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Shifting Views: How Experiential Learning Shapes University Students' Sense of Civic Engagement and Solidarity on Migration

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*Shifting Views: How
Experiential Learning Shapes
University Students' Sense of
Civic Engagement and
Solidarity on Migration*

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MA in Migration Studies
June 2019*

Shifting Views: How Experiential Learning Shapes University Students' Sense of Civic engagement and Solidarity on Migration

Presented as a Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree MASTER IN
MIGRATION STUDIES

by **Karen Larke**

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have put more weight on the use of experiential learning to provide students with opportunities to grow intellectually and develop as engaged citizens. Many recent studies have looked at the quality and educational impacts of a variety of experiential and service learning experiences, yet few have explored what other ideological impacts may result from specific non-curricular experiential learning experiences. This study measured the impact of experiential learning, in the form of week-long migration-themed trips, on undergraduate student's self-reported levels of solidarity, and related measures of civic engagement and political engagement and activism around migration issues. This study conducted surveys and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students from a private California university who participated in week-long immersion trips to Mexico and Colombia in 2018 and 2019. Overall, the study found that immersion participants were impacted by their first-hand experiences on immersion trips, which provided different perspectives and understanding of migrants and migration. Participants showed a desire to continue learning and engaging with migration and in solidarity with migrants. Contrary to predictions, participants chose not to engage politically with current U.S. migration policies. These findings suggest that experiential learning can and should be utilized in order to provide university students with more opportunities to become civically engaged and gain a better understanding of migration, an increasingly important theme of our globalized world. Such opportunities prepare students to achieve a sense of solidarity, a quality which is lacking in our current political and social climate.

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Introduction

The philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote in his later work that we cannot know something is real unless we experience it for ourselves (1994). Many things, which in the past may have been known through first-hand experience, are now translated through a polarized lens of Twitter, the news or bombastic political rhetoric. Now more than ever, there is a need for unbiased and truthful accounts of important global phenomena, especially pressing social and political topics like migration and refugee movements and policies. In the field of Education, authors Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont and Jason Stephens ask if the current higher education system is failing to provide a sense of curiosity, sympathy, principles and independence of mind (2003). There are however efforts being made to fill such gaps in higher education; to help students gain these qualities and become civically engaged. For example, there is a growing trend in higher education encouraging experiential or service learning. Literature in this field has shown that better understanding of complex social and political issues and practices in civic engagement, defined as action for the public's benefit, can be attributed to experiential learning experiences during secondary education (Colby et al., 2003). In fact, in the last decades experiential and service learning has become a powerful tool of universities to shape undergraduate students into knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

As a result of the upsurge in programming, there is a wealth of research on experiential service learning in recent years. This body of literature tends to focus on the aspects of these programs, logistically and pedagogically, which make them effective tools for learning and civic engagement, as well as the impacts that such programs and courses have on university students themselves, personally and ideologically (Colby et al., 2003; Kiely, 2003, 2005; Matto, McCartney, Bennion, & Simpson, 2017; Mitchell, 2008). There is also criticism of experiential

learning and service learning more specifically. Such research suggests some programs are not critical enough to have positive impacts on students or that programs can have unintended negative outcomes for the communities with which students, staff and institutions have engaged (Mitchell, 2008). There are other examples in the literature which show dramatic, transformative and lasting impacts on student's personality and ideology, affecting their careers and lives overall (Kiely, 2003, 2005). This study seeks to build on literature that suggests students can be transformed through experiential learning experiences. In particular, this study explores potential ideological shifts in undergraduate students toward solidarity. This is measured through changes in civic engagement with local, national and global migrant communities, desire for better understanding through continued study of migration as a field and a continued engagement with and activism around migration politics and policies.

Migration at the local, national and global scale, is a socially and politically complex topic which is not only salient in the news and political discourse, spans academic disciplines, as well as personal identities and relationships. Ask any person on the street and they are bound to have an opinion on migration or immigration. At the same time, migration is topic of study which a student must often seek out themselves, with only a handful of masters in Migration Studies programs in the U.S. currently. Education and opportunities for university students to engage with migration is growing however, as a topic of global importance on par with global climate change, migration education should not be limited to master's degrees and political internships.

The motivation for this study stems from the belief in education as a tool for empowering current scholars and the future public on topics of such magnitude. Experiential education is an extension of that tool and provides a first-hand experience with which university students can

build solidarity those who are migrants and around migration politics and policies, with the potential for further education and creation of a better-informed civic body. As policies and political climate around migration are in constant flux, students must take the opportunity to better understand and civically engage with migration on campus, in the community and when they participate politically. These opportunities come in various forms, including experiential education. This study seeks to answer the question: How is a student's sense of civic engagement and solidarity shaped by experiential learning in the context of migration?

This study takes place at a private university in California, U.S.A. The topic of this research are the experiential learning or "immersion" programs on offer at the university. Immersions at this university explore a range of "social justice topics". The immersions of this study focused on migration within a particular region and socio-political context. During these immersions, students learn about migration, by meeting community members, experts in the field of migration, "learning through doing", taking part in activities alongside communities and participating in guided reflections.

The objective of this study is to make connections between the experiences of undergraduate students while on immersions with the impacts that lead to a committed form of solidarity defined below. Students have anecdotally called immersions a "life changing" experience but in what ways and how were their lives changed? The current political and social migration movement has been deemed a "crisis". Could greater solidarity and better understanding of the complexities of migration be a potential solution?

Theories on Solidarity and Contemporary Critiques

What is the importance of solidarity? Solidarity has been described in terms of groups and individuals, social, local, global and civic solidarity. There is also overlap in theoretical

discussions of empathy, compassion and solidarity. When I refer to solidarity, I am using the concept of social solidarity, as defined by De Beer and Koster (2003). They distinguish between solidarity as an act and as an attitude. Social Solidarity as an attitude may lead to actions, in forms of civic engagement and political engagement on migration issues. Another related definition mentioned in this study is *affective solidarity* or solidarity founded on a feeling of affection, duty and responsibility and not on the assumption of future reciprocity or dependence (Hemmings, 2012).

In classic sociology, there are two main theories put forth by Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx regarding solidarity. Although these theories have been critiqued as no longer applicable, they are still a formative basis for understanding the conceptual evolution of the term solidarity. Both authors wrote in a time of great social and economic change, the industrialization of the 19th century. Their theories on solidarity reflect the social order as it stood at that time. Durkheim describes two forms of social solidarity: *mechanical and organic* (1964 [1893]). *Mechanical solidarity* is formed out of commonalities of beliefs, values and often religious practices and *organic solidarity* relates to interdependence based on division of labor (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; O'Donnell, 2007). In regard to *mechanical solidarity*, the ties that bound people together were based on common beliefs, held together by face to face contact, which is stronger than simple common interests (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; Sammut, 2011; Vasta, 2010). *Organic solidarity*, however, is characterized by a shared relationship to a particular division of labor within society (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; Sammut, 2011). This type of solidarity was only possible when there was equal opportunity. Without this equality, the result would be feelings of anomie (Durkheim, 1964 [1893]; O'Donnell, 2007).

Similar to Durkheim's concept of *organic solidarity*, Marx's theories about solidarity revolve around the division of labor in society. Solidarity according to Marx, is based around "recognition of differing group interests as the basis for political action and change" (as cited in Vasta, 2010, p. 506). Solidarity is formed through class position and therefore challenged by a capitalist social structure. This theory relates to Marx's conception of a classless future in which less division among classes would lead to greater social solidarity (O'Donnell, 2007; Vasta, 2010). Class inequality was not considered a sound basis for solidarity and both Durkheim and Marx believed that greater equality would strengthen social solidarity (O'Donnell, 2007).

Durkheim and Marx's theories on solidarity are understandable based on the time in which they were written. They both address changes to the structure of social order within capitalist societies, affecting the way in which groups and individuals relate and bond to one another. However, since these theories belong to a particular time and place in the past, modern critiques of their work and new approaches to the study of social solidarity now prevail. The next section of this review will look at recent approaches to the study of social solidarity (solidarity). Due to the broad definition and application of social solidarity as a concept, this review will focus on literature that applies to the greater subject of this paper; as it relates to migration and migrants. Because much of this literature focuses on society as a fixed group, it often uses language around diversity and multiculturalism rather than focusing on migrants and migration specifically.

Multiculturalism, Globalization and Challenges to Solidarity in Contemporary Society

The political philosopher Marx wrote that solidarity would be challenged if there was greater diversity and multiculturalism in a society (O'Donnell, 2007). Modern theorists pick up

on this debate when approaching the challenges to solidarity faced in globalized social structures. Mike O'Donnell makes the case for building solidarity around human rights and greater social equality (2007). Referring to work by Mary Kaldor, where she writes, civil society has become more transnational and therefore "reason, moral sentiment and/or civic action...provide the basis for social solidarity" (2007, p. 260). O'Donnell suggests that human rights, as established through the Declaration of Human Rights, should form the basis for solidarity within a society. In the frame of a globalized and diverse society, "Minority exceptionalism risks fragmentation and majority hegemony risks degenerating into an oppressive nationalism. In contrast, human rights, at least in principle, embrace everybody equally and are therefore the natural (human) basis for social solidarity" (O'Donnell 2007, p. 260). If we are living in a globalized society where transnationalism is more the norm than an exception, the only means of achieving solidarity is through adoption of regulations morally stronger than the norms of nationality. This, according to the author, is the best solution for our current lack of solidarity within multicultural societies.

O'Donnell is writing in the context of Europe and the UK which have historically framed the debate around nationality and multiculturalism policies. While the author adequately supports his argument for a changing the ideological basis for solidarity, he fails to provide empirical data to support the claim that human rights and social equality can supplant nationalism and multiculturalism and that this will lead to greater social solidarity. O'Donnell uses global and national agreements on human rights as examples of guiding principles, however recent breaches to the basic human rights principles in the case of the treatment of asylum seekers in the US and the EU suggest that these agreed-upon principles are still more suggestions than norms.

In regard to immigration and social equality, the author recognizes that the current

systems employed in most countries within the European Union, in which there are huge disparities in equality, undermines the basis for social solidarity, he distinguishes that civil rights and not social welfare is the key aspect of a more equal society (O'Donnell, 2007). The author suggests that, while he refers to the UK in his case study, the change in the basis for social solidarity to that of human rights could apply to the globalized world. I find this idealism hard to swallow in the face of recent violations of human rights and little evidence of progress toward greater social equality and solidarity. However, a growing field of Human Rights Education seeks to empower people to better understand their rights relative to the Declaration of Human Rights and understanding of basic human rights rather than those derived from particular nationalities.

Will Kymlicka also describes the debate over the impacts of nationalism and multiculturalism as the basis of solidarity (2015). Kymlicka argues that there is space for reconciliation and we may not be required to choose between solidarity and diversity. The author describes the impacts of nationality on solidarity and how this has excluded minorities. He writes, "...as we all know, this link between nationhood and liberal-democracy creates endemic risks for all those who are not seen as belonging to the nation, including indigenous peoples, sub-state national groups and immigrants" (Kymlicka, 2015, p. 5). While nationality has been important for solidarity in the past, it has historically proven exclusionary to groups seen as "outside the nation" (Kymlicka, 2015). This, he suggests, brings us to the purpose of multiculturalism not as a political and cultural form of redistribution of power but as a neoliberal tool, to use cultural markers as part of market competition and ethnic networks as social capital (Kymlicka, 2015). The author concludes that the such solutions as they are in practice now are unlikely to lead to greater solidarity within modern societies.

Both approaches have failed to provide a solution for social solidarity and migration. A solution of a “multicultural liberal nationalism” in which “...the activities of one’s group – be they religious, cultural, recreational, economic or political – are understood as forms of belonging, and of investing in society, not only or primarily in the economic sense, but in a deeper social sense, even (dare I say it?) as a form of nation-building” (Kymlicka, 2015, p. 12). This combination of multicultural and national would form the basis of solidarity among immigrants and non-immigrants alike. However, the author cautions that solidarity built around the concept of nationality is still exclusionary (Kymlicka, 2015). This solution for solidarity would apply only to immigrants who are citizens, permanent residents or with a pathway to citizenship.

This creates a problem for the growing population of temporary migrants and immigrants who have yet to be granted more permanent residencies. Kymlicka acknowledges this “precariousness” and writes that a world with this increased “liquid mobility” would be difficult to form a base of solidarity around (2015). I would argue that this is close to the reality of the world we live in today. The so-called “precariousness” of “liquid mobility” could also be known as networks of people identifying as transnational. If nationality is still the basis of solidarity, this solution solves the issue of increased solidarity among citizens but leaves out a large group of immigrants who may not have or want the option of permanent residency. In a globalized world, with more people than ever living transnational lives, are measures seeking to bring more people into the fold of national identity really the solution to greater social solidarity or should we look beyond old constructions of how to build solidarity? The purpose of critiquing prior definitions and attempting to redefine solidarity in the modern context is to better understand how solidarity formed in social settings. This study relies on modern investigations into theories

on solidarity in order to define, measure and predict solidarity as it forms in undergraduate students as a potential result of experiential learning.

The first sections of this review looked at the classic work of Durkheim and Marx, followed by two contemporaries who posed potential approaches to social solidarity, through human rights and social equality and “multicultural liberal nationalism”. The next sections will shift away from prescriptive measures and step back to address what aspects of society have changed which make concepts around human rights, multiculturalism and nationalism difficult to reconcile in the globalized world and therefore seek a more applicable definition of solidarity. The authors Paul de Beer and Ferry Koster argue that individualization is one of the factors which impact levels of solidarity at the individual and country level (2009). De Beer and Koster use empirical data to measure various aspects of solidarity and individualization. Individualization is not easily defined but includes processes of “detraditionalization”, “emancipation” and “heterogenization” which result in a moving away from the types of individual characteristics that bond groups together under Durkheim’s theory of mechanical solidarity (2009). The result of their empirical data sets does not clearly show the trend of individualization. Solidarity has proven difficult to measure in this case however; social scientists are still exploring these trends in connection to social solidarity.

Ellie Vasta also explores issues of solidarity in contemporary society (2010). Like De Beer and Koster, she acknowledges that individualization has had an impact on solidarity in contemporary society, as well as other confounding factors. These include: the techno-science revolution, the re-organization of work, the process of individualization and the political opportunity structure (Vasta, 2010). These social transformations contribute to what social scientists have labeled “social distancing” and seek to explain why many of the old explanations

for social solidarity no longer apply (Vasta, 2010). Vasta explains how these factors have changed the way social solidarity now functions. There are two main results of these social transformations on social solidarity, according to Vasta. The first is a "...decline in the acceptance of difference and a desire for social cohesion, dictated by majority population" (Vasta, 2010, p. 515). Second is the increase of ethnic and religious diversity over the last 50-60 years as a result of more mobility and globalization (Vasta, 2010). Vasta suggests that the results of these changes to social solidarity is a society less cohesive than before, with an increase in assimilationist discourse in public and political debate (2010). In opposition to the assimilationist discourse, now more prevalent, a new type of social solidarity has come about: global solidarity. According to Vasta, new groups formed over the web and across borders to form new global movements (2010). However, as the author notes, "These groups are not necessarily organically involved in a long-term or ongoing way. This makes solidarity more abstract" (Vasta, 2010, p. 517). With solidarity more abstract, there is more moving in and out of solidarity and less commitment, thus solidarity has also become more *strategic* (Vasta, 2010).

The rise of abstract solidarity, in which one does not need to have a common value, class or collective identity, as a result of the social transformations described in the previous paragraph, is being countered by a longing for community, a stronger sense of nationalism and rejection of the outsider (Vasta, 2010). The new politics of solidarity has become more individualized, global, abstract and strategic, according to Vasta (2010, p. 518). She asserts that changes in solidarity are determined top-down, as policy and public discourse, but there is also an "alternative politics of solidarity". This process is at work in globalized neighborhoods where concepts of national identity and integration are being defined by the individuals themselves (Hamaz & Vasta, 2009). There are also civil society groups who "oppose the need to control

difference” and “challenge the process of globalization” (Vasta, 2010, p. 518). There are new modes of resistance emerging to counteract the prevailing othering which the modern politics perpetuates. This study uses Vasta’s definition of an “alternative politics of solidarity” which puts the act of determining a global or national identity in the hands of the individual. Therefore, individuals have more opportunities to be in abstract or strategic solidarity based on their identity and how they determine “difference” within their social group or society as a whole. However, the strategic nature of solidarity may also translate into a lack of action or commitment from the more individualized actor. The next section of literature on solidarity will thus question: Are there methods of engendering social solidarity and how might solidarity transform into civic engagement or acts of social justice?

Solidarity: Definitions and Prescriptions for Engagement and Social Justice

The next section will review literature which redefines and compares concepts of solidarity outside of the field of Sociology, as well as methods of teaching empathy or solidarity. This process is important as the first step in preparing groups and individuals to arm themselves with the knowledge and ability to take action towards solidarity through civic engagement or acts of social justice.

Feminist writer bell hooks defines solidarity as a “sustained and ongoing commitment.” She writes that “To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite...” (hooks, 2000, p. 64). Compared to solidarity, support can be given as easy as it can be taken away. In this way, “support” is more comparable to Vasta’s concept of abstract solidarity. hooks is writing in feminist discourse, she is writing about sisterhood as a shared community and interest, but her words can be applied more broadly as guideline for creating social solidarity; there should be a

commitment that is sustainable based around a common goal. Returning to the works of O'Donnell and Kymlicka, who suggested that new forms of nationalism or human rights based civil rights might be a solution for creating solidarity during a time of diversity (Kymlicka, 2015; O'Donnell, 2017), hooks is suggesting that rather than being based on identity, solidarity should rally around the acceptance of difference but also a common desire toward a particular goal. The shift in perspective away from solidarity based on identity toward that of a common goal may be most practical in an era of greater diversity, transnationalism and increased social connectivity. As explored in this study, identity is an important factor in solidarity. However, identity is not identified as excluding or including groups from having solidarity in sharing a common goal, instead playing a more complicated role.

Clare Hemmings explores solidarity as it relates to identity and transformation, contrasting solidarity with the term “empathy”. From the field of Feminist Theory, the author writes, “For sceptics, presumptions of empathy underplay the profound classed and raced differences within feminism that cannot simply be transcended by a feminist will to connection” (Hemmings 2012, p. 152). The concept of empathy has been used to gloss over the differences stated above and may lead to a sentimental attachment rather than a genuine engagement with the other (Hemmings 2012). These issues with empathy led the author to seek a different concept in which feminist epistemology can develop. She spends the rest of the article outlining a term she refers to as “affective feminist solidarity”. As the author relates,

I was moved to become a feminist in order to maintain and value myself, and to find an alternate way of being in the world only once I had experienced the dissonance between

my sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation. Denaturalization produced a critical relation to the world providing new conditions for a feminist identity and community. Identity, in other words, resulted from an affective dissonance; it did not precede it, and might well not have come after (Hemmings, 2012, p. 152).

While Hemmings uses a personal account to explain the process of affective dissonance, later leading to “affective feminist solidarity”, the experience may translate to other social solidarity groups or movements, as well. Just as hooks’ description of solidarity included a prescription for solidarity to move beyond identity toward a shared goal, Hemmings describes an experience of dissonance which lead to an affective solidarity with feminism and moved the author beyond the limits of empathy. In the conclusion we see the possibility for similar processes of other potential formations of sustainable solidarity. She concludes, “to seek solidarity with others, not based on a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds” (Hemmings 2012, p. 158).

The formula for Hemmings feminist affective solidarity includes affective dissonance, which comes from self-reflection (2017). This dissonance has the potential to move into the feeling of injustice and further toward a desire to rectify that feeling by seeking a type of social justice, according to Hemmings (2017). The author describes a process which occurred to her and which she theorizes creates solidarity outside of the bounds of identity and empathy. The work of Elizabeth A. Segal and M. Alex Wagaman and their study on teaching social justice also looks at the potential to induce solidarity and teach social justice to groups of students. The authors describe the pedagogy of using social empathy as a tool for social workers in training to “teach” them social justice (Segal & Wagaman, 2017). This article focuses on social justice and

the concept of social empathy rather than that of social solidarity. However, like hooks and Hemmings, this article is concerned with the processes which provide individuals the understanding and conceptual tools to build a more just society.

Compared with the other versions of social solidarity, social empathy is more individualistic and based around a core understanding of social and economic disparities. According to the authors, “Social empathy is built on a foundation of interpersonal empathic abilities with two additional key components: (a) contextual understanding of structural barriers to social and economic opportunity and (b) the ability to apply macro perspective taking to understand the social and economic conditions of others” (Segal, 2011; Segal, Wagerman, & Gerdes, 2012). Contextual understanding (a) can be taught through study of historical patterns of discrimination and oppression. Whereas, a macro perspective (b) can be cultivated through “...experiential opportunities that emphasize the ability to put one’s own and others’ experiences into a systemic context...”, (Segal & Wagerman, 2017, p. 210). Such processes may have important impacts not only on the students of social work programs but also in university students more generally. This study describes measures by which social empathy can be used to teach social justice. While social empathy differs from the definition of social solidarity used in this study, pedagogical tools such as this can serve as a powerful precursor for the self-reflection, dissonance and sustainable commitment which other authors have suggested social solidarity may require.

The theories and definitions in the first section of literature help ground the debate on social solidarity and how concepts have adapted along with the changing social structure of an ever-globalizing world. Social theorists have described ways in which social solidarity can be achieved on a national and individual level, however Vasta’s work suggests that in the “new

politics of solidarity” a more global and abstract type of solidarity which does not rely on strong cultural ties may be emerging (2010). The later section refers to work from Feminist studies and education and describes processes of building solidarity. Hemmings describes an individual process of experiencing dissonance leading to solidarity beyond identity and empathy whereas a macro perspective of social empathy building is taught through courses in social work education. The next section will look at civic engagement in higher education and how experiential education is providing opportunities for community engagement and the potential for creating social solidarity.

Civic Engagement: The Role of Higher Education

Civic Engagement is defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern” (Delli, 2000). Civic Engagement is not inherently political but political engagement is a part of and can grow out of civic engagement, according to the American Political Science Association (Matto, McCartney, Bennion & Simpson, 2017). Civic engagement in education seeks to engage students in communities and political activities which build the skill-set of an engaged citizen (Matto et al., 2017). The purpose of civic engagement education inside and outside the classroom is to prepare students for continued engagement as citizens and community members.

Civic engagement is the participation in our society and specifically in communities, through actions and political involvement. When a social justice lens is applied, educators and communities can activate students to engage in social justice issues. Research on civic engagement in higher education has explored the link between experiential learning opportunities, such as service learning, and greater civic engagement among students, as they continue in the university and beyond graduation (Matto et al., 2017). Civic engagement has

always been an important aspect of higher education, according to Colby et al. (2003). While civic engagement continues to be important, the methods through which civic engagement has been taught have changed significantly (Colby et al., 2003). The following selection of literature describes how experiential education has filled an important gap for teaching civic engagement in contemporary higher education.

Practices implemented in service learning which result specifically in greater civic engagement for university students after college are described by authors Richard, Keen, Hatcher and Pease (2016). This article used national survey data and found that co-curricular service learning, meaning programs which do not require academic components, provide a rich learning environment which influence civic outcomes after college (Richard et al., 2016). According to the authors, immersive service experiences kick-start the process of reflection which students take forward into their curricular experiences and beyond college (Richard et al., 2016). One interpretation is that the influence of SL courses on a civic-minded orientation after graduation seems to occur through the reflection, dialogue activities, and assignments associated with those course-based experiences (Richard et al., 2016). Experiential educational opportunities give students the chance to build skills in reflection and dialectical discourse which they can continue to build on in academic courses and civic life.

The American Political Science Association claims that developing civic skills may require experiential education opportunities (Matto et al., 2017). However, the authors also note that the norm of civic education is still text-book based and "...not an engaging and experiential civic education that produces a more politically literate and civically competent citizenry" (Matto et al., 2017, p. 79). The authors also explain the necessity of including all disciplines in civic education. Experiential learning is suggested as a method of enhancing civic knowledge, skills

and attitudes. Service learning and other project-based educational experiences are a way of extending learning outside the classroom and preparing students as informed democratic citizens.

Authors Tania Mitchell and Kathleen Coll evaluate a course which employs experiential elements geared toward social justice action and civic engagement (2017). The course was modeled on core aspects of critical service learning which encourage long-term partnerships to build dialogue, trust and solidarity (Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell & Coll 2017). According to Mitchell, students who participate in courses which required an experiential element transformed “from subjects to citizens”, as noted by Battistoni and Hudson (as cited in Mitchell & Coll, 2017, p. 188). According Mitchell and Coll, service learning and related courses are where many non-social science majors become exposed to politics and public policy (2017). Additionally, students in the course came to value political leadership and academic knowledge relevant to their own family and identity leading to stronger connections and solidarity with the community they had engaged with (Mitchell & Coll, 2017). This study reflects on a course in which students learned to engage service learning and become civically engaged with an outcome of stronger community relationships and a potential for lasting commitment to that community and social justice action. This course and other service learning courses provide evidence for Richard et al. describes, that courses which employ experiential elements to teach civic engagement beyond the course and often beyond college (2016).

Higher Education has been the traditional training-ground for developing engaged citizens. As the university system adapts to a competitive and globalized world, curriculum and liberal arts education are no longer adequate for developing the intellectual and ideological basis for student’s identity as citizens. (Colby, et al.,2003). At the same time, higher education has put more emphasis on experiential or service learning; classes or experiences which take students out

of the classroom and into the real world. While this literature focused on the connection between experiential learning and civic engagement, I argue that experiential learning is also space in which to build solidarity with communities and ideologically toward policies and politics within a society.

Experiential Learning and Student Transformation

This study builds on the findings that experiential learning can transform student's attitudes and increase civic engagements. The review of literature in this section is concerned with what makes an effective experiential learning program and which aspects of experiential learning connect result in civic engagement and student transformations. Although there are many models, in particular "pedagogies of engagement" have been proven to support complex learning, as well as moral and civic development of a sense of social responsibility, tolerance and non-authoritarianism (Colby et al., 2003). The literature is broken up in two sections, the focus on Critical Service Learning for achieving social justice aims and the practices of experiential learning with student demographics as a variable for student transformations.

Experiential Learning: the importance of critical service learning for social justice

Tania Mitchell has researched critical approaches to evaluating service learning. Specifically, she evaluates the claims that service learning with a social justice aim results in what she calls "social change orientation" and other affects. Mitchell describes the aspects which differentiate Critical Service Learning, from the traditional pedagogy of service learning, as an emphasis on social change, working to redistribute power and develop authentic relationships (2008). However, most important is evaluation of the purpose of service learning programs overall. Is Service Learning "a problem-solving instrument of social and political reform?"

(Fenwick as cited in Mitchell, 2008, p.51). How can we know that these programs are resulting in any type of social or political reform or helping create citizens as many in the field claim?

According to Mitchell, an assessment of experiential learning courses should be used to evaluate the program's social change impact (2008). A balance of "real social change" and impacts on students is an ideal outcome in Critical Service Learning but more easily measured are impacts on students. Students can use reflection to see differences and find a connection, build coalitions and develop empathy (Mitchell, 2008). Moving past superficial encounters and activities that perpetuate unequal power dynamics, students have the potential of creating real relationships with community members (Mitchell, 2008). These factors may influence students' ability to build solidarity and a commitment to a social justice cause. Mitchell reflects that such experiences for students are not enough (2008). A commitment to continue working toward social change beyond the class or experience may be difficult to predict (Mitchell, 2008). The author does not however evaluate how student's empathy, commitment and or solidarity may continue on after the course or experience.

Dan W. Butin also critiques the efficacy of service and experiential learning and the impacts on students. Butin's critique recommends different approaches to evaluating service learning (2003). For example, "A political perspective thus rejects service learning as an instrumental and melioristic methodology to instead focus on how service learning affects power relations among and across diverse individuals, groups, and institutions" (Butin, 2003, p. 1682). This type of approach fits the model of teaching social justice for increased empathy (Segal and Wagaman, 2017) by step outside of one's own understanding and reflect on the political, historical and social factors within the system which contribute to relative power of certain groups.

Butin

also highlights the theory of “border crossing”, where experiences in service learning allow students to “glimpse or even become immersed in a reality unknown to them beforehand” (2003, p.1682). An important question is how the student is able to cross the “border” and to acknowledge how borders can be different depending on student demographics. Such questions about student’s transformations can be looked at through ideological “constructions”. According to Butin, there are ideological forces of “construction, deconstructions and reconstructions” which occur during experiential learning (2003). Concerning reconstruction, the challenge exists of measuring how and to what extent student’s ideologies have been changed after their course or experience is over. The research of this study explores such ideological transformations of solidarity and civic engagement in migrant communities and with politics and policies of migration within society. There is a glut of literature which has reviewed the impacts on student’s civic engagement, however studies have also investigated more complex ideological and emotional transformations which have occurred as a result of participating in experiential and service learning. The next section will review relevant theories and research in the field of transformative and experiential learning.

An important theoretical frame for evaluating impacts of experiential learning is the concept of “transformative learning” developed by Jack Mezirow (1995, 2003). Transformative learning is defined as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). This type of learning is specific to adult learners and requires the learner engage in self-reflection and participate in critical dialectical discourse (Mezirow, 2003). Ability to engage in both self-reflection and dialectical discourse is impacted by age and education of the learner as

well as the conditions created by the educator, according to Mezirow (2003). Researchers in experiential and service learning have used the theory of transformative learning to explain moral, political, intellectual, personal, cultural and spiritual perspective transformation in student participants (Kiely, 2004). Transformative learning is additionally important for the evaluation of students in this study because key changes in perspectives and mindsets make space for potential social solidarity and civic engagement.

Richard Kiely uses Mezirow's theory on transformative learning (2003) to explain how particular experiences in education lead to impacts on university students' personal, moral and civic viewpoints. According to Kiely, perspective transformation and building of moral obligation comes through contact and story sharing with communities (2003). The author reflects on how the lasting impacts on students from the above-mentioned community engagement has led to "building solidarity with the poor, valuing collective action, and using their power and privilege to support social change" (Kiely, 2004, p. 13).

Kiely evaluates service learning trips where students return "transformed" (2004). The author points to the intensity of the experiences and other factors to explain how students years later continue to engage with social justice issues or exhibit continued solidarity around the topics which they engaged during their experience (Kiely 2003, 2004). There are also aspects which may have impeded a student's ability to engage fully with the community and therefore continue their commitment, according to Kiely (2004). For example, a service component, building a house or serving food, puts students in a relative position of power which may keep them from engaging in dialogue or moving into a place of openness where they can shed their preconceived notions and try to understand the experiences of others (Mitchell, 2008). In this way, the service component of service learning may be the least important aspect leading to a

student's transformation "into citizens" or spiritually and culturally, mentioned in the literature about service learning (Kiely, 2004; Mitchell, 2008). Immersion trips, of which this study is focusing, are not based around service. This is one argument to suggest the importance of evaluating different types of experiential learning programs, as civic engagement, student transformations and solidarity building do not necessarily come from the act of service, but the critical approach, dialogue and reflection involved in the experience (Mitchell, 2008).

Building off this critique, Anderson, Welch and Johnson write that students need to move away from feelings of pity, sympathy, and empathy and instead recognize agency of the community for service learning project's benefits to outweigh costs (2016). Additionally, programs need to update old colonial models to a Freirean model in order to tap into the aspects of experiential learning which impact students the most (Anderson et al., 2016), such as dialogue across difference and other aspects of critical service learning described by Mitchell (2008). Anderson et al. also notes that the students who have the potential to gain the most from experiences abroad are least likely to participate (2016). Identity is an important factor for evaluating impacts on student participants in experiential learning programs and courses.

The next section of this review will focus on both program aspects and student demographics. This evaluation is useful when considering the many variables at work when assessing impacts on student personal and civic transformations and the possibility of transformation.

Experiential Learning: student demographics

The following section will explore demographics, identity and how this impacts students beyond their service learning experience. Reviewing the works Niehaus and Kavaliauskas Crain

(2013) and Niehaus and Rivera (2015), these articles use national surveys to evaluate student impacts. Before discussing the findings of these studies, I would like to address the difference in scale between these articles and that of this study. Much of the literature in this field have used large-scale surveys of multiple institutions to gather data spanning many years. While this is useful for making statistical generalizations, it also forces focus on the average participants of service learning, immersions and alternative breaks as a whole, in this case white, middle class female students (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). Smaller scale analysis may not be ideal for making generalizations but the focus on specific service learning or alternative break trips at the university instead of surveys of thousands of participants shows university and program-specific student demographics. A smaller scope may also help researchers tie demographics and identity closer to outcomes of improved civic engagement and solidarity.

Elizabeth Niehaus and Mark Rivera use the National Survey on Alternative Breaks to explore student demographics of alternative break participants throughout the U.S. (2015). The authors focus was on the students who did not make up the majority of participants: students of color. Niehaus and Rivera argue that there is a need to explore what kinds of learning and development students of color can gain from their experience during service learning (2015). They argue that the experience of service learning during alternative breaks can create a different kind of racial understanding for white students and students of color (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). Knowing that students of different racial or class backgrounds will internalize service learning differently, there is greater reason to better understand how these experiences manifest themselves in student's college careers and beyond. Research is lacking around the impacts of experiential and service learning experiences on non-white students and the impact on their level of civic engagement.

There is research suggesting that for a variety of reasons students of color are not encouraged to participate in experiential learning opportunities, including an assumption that such experiences are a form of white “do-goodery” (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). This study of migration-themed immersions focuses on experiential learning experiences which try to avoid such paternalistic approaches to community interactions and engagement. The key element in these immersions is to learn from the community and reflect on the experiences of social injustice there and upon return to the university thereafter (Savard, 2010). Like Butin, the authors suggest that there is an opportunity for “border-crossing” during experiential learning programs which allows students to reflect on their own identity and experiment in different social roles, giving students a better sense of their own identity at the end of the experience (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). This leads the authors to reflect that the starting point of student’s identity can influence how open they are to self-reflection, trying out different roles and better understanding their own identity (Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). This study will include the element of identity as a key factor of student’s potential engagement and transformation as a result of their experience.

Immersion in the context of Jesuit Institutions

Much like service learning programs and alternative breaks, Jesuit institutions offer their own version of experiential learning programs for university students. Often referred to as immersions or Arrupe Immersions after Father Pedro Arrupe, who challenged students with a Jesuit Education to be a force of good not only in their community but in the world (Savard, 2010), immersions embody an ethos of “dismantling unjust social structures” and seeking social justice (Arrupe, 1973). There is also overlap with many practices of Critical Service Learning, as described by Tania Mitchell (2008). Jesuit immersions follow Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm as

a praxis, which include methods for maximizing student reflections and potential for transformation (Savard, 2010). Critical Service Learning puts equal weight on reflections as well as the importance of moving past superficial encounters which perpetuate unequal power dynamics (Mitchell, 2008).

John Savard describes Jesuit immersion programs and the impacts on students' transformation, writing, "One could argue that immersion programs at Jesuit colleges and universities are the most cost-effective means to animate student participants to become citizens of solidarity who, by their words and actions, will make this world a better place to live" (Savard, 2010, p.187). However, immersions of Jesuit institutions may seek social justice however, they may still maintain a paternalistic outlook on service and community engagement in general. As Savard notes in his work, there is a strong focus on global poverty and the injustices of the poor. According to Kelly, "Students discover the "richness" of the poor, which is found in their values and spirituality. That richness is often masked by deep poverty" (2010, p.1). This glorification of poverty is not found as part of Ignatian Pedagogy but does come across in such assessments of immersion programs like Savard's. For example, a question intended to measure the level of social justice and structural issues of global poverty states: "People who are poor are hopeful, although they have few resources" (Savard, 2010, 1974). Such an approach to outside communities may lead to fetishization of poverty and lack a critical analysis of the systems which create poverty and resource imbalances globally.

Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach to analyze the impacts of migration-themed immersion trips on undergraduate university students and whether transformations from the experience helped build a sense of solidarity with migrant communities and politics and policies

of migration in the U.S. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who participated in the 2018 and 2019 Puebla, México and 2019 Bogotá, Colombia immersions. Interviews were held in the weeks following or one year after the immersion trips took place. The sample of voluntary student interview participants included 4 undergraduate students. Three of the students had participated in immersions in 2019, one in Puebla, México and two in Bogotá, Colombia. The other student had participated in an immersion in spring 2018 in Puebla, México. Despite the difference in years, the trip itinerary for the migration-themed immersion in Puebla, México from 2018 to 2019 was the same.

Interview questions were developed using theories on solidarity (Vasta, 2015; Hemmings, 2012) and civic engagement (Richard et al., 2016). Relevant demographic data was also recorded, including student major and year in the university. Student participants provided additional personal information about family immigration background and ethnic identity during the interviews. Participants identifying information was removed from the data. The names used in the data and analysis sections are pseudonyms.

Online surveys were also sent to 2019 migration-themed participants before and after the immersion trips. Surveys included 38 questions ascertaining self-assessment feelings of solidarity, civic engagement, political engagement and knowledge of migration studies. Data was collected from 15 participants who completed the online surveys. Student completion was inconsistent for both the pre and post-immersion surveys. Therefore, only relevant demographic data from surveys will be detailed in subsequent data and analysis sections.

This study took place at a private university in California. As a Jesuit university, the institution promotes a mission of social justice, with values incorporating elements of social justice (Arrupe, 1973). All Arrupe Immersions serve as an “alternative break” and focus on a

social justice issue. The goal of Arrupe Immersions is to provide opportunities for undergraduate students to learn about, meet, engage with, and reflect on social justice issues and the communities they impact. Arrupe Immersions (hereafter referred to as “immersions”) use Ignatian Pedagogy to guide preparation, interaction and reflection while immersed in other’s communities. According to John Savard, immersion programs at Jesuit universities hold all of the components of the Ignatian Pedagogical paradigm (2010). Ignatian Pedagogy relies on the process of experience, reflection and action (Streetman, 2015). This process requires students reflect on their own context in which they enter an experience and what they bring to the site of immersion as well as other reflective preparations for learning and spiritual transformations (Streetman, 2015). All immersions included in this study are informed by Ignatian Pedagogy and rely on Jesuit institutions in host communities to act as co-organizers and guides during the trips.

The Puebla, México immersion has been on offer at the university since the year 2013. It began as an exploration of communities in México and did not gain the theme of migration until 2015, when the university recognized the social importance of the transit of migrants from Central America in Central México. The migration-themed trip to México for 2019 had an unprecedented number of applicants and a limit on space. For that reason, a new immersion trip was created to Bogotá, Colombia, with an existing Jesuit partner institution. This additional immersion trip option gave those who applied for immersions with the theme of migration a chance to learn about migration in different global circumstances. The Bogotá, Colombia immersion focused on the current situation of Venezuelan refugees who have been seeking asylum in Colombia by the hundreds of thousands for the last few years.

Student demographics for immersions range from undergraduate freshmen to seniors. There is no requirement for particular major or other academic requirement for acceptance into

immersion programs. Requirements from the university to ensure student eligibility included proving student's academic and behavioral record. Student recruitment and marketing was done through social media, posters and flyers, with much of the recruitment through word of mouth and by past immersion participants themselves. Student applicants had access to brief descriptions and information on financial cost of immersions. Students were made aware of financial aid options and potential scholarships from the time of recruitment and throughout the application process. During scheduled meetings throughout fall and spring, the immersion leader, staff of the university, gave their group the preparatory information including logistics, itinerary, packing list and expectations of community engagement.

The schedule for immersion trips is based around the university semester system. Preparation for immersion trips begin every year in September with student recruitment, host institution collaboration and leadership training, all leading up to winter intersession and spring break the following year when the week-long immersion trips take place. A follow-up post-immersion meeting is held the week after students and staff return to the university. In contrast to previous years, immersion recruitment for 2019 changed its marketing to focus on the social justice theme ("Sports and Communities") rather than country location of the immersion (Peru). The 2019 recruitment saw a much higher interest in the environmental justice and migration-themed immersion trips.

Limitations

Limitations for this study included low participation and attrition of student participants in surveys and interviews during data collection. Although students were contacted before the immersion trips and given multiple opportunities to fill out online surveys, they did so either only before or after the immersion trip. This made the surveys unusable for comparison of the

data. The sample size for the group was only 22 student participants, leaving little room for attrition. Additionally, when the study adapted to rely more on semi-structured interviews, again students were reluctant to participate. Those who did self-select to participate in interviews did so for personal or professional reasons. A potential explanation for low participation, not anticipated in the research design, could be the “recovery period” which participants return from immersions in a state of confusion and guilt, as some of the interviews suggested.

An additional noteworthy limitation is the nature of immersions. The immersion trips are open to all students on campus in good academic and behavioral standing. However, a particular type of student is more likely to join an immersion trip. Students who have an existing relationship with the University Ministry at the university, or a familiarity with immersion trips or social justice activism, are more likely to participate in immersion trips. This association may play a role in student’s existing openness and interest in civic engagement and solidarity. Students who chose to participate in migration-themed immersions also did so because of an existing interest in the topic of migration for a variety of reasons including family background and academic interest.

Data: Four Participant Profiles

Profile “Kat”: Puebla, México – Spring 2019 Immersion

Kat is currently studying International Relations with a focus on the Middle East. Kat’s motivation to participate in the Mexico immersion came from parallels drawn between the migration situation in the Middle East and that of North and Central America. Kat also described this immersion as “the one that was most relevant to what I wanted to focus on in the scheme of human rights”. Kat noted that migration is a big issue in the U.S. “at the moment” and she wanted to be able to talk about it. Lastly, Kat mentioned that although her family did not come

from México, they did migrate to the U.S. from a country in Latin America. Overall, Kat wanted to participate in the immersion to expand her understanding of migration beyond her own experience and studies.

When discussing the impact of the immersion, Kat noted that her experience was intense with “a lot of exposure to a lot of issues and a lot of people in a short amount of time”. She described a difficult transition back to the U.S. and the university. The immersion experience did motivate her to apply for a semester internship in Washington D.C., saying, “...I think that that experience gave me exposure into migration rights and immigration rights and like a deeper passion for that issue. So, definitely, yes it was very important to like bring those experiences back.” When asked about opportunities to relate this experience on campus at the university, Kat mentioned some groups which support undocumented students but also noted that these groups are “mainly surface level...not much activism”.

In terms of civic engagement, Kat was determined to do something with the information and the experience. This informed her decision to spend a semester internship at an organization which focuses on migration in Washington D.C. She also noted that, while she is an International Relations major, the classes she has taken so far in her program have not focused on migration as much as she believes the university and program should. This was one of the motivations for participating in the migration-focused immersion in the first place and a factor for the decision to do a semester internship in Washington D.C.

A key topic in the interview with Kat was the contrast of her previously held knowledge on migration and the first-hand experience that she had on the immersion. She noticed herself becoming desensitized to the topic of migration and “seeing it...in person for the first time...that was just like a complete shift in my view of migration.”. The news and her studies had not

prepared her for this first-hand experience. On encountering migrants in person, Kat said, “I think that’s what shifted it, just like seeing people and their actual emotions and being able to talk to them”. She then compared in-person dialogue and encounter with learning about migration in the classroom, “Hearing it actually from someone who is going through it...definitely there is a difference between a professor telling you what is going on and them actually telling you from a personal experience...yes, it was super different.” Kat gave examples of knowledge, from both university courses and the news, which she contrasted with the first-hand experience of speaking with migrants in transit and migrant shelter staff and volunteers. Kat’s experience was contrary to her expectations, resulting in a kind of affective dissonance, allowing her to add to her personal experience and understanding migrants as people and the migration situation more generally.

Kat describes seeing the train which migrants ride on their journey north: “La Bestia” or “the beast” as one of the most impactful experiences on the immersion. Kat described seeing the migrants trying to jump on and people falling off the moving train. However, she relates that the most powerful memory of that scene was the “trash” that had fallen to the ground as people jumped. Although Kat calls it “trash”, she then describes its significance. The “trash” is medicine, food and “all the necessities”, she says. Kat connects this moment in the migrant’s lives with their future life by examining such necessities of all humans, food and medicine, and by seeing migrants waiting and jumping on the moving train, after leaving the relative comfort of the shelter. This experience helps humanize the migrants, going beyond even the power of their story and reminding Kat and the others that these are human lives; needing nourishment, health and safety, like all people.

In addition to the impact of encountering migrants and migrant shelter staff first-hand, Kat also described how the identities within the group of undergraduate students served as a place of encounter and solidarity building. The majority of the group identifies as Latinx and some students identify as Mexican or Central American. Kat identifies as Latina, and even though she is not Mexican or Central American, she empathizes with the students who relate most closely to the migrants and the migration experience witnessed during the Mexico immersion. Kat describes the sense of solidarity within their group saying,

So, I know, for me I'm not Mexican and my family..., my family didn't have anything to do with it a lot, like Central American, Mexican migration issue, but...still the concept of ...coming from your homeland to another, to this country was very impactful for me and for a lot of the other students that were not Mexican or Central American it was for them, like you could tell -- because we also sympathized with the Mexican students who were sharing that like it was just really hard for them to know that their families have gone through this journey. Like they could imagine their families going through these struggles...

Kat is describing the process of understanding and gaining sympathy for the other students in the group. The space and situation they are placed in while on the immersion allows for this encounter. A space for encounter which is not present on the campus back home, according to Kat.

Kat described that the students who did not identify as Latinx "gave space," to share and reflect, to the students most impacted by the experience, "...and then for the students that were not Latino at all they were very understanding. I don't know -- because like seeing your peers like having to go through this realization and like watching them go through this realization it is

also impactful for ...yourself". Kat reflects on her and other's identities back in the U.S. and at the university specifically, saying that their "dual identities" and "histories and ancestries in other places" can get lost there. The immersion served as a space where the discussion of family struggle, migration, assimilation and cultural identity was discussed and put in perspective. Allowing new understanding and perspective for those in the immersion group who do not relate to these identities and bonding together those students who do. The latter group, according to Kat, may not have that space (or have not yet found it) to share and bond around these identities on campus. Within the immersion group, the identity formed from a migration experience is something that the students without a migration story "understood...upon going to Mexico", according to Kat.

Profile "Jessica": Bogotá, Colombia – Spring 2019 Immersion

Jessica is a senior at the university studying International Business. This was Jessica's second immersion during her time at the university. Jessica was the student leader of the immersion to Bogotá, Colombia. She had originally applied to go on the migration themed immersion trip to Puebla, México, but when the group split, she decided to lead the Colombia trip. Jessica stated in her interview that the reason she chose a migration immersion is because she comes from a conservative background. She thought the immersion would help her to better understand migration abroad and in the U.S. When asked about the conservative social and political perspectives from her family and "back home", Jessica said it was,

...a very conservative area. And there is just, there were a lot of Trump campaigns and things like that happening in my community whenever I would go back home. And whenever I would read things in the newspapers I would...get sentiment from like friends or like Facebook and all of that, like negativity about like immigration from Mexico. But

coming to this university I hoped to escape that a little bit, having a little more of a liberal mindset and so this has been something that has always been on my mind, being in California and I have a lot of friends in, in the LA area, as well, that experience this more directly. Especially from college, getting to meet them and hear their stories about it.

And so, I wanted, I really wanted to hear like both sides.

Jessica describes this difference between her background being conservative and her presence at the university and interaction with peers engaging with the topic of migration being a “sticky subject” for her. Even though it is “sticky” Jessica is determined to understand it better and “get over those hurdles and try to understand both sides.” Jessica also acknowledges that she will experience discomfort while exploring both sides, but this will eventually allow her to understand the subject of migration better. Post-immersion Jessica had discussed with the group planning a call to action but had some trouble putting it together with all the pressures of the end of the semester.

Jessica also expressed interest in becoming more involved in local community organizations. She mentioned that the local organizations she was aware of seemed to assist more Mexicans than Latin Americans generally. Although she has not found an organization to become involved in, Jessica does feel better prepared to work with a migrant organization in the future, and the exposure to an organization like Jesuit Refugee Services has given her a look into what organizations can do. Particular to JRS, Jessica recognized there are many Catholic organizations assisting migrants, and that migrants of intersectional identities were apprehensive to seek assistance from faith organizations, but JRS specialized in assisting those populations. This helped change the perspectives of migrants who sought assistance of Jesuit and Catholic organizations, something Jessica as a Catholic considered a good thing.

When asked about politics and political engagement, Jessica was still hesitant to talk about politics more generally. The conflict between Jessica's conservative background and her experiences at the university and the immersion became apparent in the interview. Jessica mentioned a distrust in the political system and a belief that corporations have a lot of influence over politics. At the same time, Jessica recognizes that other students at the university believe politics are the way to make the most change in the U.S. Jessica spoke of having a "a lot to learn still" about politics. She says she is trying to be more informed and not use "specific" news sites.

Jessica was also exposed to a global perspective on migration from an expert speaker during the Colombia immersion. According to Jessica, the lecture from this speaker compared migration in different places and gave the perspective of politicians, focusing in on the situation in the European Union. In contrast to the expert speaker, a student in the group also gave another perspective on migration a little closer to home. Jessica relates hearing from a member of the group, saying,

...one of our participants brought up, was that she is from Mexico and she had family members that had to go to, go across the border to California to do a job every day or go to school, things like that. But when there were a lot of immigrants coming into Mexico, they were trying to take away from like the resources, because they would try to cross the border like illegally, and things like that and then the United States and California would put sanctions that would not allow them to cross anymore and that would be preventing the people who actually had jobs in California or needed to go here for school to not even cross as well.

Although physically in Colombia, Jessica took from the immersion a global perspective on migration. Due to her background as an international business major, which focuses on global

more than localized politics, she paid particular attention to this part of the discussion. However, Jessica also stressed the importance of a group member's perspective on the broader and more personal impacts of migration at the border between Mexico and the U.S.

On a global scale, Jessica encountered the topic of migration through first-hand experience and dialogue about migration politics in Colombia and Venezuela, North America and Europe. Dialogue and experience also exposed Jessica to a variety of individual perspectives, from European Union politicians to a family living at the border of the U.S. and Mexico. This experience gave Jessica more information but also the sense that migration as a phenomenon is far more complicated than courses or the media have it appear. Jessica describes the experience overall as “eye-opening” but perhaps more importantly is the take-away that “everything is two-sided, and you just can't look at things as one-sided.,” something Jessica says she tries to remind her more conservative family and friends back home.

Profile “Sam”: Bogotá, Colombia – Spring 2019 Immersion

Sam is a sophomore studying Political Science. She joined the immersion after the Bogotá, Colombia trip was added as an option. She chose the Colombia immersion in order to expand her knowledge and experience of the world. Colombia was of particular interest to her because, in contrast with México, she says that she rarely hears about the situation with Colombia and Venezuela. Additionally, she chose to participate in an immersion because she wanted a hands-on experience alongside her university peers.

Sam said that the immersion provided a good glimpse of the migration and refugee situation in Colombia. She also mentioned how this experience impacted how she and others view the world and that that is a very important aspect of the immersion trip. Upon returning to

the U.S., Sam mentioned that she and the others in the group need to ask themselves “what can we do next from this?” but have yet to collaborate on a group initiative. In terms of further engagement more locally, Sam feels that the members of the group need to “keep going in educating ourselves on similar issues like this.” Defined plans for engagement at the time of our interview had not been made. However, Sam mentioned the importance of not forgetting the experience and taking some action in the future.

Reflecting on the immersion experience in contrast with the current U.S. politics on immigration, Sam relayed a sense that the Colombian government is “more open to immigrants” whereas “the U.S. is hesitant right now.” She goes on to say, “it’s intense so I don’t feel like paying it any [attention] right now.” Sam is opposed to the current migration policies of the U.S. government but also feels indifferent. She reflects, “I don’t know what are the next steps because it’s just we are kind of stuck. So, it’s like I feel like I can’t do anything about it.” She feels great empathy for the families affected by current policies, mentioning news of a recent ICE raid in her local community. However, this empathy, while palpable, does not seem to move Sam into a state of action. She is instead frustrated and overwhelmed and “stuck,” lacking will to participate in anything related to political engagement beyond arming herself with knowledge and information about the migration situation in the U.S. and the world.

The impact of first-hand experience on the immersion changed the participating student’s perspectives on migration in the Colombian and global context, according to Sam. Upon returning from the trip, Sam said, “I now know a lot more of what is going on and I have seen with my own eyes what has been going on in Columbia.” She uses this knowledge to reflect on how the U.S. treats migrants, stating that “we don’t give enough” resources to those who need them in the U.S. Returning to the experience of being in the country and seeing the situation

first-hand, Sam describes seeing a family walking on the side of the road, carrying backpacks and looking exhausted. She has a strong feeling that these people are Venezuelan refugees, which strikes her hard. She describes her feelings saying, "...it's just like, wow, like I'm seeing it right there. Not on the news, it's right there. They are trying to come for a better life. So, it -- it was really kind of a shock, but it's just like, but I'm glad I saw that." Sam contrasts the news and her knowledge of Venezuelans fleeing their country with the sight of the people walking. This adds to her knowledge but also adds potential challenges to what she already knows from her studies and the news or a type of dissonance (prior to the immersion, she had done some independent research on migration to Colombia from Venezuela, her specific interest is in U.S. intervention in Latin America and migration). This dissonance, caused by first-hand experience and self-reflection, is the starting point for solidarity (Hemmings, 2011).

Identity played an important role in the group reflections during the immersion in Colombia. Personally, Sam describes being half Peruviana and Salvadoran. Prior to the immersion she had the opportunity to visit both countries, an experience which changed the way she views her background and identity, something she says someone with connections to another country should do, "to see what you are all about." Sam describes the group on the immersion, 12 altogether, many of whom have the same background as her, a self-identifying Latina. This common bond she connects to the group's ability to relate to and understand her perspective during reflections. Describing the non-Latinx students in the group she says, "There were a couple who didn't really know" but "they were getting it. So, I was thankful for that." When asked more about the importance of sharing a common background with the group, Sam elaborates saying, "...I do feel like people who are similar to me, they need to feel like they are not alone in what their struggle with is... my grandparents were immigrants to the US, so...when

I told them that -- they were very appreciative of what I had to say...” Much like Kat and the other students interviewed for this study, Sam encountered opportunities for solidarity in both her experiences of dissonance and reflection on identity within the group. She makes connections with students who share her identity while also allowing those with different backgrounds to better understand the importance of her and other’s identity and how it relates to migration.

Profile “Anna”: Puebla, México – Spring 2018 Immersion

Anna is an International Relations and Spanish major at the university. She became interested in the immersion trip to México when learning about migration in her Spanish classes and because her family is from México, and she had not yet visited. She wanted to experience both the Mexican culture of her family, as well as the culture of an immersion trip through the university.

Anna describes how this experience impacted her during the immersion and on her return to the U.S. When asked about civic engagement with migration and the local community post-immersion, Anna said that the experience “is impacting what I’m in doing as far as work maybe when I’m done with school or if I wanted to go back to school.” Anna also worked in the community post-immersion at a local organization which assists immigrant women. She says she chose this organization as an option for her Spanish Service Learning course in order to continue with what she had learned and seen on her immersion trip to México. When asked about opportunities to engage with migration topics on campus, Anna could not think of any on-campus groups which relate to the topic of migration.

In regard to political engagement, Anna was hesitant to give an opinion. When asked about her opinion on the current political situation of migration in the U.S., she referred to news

articles about children in detention and the general rhetoric around migrants themselves. She said, "...it's hard to see..." and expressed frustration about the rhetoric or "the way people speak about people." She feels that the news does not tell the whole story, especially stories of people who did not want to move but had no other choice. Anna does not refer directly to the current political administration but more generally equates the news and the "way people speak" with the current political climate.

The immersion experience in México impacted Anna in multiple ways which she related. In particular was the first-hand look at the train, "La Bestia." Reflecting on seeing migrants trying to jump on or off the train, some deciding to stay at the shelter nearby, she says, "...it was nothing like I've seen in movies or a I've heard about, but it was just really impactful to see that in person," she said. Contrasted with what Anna had previously learned, this experience was not laden with facts and figures but gave more "contextual information from people's experiences and people we were talking to." Rather than conflicting with what Anna had learned in classes this experience added to her knowledge and understanding of migrant's experience in México and migration in general. This particular scene is something that one year later she recalls when she hears news stories about migrants in transit in México and "La Bestia."

Anna described the entire immersion group as identifying as Latinx or Mexican with everyone being able to speak Spanish. She believed this was as an important factor for understanding the experience of the immersion and relating within the group. According to Anna, many members of the group, "...really resonated with being there, the culture and like their own family's history and migration stories." Anna described one person who did not identify as Latinx, a Latin American studies major with knowledge on migration and México which helped give them the background for understanding. She reflects on the different

perspectives within the group, saying that many of the stories they heard from migrants were similar to stories they grew up hearing from family members. However, for someone without a migration story, she ponders that this experience could be “eye-opening.” Anna sees an immersion experience like the one she participated in as a potential counterpoint to the rhetoric in news currently. An immersion experience for someone without the identity or background of migration could lead to better understanding of migrant’s lives. This in-person interaction could also allow migrants a chance to speak for themselves as opposed to being spoken about as they often are in the media, she suggests.

Anna, as opposed to the other students interviewed for this study, felt she had a lot of information on migration from the Spanish classes taken at the university prior to the immersion trip. Like the others, she found her experience of seeing the migrants in person and the train “La Bestia” first-hand to be very different than any of the knowledge and media she had previously engaged with. Importantly, she contrasts this first-hand experience with the rhetoric in the media, suggesting that stories of migration are not new to her and others with migration backgrounds but could be eye-opening to those who do not share this identity or background.

Demographic Data Findings

Online surveys resulted in a collection of demographic data from 15 of the 22 total participants of the two migration-themed immersion trips in 2019. Of the 15 participants who submitted surveys, 80% are female identifying, with the other 20% identifying as male or gender non-binary. Compared to demographic data from the National Survey of Alternative Breaks, this ratio is consistent with the national average (NSAB). Data also showed that 47% of participant’s parental education background shows a completion of high school or less than high school, 40%

having attended a four-year college or more and 13% having attended some college. In order to address the question of dual-nationality or transnationality, a demographic question was asked about the number of passports the participant or a close family member holds. The data revealed that of the 15 participants 53% said they have more than one passport or a close family member does, with the other 47% of participants or their family members holding only one passport. The data also showed that 60% of the participants who took the online survey identify as Democrats, with the other 40% as Independent, Democratic Socialist or “other.”

Discussion

The main findings of this study related to civic and political engagement and the correlation with solidarity building. Interviews showed that students wanted to engage, and understand migration better, with some evidence that they had started building solidarity with migrants, a commitment formed through the combination of an experience of affective dissonance and a personal connection with community members (Hemmings, 2012; Mitchell & Coll, 2017).

The research hypothesis stated that the presence of civic and political engagement would relate to solidarity around migration. While civic engagement was measured through the students’ desire and interest to learn about and become involved in migration communities and organizations, the timing of the interviews, mainly a few weeks after the immersion took place, may not have been a long enough period to measure the full impact on students’ civic engagement. Political engagement was measured through interview questions about future participation in the politics of migration, in the form of voting or activism, and general feelings toward the current political administration’s migration policies. Counter to the expectations of this study, where political engagement falls under the umbrella of civic engagement (Matto et al.,

2017), political engagement was relatively negatively correlated with the immersion experience. Interview participants stated that they were not interested in engaging with the current political administration in the U.S. They also stated that they felt hopeless, indifferent and apathetic about current policies for migration in the U.S. Although they believe current U.S. migration policies are terrible and that they disagree with them, none said they wanted to engage directly with politics of migration through protest or other forms of political activism.

Solidarity with migrant groups and around politics and policies was interpreted from the desire to continue supporting and future participation through civic engagement. Solidarity has been linked to the experience of affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012) with previously held personal knowledge and understanding of migration being challenged through first-hand experience and dialogue with migrants and stakeholders during the immersion. This opportunity gave immersion participants a chance to reshape ideological commitments through discourse and reflection (Mezirow, 2003) to make space for solidarity relating to the experience of dissonance, in this case understanding of migration and commitment to solidarity with migrants. Participants described their first-hand experience as “shifting” their perspective, as unforgettable and something they reflect on often. Participants who felt they had knowledge from courses or had read news article on migration were shocked to find a more complex, personal and humanistic experience while on the immersion. This feeling of dissonance, or “feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds,” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158), helped participants move out of the feeling of discomfort of confronting something they don’t know transformed into solidarity, a commitment to better understanding and future civic engagement.

Other relevant findings include the existence of dialogue across difference and identity exploration related to a shared migration background within the group. As noted by Hemmings, solidarity does not hinge on identity (2012) however, identity did play a role as participants described the experience of watching their classmates grapple with and reflect on the migration experience. Some considered their migration background as a key part of their identities and as self-identifying Latinx students. Other immersion participants experienced recognizing themselves as outside of the group, not identifying as Latinx, but being brought into the conversation of migration and helped to understand alongside their peers. The group served as its own setting for dialogue across difference, which Mitchell (2008) identifies as a key aspect for lasting student impacts through experiential learning. The interviews also suggest that there should be more research on students of color's experience of experiential and service learning programs, as Niehaus and Rivera suggested (2015).

Mention of the news or media was present in all the interviews as well. Interview participants reflected on the difference between what they heard about migration in the media and what they witnessed during the immersion. One participant mentioned that the media relayed the same information they encountered while on the immersion but that the experience of meeting and seeing things first-hand taught them to look at media more critically. Other participants spoke of avoiding biased news sites and returning to their hometown to challenge the one-sided viewpoints they encountered. There was also mention of images of the Migrant Caravan of 2018 being used to exploit migrants or to attract attention as "click-bait." In respect to the media, all the interview participants concluded that the real situation was more complicated than the media makes it seem and being there and actually meeting the migrants gives one a much different perspective on migrants and different migration situations. While

media is not a topic which the literature on experiential learning discusses, outmoded means of education are. If, as Colby et al. suggests, higher education is not supplying students with a sense of curiosity and independence of mind, a critical approach to information (2003) then where is the education for a topic like migration going to come from? Do we want undergraduate students being “educated” through the media or should education take greater responsibility for producing critical-minded and engaged graduates?

The limited demographic data reveals certain trends related to immersions with a migration focus. The relative proportion of participants who say they or a close family member holds more than one passport, 53%, a proxy for dual or transnationalism, suggests that students with a transnational identity are interested in learning more and exploring the topic of migration during their time in university. Although the urban location and the level of diversity at the university overall may also have a causal relationship to transnationalism, this only strengthens the conclusion that this demographic of students are interested in and looking for education and experiences related to migration. As Niehaus and Rivera discussed, the narrative of “border crossing” during abroad programs and experiential learning is changing as we see students of different backgrounds interpreting their experiences differently than white middle-class college students (2015).

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between students, their educational experiences and the potential impacts of learning about migration first-hand through experiential education. The participants of this study described an intense, extremely impactful experience while on migration-themed immersions resulting in an increased desire to learn more about migration and

become engaged in migration civically, through internships and volunteering at the community and national level. The literature suggests that through experiences of dissonance, transformative factors and education while on immersions (Hemmings, 2012; Mezirow, 2003; Segal and Wagagman, 2017) students can build solidarity with a group and around a topic. The participants in this study also relayed an ambivalence toward the current political system, meaning they do not wish to engage with the political system around migration. However, a deeper discussion of political engagement, university student activism and voter turn-out is needed to better understand this topic.

The findings in this study also contribute to the discussion on higher education and the practice of experiential education. Many aspects of the study relied on literature from outside the discipline of education. The study of migration often uses an interdisciplinary approach to explore the interconnected nature of social and political phenomena and policies. It is recommended that immersions and experiential learning programs continue to explore topics like migration to ensure better understanding of the topic and give students opportunities to engage with migrant communities. Making immersions and other experiential learning programs accessible to all students and supporting their engagement with the topic should become a priority of the university.

The conclusions drawn from this research on solidarity building through experiential education, as well as aspects of student identity formation and political engagement, should be considered in light of the limitations of the methodology and the sample size of this study. Future research could build on the concept of solidarity to include studies on the growing influence and trust/distrust in media in comparison to education through first-hand experiences. A comprehensive longitudinal study to explore whether the measured impacts of solidarity and

civic engagement persist over time is also worthy of more research. Lastly, research from the perspective of the host institutions, community organizations and members would give future research added depth and perspective.

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