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Promise and Problems of Short-Term Mission Trips through the Eyes of Christian Young Adults

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A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

May 2, 2022

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Abstract

Short-term mission trips are a popular form of international travel among Christian youth. Though many who attend these trips see them as a way to gain international experience and help others, there are also those who question the value of such trips and describe them as merely “voluntourism.” This research study investigated the experiences of 11 people who did a mission trip as a young adult, guided by the following research questions: *What motivates young people to do short-term mission trips? What lasting impact do these trips have on their participants’ worldviews?* The findings reveal that while most trip-goers were motivated by an altruistic desire to good to others, they also chose to go for self-betterment, in response to peer and/or family pressure, or to explore an academic interest. Participants’ reflections on doing one or more mission trips expose areas of personal growth as well as criticisms and concerns relating to cultural sensitivity and imperialism. While the trips had a lasting impact on participants’ worldviews, some expressed significant concerns about the community’s benefit. This study is particularly relevant to churches and religious nonprofit organizations organizing and/or overseeing volunteer work abroad.

Introduction

A short-term mission trip involves a group of people, normally from the same church or religious organization, travelling to another country for a period of one week to up to two years, with the most common length being close to one week (Johnson, 2016). The goal of such trips is to provide a form of faith-based service to a particular community, often in the form of evangelism, delivering medical supplies, English language teaching, or supporting the activities of a local church (Beyerlein et al., 2011). Participants may be any age, though youth participation in short-term mission trips is particularly high.

Mission trip activity is ubiquitous in the lives of many churchgoers. Over the past several decades, short-term missions have become “an increasingly common part of the American adolescent religious experience” (Beyerlein et al., 2011, p. 780), making them a popular form of youth international engagement in many congregations. Estimates suggest that about 1.6 million Americans attend a mission trip each year, often financing their travel through donations from family and friends (Adler & Ruiz, 2018). It is common for church members to receive requests for support in the form of letters showing photos of the host community, a description of the goal or project to be completed, and a request for prayer as well as financial assistance. After informing others about their trip and raising the money to attend, many return with heartfelt stories about their experiences. Reports of “eyes opened,” a change of perspective, feelings of sympathy, and a desire to help the host community abound in returnees’ descriptions of their trips (Tirres & Schikore, 2020).

In recent years, however, the nature of the short-term mission as a generally positive act of service has been increasingly called into question. An increasing amount of the attention on mission trips analyzes them as a form of “poverty tourism,” in which “the countries visited are

presented as one-dimensionally impoverished, its citizens cast as helpless innocents, and middle-class Americans portrayed as the only saviors who can help” (Held Evans, 2011). Many of these critiques come from within the mission-going community itself. One former participant writes, “I don’t deny that my mission trip experience was powerfully beneficial. But notice who benefitted: me” (Michelle C., 2015). In her view, the trip still served a purpose, but it was the unintended purpose of demonstrating the limited utility of the short trip to the host community, the supposed object of help. Another former participant suggested that the two mission trips she attended had a mostly negative effect on the host community: “We believed that we were improving lives simply with our presence, but in many ways, we were disrupting them” (Williams, 2019). Both stories illustrate how these mission trips opened the eyes of the participants, but in both cases, their reflections focused on critiques of the system that sent them abroad in the first place.

This capstone paper investigates the experiences of Christian young people from the United States who travel to other countries on short-term mission trips, through the theoretical lens of self-authorship in international education. International education programming, including academic study abroad, volunteer work, internships, and public diplomacy, is often focused on expanding participants’ worldviews and introducing them to other countries and/or cultures. In this way, the short-term mission could be classified as an international education experience. In examining self-authorship theory and relevant literature on the effects of mission trips on intercultural communication, cultural sensitivity, and more, the paper considers how similar effects might be seen in students who attend a short-term mission trip.

The field of international education currently lacks an analysis of the short-term mission trip from a development theory perspective. Religious and secular sources alike have looked at the effects of the mission trip mainly on cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication and

have analyzed its pitfalls. In using development theory to situate my research on mission trip participants' motivation and subsequent experiences, I hope to provide a new dimension to this body of work. Viewing the impact of short-term mission trips through the lens of self-authorship allows for an investigation into the role the trips play in participants' cultivation of their own unique worldview. Such a connection is a unique addition to international education literature, which to date has not focused on faith-based work abroad as it relates to student development.

The study seeks to understand the goals of the young people who take these trips and whether they have had a lasting impact on their participants. The research questions this paper addresses are: *What motivates young people to do short-term mission trips? What lasting impact do these trips have on their participants' worldviews?* After reviewing the theoretical framework of this study, the design and methodology are discussed, followed by research findings, discussion of these findings, and concluding analysis and areas for further research.

Theoretical Framework

Student development theory, specifically, the theory of self-authorship, provides a theoretical framework for this investigation. Self-authorship is "the capacity to internally define one's beliefs, identities, and relationships" (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2017, p. 235). The journey towards self-authorship is one in which people gradually turn from trusting external authority to define their beliefs, to cultivating and trusting their own internal voice. Self-authorship provides an ideal angle through which to view the effects of the short-term mission trip. The lives of many Christian young people involve trust in at least one clear authority: the Church. The framework of self-authorship sheds light on the interaction between religious and social teachings participants have received and the reality of their lived experience, which may

confirm or challenge them. Self-authorship paves the way to look at students' relationships to authority and to their own internal voice as they plan for and complete a short-term mission trip.

Baxter Magolda (2017) describes three major steppingstones along the journey towards self-authorship: external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship. In the "external formulas" stage, the voices of others often "drown out" one's own internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2017). At this stage, people rely on external authorities, such as parents, guardians, and professors, to decide what to believe and how to act. In this research study, pastors and church leaders may fit into this category as well. Rather than using their own criteria to guide their decisions, young people primarily do what they believe these authorities expect them to do.

At the "crossroads" stage, as its name suggests, people find themselves in a place where the expectations of external authorities point them in one direction, while their developing expectations and desires for themselves point them in another. They experience conflict between what they want and what others want from them. In Baxter Magolda's (2017) research, "Following external formulas guided by others' visions left participants feeling unfulfilled; they recognized that an important piece was missing—their own voices" (p. 11). Baxter Magolda (2017) found that process of listening to and cultivating one's internal voice happened most often throughout participants' twenties. They began to rely less on external authority as they focused on listening to their internal voice to determine their path in life.

Finally, at the "self-authorship" stage, individuals not only listen to their internal voice but trust it above all others to make decisions. They are grounded in their own values and beliefs. Baxter Magolda (2017) notes that the self-authorship stage does not imply a reversal of earlier beliefs and values or a complete rejection of authority. Instead, "although participants did not always change the fundamental basis of their values and beliefs, they used their own hands to

make their values and beliefs their own” (p. 14). Once people trust their internal voice, they are able to build an internal foundation of values to guide them through the many trials and decisions that life brings. Their intuition improves, and ultimately they become “less afraid of change, more open to deep relationships with others, and more open to continued personal growth” (p. 13). Having reached the self-authorship stage, people felt at home with themselves and were able to steer their own ship, so to speak.

Literature Review

The existing literature analyzes multiple components of the short-term mission trip and its effect(s) on participants. Discussions of the trips’ effect on participants’ cultural sensitivity, civic engagement, and spiritual development post-completion illuminate how participants respond to immersive, faith-based service experiences. Medical missions, a common source of mission trips, has also received attention in the literature. Additionally, several studies highlight the phenomenon of “voluntourism” and question the lasting benefits of short-term mission trips. All are relevant to this study.

Previous qualitative studies have found that short-term mission trips can have a tangible effect on participants’ lives. Youth who go on mission trips may be more civically engaged later in life, more likely to volunteer, engage in political participation, and give money to causes as adults (Beyerlein et al., 2011). This might occur when a trip’s themes are focused on social justice issues. Bible stories centered on social justice issues such as caring for people in poverty, immigrants, and women “may be reinterpreted by moderators to intentionally steer participants toward giving engagement once they return home” (Beyerlein et al., 2011, p. 793). In the short term, participants may feel more closer to God, become more committed to Christian service, and more likely to participate in future trips (Mansitas, 2000). This suggests that participants

experience noticeable spiritual growth on their trip, which might direct them to continued service later in life. Similarly, Haygood (2016) found that attending a short-term mission trip may speed participants' development of cultural intelligence. Consistent direct interaction with the host community, as guided by field workers leading the trip, was a significant factor in developing this intelligence. Tirres and Schikore (2020) also highlighted heightened empathy through immersion experiences. Participants reported a change in perspective and a "desire to do something" (p. 101). Short-term mission trips have been shown to have an immediate impact on participants due to their immersive nature.

However, short-term mission trips might not always end with a positive effect on participants or their view of the host community. Adler & Sallaz (2008), accompanying a group on a short-term mission to Mexico, found that although participants sought to hear the stories of Guatemalan migrants trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, they did not always view their stories as authoritative, in other words, they saw them as merely one version of events, open to interpretation from another source. For example, when the Guatemalan migrants described mistreatment U.S. border guards, participants reacted with disbelief, stating "I don't believe that" or "They're being told to say that" (Adler & Sallaz, 2008, p. 9). Throughout the trip, participants seemed to rely on "the power of authorities to interpret this humanity [of the migrants] for our group" (Adler & Sallaz, 2008, p. 11). In showcasing the importance of an authority, in this case, the trip director, in helping participants make sense of their experience, this analysis presents an interesting connection to the conceptual framework of the planned study. Johnson (2014) in analyzing the effect of short-term mission trips on reducing prejudice, points out that exposure alone may not be enough to change participants' existing mindset regarding a country or culture. Because of the privileged economic position of trip participants relative to the host community,

“the attitudes [of participants] may be comprised more of compassion and affection, instead of a commitment...to improve the community’s quality of life long-term” (Johnson, 2014, p. 20).

Along the same lines, although Mansitas (2000) identified an increased commitment to service shortly after the conclusion of the trip, a follow-up six months later revealed these gains had not been sustained. Such findings question the ability of short-term mission trips to play a significant role in participants’ personal development and their journey towards self-authorship.

A large section of the literature on short-term mission trips studies medical missions, a common focus of short-term missions. Short-term medical missions are distinct from other forms of short-term missions due to their need for skilled participants. Depending on the sending organization, the focus on providing medical care often overshadows the faith-based mission of the trip, and participants’ motivation to attend may have more to do with gaining career-related experience than spiritual growth. However, studies of medical missions can still enhance our knowledge of the lasting effects of mission trips on participants. Lamb et al. (2018) found that among a group of certified registered nursing assistants (CRNAs) who attended a medical mission trip, participants still listed humanitarian values as a major motivational factor, along with the opportunity for professional growth. According to Vu et al. (2014), participation in a short-term medical mission trip improved participants’ intercultural communication, adaptability, and cultural competency. Because of participants’ career focus, the sustained impact of these trips comes across more clearly, as participants in both studies viewed the trips as an important step in their overall career trajectory.

One area in which mission trip participants discovered dissonance between their hopes for the trip and their lived experience was in literature focusing on the phenomenon of volunteer tourism, or voluntourism. Anderson et al. (2017) recorded insights from volunteers whose

expectations for the trip, and subsequent reality, ended up being quite different. One volunteer was told by a doctor that the equipment they had donated did not always work, and “it would have been more helpful if these medical students, who think they know it all, had just stayed home and sent money” (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 32). Similarly, Root (2008) questioned the motivations and preparations of trip organizers, suggesting that “the mission trip is a tourist event, but most insidiously, a tourist event that uses vagabonds as its activities” (Root, 2008, p. 317). The gap between the perceived benefits of the short-term mission trip, and its actual effects, may affect participants’ relationships with the authorities organizing them, namely hosting churches or religious organizations. Such dissonance has a clear relevance to the participants’ journey of self-authorship, as they experience firsthand that the benefits communicated to them might not play out in the way they expect.

Research Design and Methodology

Methodology

I used qualitative research as the methodological approach to this study. Specifically, I used a phenomenological approach, focusing on participants’ lived experiences. A qualitative, phenomenological study provided an ideal entry into answering my research questions and eliciting participants’ lived experiences and internal thought processes. Phenomenology “typically involves several long, in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest...the focus is on life as lived” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 50). To learn as much as possible about the participants “life as lived,” a qualitative, rather than quantitative, study is most appropriate. Qualitative methodology provides a window into participants’ intimate lives which served the study well as I examined participants’ motivation to go on mission trips and the worldview changes that occurred as a result.

Participants and Sampling

My sample population was comprised of 11 Christian adults and young adults who participated in a short-term mission trip as a “young adult,” an age range generally defined as 18-25 (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2017), though I still included one participant who, at 17 years old, fell slightly outside of this range. The sampling strategy used to recruit participants was convenience sampling. I recruited participants from within my own network through email, text message, and social media. After an initial round of outreach, I proceeded to snowball sampling, asking participants for referrals to others who fell within my sample population. Convenience sampling allowed me to make initial contact with participants, while further snowball sampling led me to “identify cases of interest from people who know people who know which cases are information rich” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 187). In my study, this looked like referrals from one participant to other potential participants who also attended a short-term mission trip. Initial participants were people who went to college, lived, or worked in Western Massachusetts, as that is where I live and where I had the easiest access to possible participants. For the same reason, a few initial participants were previous or current attendees of the same American Baptist Church in Amherst, Massachusetts. Snowball sampling enhanced the relevance of the study and the diversity of my pool of participants, as I branched out to participants from different denominations who lived elsewhere in the United States.

Data Collection Method

The primary data collection method of my capstone was guided participant interviews with 11 participants. To answer my research questions, participants’ stories came to the forefront, as the study focused on their reflections of their experiences on mission trips. The interview was an ideal format in which to do this. It yielded a large quantity of data in a

relatively short amount of time. I was able to follow up with participants immediately in the moment and observe indicators of emotion such as tone of voice, physical gestures, and pauses in conversation that do not come across in a written format. As participants' comments were personal in nature, this generated more insight into participants' thought processes and feelings as they related to their experiences. The interactive and intimate format of an interview served the purpose of this study well.

Guided interviews provide some uniformity across all participant interviews and enable the researcher with a foundation for comparisons and contrasts, while allowing for follow-ups and requests for elaboration, which can make each interview deeper and more fruitful (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Because the research questions elicited participants' stories from the decision to go on a mission trip all the way to their post-trip reflections, it was essential that "the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 236). I had a list of general questions prepared ahead of time but left room for spontaneity in the interviews, following participants' lead as they related their experiences. There were occasionally specific topics or ideas not covered by the prepared questions that were still pertinent to the research questions. Given the theoretical framework of this study, self-authorship, the participants' framing of their own story was just as important as the story itself. The guided interview provided a rich conversation that placed the participant at the center, allowing the researcher to understand how they organized the meaning of their experiences and progressed on the path towards self-authorship.

Ethics

Through informed consent prior to participation in an interview, participants learned about their rights as a research subject, including the fact that they could withdraw from the

study at any time without penalty. Prior to starting each interview, I confirmed that participants understood the informed consent document sent to them, asked if they had any questions, and reiterated that their participation was voluntary. Because sensitive topics inevitably surfaced in these interviews about participants' beliefs and experiences with religion, I took particular care in probing for follow-up or asking participants to elaborate. I did not pressure the participants into speaking further if they were not comfortable with a certain topic or line of questioning. I kept the ethical principal of respect for persons at the forefront of my communications with participants, remembering that these individuals are not a means to an end, and their privacy, anonymity, and consent must be respected (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To respect anonymity, I used a pseudonym for every participant to protect their identity. This was particularly important in protecting participants from any negative repercussions that might result from sharing criticisms of their church, its leaders, or another aspect of their trip.

Researcher Positionality

Though I focused on allowing participants' stories to come to the forefront in my research, it was still my responsibility as the researcher to receive and interpret data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I treated this process with the utmost care, conscious of my own position as a Christian person doing research in the same space where I hold many of my own friendships and personal experiences. I also remained conscious of other identities that impact my view of the subject matter: as a white woman I am not well-acquainted with faith traditions that center on people of color, such as the many African American, Asian American, and Latin American Christian communities in the United States. My own church tradition is usually viewed as the "default" version of American Christianity. This consideration was ever-present in my interviews

and subsequent analysis as I did interview some participants with identities and traditions different than my own.

Because many participants, particularly those contacted initially, came from within my own community, I knew that some might share critical perspectives relating to the church that we both attend or the larger Christian community we are part of. Throughout the data collection process, I refrained from letting personal connections to the subject matter cloud interpretations. To combat possible bias on my part, I utilized member checks, sharing the transcript of the interview with participants to receive their comment on anything they wanted to clarify or strike. I also used peer debriefing, ensuring objectivity in my analysis by sharing findings and analysis with a critical peer for feedback. To engage myself in critical reflexivity, I kept a journal where I recorded thoughts, feelings, and emotions brought on by my research. Recording my reactions helped me sift through any assumptions that I might have made during my research and challenge them appropriately.

Data Management and Analysis

I recorded and transcribed each interview, after obtaining consent to do so from each participant. I used the dictation function within Microsoft Office to assist in transcription but read and edited each transcription myself for maximum clarity. Interview recordings and their transcripts were stored on my password-protected computer and backed up to a secure external hard drive.

I read each transcript multiple times as I began the process of open coding, identifying main categories of data, such as amount of time spent abroad, destination of the mission trip, and age of the participant. Because I solicited participants' reflections from before, during, and after their trip, I also categorized the timeline of participants' experiences. This made for the clearest

analysis of changes the participants reported. These basic categories provided a first layer of data organization. From there, I reread the interview transcripts and identified more codes. Because I prepared general interview questions along the lines of my theoretical framework, I entered the research with a list of potential theory-generated codes but added in vivo codes and altered my theory-generated codes during analysis. My beginning theory-generated codes included career, personal, and spiritual motivation (respectively), desire to expand worldview, peer relationships, and family relationships. As I interacted further with the data, I identified clusters of related codes and wrote analytic memos describing key concepts that emerged from the data.

After I made significant progress in coding, incorporating in vivo codes, and identifying major categories and themes, I moved to interpretation. Throughout coding, it was important to check my developing understanding of the data against the literature and review my conceptual framework multiple times, seeking to construct “a credible explanation that provides significant knowledge” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 348). As I interpreted the data and sought to accurately report the stories of participants in my findings, I also searched for alternative explanations, critiquing the patterns I found and refining my analysis as I made the case for the most plausible explanation of the phenomena I uncovered.

Credibility

As I recruited first from within my own community of acquaintances, I believe that my relationships with possible participants enhanced trust in me as a researcher and a receiver of their stories. This lent credibility to my findings, as participants were more comfortable honestly sharing their experiences. Faith and spirituality are sensitive topics for many and speaking to another person of faith created a comfortable atmosphere in each interaction that would not otherwise be there. During the research and writing of this paper, I engaged in critical reflexivity.

I tried to examine my own beliefs and judgements about mission trips as I went about this study, keeping a journal as my interviews and analysis progressed. This proved effective, providing a place to explore feelings and reactions to my research while maintaining objectivity as my study moved along. Member checks with participants also added credibility, as participants were able to confirm that their experiences were recorded correctly. Peer debriefing within my capstone cohort was invaluable to the integrity of this study, as my classmates and I provided rigorous feedback on each other's work. My study within the field of international education and rigorous adherence to all institutional policies related to participant consent further served to prevent bias and lend credibility to my findings.

Limitations

One inherent limitation of this research design is that I interviewed participants about experiences that had already passed. Ideally, to capture participants' pre-trip motivations and post-trip accounts of their experiences, I would have conducted two sets of interviews, one before, and one after the trip. This was not possible for this study; however, I believe that the analysis of one-time interviews with multiple participants still provided valuable insight in answering my research questions.

Another limitation might be social desirability bias. Participants may have been motivated to respond to my questions in a way that showed their actions in a more positive light. They might have consciously or unconsciously tried to make the trip and its effects seem greater than they were, or felt pressure to appear more faithful as they talked about their trip.

Findings and Discussion

To provide context to my findings, two tables begin this section: Table 1 introduces the participants, their ages, and information about their trip(s). Table 2 shows participants'

motivations for doing their trip(s). Following these tables, I describe the three major themes that emerged in answer to my research questions (*What motivates young people to do short-term mission trips? What lasting impact do these trips have on their participants' worldviews?*). First, I illuminate participants' career, family, academic, and faith-based motivations. Following this, I describe the effects of the trip on participants, their explanations of how it changed them and their worldview, and the more critical reflections that emerged in my interviews. I conclude with my own suggestions about the importance of this study, who it can help and how.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age on trip	Age now	Destination	Purpose of trip	Trip length
Anna	Female	19	26	Tijuana, Mexico	Service project (carpentry)	2 weeks
Beth	Female	22	40	Blue Fields, Nicaragua	Service project (building a sidewalk)	10 days
Carrie	Female	20	28	Pueblo Modelo, Guatemala	Service project (farming)	1 week
Fred	Male	17	27	Tegucigalpa, Honduras	Service project (children's home)	2 weeks
		18		Tegucigalpa, Honduras	Service project (children's home)	2 weeks
		19		Tegucigalpa, Honduras	Internship (children's home)	1 month
June	Female	19	26	Multiple locations, China	Teaching English	3 months
Leah	Female	23	29	Multiple locations, Dominican Republic	Medical (mobile clinic)	10 days
Lexi	Female	21	29	Multiple locations, Peru	Medical (mobile clinic)	10 days
		23-24		Central African Republic	Medical (hospital)	2 years
Michaela	Female	19	28	Guaimaca, Honduras	Medical (Spanish-English translation)	10 days
		20		Guaimaca, Honduras	Medical (Spanish-English translation)	10 days

		25		Guaimaca, Honduras	Medical (Spanish-English translation)	10 days
Natasha	Female	17	26	Rivne, Ukraine	Teaching English	3 weeks
Rebecca	Female	15	25	Tijuana, Mexico	Service project (building houses)	1 week
		17		Tijuana, Mexico	Service project (building houses)	1 week
		19		Tijuana, Mexico	Service project (activities for kids)	1 week
		20		Tijuana, Mexico	Service project (activities for kids)	1 week
Rose	Female	15	30	Uruguay	Youth choir, Service (orphanage)	1 week
		17		Germany	Youth choir	10 days
		20		England	Youth choir	10 days
		22		Battambang, Cambodia	Service (orphanage)	1 week
		23		Multiple locations, China	Evangelism (faith sharing)	1 week

Table 2

Participants' stated motivation to do a mission trip

Pseudonym	Career or academic Interest	Encouragement from Church	Encouragement from Family	Encourage ment from peer(s)	Learn about country	Act on values and beliefs
Anna		x				x
Beth	x				x	x
Carrie	x	x			x	
Fred			x			x
June				x		x
Leah	x					
Lexi	x					
Michaela	x					x
Natasha		x		x		
Rebecca		x	x			x
Rose				x	x	x

Motivation

Participants expressed a variety of motivations for doing their mission trip, including faith, career interests, and encouragement from family or friends. Many were driven by a sense of spiritual purpose and saw a mission trip as a way to act on their existing values. As Michaela, who went on three trips to the same community in Honduras, stated, “for me it's primarily faith driven, so service is a big part of my life and how I view my life.” Participants often described their mission trip in the context of recent spiritual growth, such as Anna, who saw it as the next important step after becoming a Christian: “Okay, I just gave my life to Jesus, the next step is to go on mission.” Strong convictions and a desire to be of service came to the forefront of my discussions with participants about their motivation. They wanted to be useful to others. As June, who taught English in China, put it, “I'd been seeking out opportunities to give my time, and to love people, and thirsting for more and more...I was really hungry for more opportunities to volunteer or be in meaningful service.” In total, seven participants (Anna, Beth, Fred, June, Michaela, Rebecca, Rose) out of eleven explicitly cited a desire to act on their religious values as a main reason for doing their trip.

Family, Peers, and Church.

Other participants did not actively seek out volunteer activity and were mainly motivated by pressure from family and peers or saw their mission trip as just a next logical step. Natasha described looking up to older students at her church who had gone on a mission trip: “...those were students that I looked up to naturally. And they were students that I admired, and I wanted them to like me. I was very insecure at that age and I really just wanted them to accept me.” Though the trips were always of interest to participants, not all described having a powerful impetus to go. Beth expressed that her trip to Nicaragua “just seemed like a fun adventure...I

don't know how much thought I put into it really". Natasha, Anna, and Beth remembered mission trips as entrenched in the culture of their church, something that everyone did when the opportunity came up. June, Natasha, Anna, and Carrie, in addition to their own reasons, spoke about hearing older students or church members who had gone previously speak positively about their trips, which increased their interest. Overall, peer, family, and church-related motivations seemed intertwined, as the participants who spoke about family and peer encouragement did so in the context of the overall culture of their church, as "just one of those things" or "just what you did". Six participants in total (Anna, Carrie, Fred, June, Natasha, and Rose) expressed this motivation.

Career/Academic Interests.

Motivation because of career or academic interests was another main reason participants went on their trip. This was especially true for the three participants who did a medical mission trip: Leah, Lexi, and Michaela. They wanted the experience that came with assisting at a medical clinic. For example, when Leah decided to go to the Dominican Republic, "the main reason I wanted to go is to get more global health experience...see what the healthcare system there was like and how I could help, and you know, get more clinical skills." Michaela described her motivation "primarily faith driven", but also expressed academic interests that aligned with her trips to Honduras: "I was always interested in doing a trip to Latin America, because at the time my studies were oriented in that space." Similarly, Lexi expressed that prior to going on her first trip to Peru, "I had been very interested in global health, and that was actually my motivation for pursuing nursing as a career."

Participants in non-medical trips also drew connections between their career interests and the focus of the trip. Beth had done a college internship for a nonprofit organization before deciding to join them for a mission trip:

I did the internship, working with them, doing grant writing and grant researching for my communications degree because I thought I might go into nonprofit fundraising, and then they had a missions trip, so I figured that I would go on the trip and find out more about this place I had been raising money for, or attempting to.

Part of Carrie's desire to do her trip to Guatemala involved her study of Spanish: "I was studying Spanish in school...literature and culture and learning just about different communities, specifically South America and Central America. And so I wanted a chance to practice Spanish." Five participants (Michaela, Leah, Lexi, Carrie, and Beth) indicated that their mission trip was in some way tied to their academic and/or career interests. Overall, nine out of eleven participants cited at least two different motivations for doing their mission trip. The two who cited only one were Lexi and Leah, both medical mission trip participants. In most cases, faith, career interests, and encouragement from family or friends combined to create participants' interest in the trip.

In discussing their motivation to travel abroad for a mission trip, participants described their interest in global health, development, and desire to act on their existing religious beliefs concerning doing good for others. It is important to note here that among all the reasons cited for going on the trip, the intent to provide service to others was the only reason that focused on the destination community, who would be receiving the help. All other reasons concerned the participants' own self-improvement and self-fulfillment. Throughout my interviews, participants did not cite motivations that involved working towards the long-term flourishing of the host community. In other words, the motivations participants discussed were mainly internal –

seeking to explore an area of personal interest or act on their own religious values – rather than external – seeking to have a role in improving the lives of others. The literature reflects this tendency toward self-serving goals in mission trip participation, noting that most of the changes on mission trips happen to the participants rather than the host community. As Anderson et al. (2017) note, “volunteers are spending significant sums of money investing within self-fulfillment trips rather than the recipient community” (p. 29). This effect can already be seen before the trip in the way participants spoke about their motivation. Though the desire to good for others was certainly a common finding, it was often combined with participants’ descriptions of what they could get out of the trip.

These findings regarding motivation suggest that young people who attend mission trips might still be in the beginning stages of self-authorship, relying on external formulas to choose their path. In much of the Christian world today, the dominant “formula” involves young people attending church and at least one mission trip, seen as a pivotal part of *their* development (distinct from the development of the community on the receiving end). As Natasha put it, in the culture of her church, “the good students went...it was like, you have now unlocked this level of being a good Christian, or your next spiritual level or whatever.” Baxter Magolda (2017) notes that prior to reaching self-authorship, young people are very likely to take cues from others to decide what to do. Applied to the context of mission trips, this suggests that many young people are going on mission trips because they view them as a normal step towards achieving their goals.

Effects of Trip

In reflecting on the effects of the trip, participants reported changes in their worldview and how they thought about their faith and values. The phrase “eye opening” came up in six of

my eleven interviews, usually in the context of witnessing poverty in the host community.

Participants sometimes struggled to describe this, for example, Fred said that “It was really cool being there because you, well, it wasn't cool, but it was very eye opening 'cause they were right in the area where the poorest people in Honduras were.” Carrie described her impression of the village her group went to in Guatemala as “definitely eye opening as far as how deep poverty can look.” Anna, who went to Mexico, described, “I think it really opened my eyes...being around people who have nothing and that were more joyful than I've ever been.” Participants highlighted their first impressions of the host community as something that set them on a path towards an expanded worldview.

Another main area in which participants reported growth and change was in their faith-related values, particularly around service and practicing gratefulness. Rebecca described spiritual growth as coming out of her comfort zone: “It was a lot of praying and relying on God to you know, really push me through or push me in general too, be out of my comfort zone, which was definitely what I was experiencing.” This feeling was echoed in other participants' comments as well. Fred said that after time in Honduras “definitely made me reflect more on what I wanted to do with my life...I definitely wanted to be more connected to my church.”

Others emphasized that their faith had been affirmed or strengthened through the trip. Rose said that her trips to Cambodia and China helped her “build my faith and what I can ask the Lord for, and then also trust him in my steps.” In a different vein, June and Michaela described the effects of the trip as broadening their view of faith and their ability to communicate about it. After June's time in China, she said she was “able to think outside of myself and consider that maybe the way that I have been taught to be Christian is not the only way.” Michaela's trips to Honduras helped her “speak to my faith to people who are both Catholic and not Catholic better

and like understand it myself better, but also be able to speak to it a little bit better and like why it's important to me.” In this way, participants reported an increased “trust in God” but also an ability to describe why they believed what they did more effectively.

However, effects on faith were not uniformly positive. Out of my 11 participants, 10 still identified as Christian at the time of their interview. One did not. Lexi, who worked as a nurse, first on a mobile clinic in Peru, and later at a hospital in the Central African Republic, explained that the tragedies she experienced on her mission trip served to end her religious beliefs entirely. She related,

...living there was the end of my faith. I think a big part of it was like, being exposed to a lot of death and suffering. Did I tell you about the baby? ... I think about him all the time. You know when sometimes your chest, just hurts a little 'cause it's so sad? I remember being like, God, if you were good. You would have let me die and let a little girl live. Or that little boy live... that was mostly it, just like, being exposed to a lot of what I felt, and continued to feel, was senseless pain and suffering. Pain and suffering that was happening to people because of where they were born...Anyways, that's why. That was the nail in the coffin of my faith.

Lexi identified as an atheist during the interview after multiple tragedies on her trip led her to question the faith she had placed in God. As she described above, her experiences did not serve to enhance or expand her faith, as other participants described, but rather end her practice of Christianity. She ultimately could not reconcile her belief in God with the suffering she witnessed while working as a nurse. Lexi was also the participant who spent the most time in-country. Her time in the Central African Republic was almost two years. As she was both the only participant who identifies as an atheist and the one who went on a mission for the longest,

there is not enough data to conclude if the length of the trip and the changes in her beliefs were related.

Lexi's change of beliefs was the biggest among my participants, but not all the participants who still identify as Christian expressed that their trip was positive, worldview-expanding, or life-changing. Fred described his post-trip motivation very casually: "I know when I first got back, I think I tried to read the Bible more and stuff." Rose, who did multiple trips in multiple countries, didn't view all of them as equally affecting: "I would say, to be 100% honest with you, Germany and England, I didn't really feel were life changing... It felt more like I was being touristy and like, just hanging out with my friends." Beth also related that she did not feel a big change or a sense of purpose after going to Nicaragua: "I never felt like there was like a big purpose that we accomplished, 'cause even hanging out with the kids, we didn't speak their language...maybe the money would be better spent just giving it to the organization." Overall, six participants reported positive feelings regarding the outcome of their trip while five expressed misgivings about the effectiveness of the trip, or did not feel it had a positive impact on them or the host community.

My findings echo the existing literature on the effects of short-term mission trips on their participants. Beyerlein et al (2011) and Mansitas (2000) both suggested that participants who went on a mission trip were more likely to do another trip and were more likely to engage in other forms of service. 5 out of 11 participants went on more than one mission trip, which aligns with Mansitas' suggestion that people who do one mission trip are likely to do another. Even those who did not do another mission trip had the desire to serve or to do service work in another area. Leah, who went to the Dominican Republic, later went on another trip to Thailand, though the Thailand trip was not faith-oriented. Carrie and her husband wanted to visit Guatemala a

second time but were unable to due to financial difficulties. Upon returning from her trip to China, June changed her psychology concentration to childhood development and learning and cited the trip as the reason why she went into education. Absent here is civic engagement or political participation, two actions that Beyerlein et al. (2011) conjectured might be outcomes of a short-term mission trip. Surprisingly, though participants mentioned aspects of the host country's culture that were new or different to them, they did not generally describe themselves as more culturally competent after their trip. Increased cultural intelligence was an effect of the trip cited only by a couple of participants (Leah, June). It did not emerge as a universal effect of the trip. Participants mainly spoke about changes they made to their academic trajectory, or spoke to how the trip strengthened their existing interests. This seems to fall in line with Mansitas' (2000) finding that participants did not sustain their excitement or commitment to service long-term. This seemed true for my participants when it came to volunteering, civic engagement, or political participation: no participants mentioned these as activities they went on to do because of their trip.

In participants' discussion of the effects of their trip, we can see different places on the path to self-authorship. The above findings shed light on the extent to which the experience of going on a mission trip helps participants move down the path to self-authorship. In Baxter Magolda's (2017) study of participants from their college years through their twenties and thirties, as participants progressed towards self-authorship, they "focused on identifying what made them happy, examining their own beliefs, finding parts of themselves that were important to them, and establishing a distinction between their feelings and external expectations" (p. 12). Many of my participants identified what made them happy. Anna, for example, said she had found purpose in "my biggest desire with my life is...to make people feel loved and known."

Rebecca found satisfaction in the trips themselves, saying, “I am such an advocate for small or short-term mission trips because of how much of an impact it made on my life personally.” In the interviews I conducted, however, not all participants spoke about examining their own beliefs or distinguishing their feelings from others’ expectations. This suggests that although mission trips can serve as an important step towards self-authorship, they alone are not necessarily enough to get participants all the way there.

Critical Reflections

Another major theme that emerged from the data was participants’ critical reflection. Though most participants expressed positive views towards their mission trip, many also shared critiques of their experience. While reflecting on their experience, they shared critiques and criticisms that emerged from hindsight. Some critiques involved the long-term effects of the mission trip, as Leah put it, “worrying about, you know, the long-term sustainability of the mission. Like we helped in the moment, but where are those people now?” Others discussed the foundations of the trip itself and the usefulness of having Americans go to another country to do service work. Beth, who was part of a group doing construction work, said:

It felt a little foolish because I felt like there were people in the neighborhood who for sure could have been paid or organized or whatever to do this, so yes. I felt a little ridiculous. Having Americans who had no idea what they were doing trying to do this work that the community could have done.

Some participants also engaged in candid discussions about the value of the mission trip and related their discomfort about participating in a system where evangelism of other cultures is the ultimate goal. June related mission trips and colonialism together in her critical reflections:

I have a lot of questions and misgivings about the colonial flavor of Christianity as we know it today and how settler colonialism and genocide is often inspired by pushing forward Christianity and obviously wealth...I'm very aware of that, very aware of the fact that like, Christianity, as it began, was an underground movement from poor brown people in the Middle East and then was co-opted by European empires and used as a tool for imperialism. And that's really yucky.

Natasha processed her thoughts on the nature of culture and religious beliefs, considering:

...how difficult it has been historically for people to separate out which part of this is faith and which part of this is culture? I believe God created cultures to be distinct. Or created people to create cultures and we have created them distinctly. That's good and beautiful. And we shouldn't try to flatten it.

Researchers have demonstrated similar concerns. Guttentag (2009) writes that mission trips often have "... an implicit or even explicit goal of imparting certain religious beliefs on the host community...such a desired impact inherently prevents this form of volunteer tourism from truly valuing a host community's culture or allowing a 'genuine exchange' between volunteers and hosts." Beth, June, Carrie, and Natasha's reflections all touch on the sticky issues of cultural imperialism and colonialism within mission trips, wrestling with the idea that the participants' desire to help may be misguided or not well-thought out.

Carrie shared thoughts on the white savior complex through a story about her trip to Guatemala:

I guess kind of like the white savior syndrome. There were definitely some vibes of that... the whole group coming, you know, was a group of white people. It sometimes did feel like we were telling them what they needed. You know, you should build a chicken coop.

And you should get this type of training or this work. Which, you know, was fair, I mean, those are those are good things to share and educate about. We also did have like later, after our trip...there was a group within the village that kind of got angry. It did become violent towards the group going to help, and I don't know all the details behind what happened, but I think there were some complaints about some people getting housing and other people not getting it. Like not having a whole lot of trust in the people that were coming to help. And it kind of reminds me a little bit of that book, *When Helping Hurts*, and just being like really mindful of making sure that the services you're providing are not just like, you going in because it feels good to you to give somebody a house.

Though Carrie shared that she had a positive experience on her trip and wanted to return to Guatemala someday, she also engaged in critical reflection about the nature of the help the group was providing.

These stories provide an entry point into a discussion of the literature on “volontourism” - volunteer tourism. The reservations, doubts, and criticisms that participants shared parallel criticisms present in the literature. Beth’s comment that “maybe the money would be better spent just giving it to the organization” and Anderson et al.’s (2017) reflection from a local doctor that the American medical students who came on a mission trip should have just stayed home and sent money both describe a major issue with these trips: that though they claim to be opportunities to help the local community, they very often serve to help participants themselves rather than the locals. In interviews, participants demonstrated what Zakaria (2014), in an opinion piece for *Al-Jazeera*, describes as “the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer’s quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community’s actual needs.” All of my participants enthusiastically described their own quest for experience and its results.

Five of them shared critical reflections, such as those above, that question whether their trip was a good idea in the first place.

This process of criticism and critique may form part of what Baxter Magolda calls “cultivating the internal voice.” For these participants, processing their experiences on their trip involved, as Baxter Magolda puts it, “developing parts of themselves they valued, establishing priorities, sifting out beliefs and values that no longer worked, and putting pieces of the puzzle of who they were together” (p. 12). It seems that for many of my participants, questioning the value of mission trips, and similarly, questioning the beliefs handed down to them by their churches played a crucial role in cultivating their internal voices. In self-authorship, the internal voice guides adults to make choices about where to work, whom to form relationships with, and how to live. In looking at participants’ wrestling with their trips, we see this process happening in real time.

Conclusions

Religious belief and faith-based motivation were the primary motivations addressed by participants. Participants were motivated by a desire to do good, which led them to take part in service work. Academic and career interests, while also a common motivation, were usually mentioned secondarily to spiritual motivation. Participants saw this as an added benefit to the trip, but not as the main reason why they wanted to go. Encouragement from friends and family members also played an important role in participants’ decision-making. Overall, it can be said that a combination of faith-based interest in service, coupled with community support and desire to explore an area of academic interest, motivated participants to go on a short-term mission trip.

Mission trip experiences did leave a lasting impact on participants’ worldviews. This impact was largely positive: participants cited increased appreciation and gratitude for their lives

as they were, satisfaction with the help they provided to the host community, and new relationships that have lasted to the present day, both with members of the host community and with fellow trip participants. At the same time, half of my participants were critical of the long-term value of their trip and the viability of short-term missions in general. This suggests that mission trips certainly have an influence on participants' worldviews, both in expanding their intercultural experiences and in understanding and critiquing the larger systems surrounding the practice of mission trips.

The experiences participants had while on their trip(s) helped them progress down the path towards self-authorship. Some participants found themselves at the crossroads, evaluating their lived experience against what they had heard about mission trips before going. It is apparent through their more critical comments that they were reflecting on what their internal voice versus external voices of authority were telling them. In their reflections, these participants demonstrated their process of discernment between what they had been told and what they believed. Participants such as Natasha and June incorporated new understandings of Christianity and mission trips into their religious beliefs. Lexi stepped away from Christianity completely and went on her own path. At the same time, lack of questions and criticisms from other participants does not necessarily mean they made no progress on the path towards self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (2017) makes clear that self-authorship does not always involve a rejection of external voices, rather, it means one shapes one's own values and beliefs instead of letting others shape them. Participants who had uncritical views about their trip may have a path towards self-authorship that incorporates more positive beliefs about mission trips and their effects.

In terms of mission trip effects, this study reveals an interesting contrast between participants' perception of the effects of short-term mission trips versus the trips' actual effects.

Trips are advertised as an opportunity for service. Participant motivations reflect this: they expressed a desire to help others in addition to a desire to improve their own lives through practicing another language, gaining career-relevant experience, and more. However, the effects of the mission trips, as reported by participants, almost exclusively center around self-betterment. There is a disconnection between intention and impact when mission trips are presented as helping the host community, when in reality, the participants are the ones who benefit the most. Wanting to better oneself or learn through a short trip to another country is not harmful in and of itself. Rather, the problem appears in how participants think of these experiences and set expectations, which does not necessarily line up with what the trips do, for the participants or the host community.

Practical Applicability

Through this comparison of participants' motivations and the effects of short-term mission trips, both problems and promise emerge that can lead individuals, churches, and nonprofits to plan and execute these trips more effectively and/or responsibly in the future. These organizations might benefit from reconsidering how they explain short-term mission opportunities to potential participants. The evidence provided in this study can help sending organizations think through the goal(s) of the trip compared to its actual effects on both the participants and the host community. For those who still wish to send groups of young people abroad, it might be important to examine their relationship to the host community and consider whether their presence there is a benefit or an imposition.

Recommendations for Further Research

The field would benefit from a more in-depth review of mission trips according to their stated goal. For example, studies of medical mission trips specifically exist in the literature on

mission trips. Further research could focus on English-teaching trips, trips to orphanages, trips specifically for evangelism, and more. Additionally, some short-term mission trips visit an existing church in the host community and focus on learning from and building relationships with local people, rather than trying to share Christianity with locals who do not share participants' beliefs. These foci are quite distinct from one another and may have very different outcomes. Research that homes in more specifically on the type of trip, its purpose, and its destination could provide a clearer idea of how the trip impacts participants and host community members.

Additionally, a large omission in the existing research is just that: the voices of those on the receiving end of these trips. In order to fully understand the impact of mission trips, the host community's stories must come to light. This would provide an indispensable look into the relationship between missionaries and their host communities and the actual versus perceived effects of these trips on those they intend to serve. Even though it may be more difficult to gain access to this group of participants due to distance, language barriers, and other obstacles, if mission trip organizers are to fully understand how their trips impact others, they must hear from those they profess to help.

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