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Making Good: An Exploratory Study of the Socialization, Identity, and Sensemaking of Mission Trip Volunteers

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MAKING GOOD: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE SOCIALIZATION, IDENTITY, AND SENSEMAKING OF MISSION TRIP VOLUNTEERS

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Master of Arts

By
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MAKING GOOD: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE SOCIALIZATION, IDENTITY, AND SENSEMAKING OF MISSION TRIP VOLUNTEERS

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This research explored how mission trip volunteers assume various roles throughout their volunteer experience. By seeing the various roles that emerge in mission volunteer work, the identities that they construct based upon these roles are revealed. Discovering the ways in which these roles and constructed identities affect the way that mission trip volunteers could potentially help colleges improve their recruitment messages and distinguish themselves from other institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data from the participants, and the data were analyzed through a thematic, constant comparative method. Findings revealed the types of stories heard from other mission trip volunteers prior to serving, the impact of those stories on decisions to volunteer, the various identities that emerge while serving on a mission trip, and how mission trip volunteers make sense of their experiences after serving. This study applies several well-known aspects of organizational communication to the context of mission trip volunteers, offering new and interesting data. This study also provides practical implications for mission trip coordinators and individuals who might be interested in being a mission trip volunteer.

*Key words: Socialization; Identity Construction; Sensemaking; Mission Trip Volunteers; Storytelling*
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There are over one million individuals in America who participate in mission trips each year (Culbertson, 2011). These trips range from one week to several months, or even year-long commitments in some cases. These trips are designed to help “you become part of a movement to build a better world” in hopes that “you will join in a journey that will open your mind, your heart, and your world” (United Planet, 2012, p. 1). Such notions are often derived from a religious perspective, as mission trips are often affiliated with religious organizations or institutions. Bruscke (2013), in a *USA Today* article, stated, “Being called or volunteering to go on a mission trip can be one of the most satisfying experiences for a person of faith. On a mission trip, you get to visit a different community or culture and become directly involved in a project or in teaching tenets of your religion” (p. 1).

Similarly purposed, yet with significant distinctions, voluntourism has been an area of service-based trips that has been more widely studied in the academic realm. Several academic scholars have examined the experiences and work of voluntourists or volunteer vacationers, who go on trips to enjoy leisure as well as work for the common good of others. One example is Brown (2005) who examined volunteers in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Erdely (2011) also investigated volunteers who participated in the relief efforts of Hurricane Katrina. These are just a couple of studies which seek to explore such notions of altruism and service to others. Overall, these studies are not a dominating force of research in the communication field, but they are continually...
Increasing in popularity as more and more people join this trend of engaging in service trips.

Similar to voluntourism, mission trips have also been gaining popularity in recent decades. Since 1965, when only a little over 500 mission trip volunteers were actively engaging in service, many others have now taken on the role of becoming a mission trip volunteer (Horton, 2011). Horton (2011) proposed that the current number of mission trip volunteers is over 1.5 million and that these individuals invest around $2 billion annually in such ventures. Because this is an investment that so many individuals choose to make, be it financial, physical, emotional, or spiritual, it is an area of research that is worth exploring. Why do individuals feel the need to serve on such trips? What influences them to go? Do the stories they hear from others play a role in their expectations for their own personal trips? All of these questions are important to understand better the growing phenomenon of mission trips and those who choose to participate in them.

Not only should scholars be concerned with why people choose to go on such trips, but also how their service affects their lives once they return home. The payoff or benefit from investing so much of oneself into these endeavors and how these experiences are being communicated to others should be considered. Equally important, the motivations behind why certain experiences are talked about more than others should be investigated. All of these considerations help to shed some light on why this trend in volunteering continues to grow and why so many people and so much money are invested in this cause. The current study seeks to illuminate how stories may influence mission trip volunteers’ decisions to go on mission trips, as well as how they view themselves as they perform their service, and how they make sense of their experiences after serving.
Regardless of whether or not a personal decision is made to go on a mission trip, most everyone knows or has heard of someone who has gone on these types of trips. It is also likely that we have given donations, time or financial, to causes that we deemed to be valuable in some way. Likewise, mission trip volunteers donate their time, money, and selves to spreading the message of Christ domestically and internationally. By examining mission trip volunteers’ motivations and experiences, better understanding can be reached as to why so many people are involved with these types of trips.

As noted earlier, comparisons can be made between general volunteer tourism type trips and mission trips, but there are typically some specific differences. These differences include not only an agenda to serve, but to evangelize on a mission trip, an attempt to meet not only the physical needs of others, but the spiritual as well. There are very few published scholars whom have taken the initiative to explore the experiences of mission trip volunteers. More specifically, there are no studies which have explored the reasons behind why mission trip volunteers specifically, donate their time and service and how they communicate about those experiences once they have returned home from their service abroad.

The primary purpose of this study is to create a better understanding of mission trip volunteers by unveiling the reasons why mission trip volunteers become interested in such trips, why they decide to go, and what their expectations are prior to leaving on these types of trips. Not only does this study have a pre-trip focus, but it also seeks to explore the mission trip volunteer’s experience in the field, how they talk about their experiences after returning home, to whom they communicate their experiences and why
they may choose certain experiences to recount to others. Insight into the intent of mission trip volunteers to continue their service is also provided.

It is important to understand why more than a million people see a need and feel the call to engage in such trips. It is equally important to determine whether or not this will continue to be a growing trend into the future and what elements influence and/or effect people who are interested in serving others. By completing this study, the door will be opened for other scholars who share similar interests to further explore this specific sect of volunteer service.

This research project is presented in five chapters. This chapter has provided an introduction and rationale for exploring the role that stories play in mission trip volunteers’ decisions to go on mission trips, the various identities enacted by mission trip volunteers during their service, and how they communicate about their experiences once returning home. Chapter 2 reviews extant literature, particularly in the areas of socialization, identity construction, and sensemaking. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the research, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, specifically, each research question posed by the researcher, along with a list of themes and excerpts from participant journals and interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the findings, pragmatic implications, limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research directions.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socialization, identity, and sensemaking are all well-known aspects of organizational communication. These areas have been explored over the years in a variety of contexts, but few scholars have noted the role that each of these areas plays within organizational contexts such as churches, particularly with organizational members who volunteer their time, money, and other resources to service projects abroad. As determined from the rationale, this is the only known study that adopts a communicative perspective to examine these three concepts (socialization, identification, and sensemaking) in relation to mission trip volunteerism, specifically the socialization phases volunteers go through, the way they communicate and negotiate identity roles during service, and how they retrospectively make sense of their experiences upon their return home.

This chapter provides an overview of extant literature in each of these three areas and points to the ways in which past research relates to the current study. To begin, a review of the literature related to socialization is provided. Secondly, an overview of identity construction literature and the various factors that contribute to the constructions on one’s identity are discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes with sensemaking, the various contexts in which it has been studied, and how it can be applied to the mission trip volunteer context. Each of these three sections comprising this second chapter is concluded with a summarization, which leads into the research questions posed by the author. The research questions grew out of an interest in the stories that mission trip volunteers have heard prior to leaving on their own trips, the potential influence of those
stories on current mission trip volunteer experiences, the roles that are enacted by mission
trip volunteers during their time of service, and how these volunteers communicate about
their own experiences to others once returning home.

Socialization

Organizational socialization has been defined as “the process by which
organizational members become a part of, or absorbed into, the culture of an
organization” (Jablin, 1982, p. 256). This is to say, at the onset of organizational
participation or entry, individuals begin to be “socialized” into that particular
organizational setting. They come to understand organizational procedures and processes,
both formal and informal, or simply “how things are done around here.” More
specifically, socialization is “the process by which a person learns the values, norms, and
required behaviors which permit him or her to participate as a member of the
organization” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 67). Such a definition would suggest that these
“values, norms, and required behaviors” are key for an individual to become an active
participant in the organization. Without the knowledge of what is “normal,” acceptable,
or preferred, individual members may act in a way that does not align with organizational
standards or expectations. By engaging in the socialization process, members are able to
successfully gain and begin applying the knowledge necessary to doing work in their new
organizational setting. Lastly, socialization has been described as “the process of
‘learning the ropes,’ being indoctrinated and trained, and being taught what is important
in the organization” (Schein, 1968, p. 2). Once employees or organizational members
have reached an understanding of what is expected and what is accepted, they can then
begin to develop to their full potential as an organizational member. They align their
goals with company goals, encompass shared values, and begin to see themselves as part of the organization. In other words, they “identify” with the organization and its fellow members.

Socialization is typically studied according to three phases. These phases are anticipatory, encounter, and metamorphosis (Jablin, 1982). The exit phase is also sometimes considered an additional phase that is examined within some studies. The anticipatory phase of socialization includes aspects of the socialization process which occur before employment actually begins. This can include such things as job interviews, interactions during the application process, and employee orientations. The encounter phase envelops the aspects of socialization that occur once employment has actually begun. This may involve such things as work meetings, employee newsletters or e-mails, and communication with co-workers and supervisors. The metamorphosis phase centers around changes that an employee makes to themselves based on their experiences or an attempt to make change within the organization in which they work to better fit their own needs. An example could be striving for change in organizational policies like attendance or productivity standards. An employee may have perfect attendance and feel they should be rewarded for their dedication. As a result, they may propose a reward program to their supervisor to benefit themselves and others for their perfect attendance. On the other hand, an employee may feel that productivity standards are too high and unfair. They may talk to their supervisor in order to try and lower the standards so that work is easier to accomplish. If changes are not made by the supervisor to amend such policies, the employee is left with the decision to either maintain or modify their behavior to better suit their own needs. If productivity standards are not lowered, then maybe the employee
decides to work harder to achieve those goals set by the company. If perfect attendance is not rewarded, then maybe the employee will decide that they should start to use some of their sick days or paid time off. Both of these are good examples of metamorphosis socialization as they display an attempted and potentially successful effort for change in either their self or the company they work for to accommodate their own needs.

While the concept of socialization has been a widely researched phenomenon over the years, no formal theories have emerged from the research (Fisher, 1986; Wanous, 1992). The product of such work and time spent looking at socialization has, however, yielded many examples as frameworks for studying the socialization process (e.g., Falcione & Wilson, 1988; Lester, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These frameworks, or proposed ways of approaching research in regard to the socialization process, have included ideas such as new foci of research, more diverse contexts, and broader courses of action.

Many socialization studies have examined how the six tactics of socialization, as determined by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) have impacted role orientations. These six tactics include collective-individual, formal-informal, sequential-fixed, variable-random, serial-disjuncture, and investiture-divestiture. Collective-individual tactics relate to whether or not an organizational newcomer is socialized into the organization as an individual or along with other organizational newcomers. Formal tactics employ rules, norms, and structure to the process of socialization. More informal socialization deviates away from these rules and power structures and typically occurs in a more natural way. By this, it is meant that legalities do not govern these processes of socialization. Fellow employees describing to a newcomer what breaks are usually like or the quickest and
easiest way to perform a task are good examples of informal socialization tactics. Sequential tactics of socialization use specific steps or processes in socializing an organizational newcomer. Random socialization tactics do not have any type of specific steps or form. Variable-Random socialization tactics encompass having a set timetable for when socialization into the organization should be reached versus not having any sort of timeframe or deadlines established. Serial-Disjuncture tactics include allowing a newcomer to interact with a more seasoned employee and observe their behaviors in a role model like fashion, in contrast to turning an employee loose to develop their own working habits. Investiture-Divestiture socialization tactics refer to an organizational newcomer’s personal characteristics being accepted or rejected by the company in relation to their ability to adequately fill their position or role within the company. A company will either encourage them to use these traits or characteristics to be a good employee or to change those in some way in order to better fulfill their duties if those traits are seen to be in conflict with responsibilities of the job. Overall, the results from various studies and explorations of socialization have been conclusive with one another, and new areas of socialization are being explored, such as labor union socialization (e.g., Fullager, McCoy & Shull, 2006; Fuller & Hester, 1996; Roth, 1997), self-managing behaviors (control, criticism, and goals) (e.g., Allen, McManus & Russell, 1999; Cohen, 1993; Saks & Ashforth, 1997) and the process of how socialization tactics affect newcomers’ adjustment to an organizational setting (e.g., Ashforth, Saks & Lee, 1998; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Saks, Uggerslev & Fassina, 2007).

Socialization has been studied in various contexts, each context allowing for new insight into the factors that affect organizational socialization processes and their shaping
of new members. Ashforth, Sluss, and Saks (2007) conducted a study that examined how socialization processes (socialization tactics and proactive behavior) jointly affected socialization content (i.e., what newcomers learn) and adjustment. This was a quantitative study that demonstrated a relationship between socialization practices of employers and the behaviors of socialized employees to newcomers learning abilities. Findings also showed that the socialization processes in place caused newcomers to use various forms of adjustment and the socialization processes of adjustment affected control mechanisms that were in place for newcomer learning. These findings suggest that how newcomers are socialized has substantive and symbolic value over and above what they actually learn.

Socialization research is concerned not only with how and what newcomers learn, but also from whom they learn. For example, Filstad (2004) examined how newcomers use colleagues as role models in organizational socialization. The most important personal characteristics of newcomers during the socialization process that helped them adjust to their new work environments were found to be expectations, experience, self-confidence and competitive instinct. These characteristics were affected by early experience during the first six weeks in their new position. The findings also revealed a strong correlation between early experience and organizational socialization outcomes, such as the performance levels of employees being rated on a scale ranging from poor to great, as a reflection of how their personal characteristics affected their socialization into the organization and ability to perform their job. Newcomers relied on role models, and as a result of interaction and observation, they acquired different qualifications, or sets of prescribed behaviors, from several role models.
In relation to the current study, it is reasonable to conclude that, like organizational newcomers in more mainstream settings who used role models to become “socialized” into the organization, mission trip volunteers may also use role models within their volunteer teams/groups after which they model their own behaviors, match communication styles, and develop work habits. Such volunteer behaviors would likely result from observations and interactions which take place during the mission service trip.

**Phases of Socialization**

Now that several studies have been outlined, it is also important review the specific phases of socialization: anticipatory, encounter, and metamorphosis. The anticipatory phase involves the aspects of socialization prior to entering the organization. The encounter phase examines how employees are socialized once entering the organization. The metamorphosis stage relates to how organizational members either make changes to themselves or attempt to make change within the organization as a result of their experience.

Finally, the socialization process ends with the exit phase. This is when the organizational member leaves and moves on to other experiences. Jablin (1987) suggested that it is important to explore not only how organizational members change between roles, but also how members are affected after they have either been made to or voluntarily leave those organizational positions. Specifically, Jablin’s study focused on how people communicate during exit of the organization. Communication creates meaning not only for the member who is exiting, but also for those organizational members who will continue working within the organization after a member or members have left.
The phases of socialization have most often been studied in traditional organizational contexts, illuminating the experiences and processes of organizational newcomers. A group of mission trip volunteers is not necessarily an “organization” in the purest of forms, but nevertheless, it is a group of individuals uniting and organizing themselves together for a specific cause or goal. Volunteers are often individuals affiliated with the same or similar religious institutions and share a basic set of core values or beliefs which influence the decision to participate in a mission trip.

Cooren et al. (2012) conducted a valuable study addressing such issues. They noted that “Across disciplines, scholars of organizations increasingly assert that organizations are constituted in and through human communication, a perspective that has recently been coined the CCO approach” (p. 1149). This posits that communication “builds” or “constitutes” our social realities, including the construction of “organization.” The goals of their particular study were to “demonstrate the value of a communicative approach to studying organization and articulate the implications of distinctly communicative explanations of organizations” (p. 1150). Cooren and his colleagues open the door to conceiving of “organization” in ways beyond traditional approaches, concluding that organizational studies should “remain grounded in action or, more precisely, in communication (as the central social practice)” (p.1159). Consequently, traditional organizational concepts and theories, such as socialization, may be applied to less traditional forms of “organization,” given the constitutive nature of communication in the process of organizing. Comparisons can thus be made between the socialization process of organizational newcomers and mission trip volunteers, as the latter are also likely to cycle through similar phases of the socialization process.
In the context of the current study, the anticipatory socialization phase occurred before the trip as mission volunteers receive information to prepare them for their upcoming experiences. In a traditional organizational context, new hires may hear stories from current employees that shape their expectations of the workplace they are about to enter. In comparison, mission trip volunteers may hear stories from veteran volunteers before they embark upon their own trip. Based upon the accounts they hear from others, volunteers may draw assumptions and conclusions as to what their volunteering experience will be like. Organizational newcomers may also seek information about the culture of their new workplace. Similarly, particularly for international trips, mission volunteers may learn about cultural rules and norms of their destination in order to have better communication with the locals.

Mission trip volunteers are also going to experience what scholars have labeled the encounter phase of socialization. For a new employee, the encounter phase begins when s/he enters the organization, begins work, and interacts in the new setting. For mission volunteers, the encounter phase is the actual volunteering experience itself. It encompasses adapting to the various challenges and tasks the trip presents while working to accomplish the goals of the trip’s purpose. During this phase of socialization, mission trip volunteers may have experiences that reinforce their values and beliefs, which motivated them to become involved with volunteering in the first place. In contrast, they may find themselves in conflictual situations, which do not meet their expectations or align with their beliefs.

The third phase of socialization is the metamorphosis phase. It involves members either making a change to themselves based upon their experience or attempting to make
a change within the organization. Because many volunteer mission trips are short-lived, the metamorphosis phase may actually occur after the trip is finished. Perhaps the most interesting communication takes place after mission trip volunteers have ended their service on volunteer trips. At this point in the socialization process, members would have already formed their impressions of the experience and reflected upon their pre-trip assumptions and expectations. Upon their return, volunteers may determine the extent to which their own values need re-assessment after their service or if some other form of change needs to take place within their lives. They may also bring their service experiences back to their organization (church) to adopt as a larger practice. In essence, this is the portion of the mission volunteer experience where they can see how well their preconceived notions of the trip align (or not) with their service practices and determine if personal or organizational changes need to be made.

Exiting the organization is considered the last phase of socialization (Jablin, 1987). Mission trip volunteers, of course, do not typically exit the church as an organization; however, they do exit that particular organized group of volunteers as their experience on a specific mission trip is completed. They also exit the foreign culture in which they immersed themselves, if only for a short period of time. The mission volunteer may, however, not completely exit. Despite their volunteer group disbanding and their returning home, they may continue their mission volunteer role by participating in local projects, domestic affairs, or other international opportunities that arise in the future. In extant literature, the primary focus in this area is on employees who have either quit their jobs or been fired from them. In the current study, a different approach must be made to considering the exit phase of a mission trip volunteer. The question could
actually be posed, “Is there a true exiting phase?” Many mission trip volunteers are not one-time volunteers. They typically participate in several trips over the course of several years. While they leave one specific trip and over time, transition to another, the exit phase is really quite different than that of an employee in a typical organizational setting.

**Role Taking and Role Making**

During the process of socialization, newcomers will be immersed in trying to discern their place and role in their new organization. On one hand, they will experience role-taking, which is “the sampling phase wherein the superior attempts to discover the relevant talents and motivations of the member through iterative testing sequences” (Graen & Scandura, 1987, p. 180). In other words, new organizational members simply take the roles given to them, and supervisors observe and evaluate how s/he can best contribute to the organization.

On the other hand, organizational newcomers will also be faced with role-making. As newcomers begin to negotiate their roles with supervisors, “each party must see the other party as valuable and each party must see the exchange as reasonably equitable or fair” (Graen & Scandura, 1987, p. 182). Differences, suggestions, and new ideas are seen as helpful, and newcomers work with leaders to shape a new role to accomplish organizational tasks and goals.

In the mission trip context, volunteers may also take and make particular roles. While the ultimate goal of mission trips is typically to spread the Gospel, this is usually done through building relationships with the native people during the completion of some type of project or service. Mission trip volunteers may be given a particular role in the completion of that project or act of service. For example, some volunteers may take on
the role of a teacher or mother-figure while working with children in schools or orphanages, while others take on the role of doctor or nurse in a medical clinic, or a painter or worker on construction projects. During the trip, however, volunteers may see opportunities to adapt their roles or create new ones as they respond to their surroundings and interact with locals. Newcomers to an organization also undergo role-routinization in which “the sampling of the role-taking phase and the negotiation of the role-making phase have led to an established relationship between supervisor and subordinate” (Miller, 2006, p. 159). During this process, the level of trust and support found in the member-supervisor relationship will determine if newcomers are in the “in-group” or “out-group” (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989).

For mission volunteers, the trip leader is, in essence, their “supervisor,” and they, too, may experience different types of relationships with him/her. Volunteers who work more closely with the trip coordinator(s) may feel more “in the loop” on things than those who do not work as closely with trip leaders. Trip coordinators do a lot of communicating with the native people and the contact persons who arrange the international logistics of the trip. Those mission trip volunteers who do not work or socialize as much with trip coordinators may feel more left out, perceiving themselves as the “out-group,” because they are not in positions to gain as much information.

**Information Seeking**

Throughout the socialization process, newcomers learn and process information that helps them understand their new role. It is not usual for individuals to gather information during the anticipatory phase of socialization as they begin to form expectations of what it would be like to be a member of that organization. The job
interview, in particular, can provide important information, such as a realistic job preview (RJP) that shapes the expectations of interviewees (Wanous, 1992).

Other information seeking tactics, as outlined by Miller and Jablin (1991), occur primarily in the encounter phase. Organizational newcomers will often seek information by asking overt questions, asking indirect questions, using third parties as an information source, testing their limits, engaging in disguised conversations, observation, and surveillance. Organizational stories are a critical part of the socialization process. The stories told by those who are already part of an organization often “communicate a great deal more about organizational culture than training manuals ever can” (Keyton, 2006, p. 151). Stories may shape employees’ behaviors and actions. They inform new employees on how to perform their job and set the bar for employers’ expectations. Consequently, memorable messages are embedded firmly within the socialization process and play a huge role in how organizational members learn to function within their organizational roles. Mission trip volunteers are likely to have each received memorable messages related to what they should do, how they should think, and even how they may feel during their volunteer experiences. It would be interesting to see what, if any, messages surface as being memorable for participants in an atypical organizational setting, such as that of the mission trip volunteer.

While mission volunteers do not have the formal interview process, per se, they may engage in similar information seeking behaviors to gain information about their upcoming experience, particularly if they have never been a mission trip volunteer before or if they are travelling to a destination that is unknown to them. Current mission volunteers may use fellow or previous volunteers, pastors, friends, or family members as
sources of information related to their volunteer service, the roles they are expected to fulfill, and other necessary information.

After a review of the literature related to socialization and its phases, information seeking tactics, the processes of role development, and the role that storytelling plays within organizational member socialization, the following research questions have been developed:

RQ1: What kinds of stories do mission trip volunteers hear prior to their mission trips?

RQ2: How, if at all, do mission-related stories influence mission volunteers’ decisions to go on a mission trip?

Identity Construction

As socialization allows organizational members to learn the rules and norms of their working environment, understand the function of their roles within the organization, and negotiate those roles along with other members, it also gives them an idea of who they are within the company. Cheney (1983) explored how organizational members identify with their employers, but before organizational identification can be understood, we must first begin to see how identity is constructed on an individual level through social means and processes.

Identity is thought to be the sense of ourselves that we gain through interaction with others (Mead, 1970). This means that our interpersonal relationships with others help to influence and shape the way that not only we see ourselves, but how we project ourselves to others and the interpretation of meaning that they take away from those interactions. Much work has been done to attribute the amount that these interpersonal
social relations contribute to our collective social identities according to the work of Weber (1947) and others. Scholars such as these examined the shared values and characteristics to which those of particular groups and/or social classes united themselves together upon and as a result, how those similarities and shared beliefs affected their group identity.

These collective identities could be based on any number of elements such as race, gender, religion, education level, economic status, among others. Based upon the degree of similarity an individual shares with others within and across these various areas, they may find themselves having to “shift” among various roles and “selves” depending upon the context in which they find themselves surrounded. Waters (1990) conducted a study on persons of multiple ethnicities. She explored how their identity in relation to their national heritage and place of origin shifted depending upon the context they found themselves in. She found that ethnicity was a concept that individuals either chose to accept, reject, or place special emphasis upon based upon their circumstances. This acceptance, rejection, or emphasizing was driven by a “need for community,” or to find a sense of belonging among a particular group of people.

Since identity and the construction of it are strongly embedded in and through communication, it can be applied to many different situations. Because of this, we can apply identity construction to the mission trip volunteer context and examine the specific factors that contribute to the construction of their identities within their role as a volunteer doing mission work. The current study seeks to discover these relevant constructs of identity as well as the extent to which identities may shift depending upon the various roles that a mission trip volunteer enacts during their time of service.
Ochs (1993) described our social identities as “a crucial dimension of the social meaning of particular linguistic constructions.” (p. 288). Through this statement, he notes the power that language has in the construction of one’s identity. As previously discussed, we know that socialization and the language used in that process is influential in how organizational newcomers find their “selves” in the function of the organization and in future sections, we will see how constructs of language, such as narratives are used to make sense of our experiences.

Horrocks and Callahan (2006) actually began to delve into the ways in which narrative and emotion are used to construct identity. The following quote best illustrates the approach they take in their study and accurately reflects the ways in which expression of emotion through storytelling will be examined within the current study:

The process of creating a sense of identity through storytelling allows us to participate in interpersonal relationships, while constructing and sustaining a satisfying self-concept…This research study uses both oral and written narratives, full of emotion, as a means to uncover identity development. By researching both dimensions of narrative, this study reveals not only the tensions that exist between expressing our emotions and maintaining an acceptable image within organizations, but also shows the reality between how we see ourselves and how we want others to see us. (p. 69)

Horrocks and Callahan also discussed the gap in extant literature surrounding an explanation for the relationship between self-perspective and identity enactment. The current study may help to place links within such gaps due to the fact that the roles in
which mission trip volunteers enact will be examined. Findings from the current study can then be used to compare and contrast to existing studies that may be similar and the extent to which they could be cross-applied to various situations can be determined.

Gilbert (2002) mentioned how our perceptions of reality from our life experiences serve as guides for our narrative constructions. He believed that we use these narratives as ways to see the world in which we live and ourselves at work within our world. Applying such a concept and way of thinking to the mission trip volunteer context would prove most interesting because we can see the perception mission trip volunteers have of their own work and the various identities that may be constructed as a result of their experiences through the stories they have heard prior to going on their trips, as well as, the stories they choose to relay to others once returning home from their service.

In other words, as newcomers are socialized into the organizational setting, they become well aware of their position within the company and begin to assume an organizational identity. This identity can include the tasks they are to perform on a daily basis, how they are seen by their co-workers and managers, or how they see themselves as a part of the organization. Based upon the expectations the employer has for an employee, as well as the expectations one sets for their self, this will determine the amount and quality of work that they do. They may be required to perform the same tasks day in and day out, or they may be required to have a great degree of flexibility, being able to perform multiple tasks from day to day or even simultaneously. All of these factors contribute to one’s identity within an organization and how they are constructed.

As an organizational member, one is expected to carry out specific duties or tasks in order to fulfill their job requirements. The roles that are enacted to complete these
duties are important to our identity. Callero (1985) studied role identity and how it affects one’s self-concept. Findings from the study showed that these role identities influenced our perceptions and interactions with others, as well as the way that we form our own self-image. Similarly, Charng, Piliavin, and Callero (1988) looked at the relationship between role identity and its relationship to repeated behaviors. Findings strongly indicated that role identity is positively related to repetition of behaviors.

Burke and Reitzes (1981) also explored the concept of role identity. They guided their study under the assumption that identification with certain roles would align itself with acting out behaviors that were consistent with those role identifications. Findings confirmed this assumption. The conclusion can be drawn from this and other studies, that the roles we take on and identify with, mirror an internalization of specific values or characteristics that are important to one’s personal identity.

Cheney (1983), building on Burke’s work, stated that our identities are “vital because they grant us personal meaning” (p. 145). Therefore, we assign names and labels to our identities. Therefore, when speaking of mission trip volunteers, we see how they may begin their identification process by mission volunteers recognizing the wide gap between their lifestyles and those of citizens in third world countries. The poverty, disease, and poor living conditions that these individuals face are quite different than that which even the poorest U.S. citizens experience. As Christians, they may identify with the values of that religion such as helping others, serving the poor, caring for the sick, etc. So because they have recognized these societal differences and they share a high level of identification with the values of their religion, it is likely that they feel compelled to act on these values and put them into practice by travelling abroad to share these values with
others through this care, support, and compassion for meeting their needs. This type of service put into action allows mission trip volunteers to grant themselves this “personal meaning” of which Cheney (1983) spoke.

Some mission trip volunteers may even find that they embrace multiple identities. For example, some mission trip volunteers may hold a profession in the medical field. They may be doctors, nurses, dentists, optometrists, etc. While these titles may describe their working life, they may also identify with a particular religious affiliation. They could be Christian, Protestant, Catholic, and even more specifically, they could be Baptists, Mormons, Pentecostals, Methodists, etc. Aside from both working a spiritual life, mission trip volunteers may be married and have children. This adds another identity into the equation. While serving, mission trip volunteers may find themselves wearing different hats at different times. In certain situations they may view things more from the lens of a parent, rather than a doctor or nurse. At other times, the opposite may be true. While most mission trip volunteers do tend to embrace the identity of a Christian and view the entirety of their service from that perspective, they may find themselves in situations where they have to try and see things from the lens of a non-Christian to better understand the choices some of the people they are helping have made. American mission trip volunteers may also have to learn to shift their cultural perspective to understand and appreciate differences between their lifestyle and that of those they are helping. In summary, it is probable that mission trip volunteers will enact multiple identities related to their Christian, professional, and personal identity constructs. The roles they enact will likely be dependent upon the particular context they are in and the people they are interacting with at a given time.
Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that “social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons” (p. 20) and “stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation” (p. 20). Furthermore, the authors claimed that “social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification” (p. 20). They apply this perspective to socialization within organizations, conflict regarding roles, and relationships between intergroup members by looking at role expectations and behavioral norms, how organizational members respond when role expectations conflict with identity, and the differences of intergroup and outgroup members.

The Ashforth and Mael (1989) study will be useful in comparing to the current study in noting how, if at all, these elements of their arguments, such as identity, perception, and outcomes, emerge in mission trip volunteers since they are not the typical organizational members. Since socialization processes are likely still present within the experiences of mission trip volunteers, it is also probable that they will enact specific role identities within their volunteer groups, and will form relationships with those with whom they travel. Because of the connection between these things, results would likely be similar and therefore, applicable to the findings of the current study. Comparisons can be made to see if any outlying results appear and possible explanations for such differences, if they do occur.
Kuhn and Nelson (2002) examined multiple identities and sought to investigate how organizational members identify with multiple social groups and the ways in which their identification contributed to their collective identity constructs. By developing a case study of an organization that was anticipating a planned change and by using a longitudinal and multi-method approach, findings determined that organizational members who played a key role in the networks of communication all had similar identifications related to four social groups. Other organizational members focused on different aspects of these identities. Members were also found to justify their behaviors during this planned change by using communicative resources by using structured interests and placing emphasis on collective identity. This study is useful to examine in relation to the current research because it calls attention to the possibility that mission trip volunteers could also assume multiple identities from their volunteer experiences. By seeing how one’s identity is constructed and enacted, a better sense can be made of how one sees themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Additionally, Jung and Hecht (2004) have also studied the concept of identity. They developed the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). This theory posits that identity is situated through four different frames: (a) personal, (b) relational, (c) enacted, and (d) communal. Personal identity refers to one’s self-concept or image. Relational identity occurs on four levels which include others’ view of one’s self, through relationships with others, through relationships to other self-identities, and finally, a relationship itself. Enacted identity is performed or expressed through communication and interaction with others. Communal identity is determined through collective group characteristics.
Jung and Hecht (2004) noted that their approach to identity was communicative, meaning that their focus was not only on how communication produces identity, but also how identity is communication. The way that we talk about ourselves to others, the way that we portray ourselves in that discourse, and our interactions with others that lead to the formation of perceptions, all contribute to our sense of identity. Thus, we act upon these identities through our communication and behavior. Rather than focus on the individual aspects of identity, this theory strived to demonstrate the sociality of identity formation and construction.

Hitlin (2003) argued that “values are a cohesive force within personal identity” (p. 118). He also proposes that “conceptualizing values as the core of one's personal identity leads toward understanding the cohesion experienced among one's various social identities” (p. 118). These assertions lead to the belief that an individual’s values contribute a great degree toward one’s identity and by looking at these values as a central element of identity, we can better understand the similarities among the multiple identities that an individual takes on within society.

Acquino and Reed (2002) looked at moral identity and the extent to which individuals share similar characteristics that are used to form their definitions of self. This study also proposed that like other types of identity, moral identity could be linked to specific attitudes, beliefs, and values. Findings from their study showed that moral identity was a key factor in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that one produces.

**Volunteer Identity**

Not only is it important to have a general understanding of how individuals construct their identity, but it is also necessary given the research context to look at how
volunteers construct and enact their identities. Coghlan (2005) found that many volunteer tourists were driven by a commitment to provide services that aid in some cause while escaping the routines of everyday life. She also noted that many volunteer tourists are motivated to volunteer their time and efforts in an attempt to enhance their self-development and relationships with others.

As Cooper and Tomazos (2011) stated, “Volunteer tourism in its many facets and forms claims to offer transformational experiences for the participants and valuable output and yield for the causes it serves” (p. 2). In other words, these researchers and many others believe that volunteers are seeking change within themselves and want to create positive change for the people and environment they are seeking to aid (e.g., Brown & Lehto, 2005; Coghlan, 2006; Tomazos & Butler, 2009; Wearing, 2001). In order for this to happen, volunteers must be acting on some sort of value system, either individual, institutional (church, work, etc.), or a combination of the two.

Adolescent Identity. Many middle and high school aged teenagers go on mission trips. Since this demographic composes a significant portion of mission trip volunteers, it is important to consider how they, specifically, construct their identities. McLean (2005), for example, examined the role of narratives as an element in adolescent identity construction. More specifically, she explored how adolescents construct identity narratives from self-defining memories, turning them into life stories, as well as how those memories were recounted. For later adolescents, the primary function for recounting personal identity narratives was entertainment, whereas younger adolescents’ function of narratives was an explanation of one’s self. Later adolescents were also more
likely to tell their stories to peers, in comparison to earlier adolescents who more frequently relayed the stories to parents.

Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004) examined a group of college students who were engaged in a service learning program. Eight students were observed and the study sought out how participation in a service learning program influenced their perception of social justice. Of particular relevance to this current study on mission trip volunteers, the motivations of these students to serve were also examined, which reflects a set of values. These motivations to serve were found to be topic interest, fulfillment of degree requirements, and convenience with schedule. Because of these findings, it can be assumed that students were driven to serve out of a meeting of needs for one’s self or an interest in serving others. This is indicative of individual versus collective value sets.

Identity construction is a multi-faceted concept. It requires consideration of one’s self-concept, the values and beliefs that one considers as truth, and the various characteristics and attributes that one enacts in the form of the various roles they perform. All of these factors shape the way that individual identities are constructed. Considering the mission trip volunteer context, the following research question has been developed to address the aforementioned issues:

RQ3: What identities do mission volunteers enact during a mission trip?

**Sensemaking**

Karl Weick and his studies of sensemaking within organizational contexts have provided much insight over the years into how organizational members explain and justify their actions. He discussed how each organization has a unique language and symbols that heavily influence sensemaking processes of organizational members.
Sensemaking is not a concept that is original to Weick, but has been explored by many other scholars across various disciplines. However, Weick was one of the first to apply the notion of sensemaking to the Communication discipline and even more specifically, to organizations. Waterman (1990) said that sensemaking “structures the unknown” (p. 41). To put it another way, individuals recount various events, people, places, and things in order to follow the process by which they reached a certain decision or course of action. Scholars who study the concept of sensemaking are interested in how constructions are made by individuals, for what reasons, and what the outcomes are for the actions which took place. Louis (1980) viewed sensemaking as a retrospective act. Weick has also followed that same notion. Louis stated,

Sensemaking can be viewed as a recurring cycle comprised of a sequence of events occurring over time. The cycle begins as individuals form unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events….Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed….It is crucial to note that meaning is assigned to surprise as an output of the sensemaking process, rather than arising concurrently with the perception or detection of differences. (p. 241)

More simply put, when expectations are not met for whatever unforeseen reasons, and people are faced with a choice of how to respond to those unforeseen events, they will act and then later rationalize why they acted the way that they did.

Weick (1995) outlined seven aspects of the sensemaking process. To begin, Weick adopted some of the premises grounded in the identity construction work of Mead.
He notes that a “sensemaker is singular and no individual ever acts like a single sensemaker” (p. 18). Weick also went on to say, “Identities are constituted out of the process of interaction. To shift among interactions is to shift among definitions of self. Thus the sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate” (p. 20). To apply this premise to the current study of mission trip volunteers, it is probable that mission trip volunteers will construct their identity from interaction with others. These others could be fellow volunteers, the foreigners whom they are helping, or their friends and family whom they tell of their experiences after returning home. The audience with whom the sensemaker is speaking or interacting will determine the self they present at that particular time.

As previously noted, sensemaking has been widely viewed as a retrospective act. This is the second aspect of sensemaking. Depending upon which identity that one chooses to present, they can recount a “meaningful lived experience” (Schutz, 1967, p. 45). This implies that the telling of such events occurs after the fact that they have already occurred. Therefore, meaning can be assigned only after the action has taken place. For mission trip volunteers, their acts of service may become increasingly meaningful after they return home and have the opportunity to reflect on their interactions, experiences, and relationships. As they discuss their trip with others, in particular those who have not had the experience of being a mission trip volunteer, they may feel the need to explain or justify their decisions or behaviors. In short, as volunteers continue to recount and retell their experiences, they will make sense of their experience in meaningful ways.
The third aspect of sensemaking is enactment. Enactment addresses the fact that organizational members are often productive of part of, if not all of, the environment in which they are faced. Once action has taken place, they are then faced with certain obstacles or opportunities as a result. In this sense, they have created the environment in which they are placed. Mission trip volunteers then could also be considered to be active producers of the environment in which they are placed. They will act in certain ways and make specific decisions which will in turn create for them a situation or environment. Again, they will act and be faced with a different environment. In essence, enactment explores the sensemaker as an active participant in environmental creation.

Fourth is the aspect of sociality. Sensemaking does not simply occur as an individual, cognitive act. Rather, it is also evolved from “a network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interaction” (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 60). This social interaction can also be through the notion of symbolic interaction as proposed by Blumer (1969). Weick (1995) also discussed how even what one processes internally is based upon others’ ideas and perceptions of oneself. The process of socialization has been one widely explored context in which sensemaking has been addressed. Various studies have been employed to determine the extent to which organizational newcomers have necessity to learn interpretation and expression of themselves in a way the pre-existing organizational members will recognize and appreciate. One of the primary aims of the current study on mission trip volunteers is to look at how these sorts of sensemaking emerge in both conversations with fellow mission trip volunteers and others with whom mission trip volunteers communicate after returning home from their service trips.
The fifth aspect of sensemaking is that it is an ongoing process. Weick (1995) drew from open systems theorists such as Katz and Kahn, mentioning that individuals are always in the midst of things and only realize their existence in such a midst when they have focused on preceding events from some futuristic point. Burrell and Morgan (1979) further extended this premise by stating that “there are no absolute starting points, no self-evident, self-contained, certainties on which we can build, because we always find ourselves in the middle of complex situations which we try to disentangle by making, then revising, provisional assumptions” (p. 237). Mission trip volunteers likely find themselves in pre-existing, ongoing situations, which they try to make sense of after reflecting upon their actions in such situations. Likely after they have left their service destination, they may be able to recount certain things about their experience. As time progresses, they may also progress in their sensemaking of actions taken during their time of service.

The sixth aspect of sensemaking relates to extracted cues. Weick (1995) argued that sensemakers are more likely to focus on the final product of their action versus the process which led them to that decision upon that particular course of action. He says that to compensate for such a focus “we need to watch how people deal with prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events. We also need to pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract” (p. 49). In terms of mission trip volunteers, the current study should seek to examine what cues that mission trip volunteers seek to extract and implement into their discourse in relation to their experiences. Not only should the
current study seek to examine what those cues are, but how they are presented and given meaning or made sense of.

Lastly, the seventh and final aspect of sensemaking that scholars typically consider is plausibility. This is the idea that when individuals go about making sense of their experiences, it does not necessarily have to be exact, but it should be accurate enough that it fits the presented facts of the situation and is complete enough that sense can be made. In other words, the account which individuals give of their experiences needs to be coherent and delivered in a way that seems as if it were probable to occur in the way it is being told.

Much of sensemaking relates to not only how individuals internally process and make sense of their actions, but also in how those actions are explained to others. Keeping that in mind, the following research question was developed for the current study in regards to mission trip volunteers:

RQ4: How do mission volunteers make sense of their experiences after returning from a mission trip?

As can be seen after a thorough review of the literature, socialization, identity construction, and sensemaking are all organizational concepts that have not yet been, but can be applicable to the mission trip volunteer context. By implementing these three processes into an atypical organizational context, rich insights can be gained as to the role in which each of these processes play out in the lives of mission trip volunteers. No known studies have been made using these three processes in a mission trip volunteer context, making this study a pioneer and hopefully a foundation upon which other scholars interested in such areas can build their own work.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This research project employed a case study approach and ethnographic methods to explore the socialization, identity, and sensemaking of mission volunteers. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world...They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (p. 3). To apply this statement to the given research context, qualitative methods were selected for this study to allow for the “interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” that Denzin and Lincoln described (p. 3). Qualitative inquiry allowed thoughtful reflection for participants, meaningful interpretation of participant responses by the researcher, and in-depth participant observations to be made as the researcher worked alongside participants, also as a mission volunteer.

Process

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, subjects were recruited from a convenience sample of two volunteer mission groups of which the researcher was also a member. An e-mail message was sent to all members of each group to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Approximately 36 individuals were contacted regarding this project. The general purpose of the project was explained and the method of data collection described. If interested in participating, potential participants were asked to reply to the message with their name, age, and most convenient time for interviews. A copy of the informed consent document used in the recruitment process can be found in Appendix A.
Research Context and Participants

This study focused on mission trip volunteers, specifically those attending two separate week-long trips each to Heredia, Costa Rica and Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Some of these participants had been on foreign mission trips before, while for others, this was their first time travelling out of the country to serve.

Heredia, Costa Rica

Located about 30 miles northeast of the capitol city of San Jose, Heredia, Costa Rica is home to one of the largest universities in the country. This makes the city home to many international students. The Spanish-speaking natives were warm and hospitable, anxious to learn about American culture and values. This mission volunteer group was comprised of 13 teenagers and 5 adults. Group members led crafts, recreation, music, and other activities in a local school of approximately 100 preschool and elementary students. These participants also assisted with some lightweight construction, such as pouring a concrete floor for one of the local churches.

Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Home to almost 900,000 people, Port-au-Prince, Haiti is located in the Caribbean. The Haitians are a blend of French and African cultures and speak a blended language called Creole. The mission volunteer group on this trip was comprised of 16 adults and 2 minors. Participants assisted in a medical clinic which provided chiropractic and general medical care. Participants were also involved in facilitating children’s activities in a vacation bible school type setting. A lot of work was also done in an orphanage, which is funded by several of the churches whose members volunteered on this trip.
Of the 36 mission volunteers, 34 of them agreed to participate in this study. The only criterion that participants must have met for inclusion in the study was to be a mission volunteer on one of the two trips to Costa Rica or Haiti. Participants from both groups ranged from 13-60 with a median age of 37. The 34 participants were all subject to observation during the service trip.

Six participants from each group also participated in pre- and post-trip interviews. All but two were able to complete interviews both before and after the trip, making a total of 14 interview participants, including 4 males and 10 females. All participants were Caucasian. In addition, 24 volunteers participated in the journaling process.

Data Collection

Data were collected using three different methods: pre-and post-trip individual interviews, journaling, and participant observation.

Interviews

Kvale (1996) defined interviews as “an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data” (p. 14). Furthermore, Kajorboon (2005) asserted that semi-structured formats for interviews allow the researcher to “prompt and probe deeper into the given situation” and to “explain or rephrase the questions if respondents are unclear about the questions” (p. 6). For these reasons, semi-structured interviews were selected as one of the data collection methods for this study.

Semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions, as well as a few demographic questions such as age. The semi-structured format allowed a deeper level
of preparedness and competence on the part of the researcher, greater freedom of expression for participants, and was productive of qualitative data that was reliable and comparable, according to Cohen and Crabtree (2006).

Interviews were conducted face to face at a time and location that were convenient for the participants. This location was typically in the designated group meeting locations where mission volunteers met with trip leaders for training. Interview lengths ranged from 6 minutes and 30 seconds to 20 minutes and 20 seconds. The average interview length was 13 minutes and 25 seconds.

All participant responses were audio recorded. After the completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, assigning pseudonyms to each participant in order to ensure and maintain confidentiality. Transcriptions of the interviews ranged from 2 to 8 pages and yielded 96 total pages of double-spaced text.

Pre-trip interview questions asked participants about the types of stories they had heard prior to going on their trip and how hearing mission-related stories may have influenced their decision to go on a mission trip. For example, “Tell me about how you first got interested in going on mission trips?”, “What, if any, stories have you heard others tell about their mission trip volunteer experiences?”, and “How, if at all, do those stories affect your perception of what the trip will be like?”

Post-trip interview questions were asked in relation to how mission volunteers talked about and made sense of their experiences after completing their service, including how they talked to others about their experiences after returning from their mission trip. For example, “How often do you share stories about your mission trip experiences?”, “To what extent do you tell different stories to different people?”, and “What stories would be
important for others to know who might go on these types of mission trips?” For a complete interview protocol of both pre and post-trip interview questions, please refer to Appendix B.

**Journals**

Although individual interviews were conducted with only some of the mission volunteers, all were asked to keep a journal for the duration of their mission volunteer trips. Participant journaling was selected as a data collection method because journal writing is a way of gaining feedback from the self and experiencing our lives in a way that provides meaning through reflection (Progoff, 1992).

Each journal contained guiding questions, and participants were asked to respond with their thoughts and opinions related to each question or prompt. Questions asked about participants’ roles on the trip, any conflict of roles, communication of beliefs/values, and any changes they may have faced in adjusting to a different culture. A selection of questions from the pre-trip interviews was also included in the journals for participants who were not interviewed prior to the trip. Following each trip, journals were collected by the researcher and typed verbatim. Twenty-four of the 34 total participants completed journals. Their responses yielded 55 pages of typed, double-spaced text.

**Participant Observation**

Finally, data were collected by participant observation. Participant observation, while time consuming, enables researchers to uncover much more in-depth information about the participants and context in which they are situated. Although the situation or context being observed may be very specific and ungeneralizable to other groups of people, the richness and level of insight into a particular group is unmatched by other
data collection methods. Individual case studies provide a naturalistic approach to research participant (Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2005), even more so in this study where the researcher was well integrated into each mission volunteer group.

During the mission trips, I participated in various activities along with participants. Some of these activities included working with youth, conducting vacation bible school activities at a local school, pouring a concrete floor for a local church, and doing door-to-door evangelism and prayer walking. Although participants were aware of the research goals, they did not appear to change their behavior. I was recognized as a group member rather than an outsider collecting data. Strong bonds had already been formed with participants prior to going on the trip through a series of informative meetings and trainings, as well as the participant interviews which had been conducted with several of the mission trip volunteers. Participants were very open in their discussions with me, sharing many thoughts and feelings on happenings of the trip and how they were affected by the experiences they encountered while volunteering. During the two trips, I logged approximately 112 hours of participant observation.

Following volunteer activities, I recorded field notes detailing participants’ feelings after encountering the local people, how they discussed those encounters with others, and what different roles/identities appeared to be assumed by participants throughout the various activities in which they were engaged. Field notes are important because “Taking field notes (or otherwise documenting observation) is at the very core of ethnographic research” (Tjora, 2006, p. 429). This is because field notes “are capable of quickly grasping important aspects of observed interaction” (Tjora, 2006, p. 429). After each trip, field notes were typed verbatim and yielded 20 pages of double-spaced text.
Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews and typing journal responses and field notes, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Open, axial, and selective coding methods as discussed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) were used. Thorough analysis was conducted until no new codes emerged. There were a total of 310 individual codes that emerged from the data. These codes were then placed into a master code list. A codebook was created to track the locations and quantities of each code within the transcripts.

After open coding was completed, similar codes were placed into larger categories so that the analysis was continued in an organized fashion. As like codes were grouped together, 24 categories were created. After all codes had been classified into categories, two rounds of axial coding were conducted in which like categories were grouped together and examined (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through an iterative process of working back and forth between the categories and the data, six overarching themes emerged to address the research questions of interest. After the themes had been identified, the data were reexamined for any outliers that might not fit within a theme. Finally, data clips were chosen that best reflected each theme.

These methods were based upon the suggestion of Strauss and Corbin (1998) who stated that analyzing by theme is a “process for encoding qualitative information” (p. 6). This type of analysis allows relevant themes to emerge from the data. These themes can then be re-applied to the data to gain a better understanding of their meaning within the given original context. This type of “constant comparative” method as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) is used to associate and differentiate among the themes, which should be monitored and revised continually to
differentiate the categorical and thematic groupings one from another. Following Owen (1984), repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness were used to determine the constitution of a theme within the data. Each theme was also supported by at least half of the participants.

A variety of verification procedures were used to ensure rigor in the analytic process and to establish trustworthiness in the interpretations of the data. First, peer examination as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was used to probe for potential biases of the researcher, uncover meaning within the data, and develop a better understanding for how the data were coded and analyzed. Three different peers examined my interpretations. Two were fellow Communication students seeking their Master’s degree and who were also in the process of writing their theses. The third student was an international Communication Master’s student from Vietnam. These peers provided feedback that stated this research study demonstrated appropriate research methods, rigorous efforts, and findings that seemed well explained by the discussion. Peer evaluation attestation forms can be viewed in Appendix C.

Second, I used member checking also as prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These scholars credit member checking as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). By conducting member checks, the researcher allows participants to review the transcripts and interpretations of the data and either confirm or disconfirm their validity based upon their own personal accounts or those of other participants.

In this case, member checks were conducted at two different points, once after the findings section was completed and a second time after the discussion section was completed. These two points were chosen as the best time for member checks I wanted to
ensure accuracy of the reported findings and also provide plausible interpretations of the participants’ responses. Three members from each volunteer group participated in the checks, totaling six participants from the research sample. These same 6 participants completed both checks. They provided feedback which was conclusive in saying that the findings were accurate representations of their experiences and the discussion provided explanation for the findings that coincided with their own. Member check attestations can be found in Appendix D.

Finally, thick, rich, descriptions were used to create “deep, dense, detailed accounts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Such accounts of participants’ experiences help to bring reality to readers by allowing them to gain a closer look at thought processes and actions of participants and make personal evaluations of how they may have responded in the same or similar circumstances. This is closely related to the concepts of narrative coherence and fidelity as proposed by Fisher (1985) which stated, “In any event, it is precisely in this sort of situation that narrative rationality is relevant as a system for determining whether or not one should accept a story, whether or not a story is indeed trustworthy and reliable as a guide to belief and action” (p. 349). In other words, thick description allows readers to evaluate the findings and interpretations themselves to determine plausibility and coherence.

Verifying the data in these ways helped establish a higher level of credibility for the research design, methods, and analysis. Together, peer examination, member checking, and thick description offers support for the findings and interpretations of the study. This higher level of credibility and trustworthiness may not have been reached without employing such verification methods.
Role of the Researcher

In this case, the role of the researcher reflected the role and experiences of participants, in that all activities that participants were involved with during the trip, I also took part in. Because I had direct personal experience with being a mission trip volunteer, I am able to report the findings from this study from a different perspective than would other researchers who choose not to engage as deeply within their projects or may not have the opportunity to immerse themselves into the research context as a participant observer. Having shared their same experiences and observed their interactions firsthand, I was able to construct better questions and understand participants’ responses on a deeper, more personal level.

A participant observer is defined as follows:

Conscious and systematic sharing, in so far as circumstances permit, in the life-activities and, on occasion, in the interests and affects of a group of persons. Its purpose is to obtain data about behavior through direct contact and in terms of specific situations in which the distortion that results from the investigator's being an out- side agent is reduced to a minimum. (Kluckhohn, 1940, p. 331)

Being a participant observer as well as being in the researcher role undoubtedly increased the richness and depth of the information reported in the findings of the study. However, it should be noted that biases were also increased. I not only had to interpret the thoughts and responses of others, but also had to sort through my own assumptions and experiences from both mission trips where I served as a volunteer. I recognize that while having the potential to be biased towards my own opinions and experiences, it is important to provide a fair representation of all findings that emerged from the data,
rather than the single perspective that I may have to offer (Moustakas, 1994). This is why the aforementioned verification procedures were employed, to ensure that my interpretations were constructed in a way that accurately reflects participants’ experiences and not just my own.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter discloses the themes, subthemes, and data clips that illuminate the voices of participants. During analysis of the data, six themes emerged: (a) service as stories, (b) lessons learned, (c) enacting a Christian identity, (d) wearing multiple hats, (e) negotiation of American cultural identity, and (f) making good for good. The themes and subthemes were developed with the minimum requirement of half of the participants making reference to the particular subject matter. Theme one addresses research question one; theme two addresses research question two; themes three, four, and five address research question three; and theme six addresses research question four (see Table 1 for summary of themes and subthemes). The following sections detail the themes and subthemes discovered through the analysis with specific quotations from the participants to support the findings.
Table 1 *Summary of themes and subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQs</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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| What kinds of stories do mission trip volunteers hear prior to their mission trips? | 1. Service as Stories | 1. Positive Stories  
2. Negative Stories |
| How, if at all, do mission-related stories influence mission volunteers’ decisions to go on a mission trip? | 2. Lessons Learned | 1. Mental Preparedness  
2. Physical Preparedness  
3. Spiritual Preparedness |
| What identities do mission volunteers enact during a mission trip? | 3. Enacting a Christian Identity  
4. Wearing Multiple Hats  
5. Negotiation of American Cultural Identity | 1. Messenger of God  
2. Construction Worker  
3. Mother-Figure |
| How do mission volunteers make sense of their experiences after returning from a mission trip? | 6. Making Good For Good | |

**Pre-trip Stories from Past Mission Volunteers**

The first research question inquired about the kinds of stories that participants heard from others prior to embarking on their mission trips. All 24 participants described hearing some sort of mission-related stories prior to leaving on their trips. In all cases, these stories were from other mission trip volunteers, either family members and/or church friends, and were both positive and negative in nature.
Service as Stories

The theme of *service as stories* suggests that past mission trip volunteers freely share stories about their service experiences with others and encompasses two different types of stories that participants heard, positive and negative. This theme includes the benefits and rewarding experiences of other mission trip volunteers. It also offers stories about some of the negative events that other mission trip volunteers had encountered.

**Positive stories.** All participants mentioned hearing some sort of positive stories related to other mission volunteers’ experiences. These stories often revolved around the relationships volunteers formed with the native people, strengthened bonds among fellow mission trip volunteers, and volunteers learning to be more thankful for the lifestyles they were able to embrace in the U.S. For instance, Stan reflected on hearing about the new appreciation for living in the U.S. that was attributed to the mission trip experience when he recalled, “In most all stories I have heard the people that have been before say that it is better to give than receive, to give God’s love and how much of a blessing it is.” Similarly, Regina said, “Hearing about other people’s journeys to other parts of the world and hearing about the adjustments you have to make to different lifestyles just goes to show that if you pray to God, He will make your situation easier for you!”

In addition, Kaci remembered hearing a positive story that demonstrated the closeness that resulted among mission volunteers who served together on these types of trips by mentioning, “I was told how easy it was to come together and work together as a group. We would all have the passion to come closer as friends and grow with God as well.”
Several participants also discussed how they had heard about relationships formed with the native people they were serving. Sarah said, “The stories I heard were mostly from other mission volunteers who both visited children in Haiti. Their stories about the kids touched my heart and made me super excited to meet the kids here in Costa Rica.” Ella also claimed hearing accounts of bonding between mission trip volunteers and the people they encountered while serving when she stated, “My son telling me about the kids in Africa and my boss telling me about the orphans in Haiti who were all starving for attention and love made me want to come on this trip.” Similarly, Sarah revealed, “Everyone that I have talked to has said that their hearts were changed so much and that they became so attached to the people they encountered.” In other words, the experiences of others created a desire for mission trip newcomers to replicate those experiences for themselves. Especially in these instances where positive stories were shared by former mission trip volunteers, these participants had been left with the expectation that their experiences could or would be similar to those they had heard.

Adding to these statements, Betsy divulged that, “After hearing the stories from my church group on a Sunday morning, I remember being so amazed at how God worked and I was so happy that they got to bring joy to others. I wanted to go and do the same.” These statements from participants show just how important the stories they heard were in creating expectations for their own trips. Creating a deeper desire to serve and a fervor for building new relationships, the positive stories of mission trip volunteers who had formerly served on mission trips set the bar for these participants.
Stories are clearly a popular way of sharing the experiences of a mission trip with others. These participant quotations reflect just a small amount of the many stories they had been told which conveyed positive aspects of serving on a mission trip.

**Negative stories.** Along with positive stories, participants had also heard some stories that contained negative information. About half of the new volunteers were first time mission trip-goers. Therefore, in order for past mission trip volunteers who were telling these stories to paint a realistic picture for these current mission trip volunteers, some negative information was deemed necessary to relay. Some of these more negative stories included information about the poor living conditions in the trip destinations, the extreme heat, insect encounters, and difficulties related to travel such as delayed flights and lost luggage. For example, Deidre had heard some potential negatives, as she reflected:

I remember hearing other people who had gone on mission trips telling about how hot it was there [Haiti] and how much walking they had to do. Those are things that we really take for granted: something as simple as living in a temperate climate and being able to get in our cars and drive everywhere.

Clearly, Deidre felt very strongly that she would gain a new appreciation for the U.S. after experiencing what it is like to live in a difficult environment for a week based upon the stories she had heard from other mission trip volunteers. Stan, similarly revealed that “I learned that sometimes it’s not easy to follow God, but as a Christian we will receive our reward someday soon!” Likewise, Richard also admitted hearing about challenging aspects of Haiti, as he explained:
I heard about how it was so hot in Haiti and that transportation was not reliable at all. It is human nature to forget how lucky we are to just have basic necessities. Many Haitians lack basic needs. They [other mission trip volunteers] told me how fortunate we are in the U.S. to be so blessed.

Although Richard recalled hearing this negative story, he still found a way to be positive by noting how lucky Americans are to have these basic necessities that many Haitians do not.

Kent also recalled receiving similar information when he said “I heard about the heat and having to walk up the big hill every day to get to the orphanage and clinic. I wasn’t sure how I was going to be able to do it from the way things sounded, but I knew I would manage somehow.” Even still, the new volunteers were not discouraged.

These stories were not conveyed to display gloom and doom, but rather to give current mission trip volunteers a more realistic idea of what they would be getting into and possibly encountering themselves during their service. What participants gleaned from the stories is discussed in the following theme.

**Influence of Stories from Past Mission Volunteers**

Research question two explored the influence of mission-related stories on participants’ decisions to go on a mission trip. Participants agreed that the stories they heard did not influence their decision to go on a mission trip, as exemplified by Betsy, when she explained:

Most of the stories I heard were after I decided to go. I’m not sure it would have affected my decision anyway. I can’t base my decision completely on the
experiences of others. I’m so glad I went on this trip, regardless of what other people say.

In addition, Sarah noted, “Other people’s stories didn’t influence my decision to go on this trip, but they did make me more excited when I decided to go.” All participants, however, were quick to mention that stories they heard provided valuable and helpful information.

**Lessons Learned**

The theme of *lessons learned* identifies some of the information that participants used to help form their perceptions of what the trip would be like and how to prepare for the circumstances in which they would be during their trip. According to the stories participants chose to reflect upon, three different types of information were gained from both the positive and negative stories of other mission trip volunteers. These stories helped participants mentally, physically, and spiritually prepare for their service trips.

**Mental preparation.** About one-third of participants believed they had been told stories from other volunteers to help them mentally prepare for what they might face during their trip. In many cases, mental preparation was typically related to the negative stories that participants had heard. Participants explained that the stories they heard of other volunteer experiences helped them to imagine the different scenarios in which they might be placed and to know how to handle themselves in those potentially difficult situations. For instance, Kaci shared this perception in her pre-trip interview:

I think that these people told me these stories so I would know what to do if I was in that same situation. I think they didn’t want me to be caught off guard or panic
and by sharing their stories they were making me aware that the same things they
had experienced could happen to me too.

Kaci determined that from the stories she heard, she would better be able to prepare
mentally for various potential situations she might find herself in.

Tara, another participant, provided similar reasoning for why she thought these
negative stories were shared when she noted the following:

It’s really hard to imagine what different situations you will be in on a mission
trip, especially if you have never been on one before. I think these individuals
knew I had concerns and they wanted me to know how to respond if I found
myself in a difficult situation or how to try and avoid those types of situations to
begin with.

Tara concluded that from hearing other mission volunteers’ stories, she could visualize
herself in those situations ahead of time and therefore, know how to better handle herself
in those situations should they arise.

**Physical preparation.** About half of the participants mentioned hearing things
such as packing lists, vaccination information, and fitness tips from other mission
volunteers to help prepare them from a physical standpoint for their mission trip
adventures. Walking significant distances, enduring extreme climate changes, and
knowing what to pack were legitimate concerns for many participants. Former mission
trip volunteers appeared to have done a good job covering these various areas for the
participants. Richard said, “Having been to Haiti before, I knew what to prepare for as far
as trying to beat the heat and wearing comfortable shoes to walk in. I tried to share that
with others as well who were going on this trip that hadn’t been before.”
Maddie also noted the importance of having heard these stories to know how to physically prepare for her trip when stating,

"I knew how much walking we would probably be doing based off of what others had said, so I had been walking around my neighborhood and trying to get in shape before we left so that I wouldn’t be as tired or worn down on the trip. It’s a good thing I had heard these stories because otherwise I may not have brought the right shoes or clothing and I wouldn’t have been able to do as much work as I did. I felt really prepared by hearing these stories."

Maddie credited the stories of other mission trip volunteers as helping to physically prepare her for her mission trip. Without these stories, she admitted that her trip would likely have been much less pleasant and productive.

**Spiritual preparation.** Equally as important as both the physical and mental aspects of a mission trip is the spiritual preparation for mission trips. Many stories told to participants by other mission trip volunteers addressed the spiritual enhancement provided by participating in such trips. Not surprisingly, these stories were mainly positive in nature, although some did address challenges that mission trip volunteers may face in relation to spiritual warfare and getting out of one’s comfort zone. Rebecca reflected upon stories that she had heard by saying, “Everyone has always said how much closer they grew to God in their Christian walk after going on a mission trip. I hope that it helps my relationship as well.” Kyla exhibited hearing similar accounts when she noted that “I have not heard one person who hasn’t grown in their faith and been different because of what they have seen on these mission trips. I want my faith to grow too.”

Because these participants had heard the potential of mission trips to produce spiritual
growth within those who volunteer, they anticipated similar growth resulting from their trip.

In regards to challenging situations that arose, participants also discussed having gained valuable information from those insights. As Karla explained, “There were always challenges for every trip I have ever heard about, but those challenges always ended up as positives in some way.” Kyle also elaborated on challenges when he said,

You have to get out of your comfort zone. If you don’t, you will miss out on such a blessing. Other people told me about some opportunities they missed out on because they weren’t comfortable in their faith or they were too shy to talk to someone about God and I didn’t want to be in that position. I knew I couldn’t let fear get in the way of sharing my faith with others.

Although challenges existed, Kyle knew that in order to have growth in his spiritual life, he needed to be prepared to share his faith with others, no matter what.

**Emerging Identities during the Mission Trip**

The third research question of interest explored the various identities that mission trip volunteers enact as they are serving. This question particularly focused on the roles participants assumed, the identities performed, and how those were communicated in interaction with other volunteers during their time of service. These identities centered on enacting a Christian identity, wearing multiple hats, and negotiating an American cultural identity.

**Enacting a Christian Identity**

Given the context of volunteering, it was not surprising that participant discourse and actions first and foremost reflected a Christian identity. The theme *enacting a*
Christian identity describes the ways in which participants described a Christian self and the importance of exemplifying Christian values that they deemed salient to their identity. A majority of the participants agreed on particular values and beliefs that were necessary for mission service. For example, Richard said, “Obviously being a Christian is a big belief on this trip, but more than that, believing that you can serve God by serving others.” In addition, Kelly noted, “We all shared a common goal and belief – we came to share the Gospel message to the people of Haiti and to help them any way we could.” Clearly, having Christian beliefs and a personal relationship with God as Savior were key for mission trip volunteers to serve to the best of their abilities.

Kyla also alluded to the importance of enacting a Christian identity when she said, “First and foremost, I believe you have to be a Christian. Mission work is very tedious and tiring, so you need a good, giving, Christian heart to truly experience the process completely.” Hannah expressed, “I’ve, of course, been Hannah on this trip, but I pray I’ve been a little Jesus too. I pray that others have been able to see His light shine through me in the way that I have acted this week.” Being a Christian and demonstrating Christian values through service were perceived to be very important for these mission trip volunteers.

Each of these participants and several others made assertions about how their Christian values and beliefs were communicated to others. More specifically, several participants noted that these beliefs and values were communicated through both their words and actions, or more simply put, their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Rebecca admitted that “By teaching VBS and growing relationships with the locals, we have shown love the way Jesus commanded us to do.” Ella mentioned, “My beliefs were
communicated daily in my life, mostly through my actions, but also verbally.”

Additionally, Deidre noted, “One way I have communicated my beliefs is by example. Another is by telling others about them.” Jenna reflected similar ideas about communicating her beliefs when she said, “Hopefully, I have communicated these things [my beliefs] through my actions and my words.” For these and other participants, their Christian selves were verbally communicated by sharing their faith with the local people and also talking about their spiritual lives with trip leaders and other team members.

One night in particular, in Costa Rica, the team members sat around for a couple of hours in a large circle and talked about current issues and struggles that they had in maintaining a close relationship with God. They also talked about how it was difficult for many of them to share their faith with others, especially friends and family members who were not Christians because they feared ridicule or rejection from these people. They described how it was easier for them to be a witness here in a foreign country because if someone did not want to hear about Christ here, they could go on about their business without having to face them again, whereas at home if they were rejected, they may have to still encounter those people every day.

Participants also expressed a need to exhibit Christian values in their behaviors. They acted out their Christian identity by witnessing to others in the marketplaces and town squares, by interacting with the native people during worship services, and building relationships with those they were serving throughout the week so that they could tell them about God and the many things that He has done for them in their lives. I was witness to these various enactments of their Christian identity as I observed these interactions with others and even found myself engaging in behaviors that exhibited my
love for Christ by acting out Christian principles. These principles involved loving God and loving people, by serving in worship, in my conversations, and in the work that I, and we as a group, were doing at the church and in the community.

As can easily be seen through these participant clips and my own personal experiences and observations, Christianity was important for participants in being able to fulfill their identity and role as a mission trip volunteer. Equally important was how participants enacted their Christian identity through both their words and deeds. Their communication of a Christian self and Christian values was to the other participants, as well as the people they were serving. Part of this enactment of a Christian identity involved both making those beliefs known through conversations and acts of service being performed by participants, otherwise they would not have made these specific distinctions in their reflections of both talking and acting out their values.

**Wearing Multiple Hats**

Participants not only enacted an overarching Christian identity, but they also adopted specific role identities throughout the course of their service. *Wearing multiple hats* reflects participants’ descriptions of their many different selves and variety of roles they performed. More specifically, participants viewed themselves and each other as construction workers, teachers, mother-figures, and servants. Participants noticed that they adopted different identities at different times, depending upon the context and perhaps what task was needed to be accomplished. For example, Sheila noted a shift in her roles, saying, “At church, I have been a helper. I have helped paint, clean, and other small jobs, but when it is time for VBS [Vacation Bible School], my role has switched to music leader.” Betsy also experienced wearing multiple hats while being a mission trip
volunteer. “I think that I’ve played the role of a server, listener, and observer,” she explained. She then continued to elaborate, saying, “I think these are the roles I’ve played on this trip because each of these jobs has helped me to learn new things and have a new perspective. Also, these are the three main things I’ve done all week on the trip.” As these participants explained, they took on multiple roles throughout their time of service in order to ‘get the job done.’

Furthermore, Ella specifically mentioned multiple roles when she said, “I feel I have played multiple roles on this trip including mother-figure, role model, and messenger of God. The reason I feel this way is I have served the Haitian people in different ways.” She continued to provide the following explanation:

I feel like I serve as a mother-figure at the orphanage because these children’s mothers aren’t in their lives. I have been a messenger of God by sharing His word with and praying with the people in the clinic…I have tried to serve as a positive Christian role model in both the orphanage and the clinic, as well as in our mission team.

Ella specifically described each role that she enacted and at what point in her service she took on those various roles and why.

Shawn shared similar sentiments when he recounted having enacted the following roles:

I played the roles of servant, doctor, leader, friend, brother, kid, dad, and security guard. I relished in each role, enjoying each one, and very much enjoying switching from role to role, giving me a break from each role. I shifted between
these many roles each day, depending on where we were, what we were doing, and who was with me.

Like Ella, Shawn also found himself taking on various roles and enacting multiple identities throughout the trip.

As a participant observer, I also found myself having to switch in and out of roles on the two trips. In Costa Rica, I had to sometimes be in charge of crafts or go lead the music classes. Many days I was in charge of telling a Bible story to the children at the school we worked with. Several days into our trip, I got sick and could barely talk. Since I had been the storyteller every day up to that point and could no longer fulfill that duty, someone else had to take over that role. The other volunteers had their own roles to worry about, but now had to cover my role as well. I had to learn to negotiate my roles by stepping out of a leadership position and being an encourager to someone else who now had to take on that role. It was difficult to not be in control in that situation, but it allowed other people the opportunity to step up and be leaders in that situation.

At many times on many different occasions, we had to be flexible and adapt to the schedules of the people we were serving or our suppliers of the construction materials or beans and rice for the orphanage to be effective in our ministry. Prior to leaving on the Costa Rica mission trip, volunteers were encouraged to ATL, or ask the Lord. This acronym was used to encourage the mission trip volunteers to be sensitive to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and follow His guidance. In enacting a Christian identity, mission trip volunteers were reaching out to people they encountered and each new day brought a new opportunity for them to share the Gospel with the locals. While there was a scheduled plan of events or agenda for each day, by using ATL as a guide, volunteers
were able to minister to others than those who were just “part of the agenda.” So while participants appeared to have enacted a Christian identity throughout their service, they also constructed themselves in other ways that added to their perceptions of self and others.

**Negotiation of American Cultural Identity**

In addition to a Christian self and other role identities, participants also disclosed a very interesting aspect of their American identities. The theme *negotiation of American cultural identity* captures the ways in which participants had to negotiate certain aspects of that identity to adapt to various situations in the mission trip context. For example, Alissa discussed the importance of being open to new things on a mission trip since the culture was very different to that of America. She stated, “I think it was very important to stay open-minded on this trip, to the food, people, customs, etc.” Furthermore, she also said, “I’ve reminded myself and others on my team to try new foods with an open mind and not to judge too quickly.”

Kaci also noted similar adjustments when she said, “With this culture I have had to adjust to the food, in which I have been very open to trying. I also have to know how to respect everyone around me, even if they are a stranger. Just smiling at them means something and has some effect on how they view you.” Perhaps the most interesting quote comes from Hannah who said, “I personally thought the difference in the cultures was beautiful. I adopted some of them while there and hope to take some back, but I, of course kept some mannerisms from home. I figured the people there would enjoy meeting a gringo rather than a wannabe ‘Tico.” What Hannah was saying was that she felt like the Costa Rican people would want to meet someone that was being a genuine American,
rather than someone who was just trying to emulate the customs and behaviors of their own people.

Ella highlighted adjustments made to cultural differences when she said, “I have had to adjust to the culture and environment by tolerating the heat and dealing with the language barrier.” Deidre supports these statements by claiming, “It’s just a simple fact that we adjust to what is around us, so the heat and the people become part of who and what we are.” Participants learned to deal with these struggles the best they could. They quickly learned and saw that things were very different in these new cultural settings than back at home in the U.S. Part of adjusting to these changes meant negotiating certain aspects of American culture.

Richard supported these statements when he made his own saying, “The biggest adjustment I made due to culture was how slow their pace is. Time doesn’t matter.” Rebecca shared that “How I adjusted to the culture was hard and quick. The first day we were there it was everything from what they ate, to how they drove, and how they acted. It was definitely something to get used to.” Rebecca seemed to have experienced what many would call “culture shock.” Although she, like the others, had heard stories about the differences in culture, actually experiencing it for herself was quite different. Sarah confessed, “I have tried to be courteous of cultural differences…I believe you should always be polite and open-minded to cultural differences and opinions.” Likewise, Jenna expressed her cultural adjustments in the following way:

I had to adjust to the culture and climate in several ways. We had none of the luxuries from home, no air conditioning, walking almost everywhere instead of riding/driving, two meals a day instead of three. We were the minority, not the
majority ethnic group, language barrier, not treated fairly (overcharged, taken advantage of, etc.). The city we stayed in was not as safe as at home and the government and police were unfair.

Several participants made note of using T.I.N.A., an acronym standing for “this is not America,” to help them adjust to cultural differences. This acronym was presented to Costa Rica mission trip volunteers at pre-trip informational meetings. The trip leader had anticipated that participants might have a difficult time being respectful and sensitive to the differences in culture, particularly since many of the volunteers were teenagers. Consequently, he stressed the importance of remembering the T.I.N.A. acronym when faced with cultural adjustments, as he explained,

I know how it can be when you get into a new environment and almost everything is totally different from home. Especially when you have a bunch of teenagers who are away from their parents and families, some for the first time, they are going to be pretty shocked at some of the things they see and experience on this trip. Letting them know up front is helpful, but you can never truly understand until you’re there.

Our leader knew the adjustment would be difficult for many and he wanted to convey the reality of just how difficult making cultural adjustments could be at times.

Several participants recalled how they had used the acronym during their trip. For example, Hannah said, “I had to keep reminding myself of T.I.N.A. the whole time. I’m usually pretty open-minded to new things, but it was hard sometimes having to be courteous when we didn’t like the food or we couldn’t understand what they were saying.” Bob also said, “I’ll be glad when I get back home, so hopefully this T.I.N.A. will
Mission trip volunteers wanted to leave the locals with a favorable impression, so even when it was difficult to communicate or there was some issue, volunteers had to maintain their composure and be courteous. Although things were different, they did not want to offend the locals by seeming unappreciative of their hospitality.

Participants had quite a few adjustments to make to the different cultures they found themselves immersed in. Whether it was the heat, lack of punctuality, getting around on foot, or other issues mentioned by participants, these were significant adjustments that had to be made in order to function successfully on the trip and carry out the tasks before each mission volunteer group. Negotiating American cultural values and norms, or identities, to be more compatible with that of the local culture in both Haiti and Costa Rica were how many of the participants handled being in these new environments.

**Volunteers’ Sensemaking of Mission Trip Experiences**

Research question four focused on how mission trip volunteers made sense of their experiences once their trip had ended. Just as these participants had heard stories from other mission trip volunteers prior to embarking on their trips, these participants made sense of their own experiences through telling stories to others about their service. When asked about the specific storied participants shared, with whom they shared them, and why, many participants conveyed that it was in an attempt to encourage others to go on mission trips in the future or to demonstrate how much positive change had occurred in their lives as a result of their mission trip volunteer experiences. Two-thirds of participants explicitly stated their intent to go back to the country they had just served in and volunteer again in the future. Through the use of storytelling as retrospective sensemaking of the mission trip volunteer experience, participants were reflecting upon
the change that had taken place within their own lives and were trying to display that change to others through their stories. This sensemaking was also used to encourage others to become mission trip volunteers and show a desire of participants to volunteer to go on a mission trip again in the future. Therefore, these participants wanted to continue making a positive impact, or good, in the future.

Making Good For Good

As participants reflected on their service, they seemed to make sense of their experiences in relation to the personal changes they felt and the degree to which those changes would endure upon their return to their everyday lives in the U.S. Twenty-two of the 24 participants believed they had experienced a lasting change, while only two participants acknowledged that the changes they felt during their time of service were only temporary. Kyla, for example, revealed the changes she had made by expressing this sentiment in the following excerpt:

I think this is a lasting change…When you go serve God in a foreign country on a mission trip, He opens your eyes and if you allow Him, He changes you. He molds you into who He wants you to be.

Kyla felt like the experiences she had while serving had changed her life. By going on this mission trip, she had been obedient to the Lord’s calling and had been positively changed as a result. Kendra affirmed this notion of lasting change as well when she discussed,

I believe this change is forever. No matter where I am at in life, I can always look back at this trip and be thankful. It has taught me the importance of loving on everyone and unity of your church family. I know that every time I look back at
my Costa Rica trip I can smile and know that I have learned so much and I can’t wait to take my love back home.

Several other participants also mirrored these sentiments by expressing hope for long-term change in their lives due to their experiences. Deidre expressed, “This mission trip experience is definitely going to be a change to last a lifetime for me. I am already forever changed and will never forget what I’ve seen, tasted, smelled, and lived this week in Haiti.” Kent echoed notions of lasting change as well, saying,

I have been blessed in that I have been on several mission trips. Each is different in their own ways, but the most important thing is that we go. We have to make a difference, even if it is just for a week because what would happen if we didn’t go? The people of the world would split Hell wide open.

Some may criticize mission volunteers for spending so much time, money, and effort in countries where it is sometimes difficult to determine the impact that service has had. However, Kent was saying that regardless of the change in the country, mission volunteers needed to continue to serve and spread the Gospel because it has the power to change lives, even if only a few in a week’s time. By changing and making a difference in other’s lives, Kent felt that he had been changed as well. Similarly, Judy added, “I feel this is a permanent change. I don’t feel like I will become less compassionate when I get back home because this experience will always be a part of who I am.” Jenna, in her post-trip interview said, “I am still processing the events of this trip and I am sure I will be for months to come. I am already forever changed and will never forget what I’ve seen, tasted, smelled, and lived this week in Haiti.” Although the mission trip may have ended,
Jenna knew that she would continue to reflect back upon her experiences and note the changes she had made in her life as a product of her service in Haiti.

In contrast, two participants felt somewhat differently. Bob did not feel there would be a lasting change in his life due to his mission volunteer experience. “I just think once I get back home, everything will go back to normal,” he explained, and continued, “I’m not going to have to worry about being mannerly and accommodating to differences, so things will be just like before we left.” Similarly expressing that the changes made during the mission trip volunteer experience would be short-lived, but for a different reason, Matthew stated, “I have been on a foreign mission trip before. I made a lot of change then, but I don’t think I’ll be making those changes again based on this trip because it had already been done before.” Despite the different feelings of these two participants, the overwhelming majority believed their experiences were life changing.

Participants conveyed just how life-changing their experiences were as they reflected in the post-trip interviews and journals. They used these opportunities to retrospectively make sense of their service. When asked to write or tell about memorable moments or other significant events from their trip, they were able to process these events and began to construct stories to relay these events to others.

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, the previously mentioned themes provided insight to the four research questions that guided this study. The themes and subthemes demonstrate the types of stories that mission trip volunteers heard prior to their service, the lessons learned from hearing those different types of stories, the various identities that emerged during mission trip volunteers’ service in relation to Christianity, roles, and culture, and
how mission trip volunteers made sense of their experiences. The following chapter concludes the study with a discussion of the findings, including practical implications, potential limitations, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study offers insight into the lives and service of mission trip volunteers. Even more so, these findings help to create a conversation with extant literature and open up new areas to be explored by scholars who are interested in similar topics. This chapter provides a discussion of the themes, practical implications of the research, limitations of the current study, and suggestions for future research. The study sought to explore the stories heard by mission trip volunteers prior to their service, the influence those stories had on mission volunteers’ decision to go on a mission trip, the various identities that emerged during service, and how mission trip volunteers made sense of their experiences after returning home. In doing so, this study contributes to the current gap in extant literature focusing on mission trip volunteers. Previous research has examined the socialization processes of more traditional organizational members (e.g., Jablin, 1982; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1978) but has never focused on how storytelling is used in socializing new mission trip volunteers. Likewise, extant literature has explored identity and sensemaking in numerous contexts (e.g., Horrocks & Callahan, 2006; Louis, 1980; Mead, 1970; Ochs, 1993; Weick, 1995) but has not addressed the growing context of mission volunteers and how these concepts can be related.

Six themes (service as stories, lessons learned, enacting a Christian identity, wearing multiple hats, negotiation of American cultural identity, and making good for good) emerged to address the following research questions: (a) what kinds of stories do mission trip volunteers hear prior to their mission trips? (b) how, if at all, do mission-related stories influence mission volunteers’ decisions to go on a mission trip? (c) what
identities do mission volunteers enact during a mission trip? and (d) how do mission
volunteers make sense of their experiences after returning from a mission trip?

The first research question explored what types of stories mission trip volunteers
hear prior to their mission trip. The findings suggest that both *positive* and *negative*
stories were heard by participants prior to going on their trip. Findings also showed that
these stories came primarily from other mission trip volunteers, and each participant had
heard multiple stories prior to their service. Positive stories ranged in topic from
relationships formed with locals and team members to the many blessings received from
serving abroad. Negative stories related to poor living conditions, climate, and lost
luggage or illness. Participants reflected an attitude of gratefulness for the stories, having
been provided with insight into what their trip may be like.

In typical organizations that have been the focus of many studies (e.g., Ashforth,
Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Jablin, 1982; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1978), socialization
processes have been analyzed and studied on various levels. Scholars have studied the
various phases, tactics, and levels of formality associated with the socialization process.
In the current study, based upon the findings, several of these same phases, tactics, and
levels of formality can also be found. For example, mission trip volunteers experienced
anticipatory, encounter, and metamorphosis phases of socialization. They were also
exposed to a variety of socialization tactics such as individual-collective and investiture-
divestiture. Some of these tactics were employed more formally through trip leaders and
coordinators and some more informally through other mission trip volunteers.

Prior to mission volunteers leaving on their trip, they heard stories from former
mission trip volunteers. They also attended several group meetings where stories were
presented and discussed and given an opportunity to learn more about the local customs and culture of the country they would be visiting. The various tasks and projects that the mission trip volunteers would be working on were also discussed at these meetings. Through these meetings, as well as the various individual stories that were heard by participants, socialization was taking place. This reflects the socialization process found in traditional organizations where newcomers also participate in similar types of orientations (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Despite the mission context differing from a traditional organization, the socialization of the volunteers reflected that of organizational newcomers. Just as Van Maanen (1978) described socialization as “the process by which a person learns the values, norms, and required behaviors which permit him or her to participate as a member of the organization” (p. 67), these mission trip volunteers were being shown values that are important to have on a mission trip, what normally takes place while serving, and how they should act during their trip. Schein (1968) also stated that socialization was “the process of ‘learning the ropes,’ being indoctrinated and trained, and being taught what is important in the organization” (p. 2). The mission trip volunteers who participated in this study were, in a similar sense, being trained on how to complete different tasks, how to share their faith, and what things were most important to know in order to be safe and successful while volunteering their time and talents.

It is important to note that the stories from other mission trip volunteers, as well as the information shared in group meetings, occurred during the anticipatory phase of the socialization process. This means that it occurred prior to the volunteers actually
entering their time of service. This gave them an idea or picture of what they could expect during their service.

As Wanous (1992) discussed, the job interview in typical organizational settings is a chance for potential employees to gain information about the organization along with the types of duties they would be expected to fulfill within their company role if hired. Similarly, these mission trip volunteers gained information from others who had served on mission trips in the past and from trip leaders during meetings that gave them a sense of what was in store for them on their trip. While mission trip volunteers do not typically go through a formal interview process or get a realistic job preview (RJP), these stories and meetings essentially served those same functions.

In addition, these mission trip volunteers engaged in information seeking tactics, just as potential and new employees do. In informational meetings, they asked questions of the trip leaders and others who had been on mission trips before. I, personally, conducted Internet searches on the town that we served in Haiti to determine the level of safety and what the climate would be like. Several of the participants who had never gone on a mission trip before asked me questions about my previous experiences such as what to wear, how to interact with the people, and what supplies to bring with them in order to be able to do the work that was before us. Trip leaders were also asked these same types of questions. At some meetings, we were even able to Skype with the missionaries we would be working with in both Haiti and Costa Rica and talk with them on speakerphone to have a clearer understanding of what we would be doing in each country and how we would likely be received by the local people. These were also forms of anticipatory
socialization, similar to the process described by Jablin (1982), Schein (1968), and Van Maanen, (1978).

Once we had actually reached our service destinations, we entered into the encounter phase of socialization. At this point, relationships were being formed with the local people, bonds were being strengthened within the mission teams themselves, and the mission volunteers were beginning to see how their expectations formed during the anticipatory phase compared to their reality on location. For example, mission trip volunteers on the Costa Rica trip had been told to dress in layers and be prepared for wet weather. They had packed ponchos, water-resistant shoes, and sweatshirts to prepare for the inclement weather and were at that point able to apply those preparations they had made based upon the stories and information they received prior to going on the trip. In this case, the volunteers’ experiences aligned with the expectations they had formed in the anticipatory phase of their socialization, which Jablin (1987) had described within his study.

Not only did these mission trip volunteers experience the various phases of socialization, but some of the different tactics associated with socialization as well. In these two trips, most of the socialization was done collectively versus individually. Informational group meetings were held prior to each trip. Group text messages were sent out if changes were made regarding the trip or as reminders of important events or related issues. The stories that mission trip volunteers heard from others prior to leaving could also be considered a tactic of socialization, but this was done on an individual level as each person would have heard different stories from different people in almost all cases.
Based on these examples, we can see how various socialization tactics, as outlined by Van Maanen and Schein (1979), were used. The group meetings and text messages are considered more formal measures of socialization as they were organized or created by trip leaders and coordinators, whereas the stories heard from other mission trip volunteers were more informal and did not necessarily come from those associated with the trips that this study focused on. Serial tactics can also be seen as many times group members were divided into work groups not only based on skills, but previous mission trip experience, mingling newcomers with returning mission trip volunteers. Since skills were important to consider when forming work groups, investiture tactics can also be seen. This means that mission trip volunteers were encouraged to use the talents that God had blessed them with in order to fulfill the roles that they were enacting, such as music, crafts, recreation, or construction team members and leaders.

The second research question explored the influence of the stories mission trip volunteers had heard on their decision to go on a mission trip. In this case, participants described three different types of preparation they were able to make as a result of lessons learned from the stories they heard. These types of preparation were mental preparation, physical preparation, and spiritual preparation. While participants said the stories did not influence their decision to go on a mission trip, they did note that the stories were valued as tools used for preparing for their trip.

*Mental preparation* was made by hearing stories and developing a perception of what the trip would be like. From imagining poor living conditions to the relationships that would be formed and strengthened among locals and fellow team members, participants were able to visualize these aspects of their trip. By forming these
perceptions and creating these visualizations, participants were able to think about how they might act if found in similar scenarios as those that were mentioned in former mission trip volunteers’ stories. Therefore, they were able to think ahead about how they might behave or respond and would not be caught off guard if these same experiences proved true for them.

Just as in the previously mentioned story about how to dress for the inclement weather in Costa Rica, **physical preparation** was a notable lesson that many participants took away from the stories shared by other volunteers. In Haiti, the climate was very dry and hot. Since participants had been made aware of this information prior to leaving, many brought portable fans, water bottles, and lots of sunscreen in preparation for these conditions. Participants had also been made aware through stories and informational meetings of the vast amount of walking that would be taking place on these trips. As a result, participants brought comfortable walking shoes and many expressed going to the gym or walking more at home in preparation for the trips.

**Spiritual preparation** was the third type of lesson that participants took away from the anticipatory socialization process. Participants had been made aware of potential challenges, difficulties, and turmoil that may arise during their travels. Because they had an expectation that these obstacles could arise, they were able to spiritually seek guidance from Christian mentors and the Lord. Many scriptures from the Bible were used in pre-trip meetings to demonstrate how, as Christians, we are called to go on mission for the Lord, so mission trip volunteers read and studied these Bible verses to prepare spiritually for their trip. Many participants also noted spending much time in prayer and asking others to pray for them prior to and during their trip. The stories heard prior to going on
the trips helped provide valuable information to the current participants. Although socialization has been less explored in volunteer context, these participants found the anticipatory socialization phase (Jablin, 1982) to be particularly important.

Because the stories came from others who had previously served in the role of a mission trip volunteer, former volunteers served as role models to these participants. Filstad (2004) studied how organizational newcomers use role models, particularly their colleagues, to become socialized into the organization. She found newcomers’ expectations, experience, level of self-confidence, and competitive instincts helped them adjust to their new working environment. Similarly, participants used stories of former volunteers who had been in similar or the same role(s), as well as the observation of current team members, to gauge their own behaviors. These stories helped to create an expectation by relating experiences of others who had previously or were currently sharing similar roles. As participants observed and monitored the behaviors and actions of their fellow team members and witnessed their successes and/or failures, they were able to gain confidence in their own behaviors as they gained experience in being a mission trip volunteer. Without these other mission trip volunteers and their stories, these newcomers in the mission field would likely not have fulfilled their roles so easily.

The third research question sought to discover the various identities that may emerge through conversation and interaction of mission volunteer participants as they were serving. The findings show enacting a Christian identity, wearing multiple hats, and negotiating an American cultural identity are all different aspects of identity that participants dealt with during their trips. As participants noted, one of the primary reasons that participants went on this trip was to share their faith with others. In pre- and
post-trip interviews, participants conveyed a desire to share their faith with others as being a dominant factor in participating in mission work. In essence, they were enacting a Christian identity by serving as a mission volunteer and witnessing to others in these foreign countries through sharing their faith and beliefs.

Horrocks and Callahan (2006) studied how identity is constructed through the use of narratives and emotion. They discussed how using stories allows us to form interpersonal relationships with others and in doing so, the image we create for ourselves within the organizational context. In particular, these authors examined how when emotion is incorporated into narratives, a professional image is affected. The purpose of their study was to determine the relationship between how individuals see themselves and how others view them. Many mission trip volunteers had the opportunity to share their testimony while serving. These testimonies were narratives of mission trip volunteers’ salvation experience and how God has worked in their life. Through sharing these narrative accounts, they were attempting to create an image that the locals could identify with and relate to. While in this context, I was not concerned with how using emotion affects a professional image, I do think it is interesting to see how the image of mission trip volunteers in general was affected by using emotion in their testimonies.

Many participants cried, while others laughed or showed enthusiasm. Each person’s story was different, yet there was one common thread throughout them all: they had experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ and were, in their opinions, forever changed once they allowed Him to come into their hearts and lives. Many participants gave account of difficult and trying situations they had been through and how God had comforted them during those times and had removed them from those dark
circumstances. Many locals could relate to these stories and were compelled to respond to these testimonies by also wanting to receive the gift of salvation. Using emotion in narratives in the mission volunteer context then, is favorable and beneficial in winning lost souls for the Lord, the primary goal of mission trips.

In this study, mission trip volunteers were well familiar with narratives; after all, they had heard numerous narrative accounts prior to going on their trips and exchanged narratives with one another throughout the course of their service. The narratives they heard and shared were reflections of their identity, particularly their Christian identity. Cheney (1983) talked about how our identities are “vital because they grant us personal meaning” (p. 145). This being said, enacting a Christian identity appeared important for mission trip volunteers because it allowed them to feel meaningful as individuals. Through their service, they were able to help others in a positive way and in turn, feel significant in the roles they had taken on as both a Christian and a mission trip volunteer.

In addition, Gilbert (2002) mentioned how our self-perceptions serve as guides for our construction of narrative accounts. Based upon the various identities and roles that participants adopted to construct those ‘selves’ or identities, they constructed stories that reflected themselves as enactors of those roles. Simply put, the various roles that participants had taken on throughout their service were communicated in their conversations with others through the use of storytelling. For example, I overheard one participant telling another how good it felt to be a leader on this trip and set a good example for others to follow. This participant had taken on a leadership role throughout the trip and she was reflecting herself in a leadership role in this story was telling.
Others’ perceptions of those roles also affected how participants saw themselves in light of the roles they took on and the identities they assumed. As demonstrated in the example above, this participant had formed the self-perception of herself as a leader based upon her conversations with others who had affirmed that she was setting a good example for them, they had modeled their behavior after her, etc. Perhaps this participant may not have seen herself as a leader within the mission volunteer group had others not expressed their own perceptions they had formed about her.

Prior to leaving on the Costa Rica trip, mission trip volunteers in that group were presented with an acronym at one of the informational meetings. The acronym was ATL, which stood for Ask the Lord. While there was an agenda or scheduled plan of events for everyday while on the mission trip, volunteers were encouraged to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. If volunteers felt led to do something that was not on the agenda and it was confirmed by at least one other group member, they were encouraged to ATL, or Ask the Lord, for guidance and do whatever it was He was telling them to do. Perhaps my favorite example of ATL came while I was leading a group of about six others on a prayer walk through the town. We passed a house where an older lady was selling some eggs on the front porch. I expressed an interest to stop and talk to her, but we decided to keep walking. A while later, as we were continuing to walk and pray, one of the other group members, Hannah, mentioned that she also felt led to go back and talk to the woman selling eggs at the house. Since Hannah had confirmed my desire, we asked the Lord, and went back to talk with the woman and had a very pleasant experience. We found that she was also a Christian and she thanked us for the work we were doing in her
town. ATL is just one example in which volunteers were encouraged to express and act upon the salience of their Christian selves.

*Wearing multiple hats* was another important theme in the data. Participants admitted that they actually assumed or took on multiple roles while serving. Some of these roles included being a mother-figure to the orphans in Haiti, a construction worker at the church in Costa Rica, and a disciple or messenger of God by sharing their faith with others they encountered while on the trip. Kuhn and Nelson (2002) examined multiple identities in their study and sought to investigate how organizational members identified with multiple social groups and the ways in which their identification contributed to their collective identity constructs. Similarly, these mission trip volunteers reported adopting multiple roles and identities on their trips.

Kuhn and Nelson (2002) found that individuals who were involved with multiple groups, through their communication and interactions, often identified themselves as members of each of those groups. The same was true for mission volunteers in this study. As many worked in shifts, some doing construction in the mornings and VBS in the afternoons, they interacted with different mission volunteers and locals in each of those settings. By the end of the trips, as participants reflected through their journals and post-trip interviews, they had assumed multiple roles throughout their experience. Participants who had worked in both the church doing construction and in the schools doing VBS activities identified as being both construction workers and teachers because throughout their trip they had assumed each of these roles. In addition to those task roles, they also maintained and enacted more enduring roles such
as a Christian or an American that did not change based upon interactions with others or location.

In many cases, the roles they assumed were reflective of the identities that they had constructed while serving. For example, many days in Haiti, a group of women went to the orphanage to take snacks to the children, play games, make crafts, and tell them Bible stories. Many of these women were mothers and had children of their own at home, but some did not. Regardless, each woman expressed assuming a motherly role to these children because they were orphans and their parents were not a part of their lives. Not only were we doing activities with the children that a mother might do, such as feeding them and playing with them, but we knew that these children were seeing us as motherly figures because they had no one else in their lives to assume that role for them. Thus, relating back to the Gilbert (2002) study, seeing ourselves as “mothers” to the children was not only based on our own perceptions, but through our interactions with the children and how we felt that they perceived us as well. Therefore, these observations and responses from participants support the findings of Gilbert’s study.

Participants in this study also offered evidence of negotiating their cultural identity as an American. T.I.N.A. was another acronym that was used in informational meetings prior to leaving for Costa Rica. Since many volunteers on this trip were newcomers to the mission trip scene, those of us who had been on mission trips before knew this would be a very eye-opening experience for them on many levels, but especially culturally. T.I.N.A. stands for this is not America. When volunteers found themselves in situations where they wanted to complain about something such as unfamiliar foods, the weather, or uncomfortable living conditions for the week, they were
encouraged to remind themselves that “this is not America.” Many times, I and others would say, “Just remember, T.I.N.A.,” as we encountered these types of difficult situations. It served as a great reminder to be sensitive to another culture and not get so accustomed to our own American norms that we failed to appreciate or respect the differences that a new cultural encounter presents.

As Jung and Hecht (2004) found from their study and theory development, there are four different frames from which identity can be viewed. These included personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities. The themes of *enacting a Christian identity*, *wearing multiple hats*, and *negotiating an American cultural identity*, can be applied to these existing identity frames.

*Enacting a Christian identity* would fit into the frame of enacted identity. Participants were performing and expressing Christian values and characteristics as part of their service on these trips, just as prescribed by Jung and Hecht (2004). *Wearing multiple hats* relates well to the ascribed relational identity that Jung and Hecht propose. This means that as participants interacted with others on their trip, both fellow mission volunteers and those they were serving, they internalized their perception of how those others viewed them. In turn, their identity was shaped by their interactions, as well as their own and others’ perceptions. *Wearing multiple hats* might also reflect the personal identity frame. Participants’ own self-concepts and self-images contributed to the multiple hats or identities that they wore. Lastly, *negotiating an American cultural identity* relates to the frame of communal identity. Based upon existing American values and norms that participants held, participants learned to shift some aspects of an American identity to better adapt to being immersed in a foreign culture.
The final research question explored how mission trip volunteers made sense of their experiences after returning home. Through the use of journaling, which many participants did on the plane and bus rides returning home, as well as post-trip interviews which took place 2-3 weeks after returning home, these mission trip volunteers were able to make sense of their experiences by reflecting back upon their experiences after they had already happened. *Making good for good* was the result of mission trip volunteer sensemaking after their service had ended.

This theme encompassed the notion that as participants returned home from their service and reflected on their experience, they wanted to convey to others how they had been affected by their time spent serving others on these volunteer mission trips. Through their use of storytelling to recount their volunteer experience to others, almost all of participants mentioned the idea of lasting change as a result of their encounters. They wanted others to be aware of this change within them, not just through their stories, but also in how they are now behaving as a result of their service.

While many participants expressed lasting change as a key factor in their volunteer experience, there were two participants who did not feel that the changes they had made during their service would be enduring. One of these two participants explained their reasoning for short-term change because he had been on a mission trip before. He had already had the experience of travelling outside the country and returning home to share his experiences with others. He made comparisons to his previous volunteer experience and believed that because he had already made changes during his first volunteer experience, he would not make any new changes based upon this second trip. While I can understand his train of thought, I personally cannot relate to his feelings.
Each mission trip I have been on has been different and I have always felt some sort of lasting change as a result of each trip. The other participant felt that once returning home, his life would return to normal and that the whole T.I.N.A. mentality would go away. By this he meant that all of the changes (personal, cultural, etc.) he had made while serving would no longer be present after his service ended.

As a participant observer, I can also easily understand these feelings. Transitioning from a new environment back into one that is more familiar could easily keep long-term change as a result of service from occurring. However, because both of these volunteers were male and teenagers, gender and age could have played a role in their lack of long-term change. Other participants who noted long-term changes were mostly female and in some cases adults, perhaps giving them a different perspective. The participants who reported feeling long-term change appeared to be more focused on internal change within their lives versus external factors such as food, weather, and language. Different interpretations of the question concerning change as a result of service may have contributed to the differences in their perceived change.

What was extremely interesting to me as the researcher was how, either throughout the trip at the end of each day or after the completion of the trip, participants had selected one, or in several cases, multiple memorable moments from their experiences. Weick (1995) called this process of recalling certain events or experiences “selection.” Mission trip volunteers selected the events that they felt were most important and focused on those events throughout the sensemaking process.

Weick (1995) also discussed the process of retention, which relates to what events, facts, or aspects of an experience that an individual chooses to remember over
time. These mission trip volunteers relayed to me through post-trip interviews some of
the very same memorable moments that had written about in their journals. This
demonstrated that they had retained that information for at least a 2-3 week period.
Participants also conveyed that they had selected these events to relay to others when
describing their volunteer experience and therefore, must have retained enough
information to be able to relay these stories over and over again to others.

Because participants chose to relay particular stories about their trips to others,
they were also demonstrating what Weick (1995) called the sociality aspect of
sensemaking. This means that sensemaking is not just an internal processing of one’s
own experiences, but that sense is made of these events through interacting and
conversing with others about the events that took place. According to Weick, depending
on the perceptions that we feel others have made about our actions or behaviors, we then
justify or rationalize why we acted or behaved in a certain way. In sharing their stories
about the mission trips with others, they were determining how others might view these
events and in turn, may make changes to their stories depending on who they are telling
them to or how those events may be interpreted. Clearly, stories were important as
participants made sense of and worked out their own understanding of their experiences
in personal reflection and in conversation with others.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This study undoubtedly paves the way for other scholars who are interested in
mission trip volunteers and their work to conduct future research in this context. While
they may wish to pursue different areas than those of my interest, they can still make note
of the methods used and the depth of the findings produced by this study. In particular,
the insights gleaned from having been a participant observer add to both the rigor of qualitative inquiry and the accuracy and depth of the findings.

One of the biggest limitations of this study was the small number of participants in the study. Twenty-four participants do not provide an accurate representation of all who serve as mission trip volunteers. Another limitation is that the sample size for this particular study did not encompass a variety of ethnic groups or religious denominations who participate as mission trip volunteers. By formatting this study to be completed in the time requirements for the degree, long-term effects of mission trip volunteer socialization and sensemaking were limited. Potential biases of the researcher are acknowledged, however, using participant observation is a rich technique that provided insight and knowledge that may not have emerged using participant interviews and journals alone.

**Future Research**

In the future, to address some of the concerns posed by the limitations of the study, several changes should be made. By increasing the sample size and trying to achieve a more even distribution of ethnic groups within the sample size as are present in the total population, the research is more likely to be replicable and more reflective of the population as a whole. This would not only increase the value of the study to the communication discipline, but it would also assume greater acceptance of researchers across various paradigms. In the future, perhaps a greater diversity in participants, such as non-Christian denomination mission trip volunteers, could also be included in research efforts to reach a better understanding of mission volunteers across various beliefs. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial, as conclusions could be drawn to see how
stories are continually used in the mission trip volunteer recruitment process and the level of influence they have on new mission trip volunteers. It would also be interesting to see how much mission trip volunteers are still talking about their trips over longer periods of time and how, if at all, the stories they continue to tell have changed from their immediate return home. This would illuminate further details about the process of sensemaking as it applies to the mission trip volunteer context.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study employed ethnographic methods to explore the socialization, identity and sensemaking of mission volunteers. The most significant findings from this study were that stories from other mission volunteers did not influence current volunteers’ decision to go on a mission trip, rather, they helped them prepare for their trips in a variety of ways. Also of value, just as mission trip volunteers had heard stories from other volunteers about their service prior to leaving on these trips, they also told stories about their trips after their service had ended. These stories served as sensemaking mechanisms, allowing them to reflect upon their experiences. While there is much left to be explored about mission trip volunteers, their motivations to serve, their emerging identities, and the way that they talk about their experiences, this study provides a solid foundation upon which other scholars interested in such research can build. By addressing the limitations faced in this study, future researchers can conduct additional studies to further examine these findings, as well as other topics, to offer new insights about the experiences of mission trip volunteers.
APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
For Participants 18 Years and Older

Project Title: Making Good: An Exploratory Study of Mission Trip Volunteers, Their Identities, Decisions to Volunteer, and Communication About Their Experiences as Impacted Through Storytelling

Investigator: Katelin Frederick, Dept. of Communication, (606) 669-3880

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: To explore mission trip volunteer experiences during and after their time spent volunteering.

2. Explanation of Procedures: The researcher will conduct individual interviews, approximately 30 minutes – 1 hour in length, at two different times (before and after the trip). I understand that participants will be asked to complete a journal for the duration of the trip, to be done at their own convenience, which will include some guiding questions to help structure their responses. These entries will be collected upon the conclusion of the trip.

3. Discomfort and Risks: The probability of harm anticipated is no greater than I would encounter in everyday life.

4. Benefits: While this study offers no direct benefits or compensation, it is my understanding that I will have an opportunity to give my opinions and experiences which will help generate knowledge about the various identities of mission trip volunteers.

5. Confidentiality: It is my understanding that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.

6. Refusal/Withdrawal: It is my understanding that refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services I may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant __________________________ Date ____________
Witness __________________________ Date ____________

I understand that my participation in an interview will be audio recorded. _______ initials

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD.

Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-6733

WKU IRB - 12-290
Approved - 5/18/2012
End - 5/18/2013
Full Board
Original - 5/18/2013
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT
For Parents/Guardians of Participants Less Than 18 Years Old

Project Title: Making Good: An Exploratory Study of Mission Trip Volunteers, Their Identities, Decisions to Volunteer, and Communication About Their Experiences as Impacted Through Storytelling

Investigator: Katelin Frederick, Dept. of Communication, (606) 669-3880

Your child is being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement for him/her to participate in this project.

The following paragraphs will explain in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may contact the researcher at any time to ask questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read the following paragraphs with your child. You may discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide your child can participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form. Prior to participation in the study, your child will also be asked to sign another consent form to ensure their wish to participate. You and your child will be given a copy of each form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** To explore mission trip volunteer experiences during and after their time spent volunteering.

2. **Explanation of Procedures:** The researcher will conduct individual interviews, approximately 30 minutes – 1 hour in length, at two different times (before and after the trip). I understand that participants will be asked to complete a journal for the duration of the trip, to be done at their own convenience, which will include some guiding questions to help structure their responses. These entries will be collected upon the conclusion of the trip.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** The probability of harm anticipated is no greater than I would encounter in everyday life.

4. **Benefits:** While this study offers no direct benefits or compensation, it is my understanding that I will have an opportunity to give my opinions and experiences which will help generate knowledge about the various identities of mission trip volunteers.

5. **Confidentiality:** It is my understanding that my responses will be kept strictly confidential.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** It is my understanding that refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services I may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant  Date

Witness  Date

I understand that my participation in an interview will be audio recorded. ________ initials

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator TELEPHONE: (270) 745-6733

WKU IRB - 12-290
Approved - 5/18/2012
End - 5/18/2013
Full Board
Original - 5/18/2013
INFORMED ASSENT DOCUMENT
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING MINORS

Project Title: Making Good: An Exploratory Study of Mission Trip Volunteers, Their Identities, Decisions to Volunteer, and Communication About Their Experiences as Impacted Through Storytelling

Investigator: Katelin Frederick
Dept. of Communication
(606) 669-3880

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you and your parent/guardian give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the form. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

I, _____________________________, understand that my parent or guardian has given permission for me (said it’s okay) to take part in a project about mission trip volunteers, under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Mize Smith, Assistant Professor at Western Kentucky University.

I understand that I may be asked to participate in interviews before and/or after my trip and keep a journal during my trip. I also understand that my interactions may be observed during my trip.

I am taking part because I want to. I have been told that I can stop at any time I want to and nothing will happen to me if I want to stop.

Signature ___________________________ Date ____________________

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APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

What stories have you heard others tell about their mission trip volunteer experiences?

How, if at all, does that affect your perception of what the trip will be like?

Probe: Who did you hear these stories from? Why do you think they told you these things?

After hearing other mission volunteer stories, how do you think your experience would compare?

What prompted you to want to go on this trip?

Probe: Tell me about what sparked your interest in this mission trip opportunity.

What are you most anxious about on this trip? Why?

Probe: Is there anything that you are really looking forward to and/or dreading about the trip? Why or why not?

How important do you feel that it is to volunteer on mission trips such as this one? Why do you feel this way?

What is the most positive thing that you think you have taken away from this trip?

Probe: What is your most positive memorable moment from your mission trip experience?
Is there anything negative that you experienced that you think you will take away from this trip?

Probe: What was difficult for you while serving on this mission trip that you think has impacted your life?

What do you think would be important for others to know who might go on these types of trips? Why?

Is there anything you would not tell them about this trip? Why or why not?

Looking back, how does your experience actually compare to the stories you heard prior to leaving for your mission trip?

How, if at all, were you changed by your experience on this mission trip?

Is there anything else you feel would be important for me to know about your mission trip experience?
APPENDIX C

Peer Examination Attestation

The role that I played in Katelin Frederick’s research was that of the disinterested peer during the peer debriefings as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The debriefings occurred at the end of the project where I was provided information about the study. As part of the process, I listened to Katelin’s oral explanation of transcriptions; in addition, I read the master code list and reviewed the open coding and axial coding of the data.

The central purposes of the debriefing sessions were to establish credibility and explore aspects of the research that might otherwise have remained implicit in the researcher’s mind. Through the process of playing devil’s advocate, I attempted to probe potential biases, explore meanings in the data, and clarify basis for interpretation of the data by studying the coding procedures and categories.


Attested by: [Signature]
(Peer-Name)

Date: [4/11/13]

Peer Examination Attestation

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Attested by: [Signature]

(Peer Name)

Date: 4/16/18

Peer Examination Attestation

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Attested by: 

(Peer Name)

Date: 4-14-13

APPENDIX D

The role that I played in Katein Frederick's research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

The central purpose of the member checking procedure was to establish authenticity and credibility by allowing someone other than the researcher to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the data and interpretations. Through the process, I had the opportunity to assess the adequacy of data, to correct perceived errors, to confirm and/or challenge interpretations, and to offer additional information as necessary.

Attested by: [Signature]

(Participant Name)

Date: 4/10/13

Member Check Attestation

The role that I played in Katelin Frederick’s research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

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Attested by: [Signature]

(Participant Name)

Date: 9/14/13

Member Check Attestation

The role that I played in Katelin Frederick's research was that of a participant who also provided a member check as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I was asked to review the findings and interpretations of the study and offer feedback on the extent to which I believed the summaries represented my own views, feelings, and experiences.

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Attested by: [Signature]
(Participant Name)
Date: 4/18/13

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Attested by: [Signature]
(Participant Name)

Date: [Date]

Member Check Attestation

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Attested by: [Signature]

(Participant Name)

Date: 4/10/13

REFERENCES


