

RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS' PERCEPTION OF IMPACT:
ON THEIR COMMUNITY AND THE VOLUNTEER

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ABSTRACT

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Peace Corps is fondly referred to as “the hardest job you’ll ever love”. Peace Corps volunteers live and work alongside members of a community for two years in a third world country. During their service they do many things, including, but not limited to: learning the local language and culture; empowering their community to start health, education, agriculture, or economic projects; and sharing their American culture. Volunteers serve in many different countries around the world and each Peace Corps service experience is inherently different. A total of fifteen returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) were interviewed for this study. Volunteers served at various intervals between the years 1964 through 2015. Each volunteer interviewed served in a different country and there was at least one volunteer representing each of the six Peace Corps sectors (Education, Community Economic Development, Agriculture, Environment, Youth in Development, and Health). Those interviewed were asked about how they perceived their impact on the community and how their service affected them. In the volunteerism literature, volunteers who feel as though their service made a valuable contribution are more likely to be satisfied with their experience. By analyzing the data collected from the interviews, we will better be able to understand the various perceptions of impact. Additionally, in this thesis, cross-national volunteering and how Peace Corps and its volunteers fit into that conversation will be addressed by focusing on the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers and their role in their communities.

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Introduction

The Peace Corps is fondly referred to as “the hardest job you will ever love”. More than 235,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps since its founding in 1961. Volunteers serve in many different countries around the world and each Peace Corps service experience is inherently different. The Peace Corps provides its participants with the ability to live and serve alongside a culture that is very different from their own. During their service Peace Corps volunteers do many things, including, but not limited to: learning the local language and culture; empowering their community to start health, education, agriculture, or economic projects; and sharing their American culture.

The Peace Corps is a two-year cross-national volunteering opportunity for United States’ citizens. The countries that volunteers serve in have requested skilled labor and guidance and the Peace Corps has answered by providing them with volunteers that have the appropriate skills they are seeking.

President Kennedy first introduced the idea of the Peace Corps during his 1960 presidential campaign. He envisioned the program as a way to expose young, eager Americans to another culture and give other countries the opportunity to get to know American youth. The effort allows for the volunteer and the community to see that despite cultural differences, people are more similar than they are different. Some refer to the creation of the Peace Corps as an act of “soft diplomacy” or a way of showing the United States in a positive, non-political light (Wofford 1966). Sargent Shriver helped to make Kennedy’s Peace Corps dream a reality by working through the logistics and recruiting the first volunteers to begin serving in 1961.

A total of fifteen returned Peace Corps volunteers were interviewed for this study. Volunteers served at various intervals between the years 1964 through 2015. Almost every volunteer interviewed served in a different country and there was at least one volunteer representing each of the six Peace Corps sectors (Education, Community Economic Development, Agriculture, Environment, Youth in Development, and Health). Those interviewed were asked about how they perceived their impact on the community and how their service, in turn, impacted them.

The perception of a volunteer's service is important because of the value of personal growth to the volunteer. The volunteers are often put in environments outside of their comfort zone, and this allows them to adapt and grow to meet the needs of their community. Additionally, a positive perception of one's service can encourage further civic engagement and can be used to persuade others to volunteer.

Millions of people volunteer each year in their community. Recently, there has been an expansion of the cross-national volunteering sector. Cross-national volunteering occurs when a volunteer travels to serve in another country. As transportation and technology have been refined it has become easier to connect with people all over the world. Thus, countries that are facing problems can reach out to other nations for aid or guidance; likewise, volunteers can travel to provide help.

This thesis is organized to begin with a background and history of the Peace Corps and the international service organizations that came before it and that helped to shape the program. Then, the qualifications and requirements follow, as well as the variances of life as a Peace Corps volunteer, will be covered. Finally, the data from the interviews of returned Peace Corps volunteers will be presented and analyzed. The perceptions returned Peace Corps volunteers

have of their service, and how they view their impact on their community and on themselves, are important additions to the cross-national volunteering conversation and knowledge base.

Literature Review

Background and History

The Peace Corps is a well-known cross-national volunteering opportunity for United States' citizens. President John F. Kennedy is credited with the creation of the Peace Corps. He first suggested the idea of a Peace Corps on his campaign trail. He asked a crowd of college students at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on October 14, 1960 "how many of [you are] willing to serve [your] country and the cause of peace by living and working in the developing world?" (Peace Corps). Kennedy received a positive and enthusiastic response from the university students. In fact, thousands of young people signed pledges and wrote letters expressing their willingness to live and work alongside the men and women living in communities abroad. After his election as president in 1960, Kennedy entrusted Sargent Shriver, his brother-in-law, to create or form the Peace Corps (Fischer, 1998).

On March 1, 1961 President Kennedy signed an executive order establishing the Peace Corps and designated Sargent Shriver as its first director. In preparation for this new responsibility and to get a better understanding of the parts of the world in which Peace Corps volunteers would be serving, Sargent Shriver took an "eight-country tour of Asia and Africa during the late spring of 1961" (Cobbs, 1996, p. 85). The tour was a success. He returned to the United States with about a dozen countries interested in hosting volunteers in their country.

On September 22, 1961, the Peace Corps Act formally authorized and funded the program. Shortly thereafter, young people were being trained at universities across the United States and then sent to developing nations around the world. By the end of 1961, 120 Peace Corps volunteers were serving in three countries: Ghana, Tanganyika, and Colombia (Wofford, 1966). The Peace Corps grew a great deal in its first decade of existence in both the number of

volunteers and countries served. The Peace Corps grew to its largest number of volunteers in its history in 1965, when 15,000 volunteers were serving in forty-six different countries (Peace Corps Times, 2011).

When President Kennedy first suggested the idea for a Peace Corps, the United States was at odds with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Although the two nations never physically fought or went to war, they competed with intelligence, the nuclear arms race, and the space race. Concurrently, the American government began to publicize negative aspects of the Soviet Union and sensitize the American public to Soviet threats. The Soviet Union was a communist regime and there was fear that the country intended to spread communism to developing nations. The Cuban missile crisis served to crystalize this threat. In one of Kennedy's speeches he remarks on the fact that young working professionals in the Soviet Union are "prepared to spend their lives abroad in the service of world communism" (JFK Library). At the time, the United States did not have any service organization providing assistance in developing countries. Thus, the Peace Corps also served the United States' desire to keep up with and surpass the Soviet Union.

The idea of national service was not a new concept. Indeed, it had been around since at least the early 1900's. In William James' famous essay, "Moral Equivalent of War," he touches on the idea of a community service requirement for all young people. They would be assigned to jobs that were not glamorous, but that needed to be done. These jobs would open the eyes of young people exposing them to new experiences. Ideally, James believed that this service would change the individual and expand their empathy for people unlike them. Participants would be able to see a more accurate view of the communities in which they live (James, 1910). Wofford imagined a similar national service law, which would require all young people to complete a year

or two of community service (Wofford, 1966). This utopian-esque idea of a national service requirement would provide communities and nonprofit organizations with the person-power to create much-needed improvements and change in our world. The AmeriCorps VISTA program was created under Lyndon B. Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Frumkin, 2010). AmeriCorps VISTA was constructed as a domestic version of the Peace Corps. AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers work with organizations and nonprofits in an effort to alleviate poverty in the United States.

The international service being done by young people in the Brethren Service Committee helped spark the idea of a national sponsored youth service organization (T. Smith, 2016). The service organization was part of the Church of Brethren, a historic peace church. The volunteers first worked in the United States and then were sent to Europe to learn a new language, adapt to the culture, and provide service to communities in need (T. Smith, 2016). The program showed that "youth could be the most effective carriers of a positive American image abroad" (T. Smith, 2016, p. 247).

There were other national service organizations preceding the Peace Corps. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt started the Civilian Conservation Corps. This program provided jobs for young men protecting and improving the natural resources and land owned by the government. The Civilian Conservation Corps was part of FDR's New Deal and employed almost three million young men (Wetzel, 1966). In 1949, President Harry Truman created the Point Four program that provided technical aid to developing countries across the world. However, the biggest critique of the program was that it was more geared to helping the government, and did not focus as much on the people living in the countries (Wetzel, 1966). Other programs that encouraged service and aid in developing countries were the American

Friends Service Committee, International Volunteer Services, Experiment in International Living, and Operation Crossroads Africa (Wetzel, 1966). “By 1961, there were about fifty American voluntary agencies carrying out assistance programs overseas and employing about five hundred young people in projects for economic and social development and emergency relief assistance” (T. Smith, 2016, p. 222).

Although Kennedy is credited with the creation of the Peace Corps, the idea was being discussed in the late 1950’s. Among those discussing the creation of a Peace Corps was Wisconsin Congressman, Henry Reuss, who had returned from a trip to Cambodia where he had inspected how the U.S. foreign aid was being used in the country. Reuss was inspired by a couple of young American volunteers that were helping to build schools and teach people in villages to read and write. He wanted to see more youth have the opportunity to do good in other countries on behalf of the United States, so he hoped to create what he called the Point Four Youth Corps. He introduced a bill to Congress that would set aside funds to gauge the interest of young Americans in the Point Four Youth Corps and to evaluate how realistic it would be to create and sustain such an organization. Unfortunately, the bill did not pass. However, the idea was kept alive and a Minnesota Senator, Hubert Humphrey, came up with the name “Peace Corps” for the new program (Coyne, 2016). Reuss and Humphrey laid the foundation for the Peace Corps, and Kennedy made it a reality.

Life as a Peace Corps Volunteer

The Peace Corps’ mission is “to promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals: to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women, to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served,

and to help promote better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans” (Peace Corps).

Peace Corps volunteers have served in 141 different countries since 1961. However, many programs have ended or have been temporarily suspended due to countries no longer needing volunteers or because of dangerous situations in a given country. According to the Peace Corps website (*peacecorps.gov*), there are currently 7,376 volunteers serving in sixty-five different countries. Almost half of Peace Corps volunteers serve in Africa, and over two-fifths (41%) of Peace Corps volunteers are education volunteers. Peace Corps service is a twenty-seven-month commitment: three months of in-country language, cultural, and technical training, followed by two years of service in a community in their host-country. Volunteers become immersed in the host-countries’ culture as they live and work alongside community members (McCarron, 2000).

Peace Corps volunteers are expected to help members of the community achieve the goals of the community, rather than imposing their own. The projects that Peace Corps volunteers help start are grass-root efforts, with the hope of reaching and helping as many people in the community as possible. Additionally, to enhance the sustainability of the projects it is important that any programs can be continued by members of the community after the departure of the Peace Corps volunteer.

Peace Corps volunteers often face setbacks during their service, including inadequate resources to complete projects, community resistance to their volunteer service, as well as volunteers having to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings, or due to illness (McCarron, 2000). Additionally, many volunteers report feeling isolated in their villages, regardless of the fact that they are surrounded by people. However, volunteers have also reported that the people in the

villages were constantly watching and talking about their every move, which can be frustrating in a different way for volunteers (Fischer, 1998).

Each Peace Corps experience is unique. Volunteers serve in many different countries, and even within each country the sites in which volunteers are stationed vary a great deal. For example, some sites are more urban while others are more rural and some sites have running water and electricity and others don't. Volunteers must adapt to the living conditions at their site since they will be living there for two years.

While Peace Corps volunteers do not get paid for their work, they are given a stipend that covers their living expenses and food. They are given the same amount of money the average person living in the community makes each month. Additionally, upon completion of service, volunteers receive a readjustment allowance of more than \$8000. The Paul D. Coverdell Fellows program offers returned Peace Corps volunteers reduced tuition and stipends at participating graduate schools.

The Peace Corps has been sending volunteers to countries all over the world for fifty-eight years. Although the organization's mission has remained constant, there have been changes since its inception. Today, volunteers have a plethora of information available to them about Peace Corps service in each country. Returned Peace Corps volunteers have written blogs and books, and have filmed YouTube videos that provide insights and tips about service in their country. The first volunteers to leave for the Peace Corps in the 1960's embarked on an adventure that they knew little of what to expect. In the 1960's and 1970's, the first three months of pre-service training, was held in the United States on university campuses. Today, pre-service training is held in country and volunteers are required to live with a host family to help them to integrate and learn the language more quickly.

In order to be eligible for the Peace Corps, volunteers must be at least eighteen-years-old and a citizen of the United States. Many of the volunteer positions require a Bachelor's degree. However, there are a couple of opportunities that accept people with relevant work experience (Peace Corps, 2019).

Common Criticism

The "BA generalist," a common term in Peace Corps literature, refers to volunteers that have non-technical college degrees such as humanities or history. The BA generalist was a commonplace Peace Corps applicant in the early days, because they were far less likely than their engineer or medical counterparts to have a prescribed career path (Fischer, 1998). The BA generalist is sometimes considered an asset and sometimes a liability. The BA generalist is viewed as an asset, in the sense that these individuals have a broad knowledge on a variety of topics through the humanities courses they took in college. Yet, they are sometimes considered a liability because they do not have any sort of professional or relevant work experience in what they will be doing in service. Volunteers with teaching or medical experience are considered valuable, because the experience they bring to service is something that can't be taught during training. In the 1960s, "host country officials [began] asking for a higher proportion of experienced teachers and medical or technical personnel rather than the present overwhelming preponderance of recent liberal arts college graduates" (Wofford, 1966, p. 135).

Early critiques of the Peace Corps focused on the young age of many of the first volunteers. Some called the Peace Corps the "kiddie corps," because of the number of people serving just out of college (Cobbs, 1996). Today, the average age of Peace Corps volunteers is twenty-seven. "There is no upper age limit to be eligible for Peace Corps service" (McGillivray, 2015). However, many volunteers still serve directly out of their undergraduate program.

There is an underrepresentation of minorities in the Peace Corps. According to the article, “Black Colleges Lag in Producing Peace Corps Volunteers”, there are hardly any Peace Corps volunteers being sent from historically black universities. This has been a problem since the creation of the Peace Corps. “The agency’s first 100 volunteers in training included just 2 African Americans” (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 1004). If there were more volunteers from different races and ethnic backgrounds, the diversity of the United States population would be better represented in the countries where Peace Corps volunteers serve. A part of the Peace Corps mission statement is to promote a better understanding of the United States to host countries. However, if a majority of the Peace Corps volunteers a host country receives are white, middle-class Americans they will be missing many elements of the American experience.

I hope to add to the cross-national volunteering conversation by presenting the viewpoints of returned Peace Corps volunteers as they share the impact of their service.

Methodology

A total of fifteen returned Peace Corps volunteers (seven men and eight women) were interviewed for this study. The earliest volunteer served in 1964, and the most recent volunteer finished her service in 2015. Almost every volunteer interviewed served in a different country: Albania, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala (two volunteers: 1976-1978, 2010-2012), Peru, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine. Collectively, this sample represents a diverse set of cultural experiences. As per Peace Corps regulations, volunteers served, on average, for two years and three months. One volunteer served with her husband. The returned Peace Corps volunteers served in various areas: Education (forty percent), Community Economic Development (thirty-three percent), Agriculture (thirteen percent), Environment (seven percent), and Health (seven percent).

Participants met with the interviewer and each completed a semi-structured interview.

The interview questions were as follows.

1. What motivated you to apply to the Peace Corps?
2. When and where did you serve?
3. What was your role as a volunteer?
4. Tell me about your resources, such as food, water, and shelter.
5. Describe transportation to and from work, and more generally in the community in which you served.
6. How safe did you feel during your service?
7. What was your experience of how receptive the community was to your volunteer service?
8. Did volunteers serve in the community prior to your Peace Corps service?
9. Please share the ways you made a positive impact on the community you served.
10. Describe how sustainable the projects were that you implemented.
11. What was the most rewarding or memorable experience of serving as a volunteer?
12. How did your service shape your career or life goals?

Some of the questions served the purpose of getting to know the volunteer and gaining a little background knowledge of their service. Although twelve questions were asked, this study will analyze the answers given to three main questions: volunteers' motivation to join the Peace Corps, volunteers' perception of impact on their community, and volunteers' perception of their services' impact on themselves.

One interviewee requested the list of questions before her interview. The other fourteen interviewees were not given the questions ahead of time. The majority (thirteen) of the interviews were conducted in person, and the remaining two were done over the telephone. The in-person interviews were conducted in coffee shops, on The University of Texas at Austin campus, and in the homes of some of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted over a five-month period, from October 2018 to February 2019.

All interviews were voluntary. Interviewees were recruited from The University of Texas International Office, around the Austin area and the Heart of Texas Peace Corps Association. The Peace Corps recruiter in the International Office connected me with four returned Peace Corps volunteers that worked in her office and across The University of Texas at Austin campus. The Heart of Texas Peace Corps Association (HotPCA) is an active group of returned Peace Corps volunteers in the central Texas area. They have monthly meetings and social events to hear about the experiences of others and to keep the Peace Corps spirit alive. The eight returned volunteers from the HotPCA were recruited from the official HotPCA Facebook group page. The remaining three volunteers were recruited through a friend or family member.

Using qualitative data analytic methods, I compared the information from the existing literature with the data I collected from the cohort of returned Peace Corps volunteers.

Motivations to Join the Peace Corps

Interviewees were asked *What motivated you to apply to the Peace Corps?* Five themes emerged from the responses: always wanted to be in the Peace Corps, desire to understand another culture, desire to help others, delaying next life chapter, and serving country.

Always Wanted to Be in the Peace Corps

“My mom was a Peace Corps volunteer. She served in Sierra Leon in West Africa, so I grew up eating stew and rice and hearing pigeon words that she would say. My dad and her (sic) met in Sierra Leon, so I was born there and lived there for the first few years of my life as well. So, I think there was a piece of growing up and hearing a lot about it.”

- Ghana Volunteer (2007-2009)

This Ghana volunteer was not the only one to express the sentiment that the Peace Corps was something she had always wanted to do. In fact, five other volunteers also had Peace Corps service as a lifelong goal.

One volunteer from the 1990’s remembers seeing a commercial about the Peace Corps on the television when she was a little girl; it advertised for “the toughest job you’ll ever love” and she knew that she wanted to see the world through the Peace Corps.

Desire to Understand Another Culture

The third goal of the Peace Corps mission is “to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans” (Peace Corps, 2019). Through Peace Corps service, volunteers have the chance to learn about and understand a culture that is very different from their own. Six volunteers cited cultural understanding as one of their main motivations behind joining the Peace Corps.

“I wanted to get that professional experience as well, so when I was applying to graduate school and for my intended career I would have that experience already.”

- Ukraine Volunteer (2004-2006)

This Ukraine volunteer received an undergraduate degree in International Studies and thought she wanted to pursue a career in International Development. She sought professional international work experience as well as the cultural experience of living and working alongside a community.

Another volunteer grew up in Kentucky reading National Geographic and dreamt of one day visiting the places he saw on the glossy pages of the magazine. Other volunteers craved the opportunity to travel and see the world.

Desire to Help Others

“I also had a desire to do some good, give back, after all the help I’ve been given in my life, which has been pretty privileged.”

- Benin Volunteer (2013-2015)

Eight of the volunteers interviewed named the altruistic motive of a desire to help others. They felt a great responsibility to provide help where they could. It was common among the volunteers that served directly out of college to want to help others and the Peace Corps provided a way to serve through giving their time and energy.

One volunteer had a long history of volunteering in her community and when she graduated in 2008, jobs were scarce due to the economic crash so she chose to continue her passion for service and helping others by joining the Peace Corps.

Delaying Next Life Chapter

“I remember meeting one Peace Corps volunteer who was a graduate student here at UT, it sounded awesome and I didn’t really want to go to graduate school right after undergrad. I knew I wanted to travel and I knew I wanted to help people and the opportunity was rich for it in that time of energy and excitement.”

- Dominican Republic Volunteer (2010-2012)

Nine of the volunteers went on to complete additional schooling after they finished their Peace Corps service. However, only four volunteers specifically mentioned knowing they

wanted to continue on with higher education, a Master's degree or PhD, following Peace Corps service. After finishing their undergraduate degree, they wanted a break before continuing with their academics. Instead of sitting around during this break they filled the time doing something they found meaningful: Peace Corps.

A volunteer that served in the 1960's knew that he wanted to eventually go on to complete more schooling but did not know exactly what he wanted to study. He studied English for his undergraduate degree but was steadily becoming more convinced he did not want to go to graduate school for English. He hoped that the Peace Corps would help him find a topic that interested him. It did.

Two other volunteers reported being unsure of the next step in their life. Hesitant about finding a job or starting a master's program that they weren't passionate about, they chose to apply to the Peace Corps. The idea of adventure was intriguing and provided an answer to the question of what was next in their life.

Serve Country

"I also wanted to serve my country, but I felt doing it through the Peace Corps was a better avenue for my skill set, a better match than the military."

- Benin Volunteer (2013-2015)

Two volunteers considered military service but felt that they would be a greater asset in another field. They chose to serve their country through non-military national service.

"I had been out of school for about five years. I was working as an engineer and that was when the Vietnam war was picking up steam and I felt that was a very bad thing for the country to be doing. I wanted to do something that would show that the U.S. wasn't all bad, that the U.S. was doing some positive things as well, so I signed up for the Peace Corps."

- Ethiopia Volunteer (1966-1968)

This volunteer hoped to give the community he served a better understanding of Americans. He wanted to serve his country and improve the reputation that the United States had overseas. This motivation plays into the view of the Peace Corps as an act of soft diplomacy.

Motivations to Join the Peace Corps Results Chart

Motivations to Join the Peace Corps	1960's Volunteers (3)	1970's Volunteers (2)	1990's Volunteers (2)	2000's Volunteers (2)	2010's Volunteers (6)
Always Wanted to Be in the Peace Corps	0	1	1	2	2
Desire to Understand Another Culture	2	0	1	2	5
Desire to Help Others	1	0	0	1	6
Delaying Next Life Chapter	2	0	1	1	3
Serve Country	0	1	0	0	1

Discussion

The returned Peace Corps volunteers interviewed cited multiple reasons behind their choice to serve in the Peace Corps. Some motivations were altruistic, some were egoistic, and others were a combination of both. Among the sample interviewed it was common for the volunteers to be motivated by a desire to help others while simultaneously putting themselves in a better position for the future.

Volunteers all had different life experiences leading up to their Peace Corps service. Therefore, they had many different reasons for serving in the Peace Corps. Although a wide variety of answers were received, the motivations fell into five main categories: always wanted to be in the Peace Corps; desire to understand another culture; desire to help others; delaying next life chapter; and serving country.

Perception of Impact

Interviewees were asked *What was your experience of how receptive the community was to your volunteer service?* and *Please share the ways you made a positive impact on the community you served.* Four themes emerged from the responses: sustainable knowledge transferred to people; relationships and conversations with community members; community had an opportunity to learn about American culture; and helped community to be self-sufficient.

Sustainable Knowledge Transferred to People

“I’m hopeful, although I can’t see the direct benefit of it right now, I taught them skills and a language that in the near future, when they are planning to go to university in the capital, will help them for the rest of their lives.”

- Benin Volunteer (2013-2015)

Nine volunteers reported that the greatest impact they perceive they made was through the knowledge they imparted with the members of their community. The education volunteers viewed their contributions as beneficial and measured them through what their students accomplished. Some students stayed in contact with the volunteers about their accomplishments, their families, and things going on in the village. Volunteers acknowledged that their students’ success was not solely dependent on their presence in the lives of the students. However, they were hopeful that their presence, encouragement, and work in the classroom positively shaped their students.

“I think just introducing them to ways they could have a better life for themselves and their children. Whether they took advantage of it at that time at least they were given the information.”

- Guatemala Volunteer (1976-1978)

Volunteers taught classes on sexual reproduction, health, sanitation, the English language, and even economic literacy. The 1970’s Guatemala volunteer quoted above taught

sanitation and cooking classes. She views these classes as informational since she was giving the people who came valuable lessons that could help them create a better life for themselves. However, she questions whether people internalized the new information and continued to implement the strategies into their lives.

Three volunteers touched on their creation of a safe place for conversation. A Dominican Republic volunteer and a Ukraine volunteer created and led female empowerment groups in their respective communities that allowed for the young women and girls to have difficult and sensitive conversations about their reproductive health that they were not able to have anywhere else. They could ask questions and gain knowledge about topics that were considered taboo within the community. Similarly, a Burkina Faso volunteer began a karate club for kids and at the end of class he would open up the time for questions from the kids. The questions began mostly karate related, and over time expanded to a variety of other topics including God, homosexuality, AIDS, family planning, and even how certain technology works. As trust grew with the Peace Corps volunteer, these discussions allowed the kids to learn how to talk about different subjects and have friendly debate.

Relationships and Conversations with Community Members

“The continued relationships that I have with host families and community members. All the projects you do and all the things you teach other people that all kind of comes and goes. It’s the relationships you have and are able to maintain after your service that are the most rewarding, and the biggest testament to your impact.”

- Ecuador Volunteer (2013-2015)

Volunteers cite the relationships they made in their community as being the most rewarding part of their service. Host family members, host country nationals, counterparts, students, and other members of their community made their experience unforgettable.

Volunteers learned so much from these interactions. A volunteer who served in Albania was

grateful for the forgiving relationships within his community as he was learning the native language; they were patient with him as he struggled to put together sentences and encouraged him to continue practicing.

“The conversations are probably the richest things that the people will take. As far as knowledge and how they choose to live their lives one hopes that that was sustainable in a way.”

- Dominican Republic Volunteer (2010-2012)

Many volunteers attribute some of their fondest moments to the conversations they had with members of their community. A volunteer that served in Burkina Faso recalls fondly the times he spent sitting under a tree, drinking tea with members of his community, talking about anything and everything, or even just enjoying each other’s presence.

Community Had an Opportunity to Learn About American Culture

“I was the only gringo who had lived in that little village. I was the village television set, everybody just looked at me and watched me because they had never seen someone like that before.”

- Peru Volunteer (1964-1966)

Multiple volunteers attested to being “the village television set”. Community members would constantly watch what volunteers did when they were out and about in the village. The everyday doings of volunteers were intriguing to the people in the community. This was difficult for some volunteers, as they were never able to simply blend in and go unnoticed when walking outside of their home. Members of communities associated the stereotypes they knew about the United States to the Peace Corps volunteers. They assumed that the volunteers had lots of money because they were from the United States. It took a while for the members of the community to understand that the volunteers were there to teach skills instead of distribute

financial aid. Additionally, a couple of volunteers were asked if they were members of the CIA in disguise.

“I was the first black person a lot of people saw in my first sight which was a whole other experience. ‘You don’t look the same. Your hair is short. Are you sure you are an American? Are you sure you’re not from Africa?’”

- Guatemala Volunteer (2010-2012)

A few of the communities were able to gain a better understanding of the great diversity of the American people and culture. Volunteers of color experienced initial resistance from communities that expected white, blonde haired, blue-eyed American volunteers. The African-American volunteer quoted above was not the only volunteer to be questioned by her community about being an American. Similarly, a Mexican-American volunteer who served in Ecuador was not the marginally Spanish-speaking American that they had hoped to help assimilate; instead, he was fluent in Spanish and familiar with many of the Latin American cultural practices. A Hindu volunteer that served in the Dominican Republic was asked why her skin was brown if she was an American. Although these volunteers were faced with complicated situations regarding their race or ethnicity, they took it in stride by using the opportunity as a learning experience. They were able to explain to their communities that the United States is made up of people of all races and ethnicities. These volunteers were able to be a tangible representation of the American melting pot.

“I think I probably made more of a difference in other teachers’ lives through exposure and the whole goal of being an American ambassador and just helping them see a different way of life and a different perspective of the world”

- Sri Lanka Volunteer (1994-1996)

One of the Peace Corps’ three goals is to help promote a better understanding of Americans. The community is able to learn about the American volunteers through living alongside them for 27 months.

Helped Community Be Self-sufficient

“The other way I tried to make things sustainable was through fundraising, Peace Corps has a lot of resources like little grants and things to help you fund your projects and I thought about doing that, but I wanted them to find ways in their community to raise funds for their own projects. I don’t want them to think stuff has to come from the outside in order to last forever.”

- Dominican Republic Volunteer (2010-2012)

This Youth, Families, and Community Development volunteer that served in the Dominican Republic helped with a myriad of projects that the community was interested in pursuing. One of the projects that she was very proud of was the establishment of a GLOW, Girls Leading Our World, initiative in her Dominican Republic community. The group discussed HIV, AIDS, and topics of sexual health. The group learned through a certification course; when they finished going through every topic they would receive a certificate and a binder of all of the topics they covered so they would then be able to teach the course to the younger girls in the village. By the time she left her community there had been three iterations of the class and she would watch the girls teach the valuable lessons from the back of the room. Additionally, this same volunteer avoided the grants that she could apply for through Peace Corps and encouraged the girls to raise funds within the community for the projects they found important. Community fundraisers included movie nights, creating crafts to sell, and even panhandling at the bus station.

Another volunteer from Burkina Faso utilized community members in trainings. Near the beginning of his service, his language skills were not adequate to give a talk on agricultural strategies and be well-received. He recruited a couple of people from the community that he would train to do the presentations. Therefore, the information in the trainings came from people in the community and it allowed the rest of the community to fully understand the material being taught.

Perception of Impact Results Table

Perception of Impact	1960's Volunteers (3)	1970's Volunteers (2)	1990's Volunteers (2)	2000's Volunteers (2)	2010's Volunteers (6)
Sustainable Knowledge Transferred to People	1	2	0	0	6
Relationships and Conversations with Community Members	1	1	0	1	3
Community Learned About American Culture	0	0	2	0	1
Helped Community Be Self-Sufficient	0	1	1	0	1

Discussion

“I doubt very much that we changed that little town in any durable long-lasting way.”
- Peru Volunteer (1964-1966)

The returned Peace Corps volunteers put forth their best efforts in everything they did in their country of service including the projects they worked on, their interactions with the community, learning the local language, and experiencing and respecting the culture. However, they were not shy about talking about shortcomings or a lack of sustainability in some of their projects. One volunteer speculated that this could be due to the volunteer being the main driving force for many projects. Thus, when the volunteer leaves the community the continuation of a project is not very likely. Volunteers cited the most sustainable parts of their service as the knowledge they imparted, the conversations had, and the relationships built.

Peace Corps builds long-term relationships with fellow volunteers, host country nationals, host families, and members of the community. The bond between Peace Corps volunteers is incredibly strong because the volunteer is exposed to many difficult circumstances and the person who can most accurately understand what a volunteer is going through is someone who is

experiencing the same or similar things. Many of the volunteers interviewed have remained in frequent contact with other volunteers from their cohort. Other strong relationships built through the Peace Corps are the ones with members of the community. A Peru volunteer who served in the 1960's still communicates with a family he met during his service. Over the fifty years of friendship he has met the new children and grandchildren in the family and each time he visits Peru he makes sure to pay them a visit.

Impact on Volunteer

Interviewees were asked *How did your service shape your career and life goals?* Five themes emerged from the responses: desiring to educate or becoming an academic, acquiring greater awareness and understanding of the world and another culture, feeling they “owe” the country they served in, identifying career path, and meeting future spouses.

Desire to Educate / Become an Academic

“Education is the future of humanity so I wanted to be a part of that.”

- Senegal Volunteer (1995-1997)

Three volunteers mentioned becoming aware of the immense value of education during their service. In other countries, access to education is not always equal. Children who live in rural areas have less opportunity due to the need to travel long distances to get to school. Also, the education of girls and women is valued less. A Dominican Republic volunteer that served in 2010 recalled that girls would have to stay home from school if they had chores to complete or if the water to the town turned on while their brothers went to school. Seeing the inequality of education firsthand made some volunteers want to become educators when they returned home.

Two volunteers taught Montessori, one went on to open up his own Montessori school with his wife in Austin, TX. Another volunteer, upon returning to the United States, taught English as a foreign language classes for a short period of time while she was getting her masters in social work. Four volunteers returned and began working to get their PhDs. All four went on to become professors at The University of Texas at Austin teaching courses on Computer Science, Latin American History, and Social Work. One of the four volunteers still teaches courses at the university, while the other three have retired from lecturing.

The third goal of the Peace Corps' mission is to help promote a better understanding of people from other countries on behalf of Americans. Volunteers have gone on to educate their family and friends about the country where they served.

Greater Awareness and Understanding of the World and Another Culture

“I would say Peace Corps service didn't shape my life goals or career, per se. Instead, I would say it changed my life at a very integral part of my being. It changed my perspective of myself and the world and my role in the world. I would say that everything I did after my service and now for the rest of my life is impacted or will be impacted by my service in the Peace Corps in Benin.”

- Benin Volunteer (2013-2015)

Peace Corps opened up the eyes of volunteers as they saw a whole new part of the world. Their surroundings were unlike the ones they were used to in the United States. Volunteers had the opportunity to live with a host family at least for their pre-service training. This helped them to learn the language and assimilate to life in their country of service.

Volunteers learned a great deal about the culture of the country in which they served. They were able to eat the local food and take part in community and religious celebrations. Many volunteers received invitations from community members to attend events. A volunteer that served in Sri Lanka in 1994 fondly remembers taking part in Vesak, a Buddhist festival that happens on the full moon in May. Each family makes paper lanterns to light and display at the evening procession. A special moment in her service was when her host family invited her to help make their lantern for the festivities.

As volunteers begin to understand a new culture, they learn about both the desirable and less desirable cultural practices. Two different education volunteers that served in West Africa, Benin and Ghana, struggled with the corporal punishment practices and the sexual abuse their students faced. The teachers they worked alongside were punishing kids in an attempt to yield better academic results. Both volunteers viewed this “educational strategy” as morally wrong

and ineffective. However, it is not the volunteers' place to challenge these long-standing practices because they are viewed as temporary members of the community. The Benin volunteer that witnessed corporal punishment first-hand revealed that the only thing she had the power and authority to do was to not beat her students, as to be an example for the other teachers. Another undesirable practice these West African education volunteers dealt with in their schools was the sexual abuse of students. The Ghana volunteer, an art teacher at a deaf school, explained the obstacles and shame placed on and in front of the students. The perpetrators of the sexual abuse took advantage of the low status of the deaf students. Legal action is rarely ever brought to bare on these unfortunate situations.

Feel They "Owe" The Country They Served In

"I think one reason I became an academic and got into teaching and research here is that in a way I'm trying to repay a debt to Peru and to Lima in particular. I think that teaching and writing and doing research about it is a way to pay that debt because I feel I've gotten so much out of being there."

- Peru Volunteer (1964-1966)

This Peru volunteer feels that his country of service has given him so much more than he was able to give to his community. He feels that he owes the country of Peru. In an attempt to pay his perceived debt, he has dedicated the past forty years to researching, writing, and teaching about urban policy and politics in Lima, Peru. Additionally, he actively talks about his Peace Corps experience with his college classes and invites The University of Texas at Austin Peace Corps Recruiter to present, thus, hoping to share the life-changing opportunity he experienced with others.

A 1970's Brazil volunteer continues to return to his country of service at least annually. He contributes to the community he served by investing in the economy through his part-

ownership in a brewery in Brazil. Additionally, he became a visiting professor at two different Brazilian universities for five years after he finished graduate school.

Identification of Career Path

“I did go back many years after the Peace Corps and get a masters in educational psychology, so I am trained to work with children who have learning disabilities. I would say the spark for doing that was really ignited in the Peace Corps.”

- Guatemala Volunteer (1976-1978)

The Guatemala volunteer that served in the 1970's credits her Peace Corps service with encouraging her career path. She served with her husband and they had their first child during their service. She went back to school to get her master's degree a few years after returning from Peace Corps service. Then, she moved to McAllen, TX and worked with children who had learning disabilities for twenty years. She was able to continue using her Spanish language skills in the border city.

The 1960's Peru volunteer mentioned above stumbled upon his lifelong research question during his Peace Corps service. During the second half of his service, he worked with the National Housing Board, which was created by the president of Peru, and designed to cope with the problem of very rapid urban growth. In the early 1960's there was a big migration from the rural countryside to the cities all across Latin America. The cities were not prepared for the large number of rural migrants. This problem has continued to be a part of his life as a researcher and author.

A 1970's volunteer that served in Brazil showed the community the importance of language and reading in the development of a child's communication skills. Upon return from the Peace Corps he went to graduate school for communication disorders and dedicated his career to special education. He credits the time working with special needs children during his Peace Corps service with defining his career path.

A volunteer that served in Ghana in 2007 now works for a company called Global Mamas. The company partners with Ghanaian women to sell their handmade products: clothes, jewelry, accessories, body products, home décor, and more. These women are then able to make a sustainable income and support their families. The founders of the company were also Peace Corps volunteers that served in Ghana. Her work has allowed her to stay connected to the country of Ghana.

Meeting Future Spouses in Peace Corps

Four volunteers met their spouse in the Peace Corps. One married couple was interviewed during the study; they met during their service in the 1960's. One volunteer served in Ethiopia and the other in Eritrea, the countries were not yet separated. They met in pre-service training and then saw each other as often as possible. They didn't live in the same site so they had to be creative in finding time to meet up and book their phone calls through the telecommunications office. They would even book their dentist appointments on the same day so they could spend extra time with each other. They got married in the village before they returned to the United States.

A volunteer who served in Guatemala in 2010 also met her husband during pre-service training. Their sites were on opposite sides of the country, but they tried to see each other twice a month or as often as possible. They would meet at the halfway point between their two sites, each travelling seven hours by "camioneta". "Camionetas" are chaotic buses that would be filled with as many people as possible and might even be carrying livestock.

The other volunteer met her spouse while volunteering in Ukraine. Her husband was living in the village she resided in.

Service Impact on Volunteer Results Table

Service Impact on Volunteer	1960's Volunteers (3)	1970's Volunteers (2)	1990's Volunteers (2)	2000's Volunteers (2)	2010's Volunteers (6)
Desire to Educate / Become an Academic	3	2	1	1	1
Greater Awareness and Understanding of the World and Another Culture	1	2	1	0	5
Feel They "Owe" the Country They Served In	1	1	0	1	0
Identification of Career Path	1	2	1	1	0
Meeting Future Spouses in the Peace Corps	2	0	0	1	1

Discussion

“Peru and Lima have both given me so much, it’s not a fair exchange. I think a lot of volunteers will probably tell you that they got so much more out of it than they were able to leave behind.”

- Peru Volunteer (1964-1966)

Volunteers feel that they got more out of their service than they were able to give. The service experience continues to make an impact on their day-to-day lives whereas the impact in the community is more difficult to assess.

“You asked me if I would ever be in the Peace Corps again and I said no, which is true. I will say knowing what I know now, if I had the chance to go back in time and do it all over again or not, I absolutely would. That’s how much it changed my life.”

- Benin Volunteer (2013-2015)

The life-changing experience of the Peace Corps shaped volunteers’ lives in ways that they could not have imagined. Volunteers spend two years living in a community that sometimes they had not heard about prior to serving. They have to learn a language and adapt to a life that is very different from their life in the United States. It is no surprise that volunteers return to the United States with a new outlook on life or a decision to change career paths.

Through enduring difficult circumstances, volunteers are able to find out what is really important to them.

The Peace Corps volunteers interviewed continue to help others through their work. Multiple volunteers have become teachers, one volunteer works for a nonprofit, one volunteer became a lawyer, one works for a global communications company, another works for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the other volunteers work at The University of Texas at Austin. Volunteers perceive their current career as continuing to help others. For example, one returned Peace Corps volunteer that served in Ecuador currently works as a senior financial analyst in The University of Texas at Austin's Office of the President. He views the work he does as beneficial to The University of Texas, and since the university gives students so many opportunities to follow their dreams, his work indirectly helps university students.

Conclusion

Peace Corps service is incredibly nuanced. Although there are many similarities that can be drawn, every single Peace Corps experience is different. Even if two volunteers serve in the same country, in the same sector, in the same year, they will still have different experiences.

Volunteers feel they have gained more from the experience than they were able to give. They worked hard to try to fulfill the needs of the community during their service. Those interviewed think they made a positive impact through the relationships created, the conversations they had with their community, and the knowledge they imparted. However, even if they created successful projects they found that there was no guarantee the programs were going to continue after they left because they were the driving force behind the projects.

How can Peace Corps work to ensure that the community benefits more from the volunteer? Perhaps, a prior understanding of what Peace Corps volunteers can provide for the community would help the integration and acceptance of volunteers. Thus, volunteers wouldn't have to take as long gaining the trust of the community before they begin working to implement projects the community wants to see. This could allow for volunteers to complete more in their service. Further research into Peace Corps volunteering and techniques that are successful in earning the trust and respect of the village need to be done.

A common theme across the volunteers interviewed was a tendency to continue serving others in their communities after their Peace Corps service. Their continuation of service is manifested in teaching, working with nonprofit organizations, and providing services that would directly or indirectly help people in the community.

It is important to consider a possible sampling bias in this study. All of the participants voluntarily agreed to be interviewed and speak about their service. Although each volunteer had negative experiences and felt lonely and discouraged at times, there was an overall positive outlook about the Peace Corps experience. If there wasn't an overall positive outlook toward their service, the volunteers were still grateful for the things they learned. Additionally, all of the volunteers interviewed served the full twenty-seven months. According to the Fiscal Year 2016 Peace Corps Early Termination Global Report, "1,196 of the 10,440 volunteers who served did not complete their full service" (Peace Corps, 2017, p. 4). Volunteers can early terminate for a variety of reasons: medical separation, resignation, interrupted service (if a country becomes unsafe for volunteers to remain there), and administrative separation. The experiences of returned Peace Corps volunteers that had early termination were not analyzed in this study.

The findings from this study are based on interviews with fifteen returned Peace Corps volunteers. There is no single Peace Corps story, so it is difficult to draw any conclusions that will stand true for every volunteer that has served or will serve in the Peace Corps.

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Biography

Milana Baish was born in Austin, TX and raised in Corpus Christi, TX. She attended Flour Bluff High School where her passion for volunteering started. She was in the Plan II Honors Program at The University of Texas at Austin and graduated in May 2019. Throughout her college career she volunteered regularly with the Plan II/KIPP Austin Partnership and the HealthStart Foundation. She will be leaving in August 2019 to be a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia.

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