The Long-Term Effects of Participation in a Short-Term Mission Trip

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to gather understanding of the long-term effects when going on a short-term mission trip, in order to gather useful information for mission organizations and anyone who is thinking about going on one. Four qualitative interviews were performed and through coding, revealed the impact of short-term trips had major impacts in the three areas that were tested. Those areas are in self-growth, their view of people from other cultures, and the desire for future missionary endeavors. The results of this study show the importance and impact of short-term trips in a person’s life.

Keywords: short-term missions, college students, phenomenology, qualitative methods

Introduction
The act of short-term missions (STMs) in the North American church is a huge and rapidly growing phenomenon. Studies show that well over 1.5 million people travel on some Christian STM each year (Priest & Priest, 2008). However, Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler (2011) argue that this number is a significant underestimate because it only reflects adults who go, while a great proportion of people who go are teenagers going with a youth program, estimating that numbers could easily be over 3 million. The skepticism towards STMs is growing just as rapidly. The skeptics attack the effectiveness of producing change in the participants and if they really do any good when on an STM (Johnson, 2014). This skepticism on whether STMs are effective has risen the question of how much change takes place in the lives of the attendees of these trips. Determining the long-term implications of the people who go on STMs will go a long way in distinguishing the importance of them. Howell (2009) states, “Short-term missions merit social scientific observation as well as missiological reflection” (p. 206); it is important to examine the personal impact of STM efforts to help solidify and continue to develop further STM programs.

Phenomenology in STMs
Phenomenology looks at various types of experiences that can be taken in, such as perception, imagination, emotion, and desire, among others (Zafarghandi et al., 2012). Edmund Husserl is commonly known as the founder of Phenomenology, developing the concept through his Logical Investigations (Husserl 2001). This study will be looking at the lived experiences of the participants of short-term missions. Using the phenomenological process in working towards an understanding of the effects of short-term missions, from a Christian perspective, is beneficial because within phenomenology, research subjectivity is a positive and should be embraced, instead of trying to completely rid the study of any biases or influences that would be hard to avoid. Through the interpretation and coding of the “lived experiences” of the individuals who are interviewed, influences of the researcher can be brought to the forefront instead of trying to be avoided (Finlay, 2008). The use of phenomenological methods helps bring the experiences that participants of STMs gather from the mission field to light. Lester (1999) states, “Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions.” Drawing out the experiences and the participants’ perspectives will be integral in the results of this study.

Biblical Framework
Short-term missions originated in scripture. The three big categories in scripture come from Jesus’ ministry, Paul’s ministry, and the many examples of the Old
Testament. In Luke 10 Jesus appointed 72 people to go in groups into every town and place that Jesus was going to go. They were short-term missionaries, preparing the people for when Jesus came to that area to preach as a short-term missionary. Many people refer to Paul, the apostle, as the greatest Christian missionary of all time. Paul was pouring into many places and churches. With the way he spread out his ministry, he could not spend much time in each location during his missionary journeys (per common knowledge, he did not stay for more than a few weeks with exceptions in Ephesus and Corinth). He kept in constant contact through letters and he prayed for all the places he was ministering to but did not stay long-term. This type of ministry of his is discovered in much of the New Testament. 

In looking at this short-term idea of missions in the Old Testament, one can look at the book of Jonah. Through Jonah, the Lord saves all the people of Nineveh in what seems to be one day. This shows that it does not necessarily take a life-time of mission work in a country to produce change. As a Christian, it is important to replicate missions in a similar fashion that is seen in scripture.

**Literature Review**

**What are Short-Term Missions?**

The specifics of the definition of short-term missions vary based on author but most literature agrees that short-term missions are classified as trips to distant places, often internationally, with a main purpose of spreading religion. Friesen’s (2005) describes STMs as part of the larger, long-term mission movement of that area. Mission trips that are short term can last from a few days up to two years; however, most are in the one to two-week range (Priest & Priest, 2008). These trips are often led by various organizations and churches. Many churches are starting to employ mission pastors. A mission pastor’s sole job is to lead various trips (Priest & Priest, 2008).

The typical goal for a short-term mission trip (one that is accepted by most literature) is to change the lives of the people who are being reached by providing the needs and wants of those people while sharing the gospel to them. There are a number of varying goals for people who partake in “mission trips”, including helping long term ministries, learning the native language, worshiping with the native population, studying the culture of the people of the area, putting on summer camps for the children, meeting with and encouraging the local leaders of the church, or even doing humanitarian aid (painting houses, delivering medical supplies, etc.) (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, & Adler, 2011). All these different goals share one core idea, spreading one’s religious beliefs.

**An Effect on One’s Personal Growth**

The debate of the effectiveness of STMs focus in large part, around the area of one’s personal growth. Many authors write of the positive effect on oneself while others, such as Johnson (2001) and Jefferey (2001), present the current functionality of STMs as not as beneficial.

According to Zehner (2006), “Short-term mission trips transform participants, especially younger ones, by fostering increased cultural sensitivity, spiritual depth, and greater commitment to the cause of world missions” (p. 509). Many studies have been conducted on how short-term mission trips affect one’s spiritual well-being, backing Zehner’s statement. One of these studies comes from Mantissas (2000).

Mantissas (2000) crafted a study to test if individuals who take part in an STM trip will sense an increase in their spiritual wellbeing. He hypothesized that the participants would have an enhanced sense of spiritual well-being, as well as an increase of internal religious orientation and self-esteem. The study showed a positive correlation between going on an STM and an increase in their spiritual well-being, with the quantitative data found having a significant difference between the control and the experimental group. Kathryn Tuttle had a similar study focusing more on qualitative data.

Tuttle (2000), Ph.D. and Director of Student Leadership and Development at Biola University crafted a study in 1997 to explore the impact of a summer mission trip on the spiritual growth of college students who are Christians. This study showed a clear positive correlation between missions and self-growth. In addition, both Mantissas and Tuttle note that a limitation of their study was the lack of a proper scale to determine spiritual growth and suggest a better scale is needed.

Jeffery (2001) conducted a study that looked at the effect on one’s personal growth from a completely different angle. Jeffery argues that many of the North Americans who seeks to go on STMs do not focus on any long-term impact, but on the emotional rewards for helping out. That idea can be backed up by many people who are huge advocates for STMs, including Fanning (2009) and Peterson & Peterson (1991). Jeffery argues that these STMs have less long-term impact due to the fact that they are not focused on the possible long-term rewards. Because of this short-term focus on a feeling, and little focus on long-term spiritual
growth, not much spiritual growth occurs due to the neglect of that focus. Beyerleign, Adler, and Trinitapoli (2011) and Friesen (2005) would counter that argument by saying that there does not need to be a focus on spiritual growth for that spiritual growth to take place.

The Effect on the View of Others

There has been literature claiming that taking part in an STM can change one’s world perspective (Priest, et al, 2006). The prejudice on other countries, civic engagement, and the desire for future missions have all been mentioned in literature. These results, just like the ones on personal growth, are quite controversial (Johnson, 2014). Some authors bring up the idea that going on an STM can negatively increase the concept of privilege, a concept tied within ethnocentrism in America.

The concept of “white privilege” first mentioned by McIntosh (1998) is said to be “an invisible package of unearned assets in which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I want to remain oblivious” (p. 164). The United States, without even knowing, can be very prejudiced against other countries, especially 2nd and 3rd world countries. This is because of how privileged the United States is and those who live in it tend to feel sorry for countries that are underdeveloped (McIntosh, 1998). Johnson (2014) concludes that going on an STM can increase prejudice rather than reduce it because going on an STM allows for participants to see the situation those in other cultures face and result in a “looking down” on them.

In contrast, other authors have argued that STMs have reduced prejudice. In a study conducted in Mexico, Priest et al. (2006) sees evidence of a reduction of prejudice and ethnocentrism as participants can relate to others from other cultures and can see them as equals. What both authors stress in their respective studies is the need for further research on the topic.

The Effect on Further Mission Efforts

Paul Cull, a full-time missionary in the rural areas of Brazil, believes that “…the primary belief of any short-term mission trip is to expose the team members to something like the reality of the mission field, to give them a taste of the reality of the call, and perhaps motivate them for later involvement in world missions” (Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, 2015. p.276). This later involvement that Cull speaks of can mean giving financially, giving of prayer, giving of time, and potentially becoming a missionary themselves.

Short-Term Evangelical Missions, or STEM, conducted two different studies, one in the 80’s and one in the 90’s, to identify if going on STMs creates further mission efforts. Through the 1986 study, and solidified more through the 1998 study, STEM found that STMs can lead to more interest in the mission movement as a whole. In addition, STEM notes that the key in contributing to the long-term mission movement is getting participants to attend more than one STM. Friesen (2004), however, has a hard time contributing this data for the entire STM movement because the study was limited to a single group and the study was originally meant as research for the company to determine the effectiveness of their specific trips, not the short-term mission movement as a whole. Looking at further humanitarian or local mission efforts, Probasco (2013) found a statistically significant positive correlation between going on international short-term trips and an increase in volunteering with charity, with local organizations, and with international organizations.

Priest et al. (2006) looks at whether participants in STMs give a greater amount of their own income to support missionaries than those with no such experience. The authors of the study concluded that there was no significance difference in giving between those who had participated in STMs and those who had not. The authors state that these results could have occurred for several reasons. One reason is because those who go on STMs might not feel like they need to give in addition to going on a trip, as if they already have done their part. The other possibility is that the ones who do not go on STMs but have called to, give more money because they feel bad that they themselves cannot go. Probasco (2013) came to similar findings, stating that there was no statistically significant data to correlate an increase in giving from those that have previously went on an STM.

Methodology

This study will utilize the qualitative lens of phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of students of Truett McConnell University who have attended short-term mission trips and their impact on the students. More specifically, the study uses interviews to answer the question, are there any long-term effects in participating in a short-term mission trip? These effects can range anywhere from an increase in spiritual growth to having a more positive view of people in another culture. The goal of this study is to determine the overall effect of going on a short-term mission trip, and hopefully to add to the discussions of whether or not short-term trips are beneficial, effective, or worth the money. This phenomenological design was
chosen because it best fits the goal of understanding how short-term trips effect the real people who go on them, and the way that the lived experiences of going on a short-term trip has affected their lives. There is keen interest in learning if perspectives and viewpoints were changed because of participation of short-term mission trips.

**Conceptual Framework**

The following diagram explains how the concept of phenomenology can illustrate how short-term missions, and the lived experiences that come from that, can lead to change in the participants to go. The contextual framework is relatively simple. It describes that participating in an STM leads to lived experiences that occur while being on the trip, and those lived experiences can lead to personal growth, a changed perspective of people in another culture, and a further calling into missions efforts. See Figure 1.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1 – Explanation of how STMs can effect one’s life through the lived experiences of the trip

**Participants and Instrumentation**

The sample group used in the study are all current students attending Truett McConnell University. The sample group consisted of a total of five participants, all of whom have gone on at least one STM in the past calendar year. The participants were selected because the researcher had prior knowledge of them going on previous STMs. All five participants were personally asked if they would be willing to sit down for an interview and then scheduled for an interview. The interviews that took place were all unstructured interviews. A list of 12 questions were crafted that the researcher asked each participant, but the questions were open-ended, and each interview went in its own direction. Each participant was given an informed consent form explaining the interview and the confidentiality given to each participant. All the interviews were conducted one-
on-one with the interviewer. The interviews lasted anywhere from 10 to 45 minutes.

The researcher designed the interview questions to facilitate discussion by the participants, based on a similar interview by Mustain et al. (2012). The interview questions can be found in Appendix A. All the interview questions were asked of each participant, but as the interviews went on, interviews went into different directions based off of the responses given to the researcher. For example, in one interview, the participant went to three different countries on her mission trip. In that interview, each place was broken down and discussed in more detail to discover how each affected her differently based off of the different circumstances.

Data Analysis

The researcher recorded the interviews with a voice memo application on his personal cell phone. Each interview was conducted in the lobby of a college dorm. Each time it was a quiet, warm environment. Each interview was relaxed, and each participant seemed to be in a joyous mood while describing their experiences. Each interview was later transcribed by the researcher by listening to the recording of each interview. The transcriptions were encoded by examining the transcriptions and by pulling out common themes across multiple interviews. Those common themes make up the majority of the findings.

Findings

Throughout the four interviews, a few distinct common themes were evident. Each participant discussed a self-impact, a calling to further missions, and a pure unknown of other cultures. These themes correlate closely to what was projected in the introduction and literature review. Three of the four participants discussed in great detail some self-growth being evident, while the fourth discussed a kindled passion for sharing the gospel, a response potentially classifiable under the theme of. All four participants have gone on mission trips since the trip that was discussed. Also, each of the four participants had remarkably similar views on people of other cultures before the trip, a view of complete unknown. Each participant discussed that before the trip, they never really thought of people of other cultures at all. Looking at each of these common themes in depth, will hopefully supply better understanding of what the interviews bring to light.

Self-Impact

The first common theme that the majority of the participants discussed is how they grew as a person and in their Christianity because of the trip. The second interviewee summed up the impact an STM had on his life as, “it flipped my world upside down. I would say that it showed me my purpose as a follower of Jesus. That God’s heart is for people. His mission is for people. He wants all people to know about him. Simplifying things to wanting God and wanting to serve him. I brought nothing to the table. It’s all him.” Manitsas’s research (2000) shows similar findings, with participants feeling more committed to Christ, closer in their relationship to Christ, and more willing to share their faith.

The first participant discussed how trip to London, Kenya, and Dubai. She believed that she was impacted more personally than any impact she had on the people that she was there to witness to and help. She discussed how it stretched her in ways that she did not know that it would or even could. Comments from the second participant were similar. He mentioned multiple times that the trip seemed to be set up for personal growth rather than for the mission work to be done. He clarified multiple times that they did do what they intended to do, but the trip was designed specifically for self-growth. He said, “The trip was designed by my youth pastor and his goal was to instill a passion for his students and that was definitely achieved on the trip.” He said that Haiti was like a training ground for the students and almost everyone whom they came in contact with were Christians.

The other two participants were affected in much different ways. The third participant described a boldness to share the gospel that she did not have before. She said, “After going to Guatemala, I just realized that if I could witness to people that could not even speak my own language, why in the world could I not share the Gospel back at home. The same Holy Spirit that was living inside me while in Guatemala, is the same Holy Spirit living inside of me now.” The fourth participant also discussed a new boldness for his faith, but it was not because of witnessing to the people that he went to go witness to. Yes, he did that, but what strengthened him the most was the conflict between himself and the leaders of the trip. The participant said that the leaders held beliefs that did not line up with his views on scripture and tried to force those beliefs on to the students on the trip. He stood up for what he believed in, but he did not have his family to help give him answers, “I did not even have Google to help me find the passages I was trying to look for,” he said. Through that experience, he said, he grew spiritually and in his own faith, and that has been the launching point for him in his walk with Christ. On that same topic, the fifth participant also discussed that this
struggle that he faced on his mission trip led to his calling in life, a calling to lead missions.

A Calling to Missions

The fourth participant explained that he is a global studies major at Truett McConnell and wants to be a missions pastor when he graduates so he can help mobilize other people in fulfilling the Great Commission. He explained that his passion for wanting to help lead other people in missions came directly as a result of his mission trip in Honduras. He said, “I am not sure if it was because my leadership was not what I would have hoped, or if it was just through going to Honduras, but ever since then I have understood my calling to spread the Gospel.”

The second participant also had long term missional implications from his short-term missions trip. Since going on his first trip to Haiti, he has gone to Haiti a second time, gone to London, and spent six months in Asia with the International Mission Board. He also explained that he wants to be a full-time missionary. He explained that he did not necessarily have the desire to become a full-time missionary after going to Haiti the first time, but that trip made him want to go back to Haiti again, and then to Asia for six months, and to London. He also said that “Haiti helped me be more confident in going to Hands-On ministries for six months with the IMB.” For him, going to one mission trip led to going to another and so forth.

Both other participants had different experience when it came to future missions efforts, but both of them had a positive correlation when it came to further mission efforts. Both have been on mission trips since that one and are still currently interested in participating in future trips. The first participant has gone to Boston on a mission trip and the third participant has gone to Honduras plans to go to Guatemala again this summer. The third participant also explained something else that was interesting when it comes to future missionary efforts. She was very frustrated after her first trip to Guatemala because she could not really communicate with the people there too much because they only knew Spanish and she only knew English. Since that trip to Guatemala, she has become quite capable in speaking Spanish, which will allow her to be a much more effective tool on the mission field.

Other research studies into the impact of STM's on a calling to missions have similar results. Friesen (2004) concluded that “A year after returning from their mission assignments, short-term mission alumni became more polarized in their interest toward future full time mission” (p. 223). Peterson (1991) also discovers an increased interest in further missions efforts after participating on an STM.

The Unknown of Other Cultures

The most surprising result may have come in the discussion of people of other cultures. All four participants had almost identical results when the researcher asked a question about their perception of people of other cultures before their trip. Each person explained that they never really thought about people from other cultures. The second participant said, “I can honestly say I just did not think. I never really cared that much about it. It was just not something I ever considered, that people were different from me.” The first participant said something very similar, saying, “I was very uncultured; not that I had a negative or positive view of people of other cultures, I just never gave it any thought.”

But those ideas really changed for all of them after becoming immersed in a foreign culture. The second participant discussed developing a love for places and the people who live in those places. He talked about noticing other cultures now and is more interested in people that are not born in the United States. The fourth participant talked about “falling in love with Central American people.” The third participant learned Spanish so she could better talk to Spanish speaking people. It was also noted that the passion was evident when these participants started talking about the cultures that they are interested in and how much they enjoy people of other cultures.

Unexpectedly all four participants felt as if they did not accomplish much in their endeavors with the people that they were there for. Whether it was because of language or because of the lack of opportunities, every participant stressed that although the trip was great for their growth, great for their walks in Christ, they did not do much at all for the ones that were the focus of the entire trip. This commonality most likely is the result of what trip each of the students went on for their first mission trip. The second interviewee explained that he felt as if he accomplished a lot more on his following trips. More research needs to be done to explore this common result.

This concept of previously being completely unaware of foreign cultures is not one that is discussed in any depth across research. Probasco (2013) and Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler (2011) both discover that a growth of civil engagement and volunteering within areas of other cultures within the United States. The understanding developed from this study correlates with that idea. Before, these students were completely unaware that anyone was different than them, now more culturally aware, the
likelihood in participation in culturally diverse events would increase.

Limitations and Future Research

A strength of this study that was developed from the phenomenological interview was that because there were not many interviews and each interview was relatively in-depth, the researcher was able to grasp a good understanding of the changes in the participants’ lives. Another strength that this study provides is a good timetable after the short-term mission trips took place. The interview was far enough after the trips for the participants to be able to look back on events and effects with a less biased lens. Ver Beek (2006) performed a similar study, in which he constructed a case study from a trip to Honduras. A limitation he suggested to his study is that the interviews were taken way too soon, taking place three weeks afterward (p. 476). The interviews that were constructed in this study all happened around 3 years after the trips. This timing allowed the participants to actually see if there was a difference in their lives moving forward.

This study was designed to provide understanding of potential long-term effects in short-term mission work. With that being said, it only looked at four individuals, all coming from the same institution. To further research, it would be useful to have a more diverse sample size as well as having quantitative data to coincide with the qualitative data. A possibly quantitative example could be a survey that is taken before going on a mission trip and then another survey either six months or a year after, to determine tangible change in participants.

One major limitation is that the researcher already had knowledge of the participants prior to asking them to participate in an interview. The participants were not chosen randomly. It would have been difficult to randomly select people without having the prior knowledge of whether they had been on a short-term trip in the recent past. Another possible limitation is that because the interviews occurred a couple of years after the trip, there could be countless factors that contributed to the “results” of their interviews. In other words, the participants may be attributing certain changes to the STM, whereas in reality, there may have been other factors driving the change throughout the time after the trip.

Conclusion

Whether it be parents thinking about allowing their child to go on a short-term mission trip, someone being asked to help by donating to a short-term trip, or someone thinking participating in one themselves: learning about the long-term implications can be vital in that decision-making process. This study exhibits a connection between the lived experiences that occur on STMs and positive long-term effects. From the four interviews that took place, there seemed to be three main effects that lasted beyond the initial STM. STM’s appear to instill a lasting call to missions and a passion to learn about other cultures in those who participate on those missions. Most importantly, STM’s help further participant’s understanding of their faith and identity in Christ. Extensive quantitative data may be necessary in order to determine precisely the likelihood and statistical significance of these effects.

Friesen (2004), however, makes an important and sometimes lost point, as Christians, when he says, “The impact that short-term mission has on participants is only a part of the overall value of the mission effort and is secondary when compared to the life changing effects on people around the world who experience the Gospel (p. 248). Also, Matthew 28:19 says “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…” (ESV). Going and making disciples is commanded, not suggested. Short-term missions act as single vessel to take part in fulfilling this command at the heart of God’s Word.

This qualitative research can be beneficial and informational for churches, church leaders and those in the field of missiology to help better understand the effects of short-term missions on the participants. It can be useful in their understanding of the significance and importance of short-term missions as part of the global mission effort. Hopefully, the information gathered from this study can further the research in the field of short-term missions that leads to future discoveries in the research to come.
References


Appendix A - Instrumentation

Demographic Questions
1. Race:
2. Class:
3. Gender:

Short Term Missions Questions
4. Where was your first short-term mission trip?
5. What made you decide to participate in this short-term mission trip?
6. How many times have you participated on this trip?
7. What factors influenced you to participate only once/ more than once on this trip?
8. What did you feel your team achieved as a result of this trip?
9. What differences did you notice this trip make in the lives of those who participated?
10. What changes happened as a result of this trip?
11. Now that the trip is over, how was your trip either successful or unsuccessful?
12. What did this trip mean to you?
13. Did your walk with God change at all after going on your trip?
14. How would you describe your view of other people groups before going on a short-term mission trip?
15. Did that perspective change after going on a short-term mission trip?