
Engaging Youth Through Volunteer Service Travel: In Service of the Common Good

Andrew Bailey

Recreation, Parks & Leisure Studies
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Saint Paul, MN
baile270@umn.edu

Keith C. Russell

Recreation
Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA
Keith.Russell@wwu.edu



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Western Washington University

Abstract: Volunteer Tourism is becoming a popular topic in the travel literature. These experiences combine the adventure of travel with opportunities to serve the communities visited. This burgeoning field of tourism may provide an attractive outlet for generating positive developmental assets and for encouraging future civic engagement. This paper highlights a study which explored the relationship of wisdom and social capital and also discussed the influence of a voluntourism experience on wisdom and social capital domains. The sample consisted of 68 high school youth from the various high schools in Illinois. Results indicate that wisdom and social capital are positively and significantly related. In addition, wisdom and social capital indicators increased significantly over the course of the experience.

Introduction

Service-oriented vacations are becoming increasingly popular among all age groups. These trips satisfy one's longing for adventure while providing valuable services to the communities visited. Recent surveys conducted by the Travel Industry Association (2006), the University of California, San Diego (Lovitt, 2008) and Conde Nast Traveler (DeVries, 2008) indicate that interest in volunteer vacations is growing steadily. This is a heartening trend amidst mounting evidence of civic disengagement in America (Putnam, 2001; The National Conference on Citizenship, 2006). Even more promising is the general trend of increased volunteerism by today's youth. Given that early involvement in volunteerism is a strong predictor of service in adulthood (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999), it would seem prudent to capitalize on this burgeoning interest in volunteer tourism as a channel to future civic engagement.

Volunteer tourism refers to the use of “discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need” (McGehee and Santos, 2005, p. 760). When these trips include intentional opportunities for reflection and development, they also fall into the category of Service-Learning (Jacoby, 1996). These experiences have been shown to raise consciousness and increase interest in activism (McGehee, 2002; Wearing, 2001). In addition, service-learning is associated with increased self-efficacy and civic engagement (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006), improved academic performance and behavior (Lundy, 2007; Scales, et. al, 2006) and increases in empathy, cognition, self-concept, and social development (Lundy, 2007; Waldstein & Reiher, 2001).

While these outcomes are positive, they tend to represent a piecemeal collection of psychological assets that have no theoretical foundation. Many researchers are challenging this piecemeal approach to psychological evaluation, emphasizing the need for long-term, comprehensive views of human development (Baltes, Gluck, & Kunzmann, 2005). The search for an appropriate measure of “optimal human performance” has brought about the rediscovery of the ancient concept of wisdom. Wisdom was first conceptualized as the eighth and final stage of human development (Erikson, 1982), but recent research has identified adolescence as a key stage for the development of the antecedents of wisdom (Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2003).

Wisdom is reasoned to arise through the negotiation of “thorny” life circumstances in youth and adulthood (Baltes et al., 2005; Erikson, 1982). Research indicates that wise individuals possess rich knowledge and experience in matters of the human condition, self-knowledge, openness for new experiences, the ability to learn from mistakes, and good intentions in action (Trowbridge, 2005). As a multi-dimensional trait, wisdom represents a balance of intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. Given that wise choices benefit the individual and the community, wisdom is also a virtue for the common good.

Few studies have been done to determine successful approaches to facilitating growth in wisdom. However, researchers indicate that an appropriate intervention would include novel experiences and opportunities for reflection. These experiences should occur within a variety of social contexts and include the opportunity for group collaboration (Baltes et. al, 2005), as well as moral challenges that allow for some degree of profundity (Webster, 2003). Concrete experience, collaboration, challenges, and opportunities for reflection are essential elements in experiential education. As such, adolescent wisdom may be influenced through the experiential methods utilized in service-oriented experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship of wisdom and social capital and to determine the effects of a volunteer travel experience on wisdom and social capital domains:

1. SAWS is a 40-item instrument using a Likert scale format that measures wisdom as a combination of 5 sub-domains: experience, emotional regulation, humor, reflectivity, and openness to new experiences.
2. SAWS has demonstrated strong validity, and reliability ranges from .78 to .87.
3. Wisdom is an increasingly popular concept in the field of psychology that is described as a complex integration of many dimensions within an individual.

Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of 68 high school students who participated in a service-learning trip in February of 2007. Ages ranged from 14 to 18 ($M = 16.8$) and two-thirds of the

participants were female. The students came from various high schools near Elgin, Illinois and traveled by bus from Elgin to Nashville, TN during the five day experience. Students engaged in service activities (i.e. food shelters, minor facility maintenance) and cultural excursions (i.e. museums, colleges) each day followed by structured reflection exercises each evening. In addition, long hours of social interaction were a natural outcome of traveling by bus. The intense interactions with a new social group in an unfamiliar environment provide the context for reflective wisdom to emerge (Bailey & Russell, 2008). Participant motives were measured using 3 items to determine the nature of the students' motivation to participate in the trip. These items measured common volunteer motivations based on altruism, skill enhancement, and moral responsibility using a 5-point Likert scale (Berger & Milem, 2001).

Participant outcomes were measured using Webster's (2003) Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS). The SAWS is a 40-item instrument using a Likert scale format to measure wisdom as a combination of 5 sub-domains: experience, emotional regulation, humor, reflectivity, and openness to new experiences. Experience refers to the amount of challenging life experiences one has encountered, Emotional Regulation, one's ability to control their emotions, and Humor measures the ability to laugh at oneself and to appreciate life's ironies. The final two domains, Reflectivity and Openness, measure one's tendency to reminisce, connecting the past to the present, and the extent to which one is willing to experience new ideas and activities. This type of measurement assumes that wisdom is a personal trait and not a type of cognitive-based performance (Ardelt, 2004).

Measures of community involvement consisted of an 11-item questionnaire based on the concept of "Social Capital" as defined by the Saguaro Seminar www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/. These items, which were adapted from the Social Capital Short Form, measure the students' levels of social trust (3 items), as well as formal (4 items) and informal (4 items) participation in social groups. Involvement in formal groups includes attendance at non school based clubs & religious services, and participation in volunteering and community projects. Informal engagement includes having friends over to one's house and hanging out with friends in public places.

The instruments were completed before and immediately after the program. Due to miscommunications on one tour bus the post-trip sample size was reduced to 48, for a total response rate of 72%. In addition, the sample was self-selected and internally motivated to attend this tour. It is unclear whether or not the same results would apply to involuntary participation. Other limitations include the lack of a control group and the lack of a follow-up measure to validate the findings. Future research will need to address these issues.

Results

Webster's (2003) SAWS demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$), indicating that the instrument performs well with an adolescent group. While the recommended method of analysis for this instrument involves summing the five sub-domain scores, the use of sub-scales allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between wisdom and social capital. Reliability for all five subscales was acceptable as well. With the exception of the Openness domain (Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$), all alphas ranged from .74 to .82.

Table 1 displays the correlations of demographics, motivation to participate, Social Capital and Wisdom domains. Age was not related to any of the main constructs, though the sample age range was only four years (14-18). Females tended to spend more time in informal social

groups and had higher initial wisdom scores. All three motivational dispositions were positively related to wisdom, with the motivation of enhancing one's skills showing the strongest correlation. Altruism was the only motivation related to social trust. Formal civic engagement was strongly related to wisdom scores and also to measures of social trust. Informal engagement was not significantly related to any of the main constructs.

Table 1

Correlations of Demographics, Motivation, Social Capital and Wisdom.

| | Civic | Informal | Wisdom | Social Trust |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Age | 0.070 | 0.041 | -0.107 | 0.221 |
| Gender (Male= 0, Female= 1) | -0.027 | 0.310** | 0.238* | -0.010 |
| Altruistic | 0.219 | 0.192 | 0.374** | 0.282* |
| Enhance skills | 0.213 | 0.085 | 0.397** | 0.217 |
| Responsibility | 0.176 | 0.010 | 0.232* | 0.026 |
| Civic | 1.000 | 0.211 | 0.377** | 0.248* |
| Informal | | 1.000 | 0.108 | 0.096 |
| Total Wise | | | 1.000 | 0.036 |
| Social Trust | | | | 1.000 |

*Significant at a level of .05

** Significant at a level of .01

In order to better understand the complex relationship between Social Capital and Wisdom, a correlation test was conducted on the five wisdom sub-domains and the individual items associated with Social Trust and Formal civic engagement (see Table 2). Informal engagement was not included, as this variable was unrelated to other constructs. Trust in one's schoolmates was related to three of the five sub-domains, while more general measures of trust demonstrated no significant relationships. Participation in community projects and club attendance were associated with all but the Experience and Emotional sub-domains. Those who volunteer regularly reported higher levels of Emotional Regulation, Reflectivity, and Openness to new experiences. Finally, those who attend religious services reported higher levels of Emotional Regulation. These results give insight into the specific benefits of various types of civic engagement and provide evidence to reject Hypothesis 1.

Table 2

Correlations of Social Capital Items and Wisdom Domains

| | Experience | Emotion | Reflect | Humor | Openness |
|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| General Trust | -0.011 | 0.054 | -0.125 | -0.118 | 0.045 |
| Trust Neighbors | -0.223 | -0.028 | -0.174 | -0.125 | 0.016 |
| Trust School | 0.115 | 0.228 | 0.242* | 0.313** | 0.455** |
| Community Projects | 0.067 | 0.228 | 0.231* | 0.270* | 0.367** |
| Club Attendance | 0.206 | 0.220 | 0.307** | 0.245* | 0.318** |
| Volunteer | 0.072 | 0.262* | 0.261* | 0.173 | 0.318** |
| Religious | -0.005 | 0.274* | 0.166 | 0.015 | 0.188 |

* Significant at a level of .05

**Significant at a level of .01

In order to determine the unique contribution each construct made toward overall wisdom, a four-stage hierarchical regression was conducted using the total wisdom score as the dependant variable (See Table 3). Demographics were entered first, as they have been found to influence wisdom, but are nonmalleable variables (Baltes et al., 2005). Trust and Social Engagement were included in the second and third steps, to determine their comparative contributions. While both are measures of Social Capital, trust has been identified as an antecedent of civic engagement (Putnam, 2001). Motivation to attend was entered in the final step, in order to determine its unique contribution to the wisdom construct.

Age and gender accounted for 8.3% of the variance in wisdom. Social Trust and Civic & Informal Engagement each accounted for an additional 15% of unique variance in the wisdom construct. Finally, about 14% of unique variance was accounted for by motivations to attend the trip. The linear combination of all predictors accounted for 52.2% of the variance in total wisdom scores. With all predictors in the model, the only variable that accounted for a significant unique amount of variance was the motivation to enhance one's skills (8%). Gender approached significance ($p = .06$), contributing 4% of the unique variance. Given these results, Hypothesis 2 can be rejected.

Table 3
Four State Linear Regression Model to Predict Wisdom Scores

| | | R Square | R Square Change | F Change | Sig. F Change |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|----------|-----------------|------------------|---------------|
| Step 1 | Demographics | 0.083 | 0.083 | 2.721 | 0.074 |
| Step 2 | Social Trust | 0.233 | 0.150 | 3.702 | 0.017 |
| Step 3 | Formal/ Informal Engage | 0.383 | 0.150 | 1.490 | 0.185 |
| Step 4 | Motivations | 0.522 | 0.139 | 4.459 | 0.008 |
| | Full Final Model | <i>T</i> | Sig. | Part Correlation | % Variance |
| | Age | -0.816 | 0.418 | -0.083 | 1 |
| | Gender | 1.931 | 0.060 | 0.197 | 4 |
| | General Trust | -1.548 | 0.129 | -0.158 | 2 |
| | Trust Neighbors | -0.229 | 0.820 | -0.023 | |
| | Trust School | 1.741 | 0.088 | 0.177 | 3 |
| | Comm Projects | 1.322 | 0.193 | 0.135 | 2 |
| | Club Attendance | 1.041 | 0.303 | 0.106 | 1 |
| | Volunteer | -0.410 | 0.684 | -0.042 | |
| | Religious Attendance | -0.267 | 0.791 | -0.027 | |
| | Friends at Home | 0.434 | 0.666 | 0.044 | |
| | Non-neighbor Friends | -1.635 | 0.109 | -0.167 | 3 |
| | Relatives | -0.012 | 0.990 | -0.001 | |
| | Public Friends | 0.030 | 0.976 | 0.003 | |
| | Help Others | 1.168 | 0.249 | 0.119 | 1 |
| | Enhance Skills | 2.730 | 0.009 | 0.278 | 8 |
| | Responsibility | 0.279 | 0.782 | 0.028 | |
| a. Dependent Variable: Wisdom | | | | | |

To determine the influence of this volunteer vacation on wisdom and social capital, a paired t-test was conducted on pre and post-trip scores for total wisdom scores and for social trust. Other measures of social capital were not included, as this would require an additional longitudinal assessment to be accurately measured. As shown in Table 4, there were significant increases in overall wisdom scores and in social trust, both of which demonstrated moderate effect sizes. These results provide the evidence necessary to reject Hypothesis 3.

Table 4
Paired t-Tests for Wisdom and Social Trust

| | <i>t</i> | Sig. (2-tailed) | Effect Size (<i>r</i>) |
|--------------|----------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Wisdom | -4.261 | <0.001 | 0.297 |
| Social Trust | -5.732 | <0.001 | 0.394 |

A final analysis was conducted post-hoc to ascertain whether these main effects were driven by disproportionate increases in single items or sub-domains. Table 5 displays the results for repeated-measures ANOVAs conducted on each sub-domain of wisdom and on each item in the Social Trust construct. All five wisdom sub-domains increased significantly. With the exception of Openness, these increases were well-balanced as shown by the comparable F-statistics. Increases in Social Trust were driven largely by an increase in trust of one's school mates. General trust also increased significantly, but trust of one's home neighbors did not change.

Table 5
ANOVAs for Individual Wisdom Domains and Social Trust Items

| | F | Sig |
|----------------------|--------|-------|
| Experience | 12.637 | 0.001 |
| Emotional Regulation | 11.249 | 0.002 |
| Reflectivity | 10.875 | 0.002 |
| Humor | 12.975 | 0.001 |
| Openness | 5.936 | 0.019 |
| General Trust | 14.504 | <.001 |
| Trust Neighbors | 0.218 | 0.642 |
| Trust School | 35.805 | <.001 |

Discussion

The findings indicated that females tend to score higher on measures of overall wisdom. This relationship was driven mainly by higher female scores in Reflectivity ($r=.288$) and Humor ($r=.313$), indicating that females were more inclined toward life review, and that they were more apt to find humor in themselves and in life circumstances. This finding is consistent with a previous study conducted by Webster (2003) using the same instrument. Females also reported a higher rate of informal social engagement than did their male counterparts. As informal engagement was not related to Wisdom, there is no clear reason for a higher female score in Wisdom domains.

All three measures of motivation were significantly related to Wisdom, with the motivation to enhance one's skills demonstrating the strongest correlation. These findings are appropriate

given that Wisdom is reasoned to be a virtue for the common good (Kekes, 1995). Wise individuals, then, would be driven to improve their own lives *and* the lives of others. The motivation of moral responsibility was also significantly related to Wisdom. However, when controlling for attendance at religious services, this relationship was no longer significant. This could be interpreted in many ways. One positive explanation would be that wise persons choose to participate in service-oriented activities regardless of any moral mandates. This would be consistent with the idea that wise persons are autonomous, thoughtful individuals, regardless of religious and political affiliation (Baltes et al., 2005; Trowbridge, 2005).

Informal engagement was not significantly related to any measure of Wisdom or social trust. This may be due to the nature of an informal social milieu. Informal gatherings would typically include those within one's chosen social networks, be they family or friends. These gatherings would be akin to "Bonding" types of social capital, as they wouldn't involve a breaching of social boundaries to include others of differing perspectives (Putnam, 2003). Attending clubs and volunteering, on the other hand, would likely require one to negotiate circumstances involving a conflict of values or worldviews. These types of interactions are common in service tours, and are often cited as one of the key features in the Pay It Forward Tour. This integration of social groups incorporates "bridging" social capital, requiring individuals to consider their own beliefs, to compare them with the beliefs of others, and perhaps widen their own personal worldview (Putnam, 2001, 2003; Wearing, 2001).

Formal civic engagement was related to overall Wisdom and to measures of social trust. Trust has been identified as an antecedent to civic engagement. As stated by Robert Putnam "a world in which we distrust one another is a world where social collaboration seems a bad gamble" (2001, p.62). While it may be intuitive to assume that trust precedes civic engagement, this may not be the case in adolescence. Since these youth are still developing their attitude toward others and the world, it is conceivable that their trust of others is affected by the quantity and variety of those encountered. Indeed, previous research has linked hours of participation in afterschool activities to compassion for others and pro-social values (Bailey & Russell, 2008). It is noteworthy that only trust of one's schoolmates is related to measures of Wisdom in this study. Wiser youth did not demonstrate a higher level of trust in their neighbors nor in the general public. Indiscriminate trust may not be representative of a prudent disposition.

A deeper look at the various types of civic engagement in relation to wisdom domains provides a unique assessment of the contributions each activity makes to the cultivation of Wisdom. Attendance at religious services, for example, may be instrumental in helping one to manage their emotions, but it may not engender openness. In fact, none of the activities were related to all of the Wisdom sub-domains. This supports the notion that Wisdom is gained from participation in various social contexts (Baltes & Staudinger, 1996). The only sub-domain not related to civic engagement was Experience. While formal social engagement may increase the likelihood of profound experience, a myriad of unpredictable factors would surely contribute to this domain.

The four-stage regression analysis illustrates the unique contribution of each set of predictors to the Wisdom construct. While females tended to score higher on the instrument, demographics did not account for a significant unique amount of variance in Wisdom. It should be noted, however, that the variation of demographics in this study was limited. It is likely that age, gender, SES, and other demographic variables would play a larger role in a more diverse group. Social trust and social engagement, however, accounted for one-third of the variance in the

Wisdom construct. Other studies have confirmed significant predictors of wisdom which include: intelligence (9%), personality (5%), and a supportive social environment in early adulthood (6%) (Ardelt, 2000; Staudinger & Pasupathi, 2003). Measures of Social Capital, as defined in this study, account for a larger portion of the variance in Wisdom than the predictors included in these previous studies. Motivations contributed an additional 14% of unique variance. These findings were not entirely unexpected, as many researchers consider volition to be a core wisdom domain (Birren & Fisher, 1990).

Further support for the relationship of Wisdom to Social Capital comes from the increase in both constructs over the course of the travel experience. Thus, not only are Wisdom and Civic Engagement related, but a "volunteer service vacation" that incorporates intentional opportunities for community service and reflection can generate significant gains in Wisdom and in social trust. Accordingly, trust of one's schoolmates, the only measure of trust associated with Wisdom on the pre-test, demonstrated a powerful increase over the five-day experience. Measures of general trust increased as well, which is perhaps indicative of the power these cross-cultural experiences harbor to establish common bonds. It should be emphasized that this experience incorporated intentional opportunities for reflection with the expressed intent of developing civic awareness and understanding. It is unclear whether similar results would be reported for leisure travelers who do not engage in purposeful reflection.

Conclusion

Travel to areas outside of one's normal realm may have a universal appeal. Many travelers are expressing the desire to make meaningful contributions to the communities they visit (DeVries, 2008; Lovitt, 2008; TIA, 2001). Providing "volunteer service travel" opportunities for people of all ages should be a priority for those in the field of education and tourism. Indeed, today's youth are leading the way, as evidenced by the recent boon in student service groups (The National Conference on Citizenship, 2006). Incorporating intentional opportunities to reflect upon these services with a diverse group of individuals may be a powerful way to engage youth in self-directed learning. Volunteer travel allows youth to discover the world in a way that provokes thought and challenges assumptions. This represents the ideal learning environment as expressed by promoters of experiential education (Dewey, 1938). Combining the adventure of travel with the transforming power of dialogue could be an effective method of civic education. In this way, the participants receive the benefits of travel and exploration, the communities visited benefit by the services rendered, and the home communities benefit from a wise and engaged citizenry.

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Appendix A: Pre-Post Trip Questionnaire

Code: _____ **Age:** _____ **Gender: Male / Female** _____

(Please remember this for later use)

1. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (Circle One)

1. People can be trusted
2. You can't be too careful

2. Do you feel that you can trust the people in your neighborhood. (Circle One)

1. Trust them not at all
2. Trust them only a little
3. Trust them some
4. Trust them a lot

3. Do you feel that you can trust the people at your school. (Circle One)

1. Trust them not at all
2. Trust them only a little
3. Trust them some
4. Trust them a lot

4. How many clubs/ groups/ organizations are you involved in outside of school? (Circle One)

1. None
2. 1-2
3. 3-4
4. 5-6
5. more than 6

5. Do you feel well-supported by your family? (Circle One)

1. Not at all.
2. Not very much.
3. Somewhat.
4. Pretty much.
5. Very much so.

How important were the following items in motivating you to attend this trip?

6. The opportunity to help others.

1. Not at all important
2. Not very important
3. Somewhat important
4. Pretty important
5. Essential

7. The opportunity to enhance your learning and life skills?

1. Not at all important
2. Not important

3. Somewhat important
4. Pretty important
5. Essential

8. Fulfilling a social or moral responsibility.

1. Not at all important
2. Not very important
3. Somewhat important
4. Pretty important
5. Essential

How many times in the past twelve months have you:

| | Never. (A) | Once (B) | 2-4 times (C) | 5-9 times (D) | 1-3 times a month (E) | 1-2 times a week or more (F) |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| 9. Worked on a community project? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 10. Attended any club or organizational meeting (not including school or church)? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 11. Volunteered? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 12. Attended religious services? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 13. Had friends over to your home? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 14. Been in the home of someone of a different neighborhood or had them in your home? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 15. Visited with relatives? | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| 16. Hung out with friends in a public place? | A | B | C | D | E | F |

Sample Items from Webster's SAWS* and their Respective Domain.

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. I have overcome many painful events in my life. | Experience |
| 2. It is easy for me to adjust my emotions to the situation at hand. | Emotional Regulation |
| 3. I often think about connections between my past and present. | Reflectivity |
| 4. I can chuckle at personal embarrassments. | Humor |
| 5. I like to read books which challenge me to think differently about issues. | Openness |

**The full SAWS is a 40-item scale measuring 5 domains with 8 items for each domain. The author has requested that the full scale not be published*