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Ethnographic Field School Teaching and Learning in the Face of Societal Transformation: An Example from Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

"Come to the street!" ("*Vem pra rua*!") This has been one of the most powerful slogans of protest since Brazilians in large numbers have begun to take to the streets in 2013 to make a variety of statements about corruption and government policies. The beginning of this recent protest movement, which has extended to all corners of Brazil, coincided almost exactly with the start of an ethnographic field school the first author directed and in which the co-authors participated in Rio de Janeiro. In this paper, we will discuss some of the unanticipated teaching and learning opportunities for anthropology students that came about as a result of these events. We will also discuss the implications for a model of experiential learning and student anthropological fieldwork in study abroad.

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, the first author[1] of this paper directed a relatively small (8 students) ethnographic field school (the "Field School in Applied Anthropology") in Rio de Janeiro through Georgia State University. This was her fifth summer directing a field school in Rio, and it has gone through a few permutations, from a joint program with law and public health students to a medical anthropology field school to the current model of general applied anthropology, with approximately 70 students total studying abroad for anthropology credit hours since 2005. In this field school, we visit several community development organizations (see Figure 1) in different *favela*[2] communities throughout the city as well as non-profit organizations and public health clinics in other parts of the city. Although we invite guest speakers with university affiliations, the program does not have official ties with Brazilian universities; as an ethnographic field school, the expectations are that students take fieldnotes on their observations of everyday activities and put together a small project on some aspect of Brazilian society they have been able to observe.

Students on this field school had the option to participate in a research project on the effects of changes and policies associated with upcoming mega-events (the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016) on residents of Rio de Janeiro. In 2007, Brazil was chosen to host the 2014 World

[1] The first author was the program director of the study abroad program discussed in this paper. The co-authors, Jessica Glass, Maeghan Dessecker, JohnieSue Thurman, and Christina Phillips, were students on the program and research assistants on a project focused on interviewing residents of Rio on the ways in which the World Cup and Olympic preparations have affected them.

[2] The term *favela* refers to urban communities in Brazil that began as informal settlements. Different favelas in Brazil have different levels of access to city services, though favela residents often face economic marginalization and stigma.

Cup (Burman 2007) for the first time since 1950. Two years later, Rio de Janeiro received the Olympic bid (Rio 2016: 2014). Since then, a number of projects have been launched to attempt to ready the city of Rio and the nation for these events and for the onslaught of international tourism that will accompany them. In Rio, Mayor Eduardo Pães chose an approach of city cleanup known as *choque de ordem* "shock of order." Notably, former New York City mayor Rudolf Giuliani's private security firm has been consulted in designing some of these initiatives (Huffington Post/AP 2010; Roller 2011). This campaign has involved a crackdown on informal vendors and informal vehicles, on drunk driving (though police "blitzes," to which some field school students riding in taxis have been subject to search), and on littering. In addition, a "pacification" program (UPP or Police Pacification Unit) has been underway since just before the Olympic announcement; the aim of the program is to evict drug traffickers from favela communities they control and install an occupying military police force. There are also massive construction projects (including, in Rio, extension of the metro line and highways, a revitalized port area, refurbishing of the Maracanã soccer stadium, and building of Olympic venues), which have been both expensive and controversial in that many involve displacement of thousands of people and reported human rights violations (Williamson and Hora 2012, Freeman 2014).

In this research, students had one question to ask people in Rio de Janeiro: "How have changes in Rio with the World Cup and Olympics affected you? (*Como é que as mudanças no Rio com a Copa do Mundo e as Olimpíadas lhe afectou?*)." Students would ask this question of *cariocas* (Rio residents) whenever they had a chance and when communication was possible. Several students completed human subjects research training so that they could be added to an IRB that was approved for this project. Most students at Georgia State University do not have opportunities for advanced Portuguese instruction, so very few were able to communicate more than a few words, but they found ways to use translation software, talk to people with some English skills, or have the program director (first author) or others translate for them. Students participating in the program have interviewed NGO representatives, vendors, taxi drivers, van drivers, academics, people on the beach, and many others with whom they came into contact in social settings throughout Rio de Janeiro. Students presented on some of their findings at the end of the program, and students have been able to use the data they collected for conference presentation and theses at the undergraduate and graduate level.

Experiential Learning Intensified

Simply studying in another country does not automatically equate to experiential learning (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich 2011). However, cultural anthropology requires students to seek out others in the host country, to practice participant observation whenever possible, and to record and analyze all of their experiences. As an applied anthropology program set in the mega-city of Rio de Janeiro, this field school already involved an in-depth exploration into topics related to social stratification and structural inequalities as manifested in disparities related to housing, health, education, and employment. The first author has attempted to address the "elusive nature of interpreting an urban culture" (Wagenknecht 2011:137) through creating partnerships with non-profit organizations in several favela communities throughout Rio. Students have had the chance to spend time in favela communities in different zones of the city; many students have been able to establish long-term connections and friendships with people they met in Brazil as part of the program. We have also had a chance to visit public health hospitals and NGO offices (such as VivaRio and ABIA—Associação Brasileira Interdisciplinar de AIDS) and hear guest lectures from anthropologists, social workers, urban planners, and scholars from Brazil and other countries whose research is based in Rio. When possible, excursions have been planned with program themes in mind; for example, in visiting Ilha Grande, a rainforest-covered island within the state of Rio de Janeiro, we visit the ruins (now a museum) of the Cândido Mendes prison. We discuss the history of this prison, which once housed middle-class political prisoners along with other prisoners from low-income communities and was the birthplace of the now-powerful drug trafficking organization, the Comando Vermelho.

Even amidst societal transformation, it is possible for travelers, tourists, and study abroad students to be oblivious, particularly if they do not speak the language. In the film *Men With Guns* (Sayles 1997), an aside to the story of a guerilla uprising and government atrocities in a fictional Central American country is that of American tourists who go about their trip with virtually no understanding or awareness of what is happening all around them. Rio de Janeiro is quite sprawling, with some degree of compartmentalization of neighborhoods. On the morning after the first massive protest took over downtown Rio on June 17, only a few field school students knew this event had taken place. Hanging out in bars that night in the South Zone of the city, miles from the city center where the protest occurred, they were either unaware of the protest or had not grasped the implications or the meaning behind it. In addition, the powerful media network Globo continued to run their nightly *novelas* (miniseries-style soap operas) during the height of some of the most monumental protests in Brazil. However, that morning we had a productive discussion of what was taking place, so that students were able to have a historical context for these events.

Although the protest movement in Brazil that began in 2013 seemed to signify a major shift in Brazilian popular thought, we had a chance to observe significant changes on previous study abroad programs as well, changes that have been escalating since the announcement of the World Cup and the Olympic Games. A few students have had the chance to come to Rio more than once with this field school, or return to Rio after the program to travel or to serve as volunteers for different non-profit organizations. These students were able to observe the differences in favela communities they had visited before and after pacification. Armed teenagers from the drug trafficking gangs had been replaced by an occupying force of armed military police. We learned of increases in theft and domestic violence within the favelas; before pacification, these types of crime were less common because of the threat of extrajudicial justice from drug traffickers. We learned about dramatic changes to the informal economy that have come about through pacification as well. We collected stories of both positive and negative changes that have taken place in the perceptions of *cariocas*.

Fieldwork and Fieldnotes

Though there are many study abroad programs that focus on social movements as well as on the aftermath of political violence, dictatorship, and struggle, little has been published about on study abroad student (and program director) direct experiences of societal upheavals, with the exception of firsthand accounts of students. Some student accounts illustrate the potential positive long-term impact on study abroad students. A University of California at Berkeley video production (UCTV Prime 2012) features a broadcast journalism student, Justin Hinton, who studied at the American University in Cairo and was a witness to the protests of the Arab Spring.

> Maybe about a month after I moved into my own apartment, you could start to see the unrest starting to grow, and we were getting word that something big was about to happen. People were in the streets, burning police cars, burning police stations, and I would actually go out into the streets and see this happening all around.

In the video, he narrates some of the films that he had taken, including a man being forcibly dragged away from Tahrir Square:

> This was probably the worst thing that I saw on that particular day. You've got a lot of people who are hungry, a lot of people who just want a basic education . . . and they weren't happy with the way it was being provided to them. They wanted some change.

Internet and phone access were lost for a few days, but when it was reestablished, he received word from study abroad advisors that they would be evacuating. Later in the video, he notes that the film footage he had taken in Cairo were part of what helped him to secure a position with an NBC affiliate television station (UCTV Prime 2012).

Dr. Janice Perlman, now President and CEO of the urban development NGO the Mega-Cities Project, studied abroad in Brazil in the years just prior to the beginning of a two-decade-long military dictatorship:

> The summer of 1962 was a time of great political ferment in Brazil. The compelling issue was how to create a system that would overcome the failures of both capitalism and communism. The country was thrust into this challenge when the president, Jânio Quadros, resigned suddenly on August 25, 1961 and sailed off to Europe in a dramatic gesture, hoping to incite a popular uprising demanding his return with expanded powers over Congress . . . Everywhere our student group went in Brazil, there were heated discussions of *reformas de base* (structural reforms) such as land and tax reforms . . . It was a heady time to be in Brazil. Each individual was being called on to contribute his or her energies, ideas, and skills to the project of creating an inclusive and just country on behalf of "o povo" (the people, particularly in reference to the rural poor. The feeling that everyone could make a difference intrigued me and made me curious to know more about the "povo"—who were they, what were their lives like, and what changes did they want? (Perlman 2010: XIV-XV).

Perlman went on to return to Brazil to study abroad the following year and conduct extensive research in favela communities over several decades. Her work serves as a strong critique of the culture of poverty hypothesis; she has also demonstrated the ways in which urban planning policies (and particularly housing policies) in Rio de Janeiro and other cities around the world have had the effect of marginalizing working class populations who were previously quite integrated in the mainstream political and economic scene of the nation (Perlman 1976; Perlman 2010).

Studying abroad during a time when social upheaval (for better or worse) seems to be on the horizon gives students an opportunity to dialogue with citizens about their thoughts, since most conversations during such a time tend to return to the transformations that are taking place. In our experience in 2013, with every guest speaker we invited and on visits to every non-profit organization we were able to visit, Brazilians were eager to discuss their thoughts on the events that were taking place and the effects on their communities. Jessica Glass (a graduate student on the program and co-author of this paper), stated in a presentation on her experience and research in Brazil:

> I understand that aesthetics have always been used in politically charged fashions, but I never truly experienced their power before this past summer. Prior to then, I had never felt so intensely moved by political aesthetics; in Rio, everywhere I set my gaze, images displayed by protesters had me simultaneously excited, angry, and enthusiastic. The copious Brazilian flags everywhere, the abundance of Guy Fawkes masks being donned, and the profuse political graffiti all over the place occupied my vision the whole time I was in Rio. Regardless of being present at an active protest, their gestures and symbols painted Rio de Janeiro 24/7. The sentiments of the protesters were present for everyone to see, becoming unavoidable (Glass 2014).

The field school was this student's first visit to Brazil; the experience of the protests shaped her research interests and prompted her to write her M.A. thesis on the protest movement as it developed in Brazil leading up to the World Cup (Glass 2014).

While emerging social movements have the potential to change student perspectives and to encourage them to ask questions about other societies (and perhaps their own) that they would not have otherwise considered, being present in a country while these changes are taking place brings with it significant risk. In 2013, university student Andrew Pochter, was killed while attending a protest in Cairo (Lorin and El-Tablawy 2013). The fact that he was not part of a formal study abroad program (he was

interning with a non-profit organization) does not suggest that study abroad students are somehow more protected.

In Brazil, while many protests taking place around the country were peaceful, the police response often was not. Photos of protesters being subjected to tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and beatings by the police quickly made it into the international media. Although this was an historic occasion with so many opportunities for students to learn about Brazil's past and present, as a group we stayed clear of the larger protests that were taking place downtown for safety purposes. Still, some of the students attended protests they learned about on social media, which they wrote about in their fieldnotes after the program was over.

Two students (and co-authors of this paper) wrote about having attended these protests (as well as their conflicted feelings about attending in spite of the dangers):

> I knew I had to go [to the protest] but made myself have restrictions—like leaving before dark, not getting close to the front, and walking away as soon as it got crowded. It was very peaceful and the energy was very positive. Everyone wore Brazilian colors, wore masks from V for Vendetta, had the Brazilian flag, and held signs. . . Despite problems in Brazil, people are united under their national pride, *brasilidade*. I found it entertaining that street vendors were selling beer during the protest . . . It felt like a social gathering almost. " Christina Phillips, June 21, 2013

> There are a lot of protests going on currently. As an anthropologist I really wanted to go out and witness the protests. After all, I kind of understand why the protests are going on. The government is extremely corrupt. They are spending massive amounts of money on the upcoming events but disregard basic public services such as health care and education. Our instructor asked us not to go, of course, because the police have been taking violent measures against the protestors. [Another student] and I took a trip downtown where the protests were being held yesterday. We saw it *begin*! . . . The police were armed with hand guns and batons (but I mean every police officer here is). . . . We left after an hour or so. We didn't want anyone to worry about us or get upset so we didn't want to stay long. It took us *forever* to get back home because everywhere was packed with protestors. The only scary part of the whole thing was trying to get through the metro station—because it was packed with hordes of people. Maeghan Dessecker June 21, 2013

As anthropologists-in-training, experiencing the protests allowed students opportunities for observation and thick description (in their fieldnotes) of an historic event, but even though the students set limits for themselves, their attendance at the protest was counter to recommendations from the study abroad office to avoid demonstrations. As tempting as it was for a study abroad program director who is also an anthropologist to encourage students to attend an event like this, it presents too many risks. However, by talking with residents about their understandings of the political situation, study abroad students can much from simply living in a city during a time of protest. These conversations and interviews may also be dangerous in some circumstances, but if the program director is familiar with the country, s/he should be able to gauge the level of risk of talking openly about these topics.

Some of the initial catalysts of the protests, such as public transportation policies, led to opportunities for reflection on urban change and who is affected. In the spring of 2013, Mayor Eduardo Pães banned informal vans operating as a transportation alternative in Rio de Janeiro. Though ostensibly a response to the rape of a North American woman on one of these vans, the new policy was perhaps aimed at keeping profits in the hands of the private bus companies (Lavin 2013), and it clearly fit in to a larger move toward "fiscalization," (*fiscalização*) or formalization of the economy. Hundreds of thousands of residents, particularly those in favela communities, relied on these vans, which cost slightly less than public transportation but, more significantly, passed more frequently than the

municipal buses. At the same time, a public bus fare increase was scheduled. Since 2006, we had come to rely on the informal vans, particularly in visiting favela communities during our program. We struggled to find transportation to Rocinha in 2013 without the informal vans; the inconvenience of bus after overcrowded bus passing us by and taxi drivers, unfamiliar with the favela neighborhood, dropping us off in the wrong location, allowed students to experience firsthand the sometimes deleterious effects of urban policy changes on *favela* residents.

As the protests spread to different parts of the state and city, we found they were not so easy to avoid. For example, as we were walking as a group to the rocks of Arpoador, between Ipanema and Copacabana, in an attempt to see what the media dubbed the "supermoon" on June 23, we encountered a massive group of protesters walking in the opposite direction, chanting, and carrying signs. The protest had a somewhat festive atmosphere, with vendors all along the "parade route" selling Guy Fawkes masks and Brazilian flags, but the messages on people's placards suggested the seriousness of the sentiments behind the protest. On another occasion, a protest was scheduled to begin about a block from our apartments in the South Zone of the city. As with other protests in Brazil, social media (primarily Facebook and Twitter) alerted people to the time and place for the protest to take place. Local businesses closed their doors in anticipation of looting (see Figure 2), which had supposedly taken place toward the end of downtown protests, but as most of the protests that took place in Brazil, this one, focused on healthcare reform was also peaceful in its start (see Figure 3). Much of the violence documented in the international media took place in clashes between military police and protesters took place in the later hours of individual protests. We made an emergency room visit with a student related to a health crisis that may have been triggered by a van detour we took to avoid a highway that had been shut down by protestors. Another student who had been to Brazil on our program in the past and who was in Rio (but not a student on the program) in 2013 reported being pepper sprayed in an unprovoked attack by military police as she and friends were attempting to get back to the metro.

It is important to be aware of the need to balance teaching goals with consideration for students' physical and emotional health (Lucas 2009). Pre-existing emotional health issues, which may already be heightened in the context of a general study abroad program or field school situation, can be further exacerbated when conditions are unstable in the host country. Programme directors' careful attention to health evaluation forms (which many universities require) that list health conditions and medications that students take regularly minimize these risks; students should be encouraged to continue to take medications to which they are accustomed while studying abroad and to bring along any medications they might need while traveling in-country. During the field school, the programme director (first author) was in close contact with students daily about events as they unfolded in Rio so that they would be aware of the risks in various parts of the city. She used social media to determine where and in what parts of the city certain protests were planned in order to avoid those areas and cancel some of our planned events. In the case of post-trauma of our emergency room visit in 2013 (which involved the entire group in 2013, as we were on the road at the time of the student's health crisis), she attempted to follow up with each student about how they were feeling after this event.

Many cultural anthropologists are accustomed to solo travel and fieldwork. Anthropologists who lead a study abroad program in which students may also be research assistants or collaborators may need to shift their perspective. Students who are studying abroad are often getting their first taste for travel and have not necessarily committed to immersion in the manner of an anthropologist beginning a dissertation research project. Before embarking on study abroad, "faculty members should look within themselves and determine if they want to assume the responsibilities that inevitably fall on them in the event of an emergency" (Engstrom and Mathieson 2012:795).

Conclusion

Despite massive anti-World Cup and anti-FIFA sentiment in Brazil, street protests were sparse (and relatively ignored by the international media) during the 2014 World Cup as the nation became swept

up in enthusiasm for the games. Still, it is unlikely that the dissatisfaction related to serious inequalities, lack of investment in healthcare and education, housing removals, or repressive police violence will be forgotten in Brazil, particularly with Brazil's World Cup dramatic loss (which for many people has resulted in further questioning about the excessive spending associated with this event) and as preparations continue for the 2016 Olympics. Over the past year, strains of protest with different messages emerged from among the middle and upper classes, targeted at ousting President Dilma Rousseff and even bringing back a return to military rule. Future iterations of this field school (including one planned for the summer of 2015) will continue to focus on these topics and their significance in Brazil and worldwide.

Anthropologists have a particular advantage in leading study abroad programs in locations where they do or have down fieldwork. They are able to provide students with an in-depth understanding of space and place that may be based on longitudinal work in a region. Many anthropologists' choice of research topic and fieldwork site makes their study abroad programs "nontraditional" as defined by most university study abroad programs. Anthropologists may be aware of the challenges of these locations based on their fieldwork, but it is important that they prepare their students for these challenges. Falk and Kanach (2000:167) argue that "in a world where poverty and resentment abound, and disparities between rich and poor are growing ever greater, it is crucial to learn as much about 'the reality' of 'the other' as possible." In discussing the benefits of nontraditional study abroad, the precise danger might be in exoticizing this experience, so that, as Woolf (2013: no page numbers) notes, "[s]tudy abroad becomes a form of educational tourism: 'a trip,' motivated, at worst, by a kind of voyeurism in which privileged young Americans go to observe relative poverty in a developing country (Woolf 2013: online). Of course, poverty and conflict are not restricted to "nontraditional" study abroad countries. Wherever a study abroad program takes place, the study abroad director(s) can seek ways for students to engage with the issues that are most prominent in the minds of residents of host cities and regions. With this field school in Rio, the aim was never to design a tour of poverty or conflict. The focus has been on increasing student awareness regarding contemporary urban topics in Brazil and on facilitating the creation of meaningful relationships between students and people we meet and work with in Brazil, so that they might in the future find ways to effect social change both and home and abroad in a participatory manner.

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