The Science of Stories:

Learning From an American Organization Abroad

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the study of bureaucracies, researchers find no shortage of material. Bureaucratic organizations are as ubiquitous as they are diverse. The choice of research subjects is made difficult simply because there are so many from which to choose. At the mention of the term “bureaucracy,” the organizational structures of large corporations or government institutions tend to come to mind. These are significant organizational contexts, and well worthy of academic consideration. Of government institutions in particular, the body of literature is already substantial. However, there are certain institutions which are worthy of individual study due a certain uniqueness of contexts in which they operate. This paper is primarily concerned with the US Peace Corps.

Like the IRS or even the DMV, the Peace Corps (PC) is a US government agency. Also like many other government organizations, PC is charged with the implementation of legislation, primarily Public Law 87-293. The organization is subject to all the rules and regulations which govern any US government agency, the same reporting and accounting tools, the SOPs, etc (2011 Perfomance & Accountability Report).

PC’s uniqueness lies in its context. While the rules and regulations concerning the organization are numerous, the goals themselves are more general:

The three goals of the Peace Corps are:

1. To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men

and women,

2. To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples

served, and

3. To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

While some may say these goals are vague, considering the myriad contexts in which they are applied, the goals can give sufficient room for tailoring to the individual contexts.

These contexts include not just the main office in Washington DC, but also the 76 posts in countries around the world. Meaning that one organization must be made to fit 76 different cultures, support staff members of more than 76 nationalities; facilitate the interactions between the diverse local staff and often inexperienced American volunteers. Possibly the most unique characteristic of the Peace Corps bureaucracy is the kind of work it administers.

At the grassroots level, the work of PC is performed not by trained bureaucrats, but by volunteers. Often young people, fresh out of college are primary actors in the agency. Unlike traditional government bureaucrats who work in offices, whose interaction with the public is often distant and limited, community integration is the primary aim of volunteers. While they are often assigned to certain official domains, most volunteers will tell you that the majority of their work was done at the personal level, going to markets, sharing meals, playing sports, basically gaining a stake in the communities in which they live.

In a sense, it is the distinctions that make PC what it is. Because of the communal nature implicit in the work, it is difficult to attain any useful quantitative data. Certainly we can see how many young women participated in a certain health seminar, but likely that seminar came about from a series of conversations over breakfast at the market or during a break in a soccer game. It is those conversations, those interactions, which lie at the core of a volunteer’s ability to be effective (Leah).

Conversation and interaction are highly personal, which is generally the antithesis of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is essentially impersonal. A sense of formality is necessary, helping those people who might be hostile to each other work together. More formal systems can also keep decisions from being made on impulse (Merton, 1957).

There seems to exist a paradox between PC as a government agency and PC as a grassroots development project. In order to be a functioning bureaucracy it must be impersonal, adhering to strict rules and regulations. However in order to make a difference in host communities, volunteers must have a high tolerance for ambiguity and have the freedom to build relationships.

In order to more fully understand this paradox, we will examine the PC not as a structured organization, but as a story. It is unlikely that any other US government organization revolves so much around the social lives of its staff/volunteers. If, as Czarniawska claims, that social life is a narrative (1997), then narratives are the best method of attempting to understand this paradox. The study of paradoxes best fits within this narrative framework, as the

“The narrative structure of human life requires unpredictability and this is, paradoxically, why the alleged failure of the social sciences (namely, their failure to formulate laws and consequently the failure to predict) is in fact their greatest achievement Czarniawska, B. (2004).”

There are several reasons that the interpretive constructionist model of narrative analysis fits the PC framework so well. The first is benefit is that of pragmatism. Certainly there are methods which would be more scientific. Often social scientists use survey responses or purchasing preferences, or even feelings about an isolated political issue, to define a certain group within society. In order to use proper statistical methods, one must first reduce human beings to statistics.

While statistical tools certainly have their place, and can add a great deal of value to the body of knowledge, perhaps there is a tendency toward viewing them as dogmatic. Too often social scientists and others in the sociological and anthropological fields look for neat explanations of statistical anomaly. Certainly statistics can provide empirical, objective data lacking in more qualitative methods. Like Barley, I tend to view the distinction between science and literature as more construction than anything else, countering that true objectivity, while certainly a worthy ideal, is just that, an ideal.

This paper will examine the issues volunteers face and how the institution of PC reacts to them. Through a series of interviews with several returned PCVs currently doing graduate work at WIU, this paper endeavors to learn how the bureaucracy of PC affects volunteers’ ability to perform to their full potential. Being a government bureaucracy, there are many rules, regulations, and procedures that govern the operation of PC. Has the institution of PC, after 50 years, displaced its goals as Merton suggests is nearly inevitable? How has the organization handled the changes that take place? Has the bureaucratic structure remained flexible in face of changing social and political environments, or has it remained grounded in outdated rules?

Working through the constructionist interpretive method of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), the PC will be treated as a “cultural arena”. It has several unique attributes which allow it to be viewed in this way. The first is that it is an institution, thus a host to a unique institutional culture. Second, PC is a distinctly American organization operating in a distinctly un-American setting. American staff work together with host country nationals (HCNs) at the PC office, Volunteers live with HCNs, creating a “third culture” (Useem et al, 1963).

The significance of PC’s arena is that PCVs share a unique set of tasks, language issues, needs for cultural sensitivity, etc. that are not readily understood by outsiders. In examining the attitudes and perceptions of volunteers, especially towards their non-volunteer supervisors, shared ideas emerge. These typologies can provide insight into the workings of a large bureaucracy attempting to make grassroots change.

**METHOD & RATIONALE**

By comparing volunteers’ accounts of PC to Weber’s ideal types, this study hopes to identify if or how western-style democracy impacts a volunteer’s experience in various cases. The purpose of the interviews themselves was to “make sense” of the stories, so to speak. Certainly making sense of stories is a goal, but they must sense in the context of a larger narrative. The larger narrative is that of the organization. Organizations are often compared to individuals in their structure. Homo collectivus, like homosapien is an individual in the process of creating his/her own narrative, while also being shaped by the narrative created (Czarniawska, 1997).

Undoubtedly there are many other ways of studying the organization. Weber’s rational-legal form may create the most stable means of operation for the superior-subordinate relationship. It’s is quite structured and straightforward, still allowing the subordinate a greater degree of autonomy. Theoretically, subordinates could question the choices and actions of superiors using documented regulations. Charisma comes to matter less than ability. This allows bureaucracies to handle more complex tasks than other methods of organization (Merton,1957). While the tasks Peace Corps Volunteers are required to handle are complex, they are socially complex. Charisma matters a great deal in the life of the volunteer.

To use Merton’s terms, the community members whom PCVs serve would be customers. Often public service organizations are criticized for being unresponsive to their customer's needs. In this case, the Peace Corps Volunteer acts in several capacities. The first would be a bureaucratic capacity, providing a service. However, in order to effectively provide those services, volunteers would require the support of Peace Corps. Thus volunteers are more reliant on the bureaucracy than they are participants in it. In this case they do not fall neatly into either the role of bureaucrat or customer.

Social control of bureaucracies was one of Weber’s primary concerns. He was not concerned so much with administrative problems (mismanagement, inefficiency, etc.) as with the possibility that bureaucratic institutions, especially public ones might gain and wield undue policy influence. Experts in very narrow, but important positions may come to see their superior’s dependency on them, thus use their expertise as a bargaining chip to further their own goals as opposed to organizational goals. Bureaucratic staff in society occupy the same position as the expert in the organization, potentially using their exclusive expertise as leverage. Over time this causes a shift in societal power from citizens to bureaucrats. (Scott, 1981 p. 41-42).

The application of the rational-theoretical model makes a set of assumptions that do not clearly hold in this case. For example, in the case of experts coming to wield too much power, this happens because they are an elite group, thus difficult to replace. In Peace Corps, US citizen staff are rotated from one post to another on a 2-5 year basis. This tends to reduce the power that any one staff member has over a period of time. It is also Peace Corps policy to hire Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) whenever possible. Thus the majority of US citizen PC staff are RPCVs, this tends to reduce the element of expert elitism, as most of staff has already experienced life as a PCV. Certainly this runs the risk of creating a different type of elitism, and make for an interesting case study. It is not, however, within the scope of this paper to address.

Thus, while the research in this paper is primarily constructionist in nature, the author tends to agree with Rorty’s assertion that there no overarching claims that put everything in order, making sense of everything. As Czarniawska explains:

“Once they (overarching explicative theories) have received a special status, however, they will end up as “principles” and “criteria” usually do: obstructing their own change or reform (1997, 23).”

**PROPOSITIONS AND EXPECTATIONS**

Peace Corps is essentially a government organization. This organization administers programs in 76 different countries on five continents. PC celebrated its 50th year in 2011. We would expect such an institution to become increasingly rigid in its administration not only with time but also with growth. Peace Corps began with only five countries. The effect of fifty years of operation could promote a bureaucratic paradox, meaning that “… bureaucracy as a means contradicts its own goal in the sense that the less humane it becomes, the better (that is the more smoothly) it functions in the service of humanity.” (Czarniawska 1997, 94)

One would also expect a certain degree of tension or conflict between the local and bureaucratic environments. The situations in which PCVs find themselves generally require a great deal of flexibility. Their training emphasizes the need to take things as they come and be resourceful in problem solving. However, those do not tend to be the attributes of established bureaucracies.

Being a government bureaucracy, there is a great deal of reporting required of Peace Corps staff. The organization must be held accountable and prove its own success and legitimacy. However, the metrics that are used globally may not necessarily be the best indicators of success in individual countries.

Assuming that “a formal, rationally organized social structure involves clearly defined patterns of activity in which, ideally, every series of actions is functionally related to the purposes of the organization (Merton, 1957)” it would follow that culture would be irrelevant to the purposes of bureaucratic study. Other major components of bureaucracy include categorization, and clear cut division of integrated activities considered duties of office, all elements which theoretically transcend culture. However, based on my own experience and that of many other RPCVs, dealing with large groups of Americans is a challenge for host country national (HCN) staff, regardless of structural and regulational clarity.

Even with clearly established regulations and guidelines, interaction between American Volunteers and HCN staff can be complex. The definitions of “formal,” “rational,” “organized,” and even “social” may not mean the same things across culture. Thus we would expect to see a tendency for HCN staff and PCVs to experience a social learning curve, which could impact the ability of these two groups to work together as a unit.

**VARIABLES OF INTEREST**

This study focuses on the first-hand accounts of volunteers. A volunteer’s service is as unique as the volunteer. There are many variables that impact a volunteers’ service experience. One is the country in which the volunteer serves. Each country is unique, with various customs and traditions that volunteers may come to love or hate. Within this category is gender. The sex of a volunteer often determines community expectations of what is and is not appropriate behavior. Male volunteers may enjoy a greater degree of respect and freedom than their female counterparts, but they may also be expected to take part in activities (such as prostitution) that they feel are morally wrong.

The primary variable of interest in this study is the Peace Corps organization in each country. Do volunteers feel support from headquarters? Do they feel that they have been given autonomy to work as they see fit? How would they characterize the relationship between staff and volunteers? How do volunteers balance the strict nature of global rules with the reality of life in a third world country? How well does the PC headquarters understand this dichotomy in the volunteers’ lives?

Volunteers discussed the extent of their interaction with staff. Did they feel that they understood exactly who did what? What did they observe about the superior-subordinate dynamic? How would they characterize the institutional rules at each post? Did they notice that the effects of those policies?

**PARTICIPANTS**

The five participants were chosen from WIU’s Peace Corps Fellows program, as well as other students and staff members who had served in Peace Corps. All participants are RPCVs, having served between two and four years. With the exception of one staff member, all are current graduate students in various disciplines. They range in age from 26-38 years old. They also represent different countries and regions of Peace Corps service.

**INTERVIEW PROCESS**

All participants received an email outlining the goals of the project and requesting time for an interview. I met with respondents for 60-90 minutes. All participants were asked to compare the expectations going into Peace Corps with the reality of the experience. They were also asked to compare their experience with what they would consider to be a typical PCV experience. Finally, they were asked if it was worth it. Depending on the answers given, follow-up questions were asked for greater depth.

During the interview I took outline notes, while copying certain phrases verbatim. After the interview, I wrote an interview narrative using the notes. These narratives were then sent to the participants for approval or corrections, along with any follow-up questions.

**THE STORY:**

**CHAPTER 1 - Inception**

In October of 1960, President John F. Kennedy gave an impromptu campaign speech at the University of Michigan. In a year where US troops in Vietnam would triple in number, Kennedy called on young Americans to build an alternative to violence. Unlike so many campaign promises, which rarely result in action, within a year Kennedy signed Public Law 87-293 into law, creating the Peace Corps, a new addition to the US Department of State. The purpose of the law was to provide “world peace through friendship” (sec 2). Recognizing the needs of many countries to be significantly beyond their own capacity to meet, PC brought educated men and women to places where they could be most useful. Most of the volunteers were amateurs, or generalists. Recent university graduates were invited to use their new skills in the arena of public service.

While the idea of PC seemed quite novel at the time, it was in fact the latest in a series of public service efforts put forth by the US government. Starting during the depression, President Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps, to help unemployed young men build skills while giving back to the community(Johnson, 1983). As early as the 1930s there were calls for an international Peace Army, which would eventually spawn Non-Violent Action in Vietnam (NVAV), World Peace Brigade, and many others (Weber, 1993). President Truman would even create the Point Four Youth service program. The issue with these programs was that as their cultural contexts changed, their administrative structure did not (Wofford, 1966). Many of these organizations, like PC, emerged in response to war or some other type of conflict. However, once the conflict was resolved, frequently these organized found that society had changed. The post-conflict world was different than the one in which these organizations were born. They found themselves irrelevant once society’s attention had moved on to other issues.

Many skeptics assumed that PC would eventually go the way of all the others. For this reason, the program wasn’t taken seriously initially. As Wofford put it, “in the American mind, it took its place somewhere between the boy scouts and motherhood.” The early 60s was certainly not a peaceful time domestically either. There were those who thought the PC was overreaching. If the US couldn’t maintain lasting peace within its borders, how could it do so elsewhere? (Wetzel, 1966)

The pragmatists and idealists would debate the issue, but the truth was that fear of communist threat loomed large in minds of many Americans. Many viewed the PC as a way to constrain communist forces, especially in China (Wilson, 1964). The post-war social divide figured prominently into the debate. Many people found themselves diametrically opposed on an issue that had promoted national unity twenty years earlier. Perhaps PC could actually improve domestic peace. Fischer states “The recent American political crises- whose unsavory details are familiar to all except those who have dwelt in caves for the past year- have intensified student alienation from government at all levels.” PC represented a way to re-involve young people into the government (1974).

PC staff wasted no time in moving forward with their assignment. Under the leadership of Sargent Shriver, they built an organization on their own terms. Believing the in novelty of what they were doing, others often found them to be unduly arrogant. This arrogance was shown primarily as a disregard for the establishment and the desire to innovate. Originally, the private sector was to have played a key role in the new agency, but the staff soon disregarded well-meaning help in the belief that they could do it better. By and large, they were right (Scott, 1966).

PC staff dreamed big. They envisioned a plan to have all citizens do two years of service. Many believed they should give young people the opportunity to choose PC instead of the draft. Initially colleges and universities expected to integrate PC service into their curriculums, possibly even offer PC BAs (Wofford, 1966).

This was not to be, however. “The PC might have "lost its amateur soul," and might have been "swallowed up by academia," asserts Corps Associate Director Wofford, if the universities and colleges had given full support to the training and overseas activities of volunteers.” This was yet another example the trademark enthusiasm and disregard of convention that characterized the extreme arrogance of PC staff (Lunstrom, 1966).

Despite these issues, the PC was an overwhelming success. From medical treatment (Coffey,1962) to art renewal (Anderson, 1965), PC volunteers managed in a few years to do what others had tried and failed to do for decades. In Bolivia alone, volunteers helped provide infrastructure and basic tuberculosis care in just three years (Jones, 1966. Keck, et al. 1973). From Thailand to Afghanistan, these mostly generalist volunteers, were succeeding where so many had assumed they would fail (Scott, 1966).

This is not to say that PC did not have its fair share of problems. In fact 2000 of the 4000 PCVs surveyed considered one of their biggest problems to be lack of support from PC officials. The early years also had issues with evangelism. There was to be no religious affiliation in the organization, which included partner organizations. This revealed a disturbing lack of service participation among non-religious service organizations in the US. Lunstrom also cites the “Gung-ho syndrome”, or tendency to believe that American way is the solution to all problems, as major issue that plagued the organization (1966).

The problems that PCVs face have not changed much over the years. While PC still has some technical volunteers, it is certainly not the large number predicted. Generalists have taken over, and more than 80 countries have benefited from their skills. Volunteers still face issues with disillusionment, lack of sufficient preparation or support, lack of resources. Perhaps they haven’t turned the world upside, as some had hoped. But to the communities they serve, they had made a difference (Simpson, 1974).

**CHAPTER 2: Five Stories**

**WHAT IS THE POINT OF THESE STORIES?**

These five selected stories are by no means comprehensive. They are a combination of personality and circumstance, of expectations and reactions. The outcomes were as varied as the actors. The narratives were shaped by the actors, as in many ways the actors themselves were shaped by their narratives. While certainly other stories could be told, all would be part of the narrative that defines the Peace Corps organizational identity. Each story reflects, in some way or another, a strong paradox in the life of the narrator. What bearing does this have the narrative of Peace Corps?

From these narratives, certain themes emerge:

1. There is no typical Peace Corps experience:

“There is no typical PC experience, however. Just as all volunteers are different, so are all programs, countries, and communities. So many factors influence a volunteer’s service, language, differences, site, rural or urban, organizations, proximity to other volunteers, etc. Essential to any successful PC service is a high tolerance for ambiguity. Plans big and small are subject to change at a moment’s notice. And this is the case more often than not. For a variety of reasons, from social hierarchy, to linguistic miscommunication, to varying tolerance levels for ambiguity, volunteers can’t be married to a particular plan (Kevin).”

“There is no such thing as a typical service. Both of my posts were equally engaging in their own ways. If I could choose on to go back to, it would probably be Kyrgyzstan, if I could go to a different region. But this was mainly because there is a higher degree of personalization in areas like the ones in Kyrgyzstan. Volunteers become more involved in their communities (Pete).”

1. Expectations vs. Reality

Types of Expectations:

1. The Blank Slate

Some volunteers, like Leah, went into Peace Corps with no expectations at all. She was basically a “blank slate,” excited to simply have the opportunity to go overseas while being financially independent. She desired to contribute to the community in which she lived, but didn’t have any definite ideas in mind for how she would go about it.

1. Anticipating the SOP

Going into Peace Corps 14 years ago, Kevin imagined that he would be working in a very thorough, structured program. While Kevin didn’t join PC for purely altruistic reasons, he was looking for something that would be meaningful. Like many recent college graduates, Kevin didn’t know exactly what he wanted to do, but PC sounded like the something that would be worthwhile. He thought he wanted to teach high school and be a coach. Since he didn’t want to go back to school to get his certificate he did an ESL program with PC. He arrived in Kyrgyzstan as part of the fifth group of PCVs. Knowing as he did that PC was part of the government, and having a “healthy respect for governmental organizations” he expected that there would processes and standards by which he was expected to abide.

1. Searching for Meaning

Like many prospective PCVs, Amy saw the Peace Corps an opportunity to make a difference doing something meaningful and interesting. When her invitation to participate in a municipal development program in Central America arrived, she had reservations. Municipal development seemed neither meaningful, nor interesting. Assured by Peace Corps that she would be able to take on more self-directed secondary projects, she agreed.

1. Let’s Build Some Wells

Pete joined PC to build wells. More accurately, he wanted to use his agricultural experience to serve others. Like many Americans, he had this idea of PCVs living in mud huts, digging wells, etc. He was part of the 15th group of volunteers sent to Kyrgyzstan. Because of his extensive agricultural background, he expected that he would be assigned to a rural farming community.

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| Type of Expectation | Impact of Reality |
| Blank Slate | The initial lack of expectations can be a positive attribute for volunteers. If they don’t begin service with a firm idea of what they are going to accomplish, it will be easier for them transition when plans inevitably change. |
| Anticipating the SOP | Anticipating living in a fairly structured environment could also be positive. Depending on the level of structure at each post, volunteers could, like Kevin, feel a degree of relief in a less structured environment, or at least feel ready for more structured post. |
| Searching for Meaning | This expectation, while possibly the most altruistic, can also be the most dangerous. In the west, media images of the third world portray starving orphans or oppressed women. If alleviating poverty and starvation are a volunteers primary goals, they will inevitably be disappointed, possibly losing sight of the good they could do for focusing on the good they can’t do. |
| Let’s Build Some Wells | A good balance between the Blank Slate and Searching for Meaning, Well-Builders come in with an expectation of what their service might be like, but they are not married to this one particular idea. If they are able to embrace ambiguity, they will be able to handle unexpected projects. |

Realities:

While Kevin’s healthy respect for bureaucracy led him to anticipate a fairly rigid system of bureaucratic control, he was quite surprised to find that in practice, the organizations’ informal definition of a good volunteer is someone they don’t see for two years. Volunteers were expected to be self-reliant. While PC would certainly provide any assistance necessary, the best volunteers were the ones who found their own ways to make a difference. Success was staying out their hair. And Kevin loved it.

Amy’s experience also differed from her expectations, but in exactly the opposite way. Originally unimpressed by her primary assignment, she agreed to accept it because she was told that she would have more autonomy in her secondary projects. Amy found herself bound to a desk, unable to explore other options in her community. Her primary project in municipal planning took up most of her time, while giving her very little to show for it. She struggled to identify opportunities for secondary projects as her counterpart was of no help in facilitating introductions to community leaders. “PC wants PCVs to be flexible,” she says, “but are not willing to be so themselves.”

Another problem she faced was reporting. She was expected to create a monthly calendar of activities she planned to do, and then report on them, which sounds simple. However, planning is not something that is highly valued in Central American society. She found herself creating projects that pleased Peace Corps, but did not have any measurable impact on her community. While she could check all the boxes that her report considered to be “making a difference in her community”, she felt that the true impact was negligible.

In Leah’s case, her experience turned out to be “the best job in the world.” She knew she was valued within her community. Her skills were a valuable asset in her service, and she found there was a lot of room for growth in terms of language and culture. PC allowed her to build her own resume while doing things she was interested in. She had the freedom to build her own projects. She felt the whole environment was very open and encouraging.

Regulation vs. Autonomy

One of the most interesting themes emerging from these interviews was the correlation between volunteer autonomy and how the volunteer tended to view their experience. In Kevin’s case, he mentions how PC Kyrgyzstan wanted volunteers who were independent. It was important to the office that they not have to constantly hold the volunteer’s hand.

Pete describes similar sentiments. Having served in two different countries, he could compare and contrast both posts. He also served in Kyrgyzstan, nearly ten years after Kevin did. Pete felt that PC was involved in volunteer’s lives, but it was more to maintain security than to maintain organizational control. PC wasn’t checking up on his personal life or telling him how to do his job. After completing service in Kyrgyzstan, he and his wife (also a PCV) began a new service in China.

In China PCVs lived in a large city, in the university compound. With security being much less of an issue than in Kyrgyzstan, PC China was relatively less involved. He felt that PC was supportive when they needed to be, but certainly never felt as though they were a “big brother.” Pete had nothing but good things to say about PC, when asked about possible criticisms that PC has fallen victim to goal displacement, he responded:

“That's far too cynical for me. It certainly may be true, but it never crossed my mind. My PMs (Program Managers) were hard working people who wanted to improve the lot of their countrymen and women. My CD (Country Director) in Kyrgyzstan bled for us. The CD in China was more of a politician, but she was also an RPCV and cared a great deal for our mission. Honestly, I find that ugly slander, and I can only imagine some spoiled brat with entitlement issues saying it. The Peace Corps is an absolute good.”

Both Pete and Kevin did add the caveat that as males, it is possible that their gender affected their experience. While there were certain aspects of culture that were more difficult for males (pressure to drink excessively or participate in other unsavory activities associated with masculine identity), in general service was more difficult for women. PC tends to operate in developing countries. These societies tend to be more patriarchal, often treating women in general with far less respect than western women are used to.

So how did the experience differ for women? Did organizational control differ by gender? In Amy’s case, her experience contrasted sharply with that of Kevin and Pete. She felt a strong tension between the laid-back culture of her Central American post and the rule-bound attitudes of PC Central America staff. This created a paradox that tainted her service. When Amy arrived at her work site, she found a desk and a computer. Working a 9-5 desk job was something she could do in the US. So what was the point of coming all the way to Central America? To make matters worse, her assigned counterpart did not fulfill his responsibilities. The counterpart should serve as a liaison between the newly arrived volunteer and the community. Because the volunteer initially lacks community contacts and awareness of the local needs, the counterpart is there to assist the volunteer in making these connections.

However, when a counterpart is absent, or not taking his/her duties seriously, as in Amy’s case, the volunteer can feel disconnected from the community at-large. Without the resource of a community member to draw on, the volunteer’s abilities are severely limited.

Her primary project in municipal planning took up most of her time, while giving her very little to show for it. She struggled to identify opportunities for secondary projects as her counterpart was of no help in facilitating introductions to community leaders. She was also expected to create a monthly calendar of activities she planned to do, and then report on them, which sounds simple. However, planning is not something that is highly valued in Central American society. She found herself creating projects that pleased Peace Corps, but did not have any measurable impact on her community.

Becoming frustrated with pseudo-projects and a lack of counterpart support, she began to reach out to other volunteers. Some PCVs had been able to secure the resources to begin community development projects. Amy helped other villages vaccinate chickens and teach women to bake using ovens made from wire and tinfoil. Unfortunately she couldn’t report on these activities, because they took place outside of her community.

Amy acknowledges the importance of reporting. Accountability and evaluation are important parts of development. However, she felt that because reporting was the primary occupation of most Peace Corps staff, the staff members tended to lose sight of what a volunteer’s service is all about. She felt that she could have done more to accomplish Peace Corps’ goals, had she not been constrained by the narrowness of reporting on activities that fell within the purview of her assigned program. She was encouraged to do things for which there was already a box to check, but not to define new boxes. It was as though the staff came to believe that Peace Corps existed for the purpose of making reports.

One reason that reporting seemed so unproductive was because of the cultural context. In many Central American cultures, people don’t feel the need to measure everything in the way that American society tends to feel necessary. In a way, Peace Corps was attempting to force this aspect of American culture onto Central American bureaucracy. When asked how Peace Corps reconciles this seeming cultural intrusion with its admonition that volunteers be culturally sensitive at all times, Amy responded, “I don’t know if they’ve really thought about that. It’s really the only way they know. We do things the only way we know how which, for better or worse, is limited by our own cultural norms and values.” A recurring theme in the conversation was how the systems in place in PC Central America seemed to be forcing other countries to be more like America, and chipping away at their uniqueness. While many of the rules and regulations of Peace Corps might make sense in the US, they don’t fit other societies quite so well.

The most frustrating thing Amy found was not necessarily the bureaucracy. It was the “paternal” attitude of the organization. Peace Corps kept close tabs on the volunteers, too close for many. She felt that she was not treated as an adult. She understood that sometimes volunteers behave in dysfunctional ways, and lamented how one or two wayward PCVs could cause so much trouble for others. However, she also noted that Peace Corps’ methods of enforcing the rules played a large part in volunteer qualms. Frequently volunteers felt they were treated like children. Instead of explaining the reasons why certain rules were created, and acknowledging that volunteers were mature enough to make their own choices, rules were presented as something without which all volunteers would simply not be able to function.

“I think my service … had no lasting impact on the community I served. I think that's the ideal that we all go into this experience hoping to accomplish, right? To make a difference. And I definitely fell short of that. I'm confident that the systems I put into place at the computer lab (e.g., for tracking income, tracking service usage, tracking student attendance, etc.) were swiftly abandoned. The computer lab was in danger of being closed for not making enough money, so I was attempting to analyze trends in usage, and identify how much money each activity was bringing in. Again, another example of imposing American values on a culture that doesn't see the point.”

My personal experience of was similar to Amy’s in many respects. Serving in a country with a similarly laid-back culture, I found the same tendency to impose Weber’s types on traditional Southeast Asian institutions. Like PC Central America, PC SEAsia tended to view volunteers more as children than as professionals. Most volunteers didn’t feel comfortable in interactions with staff. It felt as though staff was watching them, waiting for them to make a mistake. It didn’t feel like volunteers and staff were on the same side, working together to achieve a certain goal. It was very similar to Amy’s experience, feeling pressured to conduct activities that fit neatly into pre-selected boxes.

While gender unquestionably impacts a volunteer’s service, I would argue that it isn’t a determining factor. While my experience with the organization of PC wasn’t particularly positive, my overall experience was. Unlike Amy, I was in a very rural community, teaching at a high school. Interactions with students gave me a sense of professional fulfillment, and hmy status as a teacher in a very small community meant that I was well known and quickly developed strong friendships.

All RPCVs interviewed stressed the importance of relationships, or lack thereof. Relationships tended to make or break a service. None would agree with that assertion more than Leah. After completing two years of service, she extended for a third year, moving from a city to a rural village. In comparing the two sites, she found it difficult to choose one above the other. “In essence, PC service is about relationships, and I have strong relationships in both places.” Security in the city was a concern. As is common for many PCVs, her house was burglarized. It is a common view that all foreigners are rich, and compared to most locals, they are. The assumption that foreigners will have money or valuables makes their homes targets for thieves. There was however, a just system. Leah once had a mentally disturbed individual follow her around and harass her for several months. There was a system in place that could help her with that issue. That wouldn’t happen in the village. There was a justice system in the city, but not in the village.

The PC Security Officer was “nice”, however she usually dealt with the regional security office. The regional officer was slow to become involved with her harassment situation, and generally made people feel uncomfortable. Her initial interaction with much of PC staff was negative, but much of that was influenced by the fact that she was really sick. The medical office was reluctant to issue all the medicines she required. Another factor that she felt influenced her interactions with the PC office was information from volunteers who were from a previous year. These volunteers had extremely negative things to say about PC staff. These volunteers however, were rarely at their sites and spent most of their time traveling. Once they left she felt like the door had opened to PC staff.

She had nothing but excellent interactions with her APCD (Associate Peace Corps Director). At the end of training, she was selected to give the commencement speech in French as part of the new volunteer swearing ceremony. She does note that her sites were far from the capital, so she had little direct interaction with staff. The APCD was very supportive professionally, conducting site visits, and making an effort to be invested in volunteers. Volunteers felt as though PC was their partner, not necessarily their “big brother.”

Certainly there were strict rules. One Leah cited was the rule that all volunteers must wear helmets when on their bicycles. As they once had a volunteer in the second largest city who was hit from behind on a bicycle, volunteers understood the need for this rule. The downside was that the Burkinabe didn’t understand why she wore it. It tended to put up a wall in terms of being at the same level with the local people. The locals didn’t know what exactly helmets were (one woman thought it was a headdress fashionable in the west), but they knew that these shiny pieces of plastic must be out of their own price range. This gave an appearance of wealth that volunteers generally try to avoid.

While Leah didn’t find the rules unbearable, there are always those who balk at authority. She related the story of a volunteer who fell off a cliff (rock climbing sans harness). He was sent back to the US for medical treatment. Upon his return he purchased a small motorcycle (or “moto” as PCVs call them). With moto accidents being the leading cause of volunteer death, PC banned volunteers from riding on them. All other volunteers were aware that this individual had purchased the moto. He managed to keep it from PC, however word got out that wanted a new moto and would give the other one to his PCV girlfriend. He became extremely angry when PC took his moto. He had always known that he wouldn’t complete the two years of service, and was basically enjoying a free trip to Africa until his rule-breaking would catch up to him.

Leah told this story to illustrate how those who abide the rules often suffer because of one person’s indiscretions. If all volunteers exercised common sense and good judgment (and most do) many rules would probably not exist at all. Certainly CDs caused some issues due to highly strict adherence of rules. During Leah’s service, there was a change in leadership. With this change, things got better. She said:

“I truly believe that it is a top down effort. That person at the top trickles down and affects all volunteers. It is kind of like a support that’s in place should you need it, to keep you in certain boundaries, as a person who is overseas, as someone who represents America. As far as projects I don’t know if Peace Corps should be interfering unless there is a threat.”

The first CD caused a great deal of tension, actually instilling fear. He was adamant that people not terminate their service prematurely, that they would complete 24 months of service regardless of how they felt about PC. The subsequent CD was an improvement. She was maybe a bit too direct; the Burkinabe staff expected a little bit more sugar coating. However she was very professional. While she understood that often volunteer experience required a degree of flexibility concerning certain rules, she was particular about things like dress code, often making volunteers change their clothes, shave beards, etc. The staff and volunteers understood hierarchy for the most part. However, it didn’t seem as though anyone actually read the volunteer reports. Leah had expected that there would be more feedback. In reality understanding Americans in the first place is a really difficult thing for HCN staff to take on. Like all posts, there is a lot of cultural conflict arising from two different nationalities working so closely together. Patronage is always an issue.

For example, Leah had a good friend who was very highly educated and wanted to work for PC. She would have been an excellent asset. She had experience working with foreigners and spoke excellent English. So when PC posted job openings, she was excited about the possibility. But there was a bureaucratic obstacle. Interviews were just a courtesy. The current staff had already chosen people they knew for the position. In a couple of cases, people of prestige who were there for a very long time didn’t have a good relationship with the volunteers. For Leah, the bottom line is that it was worth it. Probably even the people who were miserable thought it was worth it.

John’s Peace Corps service was greatly enhanced by his close personal relationships with several members of PC staff. As a youth development volunteer, he was initially assigned to a school in a small Ukrainian village. His mandate included activities such as after school programs and classroom support to teachers. When he visited this site, he’d been impressed with the apparent enthusiasm of the school staff, who literally performed a song and dance upon his arrival. The honeymoon was short lived, however. After training, when he took up permanent residence, it didn’t take long for him to see that the initial show of support was just that, a show. The reality was that there was nothing for him to do. He was assigned to one English class, which just happened to be the class which the director’s grandson attended. John was strongly encouraged to put special focus on this student. However, it was obvious that while this boy was extremely bright, he was simply not interested in learning English. He had a talent for art, and would rather focus his energies on that, much to the chagrin of his family.

The after school activities which the school promised were simply non-existent. Most students lived in more remote areas, and had to catch the bus home immediately after school. John found himself with all his plans ruined. All the activities promised by the school didn’t exist. And there was no interest in implementing any new activities. One of the few things he was able to do was help with gym class. But even in this he encountered problems. The uniforms of the female students made it rather difficult for them to play sports like basketball, which many of them weren’t particularly interested in anyway. So he allowed students to pass the time however they chose while he played basketball with students who wanted to learn the game. Even here he found resistance, as the director thought that he should be forcing all the students to participate in the same activity.

Eventually he grew tired of making so little difference in his community. He had been keeping his Regional Manager updated on the obstacles he’d encountered since the early days of his service. His regional manager, along with several others, was someone with whom he’d managed to maintain close relationships. He informed the regional manager that he would either have to change sites or return home. This set in motion a series of meetings between Peace Corps staff, John, and the school director. Because PC staff had been aware of the problems he faced for quite some time, they took his side for the most part, and were incredibly supportive. While the school director complained about John’s choices of agriculture and dress, PC was firm in defending him for doing his job. The director’s complaints were not job-related, they maintained. His social life was not the director’s business, as long as he was doing his job.

Having developed a friendship with a teacher in a different village, John was able to give PC a viable option for a site change. This was approved, and he was able to be significantly more productive at the new site. This school was in a more urban area, and students lived closer, thus were able to participate in after school programs. The teachers at this school as well as the director were far more willing to engage in the idea of youth development.

John’s success in problem solving was due in large part to the fact that he was very pro-active in making changes. But he was also on very good terms with several regional managers; because these people knew him personally, they didn’t need to worry that his situation was perhaps a result of lack of effort on his part. They liked him, knew that he was just trying to do a good job.

In contrast to John’s experience, a good friend of his had similar issues at site. Like John, he had informed PC of these issues early on, and had kept them updated on a regular basis. Unlike John, this volunteer did not have strong relationships with staff. His regional manager had gone on maternity leave, and was replaced by an unpopular staffer. This man was incredibly strict in his application of rules, and refused to allow any leeway. In the case of John’s friend, PC staff was not supportive at all. He was told to stay where he was, try harder and make do. Eventually this volunteer terminated his service early.

One area in which PC staff was particularly supportive was in safety and security. The safety and security officer (SSO), was a former solder charged with keeping PCVs out of harm’s way. Even in the face of a volunteer’s own stupidity, the SSO was always supportive. Certainly there were consequences for badly behaved volunteers; however PCVs knew they were safe.

**CHAPTER 3: What the Story Is and Is Not**

As previously mentioned, I myself am an RPCV. There is a school of thought which says that insiders should not study their own cultures or organizations. If “where you sit determines where you stand,” then a researcher studying his or her own group is certainly at risk of “home blindness”. As we are viewing the PC in the context of a cultural arena, certainly that makes an RPCV an insider.

Undoubtedly this is something an insider must be aware of when conducting research. However, every researcher is a human being, and thus subject to his or her own biases. The idea of an outside observer as bias-free is not practical. In anthropology there is an idea that eventually a researcher can move from an outside observer to an insider.

However, would that not merely shift the biases of the researcher? Certainly this would make sense if the alternative is a blank-slate researcher, totally free from bias. This individual however, does not exist. Any human being will have bias in one form or another. It is an awareness of one’s susceptibility to biases that enables a researcher to move past them.

I argue that a greater danger overlooked by home blindness theory is that of a cultural wall to outsiders. Many believe a researcher, by spending enough time with the target population, can come to be regarded as one of them. Anthropologist Nigel Barely refutes this, and my personal experience concurs, that while an outsider can be become accepted, loved, regarded as part of a community, there is still a sense in which the outsider will always be different. In many situations it may not really be possible to go from being an insider to an outsider. As Barley argued, anthropologists who don’t identify as a member their target culture could never be insiders, the best they could hope for is to be regarded as “harmless idiots.”

Thus an insider is able connect with conversation partners on a deeper level. There is a degree of trust already in place, making the partners more likely to say what they really think. The conversation tends to flow more smoothly, as there is less need to stop and define jargon. While I believe that the concept of studying culture from the inside is incredibly useful, particularly in this case, I am not saying that it is always appropriate in every case. Nor am I arguing against individuals studying culture with which they do not identify. I am merely supporting a more open idea of who can and cannot perform cultural research.

**CHAPTER 4: The Moral of the Story**

Volunteers were in agreement that there is no typical Peace Corps service, in much the same way that there is no typical Peace Corps Volunteer. Every PCV begins his or her journey with different expectations, but in the end it is the relationships that make a difference. As John’s example points out, even within the same country and program of service, the experience individuals have varies widely. And as in his example, it is relationships that make the difference. Whether those relationships are with community members or HCN staff, they form the foundation for the next two years of a volunteer’s life.

So does the bureaucracy have any effect on a volunteer’s ability to form relationships? While the only way to hear the whole story of Peace Corps today would be to interview all 9,905 current volunteers, these five stories present a broad range of Peace Corps experience. It is not the purpose of this paper to make generalizable theories. Generalizable theories are essentially attempts at typifying reality, and that is not an advisable method of viewing this particular story. It is however, not unreasonable to infer that to a certain degree, the relationships a volunteer has with his or her PC staff support system can have a profound influence on his or her ability to build relationships in the community. Thus we cannot look at bureaucracy as separate from the relational arena; it is actually an integral part.

The rich variety of experience presented defies neat categories. Indeed, such a wide variety invites paradox. In this case, I have chosen to embrace the paradox. Paradoxes are necessary for organizations, if only because they are so ubiquitous. “Without paradoxes, change would not be possible.” (Czarniawska 1997, 96) In a logical system, the paradox would not exist. However, as paradoxes do, in fact, exist, their existence forces a re-examination of systems, ideally bringing about necessary changes. The social, technological, cultural, temporal environments, etc., in which organizations operate are constantly changing. These external factors affect the internal system function. As these factors change, their effect on the organization is modified. This often creates a paradox in the system. This paradox acts as a signal to the organization that the system is in need of maintenance. The true test of the organization then, is how it copes with paradox(Czarniawska, 1997) .

“…As a rupture of individual experience in a real-life tragedy, the paradox reveals a culture’s failure to solve its problems (which is why the same tragedies onstage are so instructive, without being threatening). As an object of reflective observation, the paradox indicates the possibility for a culture to surpass itself, to create new solutions, and to build new institutions...”

The fundamental paradox is the universal need for both freedom and order. Freedom brings sovereignty, dignity, fulfillment, and meaning. However order, or control, especially within an organization is essential for individual existential security and organizational efficiency (Czarniawska, 1988).

In the field of policy studies, this represents a significant paradigm shift. Solving problems is so often the main goal of policy, as it should be. However, frequently paradox is confused with problems. The idea of a policy so perfect in form and function that it will never encounter paradox is pure fiction. Instead of looking at the paradox as problematic, the policy-maker should in fact view it as a chance for innovation. As said before, the idea of Peace Corps is not unique; many other organizations came before it. These enterprises failed not because of flawed motives, or even flawed SOP manuals, but because they were simply unable to innovate.

As much as society tends to view bureaucrats as robots of sorts, cold and unfeeling, they remain humans, individuals. The purpose of bureaucracies is to serve individuals, thus policies must treat bureaucratic organizations as a part of humanity, not something that is inherently “other.”

So what? Why is research on a relatively obscure organization so important? While all this is very interesting, what are its practical applications? How does benefit policy studies?

The answer is that while Peace Corps is an extreme example of an organization that is simultaneously a bureaucracy and a development organization, it is by no means the only case of an organization facing this particular paradox.

Nearly all organizations, and certainly all public ones, operate bureaucratically. Some organizations, such as the DMV, can afford to operate strictly in this manner. Rarely, however, will you hear the DMV mentioned in glowing terms. This is not a problem for them, because their purpose is not to satisfy customers, but simply to ensure that bureaucratic procedures are followed.

However, being an annoyance to the groups one serves is simply not something most organizations can afford to do. Nor is it efficient. Take for example, a group of city planners. They can go about their task bureaucratically, following proper codes and standards. This is certainly useful and legitimate, but even the best laid plans are subject to unforeseen events. Perhaps the new sewer system planned is technically perfect in every way. The only small flaw is that it would require moving a local business. It seems simple enough. But if these planners had met with a few locals, and heard their stories, they might learn that moving this business would result in a loss of revenue, as it no longer had easy access to a highway.

**CHAPTER 5: Not quite the end…**

Again this work is not exhaustive, nor was it meant to be. Possibly raising more questions than it answers, it serves as a starting point for a variety of future research questions. The singularity of Peace Corps operational context invites myriad questions. How does cultural dichotomy affect organization culture? How does impact the delegation of tasks? How does one conduct internal reviews in 76 different countries? The paradox itself requires further study. If, as I believe, it is not the existence of paradoxes which defines an organization, but the organization’s response to paradox, these responses need further examination.

A greater sample would help further develop categories of experience. As this catalog grows, it would facilitate the making of a more accurate survey with a much larger sample. Additionally, this study neither builds nor tests theory. Rather, it provides an example of how researchers can lay groundwork for broader organizational studies. While I have given many reasons for not using quantitative analysis in this case, such studies could certainly be the result of continuing with this research.

I intend for this framework of depth not to replace quantitative work, but to enhance it. Narratives allow for a deeper understand of themes and opinions. A quantitative researcher could look at the narratives when designing a survey. Instead of asking questions that would seem meaningful to an outsider, he or she could see what is meaningful to the subjects of the study. Thus, knowing what questions to ask, as well as having a grasp on the shared meaning of terms, the researcher could design a more comprehensive and applicable survey, for use in with a large sample. Thus general data gathered from six people could eventually be used to generate large amounts of quantitative data, giving the quantitative data more depth than it would otherwise have.

Undoubtedly Peace Corps would provide a great deal of data on the subject, but this idea can be applied to other organizations as well. The foundations of these ideas, the idea of ever changing operational contexts, affect every organization. These changes, depending on how an organization responds, can stifle ability or promote innovation.

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