

EFFECTS OF MISSION TRIP PARTICIPATION ON SOCIAL JUSTICE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

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Abstract

Research on the effects of mission trips on social awareness, attitudes, and behaviors towards social justice has been limited. In the current study, we examined whether volunteers going on a weeklong art camp in Guatemala with a non-profit, Athentikos, would show positive changes in their social justice attitudes and behaviors. Current trip participants (n=6) completed questionnaires before and immediately following their trip, whereas trip alumni (n=10) completed questionnaires regarding one previous trip. We hypothesized that participants will report an increase in social awareness as well as feelings about and plans for social action immediately following the trip. On average, all variables showed some increase from pre-trip to post-trip with confidence increasing significantly and interest in social justice related activities, evaluation of social justice obstacles and support, and empathic awareness showing trends towards statistically significant increase. Overall, trip attendees showed correlations within a number of positive social justice attitudes and behaviors.

Introduction

Poverty, racism, and other social issues exist cross-culturally; however, awareness of these issues varies among individuals. Moreover, it is of great societal interest to determine how to increase individual action in working to overcome these societal issues. This study will examine whether a voluntary week-long art camp in Guatemala will result in positive changes among participants in regards to levels of social awareness and desire for social justice. Social awareness is one's recognition of issues like poverty or racism, which can be focused abroad (e.g., in Guatemala) as well as within the United States. Those higher in social awareness are most likely to engage in social action because the first step to intervening in an issue is the recognition that a problem exists (Darley & Latané, 1968). Social action is defined as visible behaviors that reduce social injustices, such as volunteering with humanitarian and social justice organizations and going on mission trips. Those who help often experience empathy, or experience another's feelings vicariously, which leads them to then work to alleviate another's suffering (Myers & Twenge, 2017). More specifically, ethnocultural empathy, as defined by Wang (2003), is a learned ability and personal trait that specifically examines empathy concerning members of different racial and ethnic groups.

Preconditions exist which either encourage or hinder helping behaviors. An individual must be aware that a situation exists, recognize it as problematic, and remember its existence. Then an individual must have a sense of responsibility for solving the problem. Feelings of responsibility are heightened through a shared sense of identity with the distressed group or must be inclusive to the extent that they would include the distressed group. Another precondition for helping behavior is a sense of empathy for others. Once an individual feels aware and responsible, they must then feel self-efficacy powerful enough to start action.

Knowledge of Social Issues

There is often a social, geographic, and economic divide between those with more and less privilege. Divisions partially occur because people tend to associate with those they feel share a common identity, also known as their "ingroup," which in turn puts those who have different experiences into an "outgroup" (Sherif, 1965). These divisions can be found in social interactions or even in physical environments, where the privileged are distanced from inequalities and injustices.

Levine, Prosser, Evans and Reicher (2005) found that helping behaviors can be increased by creating inclusive identities in which similarities are emphasized and celebrated. Additionally, reminding people of their group identity strengthens the likelihood that they will help someone whom they perceive to share their identity. Levine et al. (2005) also found that expanding an identity to include a greater set of people results in increased helping behaviors. Because of the socio-economic and often physical differences between generally middle class North Americans and those living in poverty both stateside and internationally, it is difficult to breed familiarity. A type of "prejudice habit" occurs when a person may deny having certain prejudices but underlying discomfort may exist and arise in real life situations (Devine, 1989). The presence of underlying prejudices often occurs because of stereotypes, which prime people to rely on heuristics for information (Devine, 1989).

Learning Models

Since social injustices can occur at the individual, group, institutional, and societal levels (Rothenberg, 2007) there is a need to look at models for engagement and advocacy for social justice abroad as well as in the United States. Learning about an issue only through a textbook is not sufficient. The learning must stick with an individual over the long term. Memory models show information retention occurs in two ways: explicit or implicit (Myers, 2007). Explicit memory can be formed with intentional learning. Passive methods of learning, such as lectures, are not as effective as more active models such as immersive experiences (Choi & Kirkorian, 2016). Mission trips, especially international trips, are fully immersive, suggesting the outcomes of such trips will produce long-term explicit memory and learning for lasting results in behavior and attitude.

Perspective-Taking/Empathy

Because social justice actions and attitudes often lack direct or immediate benefits to an individual, it is beneficial for participants to feel connected to the cause they support. Having substantial interactions with a diverse group can encourage people to value others' perspectives and the importance of engaging in social action (Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002). It has also been found that empathic concern is correlated with valuing the welfare of others; specifically, if a person perceives someone in need as someone of high value, they are more likely to offer assistance. Alternatively, those perceived poorly are less likely to receive empathy and assistance (Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to develop an understanding and familiarity between people for them to become invested in the welfare of others.

Religious convictions have also been associated with helping behaviors, particularly if the behaviors are planned in advance or involve people (Galen, 2012). In this study, participants participated in a religious mission trip with a faith-based curriculum, meaning that spiritual elements such as forgiveness and redemption were discussed and incorporated into the artwork volunteers helped the children to create.

Beyerlein, Trintapoli, and Adler (2011) found that mission trips could increase a variety of civic activity, and out of the outcomes measured following short-term mission trips in adolescents, formal volunteering showed the largest increase. The current study will similarly evaluate whether Athentikos's I AM ART religious short-term mission trip encourages attitudes and behaviors promoting social justice with a wider range of ages. Because the Athentikos trip is taken by a self-selected set of individuals, we would expect already elevated levels of social awareness, empathy, and self-efficacy and that the trip itself will strengthen those feelings.

Self-Efficacy/Confidence

Social justice-related self-efficacy is an individual's perception of their capability of succeeding in doing social justice-related activities and having positive outcome expectations; increased self-efficacy predicts social justice activism (Miller et al, 2009). If there is a lack of self-efficacy in social justice activities, it is difficult to remain motivated to continue working, particularly if the participant is part of a more privileged group (Goodman, 2000). Feelings of self-efficacy have both direct and indirect effects on social justice interest, but those more interested in social justice tend to show greater commitment and high self-efficacy (Miller & Sendrowitz, 2011). Confidence and commitment toward political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism can be strengthened due to participation in a social justice education course (Krings, Austic, Gutiérrez, & Dirksen, 2015).

Athentikos's I AM ART program

Scott and Amelia Moore founded Athentikos in 2008 following the adoption of their two sons from Guatemala. For an I AM ART program, Athentikos pairs with organizations in Guatemala that work with at-risk youth. American volunteers travel to Guatemala and spend three days learning about the culture and history of Guatemala and seven days hosting an art camp that teaches youth about different art mediums and connects art with the world around them. During the art camp, volunteers share the same facilities as the at-risk youth, often in orphanages and group homes, and are exposed to their daily lives. Many of the children have been victims of physical or sexual abuse, child labor, or homelessness. For the majority of volunteers, this is their first exposure to interacting with people from the aforementioned victimized groups.

Only a handful of studies have examined the impact of mission trips on social awareness, social justice, and ethnocultural empathy (Wang et al., 2003; Beyerlein et al., 2011; Krings et al., 2015; Hurtado et al., 2002). However, these studies typically use college students as their sample population and examine how learning experiences within the classroom affect desire for social action. The present research will examine multiple variables together in an adult sample of trip volunteer participants from the community. The purpose of this study is to examine a wider range of adults and measure how exposure to a short-term trip experience in Guatemala directly impacts the participant group's social awareness and desire for social action.

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that, as compared to pre-trip levels, participants will have increased social awareness, and feelings about and plans for social action immediately following the trip.

Methods

Pre- and Post-Trip Participants

Participants were six Athentikos volunteers from the fall 2016 and fall 2017 I AM ART trips (6 females; age range: 19-48). The sample consisted of 5 White and 1 Hispanic/Latinx participants, all of whom identified as middle or upper-middle class. On average, participants completed a bachelor's degree or were in the process of pursuing a collegiate education. The majority of participants identified as Protestant and one participant identified as Evangelical Christian.

Alumni Participants

Alumni participants were 10 Athentikos volunteers from fall and summer I AM ART trips between 2014 and 2017 (6 females, 4 males; age range: 23-64). The sample consisted of 7 White and 3 Hispanic/Latinx participants, all of whom identified as middle or upper-middle class, with varying educational attainment (from high school to doctorate). The majority of participants, six of the ten, identified as Protestant; three specified they were Christian or Evangelic Christian, and one identified as Christian Scientist.

Design

Participation in this study had no effect on whether participants were able to participate in Athentikos's I AM ART program. Trip participants were emailed a link to the online consent form two weeks prior to their trip and after signing were redirected to pre-trip questionnaires on SurveyMonkey. One week following their trip, participants were emailed a link to post-trip questionnaires. Alumni were emailed the consent form link and then the post-trip survey. Of the 30 individuals who were emailed pre-trip, 10 completed the pre-trip questionnaires. Of those, six completed the post-trip questionnaires. Of 70 alumni emailed, 10 completed the questionnaires.

Measures

Pre-trip Measures for Current Trip Participants

Two subscales from The Social Awareness Inventory (Sheldon, 1996) were used: One measured self-experience from the self-perspective, including awareness of their own experiences and self-consciousness, such as: "When something upsets me, I think a lot about why I got upset" (Sheldon, 1996). Another subscale was others' experiences from others' perspective; this measures the awareness one has of others and their experiences, such as: "More than most, I put myself in another's shoes" (Sheldon, 1996). There are eight items in each subscale rated on a 5-point scale (1= Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree). Internal consistency in the present study was good for the self-experience from self-perspective, $\alpha=.82$, and for others' experiences from others' perspectives, $\alpha=.80$.

The Social Issues Questionnaire (Miller et al., 2009) addresses participants' awareness of issues like social inequalities, confidence about participation, and

engagement in social justice and equality activities. There are 51 items, rated on several 10-point scales. 10 items examining confidence in participating in different social justice activities (0= No confidence at all, 9= Complete confidence), 10 items examining how much participants felt they could cause specific outcomes such as "reduce the oppression of certain groups" (0= Strongly disagree, 9= Strongly agree), 9 items addressing interest in social justice actions, such as: "enrolling in a course on social issues" or "going on a weeklong service or work project" (0= Very low interest, 9= Very high interest), 9 items examining potential encouraging factors or barriers to social justice activity (0= Not at all likely, 9= Extremely likely), and 9 items about how likely participants would be to "have access to a role model" (Miller et al., 2009). Internal consistency for the scale in the present study was adequate, $\alpha=.69$.

Two subscales were used from The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang, 2003). The first subscale on empathic perspective taking includes 7 items; the second includes 4 items, which measure empathic awareness. Both are rated on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly agree). Empathic perspective taking includes items meant to indicate an effort to understand those with racial or ethnic backgrounds different than one's own, whereas, empathic awareness focuses more on the knowledge that experiences differ between racial or ethnic groups (Wang, 2003). Internal consistency in the present study was poor for the empathic perspective taking subscale, $\alpha=0.62$ and the empathic awareness subscale, $\alpha=.65$.

Additionally, a 5-item questionnaire, designed for the present study, asked participants to rate their knowledge of Guatemalan and US history and poverty. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1=not at all, 5=very).

Post-trip Measures for Current Trip Participants and Alumni

The same measures and subscales from The Social Awareness Inventory (Sheldon 1996), The Social Issues Questionnaire (Miller et al., 2009), and The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang 2003) were given post-trip. Additionally, post-trip measures included two items regarding level of engagement with Athentikos and other humanitarian organizations (rated on a 5-point scale: 1= Not at all, 5=Very often), which asked "How engaged have you been with Athentikos since your trip?" as well as "How engaged have you been in humanitarian organizations outside of Athentikos?" The post-trip measures also included eight open-ended questions regarding positive, negative, and growth-producing aspects of the trip and participant experiences.

Results

Only participants with complete data were analyzed. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses regarding trip experiences was examined for consistent themes between participants. Quantitative analyses used paired samples *t*-tests to test for changes from pre-trip to post-trip and correlations to examine interrelations among the post-trip and alumni group variables.

Qualitative Findings

Regarding the most positive aspect of the trip, the majority of participants reported that they most enjoyed working with the at-risk youth. The theme of working with the children emerged in reports of enjoyment of doing physical artwork, but also in more interpersonal ways such as sharing stories with the children or feeling a sense of community. One of Athentikos's camps is held at Casa Bernabé, one of Guatemala's orphanages. A volunteer from the 2015 Casa Bernabé camp stated, "The most positive experience was seeing how kids started sharing their stories with us, because that meant they trusted in us enough and maybe we can't fix their problems but we can bring a little bit of relief through listening."

Participants also expressed joy in the trip's service elements. One participant stated, "Having seen many other parts of Guatemala but never the "inner" city, I greatly appreciated the opportunity to be in the La Limonada community for the week." La Limonada is one of Guatemala's largest slum communities located in what is referred to as a "red zone" due to the severe poverty and gang violence.

Regarding negative experiences on the trip, two participants were unhappy with a lack of hot water showers, while others struggled with the language barrier and communication. However, five participants noted they had no negative experiences or that leaving was the hardest part of the trip. One participant stated, "It was hard leaving the kids knowing I probably would never see them again," while others simply wrote, "having to leave."

Although many responses were relatively undeveloped, participants were most expansive in their answers to the most growth-producing or challenging aspect of their trip. Participants wrote about aspects like learning about the reality many of the children face regarding abuse and trying to understand it. Eight of the responses discussed what the trip organizers call "Conflict Day" and/or the children's stories as one of the most challenging parts of their experiences. At one camp, during "Conflict Day," volunteers are educated about their location at Oasis, a residential home for girls who have been victims of sexual violence, and they hear the stories of the girls who live there. One participant wrote that her greatest challenge was "the tears of our girls and hearing about all of the troubles at Oasis and in Guatemala on the night of Kate's presentation." Another said it was "knowing how much suffering there is in a place like La Limonada while trusting in God's goodness and sovereignty." Another participant, an interpreter,

wrote about "Conflict Day" saying, "...I have to leave my emotions behind for a little while and express what the kids are trying to say without crying all the time. What I'm trying to say is the third day pushes you to always go farther because all the emotions that are involved."

Overall, the responses from participants illustrate how the experience of going on an I AM ART mission trip is more than a typical vacation. Participants' responses indicated an awareness of the service elements' value on the trip and positive associations with such elements. Though some negative experiences were reported, such as the lack of comforting amenities, overall, participants were positive about their experiences.

Pre-trip and Post-trip Quantitative Differences

Descriptive statistics for all variables at pre-trip and post-trip are shown in Table 1. To examine the extent to which social justice attitude and behavioral variables were influenced by trip experiences, pre-trip and post-trip scores were compared using paired samples *t*-tests. Most variables showed at least a minor increase from pre-trip to post-trip. However, likely due to the small sample size, the only statistically significant difference was found in the increased scores for confidence levels pre-trip to post-trip; $t(5)=-2.214$, $p=0.039$. The relationship indicated confidence levels post trip ($M=137.67$, $SD=20.39$) were higher than confidence levels pre-trip ($M=119$, $SD=25.52$).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables

Measures	Pre $n=6$		Post $n=6$		Alumni $N=10$	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Confidence	119.00	25.52	137.67	20.39	122.40	27.69
Perceived Benefits	62.33	20.37	66.83	12.75	51.90	15.77
Interest	48.17	8.61	52.00	5.80	47.60	7.93
Likelihood of Engagement	55.50	11.33	63.67	7.15	50.60	9.30
Self-Experience	36.33	6.15	35.17	4.07	32.30	3.89
Others-Experience	33.00	2.83	33.33	5.28	30.4	6.24
Empathic Perspective-Taking	22.83	2.23	23.83	4.36	18.80	3.19
Empathic Awareness	15.60	3.78	18.00	1.87	17.10	2.08

Similarly, interest, empathy, and evaluation of support and obstacles showed a trend towards an increase following the trip. I found a difference approaching significance in the scores for interest levels pre-trip and interest levels post-trip; $t(5)=-1.326$, $p=0.121$: The relationship indicated a trend for higher interest post-trip ($M=52$, $SD=5.80$) than pre-trip ($M=48.17$, $SD=8.61$). There was a difference approaching significance in the scores for empathic awareness levels pre-trip and post-trip; $t(4)=-1.760$, $p=0.0765$. Empathic awareness levels post-trip ($M=137.67$, $SD=20.39$) were somewhat higher than levels pre-trip ($M=119$, $SD=25.52$). Additionally, there was a difference approaching significance in the scores for evaluation of obstacles and support pre-trip and post-trip; $t(5)=-1.263$, $p=0.131$. The relationship indicated post-trip levels for likelihood to engage in social justice activities ($M=63.67$, $SD=7.15$) were higher than pre-trip levels for likelihood to engage in social justice activities ($M=55.5$, $SD=11.33$).

Relationships Among Outcome Variables

As shown in Table 2, correlations were computed on the combined post-trip data of trip members and alumni to examine relationships among post-trip outcome variables. The majority of correlations were not statistically significant, with five exceptions.

Table 2

Correlations Among Trip Outcome Variables

	Perceived Benefits	Interest	Perceived Support	Self-Experience	Others-Experience	Empathic Perspective	Empathic Awareness
Confidence	.39	.45*	.30	.32	.43	.11	.49*
Perceived Benefits		.70*	.67*	.21	-.08	.20	.39
Interest			.42	.12	.06	.08	.51*
Perceived Support				.10	.07	.23	.17
Self-Experience					.24	.06	.28
Others-Experience						.27	.30
Empathic Perspective							.01

Notes. * $p < .05$, $n = 16$

There was a positive correlation between post-trip interest levels ($M = 49.80$, $SD = 3.11$) and confidence levels ($M = 130.04$, $SD = 10.80$), $r = 0.447$, $p < .05$ as well as perceived benefits of engagement in social justice activity levels ($M = 59.37$, $SD = 10.56$), $r = 0.698$, $p < .05$.

There was a positive correlation between evaluation of obstacles and support ($M = 57.14$, $SD = 9.24$) and perceived benefits of engagement in social justice activity ($M = 59.37$, $SD = 10.56$), $r = 0.672$, $p < .05$.

Empathic awareness levels ($M = 17.55$, $SD = 0.64$) were positively correlated with confidence levels ($M = 130.04$, $SD = 10.80$), $r = 0.49$, $p < .05$, and with interest levels ($M = 49.80$, $SD = 3.11$), $r = 0.51$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

This study evaluated the impact of participation in Athentikos's I AM ART camps. As outlined in the literature review, to make a social impact, an individual must take a number of cognitive steps. Research has shown that there are multiple encouraging factors and obstacles in social justice activity. The current study examined a variety of those factors, many of which can be evaluated together and used to evaluate self-efficacy in the form of confidence levels, perceptions of support and barriers, and future intentionality of action.

First, given mission trip participation, it was assumed that all trip attendees were demonstrating recognition of the existence of social problems in Guatemala. Given this initial step, participants must have a sense of responsibility for the problem. Volunteers invest resources into a trip like this because they feel the trip will produce change and solve issues. The results indicate that the ability to recognize social problems and feel a sense of responsibility is not restricted to experiences in Guatemala. Participants also indicated desires to participate in social justice activities in their communities upon their return.

It was found that participation in Athentikos's I AM ART program resulted in increased levels of confidence in one's ability to complete a variety of social justice activities from pre-trip to post-trip. The confidence levels subscale included items such as confidence in one's ability to discuss issues related to racism, sexism, classism, etc. This growth suggests that the Athentikos trip helps participants feel more capable of speaking on social justice topics they may have avoided previously and taking action to effect change.

Confidence is an important part of self-efficacy (Cramer, Neal, & Brodsky, 2009), a prerequisite for this kind of social justice activity (Citchoka, Górska, Jost, Sutton, & Bilewicz, 2017). As a person's self-efficacy increases, so does their likelihood to participate in a variety of activities. As seen in the present results, confidence levels were correlated with empathic awareness and interest levels in a variety of social justice activities. Participants expressed more awareness of how others are stereotyped or systematically oppressed. Further, once people have increased confidence following an I AM ART camp, that experience may be broadened to address people and problems in their communities (Smith, 1989). This suggests that groups such as Athentikos may bolster social justice activities beyond the populations they target.

Additionally, there are several interrelated benefits of participating in a mission trip including levels of interest in and perceived benefits of engagement in social justice activities, evaluation of obstacles and support, and empathic awareness. These correlations suggest mission trips may improve multiple social justice variables at once. As such, this study predicts a virtuous cycle, or spreading activation, among post-trip and alumni outcome variables. Though this study did not examine causality, it is possible, with factors like confidence levels and perceived barriers and support for engagement, that directionality exists. For example, if confidence grows, then one may perceive fewer barriers and more support.

However, that growth could occur in another direction. There is also potential for a spreading activation in which multiple variables are simultaneously increasing because of the trip itself.

Many of the variables that were significantly correlated with one another have been found in prior research to be predictive of future action, such as perceptions of barriers and support for social justice activities and the perceived benefits of engagement in social justice activities. It is noteworthy that trip alumni are 1 to 3 years post-trip and still reporting increases in desire for social justice action. This suggests trips may have a lasting impact and encourage not only momentary behavior adaptation, but also a shift in viewpoint and behavior over the longer-term, as might be expected with an experiential learning approach such as a mission trip.

Limitations

Due to a low response rate from a small population, this study had a limited number of participants with somewhat homogenous demographics. Despite the small sample size, this study still found significant results in five domains. However, a larger sample is needed in the future to produce more robust and statistically significant results. It is predicted that a larger sample will produce additional statistically significant results since there were a few domains approaching significance with the present sample.

This study used correlational data, which cannot prove causation or the impact of unknown third variables. However, due to more interactive experiences being more beneficial in learning (Choi & Kirkorian, 2016), it is possible that many of the results found in this study could be due to the immersive experience of a mission trip. However, a control group would be needed to formally make these comparisons.

Future Directions

As this field is relatively unexplored, there are a number of future possibilities to explore, such as examining different types of mission trips or the cultural differences between volunteers and the community they are serving. Furthermore, though the subscales addressed beliefs about potential behaviors, no data were gathered based on participants' actions. Future observational methods would prove useful.

Athenikos's I AM ART camp has a number of unique variables to potentially explore. For example, volunteers have the option to spend an extra three days in Guatemala at Lake Atitlán. It would be interesting to see if the effects of the trip are increased when volunteers are given deliberate time to process their experiences as opposed to rushing back into their daily lives. Though the time spent at Lake Atitlán is free for individuals to use as they wish, many use the time to write and reflect on their experiences or discuss the camp with other participants. This helps participants consolidate their memories and cognitive and behavioral changes by allowing adequate time for mental processing.

Aside from the effects on the volunteers, there are also the at-risk youth who learn about self-expression and healing through artwork. It would be interesting to see if there are measurable effects on the children as camp attendees. Furthermore, if this curriculum is found to be beneficial for at-risk youth who have often been victims of abuse or neglect, it may also be useful for adults who have experienced trauma.

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