



Transformational learning experiences of international development volunteers in the Asia-Pacific: The case of a multinational NGO

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ABSTRACT

While most MNE activity in Asia and the Pacific focuses on rapidly developing and newly industrialized economies, multinational NGOs have for decades provided important financial, human and social capital to poorer nations in the region. Our study examines the learning experiences of a sample of expatriate volunteer workers deployed by the Asia-Pacific's largest international volunteer agency. Our field research shows that, when compared to a control group, the expatriates' learning was unique in terms of context, process and outcomes. Notably, expatriates experienced learning outcomes that were more frequently transformational, involving fundamental changes to their values, perspectives or assumptions.

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1. Introduction

The explosion of multinational enterprises (MNEs) entering, and emerging from, Asia and the Pacific in recent years is unprecedented (e.g. Dicken, 2011). This flurry of activity, however, does tend to cloud the fact that MNEs have had a long history in the region. Many of the institutions that shape the current Asia-Pacific region, like international trade policy, are a legacy of centuries of earlier MNE activity (Davenport-Hines & Jones, 1989). The impact that these MNEs exert on their host societies is contentious. There are competing views about whether less wealthy nations in Asia and the Pacific have been helped or harmed by their presence. Diffusion theorists argue that MNEs bring investment, skills and technology that contribute positively toward the economic and social outcomes of developing nations (Javorcik, 2004; O'Brien & Beamish, 2006). Dependency theorists, in contrast, argue that rather than helping poorer nations, the main legacy of most MNE activity is the exploitation of local resources and labor (e.g. Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Görg & Greenaway, 2004).

Against this backdrop has been a boom in the number of multinational non-government organizations (NGOs) operating and/or headquartered in the Asia-Pacific region (Glasius, Kaldor, & Anheier, 2002; Union of International Associations, 2010). These organizations deal with a range of issues and strategies not peripheral to global business (e.g. Kaldor, 2003), and while

sometimes positioned as a counterweight to the negative side of globalization, they provide a critical and increasingly influential link between the economically and culturally diverse nations in Asia and the Pacific. Through their hands-on development work, these multinational NGOs are central to the circulation of knowledge and cross-cultural understanding within one of the world's most dynamic regions (Teegan, 2006).

One multinational NGO committed to supporting capacity building in the Asia-Pacific is Australian Volunteers International (AVI), based in Melbourne, Australia. For 60 years AVI has coordinated and overseen the placement of highly skilled volunteers in Asia and the Pacific. Global in its operations and scope, AVI is the largest international volunteer agency in the region, having managed more than 9000 placements in 79 nations, 78% of these in Asia and the Pacific (Australian Volunteers International, 2007). At the time of writing, AVI simultaneously manages 647 expatriate placements with more than 300 international partner organizations in 49 different countries. Multinational NGOs, like AVI, deal with all the issues confronted by other MNEs. Their challenge is magnified by the breadth of their operations, the diversity and poverty of the countries in which they operate, and their reliance on fewer levers to manage psychological contracts with expatriates (notably the limited financial incentives). This complexity makes multinational NGOs worthy of more concerted attention by researchers (Teegan, Doh, & Vachani, 2004).

Our research addresses an unresolved contradiction about the expatriate 'volunteer' development staff who perform the bulk of the strategic capacity building work of multinational NGOs. On the one hand, a suite of empirical studies reports that international volunteers (IVs) undergo considerable change during a placement,

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including developing capabilities that are highly valued in contemporary workplaces (e.g. Thomas, 2002). These benefits, however, generally go unrecognized by corporate employers and business leaders, whose impressions appear clouded by misperceptions about the nature of volunteering and by the dearth of empirical research documenting and explaining the developmental experiences embedded in volunteer placements (Cook & Jackson, 2006; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008). Collectively, this literature suggests that there is a richness to the IV expatriate experience that is not well understood. Consequently the (potential) benefits accrued by volunteers are yet to be fully recognized and utilized in the corporate world. With increasing numbers of professionals seeking IVs for both altruistic and professional reasons (Randel, German, Cordiero, & Baker, 2004), and growth in international corporate volunteering programs (Hills & Mahmud, 2007), there exists a need to better understand the unique developmental experiences of IVs.

To examine this, we collected and analyzed a sample of the learning episodes reported by a cohort of volunteers deployed by AVI, primarily in countries in Asia and the Pacific, during the first 12 months of their placement. These learning experiences were compared with those of a 'control' group of domestic workers over the same period. In total, we collected 470 valid learning episodes and analyzed some 1058 data strips (strings of text describing aspects of a learning episode). Our study aimed to: (1) identify and describe the personal and professional development experienced by IVs, and (2) understand these changes by examining the learning episodes that they experienced.

The remainder of the paper is presented in four sections. The following section summarizes the literature and details the theoretical framework that underpinned the research design; from this, five research questions, which guided our investigation, are articulated. Next, the research methodology is outlined. The study's results are then presented and compared with extant theoretical and empirical research. Finally, the study's implications and limitations are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Expatriate and international volunteer learning and development

Just as organizations have turned to workplace learning as a means of developing and attracting human capital, researchers have documented the use of international assignments to develop skills in employees and managers (e.g. Caligiuri & Di Santo, 2001; Kühlmann, 2001). Not all international assignments are developmental (e.g. McCall, 1998). Nonetheless, an expatriate placement can contribute to a number of learning outcomes. These may include greater knowledge of the host culture and the international business environment, cross-cultural communication skills, coping with uncertainty, and management skills like supervising and motivating staff (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2000; Bolino & Feldman, 2000). Although less well developed as a domain, studies of IV learning point to a broader suite of learning outcomes, which range from the transformational – for instance, stronger ethical beliefs, changed personal values, and enhanced self-awareness – to the highly valued, such as resourcefulness, adaptability, and creativity (e.g. Cook & Jackson, 2006; Hudson & Inkson, 2006). In short, these studies point to a 'learning premium' that volunteer placements may provide over learning that occurs during 'traditional' expatriate placements or in domestic workplaces (see, for example, Thomas, 2002).

While progress has been made in understanding the learning outcomes of both expatriates and IVs, research to date from both domains has several limitations. With some exceptions (Osland, 2001; Shim & Paprock, 2002), empirical studies have focused on identifying or confirming particular learning outcomes, rather than

attempting to understand how this learning transpires (e.g. Caligiuri & Di Santo, 2001). Few studies employ research designs embedded in contemporary theories of individual learning and change (Brook, Missingham, Hocking, & Fifer, 2007). Moreover, research tends to rely on cross-sectional, self-report data collection methods (e.g. Powell & Bratović, 2007; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). These methods are not well suited to the type of learning that take place during international assignments. The result is that the personal and professional development of expatriates and international volunteers remains poorly understood (Kohonen, 2008; Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006).

2.2. Theoretical framework and research questions

We define learning as a process through which relatively permanent changes in an individual's capabilities occur, and which are unrelated to genetic-biological maturation (e.g. Illeris, 2003). The results of learning are stored as cognitive schemas. Research into adult learning draws on a range of general learning theories that emphasize learning through personal experience (Kolb, 1984), reflective practice (Schön, 1991), and the context provided by the learner's environment, very often in the guise of the learners' work, workplace, and co-workers (e.g. Fuller et al., 2003). Our theoretical framework draws on contemporary models of informal and incidental learning, notably the work of Marsick and Watkins (1990, 2001), and the constructivist and social cognitive theories that underpin these models (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Piaget, 1955). Our framework presents learning as a social, non-linear process, punctuated by a series of triggers that result in evolutionary and revolutionary change. It identifies distinct learning episodes as the central foci of learning, represented visually in Fig. 1 as a series of L-shaped steps.

The learning process is instigated when an incident triggers a need or desire to learn (step a in Fig. 1). The individual recognizes a disequilibrium between his or her existing knowledge, values or understanding (stored within cognitive schemas), and the experience that comprises the trigger. Learning occurs when the individual integrates this new knowledge by adding to, adjusting, or in extreme cases re-designing internal cognitive structures in order to achieve 'balance' (step b). Situations that strongly contrast with one's existing bank of experiences result in the most significant change (Rumelhart & Norman, 1978) and so the extent of change instigated by a learning episode can vary. This is represented in Fig. 1 by the varying sized steps. Finally, the context in which the learning episode transpires (step c) influences every stage of the learning process 'from how the learner will understand the situation, to what is learned, what solutions are available, and how the existing resources will be used' (Cseh, Watkins, & Marsick, 1999, p. 352).

The framework presented in Fig. 1 suggests that by exploring the processes of learning that individuals encounter – that is, the

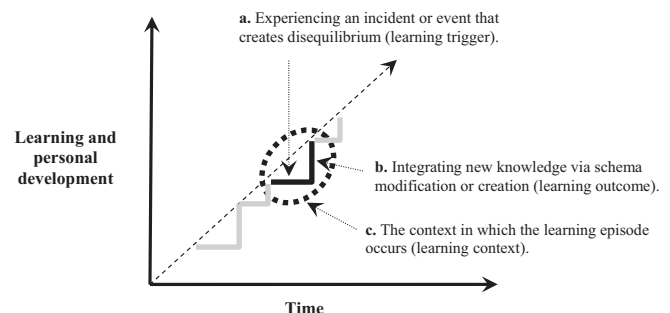


Fig. 1. A proposed framework of individual learning.

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