.
- Next Steps:
  - A more thorough and rigorous analysis of all qualitative data to better describe each stage and elucidate themes.
  - Investigate intra-individual changes across each stage.