

## **International volunteers' perceptions of intercultural competence**

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## **Abstract**

Although international volunteer sending organizations vary greatly, nearly all claim that volunteering will increase intercultural competence. Various theories of intercultural learning suggest, however, that cultural contact will only improve a volunteer's intercultural competence under certain conditions. The study collects self-reported responses from 291 volunteers who served in one of two service models that differ on multiple characteristics. This study isolates four key characteristics, and employs a moderated multiple regression to test how these variations affect volunteers' perceptions of intercultural competence. Findings suggest that that service duration, cultural immersion, guided reflection, and contact reciprocity are all positively associated with intercultural competence. In addition, guided reflection appears to moderate the relationship between duration and intercultural competence. This study responds to the need for research on the effects of international volunteering across institutional models.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, international volunteer-ing, immersion, reflection, reciprocity

## 1. Introduction

Scholars have long asserted that international volunteering and service (IVS) should be encouraged to promote international understanding, shared knowledge across cultures, global engagement, international cooperation, and peace (Angell, 1969; Chilton, 1978; Wofford, 1966). These scholars affirm that, unlike many other types of tourists and travelers, international volunteers are in a unique position to acquire intercultural competence (ICC), or “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Deardorff, 2008: 33), as they experience new cultures firsthand and work side by side with host-country nationals. This ability is considered increasingly important in today’s global society and marketplace (Barker, 2000; Matveev & Milter, 2004).

Although scholars once believed that simply having contact with a new culture would be sufficient to increase intercultural understanding and competence (Amir, 1969; Gudykanst, 1979; A. Y. Lee, 2001), recent research indicates that cultural contact will only increase ICC under the right conditions (Bennett, 2008; CILT, 2004; Deardorff, 2008; Fantini, 2007; Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Savicki, 2008). The outcomes of cultural contact through IVS ultimately depend on the individual capacity of the volunteer, the institutional capacity of programs facilitating the experience, and the nature of the service activity (Perry & Imperial, 2001; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008).

The types of programs sending volunteers overseas are quite diverse, and often differ dramatically in their activities, objectives, and designs (Allum, 2007). Despite substantial differences, nearly all claim that volunteers will increase in ICC as they serve in host communities. It is important to understand the specific programmatic features associated with increased ICC because international volunteering may be ineffective or counterproductive under the wrong conditions—leading to increased prejudice, decreased tolerance, and frequent cross-cultural misunderstandings (Allport, 1954; Mezirow, 1991; Reiman, Sprinthall, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1997).

This article isolates four variations across institutional models and tests how these differences affect international volunteers’ perceptions of ICC. These variables include service duration, cultural immersion, guided reflection, and contact reciprocity. *Service duration* is the total amount of time volunteers spend in a service activity. *Cultural immersion* refers to the depth of volunteers’ involvement and participation in a new culture, which typically increases as individuals establish personal relationships with host community members, and live, work, and study in new cultural environments (Chinn, 2006; Ference & Bell, 2004). *Guided reflection* refers to conversation and dialogue that facilitate the process of self-inquiry and reflection—of critically examining evidence and its relation to one’s experience (Johns et al., 2002; Reiman, 1999). *Contact reciprocity* in this context refers to situations where volunteers and host communities profit equally from service activities. Reciprocity emphasizes the importance of mutually shared goals, and matching volunteer activities with local priorities (Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Rockliffe, 2005). The following section details why these variables are considered important for increased ICC.

## 2. Empirical and Theoretical Review

While there is a fair amount of empirical research of international service-learning, there is significantly less on the effects of IVS on volunteers (Sherraden et al., 2008; Waterman, 1997). Researchers have often failed to connect literature from various fields of experiential

education due to slight differences in remuneration, voluntarism, preparation, and support (Davis Smith, 2004). Indeed, this distinction may be important because the voluntary aspects of service may have a significant effect on motivations and outcomes (Bandow, 1990; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). Nonetheless, the fields of service-learning and study abroad can provide rich information about plausible empirical advantages and disadvantages of individual, institutional, and service characteristics on volunteering outcomes. Consequently, this review includes theory and evidence from multiple fields researching international placements.

As foundation theories in experiential learning, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead assert that educational growth occurs through meaningful role-taking (1934). As individuals engage in human-helping roles such as teaching, tutoring, casework, social support, and other tasks that international volunteers frequently perform, they gain a greater capacity to set aside their ego, thereby improving their ability to look at problems from multiple perspectives (Mead, 1934; Reiman, 1999). These theories indicate that, compared to other non-service-based international experiences, volunteering in a new culture may be particularly effective at enhancing ICC.

Contact theory, transformative learning theory, and stage theories of intercultural learning also suggest that differing conditions may alter the effect of cultural contact on ICC. These theories explain how programs can use the “process” of volunteering to increase ICC. The following sections summarize empirical research and theory related to the four key variables of duration, immersion, reflection and reciprocity.

### 2.1. Duration

Social identity theory posits that greater exposure to a cultural out-group increases opportunities for integration, and ultimately leads to greater understanding and acceptance of an out-group culture (Turner, 1982). Likewise, contemporary contact theory stresses that the longer volunteers serve with community members and work with host-organization staff, the greater likelihood they will converge on superordinate shared goals (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and the greater the likelihood that they will experience a level of anxiety necessary to stimulate cultural learning (Engle & Engle, 2003; Pitner, 2007). Duration is also an important component of stage theories of cultural growth and learning. These theories suggest that volunteers must move through various stages of anxiety and acceptance before they can reach high levels of ICC (Kim, 1995; Lysgaard, 1955; Ogberg, 1960).

In previous studies, ICC was reported to be more achievable if length of the volunteer placement was extended (CVO, 2007; Sherraden & Benítez, 2003). Likewise, students’ intercultural growth and competence have been significantly correlated with duration of the experience (Akande & Slawson, 2000; Dwyer, 2004; Hoff, 2008; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Medina-López-Portillo, 2004; Reiman et al., 1997). In one study measuring the effects of service on cross-cultural adaptability, periods of one-month or less did not produce significant results, while longer stints abroad resulted in significant cross-cultural adaptability (Erwin & Coleman, 1998; Myers-Lipton, 1996). Duration of the experience has also been highly correlated with long-term relationships with host-country nationals, which is directly associated with increased ICC (Dwyer, 2004; Taylor, 1994).

## 2.2. Immersion

When volunteers are immersed in a culture, living with host families and serving side-by-side with community members, they are brought into direct contact with the host culture. Under the right conditions, increased contact with others provides more accurate information about others, which can decrease tension, prejudice and stereotypes (Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). Cultural immersion is also considered a key “intensity factor” that accentuates the outcomes of intercultural experiences (Paige, 1993). Stage theories of cultural adaptation emphasize that culture shock and stress resulting from immersion create a degree of psychological isolation and anxiety that encourages cultural learning (Ogberg, 1960). International volunteers who have direct and intimate communication with those in the host culture, including close friendships, romantic encounters, and relationships with host families may have more intense intercultural experiences, greater culture shock, and subsequent cultural adaptation (Brislin, 1981; Hammer, Gudykanst, & Wiseman, 1978).

Closer interaction with the community is associated with increased language skills and cultural training (Cohn & Wood, 1985). Growing evidence also suggests that volunteers improve their skills at interacting with others in cross-cultural settings when they have prolonged exposure to the host culture (Battersby, 2002; VSO, 2002). Likewise, frequency and friendliness of social interactions tend to increase when volunteers live with host country nationals or are in closer proximity to smaller villages (Cohn & Wood, 1985).

## 2.3. Guided Reflection

Although longer duration and greater immersion of a volunteer placement typically increases opportunities for repeated exposure to a culture, mere exposure to the culture may not be sufficient to increase ICC. When volunteers confront new cultural realities, they often experience “disorienting dilemmas” that contradict and significantly challenge previous beliefs (Mezirow, 1996). According to transformative learning theory, individuals only learn to accommodate these radically different experiences when they reflect critically on them (Mezirow, 1991). A reflective appraisal of previous beliefs and assumptions leads to paradigm shifts that generate greater ICC; including multiple-perspective-taking, empathy, adaptation, an inclusive world-view, contextual relativism, and other intercultural competency skills (Dirkx, 1998; Hammer, 2005; Humphrey, 2007; Mezirow, 1996; Taylor, 1994).

Reflection is crucial to regaining equilibrium when disorienting dilemmas associated with these new experiences are most acute (Mezirow, 1991). Mentoring the reflection process may be most influential for those in the initial phases of culture shock, when cultural differences are most tangible (Ward, Bocher, & Furnham, 2001). This indicates that guided reflection may moderate the relationships between duration of service and ICC. However, the direction of moderation is unclear as altering worldviews also requires time to explore new assumptions, roles, relationships, and actions (Kim & Ruben, 1988; Taylor, 1998).

International volunteers report that, with their first encounter of extreme poverty, they often experience a sense of “guilt” which, when reflected upon, leads to constructive “life altering” and “transforming experiences” (Abram, Slosar, & Walls, 2005). New experiences without paired reflection rarely result in substantial learning or development (Exum, 1980; Sprinthall & Scott, 1989). In a study of service-learning, control groups that did not integrate reflection and discussion into their placements showed no improvements, and were increasingly

negative and judgmental (Reiman et al., 1997). Returned volunteers also rated the importance of “reflection on practice” more frequently than any other condition for their professional development during the international placement (Unterhalter, McDonald, Swain, Mitchell, & Young, 2002). In cases where volunteers did not identify reflection as an integral process to their development, researchers attributed this to a lack of “appropriate guidance and support” (ibid, p. 16).

#### 2.4. Contact Reciprocity

Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact theory posits that increased contact between diverse groups helps to reduce inaccurate perceptions of the “other”, thereby increasing intergroup tolerance and understanding. However, merely bringing diverse peoples into common space is not always a sufficient condition to guarantee that intergroup learning will occur, especially among those who may hold strong views (Amir, 1969). Contact theory suggests that ICC is more likely when the following four conditions are met: 1) volunteers and community members perceive equal status, 2) they share goals, 3) they experience no significant competition, and 4) authorities, laws, and customs sanction the contact. When these conditions are met, ethnocentricity, and prejudice will be reduced and ICC can be enhanced (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

In congruence with contact theory, intercultural understanding may also increase when volunteers cooperate with community members to achieve shared or superordinate goals. This idea was illustrated by Muzafer Sherif following his experiments with intergroup relations (Sherif, 1958). Shared goals tend to produce friendly attitudes, mutual understanding, and increased tolerance towards out-group members, their ways of life, and cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Many studies have supported the assertions of contact theory. A recent meta-analysis of 515 studies with 713 independent samples found that, when Allport’s contact conditions are met, cultural contact does result in a reduction in prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In fact, when Allport’s conditions are not met, intergroup tensions, animosity, and prejudice may actually increase (Amir, 1976). While the bulk of empirical research suggests that conditions such as mutually shared goals and lack of competition are not *necessary* for intercultural understanding, these conditions do help to foster it (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006)

#### 2.5. Additional Factors

While this study mainly considers the effects of the four variables detailed above, a range of other factors have been considered relevant for ICC in scholarly research (Hoff, 2008; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Taylor, 1994). Individual characteristics and capacities such as skills and experience (Cohn, Wood, & Haag, 1981; CVO, 2007), individual attitudes and predispositions (Kim, 1995), expectations (Hoff, 2008), and previous international experiences help prepare volunteers with “learning readiness” associated with intercultural growth (Taylor, 1994). Culture shock, stress, and intense emotions, which typically precede intercultural learning, are muted by previous international experience and language abilities, and are intensified by minority race and differences in sex roles across cultures (Taylor, 1994). Frequency and friendliness of social interactions with those of other cultures are also found to increase with age (Cohn & Wood, 1985).

Scholars studying international service list a range of additional institutional factors that have made intercultural experiences more or less instructive for volunteers. These factors including supervision, in-country support, quality of pre-departure preparation, the size and complexity of the organization, group status, and overall program management (Amir & Garti, 1977; Hoff, 2008; Jones, 2005; Paige, 1993; Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Vian, Richards, McCoy, Connelly, & Feeley, 2007).

This study tests five main hypotheses based on theory and previous research. Specifically, it proposes that volunteers perceived level of ICC is positively associated with: 1) longer durations of service, 2) immersion in the host-culture, 3) guided reflection, and 4) greater contact reciprocity. It further tests whether guided reflection moderates the relationship between cultural contact intensity (immersion and duration) and ICC.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Description of Study Sample

The sampling frame included returned volunteers from two organizations that differ across the key variables. The first sending organization is a non-profit that has currently places over 3,000 volunteers each year. Placements range from 2-12 weeks, with an average placement of four weeks. Matching of volunteer placement sites is primarily determined by volunteers' interests, skills, and abilities. The majority of volunteers are from the United States (83 percent), while the remaining volunteers have origins in other English-speaking countries. Although the age range of participants varies widely (from 8 to 83 years), 70 percent of volunteers with this program are age 25 or younger. Volunteers are mostly female (80 percent), and many are students (greater than 40 percent). Volunteers typically live in urban settings and live together with other volunteers during their placement. Opportunities for structured reflection are an explicit component of the program.

The second organization is a non-profit that provides volunteer opportunities for short and long-term placements. It currently places about 300 year-long volunteers and 125 summer-long volunteers. The long-term programs are 10-12 months in length, while the shorter-term programs are about two months in length. Seventy percent of volunteers serve in the year programs for ten months or more. The Ministry of Education in the host country generally requests and supports volunteers, who teach in a variety of educational settings and work as full-time teachers. The majority of volunteers are young ( $\mu = 24$  years) and female (73 percent). Volunteers live in both rural and urban settings and most volunteers live with a host family or in teacher housing on the school campus. Once volunteers are placed in the host site, structured time for reflection is not an explicitly feature of the program.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation and Administration

In order to test the effects of these variables on ICC, researchers developed a survey called the International Volunteering Impacts Survey (IVIS). The IVIS is a primarily close-ended, quantitative survey that assesses volunteer impacts over time (Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009). Invitations to take the IVIS were emailed to 582 randomly-selected 2002 and 2006 volunteer alumni across the two programs. Three total emails were sent to solicit participation, after which 291 individuals responded for an overall response rate of 50 percent. The survey was posted on the worldwide web and all responses were submitted online.

#### 3.3. Concept Measurement

Principal Components Analyses (PCA) were used to determine appropriate indicators for each concept. After the underlying constructs were identified, the internal consistency of the ICC construct was tested using Cronbach's alpha statistics. An internal reliability coefficient of .60 or higher was set as the minimal threshold for the composite variables with few items (Nunnally, 1967). All constructs exceeded a reliability coefficient of .70, excluding the concept of guided reflection ( $\alpha = .62$ ). When items constituting the ICC construct were verified, a composite variable was created by calculating the average score of each item under the construct. Table 1 summarizes the qualities of the composite constructs.

**[Insert Table 1 here]**

Service duration was measured as units of weeks participating in international volunteer activities with the sending organization. The concept of immersion was measured with binary responses to the following prompt: *I lived with a host family in the community*. This variable did not include other measures of cultural immersion such as the work context, personal relationships with host community members, involvement in local groups, clubs, or organizations, etc. Additional variables were used in the analysis to control for possible spurious effects related to ICC. These variables included: 1) total weeks of previous international experience, 2) race, 3) sex, 4) age, 5) education lower or higher than a bachelor's degree, 6) previous exposure to ethnic, political, religious, and socioeconomic diversity, 7) training and institutional support, and 8) the volunteer organization.

### 3.4. Analytic Methods

A three-step hierarchical multiple regression was used to test for the moderating effects of guided reflection on service duration (Jaccard & Turrissi, 2003). Due to a high proportion of missing values when cases are excluded listwise in multiple regression (37 percent), it was determined that values for missing data should be imputed to reduce plausible non-response bias (Pickles, 2005). Multiple imputation procedures were completed using the Markov chain Monte Carlo method (Schafer, 1997). Imputation included all of the main variables along with an additional eight variables that were potentially related to the missingness of the imputed variables (Yuan, 2008). Following the imputation of five datasets, the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm was used to compute maximum likelihood estimates of missing values, and to combine multiple datasets for final estimates. As a result of data imputation, each variable included an estimated value for each missing case, for a total regression n-size of 291.

Prior to entering variables in the regression model, univariate analyses were completed to verify that assumptions of regression were met. In cases where a violation of assumptions was detected, variables were transformed or otherwise corrected. Only two variables required transformation including: 1) the square root of *previous international experience* due to high positive outliers and overall positive skew, and 2) the natural log of *age* due to a four cases of old age outliers and an overall positive skew.

Due to multicollinearity between product terms and their constituent parts, scale-level component terms were centered prior to multiplication (Aiken & West, 1991). Centering the component variable did not change model significance, but did alter the constant to make the coefficient more substantially interpretable (Jaccard & Turrissi, 2003).

## 4. Results



Bivariate correlations between variables in the model were within acceptable ranges. An examination of the correlation matrix revealed that only four bivariate correlations exceeded a value of 0.40 (see Table 2). The highest bivariate correlation was between volunteer program and service duration ( $r = 0.71$ ). While this value was below .90, it may have slightly inflated model errors (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Despite relative collinearity and low predictive capability of the volunteer program variable, this variable was retained in the model to account for unknown differences between the two volunteer programs.

**[Insert Table 2 here]**

The initial block step in the hierarchical regression model included only control variables and displayed good overall model fit ( $F = 5.61$ ,  $df_1 = 8$ ,  $df_2 = 282$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The addition of a second block, which included the four main effect variables, doubled the variance explained ( $R^2 = .28$ ), and indicated good overall model fit ( $F = 9.18$ ,  $df_1 = 12$ ,  $df_2 = 278$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Adding a product term in the third step contributed little to the overall variance explained ( $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ). However, this small effect is consistent with prior research studies assessing moderator effects, which generally anticipates a small change in explanatory power and relatively small effect sizes (Aguinis, 1995; Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004; C. Lee & Farh, 1999). For the sake of parsimony, the product term between reflection and reciprocity was insignificant and removed from the model. The resulting model explained about 29 percent of variance in ICC ( $R^2 = .294$ ). Table 3 summarizes the results of the moderating regression model.

**[Insert Table 3 here]**

Controlling for other variables in the model, duration is significantly related to ICC ( $b = .004$ ,  $t = 2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Volunteers serving for a longer duration report higher levels of ICC. Because guided reflection appears to partially moderate the relationship between duration and ICC ( $b = -.003$ ,  $t = -1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ ), the duration component coefficient is not interpreted as it would be in a main effects model. In a moderating model, the duration coefficient (.004) specifies a *conditional* relationship that predicts the regression of ICC on duration when reflection is at a value of zero, or at its average if centered (Jaccard & Turrissi, 2003).

Controlling for other variables, living with a host family is also related to ICC ( $b = .18$ ,  $t = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Volunteers more immersed in the host-culture by living with a host family report a .18 point increase in ICC compared to those that have other living arrangements.

Guided reflection appears to moderate the relationship between service duration and ICC ( $b = -.003$ ,  $t = -1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Although guided reflection is significantly related to ICC as a main effect in the model ( $b = .14$ ,  $t = 3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), it is not appropriate to interpret the conditional effects as first-order effects when moderation is significant (Frazier et al., 2004). This finding indicates that longer service duration is a less important predictor of ICC for volunteers who report reflecting highly on their experience. For every point increase in guided reflection, the slope of ICC on duration decreases by .003. The guided reflection coefficient (.14) represents the estimated effect of reflection on ICC when service duration is at its sample mean of 32 weeks (centered at zero). It should be noted that this effect, which decreases with longer durations of service, is likely underestimated due to the comparatively lower reliability of the guided reflection composite variable (Jaccard & Turrissi, 2003).

The effects of moderation are often difficult to interpret. Using a numerical example, among low-reflecting volunteers (those who scored a 3 on a 7-point scale) ICC would be .60 points higher for those serving for one year than for those serving for only two weeks. On the other hand, among relatively high-reflecting volunteers (those who scored a 6 on a 7-point scale) ICC would only be .15 points higher for those serving for one year than for those serving for two weeks. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the slope of ICC on duration changes at different levels of guided reflection.

**[Insert Figure 1 here]**

Contact reciprocity also has a significant main effect on ICC ( $b = .18, t = 5.04, p < .001$ ). An increase in one point of contact reciprocity is associated with a .18 point increase in ICC. The standardized parameter estimate ( $\beta = .29$ ) reveals that contact reciprocity explains more variance than any other single variable in the model, even after partialling out the effects of other model covariates ( $sr^2 = .11$ ).

In addition to significant main effect variables, three covariates were also significant in this model. Respondents volunteering with the first sending program were associated with a .34 point increase in perceived ICC ( $b = .34, t = 2.79, p < .01$ ). Previous international experience was also significantly associated with higher ICC. Each additional week volunteers spent abroad prior to volunteering was associated with a .02 point increase in ICC. If interpreted in years, each additional year spent abroad prior to volunteering was associated with a .78 point increase in ICC ( $b = .02, t = 2.08, p < .05$ ). Being female was also associated with a .18 point increase in perceived ICC ( $b = -.176, t = -2.12, p < .05$ ).

## **5. Discussion and Implications**

### **5.1. Duration**

The finding that cultural contact sustained over longer durations will increase volunteers' perception of ICC are consistent with Kim's (1995) model of intercultural adaptation, which emphasizes that cultural learning may be a *continuous* process occurring in regular cycles over time. In this sense, short-term experiences may mildly increase ICC, while longer experiences will have a greater effect on ICC.

This finding is particularly relevant to programs that focus primarily on volunteer outcomes—including international service-learning, and service-based field placements. To the degree that these programs are focused on developing intercultural competencies of volunteers, short-term programs may decide to extend the duration of service placements. For programs that do not have the resources, capacity, or market to facilitate longer-term placements, reflection and dialogue with staff or other volunteers should be an important programmatic priority.

This implication is also relevant to recent policy proposals in the US, which support short-term volunteering. The newly legislated Serve America Act and USAID's Volunteers for Prosperity program have recently received significant financial support to expand opportunities for short-term service ("H.R. 1388," 2009). In addition, the Global Service Fellowship Program, which exclusively supports short-term service, is under legislative review, as are discussions to retool the Peace Corps for short-term service for older adults, and shortened "gap-year" service opportunities for high school graduates (Quigley & Rieffel, 2008). Although the aims and objectives of these programs vary widely, they may need to emphasize longer duration of service if ICC is a primary motivation.

## 5.2. Immersion

In accordance with longer service placements, it may also benefit volunteers to live with host families where they are more likely to be immersed in the host culture. The fact that the effect size of immersion on ICC is relatively small may be partly related to the relatively poor operationalization of the immersion concept. The item measuring this concept only asks if volunteers lived with a host family, but does not ascertain the nature of the volunteers' alternative living arrangements. The inclusion of additional items measuring the intensity of intercultural experiences such as close friendships, romantic encounters, the volunteers work context, or close involvement with local groups and organizations may provide a more inclusive and valid measure of immersion, and may produce different results.

However, programs frequently do not have control over these variables. As one variable that programs often do have control over, they may place volunteers in secure living arrangements with host families. Living with a host family provides volunteers with unique insight into the economic, social, and political realities in the context of daily living. Experiential learning is likely intensified when intercultural encounters occur on a daily, personal basis. However, programs must also consider other practical reasons for placing volunteers with host families, including proximity to the work site, integration and buy-in from host communities, language issues, and resources.

## 5.3. Guided Reflection

Findings from this study are consistent with theoretical and empirical research asserting that differences in ICC depend partly on guided reflection, which in turn influence the effect of duration on ICC (Mezirow, 1997; Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Unterhalter et al., 2002). Volunteers serving for a short term are most likely to be in the initial stages of cultural adaptation, where they are most likely to experience shocking and distressful emotions (Alder, 1975; Ogberg, 1960; Ward et al., 2001). Guiding strong emotions associated with these initial experiences such as guilt, distress, or outrage at the way foreign cultures handle situations may be particularly beneficial to intercultural learning (Taylor, 1994).

Although any program placing a high emphasis on guided reflection may promote ICC among their volunteers, short-term programs may experience even greater returns. Considering the moderating effect of guided reflection, shorter term programs should explicitly build guided reflection into their programs. This may include discussions with program staff, but may also include discussions with those in the host community or seminars and presentations by community members. Dialogue with culturally competent volunteers, family members, or friends may also encourage reflection, as can journaling, emailing, or blogging.

It is important that dialogue and reflection be guided by mentors, however, as reflection in isolation has the potential to lock in previous beliefs, in-group mentalities, and ethnocentric viewpoints (Simpson, 2004). Hypothetically, mutual reflection and dialogue guided by those who are not culturally competent may actually result in decreased ICC. This has valuable programmatic implications for appointing staff responsible for training and facilitating the volunteer placement. Programs that facilitate guided reflection may want to research this area in greater detail to determine the association between staff and volunteer ICC.

Service-learning programs often advocate the use of the DIE (describe, interpret, evaluate) method to reduce immediate judgments about the culture and to explore alternative considerations and interpretations of intercultural behaviors (Bennet, Bennet, & Stillings, 1977;

Pusch & Merrill, 2008). In this sense, differences are often not interpreted as inherently good or bad, but different and unique—a mindset consistent with ICC and respect for diversity.

#### 5.4. Contact Reciprocity

The finding that contact reciprocity is significantly associated with an increased perception of ICC suggests that mutually shared goals combined with perceptions of relative equality may contribute to reduced in-group and out-group distinctions. Breaking down these barriers may contribute to enhanced intercultural learning, increased understanding others worldviews, and respect for diversity—all important dimensions of ICC (Deardorff, 2008; Gudykanst, 1979).

One reason why contact reciprocity has a positive main effect on ICC may be related to volunteers' service experiences. When volunteers approach their work with a paternalistic approach or with goals that are not mutually shared by the host organization or community they, by definition, fail to practice ICC. Volunteers who engage in reciprocal activities may gain a better appreciation of indigenous approaches and cultural contributions, and may thereby learn to be more flexible and accommodating in their thinking and ideas. As with other variables in this model, it is also possible that volunteers with higher initial levels of ICC initiated and maintained more reciprocal relationships with those in the host community. Because of the research design, it is difficult to know which came first.

Reciprocity is often promoted as a priority for service programs, but the justification for reciprocal practice is generally tied to outcomes on the host organization and community (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Porter & Monard, 2001; Pusch & Merrill, 2008; Sherraden, 2001). This study suggests that reciprocity may not only benefit the host community, but may also increase volunteers' competencies. As volunteers practice alternative practice methods, which may be contrary to their preconceived paradigms but which work effectively in an indigenous context, they may learn that their prior perspectives are not always the most correct or effective.

Development-based volunteer programs have long asserted that projects involving international volunteers should be “demand-driven” from the host communities (Leigh, 2005; Smith & Elkin, 1981). However, volunteer programs are frequently criticized for being “volunteer-driven” or primarily accountable to funders, sending-organizations, or volunteers (Engel, 2006; Georgeou, 2007; Henderson, 2002). In order to meet conditions of reciprocity, programs must be equally accountable to host communities by aligning their goals, the availability and eligibility of their volunteers, and their institutional capacity with the needs and demands of the host community.

Despite the benefits of contact reciprocity, meeting these conditions may limit the capacity of some sending programs. Many projects instigated by host communities require that volunteers have a specific skill set or a high level of educational or occupational experience (Pleues & Stuart, 2007). The supply of skilled volunteers is frequently low, while the availability of unskilled volunteers is comparatively high. Full reciprocity may be difficult to achieve if volunteer supply and demand are not matched. For instance, if the two-year Peace Corps is restructured to support shortened “gap year” assignments across borders for recent graduates, as suggested in recent policy proposals (Quigley & Rieffel, 2008), the supply of high school graduates would likely increase. However, these young volunteers would need to have skills demanded by the host community if programs hope to meet the conditions of reciprocity.

Future research should more carefully consider the effects of IVS on host-communities. Focusing exclusively on the effect of IVS on volunteers may lead to overly optimistic results.

For instance, while volunteers may perceive equal status with community members and enhanced ICC, host-community members may not. One necessary condition of contact reciprocity, as specified by contact theory, is that status and power differences must be minimal or null. Community members may feel that volunteers place themselves on higher ground as they provide services that would not otherwise be available (Devereux, 2008). Therefore, while contact with the community may enhance a volunteers' perception of ICC, it may correspondingly create more rigid in-group and out-group distinctions from the perspective of community members (Turner, 1982). Assessing one population without the other may provide a biased view of overall outcomes.

### 5.5. Covariates

Compared to other variables in the model, the relatively large effect size of one volunteer program over the other indicates that greater investigation is needed to assess the nature of differences between programs. Some of these differences may include geographic location, individual or group placement, fees and levels of compensation for volunteers' time, or other events and characteristics outside of the volunteers' placements. The significant effect of previous international experience on ICC is consistent with theories of cultural learning outlined earlier in this study (Gibson & Zhong, 2005). The finding that females rate themselves higher on ICC than males may be attributed to sex differences in communication styles and personality, such as empathy, emotional and verbal expression, and greater sensitivity to the needs of others (Beutel & Marini, 1995; Gibson & Zhong, 2005; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Saechou, 1994).

### 5.6 Limitations

The research design used in this study has significant limitations. As a cross-sectional study, this research uses retrospective data based on self-report. This type of data is known to have a number of methodological weaknesses, and often yields results that are inconsistent with other longitudinal studies (Menard & Elliott, 1990). It was also not possible to randomly assign volunteers to different types of service programs.

In addition to research design, generalizability of findings may be affected by mild collinearity between variables, missing values, volunteer selection bias, and other possible response and non-response biases. These limitations were reduced through non-response analysis, variable transformations, multiple imputation of missing data, and the inclusion of individual and institutional control variables.

Respondents also rated themselves highly on the majority of items, resulting in low variance on some items and scales. Low variance on scores of highly-rated items makes it difficult to detect differences and produces relatively small effect sizes. This is particularly problematic for detecting moderator effects, as these effects are typically quite small (Aguinis, 1995; Jex & Elacqua, 1999).

There appear to be important programmatic effects that remain unexplained in the model. Even after controlling for differences in the length of the program, institutional support, and other important programmatic features. However, the fact that variables in this study explain about 30 percent of variance in returned volunteers' perceptions of ICC suggests that these results have practical relevance for policy and practice.

## 6. Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that service duration, immersion, guided reflection, and contact reciprocity are worth careful consideration when planning an international service experience to increase volunteers' intercultural competence. This study marks the initiation of a series of future work on the impacts of IVS on volunteers, organizations and host communities.

Many of the limitations outlined in this study will be addressed in future research already underway, which will look more carefully at the effects of volunteering on host-community members, and will have the added advantage of quasi-experimental design to make stronger claims on impacts and causal mechanisms. Identifying and studying how these variations affect outcomes are especially relevant today given the recent policy proposals aimed to expand and support a greater variety of international service program models (Quigley & Rieffel, 2008; "H.R. 1388," 2009).

This study is among the first to specifically identify and test how variations in volunteer characteristics, volunteer-coordinating organizations, and international service characteristics affect identified outcomes (Powell & Bratović, 2006; Sherraden et al., 2008). While some models may be effective at achieving outcomes such as ICC, they could also be ineffective at providing development aid or assistance to host-communities, or achieving a range of other stated goals of organization. Future research may expand knowledge in this area by examining how similar variations in institutional models affect alternative outcomes.

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**Table 1: Summary of composite variables**

<b>Composite variable</b>	<b>Number of indicators</b>	<b>Mean score<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Component loadings</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>
Intercultural competence	10	5.83	.65 - .72	.87
Guided reflection	5	5.69	.58 - .71	.62
Contact reciprocity	4	5.19	.67 - .84	.72
Exposure to diversity	5	4.77	.44 - .84	.77
Institutional support	4	5.18	.60 - .88	.80

**Table 2: Zero-order Pearson Correlation Coefficients between all variables (N = 291)**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Intercultural competence	---												
2. Past exposure to diversity	.14*	---											
3. Institutional support	.28**	.07	---										
4. Volunteer program	-.01	.04	-.19**	---									
5. Previous int'l experience	.12*	.21**	.04	-.27**	---								
6. Race	-.14*	-.11	-.07	-.05	.00	---							
7. Age	-.06	.11	-.08	.35**	.08	.09	---						
8. Sex	-.12*	-.09	.01	-.16**	.17**	-.03	.10	---					
9. Education	.08	.18**	-.02	.02	.12*	-.09	.29**	-.02	---				
10. Immersion	.16**	.00	.25**	-.54**	.15*	.07	-.18**	-.03	.13*	---			
11. Guided reflection	.26**	.02	.20**	-.09	-.09	.01	-.04	-.06	-.11	.07	---		
12. Contact Reciprocity	.40**	.17**	.43**	.00	.02	-.07	.04	-.01	-.03	.15*	.21**	---	
13. Duration	.11	.00	.17**	-.71**	.36**	.08	-.14*	.20**	.05	.28**	.15**	.04	---
14. Duration x Reflection <sup>a</sup>	-.14*	.10	-.05	.00	-.08	.07	.14*	-.05	.02	.02	-.07	.00	-.03

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed); <sup>a</sup> centered product variable

**Table 3: Hierarchical multiple regression of ICC on predictor variables (N = 291)**

	<b>Model 4 (<math>R^2 = .29</math>)</b>						<b>Model Summary</b>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i> ( <i>b</i> )	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	VIF	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	<i>SE</i> ( $\sigma_{\bar{x}}$ )
<b>Step 1 – Control Variables</b>							.137	5.61***	.612
(Constant)	3.687	.329		11.20	.000				
Past exposure to diversity	.018	.034	.029	.53	.596	1.173			
Institutional support	.039	.031	.075	1.28	.201	1.341			
Volunteer program (short) <sup>a</sup>	.344**	.123	.250	2.79	.006	3.149			
Previous int'l experience	.015*	.007	.121	2.08	.038	1.316			
Race (White)	-.192	.101	-.100	-1.90	.058	1.078			
Age	-.006	.003	-.098	-1.64	.103	1.420			
Sex (male)	-.176*	.083	-.114	-2.12	.035	1.128			
Education (> Bachelor's)	.113	.080	.079	1.41	.160	1.226			
<b>Step 2 – Main Effects</b>							.146	14.22***	.561
Duration (weeks, centered)	.004*	.002	.165	2.11	.035	2.385			
Immersion (host family)	.175*	.085	.132	2.05	.041	1.619			
Guided reflection	.140**	.043	.176	3.27	.001	1.143			
Contact reciprocity	.182***	.036	.294	5.04	.000	1.332			
<b>Step 3 – Interaction Terms</b>							.010	3.85*	.559
Duration*Reflection <sup>b</sup>	-.003*	.002	-.102	-1.96	.050	1.069			

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed); Model  $F = 8.86$ ,  $df = 13, 277$ ,  $p < .0001$ ;

<sup>a</sup> Reference group is listed in parentheses. <sup>b</sup> Interaction terms is centered .

**Figure 1: Moderating effects of guided reflection on duration**

