Psychology   College of Arts & Sciences

2007

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The Impact of College Student Immersion Service Learning Trips on Coping with Stress and Vocational Identity

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of service learning immersion trips on vocational identity and coping with stress among college students. Fifty-one students (15 males, 36 females) who participated in immersion trips and 76 students (25 males, 51 females) in a non-immersion control group completed a series of questionnaires directly before and immediately after both fall and spring break immersion trips, and during a four-month follow up. Results suggest that, after returning from an immersion trip, students report a greater ability to cope with stress and a somewhat stronger sense of vocational identity relative to students who do not participate in immersion trips.

KEYWORDS: vocation; identity; personal well-being; altruism; stress; immersion trips, service learning; volunteerism

Introduction

A number of research studies have investigated the need for college students to find purpose, meaning, and a sense of vocation during their university years as they reflect and discern on their career and general future directions (Chartrand & Camp, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Dreher, under review; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Synder, 1998). Seligman (2002) has defined vocation as an active effort to use personal strengths to positively impact the world, and as a crucial part to a healthy functioning personality.

Many universities offer programs that provide students the opportunity to participate in activities that develop their vocational identities and help them nurture lives of greater meaning. Volunteerism and service learning opportunities hopefully help create more engaged global and altruistic citizens. For example, Johnson et al. (1998) conducted a longitudinal study that surveyed students from their first through fourth years in high school. Those students who were actively involved in service learning and volunteerism became more academically motivated and developed a greater sense of vocation regarding their future goals and aspirations. Kish and Stage (1974) examined college students who volunteered at psychiatric hospitals and found that those who volunteered experienced more meaning and vocational direction than those who did not. Post (2005) reported that altruistic emotions and behaviors are closely associated with a greater sense of well-being, positive physical health, and a longer life. Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma, and Reed (2003) also found that community service involvement is associated with better physical and mental health.

In the present study, we sought to determine if college student community service immersion trip participation contributes to a stronger sense of vocation and better coping with stress. We hypothesized that students who engaged in immersion service trips

would emerge with a greater sense of vocational identity and better ability to cope with perceived stress.

Methods

Participants

The study included a total of 127 participants (39 males, 83 females) with a mean age of 19.51 ($\underline{SD}$ = 1.20, Range = 18 to 24 years). Of all the participants, 51 (15 males, 36 females) took part in an immersion trip while 76 (25 males, 51 females) did not and acted as a control group. In order to minimize attrition, all participants were informed that they would be entered into a raffle to win $300 worth of gift certificates if they completed all phases of the study.

Twenty-six students (10 males, 16 females) participated in an immersion trip during fall break (November 21-25, 2005), while 25 (5 males, 20 females) participated during spring break (March 25-April 1, 2006). Fifty-one students who went on the immersion trips (15 males, 36 females) successfully completed all phases of the study. The majority of the students ($\underline{n}$ = 31, 12 males, 19 females) went to Tijuana, Mexico. In addition, 4 females went to East Los Angeles, 6 females went to Nogales, Arizona, 4 (3 males, 1 female) went to New York City, and 3 females went to Tuba City, Arizona.

Students in the control group were selected from introductory psychology courses ($\underline{n}$ = 25) and from two residential learning communities ($\underline{n}$ = 51) that focus on social justice and community service. This latter group was selected in order to provide a control group with as many personal similarities as possible (i.e., interest in social justice and service work) to those students participating in immersion trips.

Measures

Vocation Identity Questionnaire (VIQ; Dreher, Holloway, Schoenfelder, under review; see Appendix A). In order to provide data about the students' vocational identity, defined as having a strong sense of "calling," students completed the 9-item Vocational Identity Questionnaire (VIQ). On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), students responded to questions such as "I have a calling that enables me to develop my skills and talents and use them in a meaningful way" and "Most of the time I genuinely enjoy the work I do." Scores range from 9 to 45 with higher scores reflecting a more firm sense of vocation.

Stress and Coping Scale (see Appendix B). In order to assess the students' perceived levels of stress and their perceived ability to cope with the stressors in their lives, students answered two questions on an author-developed 10-point Likert scale (e.g., "How well do you feel you are currently coping with the stressors in your life?") where higher scores reflecting better coping.

The Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS; Crowne & Marlow, 1960). This scale is designed to measure social desirability or defensiveness and consists of 33 true-false statements (Crowne & Marlow, 1960). Sample items include, "I

like to gossip at times" and "I always try to practice what I preach." Items are scored using one point for each true or false item endorsed in the direction of social desirability or defensiveness. The Marlow-Crowne SDS has been found to maintain adequate internal consistency ($\underline{KR-21}$=.75) and construct validity (Crowne and Marlow, 1960).

Procedure

All of the participants were given the scales noted above directly before (pre-trip) and immediately after (post-trip) either the fall or the spring break immersion trips during the 2005-06 academic year. In order to minimize the effects of extraneous variables, students were encouraged to complete the pre-questionnaires as close as possible to the beginning of the pre-immersion meetings, and the post-questionnaires as close as possible to the end of the immersion trips. In addition, students on the fall break immersion trips were given an additional questionnaire approximately four months after returning from their trip (the follow-up scores). It should be noted that only fall break participants were given the MC-SDS.

All participants signed a consent form (which provided informed consent and guaranteed confidentiality) before filling out the questionnaires. Students were given the option of filling out either a paper or electronic version of the questionnaires. Only data from those students who successfully completed both the pre and post trip questionnaires were used in the analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics were analyzed from all participants for the vocational identity, coping, and social desirability measures. A table with the means and standard deviations (by experimental condition and gender) for the pre-trip, post-trip, and follow up measures is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.   Means and Standard Deviations for Vocational Identity and Coping with Stress by Experimental Condition and Gender

Variables	Immersion Trip Participants				Control Group Participants			
	Before immersion experience				Before immersion trips			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
coping	5.90	1.79	5.77	1.82	6.56	1.46	6.06	2.29
vocational identity	35.40	3.47	32.57	4.64	33.50	5.02	31.91	6.55
social desirability***	13.90	7.92	16.40	4.78	13.50	5.72	15.29	4.53
	After immersion experience				After immersion trips			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
coping	6.50	1.78	7.27	2.02	6.07	2.06	6.23	2.03
vocational identity	34.60	4.62	33.79	4.89	31.56	4.11	31.83	6.04

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	4 months after immersion experience				4 months after immersion trips			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
coping	7.78	0.97	6.21	1.25	7.17	1.85	5.70	1.69
vocational identity	36.56	3.78	33.77	4.57	34.83	3.76	31.85	5.49

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on post-trip vocational identity scores using pre-trip vocation and social desirability scores as covariates. Results indicate a marginally significant main effect [$F(1,74) = 3.31$, $p<.10$] such that students who participated on immersion trips had higher scores and thus a stronger sense of vocation. No significant gender or gender by trip interaction effects emerged. Post-hoc analysis revealed that those who participated on immersion trips showed a tendency toward stronger vocation identity than those who did not immediately following the trips ($p<.10$). When these analyses were repeated using the follow-up data, significant main effects failed to emerge [$F(1,53) = 2.54$, $p >.10$].

An ANOVA was conducted on post-trip coping scores using pre-trip coping scores as a covariate and a significant main effect emerged [$F(1,71) = 6.66$, $p<.05$]. Immersion trip participants reported better coping with perceived stress than control subjects. In addition, a marginally significant gender interaction emerged [$F(1,71) = 3.79$, $p = .056$] such that males reported better coping with stress than females after participating in an immersion trip. When this analysis was repeated using follow-up scores, a marginally significant main effect emerged [$F(1,54) = 3.84$, $p = .056$] and a significant gender interaction effect was revealed [$F(1,54) = 11.52$, $p <.01$]. Post-hoc analysis revealed that immersion participants reported an increased ability to cope with stress, with this effect especially strong for males.

Discussion

Our results indicate that, following a college-based service learning immersion trip, immersion participants reported better coping with stress in their lives and a stronger sense of vocation relative to students who did not participate in an immersion trip.

In addition, our results yielded interesting results regarding the ways in which an immersion trip impacts men and woman differently. Results suggest that better coping after immersion trips was especially true for males. While males experienced greater benefits when examining coping with stress, no significant gender difference was observed for vocational identity.

The increase in vocational identity was found to be consistent with prior research (e.g., Johnson et al., 1998; Kish & Stage, 1974). As mentioned earlier, those who participate in acts of service gain a greater understanding of their personal identity and what they want to do with their lives. Perhaps the impact of doing service away from the

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comforts of home provides participants with new avenues of discovery in which they gain insights into their lives. Our results regarding vocational identity remained after using the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale as a covariate, thus controlling for the self-reporting bias.

While post measures of vocational identity suggest an increase for immersion participants, our follow-up measures yielded no such significance between groups. A possible explanation for this finding is that discerning one's vocation is an involved and ongoing process and that some of the vocational benefits might disappear over time. However, many students choose to go on multiple immersion trips during their time in college. It would be important to examine how a person's vocation identity is affected in the long term after participating in multiple immersion trips during different phases of their college career.

While being faced with the grim realities of human suffering, such as poverty, homelessness, mental illness, violence, and disease, participants, upon returning to the university, are likely more aware of the realities of the world and realize that the suffering they face in their own lives is much less significant compared to the suffering of those whom they interacted with during their immersion experience. In this way, immersion trips may help students put their lives into perspective. For example, participants may be thinking, "My life is stressful, but compared to the poor in Tijuana, I have nothing to complain about." This may account for better coping with stress scores among immersion participants.

Our results must be viewed cautiously in light of several important limitations. While it would have been ideal to randomly assign participants to either an immersion or non-immersion group, students choose to either participate on the immersion trip or not. Thus, a true experimental design with random assignment into experimental and control conditions is not possible. Another limitation included the fact that while the control group for fall immersion trips consisted of similar students from the same residence hall communities, the spring control group consisted of psychology students from an introductory psychology class. Attrition was also an important limitation. Only about half of the people who completed initial surveys successfully completed the post-test surveys (or follow-up surveys).

Further research might seek to examine the benefits of experiencing a more traditional spring break relative to an alternative immersion spring break. Future research should use larger samples from multiple universities and investigate more detailed elements of coping and vocational discernment. This study perhaps represents a first step in examining the possible psychological and vocational advantages of service learning immersion trips.

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Appendix A.   Vocation Identity Questionnaire (VIQ; Dreher, Holloway, Schoenfelder, under review)

Please answer the following questions with 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree.   (If you are a student, "work" is your current school work, unless stated otherwise,)

1. If I were independently wealthy, I would quit my current work or course of study………………………………………………………………………….5   4   3   2   1

2. Most of the time I genuinely enjoy the work I do. (answer re: your studies)…………………………………………………………...………5   4   3   2   1

3. My daily routine is often so tedious that I feel I'm just putting in time until the end of the day…………..…………………………………………...……………5   4   3   2   1

4. I get a sense of personal satisfaction completing projects and solving problems that come up. ……………………………………………………………5   4   3   2   1

5. I sometimes get so involved in my work that I lose track of time (answer re: your studies)…………………………………………………………...…5   4   3   2   1

6. My major motivation in my work is making money (answer re: your future career.)………………………………………………...………….………5   4   3   2   1

7. I have a calling that enables me to develop my skills and talents and use them in a meaningful way ……………………………………………….…5   4   3   2   1

8. In my daily life I often feel connected to larger patterns of joy and meaning……………….……………………….…....…...…………..5   4   3   2   1

9. I see my work as a way to make a positive difference in the world (answer re: your future.)…..……………………………………………….…..5   4   3   2   1

Appendix B.   Author-developed scale measuring health, faith, coping, and stress
Please answer the following questions using the scales below:
1. How stressed are you at this time?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
very relaxed				average					very stressed

2. How well do you feel you are currently coping with the stressors in your life?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
poor coping				average					excellent coping

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Brad Mills and **Richard Bersamina** both graduated as psychology majors from Santa Clara Univ. in the spring of 2006, and both are doing community based service learning for this year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Brad is in Bolivia working as a teacher/counselor at a rural school, while Richard is in Seattle working in community mental health. Richard will begin social work graduate school this fall at the University of Washington, and Brad will stay in Bolivia for another year. You can reach Richard Bersamina at richard.bersamina@gmail.com, and Brad Mills at bradmills1@gmail.com.