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Exploring Volunteers' Understanding of Harm in International Volunteering Projects: A Mental Models Approach

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Exploring Volunteers' Understanding of Harm in International Volunteering Projects:

A Mental Models Approach

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Despite the growing numbers of volunteer tourists each year, volunteers’ understandings of harm while participating in international volunteering projects have received little attention. I conducted a qualitative study using a mental models approach to explore how volunteers based out of Calgary understand harm before going abroad and after returning from international volunteer trips. I explore how emotions work in these particular spaces and how they impact volunteers’ overall experiences. Gaps in volunteers’ understanding of harm pre- and post-travel were identified and analyzed. Findings suggest that volunteers’ pre-travel understanding of harm was associated with physical harm, however, volunteers’ understanding of harm post-travel tended to be associated with emotional harm. Understanding emotions in volunteer tourism spaces will aid sending organizations in mediating the relationships within and between volunteers in order to understand how harm may be reduced by training, support and outreach programs.
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“Go and buy a bottle of wine. You’ll feel better tomorrow” Dad.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Volunteer tourism, broadly defined as an activity in which people pay to volunteer in global development or conservation projects, is one of the fastest-growing forms of alternative tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a; Conran, 2011; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Ellis, 2003; Holmes & Smith, 2009; Mintel, 2008; Richards, 2008). Volunteer tourism is a term that describes a wide range of tourist behaviours and tourism products and services and is increasingly marketed by governments, non-government organizations and private commercial operators as a non-consumptive solution to a range of social and environmental issues in communities worldwide. Volunteer tourism has gained popularity in Canada because, through volunteering, tourists believe they can make a direct and tangible impact on host communities and take home an experience that directly and positively impacts themselves (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a).

Demand for alternative tourism has led to the creation of educational tourism, farm tourism, cultural exchange tourism, scientific tourism and volunteer tourism, among others (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Volunteer tourism is the “poster-child” for alternative tourism largely because it encompasses a wide array of tourist behaviours and tourism products (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Unlike mass tourism which is understood in this paper as a holiday that is standardized and rigidly packaged, mass produced, mass marketed and consumed “en masse” by tourists without consideration of local norms or culture (Poon 1993), volunteer tourism applies to “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a p. 2; Wearing, 2002).
In European-based or derived societies, the privilege of leisure travel carries the belief that humans stand apart from nature and are entitled to use it for their well-being (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). Paradoxically, it is also these beliefs that Wearing (2001, as cited in Pearce & Coghlan, 2008 p.132) argues “carry the seeds of ethical and moral responsibility”. These beliefs run the danger of perpetuating simplistic ideals of development, ideals that may be based on over-simplistic boundaries between two places with differing ideologies, that of the north and south (Simpson, 2004). The historical roots of volunteering are founded on notions of altruism and self-development (McIntosh & Zahra, 2009) and, like tourism itself, volunteer tourism is rooted in multiple layers of human and social needs (Matthews, 2008).

While it is commonplace in academic literature to argue that volunteer tourism is an important contributor to enhancing international and cross-cultural understanding and the development of global citizenship (Lyons et al., 2012a; D’Amore, 1988; Ketabi, 1996; Matthews, 2008; Smith, 1989), recent critiques of volunteer tourism highlight some of the negative impacts of volunteer tourism on host communities and/or host community members (see, for example Conran, 2011; Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2010). While the positive/negative binary is seen in much of the literature surrounding volunteer tourism more generally, literature focusing on volunteers’ negative, challenging, and/or harmful experiences is noticeably absent (McLennan, 2014). The idea that emotions have a role to play in volunteer tourism is mostly absent from the literature. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of volunteer tourism by highlighting how harm emerges as a dominant theme in volunteer tourism participants’ descriptions of their experiences.
**Research Objective**

The idea explored in this thesis is the result of my personal experience with volunteer tourism. In the summer of 2012 I participated in a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) sponsored internship in Ghana. During my four months in Ghana I worked for an NGO named FISTRAD (Foundation for Integrated and Strategic Development) that ran a community radio station and a women’s resource center. While working for this organization I lived in Sandema, a small, rural town in the Upper East region of Ghana. I was part of a group of six interns who were all living in Sandema but working for different NGOs. It was during my time volunteering in Sandema that I began to question the motivations, benefits and harms of volunteer tourism. There are many NGOs in Ghana that host international volunteers, but what I didn’t expect to see was the multitude of commercial operators sending volunteers on trips where they can “backpack with a purpose” (Operation Groundswell, 2014). While I was in Sandema for four months, I met many international volunteers who came with commercial operators and were traveling through Ghana, volunteering at local schools, orphanages and other types of organizations, passing through Sandema where they would volunteer at the local orphanage for no more than two weeks at a time. It was during these times, when an influx of foreigners stayed in Sandema, that I began to question the impacts that we, volunteers living in a foreign community, were not only causing but also receiving. I began to question the volunteer experience. I wanted to learn about what motivated people to volunteer abroad and to understand how volunteers felt and experienced their time abroad. These questions led to my main research question, how do volunteers understand and experience harm while volunteering abroad? The objective of my research is to identify if gaps exist between volunteers’ understanding of harm prior to their volunteer experience and their understanding of actual harms experienced post-
travel. The objective of identifying gaps in volunteers’ pre- and post-travel experiences is to explore how sending organizations might improve communication with volunteers to ensure harm is minimized.

**Scope of Research**

This thesis focuses on volunteers’ understanding of harm both pre- and post-travel. I aim to represent volunteers’ understanding and experiences through a mental models methodology. This thesis begins to introduce and explore some of the major themes discussed by participants and some of the gaps found between volunteers’ pre- and post-travel experiences. All participants were living in Calgary when I conducted my interviews, although volunteer destinations differed among participants. I attempt to make recommendations as to how sending organizations might address these themes and gaps through training, support and outreach programs. This thesis aims to situate findings within contemporary literature on volunteer tourism but does not offer a critical understanding of all themes discussed. Many complex themes were presented and addressed by volunteers and it is outside the scope of this thesis to begin to understand them all.

**Methodology**

In order to fulfill my objective I used a mental models methodology to explore volunteers’ understanding of harm pre- and post-travel. To do this I first conducted a detailed literature review on volunteer tourism (see Chapter Two). My results are derived from 11 personal interviews that were then coded and diagrammatically represented in the form of mental models. Chapter Three introduces the mental models approach and presents my research design and the approach I used to analyze my data.
This thesis is organized into six chapters. Following this introduction I present a literature review on volunteer tourism in general. The literature review highlights the history of volunteer tourism, key actors in the volunteer tourism industry and important concepts related to volunteer tourism such as volunteer tourism as a development strategy, power and privilege, and social justice. Chapter Three introduces readers to a theoretical understanding of the mental models approach as part of my data collection process as well as my research design and data analysis. Chapter Three also highlights contemporary uses of mental models and identifies some limitations of mental models research. Chapters Four and Five are structured in the same way, first presenting the results of my research in the form of a comprehensive mental model, followed by a discussion of the major themes expressed by participants. Chapter Four shows my results and discussion regarding volunteers’ understanding of harm pre-travel and Chapter Five shows my results and discussion on volunteers’ understanding of harm post-travel. The concluding Chapter Six summarizes my main findings, offers recommendations for how sending organizations may address gaps between volunteers’ understanding of harm pre-and post-travel, and discusses future research possibilities.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“First they went climbing in Kathmandu. Then they stumbled into a local school and taught English to baffled Nepalese. Fifty spliffs and a thousand emails later, they returned home with a Hindu charm and tie-dye trousers. They had lots of great stories but the world remained thoroughly unchanged (Barkham, 2006, as cited by Lyons & Wearing, 2008a, p.48)

Introduction

Travel and leisure are often embraced as gateways to the unknown. Through travel, people can satisfy their curiosity by “checking out the planet, collecting places”, and building up their knowledge of the world (Matthews, 2008, p.106). Increased globalization has made direct and experiential knowledge of the world and its citizens a celebrated and sought-after commodity (Matthews, 2008). In recent decades, problems surrounding the role of mass tourism in the broader macro-social issues linked with globalization have become apparent (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Stemming from these critiques on mass global tourism, a search for a new ‘ethical’ tourism, one that attempts to minimize negative impacts and somehow ‘give back’, has emerged (Lyons et al., 2012). At the forefront of this diversification is alternative tourism, which criticizes and offers solutions to mass tourism by proposing more socially and environmentally sustainable practices, envisioning small scale, people-centered, community-led programs, and seeking to spread the benefits of this tourism to hosts, guests, and the surrounding cultural and social environments (Barbieri, Santos & Katsube, 2011).

This chapter identifies and explores the roles of key actors in volunteer tourism programs. The history and emergence of volunteer tourism as a development strategy is discussed and critical concepts such as power, privilege and social justice in relation to volunteer tourism are explored. Exploration of these concepts aims to highlight the proposed benefits and harms of volunteer tourism.
Role of the NGO in Volunteer Tourism Programs

NGOs (non-government organizations) have emerged as the primary advocates and implementers of volunteer tourism programs (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Conran (2011) suggests that the growth of NGOs in recent decades parallels the growth and intensification of neoliberalism. Conran (2011) argues that cultural politics, which have supported the continued expansion of neoliberal cultural ideologies and economic policies, have normalized NGOs’ privatization of social services and economic development. She states that neoliberal policies and practices, “in which the role of the state is to protect and expand unregulated market exchange and privatized social services, have ushered in the continued expansion of neoliberal global capitalism and its corollary, the volunteer sector” (Conran, 2011, p.1455). The continued expansion of these neoliberal policies and practices have led NGOs, voluntary organizations and private foundations to take on the social, economic and environmental projects which governments no longer support. This neoliberal political and economic climate allows volunteer tourism projects to directly capitalize on matters of environmental sustainability, cultural survival and poverty reduction (Conran, 2011).

Whereas traditional mass tourism often implies the commodification and staging of culture for consumption, alternative tourism depends on active involvement and reflective interaction from the tourist (McIntosh & Zahra, 2009). Countering the current trend in tourism, which moves closer toward the search for global profits, volunteer tourism provides an alternative priority that strives for the decommodification of the mass tourism industry (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Moving beyond traditionally, well-known organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Volunteer Services Abroad and the United Nations, there are currently thousands of NGOs, charities and commercial volunteer tourism operators worldwide (Barbieri, Santos
Wearing (2008) argues that NGOs provide positive examples of policy strategies that shift the tourism industry in favour of decommodified practices (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). He states that NGOs can establish development initiatives, which are inclusive of indigenous and host-community priorities. NGOs “place a high priority on the quality of interaction between tourists and host communities and recognize that this interaction must move beyond superficiality” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a, p.8). NGOs, he argues, provide the avenue to engage in the decommodification of tourism as they “move beyond the most exclusive pursuit of industry profits and are able to place social, cultural and ecological value on local environments and communities” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a, p.8).

Even though volunteer tourism is increasingly marketed as a creative solution to a wide range of social and environmental issues, challenges can be seen when looking into the complexity of the relationship between the communities who host volunteer tourists and the NGOs whose role it is to act as a mediator between these communities and the international volunteers (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Wearing et al. (2005) claim that most NGOs see tourism as a tool that has the potential to effect new and positive attitudes, values and actions in both the host and tourist communities (Wearing et al., 2005). NGOs often engage in volunteer tourism through a range of activities and projects that aim to achieve socially appropriate tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Revenue to support NGOs and their programs comes from public memberships, public and private institutions and donations from philanthropic organizations (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). While those forms of revenue continue to play an important role for NGOs, in recent decades the notion of value-adding has made its way into fundraising strategies, in an attempt to face the issue of economic sustainability that is essential to the success and longevity of community based projects (Lyons & Wearing, 2008a). Value-adding may affect
who gets to volunteer abroad and who gets left out because of lack of funds. As volunteers begin to play an active role in fundraising efforts, the role volunteers have in volunteer tourism programs may be altered as a result.

**Role of the Volunteer in Volunteer Tourism Programs**

At one time, it was understood that volunteers were people who “offered services, time and skills to benefit others, provided voluntary aid while living in developing communities, and gained mutual learning, friendship and adventurousness” (Beigbeder 1991; Clark 1978; Gillet 1968, as cited by Lyons & Wearing, 2008b, p.148). Volunteers, generally, were recognized as those who provided assistance to a community without financial gain (Lyons & Wearing, 2008b). Today, volunteering is seen as an alternative mode of travel that is more rewarding and meaningful than traditional mass tourism. Volunteer tourism focuses on the altruistic and self-developmental experiences volunteers can gain, while at the same time, allows volunteers to participate in community development projects, scientific research, or ecological restoration projects (McIntosh & Zahra, 2009). While volunteers do, almost always, help others, their motivations for such travels are not always altruistic and the implied altruism associated with “helping” has recently been called into question in academic literature (Lyons & Wearing, 2008b).

While volunteer tourism exists in all generations, research shows that it is most marked among generation Y (those born between 1980 and 2000) travelers (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). Volunteer tourists are usually between the ages of 18 and 29 and approximately 80% of all volunteer tourists are female (Mostafanezhad, 2013). Partaking in a variety of work, most volunteer tourists work through NGOs in the social service arena engaging in work in schools, orphanages and working on construction projects (Keese, 2011). In Canada and the USA
specifically, international volunteer tourism programs often form part of college and university students’ formal education, offering students a chance to internationalize their degrees and work experience (Vandersteen et al., 2009). In recent years, volunteering during a gap year, whereby a person delays further education or employment by taking a period of time off in order to travel, has become increasingly popular (Millington, 2005 as cited by Lyons et al., 2012).

Pearce & Coglan (2008) argue that generation Y volunteer tourists have specific characteristics which support the rise in popularity in this form of travel. The authors state that these volunteers have a heightened awareness of global problems, sustainability issues and other travel opportunities accessed by Internet services. Howe and Strauss (2005) add to this by reporting that generation Y individuals are “frequent volunteers because they value variety, change, multitasking and believe they can make an impact” (Howe and Strauss, 2005, as cited in Pearce & Coglan, 2008, p.134). They also point out that generation Y individuals use a different decision-making style from previous generations whereby they make rapid and emotive decisions without much consideration for the long-term or their career consequences (Pearce & Coglan, 2008). Dougherty et al. (2004) agrees and describes generation Y travelers as a “sheltered and frequently rewarded generation with short-term horizons” (Dougherty et al., 2004, as cited in Pearce & Coglan, 2008, p.134). He claims that generation Y travelers are likely to more readily decide to volunteer and expect to be well looked after and even praised while doing so (Pearce & Coglan, 2008). The importance of understanding these views of volunteer tourists is focused on the travelers’ capacities to understand and interpret their experiences. In this view, volunteer tourism is not something that is to be consumed, rather, it is an opportunity for volunteers to undergo a process of self-reflection (in the best case) or self-indulgence (in the worst case). Or, perhaps, volunteer tourism provides people with a change from their regular
routines and enables people to get to a destination, volunteer for a time, and satisfy their travel ‘bug’.

**Role of Sending Organizations in Volunteer Tourism Programs**

Existing literature on volunteer tourism tends to take either a positive or negative stance when discussing the potential benefits of volunteer tourism (usually focused on the volunteer) or the problems associated with the field of tourism (usually focused on the host community). Few academic articles focus specifically on how to achieve mutual benefit through volunteer tourism (Raymond, 2008). Traditionally, NGOs and other non-profit organizations have developed volunteer tourism programs (VTPs). However, in recent decades, commercial providers are assuming the role of a sending organization which “develops and organizes a VTP and can range from a locally based non-profit organization, to a multinational commercially run organization” (Lyons et al., 2012; Raymond, 2008).

Out of the many volunteer programs that have been developed, NGOs traditionally had direct relationships with the host communities in which they operated. One of the major contemporary criticisms of NGOs and other sending organizations is that they develop products and services that do little to serve the needs of both the international volunteer and the host communities they aim to serve (Lyons et al., 2012). Sending organizations are criticized because they offer short-term programs where the “packaged” volunteer experience allows commercial operators to make a profit, regardless of the implications for host communities (Lyons et al., 2012).

The importance of NGOs and other sending organizations developing strong, honest and equitable relationships with host communities has been identified clearly in academic literature (Comlamh 2007, Simpson, 2007) and can be linked to the roots of volunteer tourism with
missionary movements, many of which have been criticized for paternalism and a lack of respect given to host communities (Lyons et al., 2012). Lyons & Wearing (2008a) argue that if sending organizations are to have any long-term influence, it is imperative that they take on an experiential learning approach to their programs. In an experiential offering, organizations would provide volunteers with “the opportunity not just to ‘experience’, but also reflect upon their behaviours and think critically about the bigger issues surrounding their program” (Raymond, 2008, p.54). In reality, every organization designs its own approach to its program. Organizations may have intensive training programs and support systems for volunteers, or training programs and support systems may be non-existent. It is up to the individual sending organization to organize and implement training, learning and support systems for volunteers.

**Volunteer Tourism as a Development Strategy**

“University of Life. Year one: Advanced Adventure Playgrounds. Part One Exam: go to the Third World and survive. No revision, interest, intellect or sensitivity required...it’s not the hippies on a spiritual mission who come here anymore, just morons on a poverty tourism adventure holiday...going to India isn’t an act of rebellion these days, it’s actually a form of conformity for ambitious middle class kids who want to be able to put something on their CV that shows a bit of initiative...Your kind of travel is all about low horizons dressed up as open-mindedness. You have no interest in India, and no sensitivity for the problems this country is trying to face up to. You also treat Indians with a mixture of contempt and suspicion which is reminiscent of the Victorian colonials. Your presence here, in my opinion, is offensive” (Sutcliffe 1999, pg. 140, cited in Simpson, 2004, p.148).

Volunteer tourism as a development strategy emerged from new, “ethical” ideas about mutual benefit, understanding and respect in international travel (Lyons et al., 2012, p.362). One of the most visible forms of volunteer tourism has emerged in ‘third world’ volunteer tourism programs. These programs aim to combine tourism with the altruism of development work, thereby producing a practice of international development work that is “doable, knowable and accessible to young travelers” (Simpson, 2004, p.681). Governments in “developing” countries
often actively seek tourism as a means of economic growth, believing that volunteer tourism, in particular, can bring countries multiple benefits, such as employment opportunities, small business development, and foreign exchange earnings (Scheyvens, 2002).

Many existing studies advocate volunteer tourism as a development strategy that leads countries to sustainable development, promotes the empowerment of locals in host communities, and contributes to cross-cultural interaction and exchange (Sin, 2010, p.983). In academic literature, volunteer tourism is commonly seen as a positive alternative to the harmful effects brought about by mass tourism such as a lack of consideration for local norms and customs; a general assumption is that volunteer tourism brings about mutual, positive change (Scheyvens, 2002; Uriely et al., 2003, as cited in Sin, 2010). Volunteer tourism is considered a rewarding and meaningful form of travel that allows tourists to participate in development projects related to community development, scientific research or ecological conservation and restoration (McIntosh & Zahra, 2009).

Simpson (2004) critiques volunteer tourism for offering a highly simplistic understanding of development, which downplays social and economic development goals, perpetuates negative stereotypes and engenders cross-cultural misunderstandings between participants (Conran, 2011). Development also invokes, provokes and produces emotions (Wright, 2012). It is no surprise that mainstream development has avoided the role emotions play in the creation and development of people and places but, as Sarah Ahmed (2004) points out, emotions do things. Emotions can bring people together and they can separate people, cultures and societies. Emotions play a strong role in perpetuating and recreating colonialism and racism (Wright, 2012). Understanding how emotions impact volunteer tourism participants and programs is
fundamental to understanding the workings of society and our goals for the future of development strategies.

Over the last ten years, short-term, “gap-year”, volunteer tourism programs have become recognized, institutionalized and professionalized by “western” society. These programs have largely contributed to the public face of development, encouraging young people to “do” development (Simpson, 2004). Simpson (2004) argues that these kinds of gap-year, short-term programs (usually no longer than six months) produce an overly simplistic geography of development that legitimizes the validity of young, unskilled labour as a development solution.

She claims that

Gap year projects create a publicly accepted ‘mythology’ of development. The notion of “third world” is highly important in the popularity of gap year programs. Indeed, the very legitimacy of such programs is rooted in a concept of a “third world”, where there is a ‘need’, and where European young people have the ability, and right, to meet this need” (Simpson, 2004, p.682).

Simpson (2004) argues that sending organizations, while frequently mentioning “development”, do not specify objectives or utilize theoretical approaches and actually do little in terms of strategic development planning. Simpson’s critique questions how well the needs of communities are identified and met by short-term, non-specific skilled volunteers who form the bulk of the volunteer workforce (Simpson, 2004).

**Poverty Tourism’s Effect on Volunteer Tourism Programs**

Volunteers are attracted to volunteer tourism programs in the “developing world”, often due to a naive perception and encounter with poverty and the “other”. Volunteer tourism, located abroad, creates a cultural and geographic distance that McGehee and Andereck (2008, p. 18) claim is “ripe for the othering of the voluntoured by the volunteer tourist”. The volunteer tourism industry constructs a narrative of philanthropy, repeating a mantra of “making a difference,
doing something worthwhile, and contributing to the future of others” (Simpson, 2004, p.683).

Through this narrative, poverty is constructed as something that is absolute and suffered by the foreign “other” who knows only poverty, disease, monotony and hunger (Simpson, 2004). Simpson (2004) argues that poverty thus becomes a definer of difference, as opposed to an experience shared by people marginalized by resources distribution. According to Lyons et al. (2012) the volunteer tourism industry is based on the idea that the “better off” can provide aid to the “worse off”. This ideology creates a dichotomy in volunteer tourism that some are saviours and others need saving (Conran, 2011). While this concept has been critiqued in academia (see Hall & Tucker, 2004; Lea, 1993; Mowforth & Munt, 2009; Sin, 2010), Conran (2011) argues that the “helping” narrative continues to dominate the volunteers’ motivations for participating in volunteer tourism projects. Conversely, alternative narratives suggesting that human beings are empathic by nature have also been suggested (see Rifkin, 2009).

When poverty becomes a definer of difference, poverty also becomes an issue that is distanced from the volunteers’ real lives. According to Simpson (2004), host communities and host community members become a spectacle rather than something to actively interact with. This dynamic often creates, and reproduces, the “poor-but-happy” tale within the volunteer tourism industry and amongst volunteers alike (Simpson, 2004, p.688). The “poor-but-happy” rhetoric implies that material deprivation equates to social and emotional wealth and that, within this narrative, poverty is something that poor people are content with. Such statements are problematic because they downplay poverty. Simpson (2004) argues that without proper reflective and critical thinking by the volunteers, the rhetoric of “poor-but-happy” can be turned into an experience that verifies this view and ignores the nature of, or reasons for, poverty. Suggesting that people “do not mind being poor” normalizes the structural inequality on which
the experience is based (Simpson, 2004, p.688; Conran, 2011, p.1459). Conran (2011) insists that, even though volunteer tourism can have positive effects on host communities and even if volunteers gain a deeper understanding of the larger politics surrounding their experience, their actions nevertheless contribute to the structural inequality they may be seeking to subvert (Conran, 2011).

Without radical structural change, the accomplishments of NGOs and volunteer tourism programs remain unsustainable because “the problems which volunteer tourism seeks to address are the outcome, rather than the cause of underdevelopment” (Tefler&Sharpley, 2008, p. 8, as cited in Conran, 2011, p.1467). The volunteer tourism industry is often marketed as if travel to and encounters with the “other” is enough to generate structural change (Simpson, 2004). This is simply untrue. If volunteer tourism is to achieve its broader goals, it must address the structural inequality on which it is based, and the policies and practices that perpetuate and exacerbate it (Conran, 2011). As long as the volunteer tourism industry fails to acknowledge this oversight, it retains a short-term focus on the individual advancement of its participants and projects (Simpson, 2004). Vogler (2004) argues that focusing on the individual in volunteer tourism treats the individual person as the fundamental unit for ethics. Vogler (2004) argues that structural inequality is a man-made injustice that is neither any one person’s fault nor the sort of thing any one person can remedy (Vogler, 2004, p. 31-32 as cited in Conran, 2011, p.1468). Because inequality is systemic, it is unclear what particular impact volunteer tourism, as a vehicle for development, can have on addressing these challenges (Conran, 2011).

The Role of Power and Privilege in Volunteer Tourism Programs

Advocates of volunteer tourism need to take seriously the post-colonial critiques against it (Conran, 2011). One understanding of volunteer tourists’ attitudes and actions is explained by
the volunteer tourism industry’s legacy of missionaries and soldiers, colonists and explorers, and teachers and entrepreneurs that implicate volunteer tourists’ attitudes and actions in a tradition of western power and privilege (Hindle, 2007, p.10, as cited in Conran, 2011, p.1464; Lyons et al., 2012). According to Sin (2010), within the volunteer tourism industry there is an assumption that the origins of tourists, and tourist services are from the “developed” world, while the host destinations are from the “developing” world. Volunteers who originate from “developing” countries are largely absent from academic literature as are the experiences and perspectives of host community members (Sin, 2010; Conran, 2011). While “caring relationships” are likely to occur and be accepted by both volunteer tourists and host community members through emotional experiences and interactions, volunteer tourism may still be another form of aid that perpetuates and reproduces existing power hierarchies between the rich and privileged, and the poor and less privileged (Sin, 2010, p.991).

The policies and practices of the volunteer tourism industry would do well to consider the ethics, morals and responsibilities that in my opinion should be central to alternative tourism. The social demarcation between rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged, creates a sense of responsibility whereby those who are privileged feel they have a responsibility for “others” (Sin, 2010). The privileged empathetic, usually those tourists who pay to travel and volunteer abroad and the tourism companies who earn profits from volunteers’ travels, are treated by volunteers and host communities as responsible for ensuring ethical tourism developments (Sin, 2010). Sin (2010) has argued that the reason why volunteers from “developed” countries feel this responsibility is a sense of guilt left over from a history of colonialism, a guilt which they may or may not be aware of. Emotions, such as guilt, are often left out of mainstream development literature but play an important role in shaping our understanding of the world and how it came
to be this way (Wright, 2012). This moral ambiguity automatically implies a lack of equal relationships since the “responsible” volunteers assume a position of power and privilege (Sin, 2010). The volunteer tourism industry would do well to address the neo-colonial critique levied against it if it hopes to contribute to broader structural inequality issues. McKinnon (2006, cited in Conran, 2011) argues that

If a moral right is placed so absolutely with the local (and the wrong, conversely, with what is foreign), it lays waste to the idea that there can be an international project for social justice and emancipation—–if one cannot ethically intervene in communities outside one’s homeland, then international development can only ever be imperialistic.

Although the neo-colonial critique must be taken seriously, volunteer tourism has also been recognized as a platform for structural change; if development and volunteer tourism projects were to be limited to neo-colonial encounters, would it ever be possible to see volunteer tourism as a tool for structural change and emancipation (Conran, 2011)?

While volunteer tourism alone will not solve issues of structural inequality, volunteer tourism has the potential to raise global consciousness, or to be a catalyst for global change, and provide opportunities for embodied engagement, education, advocacy and contributions to global justice movements (Conran, 2011). As John Hutnyk (1996) notes:

It is not enough just to raise questions about the moral propriety of First World youth taking holidays among the people of the Third World; it is not enough to encourage discussion of such contradictions in cafes along the banana-pancake trail. Nor is it sufficient to reflect critically upon the politics of charity, while working because something must be done (Hutnyk, p.222, as cited in Conran, 2011, p.1466).

In fact something must be done, and many scholars argue that volunteer tourism has the potential to increase exposure to social inequalities, environmental and political issues, thereafter increasing social awareness, compassion and support (Klandermans, 1992, as cited in McGehee
& Santos, 2005). While many volunteer tourism programs lack an overt political mission, these programs are likely to promote consciousness-raising and further activism by drawing together like-minded individuals and potentially establishing networks and idea exchanges (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

The Role of Social Justice and Consciousness-raising in Volunteer Tourism Programs

Volunteer tourists have the potential to incite change through processes of social justice and consciousness-raising (Conran, 2011). Processes of social justice have the ability to expand global consciousness of volunteer tourists by recognizing and addressing the existence of the very political-economic structural foundations that create and perpetuate global inequality, and then seeking social change (Bell, 1997; Crabtree, 1998; Wade, 2000; Simpson, 2004; Conran, 2011). Hytnyk (1996) and Conran (2011) suggest that there are reasons to examine the role volunteer tourists may have in political activism through the expansion of global consciousness. Of the tourists who engage in alternative travel, specifically volunteer tourism, many are likely seeking to gain a greater awareness of social justice (Conran, 2011). Conran (2011, p.1467) argues that this type of emerging social consciousness is “at the heart of volunteer tourism’s potential as a platform from which to develop structural change”.

McGehee and Santos (2005) argue that volunteer sending organizations can provide volunteers the opportunity to participate in social movements and activism through the various consciousness-raising experiences offered by the volunteer tourism industry. By promoting a socio-political objective, volunteer tourism participants can contribute to larger social justice agendas through social movements (Conran, 2011). Social movements aim to reshape governance and decision making through an organized effort by a significant group of people to
change (or resist change in) some major aspects of society (Marshall, 1994, as cited in McGehee & Santos, 2005).

An important first step to any social movement is consciousness-raising; an individual must be aware of issues and inequalities that exist in the world and their identification with and awareness of the “battlegrounds” of social conflict (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Mueller, 1992 as cited in McGehee & Santos, 2005, p.762). The uniqueness of the volunteer tourism experience may provide participants with a community that shares common goals and values, as well as provide grounds for the development of networks and consciousness-raising experiences. Unlike mass tourism, volunteer tourism often initiates changes in individuals’ perceptions of the origin of and their role in the perpetuation of social problems at a local and global level. Volunteer tourism allows volunteers to examine societal issues such as environmental, cultural, and societal problems in a deeply personal way through their own eyes, and often with their own hands (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

Social psychological theories suggest that a consciousness-raising experience is a necessary first-step to social movement participation. Through volunteer tourism, volunteers may establish networks that, through various consciousness-raising experiences, may encourage social movement participation (McGehee & Santos, 2005). McGehee & Santos (2005) claim that personal ties and networks that share one’s ideas and goals can be imperative to social movement participation and support. Individuals must first become aware of the inequalities and issues that exist and then discover change through personal experience. Individuals are much more likely to move beyond consciousness-raising to social movement participation through the support and encouragement of friends and networks. Ironically, the individual experience of consciousness-
raising almost always occurs within a group setting, a setting that volunteer tourism provides for
individuals (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

Volunteers today have an increasing freedom of choice; they want to travel, ‘find
themselves’, and satiate their desire for novelty in way that attempts to respects local cultures
and norms. Conveniently, according to Soderman & Snead (2008, p. 119) sending organizations
“are crying out for able-bodied young people”. While charities have traditionally dominated
volunteer tourism, universities are also taking a major role in the expansion of the volunteer
tourism industry. In “developed” countries, such as Canada, the USA and Australia, universities
package and market international volunteering experiences as “service-learning”. Service-
learning is defined as: [a] method under which students learn and develop through active
participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs,
and which are coordinated with a formal educational institution to address and support an
academic curriculum (University of Colorado 2005 as cited in Sin, 2009, p. 482). According to
Roberts (2003, as cited in Wearing et al., 2008, p. 149), higher education institutions recognize
international service learning as a “non-negotiable component of undergraduate education.” The
implications of this trend in education raise questions about the efficacy and ethics of service
learning led volunteer tourism. Currently, it appears to be unknown whether the removal of
choice from volunteer’s participation in international volunteering projects impacts not only the
quality of their work, and the cultural understanding it can engender, but more importantly,
whether the removal of choice from volunteer tourists creates more problems for host
communities than that removal aims to solve (Lyons & Wearing, 2008b).

The main goal of service learning is to encourage students’ active involvement in
understanding and solving social issues while cultivating responsible citizenship (Canada
&Speck, 2001 as cited in Sin, 2009). Service learning promises skills development and improved employability for volunteer participants. Increasingly, students undertake these experiences because of the expectation that the experiential knowledge acquired from service learning is essential for their education and future career (Wearing et al., 2008). Sin (2009) argues that service-learning speaks to students’ sense of duty and fairness, and encourages those who can to support those who are “left behind”. Service learning focuses on personal development and learning through experiential knowledge; in the case of volunteer tourism, the “authentic” knowledge provided by travel, is distinct from the focus of volunteer tourism which provides unpaid work on behalf of others (Sin, 2009; Matthews, 2008). In order for volunteer tourism to move beyond the criticisms of mass tourism and develop as a sustainable alternative, those affected by volunteer tourism (i.e. host communities, volunteers, and sending organizations) need to be actively involved in all stages of developing volunteer tourism programs (Raymond, 2008).

Currently, research into volunteer experiences shows that many sending organizations do not encourage experiential knowledge. Raymond (2008) points out that, in volunteer tourism, there seems to be the belief that through contact with the “other” volunteers will “automatically experience a broadening of horizons and develop a deep understanding of host communities”. A number of authors (see Crabtree, 1998; Griffin, 2004; Jones, 2005; & Simpson, 2005), draw attention to the inaccuracy of these assumptions, and suggest experiential learning should be a stronger component of volunteer tourism programs. Volunteers often have idealistic assumptions about a country or their potential contribution in a community development project; this idealism can have major implications for host communities and local community members (Raymond, 2008). Volunteers often embrace encounters and interactions with locals as a means of satiating
their curiosity and accumulating experiential knowledge of the “other” (Matthews, 2008). MacCannell (1989) argues that within the emotional and embodied volunteer experience, locals are constructed as the anchor point that reminds travelers of their location, a location different from home. It is the local people who embody a specific time and place, and without them, MacCannell (as cited in Matthews, 2008, p.106) argues, “one’s trip would be meaningless.” Local encounters are highly valued by volunteers for their memorable significance and for the insight they offer into a place and culture. Thus, both experiential and service knowledge have the potential to provoke an existential transformation in volunteer tourists through “authentic” moments, often experienced in the volunteers’ direct interactions with host community members. According to Noy (2004), volunteers undergo remarkable personal changes as a natural consequence of an extraordinary experience. These changes are often stimulated and validated by the uniqueness of the experience, which, in turn, is founded on the uniqueness of the destination, including the people (i.e. not just physical surroundings).

The Emotional Geography of Volunteer Tourism

Recent years have shown an increasing exploration of the ways emotions affect how we understand our past, present and future. The emotional geographies of our lives are dynamic, deeply personal and transformational. Whether we feel joy, sadness or excitement, emotion has the power to transform the shape of our lives (Bondi et al., 2007). Surprisingly, the emotional landscapes of geography have been avoided in much of the mainstream literature (Wright, 2012). Bondi et al. (2007) argue that the discipline of geography is often presented as an emotionally barren terrain where spaces are ordered by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics. This radical separation of reason from emotion has done little to increase our understanding of and experiences with the world (Wright, 2012). But
emotions are ‘tricky’ and “there is little we do with our bodies that we can think apart from feeling” (Davidson & Milligan, 2007, p. 523). Emotions are not easy to define or demarcate, they are not easily observed or mapped, and yet they inform every aspect of our lives (Bondi et al., 2007).

Every part of our lives is deeply entrenched in our emotional responses to our experience of events; whether it is a low cloud that makes us feel gloomy or bright blue skies that raises our spirits, emotions have an interactional quality. Emotions have concrete effects on surroundings and shape all of our experiences, affecting our sense of time and space (Davidson & Milligan, 2007). Davidson & Milligan (2007) highlight the fact that attempts to understand emotion or make sense of space are circular. Emotions are understandable (i.e. sensible) only in the context of particular spaces, moreover places must be felt to make sense. These same authors conclude that meaningful senses of space only occur between people and places.

Volunteer tourism is a deeply emotional experience. Wearing et al (2008) argue that volunteering can be a life-changing experience that has the potential lead the individual into a journey of self-discovery. Not only is volunteering a personal experience, but it is also a highly social experience. In international volunteer tourism projects, volunteers often travel in groups to live and work in a host community. Emotional relations and interactions with the self, others, places and/or things, are part of our personal geographies (Bondi et al., 2007). Wright (2012, p. 1116) points out that “emotions are not purely personal feelings that lie within stable, coherent subjects” but are relational. Emotions are found in between people, and in between people and place. Interestingly, there has been little investigation into the emotional experiences associated with volunteer tourism. My research aims to explore how volunteers understand and experience
harm while volunteering abroad in order to contribute to the literature on the emotional and embodied experiences of volunteer tourism.

**Understanding Harm in Volunteer Tourism Programs**

Volunteer tourism is often understood by tourists as an alternative form of tourism. Alternative to mass tourism, where tourists are supposedly “uncaring hedonists” and host communities are objects of exploitation and commodification, volunteer tourists have been widely positioned by the tourism industry as “compassionate ambassadors of goodwill” and host communities are seen as respected equals and grateful recipients of assistance (Guttentag, 2011). The apparent benefits of volunteer tourism have been widely discussed in the literature (see Wearing 2001; Jones 2005; McGehee & Santos 2005; McIntosh & Zahra 2009; Wearing et al. 2008), but the potential of volunteer tourism to produce negative impacts and/or harms on the individuals and communities involved remains scarce (Guttentag, 2011). Harm, understood as a negative impact that causes physical or mental damage or injury, has been highlighted in the personal changes that volunteers experience as well as in the actual work that volunteers achieve (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

Wearing et al. (2008) claim that volunteer tourism provides tourist with an experience that enhances positive personal transformations (further discussed in Chapter 3: Volunteering and the ‘self’). However, these proposed personal transformations in volunteers may only occur after the benefits of the volunteer project have been established. If the work done by volunteers is in any way detrimental to the host community, then the benefit gained by volunteer tourists, has been gained at the expense of the host community (Guttentag, 2011). Furthermore, according to Brookes (2003) the notion that personal transformations that volunteers experience will remain upon their return home cannot be perceived as inevitable.
While the work that volunteers achieve may seem intrinsically beneficial, the unintended consequences receive little attention and are highlighted here: (1) projects may create dependency if host communities begin to rely on external sources of assistance; (2) projects may reduce local job opportunities by providing free labour; (3) volunteers may lack skills to perform assigned work and remain only for brief periods of time; and (4) project goals may conflict with host community needs/goals. There remains scant literature discussing the emotional impacts of volunteer tourism on both volunteers and host community members (Guttentag, 2011). The aforementioned unintended consequences of volunteer tourism are important for sending organizations to consider when planning and sending volunteers abroad so that harms may be minimized.

**Concluding Comments**

This literature review provides background knowledge on volunteer tourism, an understanding of the main actors involved in the volunteer tourism industry and some insight into the important concepts and negative impacts that are associated with volunteer tourism. The following chapter (Chapter Three) introduces the mental models approach to research and provides a theoretical understanding of mental models as well as a rationalization of why I chose to use a mental models approach for my research. Chapter Three also outlines my research design and my approach to data analysis.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I identify gaps in the literature that led to the rationale behind selecting a mental models research methodology. I introduce mental models as a research method and discuss varying applications of mental models research. My research design and my approach to analyzing data are presented. I discuss participant selection, ethical considerations, transcribing data, data organization and limitations that were encountered.

Volunteering and ‘the Self’

Volunteering can be a life-changing experience, but it can also lead the individual into a journey of self-discovery and self-doubt (Wearing et al., 2008). Volunteer tourism is a form of leisure travel that often gives tourists the opportunity to develop and improve their sense of self, something that Dumazedier (1974) argues is difficult to achieve through work or other types of institutions in modern society (as cited in Wearing et al., 2008). According to Kelly (1983, p.73), contemporary life forces individuals to conform to social expectations and roles, and these roles “provide little opportunity to get in touch with one’s self”. Leisure travel creates conditions whereby individuals can “try on” identities, they can choose who they want to be and what they want to do (Wearing et al., 2008). Volunteers interact with new places, people and activities in complex ways, giving them many opportunities to experiment with different representations of who they are, or who they want to be. It is exactly this ability of leisure travel to bring about change in individuals that is the most relevant to understanding the relationship between volunteer tourism and the self (Wearing et al., 2008).

While many of the motivations for volunteering abroad revolve around naive ideas of poverty and stereotypes of the “other”, recent research shows that “these idealized visions, once overcome, clear the way for more fruitful, reflective and realistic depictions of the self and the
other” (Matthews, 2008, p. 102. See also Doron, 2005; Lyons, 2005; West, 2005; Young, 2005; O’Reilly, 2006). While there appears to be a positive trend in volunteers’ motivations, critics suggest that volunteer tourism is often less about altruism than about self-fulfillment (Soderman & Snead, 2008). Considering that volunteer tourism is a relatively new form of leisure travel, research into the specific motivations for volunteering abroad remains scarce. It is important to examine the volunteers’ motivations for participating in volunteer tourism, if alternative forms of tourism such as volunteer tourism are found to have a positive effect on social movement participation (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

Wearing (as cited in Lepp, 2008) notes two benefits of volunteer tourism: an increased awareness of the self, and an increased awareness of others, which then lead to personal growth. These benefits tend to correspond with volunteers’ motivations for participating in volunteer tourism projects. Generally, volunteering is undertaken for a number of reasons, such as: becoming a global citizen, increasing cross-cultural understanding, seeking an authentic new experience, using free time constructively, gaining new skills and contacts for future employment, and/or pursuing altruistic intentions (Anthoney, 1999; Foster & Fernandez, 1996; Soderman & Snead, 2008; Lyons et al., 2012; Conran, 2011). Volunteering also provides a range of emotional and embodied benefits to volunteers including: enjoyment, satisfaction, self-confidence, cross-cultural understanding/exchange, the development of new skills, social networking and an increased interest in issues surrounding social justice (McGehee, 2002; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; McGehee & Sonatos, 2005; Lepp, 2008). Volunteer tourism has also attracted people who desire to see, touch, feel and connect with natural spaces. Volunteer tourists who are passionate about the ecology and the conservation of natural areas and/or peoples may
chose to volunteer with organizations that offer experiences in the natural environment (Newsome et al., 2013).

Volunteer tourism also plays an important role as a facilitator of “global citizenship” (Lyons et al., 2012). Global citizenship, when understood as a moral position that celebrates cultural diversity, human rights and an active concern for the needs of others, has a central goal of harmonious relations between the peoples of the world (Carter, 2004, as cited in Lyons et al., 2012). Many sending organizations claim that volunteers’ experiences improve global citizenship by providing participants with an opportunity to become more involved in “changing the world” (McGehee & Santos, 2005 p. 774). Sending organizations often propose that volunteers gain openness to and acceptance of other cultures, heightened cultural awareness and sensitivity and empathy towards others. Literature suggests that global citizenry increases volunteers’ sense of belonging, responsibility, and political action, in a way that differs from traditional ideas of citizenship. For instance, volunteer tourism is thought to be a facilitator of global citizenship because of the role it plays in promoting intercultural communication, building tolerance, shattering stereotypes, and exchanging values (Lyons et al., 2012). While global citizenry does offer many benefits, Raymond and Hall (2008) argue that volunteer tourism sending organizations have a responsibility to minimize cross-cultural misunderstanding, which can actually threaten to reinforce, instead of diminish, cultural stereotypes (as cited in Lyons et al., 2012).

In order to minimize the potential for cultural harm, volunteers’ motivations regarding cross-cultural understanding need to be understood in greater depth. Cross-cultural understanding is often marketed as one of the broader benefits of volunteer tourism. According to Conran (2011), cross-cultural understanding is a personal experience that is central to
consciousness raising and is a source of learning, appreciation, inspiration, cultural respect, solidarity and equality.

According to Lyons et al. (2012), in recent decades political and community leaders have promoted the benefits of cultural exchange and cultural exchange programs, suggesting that they promote acceptance and tolerance of cultural diversity and engender global citizenship. Proponents of cultural exchange programs highlight their importance in macro-level relationships between countries and cultures. Proponents of cultural exchange programs also claim that these programs aid in the abolition of “neocoloniality” (Atbach & Lewis, 1998, as cited in Wearing et al., 2008b). While cultural exchange programs have been promoted by politicians as a cure to a range of regional conflicts, some critics argue that they actually mask and reinforce capitalism and the values of globalization (Wearing et al., 2008b). Lyons et al. (2012) state that cross-cultural understanding does not occur through contact alone, and argue that if critical thought is not engaged in by volunteer tourists, existing stereotypes may be reinforced, thereby deepening dichotomies. Lyons et al. (2012) also question the mutual benefit of cross-cultural programs “given the inherent complexities of significant cultural (and economic) divides and, more importantly, the dearth of research on host community experiences” (see also McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Woosnam & Lee, 2011). Barbieri, Santos & Katsube (2011) suggest that cross-cultural understanding should be understood as a goal of volunteer tourism rather than a natural result of sending volunteers abroad.

Many volunteers conceptualize volunteer tourism as an alternative experience that allows them to move beyond the mass tourism practices of passing through places as an outsider (Lyons et al., 2012). Volunteers desire an experience that is different from mass tourism; they want an experience that regular tourists are not exposed to (Lepp, 2008). Volunteers’ search for new and
sensuous experiences is at the core of volunteer tourism. According to Sin (2009) the search for authenticity by volunteer tourists has been coupled with a search for sensuous experiences and heterogeneous spaces. Sin (2009) also notes that volunteer tourists are often looking for interruptions and distractions from the monotony of their everyday lives. They search for new experiences to satiate their desire and confirm their identity in “a fragmented and uncertain postmodern world” (McIntosh & Zahra, 2009, p. 541).

Volunteers are often exposed to intimate moments as they take part in shared experiences. The search for intimate experiences is at the very heart of volunteer tourism and can involve building relationships among group members or relationships with host community members (Conran, 2011; Wearing et al., 2008). According to Conran (2011, p. 1459): intimacy in volunteer tourism refers to an “embodied experience that arouses a sense of closeness and a story about a shared experience”. Conran (2011, p. 1459) argues that volunteer tourism is intimately experienced and often involves a yearning for something shared; a narrative that includes oneself and others. In direct opposition to the consumption of commodities, intimacy requires something emotional and something that is real rather than superficial, something requiring enduring involvement rather than purely situational involvement, and a commitment to wanting to identify with the other.

Intimate experiences with host community members are major motivating factors for most volunteers. Conrad (2011) argues that volunteers seek out these intimate experiences in order to construct narratives about their new friends and “family” from abroad. In order for volunteer tourism to shed its neo-colonial critique, the power-laden exchanges between volunteers and host community members must be acknowledged. It is through intimate encounters that participants in the volunteer tourism industry create stories about themselves and
others, but it is also through these intimate encounters that goodwill and compassion can be used to both justify and depoliticize the volunteer experience. Unfortunately, studies into the emotional and intimate relationships created and impacted by volunteer tourism are largely absent from the literature and attempt to be addressed in this research.

Research on sending organizations’ guiding principles remains scarce. According to Raymond (2008), sending organizations should take a holistic approach to the volunteer experience. The volunteering experience should be viewed as a continuous process, not an isolated event. Sending organizations should offer volunteers pre-departure preparation, in-country support and a post-experience debrief to aid volunteers who may be dealing with reverse culture shock. While these types of considerations aid volunteers in their adaptation process, there appears to be no study that has tested the effectiveness and success of these processes on volunteers’ emotional well-being. Communication between sending organizations and volunteers differs depending on each organization’s guiding principles. The research reported here aims to identify gaps between volunteers’ understanding of potential harm to themselves and their hosts that existed prior to their volunteer experience and their understanding, post-travel, of actual harms experienced. The objective of identifying gaps in the pre- and post-travel awareness and experiences of volunteers is to understand how sending organizations can improve communication with volunteers to ensure harm to volunteers and host communities is minimized.

**Mental Models Approach**

One approach used to identify gaps in knowledge between communicators is mental models research. Mental models research can be used to understand a wide variety of issues and concepts and is commonly used to identify gaps in knowledge that are held in common among communicators, for example sending organizations, and their audience, volunteers (Craik, 1943;
Olsen, Arvai & Thorp, 2011). Mental models are psychological, diagrammatic representations of real or hypothetical situations that are constructed to represent people’s perceptions and understanding of a wide variety of issues and concepts (Craik, 1943; Olsen, Arvai & Thorp, 2011). Each person’s understanding of the world, the self, and their behaviour in interacting with their environment depends heavily on the conceptualizations of the world they hold. Mental models are an individual’s internal representations of what they have in their mind and what guides their use of things (Norman, 1983).

The concept of mental models was first conceptualized by Kenneth Craik (1943). Craik suggested that the very nature of thinking is the manipulation of internal representations and understandings of the world. He stated that the mind processed mental representations of information in the form of symbols. He believed that

If the organism carries a ‘small-scale model’ of external reality and of its own possible actions within its head, it is able to try out various alternatives, conclude which is the best of them, react to future situations before they arise, utilize the knowledge of past events in dealing with the present and future, and in every way react in a much fuller, safer, and more competent manner to the emergencies which face it (Craik, 1943, p.61).

While the aforementioned belief focuses specifically on emergencies, contemporary use of mental models has expanded to include broader applications than to emergencies only (see Applications of Mental Models). Based on this theory proposed by Craik, Johnson-Laird (1983) suggested that mental models may carry important lessons for cognitive science and reasoning. Norman (1983) provides some observations of mental models in the cognitive process. He notes that mental models are incomplete, limited, unstable, and have undefined boundaries (Norman, 1983). While these are all true, mental models are still useful because they are naturally evolving; an individual continues to modify a mental model until they reach a result that is
workable and functional (Norman, 1983). Jones et al. (2011) describe mental models as highly dynamic models that are able to adapt to changing circumstances and evolve over time. They argue that because of cognitive limitations, it may not be possible nor desirable to represent every detail that may be found in reality and it is through eliciting different perspectives that a mental model aids in improved communication and decision making (Jones et al., 2011; Smythe & Thompson, 2014).

More recent work on mental models emphasizes their use as a tool to aid in risk communication and the decision-making process (Olsen, Arvai & Thorp, 2011). The purpose of mental models in risk communication is to provide a means to “supply laypeople with the information they need to make informed, independent judgments about risks to health, safety, and the environment” (Morgan et al., 2002). According to Morgan et al. (2002) effective communication focuses on providing people with information on things they need to know but do not know already. Morgan et al. (2002) claim that in risk communication, communicators often ask technical experts what they think the public should know, without asking the members of the public who will actually be using the knowledge. In these cases, those who make judgements may not know very much about the knowledge, or the needs, of the intended audience. This is problematic because the intended audience may become confused, annoyed, or altogether disinterested (Morgan et al. 2002). As used in risk communication, mental models aim to bridge the gap between experts and non-experts by representing all stakeholders’ beliefs and communicating the issues that recipients most need to understand.

In the context of risk communication, mental models are grounded on the idea that people assemble their knowledge of risks into conceptual “maps of ideas”. The development of a mental model entails eliciting these conceptual maps from participants through carefully designed, open-
ended interview protocols. Once elicited, these maps may be analyzed to identify the gaps in knowledge between stakeholders. Identifying these gaps allows analysts to pin-point people’s specific knowledge about risks and contributes to more efficient and effective risk communication strategies at the individual, agency and community level (Zaksek & Arvai, 2004).

**Applications of Mental Models**

The theoretical review of mental models intends to provide relevant information about the nature, history and establishment of the mental models approach in multiple aspects of life. In this section, applications of mental models research in risk communication are briefly summarized and reviewed.

While mental models are applied to multiple fields of research such as: human-computer interaction (Carroll and Olsen, 1987; Di Sessa, 1984), language (Collins and Getner, 1987), systems dynamics (Doyle and Ford, 1998), education (Driver and Easley, 1978; Wu, T. B., 2009) and cognitive science (Galotti, 1989; Kempton, 1986), mental models in risk communication and decision making are the most relevant for this research project and are explored more thoroughly than other applications.

Kovacs, Fischhoff and Small (2001) conducted a study examining the perceptions of risk for PCE (perchloroethylene) use among dry cleaning store owners and dry cleaning customers. PCE, classified as a probable carcinogen by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and IARC (International Agency for Research on Cancer), is used by approximately 85% of commercial dry cleaners in the USA. Dry cleaner owners and customers may have some control over their exposure to PCE but decisions to exercise control are often affected by awareness and perceptions of health risks. Kovacs et al. (2001) interviewed 20 dry cleaners and 30 customers in Atlanta, Georgia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They found that dry cleaning customers had
almost no knowledge of the dry cleaning process, PCE and/or the possible negative health effects. Dry cleaning owners had knowledge of PCE, but many denied cause for concern. Communication strategies between dry cleaning owners and customers were informed by using mental models and a better design for communication between dry cleaning owners and customers was implemented.

Newman et al., (2009) explored existing knowledge and beliefs surrounding HIV vaccines. Millions of dollars are invested each year into HIV vaccine development. The acceptance of HIV vaccines is not guaranteed and vaccine developers face many challenges such as stigma, mistrust of government agencies and medical research, and AIDS conspiracy theories. The US CDC (Center for Disease Control) recommended research be done to address these challenges. Newman et al. (2009) conducted 9 focus groups (including 7-13 persons per group) in 3 different venues and included adult participants from segments of the population disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. Venues for the focus groups were chosen based on 3 criteria: serving individuals at elevated risk for HIV infection, including ethnically and sexually diverse adults, and representing likely areas for the future distribution of HIV vaccines. The study reported a variety of misconceptions and fears; these views may present challenges to HIV vaccine acceptability.

Mental models research has also been beneficial in understanding what lay people know about the disposal of nuclear waste. Skarlatidou, Cheng and Haklay (2012) conducted a study examining lay people’s understanding of the disposal of nuclear waste. Nuclear waste contains radioactive chemical elements that are commonly disposed of through geological disposal. In the UK, public involvement is required in the selection of nuclear waste disposal sites. After several failed attempts at locating an appropriate disposal site, Skarlatidou et al. (2012) conducted a
study of 20 laypeople and 5 experts to compare knowledge and identify gaps and misconceptions. While experts focused mainly on scientific information and engineering principles, findings showed that although laypeople knew little about nuclear waste, they had an overwhelmingly negative perception of it. Participants suggested that more information regarding the risks, accidents, and treatment of accidents, presented in a way that was easily understood, would provide them with a higher level of confidence and security. This study led to the development of an online information system built for the improvement of public understanding of nuclear waste in the UK.

Bostrom, Morgan, Fischhoff and Read (1994) used mental models to better understand the growing public concern and perception of global climate change. Bostrom et al. (1994) argued that individual citizens can play an important role in climate policy and thus their understanding of climate change and climate related issues is imperative. Interviewers conducted 93 mental model interviews in 3 studies in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. The first study used mental models to elicit Carnegie Mellon University students’ understanding of climate change. Bostrom et al. (1994) found many basic misconceptions about climate change, specifically surrounding the belief that climate change is related to the ozone layer. Part of the study also used mental models to elicit understanding of climate change from 37 interviews conducted at an annual automobile show in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Results showed that laypeople had several problematic misconceptions about climate change such as the belief that the weather and climate were the same thing. They held many false understandings about the greenhouse effect (only 53 percent agreed that it does, or will, exist) and most participants believed automobiles were the main cause of global warming. When individuals were asked about the effects of climate change, their views were largely in agreement with the expert model, although some major effects
(increase in coastal damage) were not mentioned. This study opened the door to multiple inquiries on public perception and risk communication regarding climate change.

Zaksek and Arvai (2004) explored tradeoffs between wild land fire risks and benefits. Wild land fires are naturally occurring and play an important role in ecosystem renewal. While wildfires have many benefits, such as releasing soil nutrients and triggering regeneration, they also pose a significant threat to environments and people alike. Risks surrounding wild land fires consist of a loss of commercial, social and ecologically valuable forest stands, and a threat to people’s lives, property and security. The challenge for wild land fire management is to balance two objectives: the maintenance of fire as a natural disturbance and the minimization of risks to people and the environment. Zaksek and Arvai (2004) conducted a mental models study consisting of 6 experts and 26 nonexperts in Divine, Pemberton and D’Arcy, British Columbia. These areas have been exposed to blanket fire suppression policies since the early 1900s. The study revealed many gaps in nonexpert knowledge of wild land fire risks and benefits.

Another example of the mental models approach was to inform community outreach for a campus recycling program. Olson, Arvai and Thorp (2011) conducted a study that used mental models to better understand student and faculty knowledge and misconceptions about recycling.

Research Design

Mental models help communicators (in my case, the sending organizations) better understand their audience (volunteers) by eliciting the understanding of the audience on a particular issue or concept (for example, understandings of harm). This knowledge is then interpreted and diagrammatically constructed into a map, see Figure 3.1.
Identifying knowledge gaps among volunteers’ pre- and post-volunteer experiences may allow communicators to create more efficient and targeted programs that aim to improve the audience’s knowledge on the particular issue, in this case, harms experienced by volunteers when volunteering abroad. In order to understand how volunteers experience harm I decided to take a qualitative approach to my research. Qualitative methods allowed me to explore the depth of participants’ understandings and experiences of harm and provided some understanding of how volunteer tourism projects might influence volunteers’ experiences of harm. Host community members were not interviewed in this study but would be beneficial in future research on understanding harms in volunteer tourism.

Participants

Recruitment of participants took place at the University of Calgary during the summer and fall of 2014. Interviews with participants took place on the University of Calgary campus and in local cafés around Calgary based on what was convenient for the interviewees.
Participants were recruited through posters I created (see Appendix 1) that were distributed throughout the University of Calgary campus. A mass email with the poster was also sent out to all of the university clubs (e.g. Engineers Without Borders, Women in Leadership, Palliser Club). The poster briefly explained the project as well as the aims of the project, and requested that potential participants email me to schedule an interview. The poster asked people who were either interested in volunteering abroad, but had yet to volunteer abroad, or for people who already had volunteered abroad and wanted to share their experiences, to contact me. The poster specified that the interview would aim to find out more information about how volunteers feel and experience the impacts of their work while abroad.

In total, the sample consisted of eleven in-depth interviews. Three interviews were completed with participants who were organizing their volunteering trip, but had yet to depart and eight interviews were completed with participants who had already volunteered abroad and were interested in sharing their experiences. While I had hoped to interview an equal number of males and females, only one male responded to the poster. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes (the shortest) to 1.75 hours (the longest). All interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by me. All mental models were designed by me.

**Design of Mental Models**

I developed an expert model based on an intensive literature review that was then combined with interviews with three experts in the field of volunteer tourism, see Figure 3.2. I use the term “expert” because that is the term that has been used in previous mental models research, but the expert model should be thought of as a comprehensive model that displays current knowledge and understanding on a particular issue (in this case the volunteer experience) through an intensive literature review and interviews with experts in the field of study. The
experts were: (1) an Associate Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). This professor has over 25 years of experience in Tourism Studies and has received awards from Industry and Government for his work in the Leisure and Tourism. He also has authored 10+ books in the field of leisure and tourism and over 50 refereed papers, (2) an Associate Professor at Michigan State University (MSU). This Professor focuses on research surrounding sustainable development and decision making. He has extensive experience in multiple countries and has authored multiple articles in the area of Tourism in Development, and (3) a Volunteer Coordinator for an organization in Edmonton. This expert works with volunteers who participate in projects and is their main coordinator and contact while in the field. She has transitioned from being a volunteer herself to organizing and coordinating volunteer led projects.

Figure 3.2: “Expert,” or Comprehensive Model
The expert model shows three main themes: motivation, benefit and harm. By addressing these three themes I hoped to gain a clear understanding of the volunteer experience from the beginning to the end of their volunteer trip. Each interview conducted with volunteer participants resulted in one or two mental models depending on whether or not the participant had participated in a volunteer trip abroad. These models displayed individual participants’ knowledge on the topic of harm either pre- or post-volunteer experience. Participants who were preparing to volunteer abroad but had not left yet (three participants) had one mental model per interview whereas participants who had already volunteered abroad had two mental models, one each for the pre-volunteer trip and the post-volunteer trip. This resulted in eleven pre-travel mental models and eight post-travel mental models. Any concepts the participants spoke about were noted in their individual mental model regardless of their presence or absence in the expert model. This study was approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Facilities Research Ethics Board on September 18, 2014, Permit #REB14-0513.

**Interview Guide**

The interview guide and the logistics of interviews were largely influenced by the expert model and interviews with experts. Participants were asked open-ended questions allowing their voice to be unobstructed by my line of questioning. Each interview was structured the same way, beginning with: *What can you tell me about what motivated you to volunteer abroad?* Following this question participants were asked the following two questions: *What can you tell me about the benefits you expect/expected to gain from volunteering abroad?* And *What can you tell me about the harms you expect/expected to experience while volunteering abroad?* For participants who were interviewed after returning from their volunteer experience, additional questions were asked in order to gain understanding of their thoughts and experiences after completing a
volunteer trip abroad. For example, I asked: *Now that you’ve told me about what benefits and harms you expected to gain from your trip abroad, can you tell me about what benefit and/or harms you actually experienced or perceived while volunteering abroad?* I used some follow up questions such as *Can you tell me why that’s important?* And *Can you expand on that a little more?* to expand and clarify topics participants discussed.

**Analyzing Mental Models**

In terms of analysis, the expert model provided me with an understanding of the volunteer experience as a whole. The pre- and post-volunteer experience mental models focused on highlighting volunteers’ understanding of harm before going abroad and after returning from international volunteer trips. Each participant was asked to express their motivations for going abroad, the benefits they hoped to gain and/or gained from their trip and their understanding of harms/actual harms experienced on their trip. Using this type of mental model comparison allowed me to visually detect gaps in volunteers’ understanding of harm between their pre- and post-volunteer experience.

**Creating and Reading Mental Models**

Models were created by drawing out participants’ responses to interview questions. I used OmniGraffle software, which is commonly used for diagramming and graphic design, to create my mental models. Figure 3.1 is an example of a mental model I created. Figure 3.1 represents one participant’s motivations and understanding of harm before they had engaged in their volunteer experience. Looking specifically at harms, we can see that this volunteer spoke about two main potential harms: (1) health and (2) safety. When discussing potential harms, this participant spoke about the fear of getting sick. Getting sick would negatively impact his/her overall health, which would then be understood as a harm. As we move toward the center of the
model the categories become increasingly broad; from specific harm, to greater concern (in this case health and/or safety concerns), to a harm. The solid boxes in the mental model represent topic that were represented in the “expert” model. The dashed boxes represent topic that were not represented in the “expert” model. Content from each of the participants’ mental maps that I created is discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Limitations

A challenge I encountered through using mental models was the categorizations of “benefit” and “harm”. From my own experience, and from the literature I could deduce that most volunteers would view their experience as positive and/or beneficial, even if they underwent serious challenges during their experience abroad (for example, a volunteer may undergo a harm related to their emotional wellbeing that was very difficult for them, even traumatic, but the fact that they overcame this challenge made them feel like a stronger person subsequently). So, the harm that happens in the moment can actually be perceived as a benefit due to personal growth in the long-run. I asked participants to discuss their views of both benefits and harms in five stages: (1) pre-departure, (2) upon arrival, (3) in country, (4) preparation for departure, and (5) post-trip. I found these stages were beneficial because they helped volunteers remember specific moments, and also helped me to understand why something was understood as a harm in each individual stage. The stages were used in the interview process but were not incorporated into the mental model because the model aimed to understand perceptions of harms/actual harms as a whole regardless of when they happened. Upon completion of the interview, the majority of participants commented on how great it was to revisit their experience. They commented on how, by viewing their experience through a benefit/harm lens, they were able to better
understand some of their emotional responses to their volunteer experience both during and after their volunteer experience.

Another challenge I encountered was finding participants who had not yet gone on a volunteer trip abroad but were interested in and/or planning to go in the near future. Although I had hoped to have more than ten interviews of this type, I was only able to interview three. Fortunately, because I had set the interviews around the aforementioned 5 stages, I was able to use all participants’ pre-departure (stage 1) comments to create mental models for pre-volunteer perceptions of harm.

The main challenge I faced involved the limitations of mental models research. While mental models are excellent at visually showing gaps in knowledge, they may lack the depth required to begin to understand why participants see specific experiences as harmful. That is not to say that the mental models were ineffective, as they fulfilled my objective of finding gaps in knowledge between volunteers’ pre- and post-volunteer experiences. However, I was able to gain understanding of these gaps through revisiting interview transcripts and pulling out quotes that helped explain the depth of participant’s experiences as seen in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

In the following chapters, I display mental models and discuss my findings on volunteers’ understandings of harm.
CHAPTER 4: VOLUNTEERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF HARM: PRE-VOLUNTEER TRIP

The findings in this chapter are based on interviews with participants who spoke about the hazards of international volunteer projects, from their own perspectives as volunteers, before participating in a volunteering abroad trip. A comprehensive model of volunteers’ combined responses including the number of volunteers who voiced a specific pre-travel harm is presented at the beginning of this chapter (Figure 4.1). Participant’s individual mental models of harm pre-travel are shown in Appendix 2. Five main themes emerged and are highlighted: (1) health, (2) safety, (3) cross-cultural interactions, (4) the project context and (5) emotional well-being. While the outcomes are categorized into main themes, it is important to recognize that many comments touch on multiple themes and have been interpreted and categorized by me for ease of understanding. In the following quotations, participants who had not yet gone overseas are identified by the letter A (for example A1, A2, etc.) and participants who had volunteered abroad and returned are identified by the letter B (for example B1, B2, etc.).

(1) Health Theme

While the location for each participant’s (or potential participant’s) volunteer experience varied, and included locations in Africa, Southeast Asia, Asia and South America, many volunteers first described health and safety concerns when asked about potential harms they expected to encounter on their volunteer trips abroad. Even though most interview participants mentioned health as a concern (eight of the eleven interviewed), the type of harm and the degree to which they felt it was an actual harm varied widely among the participants. One volunteer who travelled to Ghana spoke about what potential hazards he might encounter before his 6 month volunteer trip. His reply is an example of responses I received from participants regarding
Figure 4.1: Comprehensive Model of Volunteers’ Understanding of Harm Pre-Travel
understanding of harm in health. When asked what hazards he prepared for before he left he answered:

Heat and diseases (Participant B4)

When asked about what kinds of diseases he expanded:

The kind the travel doctor told me about…Those things are, those things are real. In developing countries, especially the places where you’re not from there, that’s the one thing that was…if it was possible for me to worry about it more, I would have (Participant B4)

The following two quotes are representative of volunteers’ anticipation of getting malaria, or another disease. Even though they acknowledged getting sick to be a harm, they approached this potential harm in a way that leads me to understand that they see getting sick as an expected part of the experience:

Malaria pills are something everyone tells me to get while there, which is weird. Maybe I should take a few here? I mean, for some reason malaria doesn’t scare me. I don’t know. I’ve known people who have gotten it and they lived…I mean, it will suck if it happens but I’m not too worried about it. (Participant A1)

I anticipated getting sick…Risks, there’s always risks. (Participant B5)

When volunteers spoke about the potential harm of getting sick they tended to approach the topic as if it were something that came along with the experience; as if getting sick would be an acceptable part of the “authentic” experience they were searching for (Mathews, 2008).

Participants tended to view getting sick as an embodied experience that was purely physical. Not one volunteer mentioned any harms related to mental health and well-being. This is consistent with what I found in the literature. Pre-departure preparation from sending organizations often requires volunteers to have vaccinations and malaria pills (or any medicine that may be necessary depending on the host region) to prevent and/or treat physical harms. In all of the
interviews I conducted, not one volunteer mentioned any preparation or training to aid volunteers in preventing and/or dealing with mental health and well-being. The effects of this lack of training are shown in the following chapter.

(2) Safety Theme

Safety commonly appeared in volunteers’ understanding of potential harms before embarking on their volunteer trips. Many participants specifically mentioned crime as a potential hazard, how much of an actual threat crime was to them varied greatly, from an extreme threat and fear, to a minor concern. As with harms related to health, participants who spoke about crime talked about harm as a physical threat. Not one participant mentioned any concerns about the mental health toll being the victim of a crime can have on an individual. The following quotes are representative of how participants viewed the threat of crime. These quotes show that although crime is identified as a potential harm, it is approached as a small concern:

For some reason I’m not really worried about what happens while I’m there. I haven’t thought about it really at all. About the danger while I’m there and stuff. Because I’m very much sure I won’t be…be allowed to be on my own…I mean, it has crossed my mind you know, that something really bad could happen (Participant A1)

When asked to expand on what something really bad meant to her she replied:

Like held up at gunpoint or something like that. I don’t think I’m getting sent into war torn areas so it’s not so bad. I mean, there may be times. (Participant A1)

A volunteer who spent 6 months in St. Lucia described her fears of being the victim of a crime. While doing background research on St. Lucia prior to her departure she read newspaper reports highlighting recent increases in levels of crime toward locals and tourists. Even though she recognized crime to be a potential threat, the way she spoke about it lead me to believe it was
viewed by her as a minor inconvenience, not a real threat that could have any long term consequences on her physical or emotional well-being:

When I was reading about the things going on… I guess the potential for violence and just petty crimes, kidnapping and pick pocketing. Those were the things described in the reports so ya, I guess that was a kind of concern. (Participant B2)

One volunteer spoke about her fears of being surrounded by dangerous animals. She spoke about the personal risks she thought she might encounter during a volunteer trip in the Amazon. When asked what specific harms she meant she stated:

Like dangerous animals…like crocodiles and alligators and big snakes and spiders. And then there’s malaria and those kind of personal risks that you’re putting yourself into. (Participant A3)

The following quote is representative of the role volunteers play in producing particular notions of the “third world” and of the “other”. Before volunteers embark on their trip, they often hold representations of destinations that are based on simplified concepts of the “other”, and in this quote, crime is seen as a definer of difference between life in Canada and life in “Africa”.

Crime is a concern for the volunteer that is “out there” in “Africa” (Simpson, 2004):

I thought about petty crime. I think it’s hard…South Africa for example is covered a lot, and there are also a lot of South Africans who live in Calgary. So you hear about South Africa and those experiences, right? Or even Kenya. Like I know from Kenyans, speaking with Kenyans about crime in Nairobi, and you inform, you end up, even though you know it’s different, you end up thinking that Ghana, which is as far away from South Africa as Mexico is from Alberta, right? You kind of think it’s going to be a similar thing. When in reality it was obviously very much not so. If I’m going to be honest with myself, I’ll have to admit to thinking there was going to be more crime, and even more dangerous crime even. Not just petty theft. I think I thought, thought in that case, I thought Africa was going to be “Africa”, cause it was going to be Africa, it was going to be more um, threatening than it was. (Participant B4)
The above quote also shows how participation in volunteer tourism can provide consciousness raising experiences. Volunteers are provided with an opportunity to question their constructions of the world through interacting with new social and political environments.

(3) Cross-Cultural Interaction Theme

Considering most interviewees traveled to, or were preparing to travel to, different countries, culture became a main topic of discussion for the participants. Many participants expressed concerns about the potential for harm regarding being in a culture different from home. As with health and crime, cultural harms were understood to be physical in nature; for example, participants spoke about physical safety concerns due to not knowing cultural practices, or they spoke about physical things they could do to reduce cultural harm, such as wearing appropriate clothing.

The following quotes are representative of the physicalizing of cultural harm. In the following quote, the merging of harm related boundaries (for example, between safety and culture) is displayed. This participant was describing her concerns around safety, but instead of placing the concerns in a context of crime, she grounded them in a cultural context. She emphasized that safety can become a risk or harm when a volunteer has little knowledge and understanding about cultural practices:

I don’t really know the country that well. And I think that’s kind of a safety risk as well. Because if you don’t know the area and you don’t know what you’re getting into there’s a bit of a naïveté going into it and you may think it’s this great big wonderful experience and you don’t know...what could happen. (Participant A3)

In the following quote a participant directly mentions behavior and how behavior could lead to challenging and potentially harmful situations:
There’s always risks in traveling and I had traveled enough to kind of know that my behaviour could get me into certain situations and just to be aware of that. And keeping not just being um, being a little bit more aware than I would be just traveling around Canada. If that makes sense? (Participant B5)

Cross-cultural understanding is regarded as one of the leading benefits of international volunteer experiences. Literature highlights volunteer tourism as an avenue for the promotion of cross-cultural tolerance, goodwill and understanding (Lyons & Wearing, 2008b). The following quote exemplifies how potential volunteers view cross-cultural exchanges in the context of harm.

Aside from one interview, participants viewed cultural harm as something that could be avoided through physical actions such as wearing appropriate clothing:

The culture is very different. So, I think it’s like Muslim but it’s so diverse. Indonesia is just like a mosh pit of so many different...like I mean the island beside us spoke a different language. So, I think just making sure that I didn’t do something to offend them. Like the clothing we wore had to cover your knees and shoulders. That kind of thing. So, I didn’t want to go to this country, do something stupid and then get in trouble for it. (Participant B3).

Of all participants interviewed only one spoke about the potential harm Western impacts may have on local communities:

I think that the only hazards or risks is just western influence perhaps and not realizing what I’m doing and the cultural impacts, perhaps. Like, I don’t know, sometimes if you take an IPod and what it means to these kids and they all want to play with the IPod but then it dies two weeks later...and just, how like, bringing over all these commodities and what it means to them and how that might reflect in the long run. (Participant A3)

Volunteers’ behavior and interactions with host communities can have serious implications for host communities (Lyons et al., 2012a). Sending organizations must play a key role in encouraging volunteers’ critical engagement with their cross-cultural experiences so that volunteers can gain a deeper understanding of the historical and socio-economic circumstances in host countries (Raymond, 2008). By engaging volunteers in critical reflection regarding causes
of poverty and underdevelopment sending organizations may create platforms for engagement in social justice and social movement participation.

Religion was a concern for a couple of participants. One volunteer participating in a church organized volunteer trip expressed fears of being exposed to new and different beliefs and traditions while another participant shared her concerns about being non-religious while working for a religious organization:

The biggest fear for me is the spiritual stuff. Like, I will be going into places that have witch doctors. Which is something I'm very unfamiliar with. It will be scary. (Participant A1)

I guess, and I don’t know if this would be a harm or a risk is that this organization was religious, it was Catholic based. And everybody that I was going with, well, most of them, actually three of them had a Catholic upbringing ironically, and one was Muslim so, maybe she felt the same way. But I’m not religious…I have no religious affiliation at all and I felt like it might be a risk for me to go into a religious organization and follow religious ideology with the kids. That would be hard for me to follow. I felt like I would find myself struggling with how to support a child if I’m supposed to follow religious ideology or whatever. That was something that I remember sitting in my training saying like, how religious is this organization and you know, what am I going to be expected to say!? (Participant B7)

Along with culture, issues of religion, gender and race were addressed by participants. These concerns appear to be almost totally absent in the literature surrounding volunteer tourism. Of note, however, is that in discussions of religion, race and gender, volunteers began to speak about the emotional challenges they were preparing for.

Race was a topic that came up when speaking about potential harms and/or concerns. Discussions of race by participants were minimal and are highlighted in the following quotes.

One participant was nervous about being in a country where “being white” would be a minority:

This is really awkward to say but it’s probably very valuable to say. I personally have never been surrounded by black people…and I told myself this would be a very different
experience and you’ll have to let go of whatever perceptions you have of black people and how they’re presented in the media. (Participant B2)

Another volunteer, who described herself as mulatto, expressed the concerns she had for being “the only black person” in her volunteer group:

*Volunteer:* Um, and when I first came, I, I think this is an important thing for organizations who provide this program to know. When I went in and I saw the demographic of my group we had like 2 Chinese girls...one of them was born in Quebec and the other raised in BC. And then a Japanese girl, again… all Canadians. (Participant B1)

*Interviewer:* Right

*Volunteer:* But, uh, they look different. And then I was the only, and I only look half, like I’m mulatto. But I was the only black person and so I was like...again it wasn’t a negative. Like it’s not a bad thing but when I go in to that group I’m like ok, this is the experience I’m in for. Again it’s not like a negative thing it’s just like if I had gone into a group of largely multicultural kind of group, I would have behaved or performed in a different way...Like I say, just different cause like, ya. (Participant B1)

Discussions of harms related to gender relations also came up in interviews with a few participants. Some participants shared fears of being a woman in countries and cultures where women may not be exposed to the same treatment women in Canada expect. Another participant shared concerns of being a woman in a country or culture where men have a “reputation of being aggressive”:

Another thing I was concerned about was how women are treated. And, that still remains an issue for me. You just hear stories of previous students who have gone and the experiences they’ve had. (Participant B6)

I guess just, one that we’re foreign women in the Caribbean. And two, I guess the Caribbean has the reputation of men being aggressive and men pursuing the women. Like black men being...just pursuing you. Like, you know, catcalling and, ya, just men more aggressive overall at least relatively speaking.’Cause Canadian men are not like that. (Participant B2)
Volunteers’ actual experiences with race and gender are discussed in more depth in chapter 5.

(4) Project Context Theme

Although this did not arise in interviews with volunteers pre-travel, the literature states that role ambiguity, and the lack of clarity about the role of an individual participating in a cultural exchange program, is a major challenge in the success of international volunteer programs. The effects of role ambiguity on volunteers is discussed in Chapter Five. The following quotes highlight the ways in which volunteers’ perceived challenges and harms within the context of the actual project they would be working on during their volunteer trip.

Participants expressed concerns related to the physical nature of the project and emotional concerns such as not having fun and/or having nothing to do:

I got a little bit worried about the physical component of it. Because it’s just such a different landscape, it’s not like hiking in the mountains because it’s so humid. (Participant B3)

Interactions between volunteer group members often came up in interviews. Participants shared their thoughts concerning the potential harms of living and working with a new group of people. Discussions around group dynamics were filled with emotional uncertainties and fears. Volunteers’ understanding of harm spanned from uncertainty and inconvenience to fears of being judged. Surprisingly, not one volunteer spoke about any type of emotional preparation undertaken prior to their volunteer experience. Unlike previous themes, group interactions sparked an emotional response in volunteers’ understanding of harm. These emotional responses were carried through in their post-volunteering experience:

So I checked them all out and like I thought to myself we’re a mixed bag of people. And I thought, oh this is going to be interesting. (Participant B2)
Oh, well I thought, we’re all girls here, I don’t know, let see what happens. We might get into conflict. So there was some kind of thought about group conflict. (Participant B2)

Ya, especially when I checked everyone out I thought there might be some tension, there could be. And I know that group dynamics plays a crucial role in how everyone experiences that. So I was like, we’ll see what happens. I’ll take it as it comes. (Participant B2)

Because you don’t know, I didn’t know anyone going there. So I was a bit hesitant about what type of people I was going to meet. (Participant B5)

Volunteer: So the harm, something that I was scared of the mixture of culture shock mixed with trying to get to know the girls I was living with. (Participant B7)

Interviewer: So the group dynamic. In one way you were really excited because that was a potential benefit but at the same time it was a stress for you?

Volunteer: Major. Major! And judgments. There were a lot, I was scared of judgments on me so it was like keeping things away from them. How I was feeling or even like, what I packed. I was scared to tell the girls oh I packed my straightener and this and that and that. Those were things that, those were just stupid things. (Participant B7)

Two participants spoke about the potential to cause harm to the community or community members:

If it [project] actually wasn’t beneficial. So you’re kind of coming out and been getting this outsider’s perspective and sometimes um, they’re not really true to life, they might not help those people. For example, my friend designed in her masters this program where they could use tilapia excrement or the bottom of these ponds to fertilize these crops, but it ended up that this whole program was set up and actually wasn’t helpful because it was too much work for the farmers to actually do that. (Participant A2)

Volunteer: Also, one thing that was important to me too was, in terms of harms, from my experience working in orphanages years ago in Thailand, was coming into children’s lives for a short period of time and then leaving. (Participant B7)

Interviewer: Why was that a potential harm?

Volunteer: Because um, I figured either I, well both. I would get attached to them and they would get attached to me and the other girls. And then we would leave. We were
only there for a short period of time and they would, in idea, get comfortable and we would leave.” (Participant B7)

Interviewer: So was that the emotional distress of leaving someone you’ve created an attachment to?

Volunteer: I think that, ya. Ya, I would say. I think I felt it in Thailand and also you learn about those risks in school for example for children that those are their development years and when people are in their lives for a short period of time and then they leave...That’s, for me, that’s going to be hard to deal with. That’s going to be hard to watch them go through that. That was something I remember thinking. (Participant B7)

Interestingly, while participant B7 was the only volunteer to mention the emotional harms associated with the temporary nature of volunteer tourism, it is a topic that was discussed by many volunteers upon their return from volunteering abroad and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

(5) Emotional Well-Being Theme

While volunteers spoke about perceptions of harms related to the volunteer project context, volunteers first began to mention their emotional concerns associated with volunteering abroad. In total, only three participants mentioned any perceptions of harm related to emotional well-being. Participants’ discussions surrounding emotional aspects of volunteering abroad is an important area of findings in my research and is discussed at length in the Chapter Five.

However, the following quote illustrates the types of emotional concerns volunteers shared pre-travel:

Well, for example, I might be concerned that it’s not actually a fun volunteer job…So my friend went to New Zealand…it was essentially an organization that would, volunteers would pay for to come and get rid of invasive species. But basically they were killing them. It’s basically a possum killing organization. (Participant A2)
Summary

Findings regarding volunteers’ understanding of harm provided evidence that there were many types of harms volunteers considered before participating on international volunteer trips. The comprehensive model presented at the beginning of the chapter, Figure 4.1, highlights main themes that arose from my interviews with volunteers on their understanding of harm before volunteering abroad. The types of harms volunteers discussed spanned across and between five main themes and provided insight into volunteer’s understandings of the physical, personal and inter-personal harms that may be experienced when volunteering abroad. Participants provided valuable insight into how much of a concern certain harms really are. This provided me with an opportunity to highlight areas where organizations are offering adequate pre-departure training and where organizations have opportunity for improvement.

In the following chapter, Chapter Five, I share my findings on the harms volunteers actually experienced during their international volunteer trips. The goal of highlighting both the pre- and post-trip understanding of harm is to show if, from the perspective of the volunteer, gaps in awareness of harms actually exist so that organizations recruiting volunteers for international projects can better address those harms volunteers may experience.
CHAPTER 5: VOLUNTEERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF HARM: POST- VOLUNTEER TRIP

Findings in this chapter are based on interviews with participants discussing the harms they experienced during their volunteer trips. A comprehensive model of volunteers’ combined responses including the number of volunteers who voiced a specific post-travel harm is presented at the beginning of this chapter (Figure 5.1). Participant’s individual mental models of understanding harm post-travel are shown in Appendix 3. Five main categories arose and are highlighted here: (1) health, (2) safety, (3) cross-cultural interactions, (4) the project context and (5) emotional well-being. As in Chapter Four, participants who had volunteered abroad and returned are identified by the letter B (for example B1, B2, etc.).

(1) Health Theme

One of the first harms participants spoke about when asked to share experiences of harm were harms related to health. Volunteers traveled to many different countries, including Ghana, St. Lucia, India, and Indonesia; each country had its own challenge related to health for Canadian volunteers. Most often, volunteers shared their unique experiences with getting sick abroad.

Some volunteers viewed their experience of getting sick as a regular and expected part of traveling, and others revealed more challenging and emotional struggles of getting sick abroad:

I had malaria, but I was pretty lucky because I didn’t have it that bad at all. It was mostly just lying around in the heat. I had frustration and that was my worst symptom. (Participant B5)

It turns out I have this horrible problem with water retention. I mean severe, to the point that I would cry I would be in so much pain…I felt like a sausage…I would cry sometimes. (Participant B7)

For participant B7, water retention was not only a physical pain, her emotional well-being was
Figure 5.1: Comprehensive Model of Volunteers’ Understanding of Harm Post-Travel
also impacted from negative comments by the youth she worked with:

You know…I went there thinking that I’m not going to gain weight…and I did. But not from the reason of just eating whatever I wanted; it was water weight. I suffered a lot from water…and the kids would tell you that you’re getting fat, and like, you’re getting really fat. All the time! And then strangers would tell you…They would touch you and say ‘you’re getting thick’. (Participant B7)

A surprising harm that was talked about by four out of eight volunteers was the heat. Heat and humidity was often a draw for many volunteers pre-travel, but in actuality it was perceived as a major challenge by multiple volunteers. Participants discussed the psychological effects of intense heat and high humidity on their bodies. Participant B7 explains how her problem of water retentions was compounded by the intense heat:

I don’t know what happened there psychologically. But the heat, you just couldn’t escape it. F---ing bad! (Participant B7)

My first time, just the heat! Just getting my head around how hot and how humid it was. And, just never being so sweaty [before]. That was honestly one of the things I’m most proud of personally…just how good I am with extreme heat now. (Participant B4)

I remember when I first got there and my body just kind of freaked out. It was like I went into a sauna and I just did not feel well at all. (Participant B3)

My classmates were super depressed and terrible to be around…It was really hot and I think everyone has a really hard time with that. It was at least 37 degrees Celsius, at most 42 and it was hot all the time. (Participant B5)

Another concern worth mentioning was related to the medical care a volunteer received while volunteering abroad. While no other volunteers expressed concerns over access to medical care while abroad, I believe it is a topic worth mentioning because of the high risk of getting sick and needing access to medical care while participating in a volunteer tourism project. It is my
opinion that this topic would benefit from future research. The following comment is illustrative of this volunteers’ negative perception of local medical systems:

We had a doctor from Britain. Yes, there was Dawn, and all the other doctors…were Indonesian. I’m sure they were trained, but, I mean, if Dawn wasn’t there everything was solved with antibiotics. They don’t…I mean, there was a point where [they thought] I had strep or something. I was just like ‘oh, I’m not feeling well,’ and they were like ‘Oh! Here are some antibiotics.’ (Participant B3)

Understanding the emotional effect intense heat and humidity, or any physical experiences has on volunteers health is important because “we judge something to be good or bad according to how it effects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain” (Ahmed, 2004). As can be seen in the above comments, while the weather/climate of some host countries may have initially been a pull factor for participants, the challenge of that heat on volunteers’ bodies and emotions was took a heavy toll. In fact, Participant B7 informed me that “now I can say I will never, ever live in a climate like that again!” Unexpected factors such as undesirable weather conditions may occur at any moment during volunteer trips; I recommend that sending organizations inform prospective volunteers of some of the challenges associated with high heat and humidity and also ensure that volunteers have both medical support and emotional support to deal with the emotional struggles that result from harms related to health. In terms of access to medical care, volunteers’ perceptions of local health care systems would be an interesting topic for future research.

(2) Safety Theme

Six out of eight volunteers shared experiences related to safety and crime that happened during their volunteer trips abroad. Interestingly, even though the crimes committed were of
concern to volunteers, participant’s interpretation of their experiences reflected elements of the emotional toll that the crime took on their overall well-being:

We all had different things happen to us relating to petty crime. Me, I had my camera pick pocketed. And I remember feeling so violated. I’m like, ugh, this is so frustrating. It made me sad, it really made me really sad. And, I’m still kind of bitter when I think about it, like, that’s not cool. (Participant B2)

Also, my workplace got broken into 3 times. So there were 2 smaller break ins where they stole a little bit of money and didn’t do much damage but then there was one significant damage…I felt again, a huge internalized sense of violation and also sadness. That, like, this organization that I’m working for is already struggling and to have people, their own people, you know, steal from it and break it down…I think there’s still emotion in there. Just to feel it. I think it was so dejecting. I think I honestly fell into a little bit of depression after that. And, I was surprised I did because I didn’t think, it wasn’t personal but it was because it was my workplace. I just remember feeling like, really! I don’t know, it’s a weird way to describe that. This feeling of I don’t really care about where I am or what I’m doing right now. It was definitely like a depression type state. (Participant B2)

The above statements reflect how crime affects volunteer’s emotional well-being in a negative way and the emotional toll that remains as one of volunteers’ most memorable aspects of their experience. Even after Participant B2 was asked if she had training or support to help deal with her feelings she replied:

I’m sure. I think they did talk about it. I read about it…petty crime. But, to read about something and to experience it is different. So, even though I became aware of it it’s not the same as [pause], it’s not emotional preparation. It’s knowledge preparation. (Participant B2)

Experiences such as those of Participant B2 highlight the important role sending organizations can take to ensure volunteers have the opportunity to reflect on experiences and receive support. An experiential learning approach whereby the organization provides volunteers
with the support they need while in the field as well as the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences could be very beneficial for volunteers’ overall well-being (Raymond, 2008).

(3) Cross-Cultural Interactions Theme

Cross-cultural interactions challenged volunteers in many ways. In this section of my findings, I will discuss experiences that aroused high levels of distress in volunteers. The topics that were discussed by volunteers and are indicative of volunteers’ experiences with cross-cultural harm are: friendships with locals, interactions between males and female, and the topic of race and racial stereotyping.

Some of the volunteers interviewed discussed feelings of insecurity regarding making genuine friendships with local people during their time abroad. Some volunteers actually began to question their social skills, felt frustrated and secluded. Other volunteers expressed feelings of being used or using locals to be “novelty” friends:

We did have a group that we hung out with but I would say there were some cross-cultural differences that maybe I haven’t fully figured out. But I found it hard to connect. So that was a personal challenge in the beginning. I’m like, why am I having such a hard time connecting? (Participant B2)

I made a lot of friends but I don’t know if I would say good friends because there’s still this whole, you’re always going to be an outsider kind of thing. I mean, they were friends but they were people who, I like them and they like me, but it’s still…It almost felt like I was a novelty friend. Just in our conversation, it could only get so far and just like drastically different worlds. (Participant B5)

They’re all nice people, who you like, but, especially when you’re first there you’re running into cultural communication issues that are just staggering…And so, I could have fun in like a novelty sense but it’s not easy to relax that way because that’s not how I kind of operate. (Participant B7)

The male volunteer interviewed also discussed feelings of insecurity regarding interactions between him and the other local males. While most volunteers aim to make “real”
connections with local people in their host community, the actualization of interactions between friends are surrounded by feelings of insecurity and, in his sake, feeling used:

The power dynamics are weird. People are, sometimes you get the impression, well, everyone wants to be your friend. And my female colleagues, everyone wanted to be their boyfriend. And, well, I speak as a guy, as a guy you want friends. You want Ghanaian friends. That’s part of why you go…But sometimes you can end up feeling sort of cheap. Like, this is my Ghanaian friend. And they’re like, this is my white friend. And, in return for the cred that I have as my Ghanaian friend, and he is my Ghanaian friend, I buy him drinks and hopefully we’ll match together. (Participant B4)

Volunteers’ interactions with locals illustrate desire by volunteers to make intimate relationships. Literature in volunteer tourism has begun to explore how intimacy impacts the volunteer tourism experience. According to Conran (2011, p. 1455), intimacy is “involves aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others, that will turn out in a particular way”. Through intimate moments and shared emotional experiences, boundaries between the ‘I,’ the ‘we,’ and the ‘other’ are shaped (Hunt, 2012). In mediating volunteers’ experiences while abroad, sending organizations need to understand that volunteers desire community members to become volunteers’ family and friends. Volunteers want to know more about, and become close to, local people. Volunteers desire to include local community members into their social circles while abroad, therefore sending organizations need to educate volunteers in the broader issues of poverty, power, and the structural inequality on which a volunteer’s presence in host communities is based.

The complex relationships between females and males are spoken about by nearly every volunteer in one way or another. Relationships, in any form, between the sexes became aggravated by differences in culture, norms, and perceptions of “appropriate” behavior. Many female volunteers openly discussed difficult experiences they encountered, both physically and
emotionally, caused by being a woman in a foreign country. Most female volunteers experienced extreme cat calling, instances of aggression from males, and instances where they felt they were being disrespected by males from the local communities they were living and working in. The following statements have been selected to highlight some of these challenges:

So, I really was super duper frustrated with the cat calling. Like it really pissed me off…I think in the beginning it was fun. You never get that much attention from men in Canada. Like, Canadian men don’t give that much attention. So, it’s like a way to feel appreciated right away. There was some flattery, but for me because I’m uncomfortable with a lot of attention, it did rub me the wrong way. (Participant B2)

I got to experience the cat calls beyond cat calling…It was cat calling that would get aggressive sometimes and they would touch you and you’d be like, umm f---k off! (Participant B7)

We got so much male attention for being white and female with blonde hair. Those were the three, ding-ding-ding. So, in a way at the beginning it didn’t bother us. I think it ended up a problem because a lot of people like, you know, it’s just a problem. You have people who are hassling you and don’t stop calling your phone. (Participant B7)

The following participants discuss the emotional toll difficult interactions with local men took on them:

This is the main thing that comes back and why I struggle in my mind every time I think of Ghana and why I didn’t enjoy my experience as much…I would get groped every time I walked down the street. It was exhausting. I always made sure I dressed conservatively, you know, no chest, no bare shoulders, no tight fitting clothes, you know, things that went down to my knee. It was very frustrating…The men were really challenging. There were quite a few times walking down the street and they would grab me inappropriately or just say rude things…Ya, never again! It was incredibly exhausting. (Participant B6)

It’s not as safe as it would be if I were a male traveling around. Especially on my first trip. It was a hard lesson. I was really naïve about it and sticking up for myself when things were happening that were totally inappropriate and just learning how to shake things off if they were disrespectful and inappropriate. But that’s how women are treated and there’s nothing you can do about it. (Participant B5)
The male volunteer interviewed also shared experiences where relationships between foreign females and local males resulted in a negative impact. He discussed the damaging effects these types of relationships have on the credibility of the organization:

When I was there the second time there were British teams that were there for two months and they ranged in age from 18, literally right out of high school, to...graduate students. And, it’s almost like they can’t hardly be blamed but you get 19 year old girls dating a guy with a wife and kids in the community which undermines everything. Undermines any positive work you could be doing as a westerner...Like risky is such an understatement, like, super damaging. It’s just what could, what could be worse?...I think the harder thing is these younger girls wouldn’t know. They wouldn’t know that these guys had wives because they wouldn’t tell them. And they’re like...this guy is hitting on me...he’s a handsome guy, and that’s not their fault. It’s that you shouldn’t throw people with minimum guidance in a situation or culture that they don’t understand. So ya, damage for sure. For sure! (Participant B4)

The impact of sexual relationships between volunteers and host community members on international volunteer tourism projects warrants deeper exploration but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Conversations about race and racial stereotyping emerged from the interviews in complex and interesting ways. Understandings of the complexity of race in volunteer tourism are beyond the scope of this thesis but, based on the findings reported below, I would recommend the topic to be explored in more depth in future volunteer tourism literature. The comments presented here are reflected of the diverse ways race impacted volunteers experiences and understanding of harm. One volunteer spoke about the negative stereotypes of western women that were being perpetuated by female volunteers dating local men while in the field:

I know a lot of girls will wear rings pretending they are married and have people at home. And then they will go and get Ghanaian boyfriends and people see them having rings on their hand saying they’re married but they’re sleeping with Ghanaian men. So, it just perpetuates the vision that Western women are promiscuous which doesn’t help our case as we’re walking down the street trying to mind our own business and getting groped along the way. (Participant B6)
Another volunteer discussed uncomfortable feelings she experienced in Tanzania when local people called her “white”. She identifies as a mulatto and described feelings of anxiety around the fact that she had to question her identity when it came to her self-identified race:

When I was in Tanzania I was white. They called me white…there was a different word for it, but white. And, it was really weird to experience this kind of privilege. It was very dangerous because it really is one of those kind of black or white choices. (Participant B1)

A few volunteers also described instances of frustration around the idea that they could never be invisible. Being a minority in their host country, because of their Caucasian skin tone, forced them to go through experiences of visibility:

There were times when I was frustrated because I couldn’t be invisible. I was never that person who was overlooked. I was that person who stood out walking down the street. (Participant B2)

I didn’t anticipate this going but…it was great that people knew us but I was, we were, one of three white people who were “locals” and so I have never felt my skin. I’ve never been a minority I guess is what I’m going to say. Never. I didn’t know what that felt like and that was, that was interesting. (Participant B7)

I was visible…I’ve never felt so white before in my life. (Participant B7)

(4) Project Context Theme

The project itself was an actual harm for many volunteers. Whether it was having nothing to do or just feeling ineffective, many volunteers questioned their skills and identity during their volunteering experience. This type of questioning by volunteers may be representative of a lack of preparedness. Many volunteers mentioned that they didn’t feel they received proper training from their host organizations and sending organization to be doing the jobs they were assigned to do and even began to question the impacts of temporary volunteer programs on host
communities. Interactions with volunteer group members also caused challenging and difficult situations for volunteers. Participants talked about group conflict, being ostracized from the group and feelings of frustration from being surrounded by other volunteers. The following comments demonstrate a frustration by the volunteer from either having nothing to do or lacking necessary skills to complete the task at hand:

Sometimes there was just nothing to do, and I was like, really? Am I just going to be on my Facebook all the time right now? (Participant B2)

Once this volunteer was given a task to work on 3 months after her initial arrival to the host organization, she found herself working on a project she did not feel competent in:

I was concerned because I was running a parenting program. And like, why would I be running the parent program? I’m not a parent and I’m a foreigner…and I didn’t get any training for it. I guess I expected a little more from the supervisor. (Participant B2)

Having nothing to do is a common critique of volunteer tourism by volunteers. Lack of clarity about volunteers’ roles in a volunteer tourism program creates role ambiguity. Role ambiguity as stated by Lyons & Wearing (2008b), is an undesirable condition for any organization and is negatively correlated with job satisfaction. The following comments illustrate how and why participants begin to question the role volunteers have in the host volunteer organization:

Professionally, I didn’t feel effective. But, more so because I didn’t believe, well, I was starting to believe that people without very concrete skills like literal engineers, doctors and nurses, I was beginning to think that they arguably had no place to be doing what we were doing. (Participant B4)

What are we doing? As people who don’t speak Buli, which is the language in that community, we don’t, we have maybe, we have the automatic awe and respect but we don’t have the trust. (Participant B4)
Well, it was interesting. Everyone was put into daycares…and I was the only one who was going to be teaching English. And, I wasn’t anticipating that…I can speak English but I don’t know how to teach English. (Participant B5)

Three volunteers began to question the potential of volunteer tourism programs creating harm for the local community and community members. The following quote is an example of volunteers’ awareness of volunteer tourism programs’ association with community harm:

I just didn’t see a lot of locals there. I don’t know where the heck they went but…I knew they were getting excited because they almost started to come out a little. They’re leaving! I felt really bad to take over your home, but like, we help make their living. (Participant B3)

A few volunteers mentioned intense emotional distress that came from being put in a position they didn’t enjoy or feel qualified for. This volunteer in particular suffered from being ostracized from the youth she was responsible to look after. Furthermore, this volunteer expressed negative feelings when speaking about working with at risk youth who challenged her self-confidence with harsh words and criticism:

The disciplinarian. That’s what I used to call myself. I’m the punisher because [my colleagues] were not able to let go of the idea of being friends with them [the youth] and it naturally moved into that I was the person doing all the discipline. So, in their eyes I became someone different once I switched into that role. That was hard for me because it started an immediate disconnect. I had a hard time connecting with the kids after and they had a hard time connecting with me because that’s how they saw me. Which was too bad…I slowly started doing my own thing and there was a few of them that I was still very close with, a few kids I was very close with…I think that’s when I just started to distance myself from being in their space. At the end I was completely shut off. The kids would come to me and I wouldn’t even at the end of it go out there. I would just work in the office….I was a total disconnect. I was totally cut off from them. (Participant B7)

She continued:

They [the youth] are mouthy and mean. And it’s sad because I went there to gain confidence and it’s funny because I let kids who were 12 and 13 years old affect me. I shouldn’t let anything they say affect me, but it did. Severely…Kids are cruel and these
are kids who knew exactly, they’re so smart, but they knew exactly what to say to each of us. I mean, they went after everyone and they knew exactly what to say specific to you…the kids will tell you you’re getting fat like all the time…they would touch you and say you’re getting thick. (Participant B7)

Participant B7 also discussed feelings of insecurity in regards to not understanding specific boundaries put in place by her program administrator. She explains that these types of boundaries directly reinforced the perception that friendship with the youth was inappropriate:

Sister, she’s the one that ran things. She had a lot of things that kind of f----d with my mind about what was allowed and what wasn’t allowed. So, things like I would get them to corn roll my hair and they would think it was so funny because I have blonde doll hair. I guess that was a boundary that was inappropriate. So we got it drilled into our minds what was appropriate with these kids and what wasn’t…It was a big thing for her, for Sister, to establish these boundaries. We are not their friends. We are someone in charge of them. (Participant B7)

The temporary nature of volunteer tourism was a draw for many volunteers who wanted a short trip in a secure group setting, but after the completion of volunteer programs, many participants began to question the effectiveness of a program designed around a temporary time frame:

The risks are going to be…so the first one that pops into my mind is shorter term people. (Participant B4)

It’s just such an expensive thing to have done and I think it’s also because it was 6 weeks. I think if it had been 6 months it would have been a lot different. But to put that much money, and the outcome? Maybe in a longer time but in terms of the program? Total waste of money. You may as well have just taken them all on safari. (Participant B1)

One volunteer discussed the emotional harm she felt the program was causing to the youth she was working with. Below, she describes how surprised she was about the fact that the girls she was working with were emotional when saying goodbye. The youth this volunteer
worked with were at risk youth with “sassy” attitudes, so to see their emotional distress greatly affected the volunteer:

Again, 6 months wasn’t long enough. I think it was very harmful for the children just as I’d anticipated. I was very disconnected in the end. I mean, for them, watching them say goodbye even to me they were emotional, and they’re not emotional girls. They’re bad asses. They’re not emotional girls and it was hard for them. (Participant B7)

Another volunteer expressed his thoughts on the benefit of tourism and equated the benefit to be the sales bump the community received from volunteers’ alcohol consumption:

In Sandema and the communities around Sandema I don’t think voluntourism did harm. I think if anything, the temporary nature was more tourism than anything else and it brought a lot of money to the community. A lot of money to the businesses in the community…I can only imagine the yearly sales bump we brought to our favourite drinking spot. I’m sure we doubled their sales. (Participant B4)

It is clear from a few statements made by participants in this study that alcohol is a part of volunteers’ experiences. In this study, four participants spoke about alcohol in volunteer tourism programs. The impacts of alcohol of volunteer’s well being are beyond the scope of this study but are important to mention and would make for interesting future research.

Volunteers discussed at length the harms they encountered regarding interactions with their group members. Some of the organizations participants volunteering with were composed of only Canadian participants, while other organizations accepted participants from all over the world. In both situations volunteers struggled with interactions with their colleagues. The emotional toll group interactions may have on a volunteer is evidenced in their comments:

I got driven crazy by the fact that my social circle was restricted to a few people. I liked the people. I think they’re all, I think I thought they were all good people. But, it was frustrating that my only friends were these few people and dynamics, I don’t know, dynamics get created in small groups and it can become kind of like high school. Not high school but almost weirder than high school. Even with good people, kind people, intelligent people. Just different. People were just different and they have different ideas
for what’s fun and ideas for the best way to act. And you get conflict I think. (Participant B4)

One volunteer described the emotional toll being ostracized from her group took on her:

…again, I said I became really unpopular with my Canadian counterparts but I became really close within the course of my trip with my Tanzanian counterparts. In part because I was, I actually became ostracized. The Canadians did not like me. They were very passive aggressive like when I would come over to the group they would become quiet or they would take cheap shots at me….It didn’t feel good at all! (Participant B1)

Another volunteer spoke about the emotional “storm” her colleagues put her through:

At first I was like sh*t, this is going to be hard for me. Inconvenient. And there were moments when I’m like, I don’t know, who am I with right now?.. And I’m the one who was calm and I was just trying to stay still and be like, this storm is going to go around me…It’s like these people were just very different. (Participant B2)

Participant B5 also noted that during her volunteer trip in Ghana “people (i.e. other volunteers in her program) weren’t happy. They were struggling with the cultural differences and they resulted to drugs and alcohol.” The comments made by volunteers in this section reflect an understanding by volunteers that emotions matter. Emotions do matter! To say they don’t would be reductionist. According to Ahmed (2012) “emotions do things”. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions align individuals with communities through the variety and intensity of their attachments. During volunteer trips abroad, volunteers are actually adapting to two new social spaces, first, the host community in which they are volunteering, and second the group of volunteer tourist they live and work with. We need to explore how emotions work in these particular spaces and how they impact volunteers’ overall experiences. Understanding emotions in volunteer tourism spaces will aid sending organizations in mediating the relationships within and between volunteers in order to understand how harm may be reduced by training, support and outreach programs.
(5) Emotional Well-Being Theme

Harms associated with emotional well-being were present throughout volunteers stories of difficult and challenging experiences. I have attempted to highlight volunteers’ awareness of harms associated to emotional well-being in every section of this chapter. In this section I want to highlight some of the actual words volunteers used to describe difficult experiences they encountered. These words came directly from volunteers’ and I think are important to share because they are indicative of the range of negative feelings experienced by volunteers. Feelings of disappointment, sadness, depression, vulnerability and disappointment were spoken by five of the eight volunteers. Four and/three volunteers described feelings of frustration, seclusion and/or feeling alone, and distress. Two participants expressed feeling anxious, homesick, ostracized, scared and exhausted. Two volunteers also questioned their identity while on a volunteer tourism trip. One of the eight volunteers interviewed described feeling emotionally exhausted, dejected, losing confidence, feeling violated, nervous and disconnected. One volunteer told me she became more introverted after her volunteer trip and another volunteer described moments of “emotional hell”. Sharing these words is important because the words used by volunteers to describe understandings of harm helped me, as a researcher, understand how harm is experienced and verbalized. While these challenges may not be particular to volunteer tourists, these findings suggest that volunteers’ experiences may exacerbate the emotional outcomes.

Summary

Findings on volunteers’ understanding of harm post-volunteer trip provided evidence that the types of harms volunteers experienced during volunteer programs have a deep emotional impact on volunteers’ overall well-being. Experiences shared by volunteers provided insight into how volunteers’ understand and experience harm. The concerns volunteers spoke about pre-
travel came up in post-travel discussions, although in different and surprising ways. The comprehensive model presented at the beginning of the chapter, Figure 5.1, highlights mains themes that arose from my interviews with volunteers on their understanding of harm after returning from volunteering abroad. Some of the actual harms experienced by volunteers were far from their thoughts pre-travel. While health and safety remain the two dominant concerns for volunteers, clearly there is a gap between the harms volunteers are preparing for and the harms they are actually experiencing when volunteering abroad. In the following and concluding chapter, Chapter Six, I make recommendations for how sending organizations can begin to address these gaps.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this concluding chapter of my thesis, I revisit my main research question (how do volunteers understand and experience harm while participating in international volunteer projects) and present my main findings. From these findings, I make recommendations that may be useful for sending organizations that develop and organize volunteer tourism programs. To conclude this chapter, I identify future research possibilities related to volunteers’ understanding of harm in volunteer tourism programs.

Main Findings

From the data I collected, I was able to identify key themes that came forward when volunteers spoke of their understandings of harm while participating in international volunteer programs. Findings emerged from volunteers’ understanding of harm pre- and post-travel. Key themes that emerged from interviews with volunteers prior to their travel are summarized in Figure 4.1 and findings that emerged from interviews with volunteers after their travel are summarized in Figure 5.1 These figures represent volunteers’ responses diagrammatically in the form of mental models. From my research, I was able to identify gaps in volunteers’ understanding of harm pre- and post-travel. While discussions on pre- and post-travel harm focused on the same five themes of health, safety, project context, cross-cultural interactions and emotional well-being, the largest gap in volunteers’ understanding of harm pre- and post-travel is found in volunteers’ emotional well-being.

Volunteers’ understandings of harm pre-travel focused around the five themes of health, safety, the project context, cross-cultural interactions and emotional well-being. Findings from my study indicate that volunteers’ understanding of harms pre-travel tended to revolve around physical harms. Only three of the eleven interviewees mentioned potential harms associated with
emotional well-being. Volunteer organizations often provide adequate training and support for physical harms such as getting sick, injured or being the victim of a crime. Volunteers are usually well informed about where to go if they get sick (the hospital) or are the victim of a crime (the police station). Organizations often require volunteers to purchase travel and medical insurance prior to embarking on international volunteer projects.

Volunteers’ understandings of harm post-travel focused around the same five themes of health, safety, the project context, cross-cultural interactions and emotional well-being, although the harms experienced by volunteers had a direct impact on their emotional well-being. Unlike understandings of harm pre-travel where volunteers focused on physical harms, harms discussed post-travel were embedded with emotional challenges. Volunteers described feelings of fear related to health concerns. Feelings of vulnerability and violation were discussed when volunteers shared stories associated with safety concerns. Volunteers also expressed feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, anxiety and disappointment related to the context of the volunteer tourism project. Lastly, volunteers described going through “emotional hell”, questioning their social skills, losing self confidence and becoming introverted as a result of challenging cross-cultural interactions.

The role of emotions, such as fear, vulnerability, frustration, anxiety, hope, and joy, in shaping society and in defining and transforming people is becoming increasingly recognized in the social sciences. Emotional Geography specifically tries to understand how emotions affect and are affected by the environments around them. Having long existed on the fringe of many disciplines, work on emotions, emotional geography in particular, is recognized for its important contribution to understanding the idea that the world is mediated by feelings and that emotions “colour our experiential world such that we interpret and value aspects of it in particular ways”
(Wright & Hodge, 2012; Smith et al., 2009, p.7). This work has clear implications for understanding volunteer tourism.

Emotions are not purely personal feelings that lie within subjects. Emotions carry social, political and relational qualities. Emotions do not arise independently from within our mind and body, but are found in the relations between people, and in between people and place (Wright, 2012). According to Ahmed (2004) emotions are circulatory and gain value as they move between individuals, collectives, and things and places. Emotions both produce and reproduce associations and encounters with the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Emotions also have important influence over how the production and maintenance of inequality and other forms of exclusion are understood. Wright (2012, p. 1114) points out that “emotions are fundamental to the ways we interpret the world and our experiences within it”. In order to understand what it means to be deprived, to experience the world differently and to be motivated to change, we must attend to the ways we are affected by emotions and how we affect others. Emotions are critical in bringing people together and help establish shared sentiment and “feelings in common” (Wright, 2012).

The emotional experience of volunteer tourism may provide participants with a community of people that share common goals and values. These “feelings in common” provide grounds for the development of networks and consciousness-raising experiences. Volunteer tourism often initiates changes in individuals’ perceptions of their role in the perpetuation of social problems at a local and global level. Emotions cannot be removed from how development is imagined, but sending organizations have an opportunity to create an environment that encourages volunteers to broaden their understanding of the structural causes of inequality and underdevelopment. The first step to aiding volunteers in their emotional volunteer experiences is to recognize that volunteers’ experiences are emotional!

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Emotions are connective; they bring together, blur, define and re (create) self and other, action and reaction, inner and outer worlds (Wright, 2012). The roles of emotions in social movements, activism and broader understandings of social justice have important implications for volunteer tourism. Findings from my research show that volunteers encounter a deeply personal and emotional experience when volunteering abroad. If emotions affect volunteers negatively then volunteers may be inclined to regress from social movement participation and lose interest in broader social justice issues. Conversely, if emotions affect volunteers positively then volunteers may be inclined to progress toward social movement and social justice participation. Sending organizations have the opportunity to engage volunteers through critical thinking and reflection to tackle some of the emotional challenges volunteers face before, during, and after their time abroad. Before individuals can be mobilized and inclined to social movement participation, they must first become aware of the issues and inequalities that exist. Through engaging in the emotional and often consciousness-raising experiences provided by volunteer tourism, sending organizations can play an important role in informing volunteers’ experiences. Emotional experiences allow volunteers to engage in volunteer tourism’s potential as a platform from which to develop structural change.

Recommendations

Findings of my research clearly show that emotions matter in volunteer tourism programs, and simultaneously, emotional well-being is the least recognized potential harm expressed by volunteers pre-travel. The gap between volunteers’ understanding of harms associated with emotional well-being pre-travel and understanding of harms post-travel present a space where sending organizations are failing to provide adequate training and support for volunteers. Sending organizations play an important role in volunteer tourism programs and have
the responsibility to give volunteers a fulfilling and positive experience. In my opinion, sending organizations should adopt an experiential learning approach to volunteer tourism projects. An experiential learning approach provides volunteers with the opportunity not just to experience, but also to reflect upon their behaviours and emotional challenges and think critically about issues experienced during volunteer programs. An experiential learning approach may offer volunteers a more holistically positive experience if emotional awareness and the reflection of challenges and behaviours are part of volunteers’ training and support (Raymond, 2008).

Often, sending organizations do not provide an environment where volunteers are encouraged to critically engage with their experiences. Sending organizations could provide comprehensive pre-departure training for volunteers. Ideally, pre-departure training would provide volunteers with realistic information regarding what volunteers will likely experience during volunteer programs, including some emotional challenges. Ideally, preparation would instill an attitude of open-mindedness and willingness to learn in volunteers instead of exclusively “experiencing” a place. In addition, sending organizations could provide support networks and opportunities for reflection by volunteers both during the volunteer program and upon return in order to sustain positive attitudes. Sending organizations have the unique opportunity to foster a positive consciousness-raising experience, and expose volunteers to larger social justice agendas. Since networks have been found to be an important element of participation in social movements and activism, sending organizations can activate and maintain volunteer communication, even after volunteer programs have been completed (McGehee & Santos, 2005). The many ways that sending organizations can provide volunteers with training and support is an interesting area for potential future research.
Future Research Possibilities

Findings in my research highlight an important gap in contemporary volunteer tourism research. My data reveals that sending organizations may not be aware of the emotional challenges volunteers encounter while volunteering abroad. This presents an interesting space for future research.

Previous research on volunteer tourism suggests that participation in volunteer tourism projects provide volunteers with positive experiences. Many studies fail to address the challenges and harms volunteers face when volunteering internationally. An interesting study would delve further into understanding of volunteers’ perceptions of harm and begin to understand the short-term and long-term impacts of those harms on volunteers. Do harms experienced by volunteers’ negatively impact their emotional well-being in the short-term and the long-term? Do harms experienced while volunteering negatively impact volunteers’ perceptions of volunteer tourism, development and social justice?

Another study could incorporate sending organizations and compare training programs and support offered by different sending organizations. Training and support programs could then be compared to volunteers’ actual experiences of harm. In this way, outreach and training programs could be analyzed for effectiveness. Research could compare the effectiveness of programs using experiential learning approaches. A study of comparing effectiveness of training and support programs would provide sending organizations with recommendations for how volunteer outreach programs may be improved.

Furthermore, a more diverse sample would allow researchers to have a more in-depth understanding of the challenges and harms volunteers face during their trips abroad. A more diverse sample would allow researchers to look at differences in volunteers’ experiences based
on age, sex, level of education, etc. Questions such as *are volunteer’s experiencing harm because of their lack of life experience or are their perceptions of harm similar across age, sex, etc. categories?* may be interesting to explore.
REFERENCES


Olson, L. (2008). Promoting sustainability: mental models research to inform the design of a campus recycling program (MS Thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest. 1459240


APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT POSTER

HAVE YOU EVER VOLUNTEERED ABROAD? ARE YOU INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING ABROAD?

If **YES**, I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting:

**Volunteer Tourism: Understanding Impacts!**

As volunteer tourism becomes one of the fastest growing industries in the world, it is important to explore the experiences of volunteers and the impacts of their work.

This project aims to:

- understand more of the volunteer’s experience
- learn more about the motivations people have for volunteering abroad; and
- find out more about how volunteers feel/experience the impacts of their work while abroad.

I am looking for people who are 18 years of age or older and are either interested in volunteering abroad, or have already volunteered abroad, to participate in a 30-60 min interview as part of my MA research project. Participants will be asked questions such as:

Can you please tell me why you are interested in volunteering abroad? and,

Can you please tell me what motivated you to participate in volunteer work abroad?

**Where:** U of C campus

**When:** September 15-December 15,

Monday- Sunday, 9am-5pm

If you are interested and/or would like more information please contact Monika Ladosz at mladosz@ucalgary.ca

Thank you!

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.
APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT'S INDIVIDUAL PRE-TRAVEL MENTAL MODELS
APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT'S INDIVIDUAL POST-TRAVEL MENTAL MODELS