ORIGINAL PAPER

Connecting the Characteristics of International Volunteer Experiences with Their Impacts: A Canadian Case Study

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Abstract   The direct relationship between international volunteer experiences and impacts has rarely been explored and yet is important for understanding why certain impacts occur in the lives of volunteers upon returning home. This information helps organizations to develop effective international volunteer programs. This interpretive case study of the Nova Scotia-Gambia Association's volunteer program explores the interactions between motivations, experiences, and impacts of volunteers who participate in short-term, development aid projects. It utilizes qualitative interviews and participant observation with recent volunteers and interviews with past alumni to understand these relationships. The findings identify three distinct types of volunteer narratives connecting experiences and impacts—personal, professional, and negative categories. The key characteristics of the experience are living situations and conditions, location selection, work placement options, and non-work related activities, frame experiences and effect impacts, influencing the nature of the narrative. Narratives are also strongly influenced by volunteer personalities and characteristics of the local culture.

Résumé   La relation directe entre les expériences de bénévolat international et les résultats a rarement été explorée et est cependant importante pour comprendre pourquoi certains impacts se produisent dans la vie des bénévoles à leur retour. Ces informations aident les organisations à élaborer des programmes de bénévolat internationaux efficaces. Cette étude de cas interprétative du programme de béné-volat de Nova Scotia-Gambia Association (Association Nouvelle-Écosse-Gambie) explore les interactions entre les motivations, les expériences et les résultats des bénévoles qui participent à des projets d'aide au développement de court terme. Elle utilise des entrevues qualitatives, l'observation des participants auprès de bénévoles

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récents et des entrevues avec les anciens étudiants pour comprendre ces relations. Les résultats identifient trois types distincts de récits de bénévoles reliant les expériences et les conséquences, les catégories personnelles, professionnelles et négatives. Les principales caractéristiques de l'expérience comme conditions et situations de vie, la sélection de l'emplacement, les options de stage et les activités extraprofessionnelles encadrent les expériences et entrainent des conséquences qui influent sur la nature du récit. Les récits sont également fortement influencés par les personnalités des bénévoles et les caractéristiques de la culture locale.

Zusammenfassung   Die direkte Beziehung zwischen Erfahrungen international tätiger Ehrenamtlicher und ihren Auswirkungen wurde bislang kaum untersucht, obwohl sie für das Verständnis bestimmter Auswirkungen im Leben der Ehrenamtlichen nach ihrer Rückkehr wichtig sind. Diese Informationen helfen Organisationen, effektive internationale Freiwilligenprogramme zu entwickeln. Die interpretative Fallstudie des Freiwilligenprogramms der Nova Scotia-Gambia Association untersucht die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Motivationen, Erfahrungen und Auswirkungen für Ehrenamtliche, die sich an kurzfristigen Entwicklungshilfe-Projekten beteiligen. Es werden qualitative Befragungen und die teilnehmende Beobachtung auf kurz zuvor aktive Ehrenamtliche angewandt und ehemalige Ehrenamtliche befragt, um diese Beziehungen zu verstehen. Die Ergebnisse stellen drei unterschiedliche Arten von Erzählungen heraus, die die Erfahrungen und Auswirkungen miteinander verbinden - nämlich die persönliche, professionelle und negative Art. Wichtige Erfahrungsmerkmale, wie die Wohnsituation und die Wohnbedingungen, die Ortswahl, die Optionen bei der Arbeitsplatzierung und die Aktivitäten außerhalb der Arbeit beeinflussen die Erfahrungen und Auswirkungen und bestimmen die Art der Erzählung. Die Erzählungen sind zudem stark durch den Charakter der individuellen Ehrenamtlichen und durch kulturelle Merkmale geprägt.

Resumen   La relación directa entre las experiencias internacionales de los voluntarios y su impacto ha sido explorada raras veces y sin embargo es importante para comprender por qué determinados impactos se producen en las vidas de los voluntarios cuando vuelven al hogar. Esta información ayuda a las organizaciones a desarrollar programas internacionales de voluntariado efectivas. Este estudio de caso interpretativo del programa de voluntariado de la Asociación Nueva Escocia-Gambia explora las interacciones entre motivaciones, experiencias e impactos de voluntarios que participan en proyectos de ayuda al desarrollo a corto plazo. Utiliza entrevistas cualitativas y observación participante con voluntarios y entrevistas con antiguos alumnos para comprender estas relaciones. Los hallazgos identifican tres tipos diferentes de narrativas del voluntario que conectan experiencias e impactos - categorías personales, profesionales y negativas. Las características claves de la experiencia, tales como situaciones y condiciones de vida, la selección del lugar, las opciones de ubicación del trabajo, marcan las experiencias y ocasionan impactos, influyendo en la naturaleza de la narrativa. Las narrativas también se ven fuertemente influidas por las personalidades de los voluntarios y las características de la cultura local.

Introduction

International voluntary service (IVS) can be "…defined as an organized period of engagement and contribution to society by individuals who volunteer across an international border" (Sherraden et al. 2008, p. 165). IVS encourages international understanding between peoples and nations, and has the potential to create global citizenship and intercultural cooperation (Lewis 2006; McBride et al. 2010). It is well documented that volunteering internationally can develop skills, mindsets, behaviors, and networks that prepare individuals for living and working in a globalized world (McBride et al. 2010; Thomas 2001). Despite the significant and positive impacts of IVS on volunteer's lives, there is very little research exploring the direct relationship between international volunteer experiences and the impacts on the volunteer's life. This information can help organizations to strengthen international volunteer programs in terms of the benefits to volunteers, and possibly to host communities. This interpretive case study of a long-standing and well-established international volunteer program with a small Canadian non-government organization (the Nova Scotia-Gambia Association) explores the motivations and experiences of international volunteers who participate in short-term, development aid projects so as to examine how the specific aspects of the experience relate to impacts on the volunteers' lives in the longer term.

There are two principle types of international voluntary service. *IVS to promote international understanding* primarily creates international experiences to contribute to the personal, social, and educational development of the volunteer (Holmes et al. 2010; Sherraden et al. 2006). These programs aim to foster cross-cultural understanding, global citizenship, and global peace. Examples are volunteer tourism, gap years, and work camps (Wearing 2002). In contrast, *IVS for development aid and humanitarian relief* focuses on programs for volunteers with specific skills and expertise to share with overseas partner organizations so as to contribute to host communities (Sherraden et al. 2006). Both types of IVS approaches have been critiqued for having negative impacts on the developing country and local people even if they may provide positive opportunities for those volunteering (Easterly 2006; Wearing 2002). Some question if IVS programs are only benefitting the international volunteers. Benefits to both the communities and the volunteers inevitably differ across sending organizations. It is critical to analyze the philosophy, processes, and structure of the organization's programs and how they work with the local people (Easterly 2006). This has important implications for evaluating the benefits to the volunteers and the local communities (Wearing 2002). The Nova Scotia-Gambia Association's approach is discussed below in this light.

International voluntary service can be further categorized by the nature of service (individual or group placement), duration of service (short-term = 1–8 weeks, medium-term = 3–6 months, and long-term = 6 months–1 year), and degree of internationality (unilateral, bilateral, multilateral, and transnational) (Sherraden et al. 2006). Yet when focusing on IVS categories, it is easy to lose the meaning and

significance of the international experiences and the profound impacts that occur. These experiences can become important narratives in a person's life.

Elements of the International Volunteer Narrative

The three elements of the international volunteer narrative are motivations, experiences, and impacts. Research has tended to focus on them separately, with limited analysis of the interconnections and interactions between them. A brief review of research relevant to each one provides a foundation for this case study, which examines the interactions between them.

Motivations

Many researchers have explored the reasons why individuals participate in international volunteer work. Motivations include both altruistic and self-interested elements, and interact with socio-demographic factors, such as age (Hustinx et al. 2010). For example, older people tend to volunteer because they want to 'give back' or 'help others,' while younger people tend to volunteer to learn new skills.

Multiple frameworks have been proposed for understanding motivations. One study categorizes travel motivations by physical, cultural, interpersonal, and prestige (Mayo and Jarvis 1981). Another uses the leisure motivational scale based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs—intellectual, social, competence-mastery, and stimulus-avoidance (Beach and Ragheb 1983). A third approach categorizes motivation by personality, lifestyle, past experience, past life, perceptions, and image (Swarbrooke and Horner 2003). Brown (2005) additionally introduces the psychocentric and allocentric traveler's scale and the push and pull factors as ways to determine motivations to volunteer internationally.

The research suggests various motivations with the most common being the need for a challenge, to make a difference and help others, to enhance cultural awareness, to travel to a different country, résumé building, and to gain international experience (Brown 2005; Lough et al. 2009b; Ooi and Laing 2010; Rodrigue 2010). One outstanding question is the connection between motivations and the nature of the experiences and the resulting impacts in volunteer's lives.

Experiences

Experiences can be defined in several ways: an event or occurrence that leaves an impression; the practical contact and observation of an occurrence or event; it can also be an encounter with other humans or described as a feeling ("Experience" n.d.). When looking at the international volunteer experience, it encompasses all of the above definitions. It is the activities one is involved in, and the overall impression or feeling of the time spent overseas volunteering.

A great deal of the research about international volunteer service only names the activities or mission of the project and does not describe the holistic experience of being overseas. Connections are rarely made between the overseas experiences and the impacts on the volunteer's life. One study indicates that the main activities of

IVS are education services (85 %), human and social services (80 %), community development (75 %), and environmental protection (73 %) (McBride et al. 2003). Other activities, such as working with children in schools and orphanages, giving presentations on HIV/AIDS, nutrition workshops, or advocating for women's rights have been identified (Edmonds 2010; McBride et al. 2003; Gray and Campbell 2007). While the research mentions the types of project activities, there is little detail given regarding crucial aspects such as the feelings or encounters with others that are fundamental aspects of these experiences. For example, Chen and Chen's (2011) study clearly describes the living situation and location selection but provides no further details on how these characteristics may have influenced the impacts on the volunteer's life. There have been some studies that reflect on personal relationships built with local people (Palacios 2010; Sweatman and Tirone 2010). However, these researchers did not explore the connections between the experiences and the impacts in one's post-volunteer project life.

Impacts

Impacts can be defined as a marked effect or influence; or a strong effect on someone or something ("Impact" n.d.). There have been numerous studies of the impacts on volunteers' lives. Canada World Youth (2006) conducted an extensive study of their volunteers and found six main impact areas: values and attitudes; knowledge and learning; skills; personal relationships; career/studies; and local/global action. Similar areas are documented throughout the research literature. A Canadian International Development Agency [CIDA] (2005) review of their youth programs found three broad impact areas: effects on motivations (beliefs, values); effects on capacities (skills, knowledge); and effects on performance (career, education), with 46 % of the participants showing an influence on career-related goals and education paths toward development, and 68 % involved in community engagement initiatives because of their IVS project. Lough et al. (2009a) identified four main impact areas: international understanding; international networking; civic engagement; and career development, while Brown (2005) found that volunteer tourism experiences impacted personal development and social interactions. IVS programs have the potential to impact understanding of international development, global issues, and openness to other cultures (CIDA 2005). While the research literature identifies important impacts in the lives of volunteers, it does not show how the in-country experience influences these impacts.

Methods

This interpretive study used qualitative methods to capture the volunteer's point of view on the characteristics of an international volunteer experience and their connection to the volunteer's learning and impacts on their life. Semi-structured interviews and field observations were used to provide detailed insight into the meaningful experiences and impacts for the volunteers.

Nova Scotia-Gambia Association

The Nova Scotia-Gambia Association (NSGA) is a registered Canadian charity that has been working in The Gambia since 1985 and has sent close to seven hundred Canadian volunteers to the country to work on various health and education initiatives (Nova Scotia-Gambia Association 2010). It was founded by several Nova Scotian educators who originally took students to volunteer in the Gambia. These founders had a critical perspective of development efforts and aimed to implement grassroots approaches that placed power, control, and resources in the hands of Gambians. Currently, all of the paid staff are Gambians working in The Gambia, although the organization was founded by Canadians and continues to have a strong volunteer presence in Nova Scotia.

The programs of the NSGA include peer health educator training, HIV/AIDS and drug abuse education, sending Gambians to Nova Scotia for training on health education programs, counseling skills training and support, and youth outreach programs (Devanney 1993; Devanney and Rolston 1997). The Nova Scotia-Gambia Association works with funding organizations such as St. Mary's University, Sisters of Charity, the Global Fund Malaria Project, and the Global Fund HIV Project to deliver their programs (NSGA 2010).

The NSGA uses a grassroots approach to program delivery in that their Gambian staff initiate and develop the programs. Peer health education and community arts are the primary methods utilized. The international volunteers act to support the efforts of the NSGA Gambian staff. The peer health education model allows people to pass on important information from classmate to classmate, child to parent, and neighbor to neighbor (NSGA 2010). This approach is used because discussion of health issues such as sexual health between parents and their children is taboo in traditional Gambian culture and not considered a priority in the Gambian education system (NSGA 2010). Therefore, many youth learn from their peers about these important issues. By disseminating appropriate information through peers, the NSGA is working at a grassroots level to respond to these issues (NSGA 2010). The NSGA staff conducts regular training sessions on health and wellness including HIV/AIDS, malaria, sexual health, water sanitation, leadership, good governance, and gender issues (NSGA 2010).

The annual summer program builds on the peer health education model and focuses on advancing gender equity and youth leadership. It includes Canadian volunteers trained in health and education traveling to The Gambia to work in schools to train students as peer health educators. Gambian peer health educators are taught interactive teaching methods such as drama, theater, and oral presentations, which provide a positive spirit and creative energy for their work with students (NSGA 2010). The Gambian program staff and the international volunteers facilitate this learning.

Another NSGA program utilizes community cinema nights to deliver health and safety education. The NSGA works with community leaders to identify specific community challenges such as teenage pregnancy rates, sexual abuse, malaria, gender issues (i.e., low enrollment of girls in schools); and then NSGA staff work to develop short, creative films on the identified issues (NSGA 2010). During these

cinema nights, the films are shown in an open forum to a broad range of community members with respect to age, gender, and income status, and this is followed by opportunities for them to discuss the health issues (NSGA 2010).

These methods reach more than 150 Gambian schools each year with more than 300 teachers trained to facilitate peer health education. Approximately, 100 community cinema nights are organized each year with participation ranging from 75 to 2,000 people depending on the size of the community. This work has substantially increased knowledge and dialog on health issues across The Gambia for all age levels (NSGA 2010).

The NSGA volunteer program primarily falls under IVS for development aid and humanitarian relief with short-term group placements, with both unilateral and bilateral degrees of internationality. Its grassroots approach was clearly defined based on a critical perspective of aid efforts at the outset. The philosophy puts control of programming and resources with staff members and communities in the host country, which differs from many international aid organizations. It has garnered wide support in the Gambia and from a committed group of board members and volunteers in Canada over the years as a result of this approach. As a small organization with long-term relationships with key stakeholders, it has generally avoided the pressures of the changing demands of funding agencies.

The NSGA's philosophy heavily influences the nature and impacts of the volunteers' experiences in this study.

Sample

The participants were both past alumni and recent volunteers (2011 summer school) of the NSGA. The NSGA had contact information for approximately two hundred of its 700 alumni. They were invited to participate in a preliminary on-line survey on their experiences with the organization by email, which included a further invitation to be interviewed. Twenty past volunteers filled out the survey, of which fifteen indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Twelve interviewees were chosen with the criteria to select individuals who volunteered at different times during the organization's 25 year history. The low response rate is typical for simple email solicitation and introduces biases. It is likely that respondents were more interested in and committed to the NSGA than other volunteers, and less likely to have had negative experiences. The email approach was used because it was the only contact information available in most cases.

In addition to the twelve past volunteers, three recent volunteers were interviewed who went to The Gambia in 2011 for 6 weeks accompanied by the first author, who was a participant observer and researcher across this experience. This enabled the researcher to understand the experience in The Gambia and facilitated her ability to connect and better analyze the narratives of volunteers. The nature of the summer volunteer program had changed very little over the 25 years given the consistency in the organizational philosophy, which is remarkable in the field of international development.

Table 1 provides specific information for each interviewee. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym to protect anonymity. There were five males and ten

Table 1 Overview of narratives of each volunteer

Pseudo name	Vol. year	Age as vol.	Age now	Project length	Motivations	Experiences	Impacts	Narrative category
Alice	2011	29	30	6 weeks	Previous experience; wanted more international experience	Developed family type bonds with Gambians	Desire to maintain relationships with Gambians; desire to travel back to visit	Personal development
Kaitlin	1989	17	40	1 week	High school trip; wanted a different experience	Meeting Gambian people; seeing global issues	Appreciation of own life; desire to do more international volunteering	Personal development
George	1996	47	65	1 week	Recruited by local church	Learning about a new culture; experiencing global issues	Appreciation of own life; desire to do more international volunteer work	Personal development
Jessica	2007	25	30	3 months	Internship for undergraduate program; wanted experience	Strong personal relationships built with Gambian people	Went back to The Gambia to visit friends; maintains contact with people	Personal development
Mary	2011	31	32	6 weeks	Previously volunteered internationally; wanted international experience in health	Developed strong relationships with Gambians; work experience	Desire to continue working internationally; influenced family; appreciation for life	Combined, more personal development
Laura	1994	47	65	2 weeks	Recruited by the NSGA	Work placement; accomplishments of project	Returned to The Gambia twice; continued volunteering internationally	Professional development.
Amanda	1995	48	65	2 weeks	Recruited by the NSGA; daughter had volunteered with the NSGA	Built strong bond with co-worker in The Gambia, continued business partnership	Traveled back to The Gambia many times to help with business projects	Professional development.
Jack	2007	25	30	3 months	Internship for undergraduate program; wanted experience	Work placement; professional gains and increase in skills	Influenced possible education/career path; continued international volunteer work	Professional development

Table 1 continued

Pseudo name	Vol. year	Age as vol.	Age now	Project length	Motivations	Experiences	Impacts	Narrative category
Larry	1985	43	66	3 weeks	Recruited by the NSGA	Work relationships with Gambians; personal links to the people in The Gambia	Traveled to The Gambia nine times with NSGA; local involvement with NSGA	Combined, more prof.
Shaun	1987	50	75	3 weeks	Wanted to work in international development; knew exec. director	Strong human connections; organization and volunteer impact	Traveled back to The Gambia 5–6 times; continued to work overseas	Combined, more prof.
Robert	1996	40	58	3 months	Recruited by the NSGA	Learning a new culture; teaching experience in a different culture	Looking at opportunities to teach overseas when retired; new knowledge of culture	Combined, more prof.
Kathleen	2011	54	55	6 weeks	Went to The Gambia when she was young and wanted to return	Experiencing the culture; learning how to teach in The Gambia; developed strong relationships with Gambians	Desire to do more international work when retired; learning to teach English as a second language; influenced family	Combined, more prof.
Amy	2009	29	31	4 weeks	Change in life; desire to go to Africa; previous experiences	Struggled with living situation and food; health issues	No desire for more international volunteer work or travel to Southern countries; has negative perspective of NSGA and travel	Negative
Christine	2002	24	34	~8 weeks	Previous international experiences; to gain experience	Interactions with Gambians; seeing the project impact	Perspective on international development projects; influenced family	Combined
Megan	2003	51	60	~8 weeks	Wanted a more meaningful experience	Learning a new culture; feeling as a part of the community rather than just a tourist; seeing the impact of the project	Continued to travel to Africa; understands immigrants better; volunteers in own community	Combined

females interviewed including a wide diversity of ages, both in terms of when in their lives the person volunteered and how many years had passed since the experience. This range of ages provided a broader context for understanding experiences. The NSGA has engaged a wide range of volunteers by age over the years, including those in high school, university, mid-career, and retirement. This resulted in a wide age range of participants in this study.

The recent volunteers had two interviews, one immediately after the experience and one significantly later. An immediate post experience interview was not possible with the past volunteers as their experiences occurred prior to the study. Given the interpretive case study methodology, it was decided that the benefits of having additional detailed descriptions from a few of the volunteers immediately after the experience outweighed inconsistencies introduced by this process.

Interviews

Two separate interviews were conducted for each recent participant who volunteered in 2011. The first was conducted 4 weeks after returning to Canada to learn about the nature of the experience. This immediate interview provided a rich and deep reflection of the experience, and allowed an exploration of motivations that were still fresh in the minds of the volunteers. The final interview took place 6 months after the project and focused on the initial impacts the program had on the volunteer's lives. Interviews with the twelve past participants took place in the fall of 2011. The interviews explored their motivations and experiences in the program and their perceptions of the impacts on their lives.

Each semi-structured interview averaged an hour in length and began with the interviewer asking the volunteer to talk openly about his or her experience in The Gambia. The volunteer led the interview and was encouraged to speak openly on all aspects of the experience, both good and bad. The interviewer made sure to have the person reflect on the three key elements of the narrative: motivations, experiences, and impacts.

Participant Observations

As a participant observer in the 2011 summer program, the first author was an active volunteer who worked closely with the NSGA staff and Canadian volunteers, assisting in the teaching of subjects, such as sexual health, gender issues, and drama skills. As a researcher she took detailed daily notes. Observations were made of daily activities, interactions between group members and the community, living conditions, and challenges. Observations assisted in the interview process with the first author being able to identify specific occurrences and ask questions relevant to individual's experiences.

Due to the nature of the first author's role while in The Gambia, there was a danger of her becoming overly involved in others' experiences on a personal level. The first author's previous, multiple international volunteer experiences assisted her in consciously distancing herself from close personal relationships or conflicts with other volunteers. She was very clear from the outset with the other volunteers and

Gambian staff in articulating her participant observer role. She also debriefed with the second author on ways to balance confidentiality of privileged information from her participant role with documentation in her researcher role. She conducted herself as a professional volunteer and researcher teaching in the summer school.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, along with the field notes, and coded for themes using *ATLAS.ti* qualitative software. To identify themes, codes were created as they emerged from the transcripts. Codes were grouped into code families and then mind-mapped and grouped to create a visual tool for relating both experiences and impacts. The researcher developed participant summaries and crosschecked the experience and impact codes with the personal summaries. Even though initial themes were developed by coding across individuals, the connections were most evident and meaningful between motivations, experiences, and impacts when each individual was followed through the three phases in a narrative approach.

To reduce researcher biases based on her experiences, the first author was continually aware of her own predispositions, and remained open to any direction the findings led. She recognized that negative impacts and occurrences happen, even though her previous personal experiences have been positive. All aspects and situations of the experience were documented and analyzed. The findings were discussed in detail among the authors to double check perspectives and biases.

Overall, this interpretive research takes the form of a unique case study and the findings cannot be generalized to other organizations and contexts; however, the insights from this work may be of value to others in interpreting and assessing their organizations, contexts, and impacts.

Findings

Three broad categories of narratives connecting motivations, experiences, and impacts emerged through the analyses of the fifteen interviews: *personal development*, *professional development*, and *negative* narratives. Each volunteer could broadly be placed in one category, though a number of individuals exhibited characteristics of multiple categories. There were four personal development narratives, three professional development narratives, and one negative narrative. Seven individuals demonstrated characteristics of multiple categories, yet all but two combinations had a dominant perspective.

The findings are presented by highlighting one prototypical person's story for each category. These volunteers are presented in more depth based on the strength of their narrative as distinctly personal, professional, or negative. The perspectives of other volunteers are included within a category to show the depth and diversity across each type of narrative. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the types of motivations, experiences, and impacts for volunteers within each category.

Personal Development Narrative

The defining criterion for this category is the articulated personal nature of the experiences and impacts, including a focus on building personal relationships and personal growth. Alice is presented as a prototypical personal development narrative. She volunteered in The Gambia for 6 weeks and is a graduate student studying women's sexual health at a large Canadian university.

Motivations

Alice first learned of the opportunity to volunteer with the NSGA through an alumni email from her previous graduate school as well as from other NSGA volunteer alumni. She was initially attracted by the professional opportunity to work within her field and learn more about sexual health education in a different culture. Alice had also previously volunteered twice overseas and had positive experiences. The desire for further personal growth provided a personal reason for Alice to pursue another international volunteer opportunity:

> [T]he more experiences I have, and the more diverse settings [in which] I have those experiences, my understandings of… the way the world works… how human beings interact [deepens]… But then there are layers beneath that… what does it mean to be a human being and how do I connect with other human beings?

Alice's previous international volunteer opportunities influenced her desire to pursue further opportunities, but she was also looking for a new challenge in her life.

Professional motivations for volunteering in The Gambia were common for others in the personal development narrative, including Mary and Jessica. Even Kaitlin, who was in high school at the time she volunteered, had professional motivations:

> [I]t was interesting because we had a choice [in high school], there were a couple international trips that were being organized and many of my friends chose to go to France instead… at the time I wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I got older, and I was thinking about doing some sort of… work in sustainable development in a… developing country.

Other volunteers in this category had personal motivations, such as looking for something different or looking for a new challenge. Though both professional and personal motivations were articulated for those in this personal narrative category, somewhat surprisingly professional motivations were more frequent given these narratives have a personal rather than a professional focus for the experiences and impacts. Motivations did not seem particularly predictive of the nature of the volunteer's experiences or impacts for those in this category.

Experiences

Alice's experience began with adapting to life in The Gambia. She had a difficult time at first adjusting to the heat and the overall nature of the experience. The

turning point for Alice was roughly 2 days after arriving when the group of Toubobs (white people) went to watch a football match:

> I remember the turning day for me was when we went to [name of NSGA staff member] community and I just felt… more pleased with the actual day of activities, like this is actually what I wanted, was to do something Gambian… I felt a lot more at ease and very happy to be… out and interacting with people.

After this community experience, Alice traveled to a small village where she spent the majority of her time and built relationships with local people. Alice stayed in a hotel but the family who ran the hotel lived in the compound next door. This allowed Alice to get to know the family: "[It] made such a huge, huge difference in our experience that we had a family who we lived with, lots of people… to talk to, people to play with, people to hang with…"

Interacting closely with the family proved to be a significant part of Alice's experience, facilitating her sense of connection to Gambian people and culture. She said she did not miss her life back in Canada because she felt so fulfilled where she was. Volunteers with personal development experiences seemed to feel particularly connected to the people they met. These relationships were a key element of personal narratives. Alice stated:

> [T]he way we grew close to certain people… almost, like family type bonds… but with the Gambians they're so open and they are so warm, and they're, you get so close with them that they probably also facilitated… an important piece of the personal thing, the personal side.

Jessica described a very similar emotional experience in building relationships, "I don't know any other way to describe it, I just felt great being there and… felt really connected to the people… I just had a real emotional attachment to it."

While Alice had a very positive experience with the family and most of the people she met, it is important to note her challenges with the work placement and one of the NSGA staff members. This impacted her experience and possibly her future involvement with the NSGA:

> With respect to the job… I didn't wake up in the morning and say, yay let's go see the students, like I'm so excited for work, because a lot of the time we were just winging it… so I felt it was a bit touch and go… Obviously it was too bad about what happened with [an NSGA Staff Member]… I was left dealing with feeling uncomfortable every time I shared space with [the NSGA staff member].

Other volunteers noted challenges within the work placement. Jessica describes the difficulty of balancing cultural sensitivities and the work that volunteers are sent to do:

> To try to balance respect for the culture, respect for… people's belief in their president and their political system… the control of the media… [it] was a really delicate balance for us… what we wanted to do and say as health promoters and not compromising… what the youth needed to know.

Work placement challenges could be one reason why their narratives had a strong personal focus. The philosophy and structure of the NSGA may have played a role here in that the program is defined by Gambian staff such that volunteers are asked to conform to a set of Gambian norms. This can pose challenges in the workplace for volunteers with differing values, possibly shifting the volunteer's focus to personal relationships beyond the workplace.

Others in this category rarely spoke of their work placement and reflected more on their interactions with Gambians during their work time (e.g., Kaitlin and George). This may be because their placements were very short (as brief as 1 week).

Another characteristic of Alice's experience and others who had personal experiences were struggles in leaving The Gambia:

Knowing that I was going to be leaving in a short period of time and going back to my regular life… but feeling a real kind of bond… [and] dealing with the complexity of relationships really, and… feeling strongly for people and not knowing what that meant and not knowing what to do about it.

Alice's final challenge after 5 weeks in The Gambia was experiencing reverse culture shock upon returning home:

The fact for me is that the process of getting used to life again in [Canada] seems to be taking weeks whereas in [The] Gambia it only took days… I didn't talk to people for a few days, I just like hid and didn't want to face the world.

Reverse culture shock was mentioned more frequently among those who had personal development experiences, and could be related to the length of the project (Palacios 2010); Mary shared:

[T]he first month was really, really hard for me to connect back with my family here… [to] go from really nothing to coming back here… I just think it's luxury cause I'm thinking, oh my god we have all this here and they have nothing… [S]o that was really hard, making the adjustment… you want to tell everybody about like your experience and then when you tell them they're like oh, okay… they just don't understand how much like I gained over there.

The personal development experience reflected the personal connections and relationships developed with Gambian people. Alice most frequently spoke of the people in The Gambia, and this was a common theme for all volunteers in this category. Their professional experiences played a very small role in their overall experience, while the relationships built with Gambians and learning a new culture were their focus.

Impacts

Alice's experience with the family greatly influenced her impacts. She mentioned her desire to return to The Gambia to visit the people who were important to her. The priority was staying connected to the people, learning about the culture, and learning about herself:

It's all of those people that… helped me to realign myself with what's really, centrally important in life… So in that sense people really impact me and… cultural relationships… and there's this lived and shared human experience I think is what I take away from it… I mean all of that changes me… it's sort of like a profound experience… we get a new perspective on things, on life.

The largest impact for Alice and other volunteers with personal narratives was creating new identities for the way they live their lives, taking what they learned and applying it to their lives in Canada:

I think about myself and I think that was a really pivotal trip at that particular moment in my life, especially with respect to the outcomes of my personal relationship… every time you go away and learn something new about the world and therefore you incorporate that into your identity and then you're a different person, so that identity piece is always, it's always changing.

Alice continues to explain her future plans in regard to her experience in The Gambia:

Hopefully staying connected with the family, keeping that sort of pathway or doorway open to… continuing to travel back there, potentially having a relationship with [a Gambian]… That's what I hope will happen. I hope that I don't just go back into the rat race indefinitely, once I get a career. I mean I want to have kids too… But I plan on like taking my kids wherever I go if I do research abroad.

The ideas of maintaining relationships, thinking of life in a different way, and influences on future families or current families were common themes among volunteers with personal development narratives. Jessica speaks of her future family:

The thing I always think about in the future is that if I have kids someday that I would love to take them… I want them to understand… the impact and for them to understand what it's like in the world… I just think, it just opens their eyes to something different.

Alice, as well as others in this category, developed strong relationships and sought out the human and personal connections her experiences led to personal impacts, such as wanting to stay connected to local people and gaining new perspectives of her values and identity. The common theme of building direct relationships with Gambian people and the impacts that occur from these relationships are what connect personal development experiences to personal development impacts, creating this narrative category.

Professional Development Narrative

Laura's story provides an example of a volunteer who viewed her experiences and impacts through the lens of professional development. Laura is retired and spends her time volunteering with a large non-profit organization working internationally

on poverty issues. Laura first volunteered internationally for 2 weeks with the NSGA in the 1990 s when she was in her late forties. At this time, she worked in community development and her expertise in grant writing, evaluation, and organizational development led to her volunteering with the NSGA.

Motivations

The Executive Director of the NSGA recruited Laura to work on a project evaluation in The Gambia because of her specific expertise. Laura did not talk very much about her motivations but mentioned wanting an opportunity to become involved in international development. Since Laura was recruited based upon her skills, this may have given her the professional development focus.

Five of the seven volunteers with this type of narrative were recruited and did not provide much insight into their motivations for going to The Gambia. However, Jack (who was not recruited) mentioned two personal reasons for his involvement— a new experience and a new challenge.

> I wanted to just experience something new… but also… I wanted to challenge myself basically. I wasn't really challenged during university and I find school kind of easy so I just wanted something that was going to hit me from a different angle and really push me.

Recruitment was not a distinct characteristic of the professional development narrative as volunteers in other categories were recruited as well. However, those in other narrative categories who were recruited mentioned personal motivations for going to The Gambia.

Experiences

Unlike Alice's living situation, Laura lived in a hotel surrounded by non-Gambians. Her only interaction with Gambians was at work. When Laura describes her experience, she relives the work placement and working with the Gambian team. She enjoyed working from a grassroots approach and making sure that the Gambian team was an integral part of the project:

> The interesting piece was they thought we were going to come and tell them how to do it but we didn't… we wanted to work on it together. But they're not used to that, they're used to people coming in and pretty much telling them how it's going to be… It was a big surprise to us, they thought we didn't know anything, [and] it was a big surprise to them that… somebody really wanted their opinion.

The highlights of Laura's experiences were the professional interactions with her Gambian co-workers. One significant aspect was the importance of the Gambian team in helping her as a woman to work in a traditional Muslim society:

> They really helped us with what questions to ask, they… helped us with the protocol of dealing with the schools… because some of the schools were

Muslim and… one of the schools… the student that was eighteen, because he was male, he talked to the principal as opposed to me… but that's the way it is.

It was very common for volunteers with professional development experiences to focus their stories on their co-workers and the challenges of completing their work in a different culture. Kathleen describes work place challenges in regard to language and cultural barriers while teaching:

But of course we had some trouble, if we did something that they weren't used to, [we had] a real hard time getting them to participate and getting them to understand… it just seemed like pulling teeth so sometimes that inhibited [things].

Another trend for professional development narratives was a focus on how their work was making an impact in The Gambia, be it positive or negative. Laura questioned her impact: "I guess the biggest issue for kind of the short term is… can you do something meaningfully… I don't think you can do anything meaningfully in 1 week." In contrast, volunteers like Christine had a more positive opinion of their impact:

It did seem that we were contributing and made a bit of a difference when we were there because we were doing something that seemed to be needed… they did a presentation… after we had taught them, so we got to see them using the information we had taught in the different sessions.

Professional development stories focused on the work experience including co-workers and the impact of the volunteer project rather than on personal relationships or challenges. It is important to recognize that the organization plays a key role in terms of setting the length of the placement and how possible it is for the volunteer to make a significant contribution in a specific period of time.

Impacts

After her NSGA experience, Laura repeatedly volunteered overseas. She returned to The Gambia twice, and spent time in seven other countries. Volunteers with a professional development focus tended to continue to volunteer internationally (five of seven volunteered subsequently). The NSGA was a professional entry to the international development field. Shaun explains:

[The Gambia was] the door opener for me to do international work and from 1987 on… I ran an international remittal management seminar program for ten years [across the world]… had I not had that experience in The Gambia, I might not have turned in that direction as completely as I did.

Laura is now retired and spends her time volunteering for an international non-profit organization:

I get all the perks and privilege… it gives me identity cause it's different when you're retired… I now have business cards with [an international NGO]… it's also going into a place where people recognize you, it's the kind of thing you

take for granted in a work place… and I now have that through the work that I do with [the international NGO].

International volunteer work helps Laura keep her skills up to date and feel important in society. She frequently mentioned that perhaps this is a selfish reason to volunteer, and while being right for her, it may not always be right for the international community.

The final impact that stood out for Laura was her perspective on the role and limitations of international volunteer work, and this was similar in other professional development narratives. Laura spoke frequently about unearned privilege and sometimes not knowing if she was doing more harm than good. She stated, "well because of the work I did, I'm always interested in social justice and I get very worried about… the charity model we're working with and where our particular government is going." This comes back to the structure and priorities of the sending organization. Given the grassroots approach of the NSGA in The Gambia, the charity model is not used. However, this poses major funding challenges to the grassroots approach given current government funding models in Canada. The Canadian government is now emphasizing benefits to Canadians, including economic benefits, as an important aspect of its international aid. The NSGA model does little to benefit Canadians economically, placing its government funding in jeopardy.

Impacts that stood out as being distinctly in the professional development category were more international volunteering, skills development, and critical perspectives on the role and limitations of international volunteer work. Throughout Laura's story, she reflected on her work placement, co-workers, and professional development in her experiences and impacts.

Some volunteers had narratives with characteristics from both the professional and personal categories, though one aspect tended to be more dominant. For example, Mary had a combined narrative with the personal characteristics being more dominant. Mary had a positive work placement and has continued to volunteer internationally. However, it was clear the personal side of the experience was most important to her from her interviews and the field observations. She developed close bonds with her Gambian work colleagues, and hung out with these people outside of work, which was unusual for those in the professional development category. She has stayed in contact with Gambian friends, she has a greater appreciation of her own life, and she also wants to influence her family in how they perceive the world. These types of crossovers were similar for others with both personal and professional development characteristics in their narratives.

Negative Narrative

While the previous narratives were primarily positive, one of the fifteen volunteers interviewed had a negative narrative. Negative narratives are rarely explored or talked about. The selection processes for this sample may have been biased against hearing this story as participants tended to be involved and committed to the NSGA and saw their experiences in a positive light. One volunteer, Amy, was an exception

and her narrative fit into a distinctly negative category. Amy works for a non-profit organization but is a certified teacher. She volunteered in one of the NSGA summer schools, which was her second volunteer experience overseas.

Motivations

Amy previously volunteered in Asia, but had a desire to experience Africa. She had very distinct criteria for project selection. It had to be short term so she could easily take a leave from her job. It had to fit her interests in health and education, and she wanted to work with an organization that had a strong reputation. The NSGA's summer school volunteer project was a perfect fit. The NSGA project was a chance to take a break from her career and get back to direct teaching. Amy had a clear vision of what she was looking for and what she wanted to do.

Experiences

Amy's volunteer project took place in small town, which was one of the most remote places in The Gambia that lacked any western comforts. Amy was with five other Canadians and they lived in a hotel that had inadequate electricity and water, as well as rats. She also mentioned boredom and loneliness. After finishing work each day, the group went back to the hotel with nothing to do for the evening. She felt it was unsafe to go out and explore even though she was with a large group. Amy also struggled with the food:

> I really struggled with…[the] food… And I just wasn't… mentally prepared for that… and I found I was hungry a lot… our menu options for breakfast and lunch were really bread, water, boiled eggs… bananas and peanuts.

Other volunteers who worked in the same town described the challenging living situation, including safety, boredom, and food, even though their narratives were not categorized as negative overall. Jack noted:

> When we were up country we were essentially living in poverty, we moved into this hotel and it was basically a room that didn't have any air conditioning obviously, there was no electricity, running water didn't really happen, there was two beds…with used condoms on them. So obviously… you're a little nervous about what's living in your bed.

With all the struggles Amy faced, her most significant challenge was becoming very ill during the last few days of her project.

> When I [went] to the clinic the power was out and they couldn't test my blood so they just had to treat me for malaria because… if you wait, I could die… I was so sick… so it was really hard to just even get an understanding of what had happened.

The negative experience continued with the organization in Canada as well:

It has affected my feelings about the organization… I spent… a couple of days in the hospital in The Gambia… and then I spent the next year of my life really ill in Canada… I just felt like [I] sort of fell through the cracks… that left me with a bad feeling of I just volunteered my time, I took my whole vacation time for a year, hired someone else to do my job, and got really sick. You know, I really want someone to like… just check on me or make me feel like that was appreciated in the organization.

Despite the negative experience, Amy had positive reflections about the clinic she was treated in and spoke highly of the NSGA programs:

I think like it was a great experience… I think it adds an incredible amount of value to the community and… like wow this is such an opportunity for [the volunteers] and these are extremely talented youth… I really hope they can go places and stay with these programs and continue to like learn… everything was… pretty great about the actual program.

Numerous factors contributed to the Amy's negative experience including the living situation, safety, food, loneliness, boredom and illness, yet she was able to speak positively on some points.

Impacts

The most significant impact for Amy is that she no longer has any interest in volunteering or traveling internationally:

The experience unfortunately completely changed my perspective on international travel and… I don't know if I will ever go anywhere where there's malaria again… It really reprioritized my life from loving travel and stuff but to realizing like the most important [things] are like friends, family… I love my work I'm doing here… I don't want to lose those things.

Even though Amy does not want to continue to be involved in international development, she left feeling proud of what she accomplished:

You know it's done a lot of great work… and the programs are very strong… so certainly like I came back from it feeling very proud of the initiatives that we did and just how… there's international development projects that you can be really proud to be a part of.

One final impact for Amy was her continued relationship with the Canadians with whom she volunteered, "We haven't gotten together as a group in quite some time but… we're still in touch and we definitely share like a very strong bond from our experience."

With only one negative narrative, it is hard to provide breadth or depth in the analysis of this category. Yet other volunteers mentioned negative aspects of their experiences, particularly in regard to living situations, yet these negative elements did not dominate their narratives. Others were sick during their stay, but these situations did not overwhelm positive aspects of their personal or professional

narratives. Amy had a negative experience in The Gambia leading to negative impacts after returning home. Negative experiences and impacts are important to explore so organizations can improve their volunteer programs.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate clear links between the nature of the experiences and the impacts across the three narrative categories. While there were evident relationships between experiences and impacts, motivations did not seem to correlate particularly with either of the other elements.

Key factors that influenced volunteers' narratives were living situations and conditions, length of project, location selection, work placement options, and non-work activities. These factors interact with each other to influence the experience. A key issue was how closely the volunteers interacted with local people. Palacios (2010) found that non-work place activities had a significant influence because they allowed interactions with the local people. In contrast, Gray and Campbell's (2007) study of international environmental volunteers identified the important influence of the work placement; but here volunteers worked with turtles rather than local people.

Living next to the family gave Alice an opportunity to build relationships with Gambians outside of her work placement and to shift her focus away from the actual work, while others such as Laura and Amy lived among non-Gambians. Other studies support this finding that living situations enable or diminish opportunities to interact with local people and have a large influence on the nature of the narrative (Palacios 2010; Sweatman and Tirone 2010).

The length of the project also influences the nature of the narrative. All of the participants in this study were involved in "short-term" projects based on the categories provided by Sherraden et al. (2006). However, these projects still varied in length, ranging from 1 week to 3 months. It is worth noting that even short-term projects can have positive impacts, or at least that is how volunteers in this study viewed them. This may be in part due to the NSGA framework of sending volunteers with specific skills to complete specific tasks, as well as the focus on the volunteers acting as support staff for the Gambian staff. The organizational model is important may be key and past studies identify that the nature of the organization and can have a large influence on volunteer's experiences (Palacios 2010; Chen and Chen 2011; Klaristenfeld et al. 2008). Emphasis on the impact of the organization and its leadership were characteristics of the professional development narrative.

IVS organizations have significant ability to define the characteristics of the experience that facilitate personal versus professional narratives. For example, the NSGA is clear in having Gambians define and structure programs, which may pose challenges to some volunteers being comfortable and expressing their values in the workplaces. This discomfort may be a factor in shifting some volunteers to priorize personal experiences. On one hand, this seems positive as the valuing of western norms over host country norms in IVS for Development efforts has been one important criticism of development programs (Easterly 2006). Yet for the individual

volunteer, they may feel constrained in the workplace and less able to feel comfortable in expressing who they are. There may not always be a win-win relationship between host community benefits and volunteer satisfaction in a particular setting.

A second example of the focus on local needs is that volunteers are sent to very diverse locales because of the NSGA priority to run programs in all regions of the country. The resulting differences in and quality of living situations and locations impacted volunteer's narratives. A solution to this challenge might involve better screening of volunteers at the outset, including interviews to better understand volunteers' needs and personalities, and how they would deal with Gambian culture and different living situations. In this example, it may be easier to improve volunteers' perceptions of their experiences while maintaining a priority on community benefits.

There may be a need to strike a different balance between community and volunteer benefits in IVS for development versus IVS for international understanding programs. In the former, the focus is on host community benefits and volunteers may need to adapt. For IVS for international understanding programs, it is still essential to contribute positively to host communities, but there are complex considerations if volunteer benefits are sacrificed for added community benefits.

Two important extra-organizational factors interact with the design of the experience: the personality of the volunteer and the culture of the country. The volunteer's personality and sense of personal safety can be an important factor. Amy and Laura both spent time in the same challenging locale, yet Laura was able to overcome the challenges while Amy struggled.

The culture of the country also has a strong influence on the experience. Gambian culture is extremely warm and inviting to all people (Saine 2012). It is common for a Gambian to invite a stranger into their home to eat and have a place to sleep (Saine 2012). A Gambian would give his or her food to someone else and go hungry if it meant helping another person. There is no sense of "alone time" in The Gambia. It is seen as odd for an individual to go to a room and be alone. Gambian culture is collectivist and communal relative to the individualism of Canada (Saine 2012).

Triandis (2001) states that collectivist cultures are characterized by people who are interdependent within their group (family, tribe, etc.) with priority given to the goals of the group. This shapes their behavior in a communal way. Maintaining relationships with others is prioritized; whereas in individualist cultures, people are independent and give priority to personal goals over the norms and goals of their group. When a volunteer from an individualist culture is immersed with people of a collectivist culture, strong relationships may be formed and reverse culture shock can be challenging when returning to individualist society with less focus on personal relationships (Thompson et al. 2000). Those in the personal narrative category were challenged by relationship issues relative to those in the professional development narrative category who focused on their work.

The Gambia's collectivist culture may explain why many volunteers had combination narratives. It is difficult for an individual to avoid developing personal relationships with Gambian people. For example, the first author is shy and takes time to bond with people. The family she lived with in the Gambia would engage

her by asking her to eat supper with them, or dance with them. It was the family that initiated the interactions and developed the relationship. If they had not consistently initiated interactions, the relationships may never have been developed. These relationships were meaningful, yet not as strong as Alice's family type bonds. Alice, who is outgoing by nature, created very deep, meaningful relationships with the family with whom she lived. The personality of the volunteer interacts with the nature of the experience and the culture to determine the depth and level of the personal relationships that are developed and the nature of the narrative. Two volunteers can be in the exact same living situation, location, work placement, and be offered the same non-work activities, but have differing experiences and impacts.

There are clear limitations to be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. The research is focused solely on a limited number of participants of one IVS organization and one country. Further research should be conducted to explore the effect of the country's culture on the experience by comparing volunteer experiences across multiple cultures. In addition, comparing different types of IVS organizations within a culture would add depth to the study of in-country experiences and their relationships with impacts on the volunteer's life. Also, further exploration into negative narratives would provide a much clearer understanding of how and why these occur. Explorations of the interaction between volunteers' personal characteristics and the design of the experience may provide further insight into how organizations can avoid negative narratives.

Identifying the connections between the experiences and impacts allows for a more in-depth understanding of the international volunteer process. It enables organizations to better understand their volunteer programs and how to create experiences that lead to certain impacts. Volunteers who had more personal experiences and interactions with local people tended to have more personal impacts. Those volunteers with experiences focused on the work placement, tended to have impacts that were more professionally based.

Characteristics of the experience are important to consider depending on the goals of IVS programs. Organizations looking to promote international understanding may want to emphasize program characteristics that make an experience more personal to create personal impacts and narratives. Human connections on a family level seem to facilitate impacts that are personal and strengthen international understanding. Personal impacts are also facilitated by accommodations that are closer to communities perceived as "safe" to explore, and by short-term projects with less of a focus on specific project outcomes.

IVS organizations focused on development aid and humanitarian relief may emphasize the experience characteristics of the professional development narrative. A focus on work place interactions and relationships might be prioritized which are connected to the volunteer's skills, and where the volunteers can witness the impacts of their work. These positive professional experiences seem to encourage volunteers to continue to work internationally and to develop a more critical perspective on the role and impact of international projects. Important characteristics of the professional development narrative are longer term placements, and living situations with non-Gambians. Professional development volunteers focus on their project tasks. It is also important to recognize that individuals can have both

personal and professional experiences, with one narrative being more dominant. Having experience characteristics that allow for both personal and professional narratives can allow those to have both experiences and develop critical perspectives on their work and the relationships they build while in-country.

Lastly, it is important for organizations to consider the negative narrative to learn ways to decrease the risks of volunteers falling into this category. The living situation, location selection, and inadequate health care were key factors in the negative narrative in this study.

Impacts occurred in many spheres and the types of impacts for each individual were dependent on whether the experience was personal, professional, or negative. What happens during the international volunteer experience directly affects the impacts.

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