

James English

Graduation Year: Sophomore

College: Arts & Letters

Major(s): Political Science, Sociology

Minors(s): Business Economics

Scholar Group Membership: Sorin Scholars

Did you received other funding for this project?: ISLA, Eisch Endowment

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance? If it were not for the grant that I received from CUSE, I would not have been able to carry out my research in Spain. As a student with two working parents who make it possible to attend my dream school, I cannot fully express my gratitude to institutions like CUSE for making some of the incredible opportunities that Notre Dame offers to its students become realities.

Project Title: Catholic Identity and Divorce Rate in Spain

Project Location: Spain

ND Faculty Mentor: Mary Ellen Konieczny

Project Type: Research, Creative Endeavor

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

I formulated my initial question when I discovered that the divorce rate in Spain is 61 percent, the fifth largest in the world. When I looked more deeply into the demographic makeup of Spain, I discovered that there are approximately 35 million Catholics in the country, which comprise about 75% of the total population. This number of Catholics is the ninth highest among countries in the world, but it is the third highest number of Catholics for Spanish speaking countries. I realized that these statistics are even more significant because of the relationship between them: South America, the continent home to the largest concentration of Catholics in the world, does not have a single country with a higher divorce rate than Spain, yet many countries in South America have a similar percentage of Catholics as Spain. Spain, therefore, has one of the largest combined percentages of Catholics and divorces in the world.

Taking this information into account, with the help of my advisor, Dr. Mary Ellen Konieczny, I created online surveys and distributed them to Spanish citizens before departing. When I arrived, I conducted semi-structured interviews on Spanish adults. A large majority of these respondents identified themselves as Catholic. However, interestingly, a vast majority also said that they do not go to mass or religious services more than 2-3 times a year. Unfortunately, I was not able to come in contact with a subject who had been previously divorced. Even still, when survey participants and interviewees were asked if they would be influenced by their religion in their decision to divorce, almost all expressed that they would not be. I found this interesting, because in my interviews, when participants were questioned about the importance of religion in their lives, many passionately expressed the great influence religion had on them. Many cited that their families had been Catholic for generations, and they seemed to take great pride in that. Most interviewees pronounced that married couples should seek a divorce in cases of some serious wrongdoing or if people are no longer compatible anymore, and these respondents did not seem to have a full understanding of the Church's stance on divorces and annulments.

This contradiction, of subjects stating their strong connection to and pride for the Catholic Church and further indicating the lack of influence it would have on a life decision such as divorce, is where my conclusion came from. I deduced that the Catholic Church in Spain, a country far more modern and developed than the many Catholic countries of South America, is more of a social institution to which many individuals simply belong and have a historical pride in than it is a body that guides the every day actions of its followers. This conclusion explains why many individuals I surveyed and interviewed are Catholic and have a great pride in that, yet they are not greatly influenced by Catholicism in a life decision like divorce. Furthermore, most individuals were not familiar with the Church's stance on divorce and annulment, which strengthens said conclusion that individuals mainly belong to the Church and do not adhere to, nor are they familiar with, its beliefs, policies, and traditions. These points are further heightened by my finding that most individuals (of various ages) who self-identified as Catholic do not frequently attend mass. This could be a compelling reason why they are not familiar with Church stances or why they are not heavily influenced by these stances. In further studies, it would be important to determine whether or not other decisions, such as abortion, euthanasia, and other debated topics, would be heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. Moreover, it would be very telling to be able to better understand why individuals no longer attend mass as frequently, and to determine the differences and similarities in these findings compared to other Spanish speaking, Catholic countries around the world.

There are many additional factors that could play a large role in influencing this conclusion, and therefore, it is a conclusion that must be researched more extensively to more accurately describe it. Obviously, there are many other factors that contribute to the high divorce rate other than simply a shift in the association of religious behavior in Spanish Catholics. For example, the "express divorce" bill passed by the Spanish government in 2005 made the process of getting a divorce much simpler. In addition, facts like the economic crisis of 2008 have put extra pressures and tensions on families worldwide. Through this preliminary research, however, I believe this conclusion to be the main takeaway from my studies in Spain.

Through this opportunity, I was able to begin to answer my research question. However, not only did I simply learn about my research topic; I also learned a vast amount about Spanish culture and traditions, the importance of language and communication, and my ability to be independent. Thank you for this incredible experience.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

Before beginning this research trip, I had a general idea about what it meant to come up with a research question, but very infrequently had I actually been given the opportunity to try to answer that question. Through this process, I learned a great deal about the research process and how to get from coming up with an idea to developing the question into something that is worth studying. I learned about the importance of collaborating, using previous research to inform my own project, and utilizing the experience and intelligence that my advisor contributed to my research study. I grasped a new understanding of how to effectively use resources, databases, and other sources of information that were relevant to my study. I believe that during this time of preparation, proposal writing, researching, creating surveys, traveling, and conducting interviews, I developed immensely as a student-scholar. I became much more independent, accountable, and scholarly and I drastically improved my time management skills, as well as my ability to meet deadlines. In addition, through the IRB process, I learned about the importance of preserving individuals' dignities who are involved in my research. During my trip, I believe people were genuinely interested in what I was studying and asking them about, which made me realize that human research studies are so important because they try to understand the ways in which humans behave. This, in turn, causes individuals to engage in what you are asking them about because they are intrigued by the reasons that explain why they behave the way they do. Overall, this trip was incredibly formative in my scholarly journey, and I know it is one that I will look back on for the rest of my life and be extremely grateful that I had the opportunity to complete.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

This project was a preliminary study that I hope to further in future research work through a senior thesis project. In the spring semester of 2017, I will be studying abroad in London, United Kingdom. Furthermore, while in London, I will be a part of Kennedy Scholars, a research based program for students interested in preparing for a senior thesis project. For this program, my proposed study was similar to the one I conducted in Spain this winter break; I hope to do a comparative study in England about the relationship between religion and divorce rates. This is a project I will be undertaking throughout the duration of my semester abroad in England. In addition, future trips to Spain are possible while I am in England because of the close proximity of European countries. With the data I have collected from Spain, combined with what I hope to achieve in London, I believe I will be on the right track to completing a thesis project on the topic during the fall and spring semesters of my senior year.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

