Original Research

An Exploration and Reflection of Mexican Perceptions of the United States and Americans Following a Short-Term Sport for Development Initiative

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Abstract

The present study explored the role of sport in citizen diplomacy efforts using the voices of Mexican participants involved with an international sport for development and peace (SDP) program between the United States and Mexico. Collectively, participants' experiences and cultural perspectives highlighted the promising potential of sport to foster citizen diplomacy, while also emphasizing the importance of constructively critiquing such programs. In semi-structured focus group interviews, Mexican participants reflected on connecting with Americans through a sense of shared humanity, expressed optimism for continued and future partnerships with Americans in sport, and described the United States and Americans in idealistic terms. Reflection of these findings yield additional insight on how SDP researchers and practitioners can design and implement future programs to increasingly foster, and prioritize, equitable contributions across groups while also promoting and celebrating the strengths of each culture.

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The United States and Mexico have had a mercurial diplomatic history over the past 200 years. Following prolonged periods of armed conflict and rebellion in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the two countries forged a prosperous diplomatic and economic partnership that facilitated the growth of both nations (Domínguez & De Castro, 2009). Tensions between the two countries resurfaced in the 1990s, as illegal immigration into the United States through the border with Mexico became a highly publicized and controversial sociopolitical and economic subject (DeLuca et al., 2010; Huber, 2016). Scholars have noted that hostility regarding illegal immigration has, for example, motivated acts of racism toward Mexicans and Latinos in the United States (Sabo et al., 2014; Schubert, 2017; Wood, 2018).

The geo-political tensions between the United States and Mexico have contributed to heated sport rivalries, particularly in men's soccer (Apostolov, 2017). Although these rivalries have the potential to inflame animosity between supporters, sport is also considered a globally shared activity that transcends social barriers and unifies diverse groups (Collison et al., 2016; Kidd, 2008; Murray, 2012). Since 2000, sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives have become a popular approach for promoting positive change in non-sport domains, such as in public health, social inclusion, gender equity, and economic development outcomes, to meet community needs (Giulianotti, 2010; Kidd, 2008; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Webb & Richelieu, 2015). As part of these objectives, SDP endeavors are also well-suited to promote citizen diplomacy, which focuses on the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships between citizens of different countries, communities, and cultures to improve perceptions and understanding that support collaboration and partnership toward mutual goals (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; Cárdenas, 2013). Baker et al. (2018), for example, conducted a two-week SDP program in the United States with participants from Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Panama. Following the program, participants' perceptions of the United States, Americans and American sport culture improved, including greater understanding and

more tolerant attitudes. In another two-week SDP program between the United States and China, LeCrom and Dwyer (2013) found that, although perceptions of the United States were initially negative and largely influenced by media sources, the Chinese participants described the United States as more stable, friendly, and peaceful following the program. Participants in both these SDP initiatives reported the relationships they formed with Americans were positive and increased their willingness to engage in similar intercultural exchanges in the future (Baker et al., 2018; LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013). Thus, SDP initiatives between the United States and Mexico could similarly provide a promising opportunity to improve citizen diplomacy outcomes between American and Mexican citizens.

Deporte y Cambio Social

Deporte y Cambio Social—which translates to 'Sport for Social Change'— was an SDP initiative designed through intercultural collaboration between citizens of the United States and Mexico. The aims of the initiative were two-fold: (a) to develop and implement a program that used soccer as a platform for promoting women's empowerment and leadership by training sport coaches who work with girls and women on developing an inclusive team culture using a values-driven approach and (b) to facilitate citizen diplomacy between Americans and Mexicans through the development, implementation, and participation in the SDP initiative – the focus of the present study.

Deporte y Cambio Social was developed and implemented through a partnership between a team of faculty and graduate students at two large public universities in the United States and Mexico. American team members, three of whom were fluent in both English and Spanish, focused on program development (e.g., content, materials, activities) while Mexican team members, one of whom was fluent in both English and Spanish, focused on logistical elements required for program implementation (e.g., participant and translator recruitment, facilities, equipment). Mexican and American team members regularly communicated via text message and email and met virtually on a bi-weekly basis to provide ongoing progress reports and address challenges. Deporte y Cambio Social was implemented in two phases; the first phase occurred over an eight-day trip to Mexico and the second during a 13-day trip to the United States. All program workshops were delivered by American professionals affiliated with either higher education or sport programming in the United States and who were trained in the program protocol. The program (España-Pérez, 2021) consisted of four 90-minute workshops, each comprised of two parts – (a) an interactive classroom lesson and (b) a field-based soccer experience – which aligned with the major components of the Social Change Model of

Leadership Development (SCM). The SCM is a values-based model that views leadership development and social change as a dynamic process involving seven values within individual (consciousness of self, congruence, commitment), group (collaboration, commitment, controversy with civility), and societal (citizenship) dimensions (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996)(HERI, [HERI], 1996). The SCM emphasizes the vital role of leadership and empowerment in the development of a collective social responsibility to initiate positive social change.

Theoretical Frameworks and Evaluation

Researchers have highlighted the importance of aligning SDP initiatives with a guiding theoretical framework (Darnell et al., 2018; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Welty Peachey et al., 2019). Deporte y Cambio Social was conceptualized based on sport for development theory (SFDT), which posits that embedding intercultural and interdisciplinary learning into the sport experience is a powerful way to promote positive personal and social change (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011) and uses theory O, theory E, and Allport's (1954) contact theory as foundations (Baker et al., 2018; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Dixon et al., 2019).

Theory O refers to a top-down approach that leverages the expertise of external change agents, such as funders, non-governmental organizations, and policymakers, to develop programs for communities. In contrast, theory E refers to a longer-term, bottom-up strategy for sustaining collaboration in which community members are actively involved in the creation and implementation of a program. Researchers have encouraged a balance between bottom-up and top-down processes to promote strong, positive, and sustainable intercultural partnerships that prioritize local customs, norms, and forms of knowledge (Collison et al., 2016; Dixon et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2021; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Contact theory posits that interactions between individuals from different groups must meet five specific criteria to maximize impact: (a) having groups of individuals be of equal status; (b) having common goals related to the program; (c) having both groups work toward these goals collaboratively; (d) having institutional support; and (e) increasing the potential for individuals to develop friendships with members of the other group (Allport, 1954; Dixon et al., 2019). In relation to these theoretical underpinnings, the present SDP initiative sought to involve a mixed group of American and Mexican professionals and students who engaged in both program development and implementation; focus on the shared goals of women's empowerment and leadership development; involve

collaboration between Mexican and American representatives toward those goals; receive institutional support from each collaborating university; and prioritize engagement among members of the program design team, program facilitators, and program participants to build professional relationships and friendships.

Further, the rapid nascent of SDP initiatives has led to calls for researchers to provide empirical support for theoretically driven SDP programs (Coalter, 2010; Giulianotti, 2011; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004; Hansell et al., 2021; Harris, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2013). In their review, Schulenkorf et al. (2016) noted that only 10% of studies evaluated an international program involving stakeholders from multiple countries. While international endeavors entail more complicated logistics, higher costs, and a larger time commitment, researchers have acknowledged the potential that sport can play in international citizen diplomacy and highlighted the importance of additional research in this area (Pamment, 2016). Although much of the SDP literature has relied upon Likert-type quantitative assessment tools to measure program effectiveness (e.g., Fuller et al., 2015), researchers have increasingly advocated for flexible and creative, namely qualitative, approaches to explore the perspectives of participants within the community of interest (Hayhurst et al., 2021; Sherry et al., 2017). These additional calls for empirical evaluation, particularly regarding citizen diplomacy and the nature of intercultural perspectives that develop from interacting via sport-based platforms (Baker et al., 2018; Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), prompted the current study. Our purpose was to qualitatively explore citizen diplomacy, specifically Mexican participants' perceptions of the United States and Americans, following a theory-driven, international SDP initiative in Mexico. These findings are used to explore perspectives and experiences that can underpin the development of citizen diplomacy through SDP programs as well as elucidate opportunities to strengthen citizen diplomacy by noticing, and disrupting, the societal power imbalances that can be otherwise reflected in SDP programs.

Method

Research Design and Positionality

Working within the realities of a short-term international SDP program, we used focus groups to garner diverse perspectives (Rabiee, 2004) while easing participant burden and maximizing efficiency (Jackson, 1998). A social constructivist epistemological framework was used to frame the study. Conceptually, social constructivism involves a blend of cognitive and behavioral ideals that suggest human learning and meaning are constructed through active

engagement with the environment (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Our decision to use a social constructivist framework stemmed from the program's mission and structure, as well as its reliance on interactive workshops involving participants from different cultural backgrounds.

The first and third authors, who collected and analyzed the data, share experiences in meaningful intercultural collaboration and beliefs in the power and importance of leveraging the strengths of girls and women in the sport context. The first author identified as a White American man pursuing his doctoral degree in the United States. During the program design phase, he used his soccer career and experience as a volunteer in Ghana to provide guidance on how to connect soccer-related themes to the intended outcomes of the program. While in Mexico, he served as a translator, facilitated workshops, and co-conducted focus group interviews. Although not a native Spanish speaker, he has studied extensively and is fluent in Spanish. All his interactions with Mexican participants were in Spanish, though the first author openly acknowledged his role as a cultural 'outsider' throughout the program and during the focus groups. The third author identifies as a Mexican woman who was studying towards her doctoral degree in the United States at the time of the program. During the program design phase, she used her experience as a Mexican citizen and knowledge of Mexican culture to align the program materials with Mexican cultural norms. While in Mexico, she similarly served as a translator, facilitated workshops, co-conducted focus group interviews, and served as a cultural 'insider' who facilitated interactions between Mexicans and Americans.

The second author identifies as an American White woman in a professional academic position in the United States who became a doctoral advisor to the first author amid the project. Not involved in the initial design and implementation of Deporte y Cambio Social, she was well-positioned to pose novel and challenging questions and encourage and support reflection. Accordingly, she served as a critical friend and auditor of the data analysis process while involving other authors as key informants of the programmatic and cultural experience for which she was not a part. She further examined and critiqued the data collection and analysis process, post-hoc, using her collective experiences in qualitative research design, program development and evaluation, and intercultural collaboration.

Participants and Procedures

This study was approved by an Institutional Review Board. Participants (n = 18; M_{age} =23 years) were men (n = 8) and

women (*n* = 10) Mexican undergraduate students at a university in Mexico who participated in the first phase of Deporte y Cambio Social in Mexico. Although some participants were also involved in the second phase in the United States at a later timepoint, the data for the present study were collected after the first program phase in Mexico. All participants were training to become sport coaches and had participated in all program activities. Due to logistical challenges (e.g., time, access), both random and convenience sampling were employed. First, we used a lottery sampling method with a random number generator to select approximately one-third (*n* = 23) of the total number of program participants (*n* = 74) and invited them to partake in focus group interviews via email. However, a low response rate (*n* = 13; 56%) forced an iterative recruitment strategy in which additional participants (*n* = 5) were approached during short breaks between workshops. Interested participants were told about the purpose of the focus groups and that participation was voluntary. The interviews occurred in the evening on the Mexican university's campus three days after the program workshops were completed.

Semi-structured questions served as prompts for participants during the focus group interviews which, for this study, focused on Mexican participants' qualitative perceptions of the United States and Americans following the program as part of the program's emphasis on citizen diplomacy. Given the potentially sensitive nature of some program activities as they pertained to the lived experiences of girls and women in Mexico, we conducted three focus group interviews. One focus group was conducted with men only (*n* = 3), one was conducted with women only (*n* = 7), and one with men and women (*n* = 8; 5 men, 3 women). The first author facilitated the men's focus group, the third author facilitated the women's focus group, and the mixed-gender focus group was co-facilitated by both. All focus group interviews were conducted in Spanish, took place in classrooms in the absence of others not involved in the study, and were 56 minutes long on average, with each interview lasting between 43 and 63 minutes. Each facilitator explained the purpose of the interview, defined their roles in the program, and self-disclosed relevant identifying information (e.g., American or Mexican citizenship). Both facilitators fostered transparency and rapport by encouraging the full range of discussion, including sentiments of both support and criticism. Interviews were audio-recorded by the facilitators after they received verbal consent from each focus group member, and each facilitator documented personal reactions and reflections immediately after each interview. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a professional editor fluent in both languages.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) involving six fluid phases of familiarizing, coding, theme development, refinement, naming, and writing (Braun et al., 2016), which was catered to fit a constructivist framework. The first and third authors familiarized themselves with the data and documented initial impressions using analytic memos as they read the transcripts. Next, they inductively generated codes to capture the meaning of each segment of text and inductively organized codes into higher-level themes. As part of a reflexive and iterative process, the first and third authors met weekly to review their ongoing analytic memos and discuss their interpretations of the data in their roles as a 'cultural outsider' and 'cultural insider,' respectively. The second author served as both auditor and critical friend in which she mentored and critiqued the analytic process (e.g., encouraging re-engagement and reflexivity with positionality and the research question) and posed additional interpretive possibilities (e.g., examining latent in addition to semantic meaning), resulting in collaborative conceptualization and continued refinement of themes across data analysis and writing.

Results and Discussion

Three higher-level themes were generated from Mexican participants' responses in the focus group interviews. Each major theme is described with supporting quotes from participants and discussed in the context of the extant literature. Together, these ideas demonstrated opportunity for intercultural connection and collaboration while motivating critical reflection of how best to approach these opportunities in ways that foster equitable exchange and celebrate the strengths of diverse cultures.

Mexicans and Americans Can Connect Through Shared Humanity

Participants reflected on developing meaningful connection with Americans over the course of the program by challenging their pre-existing "fixed" beliefs and learning that Mexicans and Americans experience common struggles. One participant shared:

The truth is that I had a very fixed idea of the American type, and [the Americans] who came did not have those characteristics. It seems a more diverse environment than I thought with many ways of thinking; not just one like I thought.

Another participant explained:

I thought that [Americans] had everything, that nothing happened to them. I had a very closed mind myself, but I realized that they are almost the same. Regarding their way of living there is a lot of difference, in their government too, but I realized I could feel the same fear that they have. I realized that we are the same; it is so amazing!

Aligned with contact theory (Allport, 1954), these sentiments suggest that meaningful interactions between different groups can help them question stereotypes, foster understanding, and develop relationships. Beyond contact theory, other scholars suggest that a sense of shared humanity, described as the recognition that suffering is universal and a primary feature of compassion (Neff, 2011), is conducive to improving intergroup relations, conflict resolution, and a shared identity between different groups (Morton & Postmes, 2011). Participants' sentiments highlighted the unifying potential of shared humanity:

Regardless of which country you live in, everyone suffers. It is not given that in one country it happens and in another it does not. We don't realize what [Americans] go through every day, to have everything they have. They have to work all day and they don't see the family all day. Here, in Mexico, we may be a country that works a lot, but we have more time for the family.

Another participant chimed:

It's a matter of perception, but I feel that [Americans] suffer the same in the sense of not seeing the family due to work and school. I do not have much knowledge of what they are like in schools, but they are in school all day, and in Mexico, it is the other way around. In my case it was the other way round; my mom was working all the time, and I did not see her because of her work. It is the other way around in the United States.

Participants' descriptions of their experiences in the program indicate that despite cultural differences, Mexicans felt connected to Americans through the shared importance of balancing responsibilities related to family, work, and school. Although limited in scope, previous research suggests many cultures share similar values such as work and family, yet groups may prioritize life domains differently (Aycan, 2008; Watson, 2002). While acknowledging these differences, participants leveraged their common values and shared struggles of human existence. These sentiments align with reflections from participants in other international SDP initiatives in Latin America, the Caribbean (Baker et al., 2018), and China (LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013) who connected with the beliefs,

values, and behaviors of Americans they met through the program. These findings are particularly promising given that each exchange involved participants from three distinct regions of the world, which may support international SDP endeavors toward citizen diplomacy.

Mexicans and Americans Can Collaborate Towards a Shared Purpose

When reflecting on their experiences in the program, participants reported contentment with their interactions with Americans, commenting on notions of feeling equal, which was coupled with a belief in the promising potential of future intercultural partnerships. One participant shared:

People came from the United States and they treated us equally. There is a lot of importance about having equity and working together. It doesn't matter if you are Mexican or American because you work equally to reach the goal.

Participants further commented on the sense of team cultivated through the program:

As my partner [in the workshops] says, we saw how [the Americans] treated us, how they were more linked up to the team. We integrated cultures, theirs with ours, and because we exchanged ideas, we were all completely sure what we were doing and what we were going to do.

Another participant echoed:

I once lived in America and there, America belongs to its people. In America, if you help someone else the other person helps you because it is collaborative work. I saw this in this program because [the Americans] helped me as much as I helped them. That type of cooperation with clear objectives was of great value for all of us.

Despite the historically turbulent diplomatic relationship between the United States and Mexico, the two countries have enjoyed prolonged periods of diplomatic and economic symbiosis (Domínguez & De Castro, 2009). Their geographic proximity lends itself to establishing intercultural collaborations, and despite political tensions, person-to-person programs aligned with contact theory could facilitate the formation of reciprocal partnerships that benefit both countries. Several participants further shared they are open to partnering with American coaches and athletes in the future despite the infamous heated sport rivalry between the two countries:

Yes, there is the rivalry, but I believe that we should collaborate with Americans more, because it means more opportunities for both Mexicans and Americans…if [Mexicans and Americans] connect they could do such impressive things because sometimes it is only a matter of having an opportunity.

Another participant chimed, "Americans have their differences but [Americans and Mexicans] would complement each other very well with [Americans'] energy and the talent that Mexico has could solve any problem…Americans and Mexicans make a good match." These sentiments suggest the program experience demonstrated how Mexicans and Americans could leverage their unique strengths to solve common sport concerns in a cohesive, complimentary way. Longer-term SDP experiences may be further powerful in building increasingly sustainable intercultural partnerships that foster citizen diplomacy outcomes (Hayhurst et al., 2014; Schulenkorf, 2012).

Despite Shared Humanity and Purpose, American Resources and People Were Deemed Ideal

When reflecting on the program, participants made comparisons between life in Mexico and assumed truths about life in the United States. Despite connecting over a shared humanity and believing in the potential of future collaborations, participants used idealistic language to describe the United States and Americans as the gold standard from which everything and everyone else is compared. Presently, the United States is considered the world's most powerful nation according to an annual assessment evaluating economic, political, diplomatic, and militaristic characteristics (U.S. News, 2020). Although Mexico has the second largest economy in North America, it is ranked 37th in the global power rankings with an annual GDP that is nearly 20 times smaller than the United States. It was evident that participants perceived the United States as a country with more resources and opportunities. One participant stated, "I feel that most of the United States is the best, because they really have a lot more things than Mexico. In the sense of sports, they are much ahead of us." Several participants echoed this notion, including one who shared, "[Americans] improve any human being because in the United States there are more possibilities for them to excel more widely." Another participant specifically discussed the difference in sport training resources and opportunities between the United States and Mexico when discussing the prospect of working as a Mexican coach with American athletes:

The truth is I think it is very difficult. I think it is difficult for

a Mexican coach to work there, at least one who was born [in Mexico]. It's complicated, but I see it more feasible for a Mexican athlete to be trained by Americans…because in America they have better academic training and better trained staff, which the athlete prefers. The languagebarrier can be set aside if you learn, but I also do not know how comfortable it is to insert yourself into a new culture. It will depend on the person.

Participants also described Americans as possessing more ambitious and desirable intrapersonal characteristics compared to Mexicans:

The [American] attitude is superior, their attitude is always going to be superior. I don't know what it's due to, but I've always seen them with a motivation. I've always noticed that people from the United States always seem very motivated.

Another participant stated:

I think that as Mexicans we should copy their mindset. In Mexico if you are number five on the list, you feel comfortable. You don't fight to be the first…the willingness to both say it and do it is very different for Americans and Mexicans.

These aspirational descriptions reflect a common view of the United States as the exemplar in relation to work ethic, motivation, and content expertise (Hayhurst et al., 2021), which has been explored and contemplated in SDP work (e.g., Chawansky, 2015; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Collison et al. (2016), for example, critically examined the geo and ethnopolitical tensions associated with conducting SDP research as members of the Global North in Global South contexts. Specifically, while the perceived expertise and contributions of Western governments and organizations can be positive, Collison et al. (2016) explained "being understood as separate from or privileged in relation to local people" (p. 893) can reinforce mistrust and undermine the relationships upon which SDP work is built. Dao and Chin (2020) showed how American values and beliefs are easily threaded throughout the design and implementation of SDP work and, in turn, can contribute to deference and idealism felt by members of the local culture. Within the present study, participants' responses underscored the intricate ways in which aspirational views and idealization of the 'knowledgeable other' can be formed despite intentions for a collaborative, balanced partnership between stakeholders.

General Discussion

The popularity of SDP programs has increased substantially since the United Nations endorsed their use in 2005 to address global inequities and, upon initial design and implementation, that was the intention. Mexican participants' favorable perceptions of Americans were expressed with enthusiasm and optimism which, on the surface, would suggest all parts of the program were implemented successfully. However, recent literature has indicated that, notwithstanding the promising potential of SDP initiatives toward citizen diplomacy, the possibility for critical shortcomings and pitfalls exists within these programs (e.g., Darnell et al., 2018; Dao, 2020; Dao & Chin, 2020; Harris, 2018; Oatley & Harris, 2020; Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Loat, 2019; Welty Peachey et al., 2019).

Indeed, sport-based platforms may have a unique role in promoting citizen diplomacy, as its universal popularity provides a common ground through which different groups can connect over a shared passion and discover common values and experiences that can be applied both within and outside the sport domain. Mexican participants' desire for future collaborative endeavors with Americans highlights the long-term potential of SDP initiatives despite the relatively short duration of typical programs conducted internationally. This finding is particularly hopeful, as international perceptions of the United States and Mexico, both domestically and abroad, could engender future intercultural partnerships and strengthen diplomatic ties. Toward realizing the potential for longer-term intercultural engagement, focusing on friendship potential and relationship development through regular, virtual exchange is a realistic way to facilitate sustained collaboration and opportunity beyond the constraints of time- and resource-limited grant funded SDP programs.

Despite findings illustrating the potential for SDP programs to develop meaningful intercultural relationships that support citizen diplomacy, Mexican participants also offered sentiments suggesting they did not believe they could be an equal, contributing member of that partnership – a finding that provided an opportunity to reflect on how programs like Deporte y Cambio Social may be approached differently. Researchers have asserted that SDP programs are often developed, structured, and implemented in ways that reinforce existing power imbalances, especially when those programs involve stakeholders from the Global North (e.g., the United States, Europe, Oceania), who are typically the providers of SDP experiences, and stakeholders from the Global South (e.g., Africa, Latin America), who are typically the recipients (Giulianotti et al., 2019). In the present program, efforts made to mitigate these possibilities

included holding regular planning meetings with members of both countries; conducting the program and collecting the data using the local language; and using a train-the-trainer approach in which Mexican program participants designed and facilitated their own workshops in local Mexican high schools. Anecdotally, several Mexican and American project team members, students, and coaches still communicate in both personal (e.g., on social media) and professional (e.g., research collaborations) capacities, which is indeed reflective of some sustained relationship development. Within the program, members of the American contingent were aware of their privileged position in relation to their Mexican counterparts, yet, despite efforts to align all phases of the project with contact theory, as well as achieve balance between theories E and O to promote citizen diplomacy, some criteria were only partially fulfilled. Specifically, Americans played a larger role in the program development phase while most program participants were Mexican (93%) – a dynamic that likely perpetuated views of Americans as 'experts' and Mexicans as 'recipients' of that expertise and, in turn, leveraged idealistic views of American resources and people over and above those of other cultures. With considerable reflection, we acknowledge that the sociocultural and sociohistorical context within which Deporte y Cambio Social occurred requires deeper and increasingly intentional co-construction across cultures and that identifying the full range of factors that contribute to any real or perceived imbalances is vital to the future of SDP programming.

Numerous authors have expressed the SDP sector is at a pivotal point and urged the field to improve and adjust amid a constantly evolving global, political, and economic landscape (Ahmad, 2021; Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2021). The results of the present study further support these recommendations; although the semantic meaning of participants' voices supported the promising potential of international SDP programs, the latent significance highlights a critical need to explore how best to construct programs that share power. To this end, researchers have highlighted the importance of creative, collaborative, and holistic qualitative approaches, such as participatory mapping (e.g., Sobotová et al., 2016), participatory evaluation (e.g., Dao, 2020; Oatley & Harris, 2020), realist evaluation (e.g., Harris, 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019), and autoethnography (e.g., Chawansky, 2015) that emphasize the input of all relevant stakeholders (e.g., funders, program facilitators, participants, locals, community leaders, researchers, policymakers) using a critical lens (Darnell et al., 2018; Hayhurst et al., 2021; Svensson & Loat, 2019). Such approaches to evaluation are more complicated and time consuming than traditional, positivist methodologies, which have been criticized for prioritizing voices, experiences, and forms of knowledge

emanating only from the Global North (Ahmad, 2021). However, these complex qualitative approaches also reflect the convoluted, messy reality of SDP programs in action (Darnell et al., 2016; Hayhurst et al., 2021; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016).

Among the strengths of the current study, we sought to give voice to Mexican program participants using a qualitative approach in a local setting. We purposefully included both an American and Mexican citizen to facilitate the focus groups who spent time building rapport and invited dissenting viewpoints to promote honest responses. Still, additional strategies to balance power in evaluation, as well as program design and implementation of which evaluation is inherently a part, is vital to explore in future research (Collison et al., 2016). Further, a research study that also captured the sentiments of American program participants, as well as the fuller range of stakeholders involved in the project, would have helped us to holistically understand the bi-directional nature of citizen diplomacy. However, despite our plan to also conduct focus groups with American program facilitators and participants, logistical issues (e.g., illness, visa complications) prohibited a portion of the American project team from traveling to Mexico, which greatly limited the sample from which American perspectives could be gathered as well as staffing for the research portion of the project. In the future, the development and readiness to engage in contingency plans, such as virtual communication (Hayhurst et al., 2021), could help mitigate some obstacles, such as travel restrictions. In conducting an international SDP initiative, it can also be difficult to balance data collection efforts with program development and implementation duties. Thus, developing a research evaluation team comprised of representatives from all involved countries whose sole responsibilities are to plan and conduct empirical evaluations would help protect time and effort toward data collection while promoting cultural representation. Because research evaluation is not typically a priority for funders of SDP initiatives, allocating alternative resources to these activities is vital to meet the various calls for more formal and holistic evaluation of SDP programs, including those that are qualitative.

Conclusion

The current study evaluated Mexican participants' cultural perceptions of the United States and Americans following a short-term SDP program. Our team conducted semi-structured focus group interviews after the first program phase in Mexico, which were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis from a social constructivist lens. As part of three semi-structured focus group interviews, Mexican participants indicated that their interactions with Americans helped them connect over a sense of shared humanity.

Through these connections, Mexican participants suggested that future intercultural collaborations in sport would be advantageous and that identified cultural differences could function in a complimentary way. However, Mexican participants also described the United States as an idealistic country compared to Mexico and Americans as having more ideal and ambitious intrapersonal qualities related to work ethic and motivation compared to Mexicans. The enthusiasm and optimism shared by Mexican participants around the possibility for collaboration comes with a significant responsibility for Americans to be positive stewards of power through, for example, relationship development and partnerships that leverage the strengths of diverse cultures. The reflection and recommendations of the present study serve to further inform the future of SDP programming by highlighting the promise, while informing the improvement, of SDP programs irrespective of the well-meaning intentions of program stakeholders.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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