Original Research

# Short-Term International Sport for Development and Peace Programs: A Retrospective Analysis and Critique Informed by Stakeholders' Perspectives in a Two-Year Follow-Up

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## ABSTRACT

SDP scholars have identified critical shortcomings related to neoliberalist tendencies from the Global North to the Global South. Deporte y Cambio Social was a short-term SDP program established through partnership between American and Mexican constituent groups aiming to empower girls and women through soccer. Through semi-structured, two-year retrospective interviews, the purpose of the present study was to explore cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations from the voices of Mexican and American stakeholders to offer reflective critique of, and generate participant-informed strategies for improving, the design and implementation SDP programs broadly. Using thematic analysis from a critical constructivist orientation, the meanings generated from the data showed that Mexican and American participants similarly defined power and acknowledged power imbalances informed by a limiting project framework and a sociocultural-informed deference to Americans as experts. Strong, positive intercultural experiences between Mexican and American constituent groups were reported amid often unseen social biases that can be experienced abroad and perpetuated in SDP programs. Critical reflexivity, prolonged cultural preparation, longer-term engagement, and careful construction of SDP leadership teams and program participants were among the strategies informed by the data that were further interpreted to account for the complex realities of SDP programs.

**Short-Term International Sport for Development and Peace Programs: A Retrospective Analysis and Critique Informed by Stakeholders' Perspectives in a Two-Year Follow-Up**

Scholars across disciplines have highlighted critical directions for sport for development and peace (SDP) programs (Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Welty Peachey et al., 2019). These include moving beyond outcome-based approaches that measure short-term, transactional 'impact' (e.g., pre- and post-tests) toward deeper reflection of how traditional SDP approaches, intended to empower participants, may counterintuitively reinforce dominant ideologies throughout program development, implementation, evaluation, and funding processes (Hayhurst et al., 2021a). In international settings, SDP programs are often implemented in low- and middle-income communities in the Global South but are typically funded, designed, and evaluated by Global North stakeholders (Darnell et al., 2018). Critics assert that such international SDP programming is often grounded in neoliberalist beliefs (i.e., that disadvantaged nations would benefit from adopting Western systems, values, and institutions) and, in turn, reinforces a power hierarchy that subordinates and disempowers Global South cultures (Brown, 2019; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012).

In contrast to neoliberalist notions, the careful and intentional involvement of local, non-dominant voices would offer the best opportunity for positive experience, development of meaningful intercultural relationships, and productive change as defined by local communities (Oatley & Harris, 2020; Svensson & Loat, 2019). Transforming

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approaches to international SDP programming in the future requires careful analysis of power, including how and why dominant power structures have been upheld and how they might be reconstructed in SDP programming involving stakeholders from the Global North and the Global South (Darnell, 2010). Toward this purpose, the present study sought to retrospectively critique a short-term international SDP program with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations.

## Review of Literature: Understandings of Power and Power Relations

Power has been discussed extensively across multiple academic domains. Although an exhaustive review of the literature on power and power relations is beyond the scope of the present paper, sample conceptualizations of power generally and the role of power in SDP work specifically are important to discuss. Within the SDP literature, power has been understood and explored from postcolonial feminist (e.g., Hayhurst, 2014), critical pedagogical (e.g., Spaaij et al., 2016), and critical feminist perspectives (e.g., Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). Power has also been considered within a hegemonic framework, which views power as created by repeated interactions between individuals identified as possessing authority and individuals who ultimately consent to that authority within and across cultures (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; Darnell et al., 2018; Hayhurst et al., 2021b). Other SDP scholars (e.g., Harris & Adams, 2016) have explored Foucauldian (1979) conceptualizations that acknowledge power as a relational force that is inherently connected to knowledge, influence, and meaning, which are monitored and controlled by people and/or institutions both within and across cultures (Harris & Adams, 2016). Of particular relevance to international SDP programming, anthropological scholars have critiqued the use of rigid definitions of power to describe international collaborations and encouraged conceptualizations that increasingly consider complexity, fluidity, culture, and context (Adler & Aycan, 2018).

Given the dynamic, mercurial nature of power and the multitude of ways it can operate within and across contexts, Goodwill et al. (2021) acknowledged that social power structures that operate between governments, nations, and other social institutions often manifest in person-to-person interactions. Abizadeh (2023) differentiated structural power (i.e., a passive form of social power connected to social standing that reinforces relationships in which one group has 'power over' another group; e.g., citizenship) and agential power (i.e., power facilitated through interpersonal interactions that are characterized by groups sharing

'power with' one another). Scholars suggest that when structural forms of power operate unchecked, status quo power hierarchies are reinforced; however, intentionally prioritizing agential power in person-to-person interactions can disrupt power imbalances at an individual level, which informs shifts in societal power hierarchies as well (Abizadeh, 2023; Hess et al., 2022). Yet, without proactive reflexivity to facilitate a concrete understanding of the roles, rules, and norms that consider power within and across all stakeholders and their relationships to each other, social power hierarchies are likely to be reproduced within the intercultural relationships developed between members of Global North and the Global South in SDP programming (McSweeney et al., 2022). Such hegemonic relationships, in which power and dominance are reinforced in both subtle and overt ways, can occur irrespective of intention (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; McSweeney et al., 2019).

Researchers have attributed the perpetuation of hegemonic relationships in SDP programs, in part, to programmatic structure, flow of resources, and organization (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; McSweeney et al., 2019). Nicholls et al. (2010), for example, highlighted the problematic nature of seeking positivist evidence of SDP program impact to demonstrate success and instead advocated for co-creating knowledge with local voices at the grassroots level. Further, although SDP partners can share power through respect and open communication, the very funding structure (i.e., characterized by a relationship between a partner who has received, and will control, funding to conduct SDP programming and a partner without the same privileges) remains polarizing (McSweeney et al., 2022; Nicholls et al., 2010). Accordingly, SDP partnerships between the Global North and the Global South are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance defined, in part, by capital resources and further complicated by the short-term nature of a corresponding program without guarantee of appropriate preparation or longer-term sustainability. Researchers and practitioners must critically evaluate their current and former SDP endeavors, through reflective practice and data, toward improved intercultural connection (Darnell, 2010). Such data-driven explorations are needed in the nuanced context of short-term international SDP programs developed in response to short-term grant funding.

## Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to retrospectively critique a short-term international SDP program between the United States and Mexico, Deporte y Cambio Social, with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and

intercultural power relations from the voices of varied Mexican and American stakeholders involved in the program's development and implementation. In addition to outcomes-based assessment of the program at the behest of the program's funder (España-Pérez et al., 2021), Hansell et al. (in press) explored a subsample of Mexican participants' impressions of the U.S. and Americans after the program's phase in Mexico. Participants reported feeling connected to Americans in realizing they experience some of the same struggles and shared optimism in forming future intercultural partnerships. However, participants also described deference to American expertise in sport-related professions and idealized sport training and resources in the U.S., Hansell et al. (in press) purported that, in an experience meant to be a shared intercultural exchange, the mere structure contributed to an imbalanced, hegemonic power dynamic that was not fully contemplated by American and Mexican stakeholders. In consideration of a broad range of conceptualizations of power within and beyond the SDP literature, the present study sought to explore these power imbalances more deeply, and with data, to meaningfully inform participant-driven strategies that support sustained engagement and shared ownership in increasingly power-balanced SDP partnerships.

## METHOD

### The Setting: Deporte y Cambio Social

Deporte y Cambio Social was a one-time, bi-directional international SDP initiative developed upon receipt of a sub-award received from a larger grant funded by the U.S. Department of State. The grant stipulated the awarded institution would use sport to engage at-risk youth in relation to empowering girls and women, people affected by violence, and/or indigenous populations. Thus, the primary program goals were to promote empowerment and leadership development for girls and women through soccer and to facilitate citizen diplomacy objectives between American and Mexican citizens. Academic professionals, graduate students, and community coaches affiliated with two public universities in the U.S. and Mexico developed and implemented the program from scratch using a train-the-trainer model designed for current and future sport coaches of girls and women based on the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM) – a values-based model that views leadership development and social change as a dynamic process within individual, group, and community domains (HERI, 1996). None of the stakeholders involved had significant experience with SDP program design or implementation prior to this experience. Details on specific program activities, objectives, and experiences are outlined by Hansell et al. (in press).

The American organizers included faculty members, graduate students, and community coaches who were native U.S. citizens or originally from regions of the Global South, including Mexico. This group selected the guiding theoretical framework, managed the budget, coordinated travel, designed the program in consultation with members of the partnering institution in Mexico, recruited American program participants, and facilitated workshops. The Mexican organizers included faculty members at a Mexican university who procured facilities and supplies, recruited Mexican program participants, and facilitated workshops in a supporting role for the programming in Mexico (e.g., providing directions, explaining activities). Program participants were current and future sport coaches of girls and women who were predominantly Mexican in addition to a small sample of Americans in similar coaching or student roles. The program involved two exchange training phases with 56 days in between: the first in Mexico for seven days and the second in the U.S. for 13 days.

### Research Design & Positionality

A critical constructivist epistemological framework, which acknowledges the influential role of culture, context, and power, both hidden and overt, across human social interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Levers, 2013; McCabe & Holmes, 2009), was used to frame this qualitative study. Scholars within and beyond SDP have highlighted the importance of adopting a critical lens to challenge societal status quos by questioning, untangling, and reevaluating entrenched ideologies, beliefs, values, and assumptions (Coalter, 2010; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012; Denzin & Giardina, 2016). Thus, a critical lens not only welcomes diversity and disagreement, but views them as essential components of the research process to garner new theoretical insights and explanations. Qualitative researchers have highlighted the philosophical similarities between constructivism and critical theory (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998). Both are rooted in ontological relativism, which posits reality is constructed through individuals' unique interpretations of their environment, context, and identity (De Ronde & Mouján, 2019).

### Participants

Participants ($n = 6$; $M_{age} = 41.5$ years; $SD = 10.4$ years) were a purposive sample of self-identified Mexican and American citizens ($n = 3$ women; $n = 3$ men) involved in both program phases (e.g., in Mexico and the U.S.) as program organizers, program participants, and program implementers. Just as identities are intersectional, so too is power (Goodwill et al., 2021). Accordingly, maximum variation sampling was used to select

participants using variables that influence or are influenced by power to garner multiple stakeholders' perspectives. The sample included two Mexican university students who were current or future coaches who participated in the program, three members of the organizing group who developed and implemented the program (two Mexican faculty members, one American faculty member), and one American practitioner who assisted in program implementation.

**Procedures**

Following IRB approval, eligible participants were contacted via digital communication and invited to participate with information on the study purpose, tasks involved in participating, and an opportunity to ask questions via video call. All eligible individuals responded to the initial inquiry; participants who opted out cited personal events. Six participants agreed to participate through electronic return of a signed consent form and background questionnaire and scheduled their virtual interview, which occurred approximately two years after the program ended. Each interview, ranging from 28 to 60 minutes ($M = 45$ minutes), was conducted collaboratively by two interviewers via Zoom.

Recent SDP scholarship has emphasized the importance of reflexivity among SDP researchers, their identities, knowledge, privileges, and ways they contribute to powerful systems (Hill & Dao, 2020); thus, insider/outsider roles are not fixed and are subject to change over time as researchers navigate different roles, experiences, and environments (McSweeney, 2019). The first interviewer was an American citizen and doctoral student at an American university who identifies as a White man. He has been passionate about the potential role of sport in promoting positive social change through his soccer career and continued non-profit work in Ghana. He viewed and acknowledged his role as predominantly a cultural outsider (i.e., an individual conducting research with a social group they are perceived *not* to personally belong based on fewer shared characteristics) (Liu & Barnett, 2022), given his limited immersion in Mexican cultures, customs, and traditions. At times, however, he operated as a cultural insider (i.e., an individual conducting research with a social group they are perceived to personally belong based on more shared characteristics) (Liu & Barnett, 2022), due to his ability to speak Spanish fluently. The second interviewer was a Mexican citizen who completed her doctoral degree at an American university and identifies as a Latina woman. Born and raised in Mexico for 18 years before attending university in the U.S. as a student-athlete, she had personal experience with gender inequity in Mexico both within and

outside sport. She acknowledged her role as primarily a cultural insider given her lived experience as a Mexican woman but also recognized the outsider influence of her position as part of the American contingent in the current SDP experience. Each interviewer was involved in the program development and implementation across both phases of Deporte y Cambio Social as primary workshop facilitators and translators.

Prior to the start of the study, the interviewers were in regular contact with many Mexican and American representatives who were involved in Deporte y Cambio Social since the program ended, which included the participants in this study. Forming sustained relationships beyond SDP participation, known as friendship potential, is a common outcome of SDP programs (Dixon et al., 2019). Further, scholars have noted that pre-existing relationships between researchers and participants can alleviate perceived power imbalances, enhance vulnerability and honesty, and foster more meaningful discussions during qualitative interviews (e.g., Råheim et al., 2016). For example, Day (2012) asserted that role conflicts for qualitative researchers are not inherently problematic, as long as the researchers engage in a robust reflexive process to understand how and when they alternate between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles. Within the present study, both interviewers kept ongoing analytic memos and engaged in regular processing discussions, preparations, and debriefs, including continual reflection on their intersectional identities and program roles.

The interviewers conducted semi-structured individual interviews with questions developed to prompt critical reflection related to participants' experiences in the program (e.g., describe your experience in Deporte y Cambio Social); understandings of power (e.g., what does power mean to you?); perceptions of power within the program (e.g., tell us when you perceived a power balance/imbalance); and hypothetical prompts related to intergroup power dynamics (e.g., would you ever consider coming/returning to the U.S./Mexico to deliver a similar program?). The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a professional editor fluent in Spanish and English. Participants were then contacted to complete a virtual, individual member reflection (Smith & McGannon, 2018) in which the interviewers provided participants with a case summary of initial interview interpretations and encouraged them to contemplate, question, clarify, and/or expand. All participants engaged in member reflections, ranging from 10 to 17 minutes ($M = 13$ minutes), which were also transcribed and analyzed as data (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Data Analysis

The analysis team included the interviewers and two critical friends, both of whom are American citizens who identify as White women. In qualitative research, the role of a critical friend is to provide space to explore and challenge philosophical assumptions and positionality, the research process, and data interpretations through alternative lenses that lead to a diverse and comprehensive analysis (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Wolcott, 1994). In the present study, neither critical friend was involved in the design or delivery of Deporte y Cambio Social and were well-positioned to offer perspectives external to direct programmatic experiences. Prior to data collection, team members initiated a thorough reflexive process where they discussed their role in the program, identity, philosophical assumptions, and positionality (Attia & Edge, 2017) and additionally responded to written prompts related to their understandings of power and views on SDP. During data analysis, team members used journaling and critical discussions to elucidate unconscious biases that could influence their interactions with the data (Day, 2012). For example, informed by the critical friends prior to reading transcripts, the team established norms, roles, and expectations for coding that were subsequently revisited at the start of each meeting, which included time for processing (e.g., what emerged for you as you read the data?); invitations to dissent (e.g., how does your identity inform your perspective?); and acknowledging insights from each team member regardless of role (e.g., what perspectives have not been shared?). Given the variability in the conceptualizations of power within and beyond SDP, a broad range of interpretations were considered in the context of existing literature while allowing space to explore novel dimensions of power relevant to the data.

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020). Importantly, Braun and Clarke (2020) asserted their guidance is not meant to be followed rigidly, as the process should be fluid, recursive, and flexible. Each analysis team member reviewed the data individually and pre-coded, one transcript at a time, using open coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2006) and an analytic memo to document impressions before discussing as a group. Together, the team deductively organized codes according to the study purposes and then inductively according to meanings generated that considered participants' experiences as they told them and analysis of power using a critical constructivist lens. Over several months, the organization of codes, drafted in text form and via conceptual mapping, were iteratively revised, refined, and re-defined as new transcripts were read via constant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Revision and refinement continued throughout the writing of the study in which all authors were consulted for clarity, interpretation, and context based on their unique roles in the research process.

## RESULTS

To understand intercultural power structure and relations involved in a short-term SDP program, the results section begins with an overview of participants' understandings of power that informed their experience. Participants' views on how power manifested within the structure of a short-term SDP program are then explored, followed by participants' views on power within the intercultural, person-to-person relationships that developed. Participants' names were replaced with randomly generated pseudonyms to protect confidentiality (i.e., Mexican participants were Fran, Guillermo, Mariana, and Miguel; American participants were Jennifer and Jeremy). See Table 1 for a results summary with a list of themes and descriptive subthemes.

**Table 1**
*Research Theme List*

| Higher order themes | Sub themes |
| --- | --- |
| Power relations with the short-term SDP experience | *Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a country from the Global North, like the U.S., and a developing country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance.* |
| | *Mexican participants, however, did not perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic, demonstrating consent through hegemony.* |
| | *The structure of the funding opportunity and its associated demands were believed to significantly complicate the ability to engage with the Mexican stakeholders more meaningfully around the program structure and itinerary.* |
| Manifestations of power within person-to-person intercultural interactions | *Mexican participants reported they were treated as equals by the American constituent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions.* |
| | *Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with expectation and acceptance, experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S.* |
| | *Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution. Women participants across cultures recommended considerable attention to understandings of sex and gender and the intentional construction of representative leadership teams.* |
| Understandings of power and power relations with the short-term SDP experience | *Mexican and American participants described power as a paradoxical concept.* |
| | *Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a Global North country, like the U.S., and a developing country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing power imbalance.* |
| | *Mexican participants, however, did not perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic.* |
| | *Mexican participants reported they were treated as equals by the American contingent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions.* |
| | *Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with almost expectation and acceptance, other experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S.* |
| | *Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution.* |

## Participants' General Understandings of Power

Overall, both Mexican and American participants described enjoying and valuing their experience in the program and expressing gratitude for their involvement. These findings align with responses shared by Hansell et al. (in press) where Mexican participants spoke highly of the relationships they developed with the American participants by identifying points of shared experience and optimism for future intercultural connection. Such positive reflections of participants' overall experience were consistent with those reported from similar SDP programs conducted between the U.S. and, for example, China (LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), Jordan and Tajikistan (Blom et al., 2019), and Latin American countries and the Caribbean (Baker et al., 2018). When asked about power specifically, however, both Mexican and American participants described it as a paradoxical concept. Guillermo reported:

*If you want to know a person, you give them power. It's going to give us the best of themselves or it's going to give us the worst of themselves. Power…is a great responsibility that can lead us to a positive or negative side with a very thin line.*

Mexican and American participants further described power as involving the "capacity to influence others," a "basic need" that "defines our safety overall," and a "tool" that can "break barriers and help other[s] grow alongside you," allow one to "do things for others…or society," and "reach your goals." Participants' insights align with Foucault's (1979) assertion that power is primarily a relational force that is not inherently good or bad, and when framed and used appropriately, it can be used as a positive influence at both individual and societal levels.

Two participants, both of whom were Mexican women, described power as "a strong word that we should all have in our minds as a value" that can lead to "more educational and economic opportunities." Thus, participants' awareness that power is closely associated with knowledge, influence, and control further aligns with Foucault's (1979) conceptualization of power. Although acknowledged by everyone, only Mexican men participants elaborated on the negative potential of power in a Mexican context "…in Mexico, power means to do what you want whether it is right or wrong…Many powerful people do things only for them and their family and not their community. I think it's wrong" and "power in the Mexican context can be

elaboration of corruptive power in the U.S. could suggest limited awareness of, or perceived inappropriateness to acknowledge, similar experiences that can and do occur in dominant nations like the U.S., which may further reflect deference to an idealized American culture as identified by Hansell et al. (in press).

## Power Within the Structure of the Short-Term SDP Program

Data indicated that power dynamics can be represented in short-term SDP programs through an inherent power structure based on Global North status, stakeholders from the Global South consenting to the normative power structure, and cultural implications of the itinerary and program structure. Foundationally, both Mexican and American participants acknowledged that SDP programs involving a partnership between a Global North country, like the U.S., and a Global South country, like Mexico, are inherently built upon a pre-existing relational power imbalance representative of hegemony. Jeremy shared: "I think the imbalance of power started from day 1...you're an American university, so you are automatically considered good." Jeremy's statement aligns with previous research suggesting academics and development groups from the Global North have been the primary agents who have shaped the SDP landscape (Nicholls et al., 2010), and therefore hold significant relational and cultural power over, rather than with, partners from the Global South. Miguel explained:

*Maybe I'm a little biased because personally I'm a big fan of American culture. I can say that I grew up with their philosophy that I learned through their movies, through their sports, their leagues, but I think that the university issue is amazing; how they live, how they get to campus, how doors are opened for people to be able to be in these institutions of such high prestige.*

In the present study, Jeremy shared: "I think we sort of like were dictating the program…the program was in our, the ball was on our side." Mariana observed: "I noticed Americans had a lot of power."

Mexican participants, however, did not always perceive the control that Americans had over the program and its implementation as problematic, which reflects how the Mexican contingent was complicit within the hegemonic partnership with American stakeholders. Mariana noted: "I did not notice any [power imbalance]. It was more like [Americans] reached an agreement, you talked about it and told us, and we had to do it no matter what. It was like an

option." Fran similarly acknowledged the American contingent as the leaders who arrived to "present" while Mexicans "participate." Fran observed power imbalances between Americans who could and could not speak Spanish: "When [Americans] came [to Mexico], you were the ones who were organizing everything. So, it could be a number one imbalance, the language, because [American stakeholder] spoke Spanish and English and had more decision-making power on that side." Jennifer reflected upon her experience as an English-speaking American in Mexico, which serves as an example of the type of critical reflection that is warranted throughout the SDP experience:

*I was in the middle of a group, and I suddenly could not remember anything in Spanish. I had been speaking in Spanish, I mean not well, but at least enough that the group understood me. And as I kept talking, I was like yeah…I don't know anymore (laughter). It's just this silly example but in that moment, I felt a distinct shift in how much power I had and how much I could help. I pretty much felt worthless to the group and to the project.*

She added: "This expectation that we went there and didn't have to speak Spanish speaks so much to our power and privilege. People wanting to learn from us regardless of if they can understand us is pretty amazing."

The mere structure of the funding opportunity and its associated demands were also believed to significantly complicate the ability to engage with the Mexican stakeholders more meaningfully around the program structure and itinerary. Jeremy explained: "It's a little bit artificial…when you create this positive feeling. And by creating these positive feelings, I think you are achieving in a certain way the [funder's] purposes..." He elaborated: "…They require a lot of time and involvement into setting up the programs with all these demands, but sometimes you lose focus of what is the core problem."

Within the noted logistical constraints, participants also explained they had limited clarity regarding their designated role within the program as a participant or an organizer. For example, Jennifer said, "I feel like if [my role] was a test question, I would probably not get it correct," and Mariana reported, "I believe that knowledge, to know what we were going to do and why, would have facilitated everything that happened." Jeremy added:

*…it was not a program that I would say was totally built with them…at the very beginning, we talked about we need to build this program with them, so it's going to be more*

*inclusive…I think it was more a logistics issue…I think we had the intentions to build something with them, but it was so complicated to really have a clear idea of what we want to do...we were moving, right? Because of the logistics, because of the time…*

Despite Deporte y Cambio Social being generally "well-designed" and "super well-organized," participants felt "…it was just too much to fit into a week" [Jennifer] and that "…everything was in a hurry" [Mariana]. Mexican participants' observations of the program itinerary, which largely aligned with American cultural norms on productivity and punctuality, are one example of the problematic discordance between meeting the demands of a grant originating from the Global North and local cultural norms in many Global South communities (Hayhurst et al., 2021c; McSweeney et al., 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). This discordance reflects a lack of power and agency within the Mexican contingent representative of cultural hegemony within the program.

Accordingly, participants offered recommendations toward SDP programs' central purposes to support meaningful intercultural engagement while fostering culturally relevant learning reflective of important social issues. Among these recommendations, members of the Mexican contingent suggested SDP programs be longer in duration and that the experiences across countries be increasingly parallel. Fran explained:

*I saw how an American family lived. I realized the great differences. Maybe if you had stayed with a family when you came to Mexico, you would have also realized it too. You would not only have seen it from the outside...I would not change anything more than to see the way that, when you come, you could stay in the house of Mexicans and not in a hotel because it is very different.*

Guillermo similarly reported:

*[I wish] that Americans had more time in our country, that it was at least balanced. Because we stayed two weeks and it seems to me that you were only six or seven days. Then I would like it to be the same time so that it was wider, be calmer, and we could enjoy it a little more, and that this opportunity could be used to present more things about our country…of its people who are wonderful, that you could live it in a better way…*

Other Mexican participants added, "…it would have been better if it would have been more days, obviously. I know it is not simple to be accepted one month" (Mariana) and "at least four weeks instead of two"

(Miguel). Fran explained: "Since we came back, 80% of participants asked if there was going to be something similar and if they could volunteer for another program or another visit...We told them, we did not bring the program, it isn't ours." These sentiments highlight the imbalance toward the U.S. within the program, due in part because they were more closely associated with the funding source and therefore held more power (McSweeney et al., 2019; Nicholls et al., 2010). Additionally, participants' responses highlight how SDP program itineraries and duration can be complicit in reproducing relational power imbalances that, via limited time, inhibit the ability to fully immerse in intercultural interaction, sharing, and growth.

## Manifestations of Power within Person-to-Person Intercultural Interactions

Diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Mexico improved significantly since 2000, yet the relationship has become more turbulent in recent years in relation to conflicting views and policies related to immigration and drug trafficking (Seelke, 2023). Within Deporte y Cambio Social specifically, power dynamics between Mexican and American stakeholders were informed by a complex intersection of privileges rooted in culture, race, sex, and gender. Mexican participants reported times when they felt they were treated as equals by the American contingent, which strengthened their cultural perceptions. Feelings of equality were observed most when Mexicans and Americans were jointly engaged in the program's functions. For example, Mariana said, "when we were doing the activities in the field I believe that was more of a power balance," and Miguel commented "…in all the activities, those that were done in classrooms, when you shared a talk with us, when we had practices on the fields, when we were in the camp." Fran reflected positively on Mexicans' homestay experiences during the program phase in the U.S., which she believed were met with equality, respect, and consideration:

*I told them that we Mexicans must eat together at least once a day, and what they did was invite their son to dinner so that I wouldn't feel so out of my house. They told me we have dinner together on a few occasions, but we are inviting him for you to see what a family dinner is like because we do not really have them often.*

Despite positive interpersonal connections with the American contingent in the program, Mexican participants also candidly described, with almost expectation and acceptance, experiences of racial discrimination while in the U.S. Guillermo explained:

*...when we were at [name] airport, there was a dark-skinned policeman who just noticed that we were Mexicans and threw our bags. Then I said, I will do it and put it up. He saw what I did, returned it, and threw it back again. It seems to me that there was an abuse of power from an authority there. He wanted to show, here I command...However, I insist, we are in the process of social development, and we must be tolerant of this type of action and just understand the reasons why these things occur, only that. But I'm not talking about a generality, it was simply an isolated event that that occurred on that trip, but at least in Deporte y Cambio Social we were treated wonderfully.*

Fran shared:

*...we have an idea of the profile of the nationalities in Mexico. Unfortunately many times we see racism, that you are not being loved, that they don't see you as equal, but we see that in this type of program, it was super good, and this perception was not in it...this paradigm that many people have was changed...Many Mexicans think that Americans are not interested in us. But, they were quite interested in knowing our culture, in knowing our food, how we thought and how we interacted with each other. I saw it as a good thing...I see that in this type of program, nationality does not matter, the important thing is people...*

Thus, while intercultural interactions within the insulated SDP context are often positive, they may also serve as barriers to meaningfully identifying, discussing, and disrupting authentic intercultural conflict in real world settings. Aligned with Foucault's (1979) conceptualization, participants' sentiments further emphasize power as a relational force that manifests organically through person-to-person interactions.

Specific to sex and gender, Mexican and American participants observed when biases were perpetuated, and at other times challenged, amid program execution. Women participants across cultures recommended considerable attention to understandings of sex and gender and the intentional construction of representative SDP leadership teams. Specifically, Mexican and American women participants discussed the prominent role of women within the project but wished more were involved given the program's emphasis on women's empowerment. Fran shared:

*I saw when you visited Mexico that most of the visitors were women; both the girls who coached soccer, the organizers, and many of the researchers who came were women, so I think it was already focused on women's empowerment*

*and all the activities that were done were usually led by women.*

Mariana added:

*I would have liked more women teachers and not as many men teachers. Also, more people from the sports arena, because if your goal is to use sport and empower women through that sport, more sport professionals should have been [involved] …there were teachers that had nothing to do with that sport and they were men. I don't mean that only women should be included, but I think that if we want to empower girls, [the Mexican contingent] should have taken more women teachers.*

Reflecting on an event in Mexico that was canceled by an American member during the phase in Mexico, Jennifer shared:

*…sexism showed up in the management of our trip in that it was too hot for the women's event to happen, so we didn't get to connect with just women only…It's like we're here for [women's empowerment] and you're telling a bunch of women that it's too hot for us to play instead of asking us if we want to do it.*

In observation of the American contingent group, Mariana reported: "In the case of [American woman], who was with us a lot, she would say something and then later it was changed to what [American man] wanted; then yes, I saw two unequal powers." From a critical feminist perspective, favoring the values, perspectives, and interests of a dominant, versus non-dominant group, contribute to power disparities that undermine the SDP experience for individuals the programming is intended to serve (e.g., Chawansky, 2015; del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2021).

Parallel to these types of experiences, however, were other instances in which sex and gender disparities were contemplated and challenged. Mariana explained how, in response to a training received in the U.S., the Mexican girls reflected on differences in societal norms regarding legal protections of girls and women:

*…the girls were saying, so, here [in the U.S.], if somebody turns to see you, it is almost a felony, if somebody touches your hair, it is a felony. They didn't know that. Some had the openness to tell me some very strong things that happened in their community [in Mexico], and I think [the violence] doesn't happen here in the United States, not even half of it, because you would be taken to jail or arrested…*

Although becoming aware of institutional protections for girls and women in the U.S. was inspiring for Mexican girls, these protections are also limited.

Collectively, participants' responses suggest aspects of the SDP program reflected a balance of power that enhanced the quality of their experience and at other times an imbalance of power that diminished the quality of their experience. Participants' recommendations (e.g., prolonged engagement, representation) both echo, and inform expansion of, necessary reconstructions of the SDP experience. These reconstructions are further explored amid the challenges and opportunities characteristic of short-term, international, grant-based programs.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study underscore, with data, the importance of engaging in critical and constructive reflection with respect to cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations for all SDP stakeholders. It is easy to perceive the observed challenges as unique to Deporte y Cambio Social, and given that this study was done retrospectively, we acknowledge the program had shortcomings inherently connected to disparate power structures. The alignment of the present data with a preponderance of recent conceptual critiques of SDP work (e.g., Darnell et al., 2018; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2021a; Whitley et al., 2018) suggest the conclusions are relevant to a larger body of SDP programs, particularly those that are short-term and grant based. Indeed, the purpose of this study was not to dismiss the important potential of SDP programs and positive experiences that have been described here and in other literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Blom et al., 2015; LeCrom & Dwyer, 2013), but rather to suggest that the broad-stroke, outcome-oriented impressions of SDP programs capture only one chapter of a longer and more nuanced story that will meaningfully inform the future of SDP work, if told.

Broadly, power was viewed by participants as being closely tied to knowledge, influence, and control both within and outside the program, which Foucault (1979) suggests represents the diffuse, versus concentrated, nature of power. Notions that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1979), versus tied solely to a specific person or structure, speaks to the inevitability of exploring, reflecting, interrogating, and intervening with respect to power in SDP programs. Participants' responses also reflected cultural and relational hegemonic power structures suggesting that American members had more power and influence over the program, of which Mexican members were aware but complicit in. Deference to Americans and other Global North actors is

well-documented in the SDP literature (i.e., Dao & Chin, 2021; Hansell et al., in press; Hayhurst et al., 2021d; McSweeney et al., 2019). Such deference fuels a foundational power imbalance on which SDP programs are often developed that, despite intentions to facilitate equitable partnerships, reproduces Global North stakeholders having power over, versus power with, Global South partners (Abizadeh, 2023; Dao & Chin, 2021; Harris, 2018). Within Deporte y Cambio Social, the present data suggest Mexican participants expected Americans to serve as deliverers of expertise and experience, mostly in English, which reflects the larger cultural and relational hegemonic power disparities upon which this and other SDP programs are built.

SDP scholars have also described how often unseen biases, specifically related to race, sex, and gender that are deeply entrenched in our sociocultural worlds, still manifest in SDP program execution (Oxford, 2019; Válkova, 2021). From a critical feminist theory perspective, the differential experience, perceptions, and observations by women participants reflected how cultural structures and practices reproduced within SDP programs can inequitably shape the experiences of individuals of varied groups defined by, for example, sex, gender, and race. del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2021) similarly reflected on ways an SDP program targeting gender equity and environmental stewardship in Nicaragua reinforced existing gender norms in the local context; women participants assumed cleaning and organizational tasks (traditionally feminine) while men played soccer (traditionally masculine). Chawansky (2015) used autoethnographic vignettes to reflect on ways her identity as an American White woman influenced her experience and interactions as a Global North SDP researcher; specifically, she recounted experiences of gender bias and sexualization while aiming to empower girls and women in a Global South context. Participants in the present study recounted events or aspects of the program structure that similarly reinforced both gender bias and an experience of racial discrimination beyond the context of the program while traveling. Such deleterious experiences will continue in short-term, grand-funded programs without acknowledgement and intervention.

Approaching SDP work differently in order to address issues of power is largely dependent upon a significant transformation of the strategic priorities of SDP researchers and practitioners along with the structure of dominant funding mechanisms. Other researchers (e.g., McSweeney et al., 2022; Oatley & Harris, 2020) have utilized participatory approaches, which have been implemented in partnerships with existing SDP organizations. However, such immersive endeavors are a

unique challenge for short-term SDP programs, particularly when researchers are tasked with different roles related to the program and the research. In considering power as a relational force, significant time is needed to organically develop and nurture relationships within cross-cultural SDP partnerships that prioritize agential, rather than structural power through intentional shared experiences, cultural learning, and discourse. Further, significant time is needed to adequately prepare stakeholders and participants who may have little prior SDP experience. The present findings therefore suggest that time, in addition to culture, inform relational power structures that influence participants' experiences in short-term SDP programs. However, the mere structure of short-term programming is a significant barrier to addressing these concerns.

Among the possible solutions, the present findings suggest a truly parallel experience in the partnering countries would support perceptions of deeper and increasingly equal cross-cultural engagement and intercultural learning. Further, intentional involvement of experienced SDP professionals or organizations with expertise in meaningful intercultural engagement would benefit less experienced stakeholders in adequately preparing for and improving experiences that are short-term. Relevant training in local culture, language, self-assessment, and introspection related to effective intercultural engagement, cultural humility, competence, and empathy should be an embedded requirement of the funding mechanism toward facilitating explicit discussions of power structures both within and across cultural groups as part of the relationship-building and familiarization process. Importantly, given many SDP professionals from the Global North are affiliated with institutions of higher education with competing job responsibilities (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), administrators must provide workload space to fully engage in the preparation and relationship-building required for SDP programs to be done well. SDP programs originating in the Global North that operate in the Global South are often marketed as volunteer opportunities to local college students and young adults to build their resume and develop a sense of global responsibility and citizenship that can be personally rewarding and boost future employment prospects (Dao & Chin, 2021; Giulianotti et al., 2021; LeCrom et al., 2022). Such marketing, however, can position Global North volunteers as the primary benefactors of the SDP experience, supporting hegemonic power structures and creating conflict with program objectives within the local context where the program operates (Clarke & Norman, 2021; Darnell, 2007). Thus, critical SDP scholars have cautioned against on relying on Global North volunteers to implement programs to ensure that

the program is locally managed and operated (Hayhurst, 2014). We echo this assertion, and further advocate for the importance of, or even requirement for, Global North SDP volunteers to be thoroughly trained in program objectives as well as engage in a thorough reflexive process (e.g., journaling) throughout the entirety of their SDP experience.

The use of conceptual frameworks would be helpful to guide intercultural interactions and behaviors across the short-term SDP experience. Appreciative inquiry, for example, offers a strengths-based approach for co-creating intercultural knowledge and programming within a balanced power dynamic (Nel, 2012). Relational cultural theory is a useful framework for emphasizing relational, versus individual, resilience through growth-fostering relationships built upon mutual empathy and empowerment (Miller, 1986). Growth-fostering relationships lead to, and are characterized by, zest (i.e., energy and vitality for both individuals/groups), worth (i.e., derived from using oneself to foster mutual growth), clarity (i.e., clear understanding of self, another person/group, and the relationship), productivity (i.e., taking meaningful and mutually beneficial action in the relationship), and further connection (i.e., desire to develop the relationship beyond the initial connection) (Jordan, 2018; Miller, 1986). Relational cultural theory provides a process for healthy interpersonal and intercultural relationship development that recognizes power inequities and diversity as inevitable, but prioritizes mutual over self-serving interests toward agential, versus passive structural, power.

Collectively, the findings of this study support and deepen many of the understandings, reflections, and conceptual critiques from other scholars published in the SDP literature through data-driven inquiry that explored diverse participants' voices in a nuanced short-term international, grant-funded SDP context. In considering variable conceptualizations in the literature, the findings of this study further demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of cross-cultural understandings of power and intercultural power relations, namely that power operates in multi-dimensional ways and can be explained by multiple and diverse conceptual and theoretical understandings. Among the key insights from this study, both time and culture inform relational power structures that can influence participants' experiences in short-term SDP programs that may serve as the basis for targeted solutions, many of which the participants in this study described. Importantly, insights into power dynamics within Deporte y Cambio Social may not have been identified without the present study, as

research to determine the effectiveness of the program. Accordingly, we encourage similar critical reflection of other SDP programs and experiences.

### Limitations

Given the nature of the present study, much of the meaning derived from participants' responses involved retrofitting recommendations two years after the program ended, which could be viewed as a limitation. Additionally, despite efforts to promote candid responses by welcoming insight on programmatic critique in addition to strengths, and co-conducting interviews in Spanish with a native Mexican woman along with the primary author, it is still possible not all experiences were shared. Response bias and social desirability may have influenced participants' responses, particularly given their pre-existing relationships with both interviewers. Although some response bias is inevitable, establishing intercultural, transdisciplinary research teams that are solely focused on evaluation efforts and have equitable representation across cultures could help mitigate the potential for response bias during program evaluations (Whitley et al., 2022). In addition, incorporating qualitative methodological approaches such as observation and/or document analysis could yield additional insights not captured in interviews alone. Finally, while recruitment was limited to a small pool of eligible participants, we nonetheless encourage garnering perspectives from an even broader and more culturally diverse group of stakeholders, including those affiliated with the funding source.

### Conclusion

This study qualitatively explored power from the voices of various stakeholders in a short-term international SDP program two years after the program. Within this nuanced context, our findings further demonstrate how SDP work is not insulated from societal imbalances of power and hegemony, and stakeholders should be proactive in acknowledging and exploring such imbalances by engaging in a robust reflexive process throughout their SDP experience to better identify and disrupt existing power imbalances that can be easily reproduced. Such reflexivity would benefit all stakeholders in helping them examine their own identities and biases that may influence their own and others' experience. This is particularly relevant for Global North stakeholders working in Global South contexts, as neoliberal tendencies are a known critique within the SDP landscape.

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