

Original Research

Experiences abroad: The impacts of an international sport for development trip on American young women

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ABSTRACT

While the field of Sport for Development (SFD) has grown over the last several decades, there remain gaps within program evaluation. Given that there are multiple models of programming SFD, Goals for Girls, a U.S. based SFD non-profit organization that uses soccer-based trips abroad to empower young women, provided a strong platform for study. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of a SFD trip abroad on American young women. Through interviews with over 30 young women spanning 13-years of programming, three themes and five sub-themes emerged. Collectively, the trips impacted the young women in the areas of relationship building, expansion of perception, and desire for change. The authors suggest that programming like Goals for Girls highlights both the strengths and challenges inherent in SFD.

EXPERIENCES ABROAD: THE IMPACTS OF AN INTERNATIONAL SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT TRIP ON AMERICAN YOUNG WOMEN

Although sport for development (SFD) is no longer in its infancy, there is still much room for exploration and growth. In recent years there has been a blossoming of sub-topics (e.g., theory creation, technology and innovation, leadership), demonstrating progress within the field, yet there remains a need to better understand both intended and unintended impacts of programming. For instance, much of

the programmatic impact that has been measured has focused on individual programs and short-term gains (Coalter, 2010; Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015). Kay (2009) specifically pointed out that the lack of data and resources over an extended period of time makes this difficult. In addition, much of the research around impact focuses specifically on the social change element being implemented within the program. Although this is logical, there is a possibility that programs are demonstrating impact (both positive and negative) beyond their specific and intended reach, but this information is not being captured through traditional evaluation methods. Hancock et al. (2013) state “rather than assess programs based on their primary impact (e.g., individual development, social integration, etc.), perhaps programs should be evaluated more holistically and in relation to the cyclical linkages between individual program components and their collective impact” (para. 36). Looking at programs from a broader, more collective standpoint may lead to new insights and understandings of SFD.

In consideration of under-explored areas within SFD, Goals for Girls provided a unique model for study. Goals for Girls is a United States (U.S.) based non-profit that uses soccer to empower young women. It does this in partnership with other SFD organizations across the globe. In addition to providing year-round programming in local communities, a unique component of the program takes American young women abroad for an exchange opportunity to participate

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with other female soccer players in India, Peru, South Africa, and Uganda. With over 150 alumni spanning 13 years of Goals for Girls trips abroad, a cross-sectional sample provided an opportunity to assess the impact of the program in both the short-term (those who had traveled recently) and long-term (those who participated as early as 2007). This population created a uniqueness in that the assessment is not of the local in-country Goals for Girls program participants, but of the Americans traveling abroad as participants. The purpose of the study was, therefore, to understand the experiences of American young women who traveled abroad on a sport-focused SFD trip.

Review of Literature

Perhaps at the forefront of the SFD discussion needs to be the acknowledgement that understanding programming and its impacts is an ever-evolving endeavor. There is general consensus that monitoring and evaluation are crucial to the future of SFD, and many scholars have taken on this issue directly through special issues in journals such as *Sport Management Review* (Sherry et al., 2015) and the *Journal of Sport Management* (Welty Peachey et al., 2019). Some of the push for better knowledge and understanding of programming is driven by funders or policy makers (Kay, 2009), but there seems to be focus beyond that to better understand the role sport is (or is not) playing in development collectively.

The field continues to develop as the belief in the power of sport balances itself with practitioners and scholars committed to discerning what works and what does not. Positively, scholars engaged in assessing benefits gained from participation in SFD programs have noted growth in participants' knowledge acquisition, empowerment, and personal confidence (Kay, 2009). Others have seen, specifically in girls, increased physical fitness, mental health, self-esteem and social interaction (Hancock et al., 2013). In post-disaster interventions, sport programming has built resilience, improved physical and mental well-being, and positively impacted the youth involved (Kunz, 2009). These are just a few of the positive outcomes of SFD.

Although many on the side of SFD are evangelical in their belief that sport can tackle some of our toughest social issues, published work demonstrates mixed results. Svensson and Woods (2017) noted that most SFD mission statements are idealistic about sport, and caution that a more balanced view should be adopted. Spaaij (2009) and Langer (2015) discussed a general absence of hard evidence in SFD, noting that many programs are using anecdotal evidence to justify their causes. Coalter and Taylor (2010)

summarized it this way:

Overall, despite certain tendencies, there is no consistent and predictable “sport-for development effect” in terms of personal development. As in all forms of social intervention, the nature and extent of impacts are largely contingent and vary between program types, participants and cultural contexts (p. x).

There also exists the highly criticized power imbalances that present themselves within many SFD programs, especially those driven by Westerners or the “Global North,” delivered to members of the “Global South” (e.g., Darnell, 2012; Levermore & Beacom, 2012; Nicholls et al., 2010; Spaaij et al., 2018). Darnell and Hayhurst (2011) discussed SDP programs' colonizing tendencies, and others note that the challenges of North to South programming remain situated in a historical context. Both Darnell (2011) and Dao (2013) assessed the experiences of Canadians and Americans, respectively, who interned for SFD programs abroad. In both studies, similar findings revealed that experiences were simultaneously positive and challenging. Importantly, the experiences resulted in what Dao (2013) terms reflexive privilege and Darnell (2011) calls First World guilt. In short, through their international SFD experience, the interns were forced to confront their own privilege, question the importance of material goods, and better understand inequity in ways they had not previously.

Giulianotti et al. (2016) noted that there seems to be progress in this regard where some of the North-South relationships in SFD are becoming more cooperative partnerships. Despite this potential shift, it remains difficult to separate these patterns from historically created dependencies (Darnell, 2012; Giulianotti et al., 2016). Relatedly, the current study assessed American young women traveling abroad to the Global South, so it is critical to understand the challenges that previous scholars have found related to these issues. Framing the current study as an investigation of the experiences of American young women abroad as SFD participants, much still stands to be learned about how the young women were impacted by their experiences. Pugh's (2011) transformative experience theory defines a transformative experience as a “learning episode in which the student acts on the subject matter by using it in everyday experience to more fully perceive some aspect of the world and find meaning in doing so” (p. 111). Given the potential for personal growth through a SFD experience abroad, this theory served to underpin the research.

Transformative Experience Theory

Rooted in Dewey's (1980) teachings connecting education to everyday experience, Pugh (2004, 2011) proposes three characteristics that shape the way individuals are impacted by new learning experiences. First, an individual may experience the characteristic of *experiential value*, where learning content is perceived in a way that it enriches everyday experience through emotions of enjoyment, interest, intrinsic value, or satisfaction. Another characteristic, *expansion of perception*, is described as experiencing changed perceptions about learning content in a way that causes a "re-seeing" of the world. Under this category, individuals begin to connect what they learned to aspects around them, facilitating new perspectives or viewpoints. Finally, the concept of *motivated use* portrays the behavioral aspect of learning, where individuals are inspired to act on their knowledge through transferring new actions to their daily lives. Importantly, this aspect derives from an individual's intrinsic needs rather than through prompting from others. The three aspects of transformative experience do not follow a linear pattern and often present as a dynamic interaction with overlapping qualities (Pugh et al., 2010). Therefore, transformative experience should be viewed as a holistic occurrence where individuals may experience multiple forms of engagement across one occasion.

Recently, transformative experience has been utilized within the sport-based youth development literature, exploring it as a representation of the impact of sport participation on everyday life. Jacobs and Wright (2021) proposed transformative experience theory as an illustration of how youth make use of important life skills (e.g., leadership, responsibility) gleaned through sport and then transfer them to their outside lives in school, home, or within their communities. The transformative experience theory as it applies to the sport context invites a multifaceted conceptualization for how individuals may experience the impact of deeply engaging experiences. Given the current study's sport-focus in an immersive international setting, a unique environment existed in which to study change or growth within participants. The study's research goal, therefore, was to assess the impact of a SFD trip abroad on American young women.

METHOD

This research was focused on identifying impacts on young women who participated in a SFD trip abroad, adopting a qualitative design, primarily due to the exploratory nature of the study. Kay (2009) notes the value of qualitative approaches in SFD, suggesting, "the particular value in

securing accounts of this type is that they provide a mechanism for addressing the complex social phenomena with which we are concerned" (p. 1180).

The research team took a collaborative approach to analysis that looked at the transformative experience theory (Pugh, 2004; 2011) as an important basis of understanding, while also allowing for new ideas to challenge the underpinning (Patton, 2015; Richards & Hemphill, 2018; Richards et al., 2020). In planning the study, a uniqueness existed in that the program from which participants were drawn has been organizing trips since 2007, so participants spanned a 13-year time frame, some having participated in the trip over a decade ago, and some having had the experience very recently. As such, the research team adopted a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) that aimed to capture the complex and individualistic experiences of the participants. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection, given that the one-on-one conversations would allow researchers to gather participant insights about their social contexts and interpretations of the experience abroad (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additionally, the interview method created a structure that valued the uniqueness of each participant (Jason & Glenwick, 2016), while allowing collective themes to emerge. Additionally, interviews allowed for a focus on context, culture, and setting (Brodsky et al., 2016), all critical to the impacts of the experience.

Research Context

Goals for Girls, the program included in this study, is a non-profit SFD organization dedicated to using soccer to teach young women to become leaders and community change agents (Goals for Girls, 2019). Started in 2007, one of the components of the Goals for Girls model is global exchanges, where groups of American female soccer players travel to low- and middle-income communities abroad for approximately two-weeks. During these visits, the young women participate in the Goals for Girls program by connecting with their peers abroad through the sport of soccer, focusing on leadership development, life skills education, and community change. The program focus is on leadership development through cross-cultural learning and exposure.

Each trip is multi-faceted. As an example, a trip to India may involve spending the first week of the trip collaborating with a girls' soccer team in the host community. The American and Indian young women will have established pen-pal relationships ahead of time and do team building activities to foster relationships. Both groups of young women, along with their coaches, will lead each

other through typical activities they would utilize for their soccer training and SFD work. The American young women would also accompany pen pals to their homes for a few hours to gain perspective on the life of a young Indian woman, cooking with them or participating in their daily chores.

The second week of a trip is a five-day Youth Leadership Summit. The Youth Leadership Summit is what can best be described as a 'soccer camp plus.' Teams of young women from across the host country, as well as the American team, are invited to attend the summit, all staying in hostel-type lodging for the duration. The summit is led by a combination of U.S. coaches and Indian coaches who collaborate on content, all of which is soccer-based and leadership/life-skill focused. Coaches and leaders are trained by Goals for Girls staff, prior to each summit, through virtual- and in-person sessions that cover the session topics, how to teach the sessions, and topics that may arise as a result of the sessions, as well as how to handle those and dialogue with the young women in the best manner. Each activity has a lesson built within, focusing on topics such as confidence, resilience, communication, and leadership. All young women, both American and those from the host country, are also allotted time each day to work on a community change project. With oversight from the summit staff and their soccer coach who attends the summit with them, the young women work with their team to come up with a blueprint for a project they can take home to implement in their local community, whether that be in the United States or the local host country. These projects vary greatly depending on the most pressing needs of each community, but have included topics focused around recycling, gender empowerment, mental health, and public health education. Coaches return to home communities with the young women (both American and local), providing oversight and accountability around the change projects. There are additional activities planned in the evenings for the American and Indian young women to build relationships, such as dance parties, skits, drawing, or giving each other Henna tattoos. Youth Leadership Summits typically include approximately 250 youth. The American young women who attend the trip are participants in the Goals for Girls programming, engaging in the exact same way as their host country counterparts. Between 2007 and 2018, Goals for Girls completed 11 trips, including five to India, one to Peru, four to South Africa, and one to Uganda (Goals for Girls, 2019). Although each Goals for Girls global exchange varies slightly by location, the example provided above outlines the template of each.

American young women are recruited to the exchanges through the Goals for Girls staff connections to youth women's soccer teams in the U.S. The staff contacts youth

clubs around the country to gauge their interest in participating, and the youth coaches recruit directly through their clubs. In most cases, all American young women who travel on a trip are part of one youth soccer team within one club. Young women self-select into the program, as it is not a requirement of the team, but is an opportunity presented to them as a result of their participation on a soccer team. They are high school aged and travel with chaperones who are part of the full-time Goals for Girls staff, as well as their own youth soccer coaches. Teams included in the exchanges have come from California, North Carolina, Utah, and Washington D.C. The size of the group of young women from the U.S. has varied from 11-21.

The local, host country young women who participate alongside the American young women during the summit are from across their countries. They are recruited through their local youth soccer programs who stay connected to the Goals for Girls community of practice throughout the year. Through funding provided by donations and grants secured by Goals for Girls staff, the in-country young women travel to the central site of the Youth Summit free of charge. For most of these young women, it is the first and often only time they have left their home communities. Demographically, the young women vary by country, but are typically teenagers (13-19 years old) and come from low-income, marginalized communities.

Participants and Procedures

This qualitative study consisted of one-on-one interviews with American young women who participated in any of the 11 Goals for Girls global exchanges between 2007 and 2018. The research team was provided with contact information for all global exchange participants (158 total). After receiving ethics board approval, researchers randomly selected three participants from each exchange to be contacted via email for an interview. Those who were unresponsive were sent one follow-up email, and if the researcher did not hear back, another young woman from that trip was randomly selected. New random selections were also made in the case that the email addresses provided were no longer in use. This process continued until the researchers reached a sample size of 31, with at least two interviews coming from each exchange.

Interviews were conducted via phone, Zoom, Skype, or WhatsApp, at the preference of the participant. Interviews lasted just under one hour and were audio recorded, then transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was semi-structured and included questions focused on background information (personal history, recall of the trip, what they did during the global exchange), and impact (how the

program impacted them). Researchers framed questions related to program impact around self-perceptions and behaviors (e.g., “has being in the program made you see yourself differently, do things differently?”) as well as how the young women conceptualized the experience (e.g., “how often do you think about the trip?”, “what would other peers/family members say about your experience?”). This enabled reflections that went beyond the “what” of the trips into the “how” and “why” in a more thoughtful way. All interviews were conducted in English with native English speakers. All participants were female and were over the age of 18; the age range of participants was 18-31. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Data Analysis

Analysis was framed around Saldaña’s (2014) coding principles for qualitative research, which describes a cyclical process that involves analyzing, reorganizing, and refining codes until they become themes. Initially, a mix of deductive and inductive analyses were performed, guided by the transformative experience framework. However, researchers ultimately determined that a more participant-centered approach matched the framing of the study and chose to prioritize participant-generated language as opposed to matching the terminology of the theory. Therefore, drawing from inductive analyses, researchers participated in an initial round of open coding on the complete data set (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Examples of these initial codes included “youth as teachers,” “out of comfort zone,” and “learning life skills.” In phase two, the researchers reviewed the theoretical framework for the study (Pugh, 2011) which helped guide the creation of a codebook that combined inductive codes with tenets of the theory (e.g., motivated use, experiential value, expansion of perception: Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Next, an iterative process of collapsing and revising the codebook to account for redundant codes occurred in phase three, and the revised codebook was reapplied to all the data (Saldaña, 2014). A final phase compared each researchers’ coded data, giving each an opportunity to explain their interpretation of the data while the others listened and provided feedback. This final step drew benefits derived from “critical friends” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113). It ensured that interpretations were coherent and directly derived from the data, while also respecting that each scholar brings his or her own history to the process of analysis. The iterative process resulted in what the research team determined as the most accurate and comprehensive results produced by the data collected, and are presented with an acknowledgement that “accessing an independent social reality, depicting people’s reality accurately with certitude, or producing credible or trustworthy results that

correspond to that reality is untenable” (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 106).

Positionality Statement

The three authors took a constructivist approach to the research process and subscribed to the belief that the participants’ individual experiences were to be interpreted to generate meaning while also acknowledging the role of relationships in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). All three authors identify as white females, sport management academicians, and each author has prior experience in leading SFD programs in the United States and abroad. The first author served as a chaperone on one Goals for Girls trips to India in 2017.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three major themes emerged through this research related to the experiences of the American young women who traveled abroad for short-term SFD experiences. The themes include development of relationships, expansion of perception, and desire for change. A discussion of related literature accompanies each theme.

Development of Relationships

The first theme describes the nature of the relationships developed between the participants and the young women in the host countries. Throughout the interviews, the participants made references to the impact of the experience on their ability to foster meaningful connections in a cross-cultural atmosphere. There was a common recognition of how, despite being in a foreign setting, the environment fostered genuine relationships with the local young women. Jasmine (India/2017) shared:

It’s so hard to describe because it’s just the truest relationships I’ve ever made. The young women just pour their love out on you and you do the same to them and you get really close. I talk to my pen pals still today. The young women from the summit email me and check in. It’s like you have like a little sisterhood across the globe.

Another participant, Alexis (India/2016), reflected on the meaning she gleaned from taking on a role model position throughout the program:

Building those relationships with the other young women was really cool. We are kind of influencing them and teaching them...Just seeing that we made a change in their lives. It was really cool teaching them that they have a say

at such a young age. We heard stories about young women much older [who] still didn't have the courage to stand up for themselves. So [we] let those young women know at a younger age that they have the power in their future.

According to participants, a feature of the Goals for Girls program was a prioritization of relationship-building. Instead of focusing solely on philanthropic efforts such as “going to orphanage and painting a wall of a school” (Isabel, South Africa/2017), the nature of the program created a structure for participants to develop meaningful connections in a sustained way, discover similar interests, and develop camaraderie. One specific program feature included becoming pen pals before the trip, which Sarah (India/2015) elaborated on:

One interaction that still struck me today would be the ones that I've had with my pen pal. I think just having at first that connection that we were writing to each other and then when I finally got to meet each other, we already had a base of kind of a friendship. I just remember when we got [to India] we were like instantly able to become friends, not just, “I'm this American girl here and she's this Indian girl.” We were really just able to get along and there was almost like there are not many differences between us, which was really cool.

The interactive nature of the Youth Leadership Summit along with the informal, unstructured times to play soccer were also viewed as important facilitators of relationship-building. Julie (South Africa/2010) described the summit setting as a “safe space” and “the first time she had been so personally open with people.” Furthermore, Jenny (South Africa/2007) provided an example of how the interactive activities helped facilitated relationships:

There was one girl that was in my group...who told me a lot about her family and her friends and what she likes to do and we sort of developed a little relationship while we were there. It was special because, again, these are people that you think you have nothing in common with but then there's something like soccer that brings you together.

The impact of developing relationships among program participants has been observed in prior SFD research. In one study, American university students who spent a week delivering a seminar to coaches in Belize reflected on the importance of developing relationships to help foster mutual learning and dissipate any power imbalances (Jacobs et al., 2020). In this study, crucial elements such as team building exercises, playing sports together, and engaging in meaningful discussions about social change were viewed as facilitators of quality cross-cultural

relationships in SFD programs. This appeared key in the participants' learning experiences in the current study as they reflected on how cross-cultural friendships impacted their perceptions about relating to peers from the host country, as well as circled back to their personal development (e.g., relational skills, being viewed as a role model, etc.).

Building meaningful relationships within SFD programs has also been explored through a gendered lens, oftentimes through the “safe spaces” created for females to participate in sports and interact with peers (Brady, 2005; Chawanski, 2011). Vybav et al. (2015) postulated that a SFD program in India enabled peer relationships to grow faster as a byproduct of creating intentionally accepting spaces for women and girls to participate in physical activity. Similarly, Hayhurst (2013) examined a girls' sports program in Uganda and found that the program augmented social networks in addition to increasing confidence, challenging gender norms, and improving physical fitness. Together, these studies highlight the importance of fostering relationships among female participants in sport programs for the benefits of developing both personal and social skills.

Expansion of Perception

In addition to developing relationships, participants described how their perceptions expanded outwardly, through seeing and understanding the world in new ways. This expansion of perception included recognizing privilege and guilt in addition to developing global mindedness.

Recognizing Privilege and Guilt

The first expression of expanded perceptions was evident in how participants expressed guilt for their privileged backgrounds, as well as a recognition of the social inequalities that existed in the countries abroad compared to their communities in the U.S. Given the novelty of the cross-cultural experience (i.e., being abroad without their families for a specific, non-tourist experience), many participants were confronted with how their lives at home fit within a larger world context. For instance, Brianna (South Africa/2007) reflected:

It was very, very hard for me to reconcile how much I had here in the U.S. compared to the people that we saw there, and how happy they were versus how unhappy I was ... it made me feel very, very guilty. [At the time,] it didn't make me change anything, necessarily. I do think it made me a little angrier towards people that aren't treated well.

Although this participant did not admit to adjusting her behavior in order to assuage her guilt while abroad, it was apparent she experienced discomfort with how some local people were treated, potentially as a result of systematic inequalities or issues related to race, class, and gender.

Similar phenomena have been captured in prior sport for development research through participants' experiences of First World Guilt (Darnell, 2011) or reflexive privilege (Dao, 2013). According to Darnell (2011), Canadian student interns participating in cross-cultural experiences in Africa and the Caribbean were confronted with reconciling their own social and material privileges in relation to the individuals with whom they interacted abroad. Similarly, Dao's (2013) work conceptualized participants' reflexive privilege as American participants realizing they were "once complicit in and resistant to reproducing inequitable power relations, personal ideologies and Americanization processes while in their host countries" (p. 1). Darnell (2010b) also mentions that it is difficult to separate social constructions of race from connections to privilege and feminism; likely, while not mentioned directly, some of the experiences of privilege and guilt among the participants can be connected to race as well.

In some cases, participants conceptualized their recognition of privilege in a way that was uncomfortable for them, seeing the use of SFD in this experience as being reflective of a 'white savior' complex. Many noted that the leaders of Goals for Girls had discussions around this topic specifically before the trip, describing the idea and feelings of being a "white savior," how problematic it can be in the development world, and how to minimize its impact. Laura (India/2015) said:

I think we should have addressed more of the white savior and talking about the culture, and making sure that we weren't impacting in the wrong ways. So I think just having a world view of knowing that maybe some of the things that we did weren't great even though we had good intentions. That's one of my biggest qualms that I've always had with this project was I was always like, "Are we doing this for the right reasons?"

Although perhaps uncomfortable for many of the young women on the trip, the acknowledgement of colonialism and perceptions of "white savior" are important in how they approach the world moving forward. Maria's (South Africa/2007) comment illustrates the sense of superiority that may arise when there is lack of awareness of privilege:

At the time [I felt] people were not appreciating the weight of what it means to represent our team. [I remember] just

wanting to be really respectful of other people's homes and spaces and feeling a little frustrated at times that it felt like maybe there wasn't the utmost respect being given.

Accordingly, in order to address the privilege and power dynamics, SFD or sport programs abroad should work to adopt a democratic and collaborative approach where local voices are prioritized throughout all phases of program conception, delivery, and evaluation, which has been suggested by several scholars in the past (Giulianotti et al., 2016; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013; Wright et al., 2016).

Developing Global-Mindedness

Not only did the program render growth in perceptions of privilege and guilt, but participants also recognized how the trip helped them think about the world from a more global perspective. Participants recognized that before the trip, they assumed that other parts of the world were different than their own. Hailey (South Africa/2017) mentioned that "Africa and Asia felt like a whole different universe." Although participating in the program, participants observed differences between the country they visited and the U.S. For example, one participant detailed the disparities she observed in medical practices while her team was visiting an Indian leprosy colony. However, despite perceptions about how the world operates, participants managed to find similarities. Maria (South Africa/2007) grappled in this way, "Wow, the world is such a big place, and there are so many different ways to find connection, and find meaning and purpose, and even just ways of relating to a sport." Monica (South Africa/2017) described how connecting with people from the host country informed her perspective of the culture:

It was more seeing something I had never seen and then understanding how even though a lot of the people I was interacting with had very different backgrounds than me, I could still find ways to connect with them and interact with them and have common interests. That was not only to start a friendship but also build some type of mutual understanding or trust between us.

Seeing the environments in which people live also created an opportunity to gain perspective. Participants identified how experiencing a different culture deflated stereotypes they had prior to their trip (e.g., "Africans are primitive"; Isabel, South Africa/2017). This finding is consistent with previous study abroad programs that indicate when students are exposed to a cultural context different than their own, they start to recognize their own biases and can begin shifting their perceptions of others based on what they have experienced (Douglas & Jones-Rikkens, 2001; LeCrom et

al., 2020).

Although some stereotypes were eliminated, participants were also exposed to the challenging realities in other countries. For example, one participant described an encounter during a soccer game where one African girl spat at another and called her an offensive name regarding the color of her skin; Isabel attributed this to the remaining effects of Apartheid. Miranda (South Africa/2018) provided another example of how being exposed to the every-day realities of life in another country influenced her perspective. She explained:

I gained a wider perspective of the world around me because the environment is so different in South Africa. I live in an apartment, and I thought that that was a small house, but we went to a girl's house, and her house is literally the size of my bedroom. I also noticed the ways that young women are treated there and how much they are put down in their community. It made me really grateful to live where I am, and it made me want to change the way that young women are seen in other places in the world.

Not only did this encounter expand her perspective, it also sparked a desire to change. This notion was consistent for many participants; as they saw the way others lived and worked, they responded with heightened awareness, gratitude, and a passion for empowerment. Scholars have indicated similar findings in that cross-cultural experiences increase empathy, awareness of other ways of life, and acceptance of cultural differences (Appleby & Faure, 2015; Black & Duhon, 2006; LeCrom et al., 2015). Overall, an expanded worldview was certainly a result of the Goals for Girls trips.

Desire for Change

In addition to the development of relationships and expansion of perception recognized through the program, participants also described their desire for change after engaging in the experience abroad, noting how they took action to apply what they learned on the trip. Participants elaborated on both immediate and sustained actions that resulted after the Goals for Girls program and also commented on the process by which these behavioral impacts occurred.

Immediate Actions

For some, the experience abroad facilitated immediate actions, which were conceptualized as behaviors that were easy to implement into day-to-day life and that were already in the participant's realm of experience (e.g., volunteering

more). Participants often described these actions as choices they made to learn more about the world after the trip which often involved reading books or news. Maria (South Africa/2007) commented that she was "much more interested in international politics after that trip," and that as a result, she "read a book about different development models." Participants understood the value of continuing to explore diverse perspectives and took action to do so:

Right now, I have signed myself up for daily emails about world news and news in the U.S. just to educate myself more because expanding our perspective, as I have come to learn in my experiences in India, is just so beneficial. If you only view the world through one lens, you just miss out on so much (Angela, India/2018).

Participants also described how the trip increased their desire to volunteer. For example, Sarah (India/2015) explained, "I definitely have participated in more service because of it [the program]. I think I have become a lot more aware of volunteerism because of it." Others detailed how these volunteering commitments ranged from "random little events around while I'm in college. Like a blood drive or just a table where we make meals for people" (Amy, Peru/2012) to "volunteering weekly in an afterschool program since freshman year [of college]" (Sarah, India/2015).

Sustained Actions

Although learning by reading and increased volunteering marked immediate behavioral impacts, career-related changes characterized the sustained impacts observed after the trip. For some, the program facilitated outcomes that required greater commitment and necessitated a new context or different role (e.g., change in career path). More recent participants in the program identified how the Goals for Girls trip may influence their future plans. Alexis remarked, "Maybe I could go on another humanities trip that might teach kids how to read and write or English. Or I could work for Goals for Girls. Maybe I'll pursue a career in that." An additional example of wondering about how their experience abroad might affect her career was explained by Olivia (India/2015):

I don't know for sure what I want to do career wise, but that trip has actually impacted what I foresee myself doing in the future. I've always been interested in sports, and Goals for Girls opened my mind that I could do non-profit or service through sports.

Although some younger participants speculated about future actions the trip might inspire, others noted how the

trip already affected their decisions. Angela (India/2018) explained how the program influenced her college search process. She said:

I want to work in a non-profit when I'm older. And so when I'm looking at colleges now, I'm evaluating what it has to offer me in terms of the future and how it can lead me into following my dream of using that knowledge and these experiences [from the trip] in the future as well.

Older participants connected the Goals for Girls trip to their chosen disciplines in college. Dana (Peru/2012) explained “this is actually very connected to my trip. So, my major is behavioral neuroscience and I have a minor in global engagement” while Julie (South Africa/2010) echoed a similar sentiment saying, “I minored in public health, which actually was a decision I made a lot because of the Goal for Girls trip.” Beyond majors, some participants noted connections to their academic experiences in the form of study abroad. Sofie (South Africa/2007) explained:

The trip became part of my narrative as to where my career path went and why it went in the direction it did. It was one of the key early stops along that path. And I'd say that my parents and the people around me would really acknowledge that it was an important influence on what I decided to do, career wise. [After the trip], I maintained a love for health and different things going on in Sub-Saharan Africa. Because then I ended up studying abroad in Ghana and Uganda in college as a result, as well.

In this way, Goals for Girls participants saw significant life changes as a result of their experience abroad. This is consistent with study abroad impacts, where participants have reported that their trip “continues to influence interactions with people from different cultures” and also “ignited an interest in a career direction pursued after the experience” (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 56). Importantly, scholars have noted the delineation between immediate and sustained actions, finding that both are essential to the learning process. Heddy and Pugh (2015) suggest that immediate changes can lead to sustained changes and, despite being smaller in scale, can foster “outcomes such as conceptual change, transfer of learning, and transfer of learning strategies” (p. 55). Altogether, regardless of the magnitude of life changes, it is clear that the Goals for Girls experience impacted future decisions and behaviors of participants.

Process

Although describing how the experience abroad influenced their motivation to apply what they had learned after the

trip, participants identified the role that the trip played in their behavioral change process. Participants often acknowledged the trip’s role in their future decision-making but were hesitant to identify the trip as the only determinant. Monica (South Africa/2017), for instance, noted that she was involved in more clubs after the trip but that it was an action she “probably would’ve done regardless.” Participants often identified the trip as something that “sparked an interest” (Hailey, South Africa/2017), “reaffirmed a lot of things” (Brittany, Peru/2012), or “propelled and honed” (Brianna, South Africa/2007). In this way, participants identified the program as a catalyst for behavioral change compared to the sole facilitator.

An experience abroad serving as a catalyst for future decisions is evident in previous studies. When describing education and career attainment as one benefit of study abroad, Dwyer and Peters (2004) explained how the abroad experience launched participants into future endeavors. Additionally, volunteer experiences in SFD have been shown to enhance participants’ motivation to continue to work in social change (Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

A possible explanation for why the Goals for Girls experience served as a catalyst for future decisions is related to the role of sport. Participants often referred to sport as a universal language, identifying that even if the young women could not communicate in the same spoken language, they were able to play soccer together and find ways of getting to know one another on the field. Natalie (India/2014) noted:

If anything, [Goals for Girls] really highlighted how special I think soccer is, and even though it's a sport, it can bring people together even if you don't speak the same language. You can still play the game together, which I think is really special.

This quote suggests that sport has an almost unexplainable power to connect people. Although the “power of sport” can often be evangelized in the SFD world, sometimes without the data to back it up (Coalter, 2013; Levermore, 2008), sport does seem to foster feelings of belonging and commonality. In their studies, Darnell (2011) and Dao (2013) found, similar to the findings in this study, that interns’ prior sporting experience allowed them to connect with program participants and to see sport as a powerful tool for development. Darnell (2011) noted that interns found sport to be a useful entry point, but also posited that their prior connection to sport brought them to the internship, and that perhaps this resulted in them seeing sport as more useful than others might have. This is

certainly a possibility with the current study, in that all participants already loved the sport of soccer, so perhaps saw it in a less critical light than those coming from outside sport.

REFLECTIONS

Collectively, the themes and sub-themes demonstrated both positive and negative impacts on program participants. Allowing for both immediate and sustained actions to emerge through the cross-sectional design, the research team was able to identify ways in which the short-term programs abroad changed the young women. Several broader discussion points cut across all themes and are worthy of further consideration.

It is important to reiterate that in discussing transformative experience theory, Pugh (2011) notes that the elements of the theory cannot or should not be parceled out separately, yet through some of the current study's findings, they are discussed independently. That said, they were all occurring simultaneously in participants and showed significant overlap, reinforcing the collaborative nature of the elements of a transformative experience. Regardless, it seems evident, especially given the *desire for change* theme, that a transformative experience occurred in many of the young women.

Specifically, the behaviors that participants were motivated to change indicate more than just a perspective shift. For both participants who had attended the trip in recent years (short-term) as well as those who had attended over a decade earlier (long-term), there were clear examples of behavioral change occurring. Approximately 72% of the young women made active choices that impacted their future because of their Goals for Girls experiences abroad - these included things like career choices (e.g., humanitarian work, health and service-based careers), taking courses in college to expand their understanding of their experiences (e.g., African studies, foreign language minor), joining clubs and volunteer organizations post-trip, and more consciously seeking out opportunities to study and live abroad. Although participants were careful to note that these choices could not completely be attributed to their SFD experience, they were clear that Goals for Girls played a large part in these decisions.

These changes may be positive indicators for the future of SFD. Through their participation in a SFD trip abroad, these young women learned more about sport's role in development, grew as individuals, and reflected on ways they can contribute to social development. Cohen and Welty Peachey (2015) studied a former SFD participant

who later went on to become a coach and social entrepreneur for the same organization. They noted that "SSUSA elicited a passion and desire to continue involvement with the program and to give back to society," resulting in her embracing her role as a leader and becoming a cause champion for the same organization from which she benefitted (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015, p. 120). Other scholars note that re-engaged youth (those who were once SFD program participants and re-engage as coaches/administrators) "offer special leadership skills and a unique type of peer mentorship to enable change" (Hoekman et al., 2019, p. 620).

The findings from this study indicate participants developed the skills and knowledge that may lead to the creation of cause champions or re-engaged youth who could play a positive leadership role in SFD at large. Even the more challenging experiences and reflections that resulted from their trips (e.g., First World guilt, recognition of inequities and privilege) may ultimately make them more respectful, informed, and socially-aware individuals, which is critical to leaders entering the SFD space that is so riddled with issues of power dynamics. Schulenkorf (2017) notes that SFD organizations need to "continue to invest in developing the leadership potential of others to help prepare for periods of leadership transition and sustainable development." (p. 247). Darnell (2010a) posits that programs like these support "exploring, theorizing, and situating their work within the broader politics of development and global inequality and to think directly about the approaches to social change that their use of sport facilitates" (p. 71). It would seem that the women who have participated in Goals for Girls, or similar SFD experiences as young adults, may make them ripe for leadership positions in the field in the future. Community sport and sport for development have certainly benefited from community champions or change agents, as they can often provide human capital and capacity building so critical to the field (Keane et al., 2021; Schulenkorf, 2010; Vail, 2007). The idea of "cause champions" or leaders in SFD emerging from within programs themselves seems to be an idea taking hold, and one worth continuing to explore.

There is, however, also the likelihood that for some, the experience reinforced power and race dynamics ever present in SFD. Some comments from participants related to them feeling like "leaders" or "mentors" are likely related to a sense of privilege or seniority based upon racial underpinnings, "Western" privilege, or even feminism related to a woman's role in different cultural contexts. Darnell (2010b) discusses pieces of this as the politics of underdevelopment, noting that underdevelopment can at times be mislabeled as "issues of culture" (p. 405). When

not properly unpacked or historically situated, those experiencing this can further exacerbate the separation of “us” versus “them.” It is possible that participants came to experience their time abroad as a reinforcement of “Whiteness as a standpoint of radicalized privilege” (Darnell, 2007, p. 574), negating some of the positive progress of SFD.

It is important also to acknowledge that the aim of this study, to understand how the experience abroad impacted participants, includes how it has continued to impact their future experiences. In other words, what mechanisms were at play that influenced their decisions, what skills they developed that became germane to other settings, and how they thought about their experience as a whole shaping their life opportunities. Interview data did indicate some notable patterns in this regard, namely that the experience encouraged or stimulated interests and passions participants felt they already had, but were able to more intentionally explore during the experience abroad. Other participants described the influence of time on their appraisals of the experience, noting that they often did not realize how it impacted their life until they were confronted with milestones later in their life (e.g., attending graduate school, traveling as an adult, pursuing careers).

However, in line with this aim to understand how and why the SFD experience impacted them, it should be noted that participants did not demonstrate a depth or breadth of examples that warranted the “how and why” as its own theme. This may be due to the complex nature of being able to communicate about cognition in real-time (i.e., thinking about thinking, identifying the ‘why’). Previous research has proposed that generating insights and reflecting about abstract concepts such as the impact of an event in an interview setting is a challenge for participants and can sometimes take multiple interviewing sessions (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). It may also be that participants do have the capacity to understand these complex topics but instead want to discuss experiences of interest that precipitated the impact (e.g., rich, memorable stories or examples from being abroad) rather than cognitive processes that resulted. This refers to participants’ “interest” and “stake” in questions and their subsequent responses, which often demonstrates a preference for reporting events rather than extracting meaning from them (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

Similarly, Jacobs and Wright (2021) noted a challenge in their research when interviewing adolescents about the meaning and impact of a community-based sport program they had been involved in for several years. Also using Pugh’s (2011) transformative experience framework, when researchers prompted participants to share how the program

impacted their thinking and behaviors, they typically responded with examples of content from the program rather than why or how those examples shaped them. With this in mind, future studies should consider multiple interviews with the same participant, or even journaling over extended periods of time, so that they have multiple instances to reflect on their cognition (Potter & Hebron, 2005). Furthermore, future researchers exploring this phenomenon should consider opportunities to strengthen the interview guide in an effort to prompt responses that more internationally align with how and why the experience impacted them (e.g., “how frequently does the trip cross your mind and in what situations?”). Schulenkorf et al. (2016) note in their SFD integrated literature review that one of the primary research findings of studies in the field relates to implications for the design of future programs. Better understanding the “why” of a study such as this would help bring clarity and direction to practitioners, so is certainly worthy of future exploration.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite promising findings, we note some limitations in the present investigation. This study followed a cross-sectional design, so although we are able to decipher impacts that occurred both in the short-term and long-term, our results do not capture evidence of individual impact across extended periods of time. More robust study designs implementing a longitudinal approach would offer insight on how participants’ perceptions change across different life stages. Despite this limitation, to our knowledge, this is the first study in the SFD literature that offers an extensive sample of 31 individuals’ experiences spanning 13 years of trips abroad.

Other factors that could have impacted the results of the study relate to our assessment of the participants’ immediate and sustained actions as a result of the trip abroad. In our analysis, we recognize that our delineation of these elements may bias the younger participants’ (those who participated on the trips more recently) behaviors to be characterized as smaller changes, given that they have limiting contextual factors (e.g., age, ability to explore career options through higher education, independence). It may be that the subgroup of recent program alumni have not yet had the opportunity or time to engage in the more life-changing behaviors that some of the older alumni have. Fortunately, Pugh’s (2011) transformative experience theory addresses the important point that it is often the small, micro changes that lead to more macro level, holistic changes in individuals’ worldviews. Therefore, as prior research has supported, we predict that participants may experience larger, more transformative changes related to

interests, emotions, and development of academic and career choices over time (Pugh et al., 2014).

Additionally, this study utilized an all-female population, so it is difficult to ascertain whether the results would be consistent across all genders. The authors consciously chose not to focus the study specifically on gender-related issues, so did not ask questions directly related to gender, nor did gender empowerment or the “girling” of development (Chawansky & Schlenker, 2015) emerge organically through the interviews. Saavedra (2009) notes that gender is only invoked within SFD when studies specifically include girls and women. Numerous SFD studies that have included all male populations have been generalized across both genders, and gender has not been centralized within those. So although this population was all female, the hope is that it provides context to SFD experiences abroad for all participants.

Finally, the results of this study offer some opportunities for future research uncovering the impact of SFD trips abroad for young people. The current study provided insight on what types of effects SFD trips abroad offered this group of young women. What could be further expanded is what specific features of the trip impacted them so profoundly. Some possible explanations that emerged from the data highlight the human element of the experience as a catalyst for growth and change. Specifically, the program element of connecting American young women with individuals from the partnering country as pen pals before the trip and getting the opportunity to play soccer and tour their homes, schools, neighborhoods while abroad seemed to play a lasting and important role. In many cases, participants discussed keeping in touch with the young women from the hosting countries several years after the experience. We suspect intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) might offer explanations for this discovery, as it examines how cross group contact can be positive and impactful when connections are based on equality, common goals, cooperation, and support from others. Given the structure of many SFD programs and the emphasis on fostering cross-cultural relationships (Cunningham et al., 2010; Jacobs et al., 2020; LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), future SFD research could consider exploring how cross-cultural relationships and structured social experiences may be a powerful factor in facilitating participant impact.

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