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# **Impact of International Humanitarian Service-Learning on Emerging Adult Social Competence**

**A mixed-methods evaluation**

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International service-learning experiences are associated with many positive outcomes for emerging adults, and the benefits have been well documented within the literature (Metzger 2012). Service-learning has been demonstrated to be beneficial to participants, communities, and educators (Watkins & Braun 2005). However, researchers have primarily focused on service-learning in the context of being part of university curriculum. While that research is valuable in establishing empirical evidence for practicing service-learning within the classroom, we know very little regarding the impact of international service-learning experiences on emerging adults when the service-learning is experienced separate from course requirements. It is important to note that many college-age students are participating in service outside of class assignments (Astin 2000). According to a nationally representative sample of 22,328 US college students, 46 per cent of participants reported participating in volunteering and service in their community outside of class requirements compared to 30 per cent of students who had only participated in service-learning as part of their undergraduate degree (Astin 2000).

The purpose of the present study was to understand the impact of international humanitarian community service-learning experiences on the development of social competencies in emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is characterised as a time of instability, identity exploration, self-focus, feelings of being between life stages, and a time of possibilities (Arnett 2004). This developmental stage is classified as the stage between adolescence and adulthood, typically referring to ages 18–25 (Arnett 1994). It is a period of transition, where the individual is no longer an adolescent and is striving to acquire the capacities and characteristics of full adulthood (Arnett 2004). Specifically, this study examined the service-learning experiences of volunteers who had served in orphanages in Latin America with a non-profit secular organisation Orphanage Support Service Organization (OSSO). The volunteers participating in the study were assessed, in a pre- and post-test design, for their development in areas of

social competency such as identity, self-efficacy, self-esteem and ethnocentric attitudes. A mixed-methods design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures was used.

In regards to service-learning, researchers have noted that universities function as a collaborator and partner with the community they are serving (Metzger 2012). It is likely that other organizations such as OSSO can function similarly as universities in providing service-learning experience and connecting volunteers to a community in need. Researchers found that providing service creates a dynamic learning experience for participants (Underwood et al. 2000). As such, it is likely that the act of serving, and not the affiliated institution, is what primarily accounts for the positive outcomes involved with service-learning. While there is evidence that a correlation exists between happiness and belonging to or serving in voluntary organizations (Dekker & Van den Broek 2004), further research is needed to understand how engaging in international humanitarian organizations such as OSSO are influencing the development of social competencies among volunteers. All of the participants in the current study were university students, however, their service experiences were not part of a formal university program or curriculum.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Orphanage Support Service Organization (OSSO) is a non-profit secular organisation that provides direct care to children residing in orphanages in many parts of the developing world. A primary way that OSSO provides care is to connect volunteers from the United States and Canada with orphanages in Latin America. The mission of OSSO is to do everything possible to help children living in orphanages to reach their full potential. Its secondary mission is to create a two-way bridge of meaningful connection between children in need in developing countries and caring people in the United States and Canada who have the means to help. The aim of OSSO is to change lives for the better on both sides of the bridge (OSSO 2016). To this end, OSSO operates orphanages and provides support to orphanages in the developing world. The first author of this paper has served as a volunteer with OSSO and developed training materials for volunteers.

OSSO volunteers are expected to provide direct care to children for 50–60 hours per week for a 6–30 week period. These volunteers are typically emerging adults who are also university students attending a variety of public and private universities in North America. The participants of the current study were not enrolled in a university course related to their international humanitarian service, but volunteered to participate in the research project. Volunteers pay for all costs related to their travel, housing, transportation and food.

OSSO helps facilitate international humanitarian service-learning experiences for volunteers through hands-on care at the community level in international orphanage settings. A study by

Escueta et al. (2014) on the link between the emotional challenges of orphaned or abandoned children and their educational/ cognitive scores examined data from five countries and found that exposure to adverse experiences negatively impacted cognitive development scores, especially for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and where care providers reported lower levels of education. They suggested that interventions to improve the emotional and cognitive development of such children should involve care providers who have higher levels of education and training.

In light of such findings, OSSO provides orientation and training for volunteers in early care and education of children residing in orphanage settings. First, volunteers learn about the local culture, people, basic Spanish, foods and traditions, and about the orphanages and the experiences of the children and families in the communities where they are to serve. Second, volunteers participate in weekly group meetings with site leaders, who reside with the volunteers and serve as mentors and coordinators, to discuss the needs of the children and the volunteer experience. The site leaders facilitate discussions on how the service-learning experience changes the individual volunteer, in their own lives and families at home, and on differences between cultures. The site leaders also engage the volunteers in individual meetings (once every two weeks) to discuss their personal experiences and challenges and to encourage them to reflect on their experiences and personal growth as a volunteer with OSSO in a journal.

It is important to note that OSSO does not engage in short-term orphanage support activities. Both UNICEF and Save the Children have issued statements against short-term service in orphanages as many children from such circumstances have been trafficked and exploited for financial gain (Birrell 2010; Hartman 2014). OSSO cooperates with local community-based care providers and social service agencies to provide ongoing care of children who are abandoned or orphaned. OSSO volunteers serve only in orphanages operated by religious organisations or reputable foundations whose goal is to foster the healthy development of children (OSSO 2016). The current research received university IRB approval and OSSO collaborated to identify volunteers who were invited to participate in the study. Participants completed a questionnaire prior to their departure to serve with OSSO. They completed the questionnaire upon completion of their service with OSSO and their responses were matched with a code number. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with a group of volunteers upon completion of their service.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: OUTCOMES OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING**

Among individuals who have participated in international service-learning, 75 per cent described it as a transformational experience

that led to significant changes in their life. They also reported that it would have been unlikely for them to experience the same amount of growth if they had stayed in their home country (Lough, McBride & Sherraden 2009). This transformational learning process is characterised by seeing the world from a different perspective and increasing personal commitment to the welfare of others (Eyler & Giles 1996). Similarly, Horn and Fry (2013) found that international service-learning experiences that occurred in developing countries and were longer term (i.e. longer than 2–3 weeks) predicted later engagement in global citizenship. Specifically, students were more likely to be involved in international development activities after completion of their initial international experience.

Mezirow's (1996) theory of transformative learning is supportive of the notion that personal development occurs during service-learning and is facilitated by comparative experiences or points of reference. This change in reference occurs through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs and points of view are based. Mezirow (1991) argued that active engagement with reflection activities were integral aspects of transformational learning. Bell et al. (2014) reported that students who participated in a longer term service-learning experience in the South Pacific experienced significant growth in self-esteem, self-efficacy, reduced ethnocentricity and commitment to the welfare of others as they engaged in the reflection process.

### **Academic Achievement**

One of the most documented impacts of service-learning is the gains participants experience in academic achievement. Specifically, 72 per cent of students who participated in service-learning activities reported higher grades than peers who did not (Astin et al. 2000). The overall grade point average of college students who were engaged in service-learning was 4.8 per cent higher than for non-service-learning students (Strage 2000). Additionally, service-learning students outperformed their non-service-learning peers in critical thinking tasks, writing skills and class participation (Martin et al. 2006).

Service-learning also appears to have longer term impacts on the educational achievement of students. Many students reported a greater understanding of the opportunities that come with higher education (Martin et al. 2006). Additionally, students who participated in service-learning reported an increased ability to apply what they were learning to 'real life' (Astin, Sax & Avalos 1999). Academic improvements such as higher grade point averages, increased class participation and 'real life' opportunities to apply what was being learned provide strong support for the value of service-learning experiences for emerging adults.

### **Diversity Competence**

One of the benefits of participation in service-learning is that it fosters intercultural understanding (Astin et al. 2000). Specifically,

participants in international service-learning report a greater appreciation for cultural differences, including how to recognise and navigate differences while maintaining respect for the other (Hull et al. 2016). For example a nationally representative sample in the U.S. found that individuals who participated in service-learning were more likely to have interacted and socialised with someone from a different ethnic group in the previous year, compared to non-service-learning peers (Martin et al. 2006). Likewise, students who participated in service-learning reported a higher sensitivity to people of a different age, race and socioeconomic status (Martin et al. 2006). In a related study, 95 per cent of college students involved in international service reported an increased appreciation for other cultures and are more likely to participate in cultural events (Lough, McBride & Sherraden 2009).

Participants engaged in international service-learning frequently develop a greater sense of 'global citizenship' (Stoner et al. 2014). A global citizen is defined as someone who is engaged locally, nationally and internationally, while demonstrating environmental and social responsibility (Hanson 2010). Global citizenship is fostered as participants increase in awareness of global issues and reflect on their beliefs and world view, often leading to a transformational shift in perspective (Stoner et al. 2014). For example, Wynveen, Kyle and Tarrant (2012) observed that university students who participated in a program of study abroad reported an increased sense of personal responsibility for the environment and a personal obligation to minimise their impact on the environment. This is consistent with other research which found that individuals who participated in an international educational travel program were more supportive of sustainable environment policies upon completing their international service-learning (Tarrant et al. 2011). While there has been criticism of the effectiveness of short-term international service-learning, participants in an educational travel program demonstrated significant gains in their sense of global citizenship after only four weeks of volunteering (Tarrant, Rubin & Stoner 2014).

### **Identity Development**

Individuals engaging in international service-learning frequently report an increased awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses (Hull et al. 2016). Research related to volunteering and role identity suggests that volunteering is intertwined with personal development (Grube & Piliavin 2000). Research also suggests that volunteering is a means of expressing individuality and provides volunteers with an enhanced sense of identity (Wuthnow 1991). Upon returning home, American students participating in international volunteer service reported having a 'reformed identity' (Dolby 2004). The international volunteer experience causes participants to examine their identity in both positive and critical ways (Carlson & Widaman 1988).

One of the ways that service-learning influences participant identity development is through fostering self-esteem and self-efficacy (Astin et al. 2000). Young people with greater levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem reported fewer risk behaviours such as substance use, delinquency, academic underachievement and risky sexual behaviours (Bandura 1997). The concept of self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks. It involves being able to organise and execute a course of action to manage situations, and impacts how people think, behave and feel (Bandura 1977, 1994). Individuals who demonstrate a strong sense of self-efficacy are able to view challenges as tasks to be mastered, develop a deeper interest in the activities that they participate in, have a stronger sense of commitment to tasks, and recover quickly from disappointments and setbacks (Bandura 1977). According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is achieved through mastery of experiences, social modelling, social persuasion and psychological responses. The nature of service-learning provides participants with opportunities to accomplish difficult tasks, to be around others who are also engaged in similar tasks, and to receive encouragement and feedback from others. Previous studies have identified service-learning experiences as important factors in influencing greater social competence in emerging adults (Waterman 1997).

One of the ways that self-esteem is manifested among emerging adults who participate in service-learning is the further development of social competence (Waterman 1997). Participants of service-learning reported that working with people of differing backgrounds helped them learn how to communicate more effectively (Martin et al. 2006). This is attributed largely to the increased ability to see the perspective of others and to work with people of differing ethnicities (Martin et al. 2006). Many participants also reported being more patient, which positively impacted their communication skills with others (Martin et al. 2006). Individuals who participated in service-learning reported an overall increase in self-confidence in social settings and an increased awareness of those around them (Ngai 2006).

### **Psychosocial Stages of Identity and Generativity**

In an effort to understand how service-learning facilitates personal growth, Erikson's (1950) psychosocial stages of identity and generativity provide useful insight. Erikson argued that in order to avoid role confusion one must develop a sense of self and personal identity. During service-learning, students are able to see themselves grow as they take on responsibility and develop confidence (Martin et al. 2006). More specifically, the immersion that takes place during international volunteering provides students with a better understanding of community and self (Rhoads & Neururer 1998). The opportunities for self-reflection associated with service-learning potentially assist in fostering identity development; as reported by Pompa (2002),

participants with higher levels of immersion reported higher levels of self-reflection.

According to Erikson (1950), generativity is accomplished by assisting others to experience positive changes and creating a lasting impact on the life of others. From a study of 291 students who had participated in international volunteer experiences, 76 per cent reported that they had made lasting contributions to the people and organisations they had served (Lough, McBride & Sherraden 2009). Additionally, 69 per cent stated they had specific skills that had benefited the host organisation (Lough, McBride & Sherraden 2009). Similarly, over 80 per cent of students who had participated in service-learning while in college reported that their volunteering had made a difference to others and that they had learned from the service experiences (Astin et al. 2000). It is likely that the positive impact that volunteers perceive provides experiences that are crucial in fostering identity development and a greater sense of generativity.

In summary, the research on service-learning activities demonstrates many positive impacts on the development of social competencies among emerging adult and adolescent populations. However, no known study has examined the impact of a service-learning experience on volunteers serving in an orphanage setting in a developing country over a longer period of time. The present study aims to better understand how longer international service-learning experiences impact the development of self-efficacy, self-esteem, identity status, ethnocentrism, relationship skills, materialism, and other domains of social competence among emerging adults.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A sample of 68 emerging adult volunteers serving with OSSO for 6–32 weeks was examined. A matched pairs pre- and post-test design was used to assess the impact of this unique service-learning opportunity in Latin America on the development of social competence over time. Participants completed a self-administered questionnaire designed to measure identity development, self-efficacy, self-esteem and ethnocentrism one week prior to their departure to Latin America and service with OSSO. The participants then completed the same questionnaire on completion of their service with OSSO. The pre- and post-test responses were matched together. Additionally, a subset of 15 participants responded to qualitative items assessing their perceptions and views on how the service-learning experience impacted them or fostered personal growth.

The first section of the research instrument consisted of measures of demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, education level, and length of service with OSSO. The second section included the Berzonsky Identity Style Inventory (1992), in which composite variables for each identity style (diffuse, normative, information, and commitment oriented) were

identified. The third section consisted of measures for self efficacy and self-esteem. Self efficacy was measured using a 17-item scale that reflected general self efficacy (Ingoldsby et al. 2003). Sample items included: 'When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work'; 'If I can't do a job the first time, I keep trying until I can'; and 'Failure just makes me try harder'. Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale (1965) was used to assess self-esteem. Respondents indicated their agreement with each of the 10 items (e.g. 'On the whole I am satisfied with myself'; 'I certainly feel useless at times') on a 4-point scale (4 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). In the fourth section, ethnocentrism was measured by five items that reflected openness to interacting with people from diverse cultures outside the United States. A higher value indicated lower levels of ethnocentrism. Sample items included: 'I feel most comfortable with people from the U.S.' and 'People should speak English just like in the U.S.'

Qualitative data were also collected from 15 participants upon completion of their service with OSSO. Participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions: 1) How did your experience with OSSO shape or influence you personally? 2) What did you learn about other cultures and people? 3) How did your service with OSSO impact your views on children, families, and opportunities for people? 4) How did your service with OSSO influence your competence in working with other people? Participants provided written responses to these questions. The responses were transcribed and coded, and major themes were identified.

## RESULTS

The mean age of participants was 19.80 (sd=1.41) and all but one were female. The mean level of education was college sophomore, and all but one participant identified themselves as European American. A matched-pairs t-test was performed to identify any changes between the pre-test and post-test measures. No differences were identified in length of service with OSSO. There were significant increases in self-efficacy and self-esteem levels after completion of their service. Furthermore, there were lower levels of ethnocentric attitudes upon completion of service. Surprisingly, there were no statistically significant changes in identity status scores. The results are presented in Table 1.

A qualitative thematic analysis was done on the written comments by participants and several major themes emerged: leadership; identity; parenthood and family; openness to diverse cultures and people; simple life/less materialistic; appreciation of family/things; self-efficacy; civic minded/community involvement; and regard and empathy for others. The themes reflected growth or changes in social competency in a range of attributes, discussed below, as a result of their international service-learning experience.



Items	Pre-test mean and SD	Post-test mean and SD	t-value
Self-esteem	31.65 (4.96)	33.66 (4.31)	3.60**
Self-efficacy	64.94 (10.11)	68.66 (8.01)	3.66**
Information-oriented identity	41.01 (5.66)	40.20 (5.43)	.353
Normative-oriented identity	33.26 (4.77)	32.82 (4.56)	.937
Diffuse-oriented identity	23.26 (6.12)	23.23 (6.05)	.058
Commitment towards identity	41.29 (5.10)	42.00 (4.74)	1.62
Feel most comfortable with people from the USA	2.74 (1.09)	3.44 (1.09)	4.35**
I can only relate with people from the USA	4.12 (.86)	4.60 (.55)	4.59**
I fit best with people from the USA	2.94 (1.35)	3.46 (.99)	3.21**
People should speak English like in the USA	4.35 (.82)	4.62 (.57)	2.60**
I have good understanding of people from different cultures	2.82 (1.04)	2.41 (1.03)	3.41**

**Table 1: Paired sample t-tests: prior to service with OSSO and upon completion of service with OSSO (n=68)\*\* p < .01**

### Leadership

The theme of leadership reflects the leadership and interpersonal skills that were fostered during the participants' experience volunteering with OSSO. Each volunteer was assigned to a leadership role, such as planning and organising educational activities for a group of children at the orphanage, coordinating food purchasing and meal preparation, and sanitation and health care. The volunteers were required to plan and organise the activities and lead other volunteers in accomplishing their assigned role. As a result of these experiences, many volunteers reported growth in leadership characteristics and abilities such as communication, interpersonal skills, consistency, responsibility and organisation as illustrated below:

*I learned the key to good communication and keeping a house of rules running smoothly is first, obey the rules yourself and, second, talk with the other volunteers so they better understand what you are [asking] of them. This will help me in my future as a leader because I was put into a position in [a] foreign place with rules that I was unfamiliar with and had to figure out for myself what I could do to better the situation in the house.*

*Overall, I learned that leadership is all about relationships. If the people you are leading respect you then they will want to follow you a lot more. They will like you more too. Part of gaining respect is being prepared as a leader, being clear on what is expected of them, being consistent, and following through with what you said you would [do] and keeping your tone and emotions calm. If the instructions were not clear, the children did not want to do the activity.*

### Identity

Identity development was a dominant theme expressed by participants. Many of the volunteers were uncertain of their future in regard to education, career aspirations and desired family roles and reported an increased sense of direction and a clearer identity as a result of serving in the orphanages. In some instances, participants were actively looking for guidance for their future and were hopeful that volunteering with OSSO would provide

direction. They reported more clarity about their future life as a result of their service-learning experiences, as the following quotes illustrate.

*Before I left, I was pretty indecisive about some of the things in my life. But after being in that environment for 3 months it helped me realize how important life is to me and how much I love my family. Not only did I learn to love my family more, but I have more of a desire to be a good father and be a positive person in society.*

*From this experience I don't think that I could go the rest of my life doing something that doesn't help someone else. I want to work with adoptions or with troubled youth. My plan is to achieve my master's degree and continue to serve others through it. Without this time in the orphanages I don't think that I would realize what a good person can bring to the world and what can be done even here in the U.S. Being on the other side of adoptions where the kids have been abandoned makes me want to be able to help them by finding loving homes for them.*

### **Parenthood and Family**

A common theme expressed by participants was appreciation for their own family of origin and the desire to be effective in raising their own children. The experiences in the orphanages provided volunteers with opportunities to interact as the primary care provider for the children. Daily, volunteers fed, changed nappies/diapers, taught activities and supervised play time. Serving as a temporary parent figure, the participants were able to gain valuable experience on how to interact with children.

*The lesson I learned was that children will not respond and learn out of anger and frustration from someone in authority ... Teaching a child out of love and patience will last a lot longer on children than just the opposite. Talking through conflicts in a calm manner will help a child, and even the adult, understand the center of conflict and the best resolution.*

*I gained a bigger appreciation for my family because I was able to experience just a slight bit of how it would be without them through these children. The many experiences and lessons that I have learned will help me be a better mother in the future. It has shaped my views on children and taught me how to better interact with them, love them and teach them.*

### **Openness to Diverse Cultures and People**

One of the key components of international volunteering is the participants' immersion into a culture different from their own. Participants reported that this exposure led to an increased openness to diverse cultures and people. Common responses suggest that participants unknowingly had ethnocentric attitudes and had not considered that there were ways of life other than their own. The following quotes exemplify their growing openness.

*I think by living in a different culture, I ended up learning a great deal more about my own culture. Oftentimes people think that their way of doing things is the only way of doing things. After having spent time in a different country, I learned that there are many different ways of doing things, and that my way, or the American way, is not always the only way.*

*I know better how to interact with people from other countries, especially South Americans. It shaped my views of the Catholic religion [as] well ... The biggest thing that shaped my views was the orphanage run by Catholic nuns. I never really had a view of them and it was because I didn't have much knowledge about them but what I learned is the Catholic nuns are the most unselfish people on earth.*

### **Simple Life/Less Materialistic**

A recurring theme among participants was the desire to have a simpler life and to value materialistic things less. For many, the experience with OSSO caused them to examine their definition of happiness and what they need in life to be happy. This reflection is often the result of interacting with impoverished individuals who, despite this, are happy. The following quotes illustrate a change in priorities and a desire for a simpler life that developed as they lived and served in Latin America.

*Although this might sound cliché, I did realize that I want a simpler life ... Some people had only a small house without windows or floors, a farm, food, their family, and they are happy ... Even the children (in the orphanages) were without many modern conveniences and without family and still had happiness in their lives. If I had not served with OSSO, I would not have learned these important lessons.*

*I have a closet full of close to 60 pairs of shoes and I still complain that I don't have a certain style or that I need this or that when these kids have one pair of worn out shoes and they would rather give to someone else.*

### **Appreciation of Family/Things**

In addition to wanting a simpler life, participants reported an increased appreciation for what they have and gratitude for their family situation. This new-found appreciation is rooted in working in the orphanages, as well as exposure to individuals who go without food, clothing, shelter, etc. Often they have taken these things for granted or haven't given them much consideration because they have always been a part of their life. The quotes below demonstrate participants' new sense of appreciation for their family and the things they do have.

*My experience in Ecuador definitely made me realize how thankful I really am for my parents, my family, and for the support and love*

*that they show to me. Family is something I took for granted before I went to Ecuador. I now realize that not everybody has a family like I do, and I am very grateful for mine.*

*The biggest lesson I think I learned is how blessed I am. Not only with the material things that I have but I have a family, food, this country that keeps me safe, along with many other things. Those were all things that I have taken for granted every single day of my life and sad to say know I sometimes still do. But without this experience I don't think I would appreciate them as much as I do now.*

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy development emerged as a prevalent theme. Participants expressed that, because their experience with OSSO was difficult, they now have greater confidence in their ability to accomplish challenging tasks. Due to developing greater self-efficacy, participants have demonstrated more assertive tendencies in many life domains. The following quotes are examples of how international service learning experiences foster self-efficacy.

*I learned how to work hard, before I even got there ... It was a lot of work to be able to get enough money to go to Ecuador with the OSSO program. I put in many long hours with my fundraiser as well as sent out letters for people who were willing to sponsor me. I was amazed at how generous people were and how all my hard work had paid off.*

*This taught me a great life lesson, it helped me realize that we as Americans have it really easy, and that our main stress isn't that main stress of survival as it is in Ecuador ... I want to be as hard working and as strong as these people are. They gave me motivation and understanding that even though you are going through a hard time in your life you can still work hard and push through.*

### **Civic Minded/Community Involvement**

The theme of becoming civic minded and involved in the community suggests that participants recognised the importance of being engaged locally and the ways in which they could continue to serve and improve their own communities. Below are quotes that reflect these aspirations.

*When I returned home, I decided that I wanted to be a volunteer and help people in my own community. I did some research and started volunteering at the local YWCA. I have been volunteering there once a week since I returned home. I have met some really neat people and have had the opportunity to work with some at-risk children there. I hope that throughout my life I will be able to find opportunities to do service wherever I am. I might not be able to change the world, but if I can make one person smile, then it will be worth my effort.*

*Since I have been home, my role as a volunteer has shifted from aiding in healthier development of Ecuadorian children and administering their basic necessities to being aware of individual situations, educating people in my community about service, and hopefully making my own children's lives more fulfilling so that we can make our community a better place.*

### **Regard and Empathy for Others**

Participants reported a higher regard and increased empathy for others. Most commonly, it was the interaction with the children in the orphanages that was the biggest influence on developing empathy. Frequently, participants reported experiencing a deeper love for children than previously and learning about loving others. The following quotes illustrate how participants developed these important values.

*I felt my main job was just to love the kids. I remember thinking after my first day working in an orphanage that there was no way I would be able to remember the names of all the children there. I was wrong. Not only did I learn the names of nearly 200 children we worked with, but I can say that I learned to love each and every one of them as an individual. I think that if you are going to serve someone, you have to learn to love them first. Once you love them, your service is not a chore and cannot be considered as work. It becomes a blessing and a privilege, and something you look forward to each day.*

*The last thing I will tell, but not the last thing I gained from my experience was the importance of children and love for children. This is something I know I could not have learned anywhere else. It changed my life's course for the better and gave me direction. I feel it helped me personally to open up my heart in a way I never knew possible. It was amazing.*

### **Life Changing Experience**

A final identified theme was how involvement with international service-learning became a life-changing experience. Volunteers reported that their experience with OSSO significantly impacted their life in a positive way, as illustrated by the following quotes.

*My eyes have been opened to what really goes on outside the United States and I will never forget the things that I have seen. I have learned an immense amount of lessons from this one experience and I would do it again in a heartbeat. My life will be forever changed because [of] this experience and I will never forget it.*

*When I was signing up for this experience I didn't know that it would have such a big effect on me. I didn't know that, because I went to Ecuador, I would be able to not only figure out what I am truly passionate about in life but also that it would change me personally. I am not the same person that I was when I left for Ecuador and I am very glad that I was able to change. My values in life have changed greatly. I see service as a top priority because I know that*

*when I serve, I am able to grow and feel good about myself. I take relationships with children much more seriously because I know that if I can be a good example, because of how impressionable children are, I could possibly [a]ffect in a good way a child's life. I know now that hard work is what makes people strong and that through hard work you can not only grow personally but also you can be [an] example in others [lives] ....*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined the impact of international humanitarian service-learning experiences on the development of social competencies of emerging adults. Specifically, the service-learning experiences of OSSO volunteers were assessed for development in qualities such as identity, self-efficacy, self-esteem and ethnocentric attitudes. The study also sought to better understand *how* the volunteer experience influenced development of these qualities and other domains of social competency.

The quantitative analyses identified significant increases in self-efficacy and self-esteem levels in participants after completion of their service. Consistent with other research on service-learning, participants had significantly lower levels of ethnocentric attitudes upon completion (Astin et al. 2000; Kiely 2005). Surprisingly, the quantitative analyses did not identify statistically significant changes in identity status scores when measured by the Berzonsky Identity Style Inventory (1992, 1997). This lack of change is likely explained by the relatively higher scores in the areas of information-oriented identity style and participants' commitment to an identity prior to beginning service with OSSO. It is also likely that there is a self-selection process impacting these analyses. Those who were motivated to volunteer their time for 6–30 weeks, and to raise money to pay all of their own expenses to serve with OSSO, possibly had more sophisticated personal identities compared to other populations. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that international service-learning had a significant impact on the identity development of the participants.

Several consistent themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Specifically, participants' reported that their experience with international service-learning was a transformational experience that promoted the development of leadership qualities, an increased appreciation for their families, a desire to live a less materialistic life, increased self-efficacy, a more refined identity, and a desire to remain civically engaged in their own communities. These findings are consistent with previous research that international service-learning is instrumental in helping participants' view the world from a different perspective and develop a greater personal commitment to the welfare of others (Eyler & Giles 1996).

In regards to identity development, participants reported an increased sense of direction in career, education and personal relationship choices as a result of their service in the orphanages.

Other research supports these outcomes. Dolby (2004) found that, upon completion of international service-learning, participants reported having a 'reformed identity'. It is likely that this occurs because the experience causes volunteers to examine their identity in positive and critical ways (Carlson & Widaman 1988). Research also suggests that volunteering is a means of expressing individuality, providing volunteers with an enhanced sense of identity (Wuthnow 1991).

Relationships skills were enhanced: participants reported increased self-confidence in social settings and an increased awareness of those around them (Ngai 2006). Volunteering is believed to foster interpersonal trust and empathy for others (Wilson & Musick 1999). OSSO participants also reported a higher regard for people and increased empathy for others, and that the interaction with the children in the orphanage was a major influence on their development of empathy. Frequently, participants reported experiencing a deeper love for children than they had previously experienced and that they learned from them a lot about loving others. Providing care for the children was the primary catalyst for deepening the participants' reported feelings of love for those they were serving and greater empathy for those around them.

The study also lends support to research showing that higher levels of immersion lead to greater reflection and personal growth (Pompa 2002). While short-term and local service-learning is valuable, this research shows that service-learning experiences requiring personal investment through time and money, that are longer term (lasting two to six months in duration), that are intensive (requiring 40–60 hours per week of service work), and immerse a young person into a diverse culture are particularly influential in developing social competency among emerging adults. Additionally, as part of the immersion process participants reported an increased openness to diverse cultures and people over time. Many participants became aware of their ethnocentric attitudes, and developed more sophisticated levels of cultural interpersonal competence (Astin et al. 2000). Specifically, participants reported an increased ability to see the perspective of others and to work with people of differing ethnicities (Martin et al. 2006).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, participants reported that this extensive service-learning experience was life changing. They stated that the growth and learning that occurred as a result of their international service-learning experience could not have happened without it. In previous research, 75 per cent of participants reported that their international service-learning experience led to significant life changes (Lough, McBride & Sherraden 2009). This supports the notion that such service-learning experiences have the potential to be incredibly influential for the healthy development of emerging adults.

### LIMITATIONS

This study yielded many important findings, yet some limitations must be noted. The sample was homogenous, being almost entirely European American or European Canadian females. Also, the sample was not randomly selected, and there was no comparison group of volunteers with other organisations or emerging adults who had not participated in service-learning experiences. Additionally, this project did not examine the long-term effects of international service-learning. Further longitudinal research would be needed to establish the lasting impacts of these experiences. Despite these limitations, the results of this study show that significant and important personal growth and development occurs among emerging adults who participate in longer term, intensive humanitarian service-learning opportunities.

### FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could examine the factors that predict why some engage in international humanitarian service-learning opportunities and others do not. There has also been insufficient research into the use of service-learning as an intervention for adolescents exhibiting lower levels of social competence or risk behaviours. It has been well documented that service-learning fosters prosocial behaviour in adolescents who display selfish attitudes and antisocial behaviour (Brendtro 2001). Programs that include volunteering as part of the treatment for at-risk youth report an increase in high school graduates from this cohort (Magafas 1991). Future research could evaluate the effectiveness of facilitating extensive international service-learning experiences for at-risk youth and emerging adults. The potential for intervention with young people engaging in internalising and externalising behaviours may prove to be a favourable strategy. Finally, future research could examine how the reflective process leads to changes in social competence. It would be valuable to gain insight into the impact of intense international volunteering on individuals with lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

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