STANDPUNKT : SOZIAL
FACHZEITSCHRIFT FÜR SOZIALE ARBEIT

OPEN ACCESS
Publiziert im April 2025
DOI: 10.15460/spsoz.2025.35.1.246

Learning through Study Abroad

Jason Anthony Plummer[1*], Ramona Chatman-Morris[2*], Joseph Quillin[3*], Lizette Rodriguez[4*], Randy Hope[5*], and Nancy Meyer-Adams[6*]

1 Jason Anthony Plummer, California State University, Long Beach
2 Ramona Chatman-Morris, California State University, Long Beach
3 Joseph Quillin, California State University, Long Beach
4 Lizette Rodriguez, California State University, Long Beach
5 Randy Hope, California State University, Long Beach
6 Nancy Meyer-Adams, California State University, Long Beach

Zeitschriftenartikel
Begutachtet

Koordinator*in:
Prof. Dr. Daniela Ulber
HAW Hamburg, Deutschland

Redaktion
J.Georg Brandt
HAW Hamburg, Deutschland

Erhalten: *14. April 2025*
Akzeptiert: *14. April 2025*
Publiziert: *24. April 2025*

Datenverfügbarkeit:
Alle relevanten Daten befinden sich innerhalb der Veröffentlichung.

Interessenskonfliktstatement:
Die Autor:innen erklären, dass ihre Forschung ohne kommerzielle oder finanzielle Beziehungen durchgeführt wurde, die als potentielle Interessenskonflikte ausgelegt werden können.

Empfohlene Zitierung:
Jason Anthony Plummer, Ramona Chatman-Morris, Joseph Quillin, Lizette Rodriguez, Randy Hope, Nancy Meyer-Adams (2025) Learning through Study Abroad. STANDPUNKT : SOZIAL 35 (1), 2025, Internationale Kooperationen des Departments Soziale Arbeit, S. 1-11.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15460/spsoz.2025.35.1.246

Abstract

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to recognize injustice and act. This responsibility has been expanded in the 2022 EPAS as supporting students in developing competency in advancing social, economic, and racial justice (CSWE, 2022), and the 2021 revisions to the National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics strengthened the profession's commitment to social justice by making taking action to challenge oppression an ethical requirement (Plummer, 2024). ?

Schlagwörter: ethical responsibilit, injustice, competency in advancing social, economic, and racial justice, social justice

 DOI: 10.15460/spsoz.2025.35.1.246

Learning through Study Abroad

Jason Anthony Plummer, Ramona Chatman-Morris, Joseph Quillin, Lizette Rodriguez, Randy Hope, Nancy Meyer-Adams

Learning through Study Abroad

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to recognize injustice and act. This responsibility has been expanded in the 2022 EPAS as supporting students in developing competency in advancing social, economic, and racial justice (CSWE, 2022), and the 2021 revisions to the National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics strengthened the profession's commitment to social justice by making taking action to challenge oppression an ethical requirement (Plummer, 2024). Taken together, this implies social work programs should support the sociopolitical development of students. Within the developmental sciences, sociopolitical development is a process of becoming aware of and choosing to address inequality (Heberle, 2020). Critical reflection, an important construct within sociopolitical development, is conceptualized as becoming aware of and choosing to act on oppressive structures and has been centered in most of the research on sociopolitical development among adolescents and young adults (Diemer, 2021; Plummer, 2024; Wray-Lake, et al., 2022). It is often framed as a precursor to critical action, a set of civic and interpersonal actions that challenge structural oppression (Plummer, 2024; Wray-Lake, et al., 2022; Watts & Halkovic, 2022).

Critical actions, within sociopolitical development, are conceptualized as justice-directed, system change behaviors (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2021). For example, student organizers created an anti-bullying campaign and worked to change the social norms within their middle school (Voight, 2015). Black high school students, in response racial microaggressions, organized their peers and formed a Black student union (Plummer et al, 2024). Other forms of critical action can focus on self-work. In various studies, researchers have found that youth of color describe being a role model or being the change as ways that they resist their systematic oppression (Watts & Hakovic, 2020; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020; Wray-Lake et al., 2024). For social work students, creating change and advancing social justice are often cited as reasons for entering the profession. However, such motivations might not be associated with the systems-level analysis required for critical reflection and action. It is possible for a social work student to work with a family experiencing intimate partner violence without attending to the societal norms and social structures that normalize violence, e. g., working with the victim to recognize the signs of an

abusive partner prior to entering their next relationship. At the policy-level, an acritical approach would be advocating for improvements in a program, like ending cash bail, without challenging the power structures within the criminal legal system. The goal of effective social work education is to produce social workers who are aware of how social power operates within society to secure advantages for some while disadvantaging others based on social difference.

In applying the research on sociopolitical development to masters-level social work students, we explore a short-term study abroad program as an opportunity for critical reflection and critical action, allowing students to think critically about social welfare policy and/or their own approach to practice in the United States. Additionally, in 2020, the School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach integrated critical race theory (CRT) into its curriculum. CRT focuses on the origins and continuity of racism in American social and political systems (Crenshaw, 2011; Snowden, et al., 2021). While there is no definitive set of CRT methodologies or a doctrinal cannon, there is agreement that an approach that is CRT-informed should explore to things: 1) investigating the relationship between white supremacy and social institutions, and 2) advancing ideas that dismantle systems of oppression (Graham, 2007). Thus, we are confident that the standard curriculum is capable of preparing students to become competent in recognizing and challenging oppressive structures. The rationale for exploring the merits of the short-term study abroad course is assessing whether having the opportunities to make comparisons between the United States and Germany prompted a critical reflection, identification of structural differences between the counties, or general reflections, e.g., Germany has a different approach than the U.S.

The School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach entered into a sister school relationship with Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, in German Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften Hamburg (HAW Hamburg) to offer two study abroad opportunities, a semester program for students enrolled in the Bachelors of Social Work program and a two-week course on human rights and social justice for Masters of Social Work students. Each program offers students the opportunity to learn about social work in an international, comparative context. In 2019, the director of the School of Social Work began the process of developing a graduate level short-term study abroad elective course with our HAW partners. This course focused on human rights and social justice practices in Berlin and Hamburg Germany with a goal for students to compare and contrast social work practices between the United States and Germany. In evaluating the short-term study abroad trip, we have two guiding questions: 1) how do experiences visiting historical sites and social services providers in Germany influence the students' capacity for critical reflection, and 2) how do these experiences inform their future social work practice? To answer these questions, we reviewed the responses to the three reflection papers that students wrote.

 DOI: 10.15460/spsoz.2025.35.1.246

The students were required to write a reflection that was between one and two pages in length. The reflection paper had four questions or prompts to which the students had to respond:

1. Why did you decide to write about this experience? In other words, why is the experience important to you? How did this experience move you?

2. Has this experience made you re-evaluate the American political system/process? In answering this question, please reflect on the similarities and differences between the United States and Germany. In other words, if the experience has not made you re-evaluate the American political system/process, is this because the experience was similar to the United States. Conversely, if the experience made you re-evaluate, was this due to a similarity or difference in the political system/process.

3. Has this experience made you re-evaluate how you would approach social work practice within your specialization? In answering this question, please reflect on the similarities and differences between the United States and Germany. In other words, if the experience has not made you re-evaluate your social work practice, is this because the experience was similar to the United States. Conversely, if the experience made you re-evaluate, was this due to a similarity or difference in the social context;

4. Our program focuses on the role of racism and oppression on distorting social outcomes and human development. Has this experience made you re-evaluate how racism and oppression constrain human thriving and development? In answering this question, please reflect on the similarities and differences between the United States and Germany. In other words, if the experience has not made you re-evaluate your analysis of the role of racism and oppression, is this because the experience was similar to the United States. Conversely, if the experience made you re-evaluate, was this due to a similarity or difference in the social context?

Students could choose any of the cultural or social service site visits. In Berlin, which was the first week of the course, students had a Berlin city tour and visited the Berlin Wall memorial and museum, and traveled to Beelitz Heilsätten and Potsdam.. They also visited an Islamic childcare and center, an Islamic center, and a labor market service provider. In Hamburg, they had two city tours. The first focused on the area near the city center and the second was in the Sankt Pauli neighborhood. The social service providers included community researchers who worked in Veddel, faculty members from an area technical school, and a social worker associated with a Hamburg-based soccer club. Students were also given time to meet with students from our Germany-based partner schools and present on U.S. social welfare policy. However, these aspects of the course could not be a topic for the required reflection papers.

Using DeDoose software, we used an inductive coding process, which aims to avoid pre-imposing ideas and pre-existing concepts, and instead allows for generating theory that is rooted in the worldviews and experiences of the participants (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, we used a theory-driven approach to identify themes related to critical reflection and critical action. To develop a coding scheme for the inductive codes, initial coding occurred by reviewing a random set of reflection papers. We had open discussions of differing opinions until reaching consensus on the meaning and scope of each code. We, using theoretical concepts derived from the sociopolitical development literature, then conducted focused coding on all reflection, and codes were iteratively reexamined and refined through memoing and group discussion. We are still in the process of documenting our work with an audit trail of written meeting notes, checking for consistency of our code applications, and completing our analytic memos. Yet, our initial findings suggest that for some students, visits to cultural sites and social services providers did spark critical reflection and action.

In terms of developing critical reflection, a student recounted their experience of visiting the Women's container project, "Prior to this experience my thoughts of how to approach the unhoused population was focused heavily on 'fixing' everything for them vs. evaluating what each individual needs. Visiting the women's container project has given me new insight and is something I will never forget." They also contrasted the eligibility requirements for housing in this program against how it is typically done in the United States, "through the container project the women staying there are not required to provide any official documentation to qualify to stay there. This is a stark difference to the system in the United States because so much documentation and hurdles are required for basic needs like housing and Medi-Cal insurance. More documentation is needed as proof of being poor in the United States than it is to purchase a gun. This experience has really caused me to reflect that money and resources are not properly used to assist our most vulnerable population through our current policies." Another student wrote that "I became sad." Their sadness was prompted by the questions that their peers asked, they wrote that the questions were "a reflection of the way that we think, and it very much is like a business model." For these social work students, visiting the container project prompted them to question how the United States addresses homelessness through a managerial approach, emblematic of neoliberalism. In particular, focusing on fixing the problem and how an initiative can be expanded/scaled-up suggests centering efficiency.

Since the 1980s, in the United States, economics and public policy programs have trained their students to prioritize cost-efficient, measurable outcomes over vague objectives like social justice (Berman, 2022). For these two students, visiting the container project has allowed them to think critically about the relationship between neoliberalism and the U.S. welfare state. Given that neoliberalism has become the dominant approach for solving social welfare problems and often does not result in achieving socially just outcomes (Abramovitz, 2014), strengthening student's

capacity for questioning the relationship between economic systems and social outcomes is crucial to supporting them in advancing social justice. Within the context of social work practice, this questioning is important because neoliberalism relies on improving market outcomes; however, not all social outcomes can or should be subjected to market forces.

Recognition of inequality can occur on a continuum from endorsement of the meritocratic ideology, social hierarchies, and individualism to an awareness that opportunities within society are constrained for some groups due to structural forces within society. In fact, initial research on critical reflection used the Belief in a Just World (BJW) scale (see Watts & Guessous, 2006) to capture a person's understanding of society (Parikh, 2011; Watts & Guessous, 2006). However, in their study, Watts and Guessous (2006) reversed coded the BJW scale, so that low values indicated critical reflection. Using a similar approach, Parikh (2011) found that individuals with low scores on the BJW scale make structural attributions for inequality. This aspect of critical reflection was evident when a student wrote, "Due to systemic racism, this often leads to those in power seeing people of color as 'undeserving' of help and find loopholes to prevent providing aid." In connecting racism to finding loopholes, the student may have been referring to how the costs of complying with program requirements are often racially disparate, a process known as racialized administrative burdens. Government services that are perceived to disproportionately benefit people of color often have gatekeeping policies (Ray, 2023), or as the student further wrote, "the US often asks people to justify why they need government aid."

Another aspect of the trip that prompted critical reflection was the walking tour of the Berlin Wall that ended with visiting the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. A student wrote that the tour guide's comment, "about who decides what's remembered or who gets to decide how history is remembered really hit a chord." They went on to write, "To remember the experiences and narratives of oppressed communities, is to validate their lived realities, to hold oppressors accountable, and challenge the perpetuation of stigmas." Another student wrote, "Learning about the Berlin Wall's history made me reevaluate the American approach to our borders as well as the history of colonization. Similar to Germany, the American Border zones also broke up families historically and have had a history of oppression. The United States–México border and the East German–West German border share hard memories of struggle and pain as well as hopes for a better future." Together, these comments speak to the importance of what is remembered, how it is remembered and the actions resulting from what is remembered.

One of the tenets of critical race theory is respecting the unique perspective of people of color (Kolivoski et al., 2014). This tenet of critical race theory is related to critical reflection in that the experiences with marginalizations that people of color often have becomes a form of second-sight. It is the ability to recognize their group's constrained opportunities against the dominant culture's unearned, structural advantage (Wray-Lake et al., 2023). Recognizing the storytelling that is history and the effect that author bias has had and continues to have is an important

step in challenging oppression. As a result of their experience in Germany, these students have internalized some of the curricular focus on critical race theory and are questioning the dominant public memory in the United States. Further, one student wrote, "The U.S. has failed to institutionally take accountability for its racist history. My hope is that in my work as a social worker I can 'memorialize' marginalized communities' experiences by elevating their narratives and facilitating empowerment." This excerpt blends critical reflection with critical action, suggesting that for some students, in becoming aware of structural differences between the United States and Germany they became motivated to act.

Increasing an individual's capacity is important; however, it should not be an end goal. Social work's ethical commitments and educational standards suggest that social work students must go beyond critical reflection and be capable of taking critical action. This short-term study abroad did inspire some students to go further, expressing an interest in advancing social welfare and policy in their practice back in the United States. A student, who wrote that they used to think that the required policy course was irrelevant to their social work practice, now wrote, "I started to realize the true importance of policy." This realization made them consider running for office stating, "After today I know I want to run for board at my local school district. I see myself in a seat at the board and I see myself working on making sure I do the best I can to stop any oppression that families may be facing." A person's contributions to the maintenance and enhancement of civil society are a feature of human development and of key importance to democratic societies (Lerner et al., 2014). Initial research on sociopolitical development conceptualized critical action as a set of civic behaviors (protesting, voting, boycotting, etc.) and prosocial behaviors (Plummer et al., 2022). Subsequent work has expanded the definition of critical action to include a commitment to increase ones' capacity to fight for social change, whether that is as a role model or through holding power (Watts & Halkovic, 2022; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). This student's shift from believing that policy is irrelevant to their social work practice to wanting to run for office represents both an awareness of how social structures shape individual outcomes as well as a commitment to political engagement. The commitment to taking critical action that students expressed ranged from a deepening commitment to social work as expressed by this student who wrote, "this experience made me reevaluate my role as a social worker. I want to be a driving force. I want to be the agent of change in our home country to bring many of the changes I saw here in Germany. But these changes start with admitting we have a problem" to more concrete actions such as running for political office or shifting their community of focus in their social work practice.

One of the historic sites that students visited was the sanatorium in Beelitz-Heilstätten Sanatorium, which was a tuberculosis sanatorium pre-World War I. During the tour, the guide reviewed the sanatorium's purpose of treating workers and the poor. This prompted a student to write, "This experience has strengthened my intentionality with providing care in all aspects of social

 DOI: 10.15460/spsoz.2025.35.1.246

work but especially in regard to advocating and improving access to proper medical care for significantly underserved communities." Visits to the culture sites and with social service providers made other students deepen their professional commitments. For example, after visiting with a local German community organizer, a student was inspired and wrote, "[the German organizer] has fought against the city and huge developers to keep building [in her community]. This moved me to look into macro practices back at home. This has even sparked ideas for my applied project." In their final year of the program, students are required to either complete a thesis or an applied project. The Applied Projects is a two semester course whose purpose is twofold: 1) To provide Master of Social Work (MSW) students with the opportunity to learn from and work with community partners to appropriately assess the needs and assets of the community, and 2) For students to develop the knowledge and skills they require for effective community engagement – an essential principle of social work practice. To do this, they are tasked with designing and implementing a project based on their community assessment and in partnership with an agency, organization, or stakeholder group. The student's inspiration during their time in Germany helped them value community engagement both in their applied project as well as in their social work practice moving forward.

The short-term study abroad trip served as a catalyst for both critical reflection and critical action. Currently, the course is offered as a special topics course and is not an elective. Given the effect of the trip on the sociopolitical development of the students, the School of Social Work may consider adopting it as an elective. However, this would require evaluating the course's role within the curriculum. The electives that the school currently offers have a direct connection to social work practice. For example, the course on psychopathology is taken by social work students interested in social work practice in mental health settings and play therapy elective is often taken by social work students interested in school social work or social work practice with children. The initial findings from this analysis suggest that the course may be offered as an advanced practice policy course, affording students to do comparative policy analysis.

References

Abramovitz, M. (2014). Economic crises, neoliberalism, and the US welfare state: Trends, outcomes and political struggle. http://hdl.handle.net/2123/18299

Berman, E. P. (2022). Thinking like an economist: How efficiency replaced equality in US public policy.

Anyiwo, N., Palmer, G. J., Garrett, J. M., Starck, J. G., & Hope, E. C. (2020). Racial and political resistance: An examination of the sociopolitical action of racially marginalized youth. Current opinion in psychology, 35, 86-91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.005

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Educational Policy and the CSWE Commission on Accreditation. (2022). Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs. https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-EPAS.pdf

Crenshaw, K. W. (2011). Twenty years of critical race theory: Looking back to move forward. Connecticut Law Review, 1253 - 1352. https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/conlr43&i=1271

Diemer, M.A., Pinedo, A., Bañales, J., Mathews, C.J., Frisby, M.B., Harris, E.M. and McAlister, S. (2021), Recentering Action in Critical Consciousness. Child Dev Perspect, 15: 12-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12393

Graham, B. L. (2007). Toward a Critical Race Theory of Political Science: A New Synthesis for Understanding Race, Law, and Politics. In W. C. Rich (Ed.), African American Perspective on Political Science (pp. 212 - 231). Temple University Press.

Heberle, A. E., Rapa, L. J., & Farago, F. (2020). Critical consciousness in children and adolescents: A systematic review, critical assessment, and recommendations for future research. Psychological Bulletin, 146(6), 525-551. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/bul0000230

Kolivoski, K. M., Weaver, A., & Constance-Huggins, M. (2014). Critical race theory: Opportunities for application in social work practice and policy. Families in society, 95(4), 269-276. https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2014.95.36

Lerner, R. M., Wang, J., Champine, R. B., Warren, D. J., & Erickson, K. (2014). Development of civic engagement: Theoretical and methodological issues. International Journal of Developmental Science, 8, 69-79.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). Qualitative Data Analysis: A methods sourcebook (Third ed.). Sage Publications.

Parikh, S. B., Post, P., & Flowers, C. (2011). Relationship between a belief in a just world and social justice advocacy attitudes of school counselors. Counseling and Values, 56(1-2), 57-72.

Plummer, J.A., Henderson, D. K., & Wray-Lake, L. (2024). Changemaking in Non-Black Spaces. In L. Wray-Lake, E.C. Hope, and L.S. Abrams (Ed.), Young Black Changemakers and The Road to Racial Justice. Cambridge University Press.

Plummer, J.A., Morales, M. G., & Dettlaff, A. (2024). Defund, Abolish, or Reform: MSW Student Perceptions of Police Reform. Journal of Practice Policy and Research https://doi.org/10.1007/s42972-024-00108-w

Plummer, J.A., Wray-Lake, L., Alvis, Lauren, Metzger, A., & Syversten, A. (2022). Assessing the Link between Adolescents' Awareness of Inequality and Civic Engagement across Time and Racial/Ethnic Groups. 51, 428-442. Journal of Youth and Adolescence. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01545-6

Ray, V., Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. (2023). Racialized burdens: Applying racialized organization theory to the administrative state. Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 33(1), 139-152. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muac001

Snowden, F., Tolliver, W., & McPherson, A. (2021). Needing, kneading, and eating Black bodies: The history of social work and its concern for Black citizenship in the United States. Advances in Social Work, 21(2/3), 217-240. https://10.18060.24469

Voight, A. (2015). Student voice for school-climate improvement: A case study of an urban middle school. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 25(4), 310-326. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2216

Watts, R. J., & Guessous, O. (2006). Sociopolitical development: The missing link in research and policy on adolescents. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota (Eds), Beyond resistance! Youth activism and community change: New democratic possibilities for practice and policy for America's youth (pp. 59–80). Routledge.

Watts, R. J., & Halkovic, A. (2022). Sociopolitical development and social identities. Journal of Research on Adolescence, 32(4), 1270-1279. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12811

Wray-Lake, L., & Abrams, L. S. (2020). Pathways to civic engagement among urban youth of color. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 85(2), 7-154.

Wray-Lake, L., Alvis, L., Plummer, J. A., Shubert, J., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2022). Adolescents' Developing Awareness of Inequality: Racial and Ethnic Differences in Trajectories. 94(2), 439-457 Child Development. http://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13870

Wray-Lake, L, Hope, E.C. & Abrams, L.S. (Ed.), Young Black Changemakers and The Road to Racial Justice. Cambridge University Press.

Wray-Lake, L., Plummer, J.A., & Alvis, L. (2023). Adolescents' developmental pathways to critical consciousness in the contexts of racial oppression and privilege. In L. Rapa & E. Godfrey (Eds.), Critical Consciousness: Expanding Theory and Measurement. Cambridge University Press.

The Authors

Jason Anthony Plummer his an assistant professor of social work at California State University, Long Beach. His research focuses on identifying the ways in which racism prevents society having nice things like a functioning democracy, high quality of life, and a socially just society.
jason.plummer@csulb.edu

Ramona Chatman-Morris is an undergraduate at California State University, Long Beach studying social work with prior experience in community organizing, labor research and community mental health. She is interested in studying misogynoir in the American healthcare system, climate injustice and the long-term effects of social media on global democracies.
Ramona.Chatman-Morris01@student.csulb.edu

Joseph Quillin is a graduate student at California State University, Long Beach studying social work. He is interested in researching comparative social welfare policies, evidence-based community organizing/political action strategies, international education, and clinical interventions for addressing internalized oppression.
Joseph.Quillin01@student.csulb.edu

Lizette Rodriguez is an undergraduate student at California State University, Long Beach majoring in Social Work. She is interested in researching strategies to advance abolition, support system-impacted individuals, and study the impact of solitary confinement on formerly incarcerated people.
lizette.rodriguez01@student.csulb.edu

Randy Hope is a lecturer in the School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. He has been recognized for his contributions to LGBTQ+ visibility and rights. He was appointed as a commissioner on the Citizens Advisory Commission on Disabilities in Long Beach, CA.
randy.hope@csulb.edu

Nancy Meyer-Adams is a professor and the Director of the School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. Her professional experience includes over ten years of direct practice experience with diverse family and children client populations as a school social worker, behavioral health professional, and researcher.
Nancy.Meyer-Adams@csulb.edu