

THE IMPACT OF MISSION SERVICE ON ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

The first problem of this study was to determine the difference in self-identity scores between participants and non-participants in a specified mission project immediately following completion of the project. The second problem of this study was to determine the difference in self-identity scores three months after completion of the project. And the third problem of this study was to determine the difference in self-identity scores between first-time participants and those that have participated previously. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (2nd Edition) was administered to a random sample of adolescents from churches attending the St. Louis and Houston Projects in the summer of 2010. The adolescents represented churches from Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. Adolescents were identified by their student minister as having already experienced conversion and attending church regularly (2 times a month for the past year). The instrument produced an Identity Subscale which was used to test the hypotheses. Additional scales and scores were analyzed for significant differences. Differences for hypotheses one and two were identified using one-way ANCOVAs. An Independent Samples t-Test was used to evaluate hypothesis three. A total of 159 adolescents from 18 churches were involved in the study.

No statistically significant differences were found between participants and non-participants in regards to hypothesis one or two. Also, no significant difference was found between those that were participating for the first time and those that had participated previously. Further testing of instrument scales and scores found no significant differences with the exception of Moral Self-Concept before the mission project began. Those that had participated previously had a significantly higher Moral Self-Concept score than those about to participate for the first time. Findings suggest that among other factors, the presence of a prior conversion experience and regular church attendance appear to reduce the amount of measurable impact upon the subject's identity.

Introduction

The number of students going on short-term mission (STM) projects has grown significantly since the 1960's with the introduction of teens as short-term missionaries and more affordable airfare. However the extent of the impact of such projects, regarding both the recipient and the server, is still in question. Literature regarding the impact of STMs is limited mostly to ministry outside the United States and inconclusive regarding the impact of missions on faith maturity, likelihood of future or career service and change in behaviors such as giving and prayer. Despite the weak body of research regarding the impact of mission-service, the rise of community service among adolescents over the past 30 years has produced a wealth of research. Findings connected to the impact of service upon adolescents have included the following: improvement in academics, prosocial behavior, civic knowledge, and the reduction of at-risk behavior. Dill and others found that service was a significant predictor of future service. An impact on adolescent identity has also been found in service performed on behalf of a religious organization. This is expected due to the presence of attitudes and behaviors in serving that fit into the context of religious values such as prosocial behavior and moral concerns. However, research connecting mission-service to an impact on adolescent identity is very narrow.

Scope of Project

The purposes of the present study were to determine the impact upon an adolescent's identity immediately upon returning from a mission project; the impact on identity three months after the mission project; and the impact of multiple mission project experiences upon the adolescent's identity. Adolescents attending churches participating in the St. Louis or Houston projects in the summer of 2010 were considered for the study as long as they met the following requirements: statement of prior conversion experience, regular church attendance, completion of the mission project and between the ages of 12 and 18. A total of 45 churches

Score of subjects that had participated multiple times is greater than those participating for the first time. However, the difference in the scores is not significant ($p=.322$). Therefore the null hypothesis is retained.

The retention of all three null hypotheses could most easily be attributed to one of two factors. First, was the instrument sufficient in accuracy to ensure that precision was achieved in gathering data to be analyzed? The TSCS:2 is a well-tested and proven instrument with previously discussed value in regards to validity and reliability. The second factor would be that the identities of adolescents in this study are not as plastic as those in studies related to community service. The difference in context is related to the fact that students in the present study reported a conversion experience and regular church attendance. Both Rubin and Youniss point out that one of the most powerful aspects of service could be its ability to connect a person with the community and community values. However, a student who has experienced conversion and attends church regularly already has access to these values. Service then is more of an extension of those values rather than a doorway. Other factors related to the difference in results between the current study and previous research into service is the timing of testing period two and the lack of information regarding pre-project training. The timing of Test2 resulted in many of the students completing the instrument after they returned home into an unknown environment. Equally unknown is the extent and efficiency with which students received training before participation in the project. Insufficient or poor training could contribute to less powerful experiences.

A wide array of scales and scores are provided by TSCS:2 beyond the identity scale. An analysis of these variables (Total Self-Concept, Personal Self-Concept, Moral Self-Concept and Family Self-Concept) produced no statistically significant differences with the exception of Moral Self-Concept prior to the mission project. Adolescents who had participated previously (29.22) had scores (MOR1) significantly higher than those that were about to participate for the very first time (26.69). Alpha for the t-Test was set at .05.

In summary, all study hypotheses were rejected as results of testing the data did not support the hypotheses. Further analysis of other scales and scores yielded only one significant difference (MOR1). It is concluded that the context of the mission project in this study (required church attendance and conversion) given the accuracy of the instrument point to a lessened impact upon the adolescent identity than community service within a different context. Further research into the impact of international missions as well as the role of conversion in the formation of adolescent identity is needed.

Theological and Ministry Implications

This study was founded upon three theological principles. First, the role of identity throughout Scripture including the role of Christ in restoring identity. Second, the missional mandate found in the Great Commission and lived out through the New Testament. And third, service as it relates to better identifying with the mission of Christ.

Identity in Scripture is clearly provided by God through His creation of Adam in His own image. However, that identity is lost through sin and is restored beginning with God's covenant with Abraham and culminating in the relationship as sons provided by Christ through His death and resurrection. An adolescent's conversion or acceptance of this renewed image must have a profound impact upon their process toward identity formation. This would seem to be congruent with the findings of this study in that a restoration of identity through salvation would lead to confirmation through service rather than major alterations to that identity. Therefore, the role of service in altering identity may be limited due to the identity already recovered through conversion.

The missional mandate of Scripture negates the self-centered motivation for involvement in missions. Although it is still necessary to adequately understand the impact on both the server and the recipient, Scripture is clear that God's people are called to serve and to share the Gospel of God. So, a less powerful impact upon adolescent identity does not lessen the power of Scripture to call people to missions.

from Missouri, Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas took part in the projects setting the approximate population of this study at 750-1,000.

Requests were sent to all 45 churches for their participation in the study. A total of 18 churches responded in the appropriate time to participate. Reasons for non-participation included confusion over group leadership, inability to produce list of actively-involved and converted students and concern by youth ministers over impending job changes. Of the churches that responded, 5 participating (in the mission project) and 5 non-participating students were randomly chosen from each group. For churches with less than 5 total participating or non-participating students, the entire population was used. This produced a total sample of 159 students (80 participating and 79 non-participating).

Students were contacted and asked to complete an online version of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (2nd edition). From this survey and information provided by group leaders, the following variables were created: ID number, age, gender, participant/non-participant, previous/first-time/never (experience), and ID Score. The TSCS:2 is a widely used measure of self-identity and self-concept utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Always False* to *Always True*. Reliability testing, using Cronbach's Alpha, has shown an internal consistency ranging from .73 on the Self-Concept scale to .93 on Total Self-Concept. The Identity scale showed a value of .85. Test-retest reliability for the Adult form ranges from .47 to .82 with the Identity scale at .69. A period of 1 to 2 weeks was used for the retest measure which is consistent with the design of the current study. Data collection took place at three testing times: prior to the mission project (Test1), immediately following (Test2) and three months after the project (Test3). Response rates were 72.7%, 67.4%, and 64.6% respectively.

The first hypothesis of the study was that participant identity scores would be greater than non-participants immediately following the mission project. The second hypothesis was that participant identity scores would be higher than non-participants three months after the mission project. And hypothesis three was that those participating in the mission project multiple times would have higher identity scores than those participating for the first time (scores of those that never participated were not analyzed as part of hypothesis three). ANCOVAs were conducted for both hypotheses one and two with Test1 serving as the covariate. Hypothesis three employed the use of an Independent Samples t-Test.

Discussion

The null form of hypothesis one stated that there was no significant difference between participant and non-participant identity scores immediately following the mission project. An ANCOVA was performed using Test1 as the covariate with Test2 serving as the dependent variable and Group (participant or non-participant) as the independent variable. The mean Identity score (Test2) for those that participated in the specified mission project was greater than those that did not. However, the difference was not found to be significant ($p=.395$). Therefore the null hypothesis was retained.

The null form of hypothesis two stated that there was no significant difference between participant and non-participant identity scores three months following the mission project. An ANCOVA was performed using Test1 as the covariate with Test3 serving as the dependent variable and Group (participant or non-participant) as the independent variable. The difference in Identity score was not found to be statistically different ($p=.521$) with non-participant scores being slightly higher than participants. Therefore the null hypothesis was retained.

The null form of hypothesis three stated that there was no significant difference between participants who participated previously and those that were participating for the first time. An Independent Samples t-Test was performed with the frequency of service (Freq), previous or first-time, serving as the independent variable and identity score of each subject (Test3) as the dependent variable. The mean Identity

Finally, a progression toward a more Christ-like realization of one's identity is the goal of a sanctified life. Although this study does not verify a significant impact on identity in service, it does leave open the possibility of identity-focus being a result of performing service that is closely related to the work of Christ in the world. Therefore, mission service provides the adolescent with a focused view of the mission of Christ.

A significant implication for student ministry resulting from this study is the use of internal impact on the server as the primary motivation for encouraging mission involvement. Clearly the missional mandate found in Scripture should be sufficient to involve missions as a programming tool in student ministry. The lack of evidence from the current study does not lessen the need for mission service among adolescents, but in fact frees the student minister to focus more closely on missions as an obedient response to Scripture.

The use of mission projects to provide opportunity to practice ministry skills is still of utmost importance. The lack of focus on internal factors should not dissuade student ministers from using missions as a training field for ministry. Missions provides students with the chance to sharpen skills and discover spiritual gifts. Therefore, missions does not need to be seen as event-oriented only. In fact, given the lack of identity change evidenced in this study and the preceding argument regarding missions as an opportunity for skill development, missions should be regarded more as lifestyle. There is no evidence that the emotional high that students experience after a multi-day mission project is anything more than a result of the "retreat" aspect of the event. In other words, the difference in access and influence of peers and media can produce this result in spite of a mission activity.

Finally, student ministers must continue to give attention to the manner in which they equip and prepare students for missions. Ver Beek, among others, lists lack of adequate training as a reason for most mission projects benefitting the server more than the recipient. It would be preferred, in light of the current study, that student ministers focus more on preparation that will benefit the recipient rather than a focus more heavily centered on change within the student.

Given the findings of this study in light of the implications listed above, it is clear that a converted adolescent who attends church regularly possesses an identity which is much less plastic than other adolescents. Research in relation to community service must be understood in light of this great difference. The current study prepares the foundation for further study into the impact of mission service in a context that differs from community service.

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