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The Development of an Undergraduate Study Abroad Program: Nicaragua and the Psychology of Social Inequality

Ellen I. Shupe[1]

Abstract

In its recent report outlining principles for teaching undergraduate students in psychology, the American Psychological Association Board of Educational Affairs recommended including experiential learning in the curriculum and identified study abroad opportunities as being particularly valuable. Unfortunately, although American universities offer hundreds of faculty-led study abroad programs, only a handful of the programs offer coursework in psychology. In this article, I describe a program in Nicaragua on the psychology of social inequality I developed and have been leading for the past 10 years. I begin by describing the structure of the program and discuss my pedagogical approach and goals for the program. I then discuss research related to the value of short-term study abroad and provide evidence for the success of the Nicaragua program. Finally, I outline some initial steps in the program development process and urge faculty members to consider designing new study abroad programs in psychology.

Keywords

experiential learning, study abroad, social inequality

In a recently released report, the American Psychological Association Board of Educational Affairs outlined a number of principles for promoting quality undergraduate education in psychology (APA, 2011). Among their recommendations was a call for psychology faculty to focus on developing students' cooperation and communication-based abilities by, for example, encouraging them to work with others who have experiences and perspectives that are different from their own. Similarly, the Board urged psychology departments to include applied experiences in their curriculum, as a way to promote knowledge transfer in students and the application of psychological principles to their lives. The document specifically highlights the importance of study abroad opportunities as a way of providing students with a "life-changing experience" and the ability to "learn from and with peers whose life views may differ from their own." Although study abroad can be a valuable experience, psychology students are not taking advantage of study abroad opportunities as often as they could, and arguably should, particularly given the relevance of culture to the study of human behavior and cognition. The lack of relevant data makes it difficult to determine the precise number of psychology majors studying abroad. However, one widely cited source indicates that students in the social sciences as a whole represent only 22% of U.S. students enrolled in study abroad programs (Institute of International Education, 2012), and in a recent study psychology majors were underrepresented among undergraduates studying abroad, in the majority of the colleges and universities surveyed (Schwebel & Carter, 2010). One

explanation for the failure of psychology majors to embrace study abroad is a relative lack of programs including coursework in psychology. In a recent survey of 20 randomly selected midsized American universities, none of the 133 short-term, faculty-led programs collectively offered by the schools included coursework in psychology.[1]

Recognizing the need for additional opportunities for students to study abroad in psychology, I developed a summer program in Nicaragua on the psychology of social inequality in 2003. In the following pages, I first describe the structure and content of the program and my goals and pedagogical approach. I then briefly describe a number of steps in the initial program development process and conclude by urging faculty members in other universities to consider designing new study abroad programs in psychology.

Program Structure and Organization

The *Psychology of Social Inequality* program is considered a short-term, faculty-led program, a study abroad program generally lasting from 2 to 6 weeks, in which one or more faculty

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members travel with students to the host country. Although the traditional model of study abroad involved a semester long stay, short-term programs have grown in popularity, with the majority of students now enrolling in summer programs or academic year programs lasting less than 8 weeks (Institute of International Education, 2012). Like other short-term programs, the Nicaragua program includes several predeparture orientation sessions, in which I address student concerns and provide information about trip logistics, such as lodging and transportation, the climate in Nicaragua, and health and safety precautions. The program itself lasts a total of 5 weeks, including 2 weeks spent in a traditional classroom setting on the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) campus and 3 weeks of experiential learning in Nicaragua. The first few predeparture classes are devoted to topics related to the history and culture of Nicaragua, with the purpose of providing a backdrop for understanding the literature related to inequality and students' experiences in Nicaragua. We discuss the culture of Nicaragua in terms of both *etic* characteristics, such as collectivism and cultural masculinity, and *emic* characteristics, such as Nicaraguan machismo and familialism. I also assign readings on the history of Nicaragua and invite professors with expertise in Latin American history and Nicaraguan literature to provide guest lectures. In the remaining predeparture classes, I introduce theoretical and empirical literature related to inequality and do other traditional classroom-based work.

While in Nicaragua we stay in college dormitories, homes of Nicaraguans, housing on the grounds of an orphanage, and hotels, and because the group is relatively small (10–15 students, plus myself and a translator), we travel together in a large van with a hired driver. We spend much of our time visiting nonprofit organizations, including for example, a fair-trade cooperative, organizations implementing community-based schools and vocational training, and an organization providing medical and psychological services to women. In addition, we spend several days performing service work for one or more of the organizations. We also learn about issues related to inequality from local experts and meet regularly for informal class discussions. Finally, we visit and discuss the importance of a number of historical sites in Nicaragua and take part in several cultural activities. While such experiences provide the students with a better historical and cultural context in which to understand course material, they may also lead to a broader understanding and appreciation of students' own culture (see Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010).

Because the course is heavily experiential, a large percentage the students' grade (approximately 33%) is based on their participation, including active participation in classes, attentiveness during organizational visits, and demonstrated respect for Nicaraguans and the Nicaraguan culture. The remaining portion of students' grades comes from their performance on 10 reaction papers (approximately 30%), facilitation of a literature-based class discussion (approximately 12%) and a final project (approximately 25%). Although students are required to complete five of the reaction papers and facilitate class discussion during our stay in Nicaragua, the remaining

assignments are typically completed during the predeparture classes or after our return to the United States, to provide more time for experiential learning in Nicaragua.

Program Goals, Content, and Pedagogy

Although the content of the course changes somewhat from year to year, it has always been guided by five key goals. The first of these goals is to introduce students to the psychological literature related to the social inequality and to foster a deeper understanding of its implications for the "real world." At its core, social inequality is concerned with the unequal distribution of power across groups, as defined by gender, class, race, and other indicators of group membership. In the Nicaragua course I focus primarily on class-based inequality, both because it is the most salient form of inequality in Nicaragua and because it is rarely addressed in psychological research and curriculum (Lott, 2002; Lott & Bullock, 2007). Students read about and discuss theories on the causes of inequality, including social dominance theory (e.g., Sidanius, 1993), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), realistic conflict theory (e.g., Jackson, 1993; Sherif, 1966), and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), as well as theory and research related to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (e.g., Fiske, 2004). We also discuss cognitive mechanisms individuals use to psychologically distance themselves from people living in poverty (Lott, 2002) and to legitimize social arrangements (e.g., Tyler, 2006), and we read about and discuss qualitative research on the experience of poverty (e.g., Reutter et al., 2009). The course also includes readings and discussions related to the potential consequences of inequality, such as relative deprivation (e.g., Crosby, 1976), family-based violence (e.g, Mazaruna & McKay, 2001; Powell, 2004) and learned helplessness and depression (Seligman, 1975). Finally, I include a number of theoretical and empirical readings related to interventions. Because research suggests that programs based on partnership with local communities providing their own leadership and identifying their own needs are most effective at meeting those needs and promoting a sense of empowerment, we focus on literature describing culturally relevant programs and community-based initiatives (e.g., Schein, 2003), empowerment (e.g., Syme, 2004), and liberation psychology (e.g., Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Even upper-level psychology students are often unfamiliar with the literature on legitimacy, poverty, and community psychology, and find it quite interesting. The theories and research become even more meaningful when studied in the context of Nicaragua, one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. With the majority of Nicaraguans living on less than $3 a day and a small percentage controlling the country's resources (Worldbank, 2001), the reality of social inequality is impossible to ignore. Students quickly learn to appreciate the complex mix of psychological factors contributing to the development and maintenance of inequality there. They also begin to understand important geopolitical factors at work and the sobering reality that a long history of U.S. involvement in

Nicaraguan affairs has contributed to the country's struggles (e.g., Walker, 2003).

A second goal of the course is to challenge students to critically examine their own beliefs related to poverty and the dominant ideology, suggesting that poverty is the result of bad morals, laziness, or other internal factors rather than external, structural causes (e.g., Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Students' assumptions are challenged as they listen to first-hand accounts of the barriers Nicaraguans encounter in trying to escape the cycle of poverty, and their ongoing struggles. Women in one of the poorest communities, for example, describe making and hauling cinderblocks so they can begin a sewing cooperative rather than work in the local sweatshop. Similarly, youth who lived in a Managua dump discuss the difficulty of attending school without transportation or money for pencils, shoes, or uniforms. Many students hold fast to a belief in the "American dream"—that individuals need only to have determination and work hard to succeed. Thus, I include readings encouraging them to question this myth of class permeability and other commonly held system justifying beliefs, including, for example, a belief that the world is a fair and just place, where people get what they deserve (e.g., Kay & Jost, 2003; Lerner, 1980). Finally, students reflect on the literature and their own experiences, values, and beliefs in a series of thought papers, asking them, for example, to discuss systems and ideologies that maintain inequality in the United States and Nicaragua.

The course is also designed to promote a greater sense of civic responsibility and engagement in the students. Although it is important for students to be able to identify manifestations of inequality, I believe they should also acknowledge a personal responsibility to intervene on behalf of those who are marginalized. Similarly, it is important for them to develop field-based skills, such as the ability to identify and critically analyze "real-life" problems. To address these related goals, I incorporate a service-learning component in the course—students spend approximately 10–15 hr working, either on a sustainable training farm or in an orphanage. The painting, weeding, and other work we perform is often quite difficult in the heat and humidity of Nicaragua, and as students have pointed out, not directly related to the psychological literature we discuss. I continue to include this service component, because it provides a small opportunity to help alleviate the effects of inequality in Nicaragua, and because I believe it helps students understand the very difficult work Nicaraguans must perform, typically for very little compensation. It also allows students a chance to talk with Nicaraguans in a relatively unstructured context. Research examining the usefulness of this type of service-based activity is consistent with my perceptions; studies comparing them to traditional classroom-based learning suggest students in service learning courses fare better than their classroom-based counterparts in terms of field-based problem solving (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and overall civic awareness and involvement (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010).

The final two goals of the course are related to an appreciation for other cultures and an increased ability and desire to seek out additional intercultural experiences. Because it is important for students to learn about characteristics of the Nicaraguan culture, I incorporate a number of experiences designed to increase student understanding of the traditional and more contemporary features of the culture. Students have a number of opportunities to interact with Nicaraguans during their stay in Nicaraguan homes and the orphanage, during our visits to organizations, and in their free time. We also attend local celebrations and a concert of prominent Nicaragua folk singers and visit a number of typical settings, including schools, open-air markets, malls, and farms. I also encourage students to try a variety of typical Nicaraguan food, and practice speaking Spanish. Finally, as discussed earlier, I require students to read about and discuss the history and culture of Nicaragua before our departure.

Beyond this more intimate understanding of the Nicaraguan culture, the course is designed to foster students' awareness of and sensitivity to other cultures more generally. Research suggests the development of this intercultural sensitivity can be facilitated in the context of study abroad, through guided discussion and experiences that challenge students to reflect upon and critically examine their own culture relative to the host culture (Pedersen, 2009). To accomplish this, I include frequent group discussions, in which students share interpretations of their experiences in Nicaragua. Although their initial reactions are often ethnocentric, most students begin to develop an appreciation for the Nicaraguan lifestyle and characteristics of the Nicaraguan culture that distinguish it from their own culture. For example, Nicaraguans tend to have a more fluid, less rigid understanding of time than is typical in the United States, and they lack many of the conveniences we tend to take for granted in the United States, such as dependable transportation and electricity. This means that we sometimes have to wait for businesses to open, transportation to come, or our hosts to arrive. Although many students are initially bothered by this imposition, they gradually learn to appreciate the opportunity to think, write, socialize, or observe their surroundings during these unexpected lulls. Finally, a number of the reaction papers are designed to challenge students to think critically about their own and other cultures. For example, one of the papers asks students to identify their assumptions and discuss how their own experiences and the dominant American culture have worked to shape those assumptions. As others have noted, this ability to understand and appreciate a situation from other perspectives is an important step in the development of cultural sensitivity and competency (e.g., Pedersen, 2009).

Finally, the course is designed to help students develop self-efficacy for traveling and studying abroad and to develop skills for coping with culture shock and related stressors (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005; Sachau et al., 2010). Most students who enroll in the course have never traveled outside the United States, and very few have traveled to a developing country, so managing 3 weeks in Nicaragua can be quite challenging. Thus, before leaving for Nicaragua we discuss typical travel-related stressors and effective coping strategies, and throughout the trip students are encouraged to share their day-to-day

challenges in informal evening discussions. I am also intentional about providing students with increasing responsibility during the trip. Although I assume more of a leader role during the first week, I gradually expect them to "fend for themselves," by asking for directions, ordering food, visiting nearby cities on their own, and communicating needs to their host families. By the end of the trip, students seem to feel much more comfortable and confident in their abilities and typically report a desire to study or travel abroad in the future.

Effectiveness of Short-Term Study Abroad Programs

Although the effectiveness of the program has not been formally assessed, several indicators suggest it has been successful in meeting my goals. Results from standard course evaluations indicate the program is experienced as important and meaningful, with students describing it as "an amazing opportunity" that "changed the way I view the world and myself." In addition to responding to open-ended questions, students are asked to rate the effectiveness of the course by indicating the extent to which they agree with a number of statements on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*). Across all six groups I have taken to Nicaragua, 100% of the students completing course evaluations *strongly agreed* they "learned a great deal in the course" (mean = 1.0). Similarly, 100% of the students *strongly agreed* the course material challenged them to "think in new ways" (mean = 1.0). These results are particularly noteworthy when compared to similar courses taught in the psychology department—means for the 2 items when averaged across all other 300-level elective courses are 1.77 and 1.79, respectively.[2]

Student performance in the course also suggests they learn a great deal—the content of their thought papers and the insight shared in group discussions and presentations indicate they have deeply processed their experiences and have adeptly applied the psychological literature in understanding them. My informal observations suggest the course also provides a context in which students can further develop critical thinking skills and engage in a critical analysis of issues related to inequality. When we first discuss causes and interventions, for example, students focus on education as the way to address problems associated with poverty. Our later conversations with Nicaraguans who have experienced poverty or who have worked to help others living in poverty, however, challenge the simplicity of this "education solution" and force students to grapple with the complexities of political and economic forces, as well as the external barriers faced by individuals living in poverty. Although realizing there is no single cause or solution for poverty-related problems is often difficult to accept, the development of this insight is critical. Finally, informal follow-up reports suggest students' experience in the course prompts them to engage in long-term efforts to address inequality in the United States or abroad, with a significant number choosing to do volunteer or professional work related to inequality.

This evidence for the success of the Nicaragua program is consistent with research examining the effectiveness of similar programs. In one recent study, for example, 13 students completed a standard inventory measuring intercultural sensitivity before and after enrolling in a 2-week study abroad program in the Netherlands (Pedersen, 2009). The program was intentionally designed to provide the experiences and tools needed to foster intercultural competence, with students challenged to engage in cultural comparisons and to write about their experiences using guided reflection. Results of the study suggested that the students had increased cultural sensitivity after completing the program, relative to both their predeparture scores and scores of a control group of students enrolled in a traditional classroom-based course. Results from other research are generally consistent with these findings. For example, content analysis of student papers written by social work students during a 2-week program in Italy suggested the students demonstrated an increased respect for other cultures and were better able to critically examine features of the U.S. social system following their experience abroad (Gilin & Young, 2009). Similarly, results of a recent study of business students participating in short-term study abroad programs suggested the students perceived the programs to be effective, and this effectiveness was significantly predicted by the experiential characteristics of the programs (Wang, Peyvandi, & Moghaddam, 2011).

Recommendations for Program Development

Although short-term study abroad opportunities are clearly valuable for both students and faculty directors, the prospect of planning a course abroad can be daunting. In the following paragraphs, I outline the program development process, based largely on my own experiences, to aid faculty members who are interested in developing short-term study abroad programs.

The first step in developing a program is to determine an appropriate host country—a decision that should be guided in part by the country's fit with the program's intended focus, the instructor's familiarity with the relevant country, and whether other short-term programs in the country are already offered by the university. Early in the process it is also wise for prospective program directors to ask for support from their department head and dean. Similarly, it is a good idea to consult with staff from the international studies or study abroad office, to gauge the level of support for the development of short-term programs, to assess the viability of the proposed program, and to clarify the process of program development.

Upon gaining initial support for the development of a new program, faculty members can begin the more formal process, which typically starts 12 to 18 months before the program is offered. The process often involves a site visit to the host country, the cost of which may be covered by a grant or other source of funding from the program director's university. During this period of time, the faculty member will be making decisions related to details of the course, such as the specific content

covered, the number of credit hours, and whether it will be offered to psychology majors only or to all majors. At the same time, he or she will be gathering more information and making decisions related to the time the group will spend in the host country. One key decision will be the specific location of the program. In some programs, the group stays primarily at a "home base," making day trips to other nearby cities and sites, while other programs involve shorter stays in a number of cities.

During the formal program development process, the program director will need to gather information related to in-country transportation and lodging, in addition to any organizations the group might visit. There are a number of possible resources for helping with this often tedious information gathering process. Perhaps, most important are colleges or universities near the destination city. In addition to providing possible housing and meals, they might be sources of translators, local transportation, and faculty members who could provide guest lectures to the group. Other potentially valuable sources are friends and colleagues who have contacts in the country; researchers who have published studies conducted in the country; faculty members at other institutions that lead study abroad programs in the country; and international students from the country enrolled at the faculty director's university. Finally, there are a number of "custom program provider" organizations that have staff worldwide and will make some or all of the in-country arrangements for a fee. This information related to in-country transportation, lodging, translators, and meals will be instrumental in helping the program director create a budget, which will likely be an important factor in determining the viability of the program.

Gathering necessary information and planning for the travel- and field-based experiences, in addition to attending to all of the details of the course, can be labor-intensive and tedious. Clearly, developing a study abroad program is more time consuming than designing and preparing a more traditional course in psychology. In my experience, however, the time spent is worthwhile, as it provides a valuable opportunity for both students and program directors. I urge other psychology faculty members to consider developing short-term study abroad programs, as a way to both broaden the curriculum for their psychology students and enrich their own professional lives.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Data were collected from the following 20 universities, randomly sampled from all 4-year institutions with an enrollment of between 5,000 and 15,000 students: Santa Fe College, Ashland University, Salem State College, Tarleton State University, Morehead State University, Midwestern State University, Midwestern State University, Antelope Valley College, Brown University, Idaho State University, University of Southern Mississippi, CUNY College of Staten Island, Hampton University, Rutgers University-Camden, The University of West Florida, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Cardinal Stritch University, Ohlone College, Duke University, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, and Robert Morris University. Data included all 2- to 6-week faculty-led programs offered by the universities.
2. Means represent averages across the 81 other 300-level elective courses taught in the Psychology Department at GVSU during the previous 2 years.

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