



# Narrating Histories in Chilean Prisons

Global Activities Scholars Field Placement  
Lauren Reiser  
University of Michigan School of Social Work



## Introduction

From May-August 2015, I interned in two prisons in Santiago, Chile, the nation's capital.

Chile is considered to be one of the most stable, prosperous countries in South America, with similar poverty rates as the United States. It has the third highest incarceration rate in Latin America. Like the US, Chile's penal system disproportionately affects individuals of lower socioeconomic classes.

Chilean prisons have been criticized for overcrowding, lack of rehabilitative programs, mistreatment by prison staff and violence between inmates (Sanhueza, 2014).

## Women's Prison: Needs Assessment

I conducted interviews in a section of a women's prison considered to have very high rates of poverty and recidivism.

The women shared histories of trauma, including childhood abandonment and physical and sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and substance misuse.



This word cloud was made using transcripts from interviews with 15 women. The most frequently used words appear larger.

The second cloud (next column) reflects the responses of theater group participants regarding their growth and workshop satisfaction after 3 months.

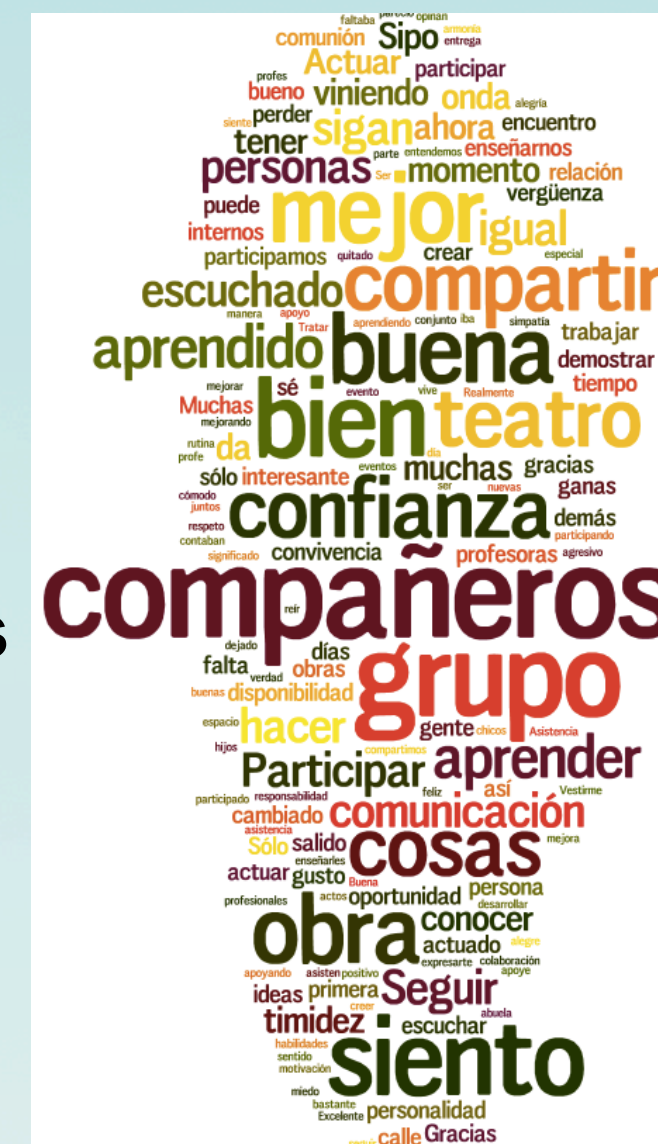
They identified a need for psychological and social support in the prison. I presented the idea of a peer counseling program used in other prisons. I co-authored a report with findings and recommendations, which we shared with prison staff and a university community.

## Men's Prison: Theater Group

I worked with a theater group of 20 male inmates. Twice weekly sessions involved games, improvisations, and script writing about issues of discrimination.

The group drew upon Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1960s). T.O. fosters critical thinking and dialogue by inviting participants to act out different approaches to problems.

The men shared that through the workshop, communication, trust, and harmony between them improved, and they felt more motivated to develop themselves and their abilities.



## Skills Developed

- Evaluation skills, including:
  - Qualitative research: interview design and analysis
  - Needs assessment & formulation of recommendations
  - Process evaluation: listening and observation skills
  - Co-authoring of reports
- Patience and humor in communication across cultures, socioeconomic statuses and native languages

## Classroom and Career Connections

My experiences have motivated me to explore issues of solitary confinement, re-entry programs, and the school-to-prison pipeline in my current SSW courses.

The theater group inspired me to take SW 513: Empowering Communities Through Creative Expression. The course has expanded my understanding of the theories and techniques of Theater of the Oppressed. I also intern with Ypsilanti's Corner Health Center Theater Troupe, which uses theater for youth peer education on health issues.

These experiences have motivated me to incorporate participatory theater in a career focused on rights and empowerment for immigrants and prisoners in the U.S.

## Lessons Learned and Advice

If there is any possibility your global experience will involve evaluation, take SW 683 in preparation.

Flexibility is key. Be accountable for what you can control, and willing to let go of what you cannot.

You do not have to problem-solve alone. Utilize peers, colleagues on-site, and SSW staff to troubleshoot.

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