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La Revolución de los Pingüinos: Educational Reforms and the Chilean Winter

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Subject: History

Abstract

Chile faced tumultuous changes throughout the twentieth century that challenged both political and social norms. Democracy had already been established in Chile, and constitutional changes had inflamed protests under the socialist reforms of Salvador Allende. However, the 1973 military coup of Augusto Pinochet brought many changes, including changes to the free universal educational system established by Allende. Pinochet was unseated, but laws passed during his reign created systematic problems in Chile's education system and years later saw students organize in a movement to reform Pinochet's education laws. By taking a look at these policies of decentralization and support of private education, we can connect present events in Chile such as the student protests that occurred in 2006 and 2011 that came to be known as, "La Marcha de los Pingüinos."

Introduction

In 1980, the government of Chile implemented reforms that transferred the decision-making regarding education to local governments and encouraged increased participation of the private sector in producing education. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte joined the Chilean army in 1935 and rose through the ranks until President Salvador Allende appointed him Commander in Chief in 1973. A month later, Augusto Pinochet led the military coup, with the assistance of the U.S., which overthrew the Allende government and saw him stay in power until 1998. Shortly after Augusto Pinochet assumed power, teachers unions were disbanded, leftist or Marxist teachers were fired, and the military was given control of schools in the Santiago metropolitan area. Issues regarding the quality of education emerged, such as stratification in the access to private education, differences in the quality of education received, and unequal opportunities for students pursuing higher education. By taking a look at these policies of decentralization and support of private education, both that connect with Chile's education system before and after Pinochet took office, we can see a connection to present events in Chile such as the student protests that occurred in 2006 and 2011 that came to be known as, "La Marcha de los Pingüinos."

Chile has long promoted education with a system that was one of the first and is still one of the best in South America. Statistics show that Chile's literacy rate is over 99% (of population 15 years of age and older)¹, but Chile's students made international headlines,

¹World Bank. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. "Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)." Accessed March 29, 2016.

especially within the last decade, for protesting against the state when they demanded fundamental changes to an education system that was reconfigured during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, in the 1970s and 80s, to favor the end of central control funding and privatization. Rallying in the streets for approximately six months in 2006, high school and university students challenged the government to reform the education system due to unaffordability. Again in 2011, Chile's culture of political involvement was stirred and the country's history of prioritizing education finally collided with the aftermath of General Pinochet's dictatorship and the neoliberalism of the current government in Chile, thus resulting in the student protests that consumed the country. While its income is among the highest third, Chile's low-income inequality is in the worst ten percent of countries in the world.² Part of this inequality is also reflected in the Chilean education system. Student protests called to improve economic opportunity in a country where the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently found it to have among the highest rates of inequalities in the world. Therefore, in order to understand the educational socioeconomic inequalities in Chile, we must understand the policies that were put into legislation before and after Pinochet took office, thus shedding light on why thousands of students protested in the name of reform.

A Culture of Political Involvement

The Chilean people have a long history of political involvement that has created a culture of protest. The establishment of rights and organization of the government as laid out by the Chilean Constitutions of 1833 and 1925 led to a system of constant political activity.³ Because of this system, as well as the creation of a strong, educated middle class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with a strong Catholic influence in Chile, the Chilean people formed a society of political activism that strived during the Salvador Allende administration and survived even the fascist Pinochet regime. Salvador Allende was Chile's first socialist president in 1970 before committing suicide during the 1973 military coup led by Augusto Pinochet. Examination of these significant events in the past two centuries of Chilean history is necessary in order to understand the motivations of the student movements.

The Constitution of 1833 established political rights for Chilean citizens as well as a complicated system of elections. One of the first constitutions of South American countries, the 1833 Chilean Constitution's twelfth article gives Chilean citizens the rights to, "present petitions to all constitutional authorities" and "publish their opinions in the press." The constitution created the *Presidente*, the nation's executive leader, and the *Diputados* and the *Senadores*, the two houses of the legislative *Congreso*. The *Diputados* would be elected every three years, while the *Senadores* would serve nine-year terms. These elections would be held in differing years, along with Presidential and municipal elections, held every five and three years respectively.⁴ The 1925 Constitution is similar in nature, but amends some details included in the 1833 Constitution. This Constitution stipulated that Representatives would be eligible for election every four years. Elections for Senators would be held every four years, but Senators would hold eight-year terms,

² World Bank 2014. Accessed April 10, 2016

³ Gonzalo Izquierdo Fernández, *Historia de Chile*. Andrés Bello, 1990.

⁴ Constitución Política de la República de Chile de 1833. <http://www.inap.mx/portal/images/pdf/lat/chile/constitucion%20politica%20republica%20chile%201833.pdf>.

so only part of the Senate would be elected at a time. The President would serve a term of six years and may be reelected, but not for consecutive terms. Municipal elections are held every three years.⁵ The democratic republic and its elections were a source of national pride for the Chilean people, who turned out to celebrate each election with parades and parties. Because the lengths of terms varied, elections were held nearly every year, leading to a perpetual state of election fever, further enforcing nationalism and focus on the government.

In addition to adjustments to term limits, the 1925 Constitution established the Chilean public education system. The new constitution gave citizens the right to assemble and the right to an education, which was a designated responsibility of the local governments, but a national priority. This national emphasis on education throughout the twentieth century led to widespread literacy and the growth of the Chilean middle class. By 1960, Chile's literacy rate, including urban and rural areas, showed that 84% of the population could read and write.⁶ The 1925 Constitution also removed Article 5 of the 1833 Constitution establishing Catholicism as the national religion, but Catholicism continued to influence the ideology of the Chilean people. In particular, Chilean ideology reflected Catholic social thought and papal encyclicals of the early twentieth century.

The Fall of Chilean Education

In the 1970s and 1980s, Pinochet's regime implemented a policy of education reform that drove able students to private institutions, and left the poorest students in the broken remains of the public education system.⁷

Throughout the 1980s in particular, Pinochet began to decentralize Chile's revolutionary public school system. Instead of being controlled by the federal government, responsibility for public schools was placed in the hands of municipal governments, unaccompanied by administrative training or resources. At the same time, municipal leaders were chosen by the Pinochet administration, which was known for its use of force and violence in ensuring subservience. Parents and teachers refrained from interference in the public schools out of fear of the government. As public schools became weaker and weaker, able students enrolled in the more effective private schools, where enrollment increased by 93% from 1980 to 1985.⁸ The students who did not have the means to attend private schools were left in the shambles of the public education system.

This socioeconomic divide grew with the utilization of capitation grants to encourage competition between public and private schools. Much like vouchers, capitation grants are fixed public payments to schools for each student, meant to reduce the cost of attending private schools. In practice, while these subsidies did allocate money from the public schools to the private schools, they were not enough to pay for the tuition of the private schools. Steep fees forced students who still could not afford private school to take on debt or resort to public schools, usually in the poorest municipalities with

⁵ Fernandez 1990

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Francoise Delannoy, "Education Reforms in Chile, 1980-98: A Lesson in Pragmatism," *The World Bank Country Studies, Education Reform and Management Publication Series* (June 2000): 1-77.

⁸ Ibid.

the worst public school systems. With debt or without necessary tools to be successful in the professional world, less fortunate students fell further into poverty while their wealthier counterparts benefitted from the healthy Chilean economy.⁹ Chile's 1980 constitution was drafted under a Junta led by General Augusto Pinochet that was designed to keep him in power indefinitely and continue to limit democracy by giving the military a role in checks and balances. While the plebiscite that led to the removal of Pinochet took place in 1988, Augusto Pinochet was not removed from power until 1990, but his Constitution and system of education remains, and with them one of the largest income gaps in the world.¹⁰

Rebuilding Education in a Pseudo-Democracy

Although Chile returned to democracy with the fall of Pinochet and the 1990 election of Patricio Aylwin, the nation continues to reform Pinochet policies, laws, and systems. For most of the last decade of the twentieth century, the Chilean system of government changed little from Pinochet's government. In fact, legislation created by Pinochet still passed through Congress after he no longer held power.¹¹

Pinochet's privatization efforts culminated in the 1991 law passed by Congress after Pinochet's removal called *Ley Organica Constitucional de Enseñanza* (LOCE), which directly translates to Organic Constitutional Law of Teaching. The law regulates Chilean education at each level, but also appoints an autonomous council to oversee the education system officially decentralizing education. Article 36 designates revenues from tuition and school fees to the council, further privatizing the system.¹² This law, along with the Constitution created by Pinochet in 1980, which first allowed the establishment of private schools, has governed Chile into the twenty-first century.

In 1997, Eduardo Frei and his administration enacted a new law implementing the *Jornada Escolar Completa* (JEC), or "Full School Day." The goal of the JEC was to fit two school days into one, giving students time for more instruction and more classes with a school day that lasted from eight o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening.¹³ While President Frei focused on *Reforma Educativa* (Education Reform), he was unable to exact significant change because Chile remained under Pinochet's law: a democracy still ruled by a dictator. With the discontent of neo-liberalism in Chile rising and Chile's culture of protest, students began organizing not long after Pinochet's downfall.¹⁴

9 Gerardo Jofre, "El Sistema de Subvenciones en Educación: La Experiencia Chilena," Centro de Estudios Públicos (1998).

10 CIA World Factbook, "South America: Chile," Last modified February 25, 2016,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ci.html>.

11 Delannoy 2000.

12 Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza, "Ministerio de Educación Pública," Santiago de Chile (1990).

13 Régimen de Jornada Escolar Completa Diurna, "Ministerio de Educación Pública," Santiago de Chile (1997).

14 Alvarado Rocha, and Viviana Liseth, "Génesis de la Revolución de los Pinguinos y su incidencia en la reforma educativa en Chile." (2010).

The Penguin Revolution

The predecessor to the 2011 student resistance to the system of privatized and decentralized education came in the early months of 2006, shortly after the inauguration of President Michelle Bachelet. Named for the students' black and white uniforms, the "Revolucion de los Pinguinos" consisted primarily of secondary school students. Through a series of non-violent protests throughout 2006 and 2007, *los pinguinos* gained support from the public for their concerns. Among these concerns were the poor implementation of the *Jornada Escolar Completa* (Full School Day) and *el pase escolar* (a free bus pass for students), as well as Pinochet's legacy law, the *Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza*, and the high prices of both private universities as well as the tests required for universities.¹⁵ Though protests often shut down cities and garnered support, the public soon grew tired of the movement. When President Bachelet moved to open a dialogue with students and promised to send reform bills to Congress, many students left the movement with the majority of the public. The leaders of the movement called for strikes to resume, but loss of support rendered the movement ineffective.¹⁶ As the student leaders had predicted, the president and Congress fell short of exacting real change to the Pinochet-era system.

A New System

Weak from lack of support after the government seemed to respond to their message, *los Pinguinos* quieted. Toward the end of Bachelet's presidency though, students began organizing once again. When right-wing President Sebastián Piñera came into office in March of 2010, rumblings began as the government became more conservative. This time, however, the students came not from the high schools, but from the universities. Better organized and already laden with student debt, these students were better able to relate to the public. Despite the nation's 99% literacy rate, students have taken tens of thousands of dollars of debt in order to attend and receive a post-secondary education at universities.¹⁷ This debt came from private lenders, which came with interest rates of 6-10% per year.¹⁸ However, the students' causes ran deeper, to the foundations of the Chilean Constitution. This Constitution, of course, is the same Constitution drafted and established by General Pinochet in 1980. The students argued that the 1980 Constitution, which draws on the ideas of American economist Milton Friedman, has led to a drastic increase in the income gap in Chile and the disappearance of the middle class.

The student movement contended that Pinochet's approach to education reform was the reason the system was bound to fail. In 1975, Milton Friedman sent a letter to General Pinochet, advising him on how to steady inflation in Chile. Friedman argued that giving the market freedom would both lower inflation and improve the quality and

15 Rocha and Liseth 2010.

16 Camila Vallejo Dowling, "A levantar la FECH, a Despertar Chile!" Last modified October 26, 2012. <http://camilavallejodowling.blogspot.com>.

17 "Literacy rate, adult total"

18 Jorgelina do Rosario, "Chile: así enfrentan los jóvenes profesionales su deuda universitaria." Infobae America. Last modified May 16, 2012. <http://america.infobae.com/notas/50546-Chile-as-enfrentan-los-jvenes-profesionales-su-deuda-universitaria>.

prices of the market.¹⁹ Pinochet applied these ideas first to the Chilean economy and then to the education system in his reforms in the 1980s. This privatization treated education as a private good that would improve in quality and decrease in price because of competition by multiple market vendors. Contrary to this belief, which was accepted by most of Chile through the late twentieth century, the student movements in 2006 and 2011 contended that education was a public good, not a private good. The movement also attributed the widespread inequality in Chile to this approach and these reforms.²⁰ Evidence of this inequality in the education system can be seen in Chile's standardized tests: *Prueba de Selección Universitaria* (PSU), *Inserción de Nuevos Académicos* (INICIA), and the *Sistema de Medición de Calidad de la Educación* (SIMCE). The PSU, combined with the secondary school report, is used to determine a student's entrance into state-run and several privately owned universities, but registration is expensive. Similar to the PSU is the INICIA test, which tests graduates of secondary schools who intend to pursue a career in education.²¹ The SIMCE is the national assessment test taken by students in their fourth year of primary school, then alternates each year between eighth year of primary school and second year of secondary school.²²

The insufficiency of Chile's municipal schools is evident in the results of these standardized tests. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2010, 93% of private secondary students took the PSU test and 76% enrolled in private universities, while 62% of students of municipal schools took the test and only 33% enrolled in private universities. The students who enroll in state-run universities, therefore, are mostly from municipal schools. Results from 2011 show that students who intended to study education at a public university, and students from regions with the highest poverty, scored lower with more students achieving insufficient scores.²³ The most significant results came from the 2010 results of the SIMCE evaluation. Students from municipal schools scored around twenty points lower than students in subsidized schools and fifty points lower than private schools in all areas of testing, both in fourth grade and eighth grade.²⁴ Because these students begin behind the more fortunate students, they are at a disadvantage when taking the PSU after secondary school, which determines success in university admission and eventually a career.

The movement asserted that these disadvantages lead to the unequal distribution of wealth. Once the country with the strongest middle class in South America, Chile now

19 Friedman, Milton. "Letter to General Pinochet on Our Return from Chile and His Reply." In *Two Lucky People: Memoirs*, by Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, 591-593. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

20 CONFEC, ACES y CONES. "5 exigencias fundamentales para un Nuevo Sistema Educacional." Accessed March 28, 2016. http://fech.cl/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Sintesis_petitorio_5exigencias_confec_2012.pdf.

21 Ministerio de Educación. "Evaluación Inicia: Presentación de Resultados 2011." Santiago: Gobierno de Chile, May 2012. Accessed March 28, 2016. <http://www.mineduc.cl/usuarios/mineduc/doc/201205071337570.RESULTADOSINICIA2011.pdf>.

22 Ministerio de Educación. "Síntesis de Resultados: SIMCE 2011." Last modified October 2012. http://www.simce.cl/fileadmin/Documentos_y_archivos_SIMCE/Informes_2010/Folleto_Sintesis_WEB_2012.pdf.

23 OECD. "Chile Key Facts, Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012." Accessed March 29, 2016. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG2012%20-%20Key%20Facts%20-%20Chile.pdf>.

24 Ministerio de Educación. "Síntesis de Resultados: SIMCE 2011." Last modified October 2012. http://www.simce.cl/fileadmin/Documentos_y_archivos_SIMCE/Informes_2010/Folleto_Sintesis_WEB_2012.pdf.

has the 15th highest disparity of income in the world.²⁵ Using the GINI index, which measures the difference between a Lorenz curve that plots the percentages of income against the number of recipients and the hypothetical line of perfect equality (a score of zero), Chile had an income distribution of 52.1 in 2009.²⁶ In light of these flaws in the current education system in Chile, the movement has proposed reforms that would create a new system of schools, as well as a reformed social structure. This new educational system, they argue, must be public, free, autonomous, democratic, pluralistic, quality, and intercultural. In order to do this, they press for increased government spending in scholarships, debt relief, and direct funding to universities instead of tax reductions. In addition to funding, the movement calls for recentralization of the school system, reform of the accreditation system, as well as the elimination and prohibition of third parties that profit from schools.²⁷ Their goals, though, are not limited to education. The president of the University of Chile Student Federation (FECH), Camila Vallejo Dowling, reflected on the movement in her blog in October of 2012, saying:

*"We the young do not only want to transform education, we want also a more democratic Chile with a new constitution, to save our natural resources and a harmonious relationship with our environment, to conquer health and rights, with other elements."*²⁸

With strong ideas based in ideology and concrete evidence, the students began their mission in the early months of 2011.

The Chilean Winter

One of the leading groups of the reform movement was the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH). Originally founded in 1906, FECH is the organization of university students in Chile. FECH has a strong history of protesting injustice in Chile, especially under Pinochet. The leadership of the organization consists of five officers, including current president Gabriel Boric and vice president (former president) Camila Vallejo Dowling, the latter of which has become a symbol for the movement, as well as a council of presidents.²⁹ In what came to be known as the Chilean Winter, students at University campuses and high schools organized strikes, boycotted classes and occupied buildings. These protests were the largest since the last days of the 17-year dictatorship of Pinochet, who had overthrown Latin America's first democratically elected Marxist president, Salvador Allende. Not everyone has approved of the students' methods at all times, but it is difficult to find anyone who hasn't come to accept them as significant part of the country's social and political landscape. The movement has employed unique methods that have brought attention and success to protests in a country in which protests are regular occurrences. First, the organization of FECH has been significant in the success of the movement. In addition to the classic protest marches, the students have staged entertaining protests that attract attention to the movement while creatively

25 CIA World Factbook

26 World Bank, Development Research Group. "GINI index." Accessed March 28, 2016. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>.

27 "5 exigencias fundamentales"

28 Dowling 2012

29 La Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile. "La Fech." Accessed April 2, 2016. <http://fech.cl/la-fech>.

communicating their message to the public and the government. On July 6, 2011, for example, couples shared a kiss during a gathering of over 500 students in the Plaza de Armas in Santiago, Chile as a demonstration for their passion for education. Students made out for 1,800 seconds in Front of La Moneda, the presidential Palace, in an attempt to publicize the \$1.8 billion it would supposedly cost to finance public education.³⁰ Flash mobs, dancing, kiss-ins, and fake group suicides sent the message, and garnered both national and international attention.³¹ Smaller groups of protesters have engaged riot police directly, hurling stones and firebombs. As a response, Chilean authorities have responded by banning demonstrations, pushing protesters back with water cannons, and offering education proposals that have been rejected by the students themselves. Students by the tens of thousands, with popular backing across Chile, continued to march without official permission and public sentiment against President Sebastian Pinera continued to grow.

Furthermore, the students have developed a strong media presence in order to spread their message through blogs, their website, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. This presence has been particularly important because, as university student Noam Titelman said in an interview with American news organization, *Democracy Now!*, the owners of the traditional media outlets belong to the privileged upper class that has benefitted from the current system so they will not support a movement to change the system.³² Because they have utilized new media sources, they have been able to gain support throughout Chile and throughout the world.

Polls have shown that the tactics of the student movement in 2011 had been successful in gaining the support of the public. By the end of 2011, President Piñera's approval rating had dropped to 34% with 60% disapproval. Approval of Congress was even lower by the close of 2011, at 18% approving, 68% disapproving of the Chamber of Deputies and 22% approving, 64% disapproving of the Senate. The same poll found that at the end of 2011, after more than a year of protests, while 42% approved and 53% disapproved of the students' demonstrations, 70% of the public agreed with their demands.³³ Statistics show that just 40% of Chilean children receive a free secondary-school education, in underfinanced public schools. The rest attend partly subsidized charter or private schools. In order to finance their university education, most of these students take out loans, the result being that they and their families are saddled with years of debt. Camila Vallejo Dowling commented, "Education was a fundamental right" and that "for 30 years, entrepreneurs have speculated and grown wealthy off the dreams and expectations of thousands of young people and Chilean families."³⁴ By Septem-

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Barrionuevo, Alexei. "With Kiss-Ins and Dances, Young Chileans Push for Reform." *The New York Times*, August 4, 2011.

³² *Democracy Now!* "Part Two: Camila Vallejo & Noam Titelman on Massive Chilean Student Protests, Post-Pinochet Chile." Last modified October 17, 2012. http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2012/10/17/part_two_camila_vallejo_noam_titelman_on_massive_chilean_student_protests_post_pinochet_chile.

³³ *América Economía*. "Chile: Sebastian cerro el 2011 con 34% de aprobación en diciembre." Last modified March 1, 2012. www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/politica/chile-adimark-cerro-el-2011-con-34-de-aprobacion.

³⁴ *The New York Times*, "Camila Vallejo, the World's Most Glamorous Revolutionary." Accessed May 2, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/magazine/camila-vallejo-the-worlds-most-glamorous-revolutionary.html>

ber, Piñeras popularity ratings, which skyrocketed after the rescue of the Chilean miners in October 2010, went down 22%, the lowest of any Chilean president in modern history. However, the student movement's national approval rating stood at 72%.³⁵

Initially, the government reacted quite differently to the students than the public did. News outlets, both national and international, reported the use of water hydrants, tear gas, and violence in order to quell sometimes-violent protests.³⁶ While the exact number is not public, hundreds, if not thousands, of students have been detained for protesting without obtaining the proper permits.³⁷ Leaders and members of the movement have reported incidents of torture while students were in custody as well. Camila Vallejo, who was present when students occupied the Casa Central, the building which houses the University of Chile's main administration offices, recalls the police authorities' use of tear gas against the students and the professors who were gathered inside. Camila Vallejo commented, "They made way for us and then they attacked us directly." She continued to say, "My whole body was burning. It was brutal."³⁸

However, in early 2012, Piñera and the Minister of Education took a different approach. The Piñera administration submitted a bill to Congress that reformed taxes and designated the capital to municipal schools. While the students welcomed the improvement, they were not satisfied. Camila Vallejo Dowling posted on her blog in October of 2012, "The Government is picking positions of the movement for education only when they do not affect the structural aspects of [Chile's] market education model."³⁹ The movement continues, but has suffered a significant loss in public support after the government's reforms.

Conclusion

Facing a society of gross inequality that resulted from Pinochet's policies, the students of Chile took on a system complex in its own inequalities. They were challenged by protesting in a culture immune to protests after more than a century of various ongoing protests. This is an attempt to save their country before the inequality becomes even more systemic. Inequality stemming from Pinochet's reforms of the nation's free, universal education system has led to a drastic income gap as students are stuck in the cycle of poverty caused by the decentralization and privatization of schools. In order to compete, students must take on heavy debt to attend quality secondary and tertiary schools. The conflict of paradigms that radical changes in Chile's system have created over the last century came to a head at the same time as riots erupted around the world.

While they may not have reached their lofty goal of complete system upheaval, the students of Chile accomplished other important feats. The movement has initiated a

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ *The New York Times*. "Student Protests in Chile." Accessed February April 2, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2011/08/05/world/americas/05chile-7.html>.

³⁷ CNN. "Hundreds arrested in Chilean student protests." Last modified August 5, 2011. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/americas/08/05/chile.student.protests/index.html?ref=allsearch>.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Dowling 2012

conversation, both domestically and abroad. Though not sufficient for the students' demands, Piñera's reform bill has alleviated some of the burden on Chile's students. Wide-spread support of the students' ideas guarantees that the conversation will not die, but students are exploring other ways to send their message. Using the strong social media presence they have built, the students continue to make connections to other movements internationally. Though the "Chilean Winter" developed independently of the other movements around the world, as our world grows more and more interconnected and our motivations become ever more universal, the students may become harder to quiet and the seasons harder to distinguish.

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Inattention or Invention? Examining ADHD through a Culture and Personality Perspective

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Subject: Anthropology/Psychology

Abstract

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a worldwide condition with diverse approaches toward defining, diagnosing, and treating. This variance is explained through a country's perspective of ADHD and whether it is a biological disorder or a manifestation of cultural conditioning and interpretation of behavior. Following the anthropological Culture and Personality perspective, this paper analyzes ADHD through a lens that considers social/environmental influences. To investigate ADHD through this lens, both online and print resources were used. Additionally, two interviews were conducted to observe whether culture influences ADHD diagnosis, treatment, and further manifestation. Overall, this paper does not claim that ADHD is not real, but it simply wishes to examine the disorder through a Culture and Personality perspective.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a mental condition observed worldwide and characterized by distraction, recklessness, and impulsivity. There is much debate concerning whether ADHD is a biological disorder spread through genes or if the disease is a manifestation of cultural conditioning and interpretation of behavior. When looking at ADHD as a whole, one might notice how the disorder is most prevalent in the United States where an estimated 6.4 million children are diagnosed (Molland, 2013). When considering these statistics, one has to wonder why Americans are diagnosed with ADHD more than any other nation. One could reason that the American lifestyle promotes the diagnosis of ADHD, whereas other countries tend to characterize the same symptoms Americans see as deviant as normal behavior. When examining societies through the relationship between culture and personality, this is defined as taking on an anthropological Culture and Personality perspective. By examining society in this way, it allows a different perspective on how and why cultures differ when it comes to the prevalence of mental disorders such as ADHD. Anthropologists who investigate these social influences are the Culture and Personality theorists since they take into consideration the varying environmental influences which form rituals, behaviors, and culturally specific beliefs. From a Culture and Personality perspective, ADHD could be viewed as a societal disorder rather than a biological defect since a specific culture's practices may influence the prevalence of the mental disorder in their country. Whether it is from the interpretations of ADHD behaviors, parenting styles, nutrition, or school environment, different cultures approach ADHD differently and it is possible that the United States is structured in such a way as to heavily diagnose ADHD based on the American lifestyle. Therefore, a proposition from a Culture and Personality theorist would be that ADHD