

# Evaluating Mexican Perceptions of the United States and Americans Following a Short-Term Sport for Development and Peace Initiative

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## Background

Sport for development (SDP) programs use sport as a vehicle to establish positive change in non-sport domains (e.g., health promotion, gender equity). SDP programs have also been utilized to promote citizen diplomacy (e.g., Baker et al., 2018), which refers to the development of meaningful relationships and partnerships between citizens of different countries (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011; Cárdenas, 2013). Deporte y Cambio Social (Sport for Social Change) was a short-term SDP initiative designed through an intercultural collaboration involving academics and sport professionals from the United States and Mexico that used soccer to promote citizen diplomacy between American and Mexican sport professionals and university students.

## Method

Three semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Mexican participants ( $n = 18$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 23$  years). Audio recorded interviews occurred shortly after the program ended and interview prompts included items related to perceptions of the United States and Americans. All interviews were facilitated in Spanish by the 1<sup>st</sup> (White American man) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (Latina Mexican woman) authors. The researchers conducted an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) from a social constructivist epistemological orientation to analyze the interview transcripts.

## Results & Discussion

Three higher level themes were generated from participants' responses:

### 1. Mexicans and Americans are connected through a shared humanity

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

### 2. Mexicans and Americans can collaborate towards a shared purpose

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

### 3. Mexicans idealized American resources and people

*"I feel that most of the United States is the best, because they really have a lot more things than Mexico. The American attitude is superior, and it will always be superior."*

Findings highlight the promising potential of SDP initiatives to build meaningful intercultural relationships towards citizen diplomacy. Sport-based platforms may have a unique role in promoting citizen diplomacy, as the universal popularity of sport provides a common ground through which different groups can connect over a shared passion and develop relationships that extend beyond sport. However, future SDP researchers should be aware of existing neo-colonialist perspectives, as idealistic views of the United States and Americans can be reinforced through SDP programming, which may perpetuate perceived inferiority and deferral to Western 'experts' (Coalter, 2010; Giulianotti, 2011). Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to prioritize the involvement and empowerment of local actors and voices.

