THE INFLUENCE OF PEACE CORPS SERVICE ON THE ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP PROCLIVITIES OF RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

by

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Abstract

Peace Corps Volunteers spend 27 months working in developing countries around the world. They orchestrate and implement a myriad of projects in various fields, often entirely on their own. This paper aims to provide insights into how Peace Corps service affects volunteers’ entrepreneurial leadership proclivities. To accomplish this a pre/post-test was administered to 74 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers participating in the Paul D. Coverdell Fellowship program at the University of Arizona. Respondents were surveyed to determine their proclivity toward using entrepreneurial strategies and their proclivity to be innovative. Service in the Peace Corps increased the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers’ ability to hone their entrepreneurial strategies and innovate. The results showed an increase in the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers’ entrepreneurial leadership proclivities after they had completed their service.

Keywords: Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, Entrepreneurial Strategy, Innovation, Entrepreneurial Leadership
Introduction

From its inception in 1961 the Peace Corps has been deploying American citizens around the world to developing countries. Since then over 225,000 Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) have served in 141 (Fast Facts, 2016) different counties. PCVs serve as long-term, grass-roots change makers (Kerley & Jenkins, 2010; Is Peace Corps Right for Me?, n.d.). PCVs spend 27 months living under the same conditions as their host communities, trying to accomplish the Peace Corps' three goals: increasing capacity building of local communities, share American culture with local communities, and sharing the culture of the local communities with Americans (About. n.d.). PCVs spend the first three months training to become change makers for their communities. In order for PCVs to have the impact that the Peace Corps is hoping for, they must spend a lot of time learning the culture, language, and technical skills need to effectively initiate change. However the Peace Corps, at least according to their website, appear to be very vague about the exact training that is involved to become change makers. This study looks at how Peace Corps service affects Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) ability to implement entrepreneurial leadership and become better change makers.

PCVs spend the remaining two years working with community members to develop a plethora of projects in fields that include education, health, environment, youth in development, community economic development, and agriculture (What Volunteers Do, n.d.). The 27 months that PCVs spend in the Peace Corps tends to create an extreme range in confidence levels for volunteers since their normal support structures are removed (Guthrie, 1967; Cross, 1998). PCVs are stripped of the normal comforts of life in America, and are forced to focus their efforts on the most basic community development such as gaining access to raw materials to get project work done (Durham, 1997). PCVs are forced to be more resourceful to get the most basic of projects
done. This resourcefulness has allowed RPCVs to frequently report increases in self-efficacy, maturity, and grit (Cross, 1998; Starr, 1994). The isolation from other Americans and staff permit PCVs to come up with innovative ways to solve problems, while building their confidence, which often translates into their professional development (Alves, 2007; Bruening, 2004; Klem, n.d.).

There are a limited number of studies that have considered the impacts of Peace Corps service on PCVs. Most studies show that for PCVs to be effective they must be able to adapt quickly, plan, and come up with innovative ways of completing projects and inspiring community members (Hirshon, Eng, Brunkow, & Hartzell, 1997; Arnold, 1967). Inflexible and overly passive PCVs often are unable to cope and choose to end their service early (Thomson & English, 1964). Winslow (1977) found that around 75 percent of RPCVs feel the Peace Corps has helped their careers, yet there are very few studies that delve into the impacts of Peace Corps service on PCVs.

The question arises; do PCVs who complete service have a predisposition to display a greater degree of entrepreneur leadership? It is true that the screening process to become a PCV is quite meticulous and can take nearly a year to be approved to become a PCV (Thomson & English, 1964). Guthrie argued that the Peace Corps as an institution draws a certain type of person; one who is more resilient and has the mental fortitude to work through difficult projects (Guthrie, 1967). Guthrie noted that only three to four percent of volunteers who join the Peace Corps leave the service or are kicked out prior to the end of service. By contrast, other American service companies realize as high as 30 percent volunteer attrition. Starr (1994) argued that it's the service which is so impactful on volunteers. Peace Corps service acts as a turning point in PCV's lives, a moment so significant that it changes how they view the world (Starr, 1994).
Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to understand whether or not serving in the Peace Corps affects an RPCVs' entrepreneurial leadership proclivities. Due to the countless number of service scenarios that many RPCVs found themselves, they were forced to create opportunities in adverse conditions, a trait that models that of entrepreneurial leaders (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004; Kuratko, 2007; Ireland, Colvin & Kuratko, 2007). Additionally, Kempster and Cope further break this idea down stating that the most effective leadership practices tend to come from "informal management" that is learned naturally (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Mayhew, Simonoff, Baumol, Wisenfeld, & Klein, 2012). In this vein, entrepreneurial leadership can be defined as an intersection of innovative thinking and entrepreneurial strategies that combine to create a better process for change makers (Fernald, Solomon & Tarabishy, 2005; Gupta et al, 2004; Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Kempster et. al, 2010; Bagheri & Pihie, 2011; Chen, 2007).

The concepts of innovation and entrepreneurial strategies can be further defined. Innovation is any new idea, item, or concept that is novel and provides a significant impact. To be considered innovative, persons must be idea-driven. That is, they must be able to come up with new concepts or ideas based on what already does or doesn't exist (Cogliser et al, 2004, Hmieleski & Corbett, 2006). Persons must be able to generate impactful ideas through multiple disciplines and be able to adapt them in creative ways (Kempster et al, 2010; Drucker, 1993; Chen, 2007, Bagheri et al, 2011). Persons also must have a strategic intuition to recognize opportunities that others may not see (Rogers, 2003; Gupta et al, 2004). PCVs are consistently forced to be innovative to complete their projects (Guthrie, 1967).
Entrepreneurial strategy refers to the strategies that are taken to inspire and drive others. Strong entrepreneurial strategies are about being able to use existing ideas as well as being able to collaborate to allow oneself to obtain more knowledge than was previously available (McGrath et al, 2000). In combination with that, persons who engage in entrepreneurial strategy, tend to be more resilient and show a perseverance when facing failure (Bullough & Renko 2013). Persons able to endure the pressures that they're facing and share their vision to inspire and motivate others (Fernald et al, 2005; Gupta et al, 2004; McGrath et al, 2000; Robichaud, McGraw, & Roger, 2001; Cogliser et al, 2004). It becomes extremely important when trying to inspire others to look towards the future, and not become bogged-down with the past. The literature (Brinckmann, 2008; Bagheri et al, 2011; Cornwall, 1998; Lounsbury, 2001) stresses the idea of understanding the target culture that persons are intending impact. Only by understanding the cultural significance of problems persons create a story that will have the desired impact. Of course, for any of this to matter the persons must be able to mitigate risk appropriately. Moreover, persons must be able and willing to take well-measured risks, and use those risks to help inspire and build the story they're trying to convey (Kotter, 2012; Stewart & Roth, 2007; Fernald et al, 2005).

Entrepreneurial leadership looks beyond just entrepreneurship and the idea of creating new enterprises. Entrepreneurial leadership refers to several individual characteristics that often fall with the field of innovation and entrepreneurial strategy (Fernald et al, 2005; Cogliser et al, 2004; Bagheri et al, 2011). Gupta et al (2004) refers to an entrepreneurial leader as someone who can realistically frame transformation and balance risk to effectively create change. An entrepreneurial leader, is in effect a change agent who can empower others to make innovative changes while reducing risk (Rogers, 1993; Chen, 2007).
Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to determine if Peace Corps service affects the entrepreneurial proclivities of Peace Corps Volunteers. There are currently very few studies that look at the impact of Peace Corps service on PCVs. In recent years there has been a considerable increase in interest in entrepreneurship as a form of social and economic development (Fernald et al, 2005; Wallace, 1999). The Peace Corps prides itself creating change makers who can make economic and social impacts within their communities (About, n.d.; History, n.d.). As such, the objectives of the study are:

1. Describe the innovation proclivities of RPCVs.
2. Describe the entrepreneurial strategy proclivities of RPCVs.
3. Describe how RPCVs entrepreneurial leadership proclivities have changed after serving in the Peace Corps.

Methodology

The study was a descriptive-correlational design in nature (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson, & Walker, 2013). It was designed specifically to measure the relationship between Peace Corps service and RPCVs entrepreneurial leadership proclivities. Being a descriptive-correlational design does however limit the ability to attribute causation (Ary et al, 2013). To address the purpose of the study, a pre-test/post-test design (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003) was used to determine the changes in entrepreneurial leadership proclivity among RPCVs. A reflective pre-test/post-test design allowed for a better understanding of how RPCVs entrepreneurial leadership proclivities changed over time.
The accessible population for this study was 74 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who were enrolled in the Paul D. Coverdell Fellows program at the University of Arizona during the spring 2017 semester. The Paul D. Coverdell Fellowship is offered to any RPCV who has successfully completed their Peace Corps service. Acceptance into the Fellowship is dependent on the participating university's application process. With over 11 different programs available to RPCVs the University of Arizona has one of the largest fellowship programs in the country (Coverdell Fellowship Partners, n.d.). The Paul D. Coverdell Fellows program provides RPCVs with the ability to continue their educations at the graduate and doctoral level after they have completed their Peace Corps service. By focusing on RPCVs who are in the fellowship program at the University of Arizona the study was able to gather data from a larger group of RPCVs than other universities, and was able to ensure that all of the participants had completed their service.

Data were collected using Mars and Torres’s (2017) Entrepreneurial Leadership Proclivity Inventory (ELPI). The instrument sought to measure entrepreneurial leadership derived by the measured intersecting points from two constructs; proclivity toward innovation and proclivity toward entrepreneurial strategy. Each construct (innovation & entrepreneurial strategy) are operationally defined by five sub-constructs. The innovation construct is comprised of: 1) idea driven, 2) interdisciplinary idea generation, 3) adaptability, 4) creativity, and 4) strategic intuition. The five sub-constructs for entrepreneurial strategies are: 1) data driven, 2) collaboration, 3) resiliency, 4) storytelling, and 5) risk tolerance.

In final form, the web-based data collection instrument was composed of two sections with the intention of measuring participants proclivity for innovation and entrepreneurial strategy. Each of the ten sub-constructs (5 for innovation and 5 for entrepreneurial strategy) was derived from a series of four statements. As this study attempted to determine the change of
entrepreneur leadership proclivities of RPCVs from pre-Peace Corps service to post-Peace Corps service, the instrument was developed to assess PCV’s retrospective (pre) measures and post measures (Howard, Ralph, Gulanick, Maxwell, Nance, & Gerber, 1979) on proclivity for innovation and entrepreneurial strategy. RPCVs are asked to answer questions about the constructs and sub-constructs as they related to their lives prior to joining the Peace Corps and then whether they have changed after the Peace Corps. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (Lester, Inman, & Bishop, 2014), ranging from 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most Times, and 5 = Always. A third section was created to measure demographic information and information about the RPCVs’ Peace Corps experience.

Face and content validity of the data collection instrument were established by Mars and Torres (2017) using a panel of content experts, as well as experts on instrument design. Using a pilot study \((n = 18)\) of individuals who approximate the characteristics of this study, they reported reliability estimate on the two constructs; innovation \((\alpha = .90)\) and entrepreneurial strategy \((\alpha = .77)\).

To access the population, a contact person (CP) with the University of Arizona's Paul D. Coverdell Fellows program was emailed to gain entree to a reliable frame of RPCVs. Using the Fellows email listserv, RPCVs were contacted via the CP. However, for privacy protection reasons, the CP would not reveal RPCVs’ email addresses, so all communication to the RPCVs when through the CP.

When contacting RPCVs for the study, an adaptation of Dillman's Tailored Design Methods was used to reduce non-response error (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian 2014). Dillman's method calls for five points of contact including: 1) initial contact, 2) Sending an initial packet
with questionnaire and instruction, 3) send a reminder, 4) follow up with a second questionnaire and set of instructions, 5) send one last follow up. Dillman's tailored design methods was adjusted slightly, and the initial point of contact was removed because the instrument was sent out electronically. Three emails were written with links to the questionnaire and then sent to the CP. A final "thank you" email was then sent to everyone. The CP then would copy and paste these emails and send them to the listserv. The entire data collection process took approximately a week and a half. The study resulted in 22 usable data cases (n = 22). Because of the multiple efforts to contact subjects, no effort was made to address non-response error. Consequently, data should be limited to respondents without effort to extrapolate. Data were analyzed and summarized using descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendencies and variability.

**Findings**

Table 1 shows that on average, the participants of this study thought of themselves as "sometimes" innovative (Mean = 3.11; SD = 0.43). Similarly, RPCVs felt that prior to their Peace Corps service they "sometimes" participated in entrepreneurial strategies (Mean = 3.15; SD = 0.35). After Peace Corps service, there was a drastic increase in both their innovative (Mean = 4.00; SD = 0.36) and entrepreneurial practices (Mean = 3.95; SD = 0.37). The average scores for each of these constructs increased by nearly an entire point (an increase in the mean of .89 and .80, respectively).
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Before Service</th>
<th>After Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial Strategy</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Based on the following five-point Likert scale 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the Time, 5 = Always

Breaking down the innovation construct into the 5 sub-constructs: idea driven, interdisciplinary idea generation, adaptability, creativity, strategic intuition, we see a similar pattern; see Table 2. There is a discernible increase in each of these sub-constructs once Peace Corps service has been completed. Interdisciplinary idea generation and adaptability saw the largest increases in means, increasing by over one point.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Construct</th>
<th>Before Service</th>
<th>After Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min.</td>
<td>Max.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Intuition</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Idea Generation</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea Driven</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Based on the following five-point Likert scale 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the Time, 5 = Always

Table 3, further echoes this pattern, as the sub-constructs for entrepreneurial strategies, data driven, collaboration, storytelling, and risk tolerance also saw increases after RPCVs completed their Peace Corps Service. Resiliency, is the only sub-construct that did not see an
increase in its average ($\text{Mean} = 3.13; \text{SD} = 0.44$, before and after). With the exception of resiliency and risk tolerance the sub-constructs for entrepreneurial strategies saw more drastic increases in averages after Peace Corps service.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Sub-Construct</th>
<th>Before Service</th>
<th>After Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min.</td>
<td>Max.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Driven</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Tolerant</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Based on the following five-point Likert scale 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Most of the Time, 5 = Always

To better understand the relationship between innovation and entrepreneurial leadership I used Mars and Torres' (2017) model. This model places innovation on the x-axis and entrepreneurial strategies along the y-axis. The mean innovation score and entrepreneurial strategy score act as the base lines of the graph, and divide it into four quadrants. These quadrants running from the bottom right going clock wise are: Innovator, Manager, Strategist, and Entrepreneurial Leader. The innovator is someone who shows creativity and adaptability, but lacks strategic perspective and capacity to act strategically. The manager tends to be someone who completes tasks the way they were intended to be done, without showing innovative thinking or entrepreneurial strategies. The strategist is a person who can advance ideas, but lacks creative vision and capacity to generate and develop new ideas. The entrepreneurial leader is someone who has innovative ideas and can push them forward through the application of entrepreneurial strategy (Mars & Torres, 2017).
RPCVs were plotted on a before Peace Corps service (Figure 1), and an after-Peace Corps service (Figure 2) graph. Figure 1 shows that prior to Peace Corps service the RPCV breakdown was as such: 6 RPCVs were innovators, 8 RPCVs were managers, 1 RPCV was a strategist, and 7 RPCVs were entrepreneurial leaders. Figure 2 shows that by the end of their service, every RPCV became an entrepreneurial leader.
Figure 1. Before Peace Corps Service Entrepreneur Leadership Proclivity
Of the 22 RPCVs that participated in this study, 10 completed their Peace Corps service within the last three years and all of them completed their service within the last eight years. Four of the RPCVs served more than the typical 27-month long service. Nine of the RPCVs served in the health field, while seven served in education. Two volunteers served in the agriculture and environment fields, there was only one in the youth in development field, and one served in another non-specified field. Of the 22 RPCVs, 12 were working on master’s degrees in public health.

Figure 2. After-Peace Corps Service Entrepreneur Leadership Proclivity
Conclusions and Recommendations

PCVs are often left to their own devices during their service. They have limited contact from staff and other volunteers and frequently design and implement projects on their own (Cross, 1998; Durham & Littrell, 2000; Starr, 1994; Guthrie & Zektick, 1967). RPCVs must learn and adapt to different people and cultures. They then must tailor projects to those cultures and the limited resources they have access to, which forces them to constantly adjust and readjust their projects to better fit the people they're working with. This process of constantly re-evaluating and re-working their projects makes them have to constantly adapt and come up with new innovative ideas.

As change makers, PCVs enter communities as de-facto leaders. PCVs move into communities and must convince them that they need to change the practices that they have been doing for generations. Most people tend to resist change, especially if they don't see an immediate impact (Rogers, 2003; Christensen, 2000; Kotter, 2012). Placing PCVs into villages and communities allows them to integrate. This integration allows volunteers to be able to collaborate, understand the community, and be able to better assess risk. PCVs hone their leadership proclivities by constantly getting the experience of working with entire communities in a leadership position. By integrating into the community, PCVs are more aware and better able to assess what kinds of projects will work.

In this study we've seen that the RPCVs who participated became stronger innovators and better entrepreneurial strategists. It becomes evident that serving in the Peace Corps has some impact on the entrepreneurial proclivities of PCVs. While the Peace Corps clearly appears to affect the entrepreneurial leadership proclivities of its volunteers, their website gives very little
information into how they train their volunteers to be change makers and employ their entrepreneurial strategies in a better fashion. This study shows that there is clearly a link between Peace Corps service and increasing a PCV's entrepreneurial leadership proclivities. If the Peace Corps use these findings to re-examine how their trainings are implemented and focus on ways to increase entrepreneurial leadership there is no telling how much more effective PCVs will be in their work.

This study was a brief glimpse into the effects that Peace Corps service has on its volunteers. Further studies should be conducted on a larger population to ensure that these results aren't only limited to fellowship students. There is a possibility that RPCVs who choose to get an advanced degree are more likely to be entrepreneurial leaders because they have chosen to continue their education. There may be RPCVs who choose not to pursue advanced degrees who don't show the same entrepreneurial leadership.

In addition, this study asked RPCVs to retro-actively answer questions about their ability to innovate and entrepreneurial strategies prior to service. There are limitations to how well people remember things several years later. While this instrument was designed to measure entrepreneurial leadership proclivities retro-actively, it is recommended that in future studies volunteers are interviewed prior to service and then a follow up is done after completion of their service. This would allow for a more accurate idea of the effects of Peace Corps service on PCVs. It would also create a better understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership can be learned.
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