



The impact of international service on the development of volunteers' intercultural relations



Benjamin J. Lough^{a,b,*}, Margaret Sherrard Sherraden^c, Amanda Moore McBride^d, Xiaoling Xiang^a

^aSchool of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1010 W. Nevada St., Urbana, IL 61801, USA

^bCentre for Social Development in Africa, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

^cSchool of Social Work, University of Missouri-St. Louis, USA

^dGeorge Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, USA

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ABSTRACT

Approximately one million people from the United States perform international volunteer service each year, representing a significant flow of ideas, people, resources, and aid across international borders. This quasi-experimental study assesses the longitudinal impact of international volunteer service on volunteers' intercultural relations, international social capital, and concern about international affairs. Using linear mixed regression models that control for a counterfactual comparison group of individuals that did not travel abroad, international volunteers are more likely to report significant increases in international social capital and international concern two to three years after returning from service. Results indicate that intercultural relations may also continue to increase years after returning from service. International service may be a useful approach to helping people gain skills and networks that are needed in an increasingly global society.

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1. Introduction

Approximately one million people from the United States perform international volunteer service each year (Lough, 2012a). This popular global movement of voluntary contribution to society represents a significant flow of ideas, people, resources, and aid across international borders (Sherraden et al., 2008). According to United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "International voluntary service has long been a source of national strength [and]...an American contribution to world stability and development" (2013, para 6).

Beginning with Marshall Plan, which supported American volunteers helping to rebuild Europe following the Second World War, the US government has funded international service programs (Arndt, 2000). Many people are aware of the long-established US Peace Corps program, however, far fewer know of recent initiatives. In 2003, Volunteers for Prosperity (VfP) expanded on the Peace Corps model, which provides funding for international service for professional volunteers. Six years later, in 2009, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act amended the VfP program, allocating funding for research on domestic and international volunteerism and further buttressing international corporate volunteer schemes.

While interest in international service programs is high, there is insufficient evidence on the impact of international volunteers. For example, a 2011 survey of more than 11,000 returned Peace Corps volunteers revealed that only 13% believed

* Corresponding author at: School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1010 W. Nevada St., Urbana, IL 61801, USA. Fax: +1 217 244 5220.

E-mail address: bjlough@illinois.edu (B.J. Lough).

that the Peace Corps adequately documented or demonstrated effectiveness (Bridgeland et al., 2011). Given grand outcomes such as “world stability and development” and “friendship and peace”, it is perhaps unsurprising that evidence of impact is lacking. In the past decade, however, descriptive and anecdotal evidence about targeted outcomes is growing—particularly evidence of the impact on volunteers (Powell and Bratović, 2006; Sherraden et al., 2008).

While anecdotal accounts may provide a foundation for critical inquiry, the majority of current research on international service is based on case and cross-sectional studies. Despite a low evidence-base, governments, universities, faith-based organizations, and other stakeholders continue to invest in international volunteer programs. In fact, an estimated 3.6 billion public and private dollars are spent annually to support international volunteerism from the US alone (Hudson Institute, 2011). Rigorous research on the outcomes of service is needed to assess whether these investments are worth their weight, as well as to inform critical dialogue about the challenges of international service (Lyons et al., 2012; Palacios, 2010; Perold et al., 2011; Simpson, 2004).

Recognizing that the goals of various international service programs are unique and diverse, this paper reports on a study that measures three goals common to many international service programs: increasing intercultural relations, international understanding, and international social capital. The quasi-experimental study assesses perceived impact of service on international volunteers matched to two comparison groups that (1) traveled abroad in some other capacity, and (2) did not volunteer or travel abroad. Further, it examines changes in volunteers’ perceptions at three time periods: one month before volunteering abroad (baseline), one week to one month after returning from service (wave II post-test), and two to three years after volunteering abroad (wave III post-test). It is a longitudinal follow-up to earlier research on related outcomes (McBride et al., 2012), and is the first known study to investigate the impacts of international service on volunteers using a quasi-experimental longitudinal research design.

2. International volunteer service outcomes

Service experiences across national borders expose volunteers to issues outside of familiar social, political, and economic contexts. It places volunteers in direct contact with people of different cultural backgrounds. In this way international service is inherently multi-national and multi-cultural. By virtue of the experience, international volunteering has the potential to help participants develop international skills, attitudes, and beliefs. Indeed, it has long been promoted as a strategy to increase the international and intercultural awareness of volunteers (Albertson, 1961), and is increasingly marketed as a strategy for promoting global citizenship, intercultural competence, and for developing international social contacts (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Lewis, 2005; Lough, 2011; Powell and Bratović, 2006).

Developing these types of skills and relationship is vital in a globalized world where international cooperation is linked to individual and organizational achievement (Watkins, 2005). Case studies and anecdotal evaluations suggest that volunteering across borders can help prepare participants with the types of skills and networks that are needed for working in a knowledge-based global economy (Brook et al., 2007; Fee and Gray, 2011; Thomas, 2001). In addition, returned volunteers often claim that international service experiences had a “transformative” effect on their cultural identity, inspiring them to enter service-oriented career paths or to work with underserved and multicultural populations (Bridgeland et al., 2011; Godkin and Savageau, 2003; Jones, 2005; Trinitapoli and Vaisey, 2009).

International service may affect a volunteer’s *intercultural relations* or, loosely defined, their relationships with those of other cultural, racial or ethnic backgrounds (Berry, 1999; Endicott et al., 2003; Fantini, 2007; Schröer, 2003; Zimmerman, 1995). This outcome is consistent with one of the US Peace Corps’ three goals: to help Americans gain a greater understanding of the world and other peoples (Peace Corps, 2012). Because international volunteers live outside of their country and culture, they typically learn another language and interact closely with people who are different from themselves. Theories of acculturation suggest that international service, which frequently entails living for the first time as a minority, may be particularly well-suited for developing an intercultural mindset that appreciates diversity (Bhatia and Ram, 2001; Castro, 2003). In a 2011 study, 86% of participating Peace Corps alums reported that their experience helped them to be more open to people of different races, ethnicities and religions (Bridgeland et al., 2011). As volunteers return from service, changes in intercultural relations may also extend to those of different backgrounds within the volunteers’ country of origin (Bridgeland et al., 2011; Machin, 2008).

International experiences are also promoted to enhance interest in, and knowledge about social, economic, and political issues and affairs in a global context (Hayward and Siaya, 2001). It has the potential to increase volunteers’ *international concern*, which includes how they think about issues of nations outside their own, as well how these issues might be addressed. Many claim that international service may enhance volunteers’ interest in issues related to global poverty and development (Barker, 2000). This claim holds true for many volunteers who report that international service enhances their awareness of other countries, minority issues, development challenges, immigration, and inequality (Grusky, 2000; Law, 1994; Sherraden, 2007; South House Exchange and Canada World Youth, 2006), as well as an enhanced global perspective overall (Purvis, 1993). These outcomes are consistent with the international service goals of both the US State Department and the U.S. Department of Education, which place a high value on “international education for American students and institutions, and the lessons that we learn from each other through international exchange” (US Department of Education, 2011, para 6).

An additional benefit of international service may be the potential development of personal and organizational ties to people living in other countries. This third outcome goes beyond the intrinsic value of friendships and relationships, but

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