International Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life

An interpretative phenomenological exploration of the ways in which older adults find personal meaning through volunteering in developing countries, and how this impacts health and wellness in later life.

by

Sally Hughes
B.A. University of Waterloo, 1996
B.S.W. York University, 1997
M.S.W. York University, 2002

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
In the Social Dimensions of Health Program

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Abstract

Much of our current research about volunteering in later life has been conducted with respondents who dedicate their time and effort to volunteer in their home communities. Some, however, choose to travel to developing countries to volunteer in a number of initiatives. Little research has been done that focuses on what influences their desire and motivation to volunteer in this particular context, what meaning is derived from it, and how it impacts their perception of wellbeing and health in later years.

Using an interpretative phenomenological methodology, this project attempted to discover how older Canadians experienced the phenomenon of volunteering in developing countries, asking the questions:

- What are the factors that lead some older people to choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in their lives?
- What were the circumstances in their lives that enabled them to be able to make this choice?
- What meaning did/do they derive from it?
- In what ways did this experience impact their perceived life satisfaction, health and well-being?

The data gathering strategy involved collecting information directly from those who have participated in this phenomenon: interviews with 12 participants, ranging from age 62 to 80, were conducted. In order to understand the context of this experience, the research design also involved gathering demographic data about the participants’ life situations.

Interview data gathered from the study were initially analyzed using coding techniques of the constant comparative method. The interpretative phenomenological analysis led to the discovery of core categories in the data, which were then clustered into a conceptual framework.

A wealth of concept-rich data emerged to form four key properties that contribute significantly to further understanding about this phenomenon: a significant, disruptive event had occurred in their lives, at a time preceding their volunteer experience; the conviction of being led or guided into pursuing this choice; the discovery of feeling instantly welcomed into a place of belonging, where each felt instantly at home and connected in meaningful ways; and an experience of marginalization, isolation and loss of meaning upon their return home, necessitating a need to ‘re-balance’ their lives and find ways to continue to find meaning.

This research study will inform the discourses about elder health and wellbeing, and volunteering in later life, particularly about the social movement of elder volunteering in developing countries. It will contribute to theories of how, and in what ways, older adults achieve meaning and purpose by positively negotiating life transitions, re-inventing themselves, learning and adopting new roles, and creating new behaviours and identities, all of which can contribute to healthy aging in later life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Committee</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Memos</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication/ Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One: INITIAL CONCEPTS GUIDING THE RESEARCH</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Research Questions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Volunteering in later life</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Individual and Societal Challenges of Aging</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Global Volunteer Context</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW: RELEVANT THEORIES AND CONCEPTS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Social Dimensions of Health</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional health/wellbeing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social health and engagement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual health</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding meaning and purpose</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Theories of Aging</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3 Theories of Identity, Roles and Transitions

Identity.......................................................................................................................... 19
Social capital, agency and aging.................................................................................. 19
Role theory.................................................................................................................. 21
Late-life transitions.................................................................................................... 22
Retirement from the labour force............................................................................. 22
Resilience and aging.................................................................................................. 24

2.4 Theories of Volunteerism..................................................................................... 26
Volunteering and elder health.................................................................................... 27
Motivators in volunteerism....................................................................................... 29
Volunteering in Development work........................................................................... 32
Critical post-colonial perspectives.......................................................................... 34

Summary: Relevance of theories to the study............................................................. 35

Chapter Three: METHODOLOGY .......................................................................... 37

3.1 Introduction........................................................................................................... 37

3.2 Research Design

Qualitative Research.................................................................................................. 38

3.3 Selecting the Methodology.................................................................................. 39

Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis....................................................................... 39

My Role as Researcher............................................................................................... 46
### 3.4 Methods

- Research Ethics Board Approval .......................................................... 47
- Sampling and Recruitment ........................................................................ 49

**Instrument Development and Administration**

- Interviews .................................................................................................. 51
- Methodological and Theoretical Memos .................................................. 53
- Data Transcription and Member Checking ................................................. 54

**Data Analysis** ........................................................................................ 56

- The Constant Comparative Technique from Grounded Theory ................. 57
- Consultations with Supervisor .................................................................. 58
- Coding ....................................................................................................... 60
- Colour-coding Guide .................................................................................. 61

### Chapter Four: RESEARCH FINDINGS .................................................... 67

- 4.1 Participants ........................................................................................... 67
- 4.2 Introduction of significant findings ....................................................... 69
- 4.3 A Description of the Key Properties of the Phenomenon ...................... 70

**SHIFTING IDENTITIES** ......................................................................... 72

- Disruption .................................................................................................. 73
- Role losses .................................................................................................. 75
- Transitions .................................................................................................. 77
- Identity and early values ............................................................................. 79
- Late-life Identity ......................................................................................... 80
**MOTIVATORS**

- Destiny .................................................................................. 81
- Moral obligation ........................................................................ 83
- Addressing inequities ................................................................. 83
- Altruism ................................................................................... 85
- Spirituality ............................................................................... 86

**MEANING**

- Finding community ................................................................... 90
- Wellness/wellbeing ................................................................. 94
- Making a difference ................................................................. 97
- Self-affirming rewards ............................................................. 98
- Managing difficulties ............................................................... 99

**CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS**

- Transformational learning ....................................................... 101
- Claiming agency ....................................................................... 104
- Coping with diversity ............................................................. 105
- Postcolonial perspectives ....................................................... 106
- Disquiet and Re-balancing ...................................................... 109
Chapter Five: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary of significant findings ................................................................. 112
5.2 Working with the participants ................................................................. 113
5.3 Contribution of the study to the field ....................................................... 115
   Theories of positive aging ......................................................................... 116
   Transformational learning across age cohort .............................................. 117
   Social capital and elder volunteering ........................................................ 118
   International Volunteering in Later Life .................................................... 119
   Applying a critical lens ............................................................................ 120
5.4 Further research ....................................................................................... 122
5.5 Reflections on the research ...................................................................... 125
   Supervisory Mentorship .......................................................................... 125
   Reflections on Methodology ..................................................................... 126
   Recruitment .............................................................................................. 126
   Interviews vs. Focus Groups ..................................................................... 127
   Adopting techniques other methodologies .............................................. 127
5.6 Reflexivity ................................................................................................ 130
5.7 Ethical Considerations ........................................................................... 132
5.8 Veracity, Rigour and Transferability ........................................................ 133
   Veracity .................................................................................................... 133
   Rigour ....................................................................................................... 134
   Transferability ......................................................................................... 135
5.9 Conclusions ............................................................................................. 135
5.10 Epilogue .................................................................................................. 137
References ..................................................................................................... 139
Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment letter; Appendix 1a) Flyer/Poster .......................................................... 150
Appendix 2: Letter of Information/Consent ......................................................................................... 152
Appendix 3: Interview guide ............................................................................................................... 154
Appendix 4: Follow-up Questions ....................................................................................................... 155
Appendix 5: Participant Profiles ......................................................................................................... 156
Appendix 6(a): Sampling sources: Vancouver/Vancouver Island-based NGOs ......................... 190
Appendix 6(b): Sampling sources: Faith-based Organizations............................................................. 191
Appendix 6(c): Sampling sources: Service clubs and Seniors’ Organizations ...................... 192

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Concept Map: Data Analysis .................................................................................................. 65
Fig. 2: Key Properties of the Phenomenon ..................................................................................... 71

List of Memos

Methodological Memo 1: Probing Questions ............................................................................... 54
Methodological Memo 2: Conversation with Supervisor ................................................................. 54
Methodological Memo 3: Coding Meaning ....................................................................................... 59
Methodological Memo 5: Blending Methodologies .......................................................................... 129
Methodological Memo 6: Consultation with Supervisor ................................................................. 132
Theoretical Memo 1: Example of Researcher-constructed categories ........................................ 62
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my brothers Roy and Peter Hughes, who nurtured me through my troubled transitions; and to my friend Joan Keir, who helped me to transcend them. I miss you all every day and am so grateful for everything you taught me.

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I would like to thank my committee members, who contributed their individually unique expertise to this project, as well as their unending support and encouragement; and to Dr. Janet Sheppard for her added validation.

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I am equally grateful for the other member of my supervisory team, Dr. Eric Roth, whose unique perspectives caused me to cut through my verbiage with questions that forced me to explain my research more succinctly, and who encouraged me in my passion for continued development work.

Many times I felt vulnerable presenting work to my supervisors, not ever knowing if it was brilliant or full of holes. I am forever grateful for, and in awe of, their guidance, expertise and wisdom.

I was further blessed to find a peer support group, with the added bonus of a mentor in the form of Dr. Janet Sheppard, who took on the leadership of this group. Her support, understanding and wisdom about process, together with the consultation with my supervisory committee about content on a regular basis, enabled me to view my work through critical lenses. She provided an invaluable place of ‘community’ to meet and share the journey, often a solitary and uncertain time, with other postgraduate students who became priceless helpers and sounding boards.
INTRODUCTION

My population of interest for this research initiative was a selected group of Canadians over the age of 55, who were no longer fully employed in the labour force, and who had made the choice to travel one or more times to volunteer in developing countries (or nations with lower living standards, defined by the International Statistics Institute as such, according to their Gross National Income per capita per year). In my own travels to Africa, Cambodia, Nepal and Guatemala, I have met many older volunteers who have told me stories of how their experience of working as a volunteer in these countries has contributed greatly to their satisfaction and sense of wellbeing in later life. In addition, within my personal contexts of seniors’ social groups, leisure-oriented and faith-based groups, I have also encountered people who have undertaken volunteer work with a variety of small, non-profit organizations that conduct a multitude of volunteer initiatives in many developing countries. Such projects may involve building schools or houses, creating educational resources and programs, providing direct health care services, or a number of other projects. Some go for short periods of time, but others go often and stay for an extended or repeated periods. These projects may be in settings that they describe as causing discomfort and, at times, personal risk. My research sought to explore the motivations and meaning that such volunteers derive from participating in this phenomenon.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters.

Chapter One outlines the context, the site of the research interest and understanding the role of an elder international volunteer. Chapter Two examines the literature reviewed as part of this inquiry concerning the social dimensions of health (emotional, spiritual, cognitive and social);
theories of aging; constructs of identity and meaning; theories about motivations and rewards of volunteering; and the impact of volunteering on elder health. Chapter Three describes the research design, the methodological approach, and the process of conducting the recruitment strategy, data collection, transcription and analysis. Chapter Four presents the individual and intersecting emerging themes from the interview data, which are illustrated by the voices of the participants. This chapter also presents the findings and addresses the relationship of these findings to previous and emerging concepts in the literature. Chapter Five reflects upon the research findings and discusses their contributions to theories of positive aging, elder health and wellbeing, and the discourse on elder volunteerism and social capital. Next, it suggests issues for further research and summarizes my reflections about the entire process of conducting this research. This final chapter ends with a discussion on reflexivity, ethical considerations, veracity, rigour and transferability, and offers a conclusion and a personal epilogue.
Chapter One: INITIAL CONCEPTS GUIDING THE RESEARCH

Research Questions

The research journey began by focusing on the following questions:

- What are the factors that lead some older people to choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in their lives?
- What were the circumstances in their lives that enabled them to be able to make this choice?
- What meaning did/do they derive from it?
- In what ways did this experience impact their perceived life satisfaction, health and well-being?

I was curious to know what leads some people to undertake volunteer pursuits in developing countries, despite enduring the inevitable hardships and perhaps even dangers. What do they gain from engaging in this phenomenon, and how do they grow from it, as they re-create new roles and identities in late life? What were the interpersonal and social events that preceded and surrounded this choice? What defines their desire and motivation to do this work, what meaning is derived from it, and how does it impact their perception of wellbeing and health in later years?

In the early days of designing the study, I examined several concepts I considered important to frame the study. These are described in the remainder of this chapter.

Volunteering in later life

Many Canadians in later life find themselves privileged with increased freedom and resources to pursue individual goals. Some older people appear to negotiate later life transitions by continuing or expanding familiar behaviours and patterns to achieve satisfaction and well-being (Atchley, 1989). However, some people may experience immobilization and stagnation through sameness
or lack of change (Koenig (2002; Pfahl 2011) and new learning may offer an alternative (Russell, 2010). Those with the necessary resources of good health and sufficient finances may choose to use new-found freedom to explore volunteering in an area or a project designed to benefit others who are less fortunate. McAdams (2005) introduces the concept of the “redemptive self” (p. 248) as an identity assumed by older men and women who have experienced economic and social successes in life, and now want to give something back in gratitude, to benefit others less fortunate.

Sargent, et al. (2013) suggest that the current aging cohort (or ‘baby boomers’, those people born between post-WWII years and the early 1960’s) constitutes a path-breaking generation whose achievements in later life may be very different from those who preceded them.

Adopting the socially valued role of volunteering has been documented as one pathway to increased life satisfaction and wellbeing in later life (Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen & Midlarsky, 2013; Brown, Hoye and Nicholson, 2012; Netting 2011; Rochester, 2009; Burns, Reid, Toncar, Fawcett & Anderson, 2006; Narushima, 2005). In my Social Dimensions of Health doctoral program studies, my reading of the literature concerning the phenomenon of elder volunteering yielded what I found to be interesting data about its connections to potential health benefits in later life. One of the core thematic areas of the Social Dimensions of Health (SDH) program at the University of Victoria concerns health over the entire life span, and explores changes in levels of health and well-being in people of all ages. In the field of elder health, a shift in recent decades from a purely bio-medical model to one that includes socio-cultural, spiritual and psychological determinants has been well documented (Reichstadt, Depp & Palinkas, 2011; Morrow-Howell, O’Neill & Greenfield, 2007). The relevance of these factors to older people’s life satisfaction and wellbeing has been further documented (Sargent, Lee & Zilkin, 2013; Yeary,
Ounpraseuth, Moore, Bursac & Greene, 2012; Foster, Miller, McKee & Cloutier-Fisher, 2009; Herzog, Ofstedal & Wheeler, 2002). Correspondingly, improved mental health and increased levels of self-esteem have also been documented (Sargent et al., 2013; Yeary et al., 2012; Nesteruk & Price, 2011; Foster et al., 2009; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Koenig, 2002). Morrow-Howell et al. (2010) found that when social roles are lost in late life, opportunities to engage in altruistic, pro-social, contributory activities afford a promising avenue for maintaining life satisfaction. Research concerning the link between volunteering and increased life satisfaction and wellbeing in later life held promise for exploration through my research initiative.

My interest was also piqued by reading about constructs such as life purpose, meaning-making, altruism, spirituality and civic engagement, and I wondered how they had relevance to the phenomenon of volunteering, and to health and wellness in later life. Having a sense of purpose, social engagement and continual spiritual growth have all been documented as essential elements for a sense of wellbeing for older individuals (Marston 2010; Foster, et al., 2009; Atchley, 2008; Jewell 2004; Herzog et al., 2002). Spirituality and meaningfulness is also positively correlated with physical health (Sherman, Michel, Ryback, Randall & Davidson, 2011). I became interested in examining how the above constructs might apply to my topic of inquiry.

**Individual and Societal Challenges of Aging**

Population aging is a defining characteristic of the times in which we live. In 2011, an estimated five million Canadians were 65+; and that number is expected to double to reach 10.4 million by 2036. By 2051, about one in four Canadians is expected to be 65+ (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011). Baby boomers (those born from 1946 to 1965) will reach
retirement age over the next two decades. Life expectancy has exceeded 80 years in both sexes for the first time in Canada, reports Statistics Canada (2011), pointing to the need for new views about healthy aging and the value of contributions from older people to society.

Much of the early gerontological research has resulted in portraying the process of aging in negative ways, (Cruikshank, 2012; Tornstam, 2005). Cultural perceptions of older adults, particularly in the mature economies of the developed world, were structured as negative, and “older adults were seen often as a burden on society rather than an achievement” (Biggs, 2012, p. 39). The established paradigm characterized this population as an economic and social problem, and older people as individuals who had passed out of mainstream society, into a phase of disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Within this paradigm, suggest Formosa and Higgs (2014), older people were placed into a restricted world of severely limited opportunities for self-determination and social engagement (as cited in Townsend, 1971). My hope was to add to the discourse on positive aging through an exploration of older volunteers’ experiences of engaging in development work.

However, recent decades have seen “a flood of writing and reporting on how to ‘age better’, in which a variety of adjectives -successful, healthy, satisfying, productive- are used to modify and detoxify aging and to counter the image of later life as a time of feebleness, loss of function, and dependency” (Morris, 2002, p.162). One such new theoretical viewpoint is the Innovation Theory of Successful Aging (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), which claims that new activities in later life may both preserve a sense of self and/or re-invent it. With freedom and available income that is not work-related, many are able to explore new pursuits. Threads from the past are re-woven into the present tapestry in different patterns, often creating new identities and roles in the process. The theory proposes to consider innovation as a growth mechanism that enables one to
broaden and deepen the sense of meaning in life, which leads to greater wellbeing and satisfaction with life (Nimrod & Rotem, 2012; Nimrod & Kleiber 2007). I suspected that this theory may have relevance to my study, and that those who choose to volunteer might have found themselves creating new identities and roles as they engaged in this new pursuit.

Biggs (2014) expands upon the theory. As people age, he suggests, they may become more interested in investing in the people and projects that matter most to them: “There is a desire to make a difference, using acquired expertise” (p 41).

**Global Socio-economic Context**

In my research, I wanted to examine the phenomenon of older volunteers choosing development work (i.e. volunteerism designed to address issues in developing countries). This raised fundamental questions that required a critical, post-colonial lens to attempt to deconstruct the issues of power inequities: how do older Canadian development workers negotiate and understand their positioning in power relations in the development context? How do they make sense of the development experience, and particularly the relations of power in which they are positioned? Analyzing the decision to travel and volunteer in developing countries, either with established NGO’s (non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which are organized on a local, national or international level) or with privately organized groups, involves adopting a critical postcolonial lens. My research participants’ subject position as white, privileged outsiders who volunteer in developing countries creates a power imbalance which may or may not be acknowledged by them (Chazan 2013; Heron 2007).

Heron’s (2007) work is particularly relevant to my topic, although her research has focussed on younger age cohorts. She writes about Northern (Canadian) women’s desire to work in
developing countries, and poses the following questions: What is it that women love about doing such work? What makes it so gratifying? Why is it primarily a sphere for women? Is the search for meaning in later life also a continuation of the search for *self*? Heron (2005) states that in the decisions to go overseas, there are themes of morality, planetary consciousness, and a sense of entitlement and obligation, but at the same time “we take for granted that we have a right to go to live and intervene in other peoples’ countries and lives” (p. 36). In a sense, she posits, our altruism becomes a passport to the South, and we think this is as it should be.

Heron echoes the position held by Chazan (2013), in that there is often an assumption of shared experience or affinity on the part of white middle-class women in relation to Third World women by virtue of being women, as there was between middle-class women toward indigenous women in the colonies. I wondered whether the choice to participate in this phenomenon was driven by altruism, or more by self-serving motivators such as fulfilling one’s own needs in some way, or a combination of both.

Developing countries of the world are thought of as places of starvation and suffering, and images are perpetuated through the media in developed countries, often in the form of TV fundraising drives. This has had the effect of increasing and escalating the ‘othering’ of those who live there. Heron (2007) suggests that these images have the effect of establishing the idea that the ‘South’ is in dire need of ‘Northern’ (Canadian) interventions. Since Canada appears as orderly and clean, our knowledge, values and ways of doing things seem right and preferable. I wondered how my participants viewed the countries/cultures to which they travelled, and how they perceived their presence there.
**Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW OF RELEVANT THEORIES AND CONCEPTS**

**Introduction**

This chapter will identify the constructs and theories (which I have attempted to cluster into four sections) found in existing literature that initially guided the exploration of my topic. In the next chapter (Chapter Three: Methodology) I will discuss the literature review I conducted to arrive at decisions about my methodology. In Chapter Four: Research Findings, I will contextualize how the literature has relevance to the study’s findings. The interpretation stage of my data was aided by making reference to concepts and theories found when I returned to existing literature with the intent of analyzing its applicability to my study, based on the research evidence.

My objective was to build the rationale for the importance of doing this study in this particular place with this population at this particular time. I considered that the purpose of a literature review at the commencement of my study was to both gain theoretical sensitivity and examine what is already known about this phenomenon, in the context in which it occurs. As is evident in the following review, as I progressed through the literature search I spent many months considering a wide spectrum of theories, all of which I felt might have relevance to the phenomenon I intended to study, in order to be able to thoroughly nest my findings within theory. Much later, I returned to the body of literature once the data was analyzed, to provide more theoretical depth, re-examining it for evidence that might support what I considered to be new emerging concepts that I had not encountered in the literature.

What follows is a review of my initial literature search that focused on four main theoretical areas: social dimensions of elder health; theories of aging; theories of identity, roles and transitions in later life; and theories about volunteering.
**Social Dimensions of health**

One of my primary key questions refers to the impact that volunteering has on all aspects of the social dimensions of health, which focus on factors in the social environment that contribute to health, rather than bio-medical concomitants. One of the eight core thematic areas which form the basis of the Social Dimensions of Health (SDH) program at the University of Victoria concerns health over the entire life span, is defined as “research which examines the development of and changes in levels of health and well-being over the human lifespan, and the potential factors which influence them” (University of Victoria: http://web.uvic.ca/sdhealth).

**Emotional health/wellbeing**

Bouwer (2013) claims it was not until 1982 that a psychological/emotional approach to the concept of successful aging was first introduced (as cited in Ryff, 1982). Psychological theoretical definitions of elder health include the concepts of life satisfaction and wellbeing (including happiness and contentment), mental and psychological health, personal growth, a sense of control, adaptability, self-esteem, a positive outlook or self-identity and having a positive impact on others. (Herzog, Ofstedal & Wheeler, 2002; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Nesteruk and Price, 2011; Yeary, Ounpraseuth, Moore, Bursac & Greene, 2012; Sargent, Lee & Zikin, 2013). Reichstadt, Depp and Palinkas (2007) found that to achieve a sense of wellbeing, contentment and acceptance of oneself, many older people focus on the importance of remaining engaged with life and living in the present as a psychologically healthful practice. Bowling and Liffe’s (2006) research also defined successful aging from a psychological framework, as possessing a sense of control over life or self-efficacy; effective strategies for coping, adaptation and self-worth; and achieving goals.
Social Health and Engagement

Social dimensions of wellness also include the degree and quality of interactions with others in community. The impact of positive social engagement on elder health and well-being was studied by Herzog, Ofstedal and Wheeler (2002), who conceptualized social engagement as social activities performed within the context of a person’s social environment. Social engagement is viewed in terms of activities that are “purposeful in expressing and supporting a valued current state or in working toward a desirable future goal” (p. 594). Productive activities, including a volunteer position, have been highlighted as an important form of older adults’ contribution to their immediate environment and society at large (as cited in Bass, 1995; Herzog & Morgan, 1989; Khan, 1986).

Herzog et al. (2002) describe a view of older age as being “filled with earnest, active, and occupied leisure activities, (which) fashions itself after the prevailing work ethic, legitimizes retirement, provides a semblance of a work–leisure routine to retirement, and defends against negative views of older age” (p.596). Merriam and Kee (2014) posit that “Social engagement, in the form of social activities, helping activities, formal and informal learning, and leisure is positively correlated with physical and mental health” (p.131). Higher levels of civic and social engagement are also associated with better health and greater resilience in the face of external crises. Depressive symptomatology has also been found to be influenced by level of social engagement (Ofstedal, Herzog & Wheeler, 2000).

The importance of staying engaged in later life is also identified by Reichstadt et al. (2007) as more than just keeping busy, but including “intellectually challenging oneself, providing happiness and enjoyment to oneself and to others, producing a sense of purpose and/or
meaningful life, contributing to others and giving to society, and/or remaining interesting to others” (p.198). However, choices and opportunities for social engagement are obviously affected by individual characteristics and external constraints. For example, claim Herzog et al., paid and volunteer work are more frequent among well-educated and healthy than among less educated and unhealthy older adults (as cited in Fischer, Mueller & Cooper, 1991; Herzog & Morgan, 1993; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995).

Perhaps the most obvious form of engagement in social relationship is with family members, relatives, friends and neighbours. However, Herzog and Wheeler (2002) suggest the notion of ‘community’ has widened: educational and other intellectual activities that are undertaken by older adults that are associated with the learning of new skills and the processing of new information “denote an openness to the bigger world and an orientation toward the future” (p. 594). I concluded that social engagement and the importance of relationship-building might have significant implications for my research, in exploring the importance of older adults’ potential and desire to forge social relationships “in the bigger world”.

**Spiritual health**

Spiritual wellness, claim Foster, et al. (2009) is the “innate and continual process of finding meaning and purpose in life, while accepting and transcending one’s place in the complex and interrelated universe” (p. 336). Continuing to grow spiritually can be an important coping strategy in dealing with the challenges and losses inherent in aging, claims Atchley (2009). “At its heart”, he surmised, “the spiritual journey is about becoming a sage” (p. 113). Elders, he posits, can possess a high capacity to bring spirituality into their lives and into the world around them. Referring to Tornstam’s (2005) theory of gerotranscendence, Atchley views spiritual
development as gradually and steadily increasing from middle age on, resulting in a shift from a materialistic, role-oriented life philosophy to a transcendent, spiritual perspective. An exploration of spiritual health in later life has lagged behind other dimensions, he claims, maintaining that gerontologists have not paid sufficient attention to understanding the importance of spirituality in later years. MacKinlay (2001) uses a developmental approach to linking spirituality in aging with meaning in life, identifying spiritual themes with corresponding tasks for the individual. Jewell (2004) concurs that continual spiritual growth and having purpose in life are vital elements for older individuals.

Many people consider themselves to have spiritual experiences without necessarily thinking of themselves as ‘religious’ suggests Atchley (2008). Because the concepts of ‘spirituality’ and ‘religiosity’ may appear to be somewhat obscure and slippery, I offer below several definitions in an attempt to better understand how this dimension of human experience has been represented in the literature. I found these definitions to be helpful in understanding the complex theme of spirituality and its application to the human condition.

Atchley (2008) defines spirituality as that “inner, subjective region of life that revolves around individual experiences of being, transcending the personal self, and connecting with the sacred, for aging people” (p 13). In their study of sociality, spirituality, and meaning-making, Cacioppo, Hawkley, Rickett and Masi (2005) define spirituality as: “A theoretical construct that represents what is common in human qualities such as kindness, mercy, virtue, empathy, trust, compassion, justice, love, friendship, devotion, and hope” (p. 143).

The literature differentiates between possessing a sense of being ‘spiritual’ and having a religious identity. “Religious identity” is defined by Keyes and Reitzes (2007) as “the degree to
which individuals evaluate themselves positively or negatively in the role of a ‘religious person’ – a position that is occupied through formal religious participation” (p. 441). Their research confirmed that mental health increased among older working and retired adults as their level of religious identity increased. As one advances in age, posits Koenig (2011), when many sources of purpose tend to fade and lose power, possessing a religion or faith can provide a person with direction, power, and wisdom. Krause (2008) argues that people who derive a sense of meaning through their religious beliefs tend to enjoy a greater sense of psychological well-being than individuals who have not been able to develop a deep sense of meaning through religion. Jewell (2004) summarizes that “the circumstances faced by the majority of older people through losses and diminishment are on a scale unknown in earlier life” (p. 6), and that religion contributes to a sense of purpose and meaning in life, and the strength to go on living. Religious teachings also enable adherents to cope with stress, offering support to help buffer the negative relationship of stress with health, posit Yeary, Ounpraeuth, Moore, Bursac and Greene, (2012). Religion encourages participation in formal groups and in giving resources and time to others, which promotes positive health, claim Yeary, et al. Keyes and Rietzes (2007).

Koenig (2002) summarizes that spiritual development will “help cope with transitions and changes, maintain physical and mental health, and energize and direct individuals to carry out activities that will give purpose, power and significance” (page 130). Spirituality, claim Merriam and Beirema (2014), works in concert with the affective, the rational or cognitive, and the unconscious and symbolic domains. To ignore it, particularly in how it relates to personal wellness and social transformation, is to ignore an important aspect of human experience (as cited in Tisdell, 2001, p.3)
Finding meaning and purpose

Related to the concepts of religiosity and spirituality described above, as well as being central to emotional and mental health, is the search for finding and maintaining a sense of meaning, or that one’s life has a purpose. As the population of older adults continues to grow, researchers are giving more attention to the development of personal meaning in late adulthood, suggest Sherman, Michel, Ryback, Randall and Davidson (2011), who concluded that there are positive health benefits when a person embraces meaning in life.

For emotional/psychological wellness to be fulfilled, posit Foster, Miller, McKee and Cloutier-Fisher, D. (2009), an expectation that there will be positive outcomes resulting from having lived one’s life is important. The lack of meaning in life is recognized as a precursor to mental health disorders, particularly depression and anxiety, concurs Marston (2010). Meaning, claims Krause (2007), affects health and well-being in complex ways: in particular, having a strong sense of meaning in life may also be a potent antidote that helps offset the deleterious effects of stress on physical and mental health. Sherman, Michel, Ryback, Randall and Davidson (2011) summarized that experiencing meaning of life is in itself healing, and associated with positive mental health (as cited in Windsor, Anstey & Rodgers, 2008). Dobrof (2011), in her autobiographical narrative, reflects that introspection can also bring a deepened understanding of the later years and their significance in the life course of the individual. Adopting a life course perspective, she considers the search for meaning is a task that begins early in life, perhaps in adolescence, and “continues as long as one is sentient” (p. 176). Mascaro and Rosen (2006) investigated the extent to which the positive relationship between degree of daily stressors and depression (as well as the inverse relationship between degree of daily stressors and hope) becomes weaker as individuals report higher degrees of personal meaning.
An example of meaning-finding through adopting new behaviours is offered by Nimrod and Rotem (2012), who applied the Innovation Theory of successful aging to the practice of travelling in later life. Their research found that life’s meaning and wellbeing were particularly enhanced through a new practice of taking up travelling, which provided challenges in planning, solving unexpected problems, facing new situations, new people, new foods, etc. Successful coping with such challenges led to a sense of accomplishment and increased self-worth, they concluded.

Theories of Aging

The aging of Canada’s population is probably one of the most discussed and debated subjects of today: gerontological theorists claim there is a continuing need for research that stresses potential rather than impediment, and focuses on building strengths of an aging population (Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Stalp, Williams, Lynch and Radina, 2009; Reichstadt et al. 2007; Cohen, 2006). Earlier theories claimed that successful aging was characterized by the absence of illness, and a high level of cognitive and physical functioning (Rowe and Khan, 1997), yet more recent theorists claim that adopting such bio-medical models when dealing with issues concerning people falling into this large and variegated age bracket has resulted in past pathologizing all older adults. (Findsen and Formosa, 2011)

The early Activity Theory of aging (Havighurst, 1963) suggested that maintaining a high level of activity, as far and as long as possible, was essential to well-being and that the loss of work-related activities creates a need for a compensatory increase in other activities. Although more recent theorists have criticized the theory for not taking chronic illness into account, nor
considering the impact of social institutions on aging, the theory is useful to my analysis in providing early groundwork for richer theories that build on the ideas, such as The Innovation Theory, coined by Nimrod and Kleiber, 2007, which posits that pursuing innovative activities in later life can be thought of as a growth mechanism that enables one to deepen meaning in life, leading to increased life satisfaction and sense of wellness. I suspected that newer theories of aging such as this, that defy traditionally negative stereotypes of decline and dependency, might have significant relevance to my research.

In past decades, unfortunate ageist stereotypes often disempowered older adults’ self-esteem, and led many to fear that they are cognitively deficient and lack the modern tools of learning, claim Wolf and Brady (2010). Elder learning, they argue, is about reversing those negative messages, while instilling hope, community and enhanced spirit. While social disengagement (Cumming and Henry, 1961) predicted age-related cognitive decline, cognitively stimulating activity may preserve cognition with age: Lawton and LaPorte (2013) address the value of cognitive stimulation in later life, when "new neuron formation in the information processing of the brain is associated with a desire for novelty" (as cited in Cohen, 2006, p. 52). Transitions in the aging brain are conducive to creative activity and the exploration of new experiences, self-reflection, experimentation, and the sharing of wisdom. Learning new activities, roles and formulating new identities appear to have the potential to enrich and ultimately preserve cognitive health, as well as positively impact physical health. Potkanowicz et al. (2009) refer to Cohen’s (2006) study, in which “older people who pursued meaningful activities that require skill, concentration, feedback, and deep involvement reported better morale and less loneliness, as well as a higher overall rating of physical health, including less medication use, fewer doctor visits, and fewer
falls” (as cited in Cohen, 2006, p. 12). In summary, late life learning fosters cognitive health and is a dynamic and vital part of the aging process.

Early theories about life course perspectives also continue to contribute to research about theories of aging used to explain transitions and identity development in later life. Erikson’s (1968) epigenetic stage of ego-integrity held that in late life, generativity grows out of one’s life experience and represents a desire or purpose to be a leader for the next generation. Erikson and Erikson (1997) describe generativity as involving “procreativity, productivity, and creativity . . . including a kind of self-generation concerned with further identity development” (p. 67).

Because adopting new roles and re-creating identity are important ideas for consideration in my research, I included role theory and generativity as appropriate theories to investigate further as to how they might apply to my data.

Tornstam’s (2005) gerotranscendence theory is conceptual framework for understanding late life development in older adults: Tornstam claims that elderly people, rather than continuing to follow prior patterns, break through old boundaries, or transcend developmental crises. This leads, he claims, to an introspective redefinition of the self and of relationships to others, as well as a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. He concluded that in moving toward gerotranscendence, people may come to see certain egotistical features in themselves and replace them with a higher degree of altruism; he describes this as self-transcendence, in which the wishes and needs of the self are transcended in favour of other people's needs and wishes. I was curious as to whether older volunteers’ participation in development work resulted in a new definition of the ‘self’ and a shift in how they engaged in relationships with others.
Theories of Identity, Roles and Transitions

*Identity*

I was interested in how older people view themselves as aging persons, and how they re-constructed identity in later life when adopting new roles and activities. McAdams (2006) defines identity as an "internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script that provides an individual's life with some degree of meaning and purpose" (p.247). Identity is defined by Gronlund (2011) as the ‘sense an individual has of oneself, comprising the abilities, roles, values, background, and reference groups important to one’ (p. 858). Gronlund goes on to theorize that ‘moral identity’ can be described as an individual’s penchant to act in moral ways, including social action and volunteering. Gronlund’s work is limited, like that of many others found in the literature search, to studies using younger participants. My study intended to explore how *older* people might expand, re-construct or re-claim identity as they adopted new volunteer roles and activities.

*Social capital, agency and aging*

Sawano (2012) claims that social capital theory encourages older citizens to participate in community building by “making use of what they have achieved in the course of their lifelong learning” (p. 667). Active and healthy elders contribute to community wellbeing through their accumulated life experience, expertise, and service.

In re-constructing identity in later life, people have proven themselves to be powerful social agents. Many older people engage in pensions associations, political-party clubs or remain active within movements to which they helped give rise in the past. Referring to British Columbia’s ‘Raging Grannies’ movement as an example, Findsen and Formosa (2011) suggest that older
adults have proven to be strong social activists, taking on the role conventionally attributed to student movements as they use their wit and imagination to target policy makers and politicians, while raising awareness of local and global issues. The ‘Raging Grannies’ gained national and international fame due to their social activism during the late 1980s and 1990s in Victoria, B.C. The ‘Grannies’ wanted more from life: they wanted to make a difference in the world, as they had tried to do in their younger, value-programming days. Being older, they claimed, gives both the freedom and responsibility to attempt to alleviate the wrongs of the world. (Hutchinson, Yarnal, Staffordson & Kerstetter, (2008).

Jolanki (2009) summarizes that re-creating identity in later life can offer opportunities for self-realization and involvement in social activities, and provide release from previous social obligations, while continuing to offer ways to remain active and productive in society. Individual agency, then, is “brought into the focus of interest as a way of challenging what is seen as an overly deterministic discourse of decline” (p.350). One interesting example of how older people claim agency and seize opportunities to combat negative ageist stereotypes is that of the ‘Red Hat Society. The ‘RHS’ exists for women of fifty years of age or older, where age is “celebrated rather than begrudged” (Stalp, Williams, Lynch and Radina, 2009, p.225). Drawing from interviews and fieldwork with Red Hat Society members Stalp et al. explored how members dress quite flagrantly in red and purple, and for what purposes they do so. They concluded that in adopting such behaviours, they establish a positive group identity that aims to counteract ageist attitudes in society, and challenge publicly what it means to be ‘old’. The society’s stated goal is to ‘have fun’, just for midlife and older women, which is distinct from other women’s voluntary organizations that typically have the purpose of benefiting others.
Role Theory

The activity theory blends with role theory, which is still used in more current research to explain social behaviour in all age cohorts. I believe it has particular applicability to older cohorts who may have sustained roles over longer periods, and perhaps have experienced serial role losses/shifts related to the aging process (Phillips, 1957; Luborsky & LeBlanc; 2003; Krause, 2007; Marston, 2010). Role theory contends that taking part in activity promotes support and positive feedback on role performance for older adults. Frequent role supports, in turn, theoretically enhance self-esteem and personal wellbeing. The initial rationale was that activity thus reinforces elders’ self-esteem and, as a result, their life satisfaction. Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2006) raise a different possible explanation: it may not be the feedback derived from activity per se that is responsible for the wellbeing outcome, but rather the quality of the social relationships that accompany activity. Wellbeing in later life, they posit, may be “less a result of what older people do, but rather of who they do it with, and how they feel about them” (p.239).

I was also interested in exploring whether connections between volunteering and role identities differed between age cohorts, although I recognized this to be largely beyond the scope of my present study. Greenfield and Marks’ (2004) research compared the effects of volunteering in the lives of older and younger adults to assess why older adults appeared to gain more from volunteer activities. Using a role theory approach, they concluded that volunteering might provide older adults, who are more likely to have experienced more major role-identity losses and absences than younger adults, with an opportunity for developing more meaning and purpose in their lives. I considered it important to address how my participants adjusted to losses and shifting of roles in later life.
Late-life Transitions

Closely aligned with role shifts, changes and transitions in later life have been documented in early research as contributing to poor mental health (Luborsky & LeBlanc; 2003; Krause, 2007; Marston, 2010). Keyes and Reitzes (2007) state that in terms of individuals’ mental health and coping ability, life transitions have historically been conceived of as being fraught with stress, but this is now being challenged in recent research.

Significant interpretative phenomenological research has been conducted around identity changes associated with major life transitions, which constitute issues that have considerable existential content (Smith, et al, 2009). However, although their research has focused on a variety of life transitions in younger cohorts, such as new parenthood, Smith et al. (2009) make no mention of research that has been conducted concerning identity and specific transitions in later life, such as retirement.

Retirement from the labour force

Because one of my eligibility criteria was that respondents must no longer be fully employed, I wondered if the transition of retirement had much to do with taking on a new role and identity in a search for new meaning and purpose. In fact, much of the literature concerning transitions in later life focuses on the event of retirement from the work force (Hubble and Trew, 2013; Phillips, 2004; Luborsky & LeBlanc, 2003; Koenig, 2002). As meaning from employment is weakened, involvement in personal networks, leisure experiences and voluntary activities may matter more, especially with gaining more free leisure time.

Koenig (2002) posits that on one hand, many people resist change and crave continuity- to remain the same, to continue with familiar routines. This choice supports Atchley’s (2008)
continuity theory, which claimed that older individuals wish to “maintain stability in the same interests, roles and behaviours they have engaged in during their entire life course” (as cited in Atchley, 1999, p. 3).

On the other hand, suggests Koenig, many cannot stand sameness or lack of change. Monotonous routine, he suggests, results in boredom, restlessness and a desire for something new or different for some older individuals. Pfahl (2011) concurs, claiming that if life stagnates, we can become immobilized, unable to see alternatives and connections among our experiences; and then risk regressive thought and behaviour patterns. Some retirees, then, may choose to take up something entirely new, such as a long-held interest they have previously been unable to pursue (Russell, 2010).

Tornstam (2009) offers a positive theoretical viewpoint. He argues that, on average, the process of retirement results in people feeling healthier and better than they did while still employed. In the transition from work to retirement, Koenig (2002) contends, “there is an amazing opportunity to start life over, but to begin this time with all the wisdom and experience gained over the years...the challenge is what to let go, and what to hang on to” (p. 57). However, the long period after retirement may present for some the dilemma of having a lot of time to spare, yet needing to do more than just ‘fill in time’. The significant amount of additional free time in retirement is one of the main challenges in the transition, concur Nimrod and Kleiber (2007), suggesting the way that time is being used may make the adjustment easier or more difficult. More contemporary researchers, such as Hubble and Trew (2013), have continued to challenge retirement as a negative and stressful transition. They claim that their British qualitative study, which explored how older people construct their social identities, heralds the emergence of a new (more positive) narrative of aging, which allows the long-acting postretirement years of
aging to be seen as not a stressful or problematic time, but as “the attainment of self-acceptance that transcends any purely medical concept of well-being” (p.199).

With a heightened awareness of longevity, Russell (2010) contends, some older people engage in an existential search for the answers to ontological questions and do so through learning new experiences. Time is seen as running out and hence the search for meaning becomes an intrinsic, developmental task of aging, with an intensified focus on value and meaning. I was curious as to how participants in my study might have transitioned through retirement and whether volunteer activities had become a substituted form of meaning and purpose for them.

**Resilience and Aging**

Resilience, a concept evolving from systems theory, has been identified as a factor in transitioning successfully through such challenging changes in later life. Wild, Wiles and Allen (2013) suggest the concept of resilience is being employed to explore how people cope with negative life events, stating that “researchers are exploring the potential for growth as a result of the experience of adversity, or the idea that new skills are learned and insights gained through coping with difficult circumstances” (p. 139). In contrast to the focus on risk factors, deficits and pathology, resilience theory draws from the strengths perspective, a philosophical standpoint that recognizes the inherent strength of individuals and communities. Recognizing that resilience is not an age-specific construct, Wild, et al. (2013) do add the dimension of aging to the theory: they conclude that existing gerontological research shows that while older people may experience greater adversity than younger people, they also may have more developed resilience resources in the form of more advanced coping strategies. Atchley (2009) concurs, claiming that older people are resilient: they have “encountered contradictions and paradoxes in life, and are
able to focus on the ‘inner life’, in service to others, and deepening connections with the sacred” (p. 15). The sense of optimism and equanimity that comes from this, he posits, contributes to well-being and overall health.

Nimrod and Kleiber (2007) also explored the ways in which older people transition through changes. Their research found that the most significant connections to well-being reflected an interest in finding meaning in life. Reasons for happiness and satisfaction with life included: “the ability to devote time to things that are more meaningful, more challenges, focus on the self, meaningful activities, and enjoying the change” (p. 19). With regard to adding new activities in later life, very limited information was found, representing a gap in the literature that my study intended to address.

Hutchison, Yarnal, Staffordson and Kerstetter (2008) also claim that an important aspect of healthy aging is the ability to cope with, and adapt to, changing life conditions and transitions. While their work focused on the value of participation in women’s leisure-based social groups as an effective health promotion strategy to counteract stress, they suggest that joining groups focused on social activism or global development work may be found to have a similar positive effect of health and well-being. Later research by Nimrod and Rotem (2012), which particularly studied older people travelling overseas as a new activity in their lives, revealed that “it is not the new experiences per se, but rather the new explorations and self-discovery, which lead to a sense of growth as a result” (p. 399).
Theories of Volunteerism

The literature contains a plethora of studies that demonstrate the positive relationship between volunteering and a sense of well-being or satisfaction. Morrow-Howell et al. (2011), for example, found that both self-reported health and functional dependency are positively affected by adopting formal volunteering roles. Brown, Hoye and Nicholson (2012) also found that self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social connectedness were all significant mediators of the volunteering/well-being relationship.

With similar results, Reichstadt et al. (2007) explored the connection between volunteerism and overall wellbeing. A large majority (73%) of participants in their study focused on giving of themselves to others and contributing to society. This brought mutual benefits for themselves and the recipients of their service: they claimed they volunteered to help others “not only for the sake of generosity, but also for the positive impact on themselves, including enjoyment, fulfillment, stimulation, social interaction, and the ability to remain engaged” (p.571). Post (2005) also found that a strong correlation exists between the wellbeing, happiness, health, and longevity of people who are emotionally and behaviourally compassionate.

Foster, et al. (2009) adds that the extent to which an individual supports community and environment, through actions such as rewarding and meaningful volunteer work, is an important measure for social wellbeing. Koenig (2002) quotes research that claims the act of volunteering is associated with better mental health, increased levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem, and more altruistic behaviour (as cited Oman, Thoresen, and McMahon, 1999). Nevertheless, he inserts a caveat, cautioning that it may be that good mental health and greatest stability leads to more volunteering. These factors may also work together, he suggests, with better health
enabling a person to volunteer, and volunteering serving to maintain good health. Koenig concludes by suggesting that having purpose and meaning in life will enhance self-esteem and self-image, making people less vulnerable to anxiety, which results in fewer stress-related illnesses.

Post (2005) also explored altruism and its relation to mental health. Quoting Frederickson (2003), who found that “when people feel good, their thinking becomes more creative, integrative, flexible and open to information” (p 66), she posits that positive emotions enhance psychological and physical resilience, and interprets this effect as being the result of the “undoing” of negative emotions that are clearly physically harmful. Helpful, compassionate acts, she argues, just allow people to feel elevated and good about themselves and others (as cited in Post, Underwood, Schloss, & Hurlbut, 2002).

Volunteering and Elder Health

Lum and Lightfoot (2005) found that older people who volunteer enhance their life roles, which then amplifies their opportunities to increase social networks, power, prestige, resources, and emotional gratification, which in turn can have a positive effect on their health. They claim their study found that volunteering by older individuals is positively correlated with self-reported health, depression levels, and functioning levels. Kahana et al. (2013) also concluded that altruistic attitudes and volunteering make unique contributions to the maintenance of life satisfaction, positive affect and other wellbeing outcomes for older adults.

Post (2005) found that cultivating loving emotions, engaging in helping and self-forgetful activities and a serene spirituality may contribute to good health and longevity by preventing the acceleration of aging at the cellular level. Furthermore, she suggests that altruistic emotions can
gain dominance over anxiety and fear, turning off the fight–flight response. Immediate and unspecified physiological changes may thus occur as a result of volunteering and helping others, leading to the so-called ‘helper’s high’ (p. 71). Post concludes that volunteering can be thought of as enhancing resilience in older adults, because it supports both physical and mental health while assisting individuals in developing networks of social support (as cited in Morrow-Howell, et al. 2011).

A number of studies use various aspects of role theory as their explanatory framework to examine the benefits of volunteering for older people. Lum and Lightfoot (2005) state that role enhancement, which is contained within the broader framework of role theory, suggests that by involving oneself in a productive role, such as volunteering, an older person will have more resources, a larger social network, more power, and more prestige (as cited in Moen, Dempster-McClain &Williams, 1992), and this in turn leads to better physical and mental health.

Role theory has also been used by Kahana, Batta, Lovegreen and Midlarsky (2013). As social roles are lost in late life, they suggest, new opportunities to engage in pro-social, contributory activities can be adopted to create or maintain life satisfaction and psychological well-being (as cited in Morrow-Howell, et al., 2010). They further suggest that compassion and good will toward others can also serve as expressions of generativity (a belief that engaging in activities, such as volunteer work, that will have lasting benefits for other people) that promote meaningfulness and well-being in late life (as cited in Erikson, 1968).

Nesteruk and Price (2011), also applying an aspect of role theory, conducted a quantitative study that examined volunteering in women’s retirement years and concluded that as a result of the
frequent role losses encountered in later life (e.g., employment, partner, and parenting roles),
volute activities are particularly suited to older adults (as cited in Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Intergenerational volunteer initiatives have been found to be mutually beneficial for all cohorts involved. An example is Fried, Carlson and Freedman’s (2009) study that reported positive results from the U.S.-based ‘The Experience Corps’ initiative that places older adult volunteers in public elementary schools, in a program designed to have high impact on academic outcomes for children. While volunteers originally signed up for the program primarily for generative, not health-related, reasons, Fried, et al. (2009) concluded that “regular participation in structured social and productive activities, as well as membership in large social networks, benefit health and functional outcomes as people age” (p. 650).

Kahana, et al. (2013) claim: ‘The ability to help others and to derive satisfaction from such actions transcends a personal future and allows for maintenance of meaning in life that fosters psychological well-being’ (p.181). They posit that such meaningfulness is also consistent with Erikson’s concepts of generativity and of ego integrity in late adulthood (as cited in Erikson, 1968).

In summary, these research findings all suggest there is compelling support for the contribution of altruistic orientations and helping behaviours to mental and emotional wellness in later life, confirming tenets of strength-based approaches to gerontology.

Motivators in volunterism

Volunteering, viewed as an altruistic pursuit that benefits others, has been seen as a socially valued and recognized important role in society, as well as a pathway to improved physical health and meaning in life satisfaction (Kahana, et. al 2013; Narushima, 2005; Rochester, 2009;
Netting 2011; Burns, et al., 2006). Research findings in the literature that examine the link between volunteering and altruism are mixed, however, and sometimes contradictory when exploring the nature and motivations that lead to volunteerism.

Generally, altruism is seen as self-sacrifice with no apparent personal reward. Burns, Reid, Toncar, Fawcett and Anderson (2006) define true altruism as “voluntary, intentional behaviour motivated to benefit another that is not motivated by the expectation of external rewards or avoiding externally produced punishments or aversive stimuli” (p. 84). However, altruism has been viewed in the literature as merely an illusion; under closer scrutiny, behaviour which appears to be altruistic often arises from ulterior selfish motives (as cited in Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Pure altruism, then, that is without benefit to the self, is considered to be a rare phenomenon (Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen and Midlarsky, 2013).

Helping behavior is not always guided by other-oriented, altruistic motives but can also be governed by egoistic motives such as enhancing one’s own mood and relieving one’s own distress, suggest Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg (2005, as cited in Cialdini et al., 1987, 1997). Vakoch (2013) concurs that volunteering is not always or purely altruistic but can also be motivated by self-interest.

Koenig (2012) claims, however, that people find meaning through volunteering by expressing values of altruism and humanitarian concern for others: it is a way for people to express deeply held beliefs, dispositions, and convictions. In Tornstam’s (2005) theory of gerotranscendence, older people come to see certain egotistical features in themselves and replace them with a higher degree of altruism. This kind of change, from egoism to altruism, Tornstam calls “self-transcendence” (p. 29). The wishes and needs of the self are transcended in favour of other
people's needs and wishes...a shift from doing things for oneself to doing things for others (Tornstam, 2005). Gratitude and the desire to repay society are among the major motivations to adopt altruistic behaviours, yet personal returns, (e.g. recognition and prestige) are also integral factors, suggests Adloff (2009), who concluded that self-fulfillment and a sense of purpose in life are also motivating factors.

Religious beliefs and faith-based motivators to volunteer are well documented in the literature. Garland, Myers and Wolfer (2009) found that people are more likely to volunteer when they are frequent church attendees, and/ or have a religious identity inherited from parents. Christian participants in their study referred to volunteer activities as a response to “a call” in their lives. However, Garland’s (2008) research also found that although spiritually-defined factors were motivators initially, beneficial relationships with others become motivations for their continuing service in volunteer roles within religious contexts.

Some purposely choose to volunteer in order to enjoy personal benefits. A good example of this is Haas’ (2013) research about British ‘ex-pats’ who chose to volunteer in their retirement communities in Spain; Haas concluded that besides the obvious advantages of self-help on a voluntary basis for both the host society and the older migrants, volunteering in charity work as an activity is an individual strategy of adaptation to a new life context. The British volunteers benefitted from the creation of social networks and establishing friendships, which contributes positively to the project of retirement abroad.

Interestingly, Narushima claims that selfless (or altruistic) and selfish (or narcissistic) are both characteristic of highly generative adults, who tend to express a strong need for both: her 2005 Toronto research concluded:
The social and personal motives of the participants were two sides of a coin, just as generativity itself springs from both selfless and selfish desires...the generative determination to leave a better world for following generations was not a pure altruistic or societal motive, but was intertwined with a narcissistic desire for symbolic immortality, or their desire to invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self (p 576).

Nesteruk and Price (2011) concur, arguing that motivations to volunteer are both altruistic and egocentric, claiming that the secondary gains associated with volunteering were found to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy, and socialization. The older, community-based women in their study expressed a need to both ‘give back’ and, at the same time, described how volunteering “gave something back to them in terms of social integration, structured time, and finding meaning in their lives” (p. 101). Their experience provided them with an opportunity to give back to their communities, as well as enabling them to socialize and to establish new relationships. I wondered if my research might yield similar results on a global level.

In summary, then, the existing literature addresses the concepts of both altruism and personal gains associated with motivation and reward as being present in the experience of volunteering. (Adloff, 2009; Vakoch, 2013; Kahana, et. al 2013; Narushima, 2005; Rochester, 2009; Netting 2011; Burns, et al., 2006). Some theorists speak of altruism as being the primary motivator with self-serving, or narcissistic, motivators (e.g. transformative learning, personal growth) as a secondary (Tornstam, 2005; Koenig, 2012). I was interested in how this dichotomy might play out in my own research.

Volunteering in Development work

Although the literature contains studies that have been conducted with a younger cohort who take time out between high school and university (known a ‘gap’ year) to volunteer in
developing countries (Rochester, Paine and Howlett (2009), no studies were found that explored the phenomenon of older people engaging in overseas development work as their volunteer activity of choice. Research conducted with younger cohorts show that they do exhibit an awareness of global issues. Gronlund (2011) suggests that “young age groups seem to offer an especially complex and intriguing field of study in their ways of using volunteering in relation to their values and identities” (p.871). Younger cohorts have been found to be more directed toward hedonism than older age groups, yet he suggests that despite this tendency, this age group is very interested in learning about other cultures and global inequities. Research has shown that the choice to volunteer in development work results in a transformative life experiences that prepares younger people for future employment (Hopkins, Olson, Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2015; Gronlund, 2011).I was interested in whether a similar transformative experience results in older age groups.

I wondered if the current baby-boom cohort (those born between the late 1940’s and early 1960’s) who were raised in the context of the global village, might in later life continue to be motivated by broad cultural and planetary concerns, aware that their aging counterparts in developing countries are burdened with socioeconomic disparities that are unfair and unjust.

McAdams (2005) does cite a growing body of research (as cited in McAdams, 2001; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Rossi, 2001) that finds older adults who score high on generativity measures tend to be more deeply invested in a wide range of endeavors aimed at improving the world around them: they tend to construct life stories that feature a wide range of variations on the theme of redemption:

Believing that they were once the beneficiaries of early advantages in life, they feel some obligation to give back for the blessings they received. Their stories tell them that early
on they were chosen or advantaged in some way in a world where many other people suffer. The contrast between their sense of personal blessing and their early awareness of the suffering of others may set up in their story a moral obligation. (p. 245).

**Critical post-colonial perspectives**

No review of the literature concerning working in developing countries is complete without applying a critical postcolonial lens to the phenomenon. White privilege often goes unchallenged by White people who see their viewpoints not as a matter of perspective, but rather as factual data, and are often are unaware of the advantages conferred by their skin colour, suggest Merriam & Bierema (2014). Development workers’ subject positions as White, privileged outsiders create a power imbalance which may or may not be acknowledged by them (Chazan 2013).

Brookfield (2012) adopts a critical approach to conceptualizing development work, arguing that “while the term ‘development’ is usually viewed as positive, it is not neutral, but is always in a certain direction, always serving some interests rather than others” (p. 875). Developing countries are thought of in Canada as places of starvation and suffering, and images are perpetuated through the media, often in the form of TV fundraising drives. This discourse has had the effect of increasing and escalating the ‘othering’ of those who live there, claims Heron, 2007). Since Canada appears as orderly and clean, our knowledge, values and ways of doing things seem right and preferable, but Heron questions the proliferation of such stories where developing countries, such as Africa, are portrayed in stories as in unmanageable disarray, and where what seems to matter is not just the assistance that is given, but the helping imperative and the “effect that helping the passive Other will have on our own life experiences” (p. 90).
When older adults learn to critically deconstruct their positions of power and privilege, suggests Brookfield (2012), it leads to a deeper understanding of power inequities (as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014). I felt it important to explore how volunteers in development work might view their involvement through post-colonial lenses, and whether they might potentially deconstruct familiar assumptions and discourses about such work.

**Summary: Relevance of theories to the study**

This substantial chapter represents many months of studying and selecting what I considered to be relevant theories and constructs to inform my research study. Many of them are inter-related and I have attempted to ‘cluster’ them (e.g. “identity, roles, transitions”, and “spirituality, meaning, purpose”) to some degree. While I felt all of the ideas had relevance and held promise for their applicability to my research, I will summarize those that I felt might be central to my discovery of the essential properties of the phenomenon I was about to explore.

First, a thorough review of the concomitants of social dimensions of health was most important, in order to inform my intent to add to the body of research on elder health and wellness. Secondly, a comprehensive understanding of theories of volunteerism and its connection to health and well-being in later life was an equally vital component of the review in order to contextualize my findings within appropriate theory. Third, because my study intended to explore how older people might expand, re-construct or re-claim identity as they adopted new volunteer roles and activities, I was interested in how people might reposition themselves in relation to their prior identities. I suspected my findings might be able to be nested within theories of identity, role shifts and transitions in later life. For example, because one of my
eligibility criteria was that respondents must no longer be fully employed, I wondered if the event of retirement had much to do with taking on a new role and identity in a search for new meaning and purpose. Finally, as volunteering rarely occurs in a vacuum, but rather within a social context, I felt social engagement to be an important factor for my research study. I concluded that social engagement and the importance of relationship-building might have significant implications for my research.

Although I was able to find a good deal of research that discussed elders who volunteered in their home communities, and research concerning younger people who volunteered internationally, I found there to be an absence of research concerning older volunteers who choose to work in developing countries. This constituted a ‘red flag’ for me, legitimizing and confirming my intent to explore the lived experiences of those who had chosen to follow such pursuits.
Chapter Three: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the qualitative research methodology and methods chosen for my study, the steps I took to engage and interview participants, and how I transcribed and coded the data gleaned from the transcripts of interviews. In an attempt to explain my choice of methodology, the chapter will begin by briefly discussing qualitative and interpretative research designs, with an introductory note about my role as researcher. I will then present the rationale for arriving at the decision to employ an interpretative phenomenological analysis. I will also outline how I borrowed some data management techniques (the constant comparative method from Grounded Theory) to create manageable texts for analysis. The chapter will conclude by discussing recruitment strategies and data collection and analysis. Selected methodological and theoretical memos from my research journal will illustrate how the challenges of robust data collection and analysis were addressed.

Research Design

The selection of a research approach and ensuing methodology is always informed by the philosophical assumptions, or world-view, that the researcher brings to the study. Research designs, or procedures of inquiry (and specific research methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation), result from this philosophical overview, or paradigm (Creswell, 2014).

The overarching philosophical paradigm that informed my study is naturalistic inquiry, which is committed to studying something in its natural state. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that qualitative methods are used over quantitative because they are more adaptable to dealing with
multiple realities, and “come more easily to the human, as instrument, because they are extensions of human activities: looking, listening, speaking, reading, etc.” (p. 187).

My research followed an interpretative process, with semi-structured interviews comprising the method. Data were initially organized through a constant comparison technique, by working back and forth between the database and participant meanings. An interpretive phenomenological analysis was conducted to arrive at a culminated essence of the phenomenon of participants’ lived experience.

**Qualitative Research**

I selected a qualitative/interpretative research design because I judged it to be the best fit for my research, at the core of which was the desire to hear the narratives of those who engage in volunteer pursuits in later life, within a social and historical context. Patton (2002) claims that qualitative inquiry addresses the meanings people make their experiences, studying persons in the context of social/interpersonal environments. Actions and meanings have to be understood in the specific context in which they occur, concur Miles and Huberman (2014). The context of my research is the landscape of choice and change as people negotiate changes and transitions in later life.

As indicated before, I wanted to examine the following questions:

*What were the factors that led these people to choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in their lives?*

*What were the circumstances in their lives that enabled them to be able to make this choice?*

*What meaning did/do they derive from it?*

*In what ways did the experience impact their life satisfaction and well-being after they returned?*
Qualitative approaches, with the emphasis on inquiring into people’s lived experiences, are fundamentally well-suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes and structures of their lives, and for connecting those meanings to the social world around them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Creswell (2014) adds that the researcher’s own training and experiences also influence the choice of design. My lifetime career as a gerontological social worker has afforded me extensive experience in hearing the voices of elders’ lived experiences. Additionally, the opportunity that qualitative methods offer to use a creative, literary-style form of writing appeared to suit both the process and the theme of my research. Finally, a qualitative design may hold the most appeal for the anticipated audience: those who may be interested in health and wellness benefits resulting from this experience, and the social capital represented by the stories of older people who choose such pursuits.

**Selecting the Methodology**

Having reviewed the current literature that related to the research question I wished to address, I turned to selecting the most appropriate methodology through which to study it. Creswell (2014) explains that theory provides a lens that reshapes the phenomenon that is being studied.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Phenomenology is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology, in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. The researcher aims to understand the cognitive subjective perspective of the person who has had the experience and the effect that perspective has on the lived experience. Phenomenology looks at data thematically to extract the essence of participant meanings.
Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) seems to be used with increasing frequency a wide variety of research topics in published health psychology research (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) assert that interpretative phenomenological researchers must approach their data with two aims in mind. The first aim is to try to understand their participants’ world, focusing on the participants’ experiences of a specific event, process or relationship. The account is always constructed by participant and researcher. The second aim is to position the account into a wider social, cultural and theoretical context. My goal was to study the data more thoroughly to think about what it meant for the participants to have described these experiences in this particular place at this particular time.

Smith, Flower & Larkin (2009) quote Husserl’s (1924) famous assertion that phenomenologists must “go back to the things themselves” (the need to “bracket” our taken-for-granted world in order to concentrate on our perception of the world) rather than to fix experiences in predefined or abstract categories.

Moustakas (1994) asserts that:

Using transcendental phenomenological analysis requires effective listening and hearing, seeing things as they appear and as they are, not judging them, learning to describe experience rather than explain or analyze it, focusing on a question and exploring in depth the everyday constituents of human experiences (p.175).

In setting aside one’s prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas about things, Moustakas (1994) claims the essence of a phenomenon can be gazed upon: “Essence means that which is common or universal, the conditional quality without which would not be what it is” (p. 85).

Phenomenology is further categorized into descriptive or interpretative traditions. In hermeneutic (interpretative) inquiry, interpretations are vitally important and central. In empirical or
descriptive phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) claims that the only way that one can capture an experience of a person, is to “return again and again to them, to look, and see, hear and touch from many angles and perspectives and vantage points” (p. 65). In this way, comprehensive descriptions are obtained that provide a basis for a reflective analysis that is the essence of the experience. Heidegger, a student of Husserl, first articulated the theory of hermeneutic phenomenology as distinct from empirical or descriptive phenomenology. He believed that humans are hermeneutic (interpretive) beings capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives (Kumar, 2012). Hermeneutics is defined as the art of interpretation, the techniques involved in understanding written texts (Kuckartz 2014). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, is a qualitative research methodology focusing on understanding the meaning of life as it is lived and experienced historically in relation to a particular phenomenon (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Creswell 2014). Creswell (2014) suggests that “those who tend to relish nuances, appreciate differences, embrace ambiguity, and seek uniqueness in contextualized lived experiences, may be more given to an interpretive mindset” (p. 795).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves the process of interpreting text in a circular pattern, whereby the researcher “enters into an understanding of the phenomenon by moving between the parts and the whole of the texts involved” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 28). Hermeneutic phenomenology thus requires the researcher to read and write the text over several times revealing themes and sub-themes while always comparing back to the whole context in order to interpret the experience. In addition, the researcher keeps a journal (notebook) throughout the study to capture self-reflective thoughts, biases, and assumptions about the phenomena of study for the purpose of later integrating these thoughts into the interpretation of the lived experience being studied.
As I conducted my literature review of appropriate methodologies for my research initiative, I came to better understand the appropriateness of a methodological approach which would help me to understand a particular experience, in particular contexts. During the early phase of this review, I struggled with choosing between IPA and Narrative analysis, as they both appeared to be appropriate methodologies for my research. I attempted to compare and contrast the two approaches.

The epistemology of phenomenology focuses on revealing meaning rather than on arguing a point or developing a theory. Similarly, narrative inquiry aims not to develop a theory but to relate the stories of individual lived experiences. The goal in both phenomenology and narrative inquiry is to study how people make meaning of their lived experience. Whereas a narrative study focuses on a single individual within a time and place, however, a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals who have shared similar lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. The philosophical underpinnings of both (that there is no single ‘universal truth’) appear to support my intention to discover the multitude of ways that older people construct meaning and purpose in their lives. In phenomenological research, the issue is always studied within a historical and cultural context; in the case of my research, within a context of transitioning into aging. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the subjects (including myself as a co-subject) are individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of inquiry (Creswell, 2014; Smith, et.al, 2009), in this case, choosing to pursue altruistic behaviours in later life and/or adopting a new identity. The ideas and language within narrative inquiry and interpretive phenomenology research contain similarities: both are concerned with individuals in social situations and with the open, holistic nature of experience.
However, the two approaches differ in how experiences are re-constructed, and to what degree it includes the researcher's interpretations or experiences. I, as the researcher, bring with me my own set of epistemologies and ontology. In narrative inquiry, researchers are autobiographically and socially present in the situation being studied, in relationship with co-participants. The researcher and participants agents are co-participants in the research (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenologies are even further differentiated in terms of the researcher’s role. Descriptive phenomenology claims that in order to bring out the essential components of the lived experiences specific to a group of people, a scientific approach is needed that requires researchers to shed all prior personal knowledge (bracketing) to prevent their biases and preconceptions influencing the study. In interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants describe their attempts to make sense of their experience: the researcher then needs to interpret that account from the participant, in order to understand how meanings influence the choices individuals make, rather than seeking purely descriptive categories of the real, perceived world. The concept of co-construction is thus supported, in which the meanings arrived at in interpretive research comprise a blend of those articulated by participants and researcher.

Connelly (2000) point out that seeing things in a specific time (narrative inquiry) and seeing things as they are becoming (phenomenology), freed from a time frame, is another fundamental difference between the two approaches. Past, present and future are seen in narrative inquiry as continuous, as opposed to phenomenologists’ viewing of time as past, present and future all contained within the present moment.
The nature of the data also differs in narrative and phenomenological inquiries. In narrative inquiry the data comes from a participant’s specific socially-constructed experience, at a given time and in a given place. In phenomenology, data is gleaned from participants’ stories as well as the researcher’s interpretations of the data.

Interpretative phenomenological research (IPA) focuses on a particular phenomenon or experience that takes on significance for people. In evaluating the applicability of interpretative phenomenology studies in the research field, Smith (2004) found that they usually dealt with significant existential issues that held great import for the participants, claiming that “many are about significant life transforming or life threatening events, conditions or decisions” (p.39). For example, significant interpretative phenomenological research, claim Smith, et. al. (2009) has been conducted around identity changes associated with major life transitions, which constitute issues which have considerable existential content.

An interesting perspective is given by Larkin, Watts & Clifton (2006), is that it may be more appropriate to understand IPA as a ‘stance’ or perspective from which to approach data analysis, rather than as a distinct ‘method’. They suggest, “At the heart of this perspective (and hence at the core of any piece of IPA research) lies a clearly declared phenomenological emphasis on the experiential claims and concerns of the persons taking part in the study” (p 104).

In summary, interpretative phenomenological analysis focuses on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience (Smith, et. al, 2009). As I explored the options for a research methodology, it became increasingly clear that an phenomenological analysis, with its focus on distilling the essence of personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share a particular experience (Smith, Flower
and Larkin, 2009), would offer a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of volunteering in later life, within a particular context. My participants’ experiences were all varying stories of the same phenomenon: that of travelling to a developing country to undertake a new volunteer role.

My next challenge was to select one of the two approaches within phenomenological research: the methodology is further categorized as either descriptive/heuristic or interpretive/hermeneutic (Moustakas, 1994). In the former, the focus is exclusively aimed at formulating descriptions of human experience. The research participants are asked to tell their individual stories and the depiction is complete in itself: interpretation adds nothing, and even removes the aliveness or vitality. Conversely, in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), participants describe their attempts to make sense of their experience: the researcher then interprets that account from the participant, in order to understand how meanings influence the choices individuals make, rather than seeking purely descriptive categories of the real, perceived world (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Creswell 2014). The goal of interpretative analysis, then, is to identify the participants’ meanings from the blend of participant-generated information and the researcher’s articulated understanding of the phenomenon: interpretations are thus vitally important and central (Kumar 2012). “Interpretive phenomenology”, states Kumar (2012), “is most useful as a framework for examining contextual features of a lived experience as generated from a blend of meanings and understandings articulated by the researcher and participants” (p. 795). Smith, et al. (2009) concurs: the researcher is “engaged in a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p.20).

An interpretative, rather than descriptive, phenomenological methodology was necessary, I concluded, in order to allow for my own perceptions and understanding of the phenomenon.
under consideration, particularly in terms of interpreting what impact the experience had on elder health and wellness.

My Role as Researcher

Reflexivity, states Creswell (2014) requires researchers to explore how their own personal background has potential for shaping the interpretations, and researchers must “state reflexively their biases, values, and personal backgrounds such as gender, history, culture and socioeconomic status that shape their interpretations during the study” (p. 187). As an older woman who has sought meaning through adopting altruistic pursuits in volunteer work, I have intimately shared in the experience or phenomenon under study. I was acutely aware of the need for on-going self-reflexivity and awareness about the ways in which I resonated with the participants, and how this inevitably impacted how I ‘re-storied’ their accounts.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) point out, we are not a structure or a framework or an ideology - we are our life experience and part of our narrative story. Being connected to and complicit in a socially constructed world, I, as the researcher, cannot achieve separation from the participants’ stories and thus I form part of the data. I was aware, then, that a balance was necessary between acknowledging solidarity, and falling into the trap of overly directing the interview, leading to bias.

Before beginning my fieldwork, I attempted to bracket out my own preconceptions about what the experiences of older volunteers might be like. Sometimes I found it a challenge to keep the balance between wanting to spontaneously share my own experiences with the participants, and the need to really ground my findings in what the participants were telling me, rather than what I assumed or expected they might have experienced. I needed to keep my own preconceptions
about what volunteering in developing countries might be like for other respondents who have had different life backgrounds than mine. In order to increase accountability for interpreting the data, I kept a journal to attempt to capture such self-reflective thoughts, biases, and assumptions about the phenomena of study, for the purpose of later integrating these thoughts into the interpretation of the lived experience being studied (Smith, et al. 2009; Kumar, 2012).

3.4 Methods

Research Ethics Board Approval

The first step in commencing my research was to seek approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board for Approval for Human Participant Research. I submitted the request on January 8, 2016, and approval was granted on February 4, 2016. My project did not require Research Ethics Board (REB) approval from another research ethics board. I, as the sole investigator, agreed to the following terms:

- *The research will be conducted in accordance with the University of Victoria regulations, policies and procedures governing the ethical conduct of research involving human participants and all relevant sections of the TCPS 2.*
- *The researcher(s) will seek further HREB review if the research protocol is modified.*

I submitted the following summary of my proposed research objective(s) and question(s):

*Older Canadians undertake volunteer work with a variety of non-profit organizations that conduct a multitude of volunteer initiatives in many developing countries. Such projects may involve building schools or houses, creating educational resources and programs, providing direct health care services, or a number of other projects. These projects may be in settings that they describe as causing discomfort and, at times, personal risk. This research study aims to explore what motivates such people to undertake these volunteer pursuits and what it means to them. What has led them to choose this work? What meaning do they gain from it? How does the choice to do this work impact their health and perceived well-being?*
I defined my target population for recruitment, and outlined the importance and contributions of the research. I provided a detailed description of my recruitment process. I was not in any way in a power relationship, including dual-roles, which could influence the voluntariness of participants’ consent. I provided a sequential description of the procedures/methods to be used in my research study.

The principle that the study carried no potential risks to the participants was addressed. I explained that participants will likely have had (or continue to have) the advantage of education, good physical health, acquired skills and/or successful, well-paying careers and material resources, and are not considered to be a vulnerable population. I committed to maintaining anonymity and protecting confidentiality of participants and their data. I noted that the identification of participants would be by pseudonyms and that I would use a coding system to identify features and patterns. I assured the board that electronic data (recorded interviews) would be stored in password-protected computer files, and written notes in a locked space (I alone had key access). All data would be stored until project completion, and then destroyed.

I outlined the perceived benefits of the study as follows:

Participants will hopefully feel they have been ‘heard’, and feel they have had their lives enriched and their experiences validated by their participation in research. My intended research will contribute to knowledge about elder health and wellness by adding to the discourse on positive aspects of aging. It will increase understanding about how older Canadians find meaning through volunteering in development work and how this contributes to health and wellness.
**Sampling and Recruitment**

For this study, I used a convenience sampling strategy, because I wanted to locate individuals who met an established set of criteria: Canadians over the age of 55 who have experienced the phenomenon of travelling to undertake non-paid work in developing countries (as defined by the International Statistics Institute) for a single or multiple periods of time.

I looked for potential participants where I believed they were most likely to be found. Population statistics indicate that a higher concentration of potential respondents who fit the study’s eligibility criteria might be found in the Greater Vancouver/Vancouver Island communities I had chosen. I hoped the search would yield respondents who fit within a range of socio-economic positions, possessed a variety of skill sets, came from different gender and age groups and engaged in as wide a variety of volunteer pursuits as possible.

I approached three carefully selected types of organizations that I hoped would yield suitable participants for my research. Non-governmental organizations or NGOs (as defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2010) as voluntary groups of individuals or organizations, usually not affiliated with any government, that are formed to provide services or to advocate a public policy) that are already operating in the Vancouver/Vancouver Island constituted the first sampling source. The second source consisted of selected communities of faith in the Greater Vancouver/Vancouver Island which I hoped might yield potential congregation members who were already involved in international development volunteer projects. The final sampling source was leaders of service clubs and community agencies that focus on older and/or retired persons. I intended to recruit participants from organizations in planned stages by randomly selecting
agencies from each of the three source lists at regular intervals (approximately every 3-5 weeks) until I felt I had interviewed sufficient participants for my study.

**Instrument Development and Administration**

Invitation letters and poster/flyers (Appendices 1 & 1a) were e-mailed to the first sampling sources (sent February 5 – 9). A total of 25 initial invitations were spread across the three sources: faith communities, current operational NGOs (both international and locally-based), Service Clubs and specific seniors’ organizations. I added only two more sources, upon the suggestion of my supervisors, to the recruitment list: one to a Centre on Aging, and one to a University Retirees Association. Prospective participants were invited to contact me by phone or e-mail: memos have been kept outlining the procedures in contacting participants, and notes indicating acceptance and rejection responses have been recorded, to establish an audit trail.

When potential participants responded, I arranged to meet individually with them, e-mailing a Letter of Information and Consent (Appendix 2) to allow sufficient time for them to peruse it and formulate any questions they may have, to be addressed at the first interview.

Although Creswell (2014) recommends a target of 8-10 people for a phenomenological study, I planned to interview participants until I felt sufficient breadth and depth of data had been collected that revealed the rich potential of my chosen methodology.

Fourteen positive responses from participants were received within a three-week time frame: five from currently operating locally-based NGOs: one from a National Service Club, three from a Retirees Association, two from international NGOs and three from faith communities. Thirteen were women and one man. The sampling area covered Vancouver, Victoria, Burnaby, Nanaimo, Lantzville, North Vancouver, Ladner and Sidney. A decision was made to conduct interviews
with the current respondents before sending out further invitations, in an effort to achieve time-limited sensitivity.

As mentioned above, all prospective participants were emailed a Letter of Information and Consent (Appendix 2). After reading that document and indicating their willingness to proceed, the prospective participants were scheduled for a first interview, at which time the Letter of Consent was to be reviewed for any questions, and signed in my presence. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that two of the respondents did not, in fact, fit the criteria for the study. These participants (one from a faith community and one from a Retirees’ Assn.) were interviewed, but their data have not been included in the study. This left twelve participants.

**Interviews**

Edwards and Holland (2013) stress the importance of understanding and undertaking qualitative interviews within the framework of a clear philosophical position. Moustakas (1994) asserts that typically in the phenomenological investigation, the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic in question. My study was about intensely personal exploration that requires a one-on-one interview method. Patton (2002) identified three types of qualitative interview: the informal conversational interview, the semi-structured interview guide approach, and the standardized interview. The informal conversational interview, in which the interviewer (although guided by the purpose of the study) asks questions in the course of the naturally occurring conversation, offers an opportunity for a wide range of responses. However, I chose to use a semi-structured approach which allowed interviewees to answer on their own terms rather than a fully structured interview, while at the same time providing some structure for comparison across interviews in the study. My intent was to remain flexible, and thus open to developing
unexpected themes and adjust the questions, as a result of the themes that had emerged (Edwards and Holland, 2013).

Data were collected over a three-month period, and involved taping a minimum of two interviews, the first approximately 60-90 minutes long, and considerably less time for the second, although the duration of interviews, as well as the formulation and number of questions, varied from one participant to another (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). During the preamble of each interview, I explained my research project, the objectives of the study, and the procedures I would take. I reiterated to each participant that she or he could choose to withdraw from interview at any time and I also ensured that each respondent had read, understood and signed the consent form in duplicate.

Using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 3), I designed the questions to elicit the participants’ experiences in their own words, with as little influence from me as possible. The first interviews usually began with an open-ended question such as “Tell me a little bit about who you are, and when you began volunteering in a developing country”. At times, much of the content of the first open-ended interviews focused on early life experiences and thus initially appeared to be extraneous to the research questions being considered. However, although some parts appeared to be irrelevant, some of these data were included in the analysis process, as they proved to be indicators of early identity formation, as well as representing triggers for the rationale of choosing to volunteer later in life. As each interview progressed, I moved on to deeper questions in an attempt to understand details and explore the meaning of the entire volunteering experience with each respondent. What appeared to elicit deeper meanings was to e-mail each participant a list of further questions (Appendix 4) along with the first transcript, after the first interview, and ask them to reflect further in preparation for the second meeting.
The second interview proved to be effective in yielding deeper insights about themes already discussed in the first interview, although little new information came forth. Two interviews with each participant appeared to be optimal. My methodological rationale for this is that the second interview increases rigour and ensures opportunity for member checking (Creswell, 2014), as well as allowing for an iterative process to evolve (Edwards & Holland, 2013; McNamara, 1999; Patton, 2002). Three interviews, held with participant #1, proved to be somewhat unnecessary, and did not appear to yield any new data. Furthermore, the participant herself indicated she felt that two interviews were quite sufficient for her to tell her story. Two participants found it extremely difficult to schedule a second interview and satisfactorily solved this by submitting written answers to further questions I had emailed.

**Methodological and Theoretical Memos**

At this point, I will interject a note about my determination to maintain a thorough audit trail of my efforts to remain authentic and transparent in the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting my data. Miles and Huberman (1984) assert that ‘memoing’ (researcher notes taken at the time of data collection to be later correlated and included with the data) serves to further increase trustworthiness in the process. A technique of grounded theory, it is “the methodological link through which the researcher transforms data into theory” (Lempert, 2007, p. 245). The process, Lempert concludes, “roots the researcher in the analysis of the data, while simultaneously increasing the level of abstraction in analytical ideas” (Lempert, 2007, quoting Charmaz, K.)

Methodological memos explained the procedures that I followed and posed the questions I asked myself. In them, I recorded reflections on personal experiences and impressions pertaining to the
process of research. These play an important role in the depiction and interpretation of the data (Klapwijk, 2010, quoting Schatzman and Straus, 1973). Theoretical memos reflect how findings are derived from the data, and function as “pathways that form an intermediate step between analyzing and reporting the data” (Klapwijk, 2010, p. 70). All of the memos I wrote were recorded in my research journal. An example follows of my thinking when conducting interviews and attempting to decide how to probe for deeper meanings:

**Methodological Memo 1: Probing Questions**

*Further questions are used in the intent to probe for deeper/different meanings of the phenomenon. Value-laden or theoretical language is to be avoided and questions tailored to individual participants. Negative forms of questioning about the meaning may yield a different perspective (e.g. ‘What would it mean to you if you no longer had the health/resources to do this work’?). This speaks to the ‘absence of health/wellness’ issue. It is vitally important for me to weave issues of health/wellness throughout the analysis.*

**Data Transcription and Member Checking**

I recorded each interview, transferred it to my computer and transcribed the data, as soon as possible after each interview. I was also disciplined in recording field notes, subsequent to each interview, as comprehensively as possible. I chose to transcribe the data myself, rather than employing a professional, because I believe there are several methodological rationales for this method: one of them is keeping access to the data tight, and being rigorous about confidentiality. Another is to ‘soak’ so thoroughly in the data as to become utterly familiar with the content. Yet another is the opportunity to look at the entire interview process, in a somewhat ‘disembodied’ experience, listening and connecting body and ears to the text. In another methodological memo, I reflected on issues of quality and rigour:

**Methodological Memo 2: (Conversation with Supervisor)**

*The process of a slow, personal transcription helps to see things that are emerging that meant something. This experience means something, and you are hearing real emotionality when they talk about it... so that's what you're feeling about the data as well as hearing and seeing it. So there is texture to this phenomenon. So then; how does that notion of transcribing the interview enable you to get together again with the data, and hearing not only what has been said, but also has not been said?*
I found that when I personally transcribed the interviews, I achieved a much deeper understanding as I reflected on both content and process of the interview. Listening to each tape several times allowed me to reflect on both content and process of the session. Following each transcription process, I made notes in my reflexive research journal to record my own observations about each participant’s story and the context in which it was experienced. This process of combing through the data allowed me to make decisions about ongoing interviews and how to formulate deeper, probing, questions, and assisted me in making an early assessment of the key themes that were emerging from the data. In order to protect the anonymity of the respondents, all identifiers were removed from hardcopies and computer files by designating each transcript as ‘Participant one, two, three’, etc. (for example ‘Participant 1; April 19, 2016’). When more than one interview took place, the interviews were identified by an alphabet character (1a), (1b), etc. The original reference data that corresponded to these codes was kept in a file on my locked computer, as were the original documents.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then returned via e-mail to each participant after every interview for member checking, to increase rigour. At the beginning of the second meeting, the first transcript was reviewed and transcripts of subsequent meetings were emailed with the request for further feedback. Only minor corrections (e.g. spelling mistakes, name corrections, etc.) were noted by participants, and all expressed agreement with the content. Some reported feeling surprised they had talked so much and so freely, stating they felt excited and positive about the process and about being asked to tell their story.

After all transcriptions were completed, I chose to write a vignette of the ‘story’ they had given me, including themes I had identified and my own interpretations of the meaning of their experiences (see Appendix 5: Participant Profiles). I then e-mailed each participant the vignette
of their story. My methodological rationale for this was to provide for another ‘informant check’ in order to further increase rigour, and ensure that opportunity was given for them to respond more fully to my interpretations. This strategy served a theoretical purpose as well, in honouring the strengths that emerged and to ensure that each participant felt gifted with a complete synopsis of their experiences (see Chapter 5). It also served both as closure and a path to renewing the relationship later on if/when the desire arose to re-open or further explore relevant themes.

To ensure the data remained well organized, I constructed organized computer files, categorized as follows: • The informed consent agreements • The drafts of the transcriptions • My field notes/memos/journal, transcribed after each conversation • Any notes made during the process, e.g. patterns, themes.

Data analysis

My ultimate goal was to collect the participants’ stories and consolidate them into an interpretive phenomenological analysis, through which the ultimate essence of their experience could be presented in detail, supported with verbatim extracts (Creswell, 2014; Wells, 2011; Clandinin, 2007). I was aware that my analysis required systemic application of ideas, and methodical rigour, but hoped it might also demonstrate “imagination, playfulness, and the combination of reflective, critical and conceptual thinking” (Smith, et. al., 2009, p. 35). My primary concern was running the risk of forcing the analysis by selecting only things in the data that would create support for my own interpretations of it. My goal was to be able to prove that what I saw as a significant piece of data was reliable. Kuckartz (2014) claims there are no ‘right’ interpretations of data, suggesting that qualitative text analysis reflects the researcher’s own preconceptions and
any assumptions that are present regarding the research question, keeping in mind that the primary concern is the lived experience of the participant.

**Constant Comparative Technique from Grounded theory**

As I began to develop a rationale to bring clarity to the process of organizing the data, my supervisory committee observed that I had begun to naturally gravitate towards the constant comparative method techniques of grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Straus (1967), in terms of language (e.g. ‘open/axial coding, theoretical sampling’, etc.) and approach. I began to compare and contrast the data analysis steps of phenomenological analysis with those of grounded theory. Both phenomenological analysis and grounded theory share very similar elements of the process of analysis: significant statements are extracted and the meanings are listed and then clustered into common categories or themes, removing overlapping and repetitive statements. Phenomenological data analysis involves the process of interpreting text in a circular pattern (referred to as a hermeneutic circle), whereby the researcher “enters into an understanding of the phenomenon by moving between the parts and the whole of the texts involved” (Smith, et.al., 2009, p. 28). The process is described as engaging the phenomenon and gradually beginning to focus on small chunks of data or ‘meaning units’: phrases or passages of text that express a particular point or meaning. Meanings are then crystallized and condensed. The ultimate aim is the description of essences. (Hycner, 1985).

While I recognized the importance of following the above process of engaging the phenomenon, I found the steps outlined in the data analysis phase of phenomenology to be somewhat abstract. The language and construction of steps in the constant comparative technique of grounded theory appeared to be more thorough and offered a more detailed initial approach to organizing the data.
and beginning to tabulate the results into themes. My approach combined explicit coding of data with concurrent organization of categories that emerged from that data, with the goal of ultimately reaching an understanding of the essence of the categories. I followed an open coding process (labeling, or categorizing, or coding phenomenon from the data) to break down the data into concepts and categories. Next, I conducted axial coding (the process of clustering and interpreting similar codes) to organize the results of the open coding into a framework of core categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Using the constant comparative technique, I continually returned to the categories, examining them against the data as it emerged until I had formulated the themes. With my supervisor’s mentorship, I then developed that thematic analysis, bringing in into a framework of the key properties of the phenomenon in order to be in line with phenomenological methodology.

**Consultations with Supervisor**

At this point in the discussion of how I analyzed the data, I wish to interject a note about how I worked intensively with my co-supervisor during this phase of the research process. (I will expand further upon her role in Chapter 5: Reflections on the research/Supervisory Mentorship, p. 126). The process of analyzing the data took on marathon proportions as I immersed myself fully into coding, coding and re-coding, attempting to organize the dozens of pages of data from the interviews. As I became slowly buried in a plethora of data, I recognized I needed intensive mentorship, and she agreed to meet with me throughout the spring and summer months, at regular 2-3 week intervals, our sessions punctuated with frequent e-mails and my written requests for her evaluation of pieces of work.
In the early part of the analytical process, my co-supervisor recognized that, because research that had surfaced in my literature review remained uppermost in my mind, I was unknowingly searching my data for exemplars that would link back to what I knew about the current literature concerning this phenomenon. She confronted me with the suggestion that I was viewing the data with a ‘preconceived shopping list’ and only looking for those things that I felt might fit, rather than questioning ‘What else is there?’ We realized I was perhaps beginning to fall prey to the dangers of conducting too comprehensive a literature review at the outset of my endeavours, when Patton (1990) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) warn this may bias the research and pre-judge whatever emerges in the data. My co-supervisor and I then spent a good deal of time, over several meetings, looking at what the data actually revealed, reviewing the transcripts and discussing how to re-name the key codes and categories. Just when I thought I had completed combing through the data and labeling categories, she suggested new themes which led to new categories which led to new ‘constant’ comparisons between pieces of data. I have included samples (Methodological Memo 2: Conversation with Supervisor, p. 54 and Methodological Memo 3: Coding Meaning, p. 59) of these conversations.

That then pushed my analysis forward, constituting a dynamic shift in my analysis: a re-working my diagrammatic representations of themes, and how I then moved to the next step of re-defining and interpreting the key properties of the phenomenon in order to bring the analysis back in line with interpretative phenomenology. I kept ongoing records of the discussions in my research journal:

**Methodological Memo 3: Coding Meaning**

As a plethora of ‘themes’ continues to emerge, the need to defend the choices made (as to which data were relevant) requires a second ‘pair of eyes’; my co-supervisor acts in this capacity on an on-going basis, at regular intervals, with discussions about data analysis to scrutinize how codes/themes were labeled. The iterative process necessitates combing through the data to check that the new emergent ideas still held, in order to further increase rigour. I recognize the need to be reflexive about how the phenomena are understood as they emerge: questions such as ‘Whose voices are/are not being heard? How is gender/faith/age to be treated in the interpretive analysis and why is it important to include/omit these themes?’ began to surface.
My co-supervisor continued to provide me with feedback until I had clarified my thinking process and felt confident that I had been true to the methodology.

**Coding**

I initially struggled with the dilemma of choosing whether to employ computer software to assist in the coding of data, or to conduct the process manually. Kuckartz (2014) advocates for using computer assisted methods for qualitative text analysis, claiming that modern software enables qualitative analysis to be conducted extremely thoroughly. However, Kelle (1995) claims that software packages do not help with *phenomenology* research analysis, stating: “Understanding of the meaning of phenomena cannot be computerized because it is not an algorithmic process” (p. 3). I therefore chose not use computer software packages to assist in my data coding/analysis.

I chose to simultaneously code data from the initial raw transcripts whilst the process of data collection was still in progress. My methodological rationale was to try to use the findings to make decisions about what further data to collect and how to use more probing questions to guide the next interview.

**Open coding**

I began by following the open coding technique of grounded theory, as described previously in this chapter. I combed through the data, line by line, in the interview transcriptions and highlighted significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provided an understanding of what the participants experienced (textural description) and how the participants experienced it (structural description) (Creswell 2014). I looked for repetition within and across interviews and issues that arose frequently throughout the interview. I attempted to achieve internal
homogeneity by ensuring that all the data placed in a certain code belonged to that code alone, and that all the codes were sufficiently distinct from one another, despite overlapping ideas. Some of the data that seemed to be significant did not fit into an existing code and required yet a new code. These new codes that emerged were then examined again with all of the data in an iterative process. I used colours and symbols to depict codes:

**Draft Coding Guide (April 2016)**

1. | 1a. Re-inventing oneself | 1b. Identity

2. | 3a. Search for Community | 3b. “Belonging

3. | Pre-destination/Destiny/ a ‘calling’

4. | Or red writing...Connection to well-being, health

5. | Meaning/ Purpose

6. | Early Experiences

7. | Guiding principles/values

8. | Altruism

9. | Motivators

10. | Learning

11. | Spirituality

12. | Self-Reflection

13. | 11a. Critical/Post-colonial thoughts | 11b. Impact on others

14. | Power/ Empowerment

15. | Reactions from family/ friends

16. | Environmental negatives: poverty, corruption, etc.

17. | Or purple writing...Life disruption/transition

18. | Dangers, fears

19. | Blue Writing....experiences upon returning home

20. | Green writing...challenges and annoyances
I observed that the coding at first seemed expansive and unwieldy, then became more refined and cogent as I progressed. I needed to go back many times yet again to every transcription, as I remembered to code yet another new idea that emerged later on. I continued with the open coding process until I felt confident that all significant statements arising from the data had been identified as meaningful and assigned to the correct code. I constantly compared raw data with my codes and looked for new ideas and better examples of ideas represented. Frequent (every 2-3 weeks) meetings with my supervisor assisted in showing me how to work through this process.

**Axial coding**

Strauss and Corbin (1998), describe axial coding as the process by which the results of open coding are organized into a theoretical framework of categories. These emerge from the process of clustering and interpreting similar codes and thus categories are more abstract and interpretive than the simple codes. I combined the statements of significance from the open coding process into patterns, like with like, or horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), including those that occurred across several participants’ stories. I attempted at this point to import the verbatim statements, or indigenous codes, that were made by the participants, into researcher-constructed codes that I felt reflected the essence of their responses:

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**Theoretical Memo 2: Example of Indigenous codes—Researcher-constructed Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous codes</th>
<th>Researcher-constructed Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolated/disappointed/lonely</td>
<td>Marginalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable/cold water/poverty</td>
<td>Annoyances, Fears</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These were clustered across and between transcripts to form a set of tentative axial coded documents. As new concepts continued to emerge, I continued the iterative constant comparison process of returning to the coded data, which finally produced 24 sets of codes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Re-inventing oneself, Identity, Search for Community, Belonging, Pre-destination/Destiny/ a ‘calling’, Connection to well-being/health, Meaning/ Purpose, Early Experiences, Guiding principles/values, Altruism, Motivators, Learning, Spirituality, Self-Reflection, Critical/Post-colonial thoughts, Impact on others, Power/ Empowerment, Reactions from family/friends, Environmental negatives: Poverty, Corruption, Life disruption/transitions, Dangers, Fears , Experiences upon returning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I again returned to the data, following the technique of selective coding (categorization), examining the codes again against the data and looking for the most saturated categories that would contribute to understanding of the core dimensions of the phenomenon. I reduced the data once again, into ten concept-rich categories: Health, Identity, Meaning, Destiny, Community, Motivations, Challenges, Life Crises, Values and Re-balancing’.

At every opportunity during the process of coding, I maintained an audit trail and summarized steps taken in my research journal:

**Data Analysis Steps (June, 2016) Research Journal Excerpt**

1. I grouped significant statements into categories. (In the beginning, I had 6 identified categories...it grew, as I progressed, into 24 documents.

2. Next, I went through these documents, taking each code and collecting them into a second set of documents, entitled “Grouped codes”, naming each with the participant’s number, and page /line source. It soon became clear that many required re-naming and further differentiation, as I added extra categories.

3. Next, I began to contract these documents again into ‘clusters’ of similar sub-themes eventually combining them into 10 refined categories, entitled ‘Clustered Themes’: Health, Identity, Motivations, Meaning, Destiny, Reflections, Challenges, Re-balancing upon return., (The
category “Identity”, for example, now had sub-categories of ‘Formative Experiences, Past identities, Identity as an older person, Identity as a development volunteer, Transitions in later life, Re-claiming agency after disruption’.

4. Then I returned to each line-by-line transcript and again went through them, to discover things I had missed (particularly the earlier transcripts), collecting them into a document entitled, ‘Final Cumulative Scan’. Very little new data emerged, and I considered this to be saturation of themes, although I added a few more into the appropriate documents. It became clear as I reviewed them that I had progressed, both in interview style (in that I became more focused on questions and allowed less ‘rambling’) and in fine-tuning the labeling of themes.

5. I began to add statements of introductory interpretations for each category.

6. I then identified each clustering of themes as key characteristics of the phenomenon I was studying, in order to be congruent with the methodology of interpretative phenomenology.

7. The final tasks will be to continue to analyze and interpret the data, searching the literature to connect these findings with what is already known (what is supported by the existing literature). Finally, newly emerging ideas that are not found in the literature will constitute significant findings in my discussion section.

As identified in Chapter Two, in my preparatory literature review I explored concepts that I suspected would comprise elements of the phenomenon I intended to study - the things being examined, compared, and related to one another. My initial approach had been informed by five core constructs: identity; spirituality; learning; motivation and altruism, and the impact of these five constructs on elder health and wellbeing. Keeping these core constructs from the literature in mind, I completed a thematic analysis through the selective coding process. Although they might be clustered in a variety of ways, I attempted to achieve internal homogeneity by attaching each of the sub-categories to one of four primary categories: Shifting Identities, Motivators, Meaning and Critical Self-awareness. My methodological rationale led me to illustrate how the categories revolve around and interconnect with each core characteristic, I have intentionally depicted this in pictorial format below:
Having completed the thematic analysis, I continued to work on interpreting the data, seeking next to define the key characteristics or properties of the phenomenon under study.
I prioritized Shifting Identities, Motivators, Meaning and Critical Self-Awareness as the four key properties of the phenomenon under examination, bringing it into line with the next step, the phenomenological analytic process of distilling the essence of the phenomenon.

‘Shifting identities’ encompassed: Disruption (or crisis), life Transitions, Role Losses (and acquisitions), Identity and Early Values, and Late-life Identity. ‘Motivators’ brought together the reasons and ‘triggers’ that operated in the decision to travel and volunteer, gathering together the categories of: Destiny/Fate, Altruism, Addressing Inequities, Moral Obligation and Spirituality. Under the heading of ‘Meaning’, I included the categories of: Finding Community, increased Wellness/Wellbeing, Making a Difference, Managing Difficulties and Self-affirming Rewards gained as a result of the experience. ‘Critical Self-awareness’ clustered together the categories of: Claiming (and re-claiming) Agency, Disquiet and ‘Re-balancing’ upon returning home, Coping with challenges in the field, awareness of Post-colonial Perspectives, and Transformational Learning, or awareness of their positioning as agents in a developing country.

In summary, I underwent a process of explicating my ‘story line’ through analyzing and relating all the categories and sub-categories to the most appropriate of the four core key characteristics of the phenomenon under study, where I felt they best fitted.

Further interpretation of this data will appear in the following chapter, where I will describe the findings and apply an interpretative phenomenological analysis to the data.
Chapter 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants

In the interviews, I collected data about participants’ life circumstances prior to involvement, in order to contextualize their experiences. I also collected the details surrounding the particular volunteer initiative undertaken, the scope of the volunteer project, and the kinds of places each participant had traveled to volunteer to gain an understanding of the conditions under which each respondent volunteered. Some participants had worked with indigenous / government organizations, some had accessed small Canadian NGOs, some began working independently. Some worked with adults, and some only with children. Three had begun their own nongovernment organization subsequent to their first volunteer experience. One co-ordinated donations made to an International Service Club, travelling to oversee the transfer of equipment and money to villages. One worked from a ship anchored close to sub-Saharan Africa ports, using her skills in the operating rooms. One arrived in South India two days before a massive tsunami devastated fishing villages, and spent her time buying and taking supplies, acting alone. One has been involved for some time on the board of an NGO established in 1996, in sub-Saharan Africa. One taught schoolchildren and nurses, and established a library in Nepal. One works with other Canadian university professors to educate peers in sub-Saharan Africa and post-communist countries. One created her own NGO, working with older women widowed by the AIDS pandemic. Two accessed volunteer opportunities through their faith communities.

Participants ranged in age from 62 to 80, with an average age of 72: eleven were women and one was male. All had British, European or Canadian heritage. Recognizing that my sample is fairly homogenous, in that all are White and predominately of the same gender, there are certain
disparities. Level of education ranged from high school (three), to five who held undergraduate degrees and four who held graduate degrees (two at the doctoral level). Socio-economically, they ranged from one who lives in a co-op housing development to others who own their own homes in affluent areas of Vancouver and Victoria. They came from a variety of past professional backgrounds including medicine, education and law enforcement.

Participants exclaimed how delighted they were to be given an opportunity to tell their story, indicating that their voices had rarely been sought out by anyone desiring to hear their lived experiences. In keeping with the tenets of interpretative phenomenological analysis, I believe there is a strong theoretical rationale to highlight and honour the individual stories gifted to me by the participants, and I have therefore included a synopsis of each of the participants’ stories as ‘Appendix 5: Participant Profiles’, presented there in the order that they were given. The essence of their stories was in part dependent upon their life journeys and how they arrived at the choice to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in their lives, and so each synopsis includes a brief biographical sketch: identifying details of names and places have been omitted to protect their anonymity as much as possible, and some details have been masked or disguised. A selection of each participant’s verbatim quotes from our interviews is included to add clarity and authenticity. My methodological rationale is to provide an appended ‘snapshot’ summarizing the essence of each participant’s individual experience, in order to contextualize the key properties of the phenomenon that are strongly reflected in the section to follow.
Introduction of significant findings

A wealth of concept-rich data emerged from my study to form four core findings that contribute significantly to further understanding about this phenomenon. To my knowledge, the literature has not identified these particular ideas as important concepts. When asked the question, “What were the circumstances in your life that enabled you to be able to make this choice?, the majority of the participants spoke unhesitatingly of undergoing a significant life crisis that had occurred in the not too distant past that inevitably led to a crumbling of, and need to re-create, identity. The second key finding had to do with an unexpected motivator: when answering the question, “What are the factors that led you to choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in your life?” again the majority of the participants responded with a surprisingly strong conviction that some greater force had guided them. They described it as an experience of destiny or fate, a serendipitous chance meeting, or sense of being ‘led’ to volunteer in a developing country.

The third key finding was the surprising gift of finding relationship in ‘community’ that all twelve experienced. Answering the question, “What meaning does this volunteer work hold for you...what do you get out of it”? the participants most frequently reported it to be the serendipitous joy of finding themselves immediately welcomed into a community, or a place of belonging, in the country to which they had travelled. The fourth significant key finding was an ensuing sense of disquiet and keen loss upon returning home, for over half of the participants.

These four key findings- disruption, guidance, finding community and disquiet upon return home -all culminated in the essence of what the phenomenon meant to them, and how it ultimately impacted their life satisfaction and wellness. At this time, and in this place, they each found fulfillment in ways they had not experienced anywhere, nor at any time before.
In addition, the data revealed significant findings concerning the link between volunteering and the positive impact it had on health and wellbeing. Answers to the question, “In what ways did this experience impact your perceived life satisfaction, health and well-being?” revealed that participants felt their emotional, mental and social health had all improved as a result of volunteering, and their physical health continued to be better after their return home, due to their adoption of healthful eating habits and exercise. This brief summary of significant findings will be repeated and expanded in Chapter Five: Discussion.

A Description of the Key Properties of the Phenomenon

As identified in Chapter 2, my preparatory literature review explored concepts that I suspected would comprise elements of the phenomenon I intended to study -the things being examined, compared, and related to one another. My initial approach had been informed by five core constructs: identity; spirituality; learning; motivation and altruism, and the impact of these five constructs on elder health and wellbeing. Keeping these core constructs from the literature in mind, I continued to work on interpreting the data, from which I had extrapolated four core key contributors to the phenomenon. In order to fulfill my theoretical rationale, that of demonstrating how the clustered categories ‘flow’ into the key properties of the phenomenon, I have again pictorially presented the configuration of the four core themes (seen in Fig. 1: Concept Map. Data Analysis: International Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life, p 65) in Fig. 2 on the following page: Fig. 2: Key Properties of the Phenomenon.
Fig. 2: Key Properties of the Phenomenon

**MOTIVATORS**
- Addressing Inequities
- Spirituality
- Altruism
- Moral Obligation
- Destiny/Fate

**CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS**
- "Coping with Diversity"
- Transformational Learning
- Post-colonial Perspectives
- Claiming Agency
- Disquiet and "Re-balancing"

**SHIFTING IDENTITIES**
- Identity and early values
- Disruption
- Transitions

**MEANING**
- Self-affirming rewards
- Wellness/Wellbeing
- Making a Difference
- Managing difficulties
- Finding Community
- Role Losses
- Late-life Identity
In the discussion that follows, which presents each of the four key properties, I have striven to continually reflect upon and contextualize the findings within the theoretical literature. I felt that linking the data back to the literature as it is discussed, concurrently in a single section, enables the process to flow more smoothly. Smith and Osborn (2004) concur this is an appropriate strategy to follow in interpretative phenomenological analysis. The inclusion of verbatim quotes in the analysis helps the reader to trace the analytic process (Brocki and Wearden, 2006): I have included a wealth of participant quotes to authenticate my analysis and show how they support my interpretations.

**SHIFTING IDENTITIES**

This section will relate the varying concepts of identity that are discussed in the current literature to the findings in my study. In Chapter 2.3 Identity and Transitions, I explored theories of identity, roles, resilience and life transitions that contribute to the phenomenon of ‘shifting identities’. This section will address how the data revealed elements that link back to these theories.

Identity from an interpretive perspective claims that people produce narratives about the identity and the self, drawing on their own experiences and also on culturally circulating stories that can help them interpret and make sense of the world and themselves in it (Edwards and Holland, 2013). An important finding in this study revealed how participants re-created identity through adopting the new role of volunteering in developing countries.
Disruption

Rather than describing their challenging recent late-life events as developmental transitions, such as retirement or an ‘empty-nest’ phenomenon (see Chapter 2.3 Identity and Transitions/Transitions), which have been studied at length in the literature (Phillipson, 2002; Kahana, et al. 2013; Koenig, 2002), many (8) defined it as having undergone a devastating disruption in the fabric of their lives. This (as well as the related finding, described above, of the need to reconstruct identity after a second disruption: the crisis of disquiet and re-balancing upon returning home) constitutes what I believe to be important contributors to the phenomenon of volunteering that I have not seen reported in the literature.

The disruptive events in the lives of my participants differed in nature yet appeared similar in intensity. Three respondents survived a devastating diagnosis of cancer, and subsequent treatment (one of whom also lost her marriage and home due to her husband’s inability to cope with her illness). Two were widowed: one suddenly lost her life-long partner at 74 years old, and one cared for a partner for years before his death. Two were divorced relatively recently, one divorced some years ago but lonely. One felt she had lost direction after achieving her doctoral degree. All but two respondents expressed a restlessness and dissatisfaction about their life situations at the time of choosing to take up this volunteer work.

Experiencing disruption is not, of course, limited to aging individuals. In addition to normal developmental crises, many people experience crisis during the course of their lives, which also holds the potential for resulting personal growth. There is a considerable body of literature that suggests growth often occurs in people following trauma and adversity. Yerushalmi (2007) suggests:
Crisis situations are on the one hand so disabling and potentially destructive and on the other hand can open doors to growth and development...although they are occasions of intense suffering, confusion and helplessness, crisis situations also make deep personal truths and new self-definitions more accessible (p.359).

Joseph and Linley (2006) claim that research has established that stressful and traumatic events may serve as a trigger towards personal growth and positive change (quoting Tedeschi and Calhoun’s post-traumatic growth model, 2004). They posit that after sustaining a major disruption, people may value relationships more, and may feel an increased compassion and altruism toward others. Additionally, they suggest that people may change their views of themselves as having increased personal resiliency, wisdom, and strength. My data supported this theory, suggesting that finding a place of community and enhanced relationship with others was a major source of meaning to them. They also reported feeling stronger, having re-claimed agency after loss and crisis in their lives.

Closely inter-related with experiencing such disruptive life events is the potential and need to re-create new roles and identities and embark on a quest to re-create identity and re-claim agency:

*It was really like re-birth, if you like... Just being there, and feeling like I was out of the chrysalis. Knowing that this is what I really meant to be doing* (2.1) p. 1, l. 12-13

*And when I lost my relationship over being sick, and was hurt yet again, I thought now this really isn’t good for me.* (3.1) p. 10, l. 334-5

*I suppose I can say that I discovered I was not useless now that I was on my own. I am still useful to do things.* (4.2) P. 2, l 65

*I had no one to negotiate with, and no one to tell me that I couldn't go there, or question why I was doing it, or oppose it in any way... So it was a symbolic in a way of being able to be who I really was...not the person I had been through a lot of that marriage, but suddenly I was free to be myself, and to connect with what was really important to me.* (2.1) p. 16, 443-6
Several participants asserted that this life-changing, devastating disruption, which constituted the major precipitating factor in their choice to volunteer overseas, was also the trigger to set them upon journey of healing and re-creating meaning.

**Role losses**

When life undergoes a significant crisis, a subsequent loss of roles, often integral to the core sense of self, inevitably follows (see Chapter 2.3: Theories of Identity, Roles and Transitions/Role theory, p. 21). Interestingly, my study revealed that role losses in later life did not necessarily immobilize older people. One respondent, reflecting on widowhood, stated:

“*You don’t feel included (after widowhood), as you were before but once you accept that, you start stepping out on your own. And you find your own route where you want to go*”

(4.2) p. 3 l. 90-93.

Neither did the results reveal that developing or creating new roles necessarily meant abdicating earlier components of identity for the respondents. While some roles are lost, such as life partner, parent or employee, many reported that other roles are retained as integral components of identity, while some evolve into different manifestations:

*I had a wonderful career and a very strong identity as a teacher, and I think it is that identity as a teacher with a particular interest in social justice that I still have. So it's a balance, but I think I am the same person no matter what I do.... it's just the balance that is different.* (11.1). p. 8, l. 244-45

_Because I think that the essence of who I am was probably in there somewhere._ (7.1) P. 1, l. 19

But I kind of think that if you're a church-goer, it is part of who you are, and you are more inclined to respond with opportunities like that. (12.1) p. 7, l. 216-7

_I think anyone who is a caregiver wants to be able to give to everybody and wants to be loved by everybody_ (7.1) p. 5, l. 145

_I guess nursing, and going out into the community, whether it's right under my nose or whether it's miles and miles away... It's part and parcel of who I am._ (8.1) p. 9, l. 281-2

And I think I was a good teacher and an effective teacher, and I was meant to be a teacher. (4.2) p. 2, l 42-3
And this was just an extension of my nursing, I think. And also an extension to my Christian beliefs p. (5.1), l. 163-4

Participants did not speak at length of their roles within their families and social circles as being particularly affected as a result of their decision to volunteer. Sometimes, they discovered that families’ and friends’ perceptions of challenges and dangers, as well as comprehension of the meaning and value of their experiences differed from theirs:

‘You have to be crazy. Are you crazy’? So many people said to me ‘Are you crazy’? (10.1) p. 7, l. 242-3

I have some very good friends. I don’t know whether they understand why I have to do this. (1.2) P. 8, l. 254-5

People say to me, ‘Oh, you are so brave to do it’ and I have friends that say ‘I could never do what you have done’, and I think why not? It’s very safe. (9.2) p. 2, l. 63-5

My sister-in-law is 12 years younger, but after the third time that I went, I asked her if she would like to come and work with me. She wasn’t at all interested in doing that. (8.2) P. 2, l. 45-8

Results of this study did not particularly reflect theory introduced in Chapter Two that posited when roles are lost in life, it results in trauma and stress. Although many lost the significant role of life partner, they framed this more as causing a rent in the fabric of their entire life, rather than focussing on the loss of the specific role and behaviours that accompanied that role. Furthermore, participants spoke often of their satisfaction in achieving and sustaining new roles as volunteers in the developing world.

These findings can perhaps be nested within the broader literature concerning resilience theory, (see Chapter 2.3 Theories of Identity and Transitions/Resilience and Aging p. 24), which addresses how people of all ages grow and develop healthy and adaptive functioning over the passage of time, in the aftermath of adversity, acute or potentially traumatic events. Although
resilience is not an age-specific construct, Wild, et al. (2013) note that with increasing age, people develop more resilience and are able to draw upon strengths built up over a lifetime. In a similar vein, Tornstam (2011) uses the term “gerotranscendence” to describe the various ways in which elderly people break through boundaries to transcend crises. This leads, he claims, to a redefinition of the self (see Chapter 2: Theories of Aging, p. 18). I would posit that as aging individuals, my participants may have developed innovative ways, such as the phenomenon of development work, to continue to facilitate resilience in overcoming crises and adversity. All those who experienced devastating life crises also demonstrated resilience or an ability to transcend the disruption.

**Transitions**

Some theories suggest that the current generation of older people negotiate transitions in later life more positively than their predecessors. Sargent, Lee and Zikin, (2013), for example, claim that the current baby boomers (defined as the cohort born between the late 1940s and early 1960s, who represent the first generation in developed countries to have life expectancies into the late 70’s and 80’s) are very different in their expectations of life after retirement age, particularly in having pioneered new roles for women.

Much of the literature about meaning-making in later life is tied to the transition phase of retirement (see Chapter 2.3 Identity and Transitions/Retirement). I was curious to find out whether participants attributed their desire to adopt new volunteer pursuits to an attempt to negotiate the event of retirement in a positive way.
Phillipson (2002) explored meanings derived from life careers and the potential for a traumatic experience in adjusting to retirement, yet only one respondent in this study acknowledged retirement as having been a difficult time for her:

*I think as you get older, you feel kind of useless. You have your self-esteem all wrapped up in your job, and then you retire and you maybe lose your community and something that you do every day... There are a lot of losses in retirement, and growing older as well... there are a lot of losses.* (12.1)  P. 5, l. 163-7

Rather than viewing it as traumatic, however, most spoke about the transition of retirement as potentially heralding the opportunity to ‘re-invent’ oneself, create new identities and roles, and pursue new learning and behaviours. Some described the transition as a powerful ‘threshold event’ that required a re-assessment of how to adjust to this new liberation:

*I retired, and that freed me up to do a variety of other projects.* (5.1)  p. 1, l. 41-2

*Well, actually it was because I wasn't so busy anymore. My kids were reasonably independent and I had the space in my life now to do that. Financially we were more stable than earlier, when we had the mortgage and all these bills and everything... But now I had the time and had always wanted to do it.* (12.1)  P. 5, l. 159-62

*I was really stepping out of my comfort zone and my routine in life...well, I was retired and I did have the money to do it. It was a big step for me.* (8.1)  P. 7, l. 224-5

*It was an affirmation and I think also a continuation (of my identity)... And because of the freedoms of retirement, I think I still do some work at a university position level.* (11.1).  p. 8, l. 263-5

*So when it came time to retire...As soon as I retired I started packing my bag, but I didn't just know where to go yet* (3.1)..p. 10, l. 334-5

In summary, the event of retirement itself, with increased free time, did not appear to be a strong factor in the search to adopt an entirely new role and behavior, as Nimrod & Kleiber, (2007) might suggest, but was seen more as one factor in being able to consider, or open up to, whatever life might hold next. Neither was it seen as a desperate time in which to seek meaning or purpose, because ‘time is running out’, as Russell (2010) suggests. As reported before, the data
revealed that a significant crisis or life disruption, rather than a developmental life transition, was the trigger that motivated participants to consider a new path to meaning.

Identity and early values

Keyes and Reitzes (2007) define identity formation partly as “claiming an identity through one’s values and outlook on life” (as cited in Erikson, 1968; Siman, 1997). Guiding values, rooted in their early years, were mentioned by four of the participants in this study, who recollected parts of their identity that resonated with values consistent with volunteering, claiming that these were established in their early years:

I have done different volunteer work from when I was a teenager on... I think that service is one of my key values. I think it’s a very important part of me and something I might’ve inherited from my parents. (2.2) P. 6, l. 179-182

I think that there’s something within me. I think I’ve always wanted to do this. When I was in nursing training years ago, I wanted to go to (a sub-Saharan African country) as a ministry, and I was in training to be a missionary. It didn't turn out to be that way. (4.1) p.3 l. 93-5

I always had a leaning towards helping people. (7.1) p. 1, l. 12. I always was a very social minded person (7.2) p. 1, l. 16-17

Well, I think it's always been an ongoing secret passion of mine. (8.1) P. 1, l. 26

Renewing commitment to existing values, following transition or life crisis, argues Krause (2007), helps to strengthen a threatened sense of self: “it helps older individuals remember who they are, and it reminds them of the things that are important in life” (p. 804). “It feeds my sense of justice and what needs to be done”, claimed one respondent, resonating with Krause’s theory.

Late-life identity

My research study began with a desire to understand how participants saw themselves and their life contexts as aging persons, and whether they subscribed to the more recent positive theories
of aging identified in my literature review (see Chapter Two: Theories of Aging). People continually construe their life-long identities as evolving stories that aim to reconstruct the past and imagine the future in meaningful and coherent ways, suggests McAdams (2005).

Generally, respondents framed their identity as an aging person in very positive ways, claiming:

*But you still have the same gift and the same values to give, even as you get older.* (8.1) p. 8, l. 244-5

*I don't see myself as an old woman: I just never think about how old I am* (1.2) p. 8, l. 257

*It's really a no-brainer. I think the opportunity and giving to the community is the way that you feel young, and to feel energetic and to feel energized.* (8.1) p. 8, l. 252-3

*Now I'm a 73-year-old and want to live longer and continue these experiences!* (7.2) p. 4, l. 123

*And I'm 75 now... As we age, I still think we are able to do valuable work.* (8.1) p. 7, l. 242-3

Therefore, the study’s results do not reflect that advancing age is a deterrent to volunteering, nor do the differences in age (the youngest being 62, and the eldest 80) appear to have any bearing on level of meaning attained. In fact, one 76 year old said the experience enabled her to understand she had personal power, even in late life:

*And somebody told me well you must go over there to (a sub-Sahara African country) and use your power... she told me that it could be a positive. It's up to you what you do with it, and all of a sudden things started to turn around, and I began to realize that I have a lot of power.* (1.1) P. 10, 332-6

The 80 year-old respondent says she cannot wait to go again, despite what she calls her ‘advancing age’, and is energized when asked if she is going on a mission again soon. She states:

*I didn't hesitate, not even for a moment.* (4.1) P. 4, l. 131. *And if God gives me the strength, I would absolutely like to do it again.* (p. 8, l.249)
These results support the more recent theories of aging identified in Chapter Two, that suggest later life can present opportunities for continued growth and change (Hutchison, Yarnal, Staffordson and Kerstetter, 2008; Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Nesteruk and Price, 2011).

**MOTIVATORS**

I was particularly curious about how people come to pursue volunteering in late life, particularly in places and in cultures that were so very different from their own life contexts. It is recognized that older people who are able to give their time and energy to this formal kind of volunteering require sufficient personal resources, good physical health, secure incomes, ability to travel and freedom from care-giving responsibilities (Nesteruk and Price, 2011). Nevertheless, I wondered why they made the effort to undertake to adopt the roles, behaviours, identities and activities that inevitably accompanied this choice. More specifically, I pondered what motivated them to continue traveling to developing countries, where they might experience dangers and certainly discomforts. When asked the question, “What made you choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in your life? the majority of the participants responded with a surprisingly strong conviction that some greater force had guided them.

**Destiny**

An extremely powerful spiritually-oriented yet secular theme resonated throughout the data gleaned from eleven of the twelve participants, who described a ‘force’ that led or directed them in some way to choose the path of volunteering in development work. Mascaro and Rosen (2006) suggest spirituality can be thought of as “the extent to which someone views life itself as
coherent and purposeful and also derives personal meaning from a force that she or he believes pervades, underlies, arches over, or transcends life” (p. 170). Although most did not explain their experience through religious language, these respondents described this force as “something greater” than themselves. Most described it as being ‘called’ or inexplicably ‘drawn’ to this work:

And all of a sudden the question changed. It was “Why is (a sub-Saharan African country) calling me?” And I'm still finding out. So instead of me going there, they're calling me to go... It's not an obligation. I've not finished yet. (1.1) p. 17, l.586-8

It was the spontaneity, the calling....connecting with the calling.... that I knew I needed to do this, to serve this purpose. (2.1) p. 10, l. 277-8. A greater calling was happening... a greater thing was happening (2.2) p. 6, l. 178

I chose to go because I felt a call to go at that particular time, to that particular place, and with that particular group. So everything came together. (4.2) p. 1, l. 11-12

This drew me... I suppose right down to my roots. (7.1) p. 1, l. 24..So it drew me... It just helped my energy forward. (7.1) p. 3, l. 77

And then I thought about it, and I thought that I would like to go on a medical mission. It came to me then, and within the next year I was asked if I would be available to go on this trip! (8.1) P. 7, l.229-31. There was a call along the way. (8.1) P. 7, l. 233

Seven described it as sense that they were guided or inexorably led into volunteering in a developing country:

I think that it’s being in the right place at the right time... You know, I still play with that philosophically... I have always felt that this is a guided experience, from a higher sense of rightness. You know, something was making this happen. (2.2) p. 5, l.173-175

I just feel that I had guidance. I wasn't carrying any flags but I just felt led, or drawn forward. (7.1) p. 3, l. 89-90

Something tells me when it's time to make the right move... instinct, or survival, or something that I'm tuned into. (1.1) p. 8, l. 285-6

I just feel that I had guidance. (4.2) p. 2, l 47

The person I was talking to said well why don't you just do it? Why don't you just e-mail them and find out? And all of a sudden I thought , yes, maybe I should! (8.1) P. 7, l. 221-3
Moral obligation

One of the ideas that my study explored was whether gratitude and the desire to repay society might be among the major motivations for older people to adopt volunteer roles. McAdams (2005) introduces the idea of the “redemptive self” (p. 249), which represents a particular kind of narrative identity that meets the psychosocial needs of men and women in their midlife years. Individuals who have experienced economic and social successes in life, and who have felt greatly benefitted by opportunities they have taken advantage of, McAdams posits, want to give something back in gratitude, to benefit others less fortunate. Half of the respondents indeed framed their motivation as partly a desire to ‘give back’:

- You know, I’ve had a blessed life... And it's time to make a small contribution back. But I'm not sure that I'm out to reform the world. (5.1), p.5 l.163-6
- Maybe it's about giving something back. (7.1) p. 6, l. 190-92
- I've been so privileged in my life it was one way of giving back. (9.1) p. 5, l. 167
- So I have to do things that are going to be of benefit to the people (6.1) p. 5, l. 150-1
- It was time to give back... (5.1) p. 1, l. 35-6

My sample, although mostly homogenous, did differ with regard to socio-economic status, although this did not appear to be a factor in either choosing to go, or achieving satisfaction and reward from their choice.

Addressing Inequities

Related to the idea of personal moral obligation to ‘give back’ from a privileged position in life is the awareness of inequities that exist globally. Travelling to volunteer in developing countries has the potential to create a transformative experience for some of those who desire to ‘make a difference’ or change the world for the better. Many older Canadians are aware that their aging
counterparts in developing countries suffer from oppression and deprivation that is in sharp contrast with their own resource-rich lives. The Stephen Lewis Foundation’s African “Grandmother to Grandmother” initiative, for example was premised upon this awareness. Heron (2005) posits that especially in the decisions to volunteer overseas, there are themes of morality and planetary consciousness. Many participants in my study were motivated by a desire to redress the inequities between the wealthy and devastatingly poor countries of the world, and expressed their need to do a small part in this endeavour:

*I guess it's partly about righting some of the wrongs in the world.* (5.1) p. 5, l. 162-3

*Well I don't go into it with a pay-it-forward philosophy, but certainly making a difference to a few people can change things and maybe have some impact.* (5.1) p. 5, l.169-170

*We are so lucky here, and we have so many resources and we don't always appreciate it... I know what I do is so very little in terms of the whole structure of the world. I feel so grateful that I was born where I was born, and the person that I am because it does give me the opportunity in my small way to address some of the differences.* (2.2). p. 6, l. 206-208

*So I'm happy just doing very little things to do my part. I wish I was smarter, but just doing little things is just something. It's just something.* (12.1)  p. 8, l. 277-8

With regard to motivating factors that led them to specifically choose to focus their volunteering on working in developing countries, half of the respondents reported always having a particularly strong desire to work in countries of the South, sometimes an inexplicable yearning from early years:

*It was something that I always wanted to do but, as I said, never thought I would have the opportunity to. So I think there’s a tremendous feeling of satisfaction that I actually did it and succeeded.* (9.2) p. 3, l. 88-90

*And I guess I've always had a strong connection to (a South Asian country) for some reason ...But I know that some part of me was fascinated and really drawn to that place more than anywhere else* (2.1) p. 1, l. 18-19

*I think that there's something within me. I think I've always wanted to do this. When I was in nursing training years ago, I wanted to go to (a sub-Saharan African country) as a ministry, and I was in training to be a missionary. It didn't turn out to be that way.* (4.1)  p.3. l. 93-5
Altruism

The principles of moral obligation, “giving back” and addressing inequities discussed above can all be thought of as selfless behaviors aimed at benefitting others, but can they be defined as purely altruistic, without any expectations of gain from the giver’s perspective? Although the literature contains studies that describe altruism as a primary motivator in the choice to volunteer (see Chapter 2.5 Volunteering in later life/Altruism), pure altruism, which is motivated by concern for the well-being of others, without perceived benefits to the self, was identified by a minority (two respondents) who did identify altruistic motives as part of their desire to volunteer:

*Altruism is part of it but it's not really all of it. It's more about doing what you can, to be a part of the collective that's working together.* (11.2) p. 4, l. 111-2

*I never had any second thoughts about (myself) because I really wanted to do it I just wanted to go and help people get better.* (7.1) p. 6, l. 199-200

In contrast, some spoke of the choice as being fuelled by a strong need within themselves to find meaning or purpose:

*I didn't think about making a difference. I just thought that my life needed to be fuller (1.1). p. 8, l. 271-2.*

*So my life is energized by all the things that I do, and I just have this joy of meeting people that I've never met before.* (6.1)... p. 9, l. 321-2

*I wanted to go somewhere sunny and I need to be near the water to be happy...* (3.1) p. 6, l. 193-4

*What is important, I think, is the drive to explore or to move forward as I'm getting older. As I get older in my life, I want to show that I can walk my talk and never give up.* (7.2) p. 1, l. 11-12

*I love adventure, and there’s a lot of self-interest in my mission trips, because I love traveling and to go to adventurous places* (12.1) p. 7, l. 229-30

*Spending all this money to go all the way over there is very selfish! But I really wanted to do it* (7.1) p. 1, l. 22
I was interested in whether generativity, or a sense that what their life has created will in some way continue into the future, was linked to altruistic behaviours. My literature review revealed studies that attributed altruistic behaviours as being motivated by a desire to leave something of importance for the generations who come after. For example, Choi and Chou (2010) found that “finding a sense of purpose through continued social engagement, by leaving a positive legacy” (p 563) was a factor that especially motivated people to volunteer. However, the data did not support the idea of generativity as being a primary motivator. Respondents in this study rarely spoke of themselves as agents of legacy-leaving: only one volunteer responded in terms of seeking generativity: ”It’s to help to improve the quality of life for those that come after”.

At this point in my analysis, I had ascertained that neither pure altruism nor a desire for legacy-leaving were particularly strong motivators for my participants’ choice to volunteer. I then considered whether religious or faith-based factors had a strong influence in motivating people to serve others. I had considered spirituality as an element that constituted part of the dimensions of health and wellness (see 2.4 Dimensions of Health/Religion and Spirituality). I was also interested in whether a commitment to religious or faith-based principles might also be a motivating factor.

**Spirituality**

The literature contains ample studies that discuss religious motives to volunteer, as well as how religiosity benefits health (see 2.1: Dimensions of Health/Spiritual health, p. 13). Religious or faith-based motivation can lead older people in the search for meaning or purpose in life (Krause,
Having thoroughly examined the literature that significantly links volunteering with religious faith and practices, I found it surprising that only four participants mentioned their faith and religious connections, and only two of these attributed their motivations to religious underpinnings. My intention was to recruit participants from both formal religious and secular organizations in an effort to explore how religiosity and/or spirituality might serve as motivational factors in the phenomenon I was to study, yet my sample yielded only two participants who identified themselves as coming from a faith-based perspective. Understandably, religious motives were raised by those two participants who came from faith-based organizations, who described their motivational path as one of ‘mission’:

*I thought that I would like to go on a medical mission. It came to me then, and within the next year I was asked if I would be available to go on this trip!* (4.1) p. 1116

*In the church that I'm going to now, we had a seminar on ‘What is God calling you to do?’ I think I've always wanted to do this...I was in training years ago to be a missionary”* (8.1 p. 6

However, the key finding described above as ‘Destiny’ in the “Shifting Identities” section certainly can be thought of as a spiritual experience, though not couched within a framework of religiosity. Interestingly, Atchley (2008) contends that elder people (those born in the late 1940s and after) have different understandings of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, and that many people have spiritual experiences without necessarily thinking of themselves as religious. Rather than participation in formal religious organizations, he posits that many older people view the spiritual journey as their personal responsibility, brought to life through choices. “I just went ahead in faith and decided this is what I was meant to be doing” (10.1) P. 1, l.38-9, stated one non-church-oriented volunteer.

For most of my participants, ideas of spirituality were indeed expressed in secular ways:
Even though it's so chaotic, it still works. It feeds you somehow... Something in the soul is fed by being in (a South Asian country).(2.1) p. 8, l. 217-8

There is a perfection about it, or a state of grace. You feel that you have just connected with something that is so fundamentally right inside your being that you know that you are connected with the right pursuit (2.2) p. 1, l. 18-20

I believe in reincarnation, but I believe that I have spirit guides were helping me along the path (6.1).p 190, l. 341-2

Now I'm not religious and I don’t attend church services, but I'm very spiritual. (6.1) p. 10, l.3

It was everything I'd been looking for... the spiritual underpinnings, and the safety I felt there.(3.1) l.14

**MEANING**

The question in this study that yielded the fullest and most detailed answers was, “What meaning does this volunteer work hold for you...what do you get out of it”? Answers included: finding community, making a difference, managing difficulties, self-affirming rewards and benefits to wellness and wellbeing. This section will describe these key contributors to the phenomenon.

Research concerning meaning and how it is construed has been extensively conducted in the literature. (Mascaro and Rosen, 2006; Sherman, Michel, Ryback, Randall and Davidson, 2011; Marston, 2010; Foster, Miller, McKee and Cloutier-Fisher, 2009; Kahana, Bhatta, Lovegreen & Midlarsky, 2013). Keyes and Reitzes (2007) suggest that “higher levels of purpose and meaning in life have been associated with more civic engagement, more dedication to social causes, and greater investment in life-affirming values and goals” (p. 435). Exploring connections and life experiences leads older adults to a capacity for wisdom and a higher level of integration, characterized by integrity rather than isolation and despair of death, argues Pfahl (2011)

The meaning of their experiences to the volunteers was described in many ways:
A desire to feel worthwhile, to contribute, to learn, to experience, to have an adventure, to see exotic places, to experience other cultures, and to be part of a community. (12.2) P. 1, l. 18-20

I think the meaning is in building relationships across cultures and that's one of the things that has kept me doing this project. And of course making a difference for children, which is what it's all about. (11.2) p. 3, l. 97-9

It's something about doing things that will make a difference in the world... and have an impact, a lasting impact, somewhere. (10.1) p. 4, l. 119-20

It's a feeling of the circle being completed. It's bridging the West and the East and that's very strong component to me... the fact that I can mobilize here, and affect the other end. (2.2) P. 2, 46-8

I can connect these people together, and away they go and work on a project! That's my favorite thing in the world to do! (6.1) p. 3, l 77-8

A sense of purpose is conceptually distinct from meaning: it has to do with believing that one’s actions have a set place in the larger order of things, and that one’s behaviour fits appropriately into a larger, more important social whole (Krause, 2007). “If you can make a difference to a small number of people, hopefully there's a ripple effect and they help a few other people”, mused one respondent. Three participants spoke about how the experience of volunteering had given their lives new purpose:

It found me! And that's the way I've always spoken about it... It actually came to me. I do feel that it was a case of my purpose (vocation) coming to me. I didn't go and search it out: it actually came there and found me. (2.1)P.2, l. 57-61

Connecting myself with my purpose... It was completely authentic and completely spontaneous... I had no idea it was coming. And yet there was a knowing. (2.1)p. 8, l. 222-3

Having credibility and values and putting them into practice... It all makes you feel good and gives your life meaning and purpose. (12.1) P. 5, l. 153-4

Because....I knew it was supposed to be. It really was. It was not coincidence... we couldn’t not do it. I felt so comfortable doing that and so well in myself, and so happy about what she and I were doing... that we were exactly where we should be at that point. (9.2) p. 1, l. 27-31

It was the fulfillment of a dream. (12.2) p. 1, l. 15

Foster, Miller, McKee and Cloutier-Fisher (2009) posit that an expectation that there will be positive outcomes resulting from having lived one’s life is important. "I think that the
nourishment and fulfillment from the whole project has truly been an amazing. I feel so privileged to have had this chance in my life”, exclaimed one volunteer. Krause (2007) suggests that some older adults are able to cope effectively with lifetime trauma because they have been able to find a deeper sense of purpose in life. One respondent, having undergone a traumatic event prior to volunteering, stated, “I mean, it really changed me afterwards. It was a life change for sure….for absolutely sure. It was an amazing openness about wow, yes... it's possible to engage again this way”.

Finding Community

The most frequently occurring significant answer (mentioned previously) relates to the volunteers’ experiences with the people they met in developing countries and the unexpected powerful feeling of ‘belonging’ that they experienced there. The overwhelming benefit gained from their experiences, reported in different words by all twelve participants, was the serendipitous pleasure of finding themselves immediately a part of a community, or a place of belonging in the country to which they had travelled.

They declared they felt welcomed into a community of caring people who made them feel they ‘belonged’. A phenomenon of solidarity (finding ‘moral friends’, rather than ‘moral strangers’: Loewy, 1996) with people there, despite disparities in race and class, was frequently reported. Volunteers counted this as perhaps the biggest, if most surprising, reward for their efforts. Six said they instantly felt ‘at home’:

I just immediately felt so at ease there (2.1) p.2, l.29

Everything about (a South Asian country) absolutely swallowed me up... in a good way. I mean, I could just accept everything about it. (2.1) p. 2, l. 27-8

I walked out (into a Sub-Saharan African country) and I just started to cry. It was like I just came home. It was just amazing! (6.1) P. 1, l. 28-9
I always felt like I belonged there. I felt a real affinity. (2.1) p. 2, l. 33

I just felt really at home (3.1) l. 26

I felt very comfortable from the minute I walked onto the camp. I felt safe. (4.1)p. 4, l. 122-3

Herzog and Wheeler (2002) suggest the notion of “community” has widened to indicate an openness to the bigger world and an orientation toward the future’ (p. 594). In exploring the importance of respondents’ potential and desire to forge social relationships “in the bigger world”, I discovered that building connections and solidarity in working together with people in community was identified as important and valued, again, by all 12 participants. Many felt an instant closeness with, and acceptance and understanding from, others there:

There was no getting to know them... I simply just knew them already... It was just a wonderful experience. (4.1) P. 4, l. 114-5

We were so warmly welcomed by the other people and they were fascinated to see why these two old ladies from Canada came.(9.1) p. 4

There was a brotherhood and a sisterhood, right there! And it didn't matter what nationality or what part of the world it is.(8.1) l. 6

When I am there (in a South Asian country), I just feel connected to those people. I just know how strong that connection is....I feel a very close affinity to those people and I do think that will never go away. (2.1) p. 8, l. 206-7

It's about humanity. I feel that my contact with them immediately opened my heart and that we are all in this together. (1.1) p. 14, l. 505

And we met in (a South American country), and it was like we had always known each other... And it was wonderful. (4.1) p. 8, l. 251

Yes, there is a kinship.....an immediate friendship that develops on all of these levels. (2.2) p.5, l.166-167

The women all teamed up together and I thought it was such a good healthy spirit of community they had, and I wanted to come back and be a part of that. (3.2) p. 5, l. 145-6

It was like a family. They are very close knit, very caring of each other and sharing, and I just felt that I belonged (6.1)p.1, l. 25-6

I felt I was being embraced... Unconditional love, I guess. (7.1) p. 2, l. 68
These women... You know, they looked out for me. I know these women, and they know me. (1.1) p. 13, l. 446

There is a knowing glance: it's as if, ‘Yes I see you’. There's an exchange that happens, which is very deep and is very supportive. I mean, it just feels wonderful to have people just look at you, and realize that they see you just for what you are. Not necessarily what you're doing in that moment, but just to see you and see who you are. That's probably the most powerful thing there is. (2.2) P. 2, l. 92-96

I found common ground with the people that I met from developing countries. (12.2) p. 1, l. 28-9

Being part of a caring community of people seemed to help to assuage loneliness some had felt in the past, and all twelve respondents found that the relationships they forged were extremely meaningful, especially those who had not been able to develop them to the same degree in Canada:

I know myself I was so desperately lonely in Canada. (10.1) p. 1, l. 60

If I ever felt lonely there, I could take myself out, drink coffee and just look at people and feel like I'm around a community of some kind. That's very important. (8.2) p. 8, 258-60

It's the same group of people, they all go together and all know each other (3.2)...p. 8, l. 247-8 I developed a group of friends in (a South American country). (3.2) p. 8, l. 257

You know they were just so much fun to be with...I really miss that. (9.2) p. 4, l. 112-3

They would often meet friends along the road, but here in the city you don't usually friends along the road! (8.2) P. 3, l. 99-100

I know that we are all born the same, but over there they have so much more essence in valuing their inter-relationships. (7.1) p. 9, l. 396-7

But she really cares about me. It's not just token... I really feel it here in my heart (1.2) p. 9, l. 303

That was a lot of fun and it gave me company that I did not have back home (10.1) p. 11, l. 37

They wanted to keep that connection with you...they wanted to know what we were doing that particular Sunday and would we go to their house for tea, or can we go for a walk, and you said ‘Oh yes’. (9.1) p. 9, l. 299-300

The meaning is very much about community, and I mean that in a very broad sense, in terms of connection with people. (11.2) p. 5, l. 144-5

I love it because then you have all the young staff so you have young adults, and then you have older kids. So you have this huge community of young people that you belong to. If I wasn't in
Perhaps the most poignant phenomenon that was frequently reported was the unexpected discovery of ‘kindred spirits’, individuals who, although so very different in race, class and so many other social dimensions, nevertheless formed a powerful bond with volunteers. ‘Moral Friends vs. Moral Strangers’ is a term coined by Loewy (1996) to describe the difference between connecting, sometimes instantly, with a person who is ‘your kind of person’ and choosing to develop that relationship, rather than spend energy on being with those who hold different values and beliefs. Participants described a ‘one-ness’ in outlook, purpose and shared realities that transcended disparities in socio-cultural life contexts:

*It's the feeling that I'm not alone and that we are doing this together.* (1.2) p. 9, l. 317

*They have this thing (in sub-Saharan Africa) which is called ‘Ubuntu’. It’s a philosophical saying, which means ‘I am me because of you’... It's a Bantu philosophy that a lot of Africans have... If you're happy, it resonates with me, and if I'm happy then it resonates with you* (1.2) p. 5, l. 150-54

*I think that's probably the crux of the whole thing, is that contact: that connection that you make with another human being. You recognize the same thing in somebody else. I mean, we are all in the same boat.* (2.2) P. 2, l. 104-6

*Yes, our lives are very, very different but there is some emotional space that we share.* (1.2) P. 5, l. 166

Participants also valued the working relationships they forged with other volunteers. Sharing in the accomplishment of goals and working side by side to meet them appeared to increase the perception of ‘one-ness’ that was so readily found and highly valued:

*We were people all working on the same cause. Because you're not distracted with telephone calls and having to do this that and the other thing, and you are all together and you have fun together. You eat together and yes, we are a community.* (8.2) P. 5, l. 153-4

*We met amazing people and other volunteers who were just outstanding.* (9.2) p. 3, l. 90-91

*And the leaders or the facilitators over there and myself have something to share in some way that draws us into that oneness.* (7.1) p. 10, l. 340-41
So these are real people that are involved in the project that I find I have a lot of commonality with and have seen them a number of times. (11.2) p. 3, l. 73-4

Most projects have a social aspect to it, in the sense that when you actually on the ground, you’re home hosted, and you’re dealing with like-minded people. (5.1) p. 3, l. 83-4

**Wellness/wellbeing**

Answers to the question “In what ways did this experience impact your perceived life satisfaction, health and well-being? were overwhelmingly positive, as the majority of participants claimed that their health had not only remained surprisingly good throughout their exposure to living situations that were characterized by poor hygiene and disease, but that they felt their health continued to be better after their return home, due to their adoption of healthful eating habits and exercise.

Potkanowicz et al. refer to Cohen’s (2006) study, in which “older people who pursued meaningful activities that require deep involvement reported better morale and less loneliness, as well as a higher overall rating of physical health” (cited in Cohen, 2006, p. 12). Six participants spoke of the benefits to their sense of wellbeing in holistic terms:

Well, it's a whole experience... Body, mind, spirit... Everything is engaged. (2.2) p. 8, L. 267

It was a very rewarding experience, for body and soul. (4.2) p. 1, l.8

It’s almost a sense of well-being that comes from a belonging, or perhaps it is doing good. (5.1) p. 8, l. 275-6

I think it really increases your sense of self-satisfaction and wellness. (8.2) p. 3, l. 85

When you're over there, your sense of well-being seems to be constant. (7.1) p. 8, l. 273-4

I found participation in the faith community there that involved learning, worship and friendship to be very healthy and wellness giving. (12.1) P. 2, l. 36

Many participants spoke of the positive social, mental and emotional benefits they experienced:

Well, it connects my head to my heart somehow and makes me bigger. (1.1) p. 13, l.437-8
I learned to be with myself and do things by myself...and the more you do that, the stronger you become. (3.1) p. 10, l. 335

When you work on these trips, there is a tremendous social health benefit. You meet some interesting people and it’s very healing. And it’s so lively and fun, and so full of life.... and it was a great antidote to losing all of my hair and that kind of thing. (12.1) p. 6, l. 195-9

So being free and strong works really well for me. (3.1) p. 10, l. 337-8

Well, I think it would say that because it's (volunteering) very engaging, it's very positive for health. When you talk about emotional and social factors, that is. (11.1) p. 12, l. 396-7

Several participants noted that an unexpected benefit of their traveling to work in developing countries was an improvement in their general physical health, through exercise, sunshine and a following a better diet:

It's almost like the warmth of the sun warms my ancient joints, and the warmth of the people warms my heart, and I don't seem to suffer as much with my arthritis or whatever. And I walk more. (1.2) p. 9, l. 305

I love being in the sun and the heat which is good for my body, as well as all the nurturing I get from these activities (2.2) p. 5, l. 159-60

What I didn't realize is that because of the unavailability of junk food there, I would start eating better. (3.2) p. 4, l. 108-9 It also improved my physical health, because I had to walk everywhere. (3.2) p. 8, l. 246

And even the weather didn't feel overwhelming with the heat...no, I felt great. And I felt physically and mentally strong. I really felt very strong. Totally. (4.1) p. 8, l. 244-5

When I go, I always lose weight and always feel better for it. (1.2) p. 8, l. 250

I feel stronger and deeper (and it's) very, very healthful. I can stand up straight. (1.2) p. 9, l. 307-8

I knew that going there to a sunny country would help me, because I have a tendency to get depressed when it's raining for 60 days straight! (3.2) p. 4, l. 104-5

Although three reported feeling quite exhausted mentally and physically, especially when working in chaotic surroundings....

There is only so much energy. (7.1) p. 5, l. 149

Physically I'm fine. I do realize I don't have as much energy as I used to. (11.1) p. 12, l. 399-400 I get suddenly sleepy at two in the afternoon! (11.1) p. 12, l. 407
There are very long days. Up at 7 AM and a lot of sitting on long routes and bumpy roads... I think it's physically and emotionally demanding (12.1) p. 4, l.6.

...many had the opposite experience, and in fact, felt their level of energy increased when involved in volunteer projects. They spoke of experiencing a new-found zest and enthusiasm for life:

And I knew that my mood would improve and I would be more energetic. (3.1) p. 4, l. 107

I just feel very much alive there. (1.1) p 2, l. 78

I think I have even more energy, by doing this volunteering and meeting all these new people. Physically, my health is always been good. (6.1) p. 10, l 364-5

My energy started to grow... I don't know... it just felt very different. (1.1) p. 6, l.195-6

Balance means to me that I'm living my life to the fullest, which means I am vibrant. (1.2) p. 1, l.45

One of the most important findings, I suggest, was that most (7) participants found the gains they had achieved in both making healthier life choices and finding a heightened feeling of well-being and satisfaction continued after their return home:

So that was a couple of things I came back with, and I decided that I would try and walk more ... I would walk to wherever and get my things. (8.1) p. 3, l. 100

I didn't really realize how strong I had become. (1.1) p. 1, l. 18-19

I know that you come back from these trips regenerated and excited. (5.1) p. 8, l. 278-9

My mental health has improved substantially (since doing this work). I'm always in a positive state of mind. (6.2) p. 5, l. 155

I knew I had the health and strength to keep doing it... I just want to keep going! (4.1) p. 4, l. 110

More than anything else, I think that will be a positive thing for my well-being. I know it was the right time to go and I know I benefited from going. (10.1) p. 1, l. 11-12

These experiences all help to reinforce that you can be of help to others, and my health has been reinforced by this. (7.2) p. 4, l. 123-4
Making a Difference

I questioned participants about whether they derived meaning from actually observing that their contributions had made a difference in the lives of those they helped. As people age, Biggs (2010) suggests, they may become more interested in investing in this: “There is a desire to make a difference, using acquired expertise” (p 41). Krause (2008) concurs, concluding that the insights provided by both Tornstam and Erikson suggest that as people grow older, it becomes especially important to find a sense of meaning in life, perhaps through making a difference in the lives of others. Participants did, upon reflection, express that seeing they had made difference was an outcome of their efforts that held meaning for them.

Making a difference in the here and now, and what it means to them. (1.2) p. 5, l. 150
I'm sure that I'm making a difference and continuing to be useful and not just doing nothing... That isn't me and never has been. (4.2)P. 3, l 69-70
I saw that people actually walked in blind, and walked out with vision. It was a miracle! (5.1) .p. 1, l. 30
I feel I can make a difference in the small things that I do. (12.1) p.4, l. 123

A third of the participants specifically ascribed ongoing meaning to their attempts to make a difference by acting as a connecting force, or a ‘bridge’ between the cultures of developing countries and their country of origin:

It's a feeling of the circle being completed. It's bridging the West and the East and that's very strong component to me... the fact that I can mobilize here, and affect the other end.
If I had to give myself a reason for my being, I like to think of myself as a conduit. I can connect these people together, and away they go and work on a project! That's my favorite thing in the world to do!
I think the meaning is in building relationships across cultures and that's one of the things that has kept me doing this project.
I like to think that I can connect this person to that person.
It's been an incredibly empowering situation to be in: to be able to facilitate.....to fulfill this role between the two worlds. (2.2).p.8, l.27

**Self-affirming rewards**

As identified above, many participants reported they were motivated to volunteer because of self-seeking behaviours, aware that they were needing to fulfil their own personal needs, rather than through purely altruistic motives. My initial literature search reviewed research that considered whether motivations to volunteer were purely altruistic, without expectation of benefit to the volunteer, or whether there was an element of self-serving rewards inherent in pursuing all volunteer pursuits. Choi and Chou (2010) found that many volunteers, *motivated* by self-interest, also derived personal *benefits* from volunteering such as self-development through learning about social problems and the people affected by them, and personal increases in self-esteem. My results confirm Choi and Chou’s findings. When asked about the meaning they derived from their experiences, most participants identified significant self-serving, rather than purely altruistic, factors that resulted in their perception of rewards gained. Seventy-five percent of respondents were open about their having gained something *personally* from volunteering:

*So my life was energized by all the things that I do, and I just have this joy of meeting people that I've never met before.* (6.1. p. 9, l. 321-2

*I love traveling and to go to adventurous places* (12.1) p. 7, l. 229-30

*When you work on these trips, there is a tremendous social health benefit. You meet some interesting people and it's very healing. And it's so lively and fun and so full of life.... and it was a great antidote to losing all of my hair and that kind of thing.* (12.1) p. 6, l. 195-9

*More than anything else, I think that it increased my well-being. I know it was the right time to go and I know I benefited from going.* (10.1) p. 1, l. 11-12

*These experiences all help to reinforce that you though you can be of help to others, your own self has been reinforced by this.* (7.2) p. 4, l. 123-4

*So you visit somewhere like that, and you have a grasp of really what happens... So I think that is part of the gain that you have, and your own worldview is more outward looking.* (5.1) p. 6, l.181-2
Some said they felt personally rewarded and affirmed when their presence there was welcomed and perceived very positively:

_They couldn’t understand why Canadians would pay their own way, and travel a long way to go over there and help. One man was amazed that all of these Canadian women were all older, about my age and that we were physically up there are ladders painting and scraping etc._ (6.1) p. 6, l. 109-111

_They could not say enough good things because they knew the kind of work that we were doing and they needed it. They knew we were doing it as relative expense to ourselves and leaving our family behind and going to places that were not familiar. I saw that they could sense that and they appreciated it._ (10.2) p. 1, l. 33-5

**Managing difficulties**

One of the things I was curious about is how volunteers coped with some of the inevitable discomforts and dangers of traveling in countries that are known to have very different living standards, as well as increased risks and dangers. I wondered whether it meant something to them to have overcome difficulties inherent in travelling and working there. Some respondents spoke of negative aspects of the experience, although generally, these were far fewer than might have been anticipated, given that they were experiencing very different levels of security and safety. Surprisingly, five reported never having felt afraid:

_I’ve never had fears about going there. I have never felt fear._ (2.1). _P. 11, l. 293

_I feel totally at home there. I feel very safe... never afraid._ (2.1) p. 11, l. 297-8

_But if you let fear stop you, you never do anything or go anywhere._ (3.2) p. 2, l. 69

_I wasn’t the least bit afraid in any way_ (4.2) p. 2, l. 37

_It was very friendly, and at that time I didn’t need to be going out and experiencing all kinds of things that were dangerous._ (10.2) p. 1, l. 22

_It was very comfortable and at no time did we ever feel that we were in danger whatsoever._ (9.1) p. 2, l.37-8
Nimrod and Rotem (2010) take a positive approach, via their Innovation Theory of successful aging, to the practice of taking up the inevitable challenges inherent in travelling in later life. Travelling, they posit, creates significant challenges in planning, solving unexpected problems, facing new situations, new people, new foods, etc., yet learning to cope with such challenges lead to a sense of accomplishment. Some minimized and treated difficulties with stoic dismissal: “I'm okay with a little bit of discomfort”. Others claimed they felt empowered by the sense of mastery they achieved in triumphing over annoyances and discomforts:

*It’s not a problem to me, but rather that I get to see something totally different, and see how other people live* (3.2) p. 2, l. 43-44

*We had showers every night but they were showers with cold buckets of water and we learned to deal with that* (9.2) p. 10, l. 859-60

*There were a lot of distances and the heat got to my friend a little bit but it didn't worry me very much. I was okay.* (9.2) p. 11, l. 389

*I think it's physically and emotionally demanding....but we coped* (5) p.9, l. 300-302

Interestingly, none reported ill health while away, but rather claimed their attention to safe food preparation and health practices resulted in a very positive, illness-free existence in countries known for compromised hygiene and health issues:

*You tend to be pretty simple... You eat a lot of chicken and rice! So you don't get sick...* (5) p.9, l. 295-7

*I think we did really well. I wasn't sick at all and I was very lucky.* (9) p. 3, l. 82-3

*I would eat less. I didn't really enjoy the food, and so I would eat less, and that was a lot smarter to do that.* (8) p. 3, l. 89

*In general, I'm fine and the food is just fine there too. In fact, I've not had any illness at all. I'm very careful to monitor that very well.* (11) p. 12, l. 408-9
CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS

As the data emerged from the interviews, it became increasingly evident that, as they journeyed, respondents developed the capacity for deep introspection and awareness of their own positioning in their developing story. Each triumphed over adversity, opened up to the possibility of engaging in something entirely unknown and outside of her/his own cultural sphere, and was rewarded with a life-affirming experience.

Transformational learning

Transformational learning is about a change in perspective of oneself and one's place in the larger social context. Merriam and Beirema (2014) discuss the impact that transformative learning can have to achieve meaning in changing the way people perceive the world, and “perhaps to change it for the better, focusing on oppressive and constraining structures in society” (p. 97). I was particularly curious whether volunteering in developing countries was seen as a transformational experience for the participants, as they learn new patterns and roles, and develop hitherto unexplored parts of themselves. Indeed, many identified on-going transformational learning as a meaningful side-product of their volunteer activity. Many found that being exposed to, and involved in, cultural differences afforded them new learning about who they are, how their lives fit into a larger perspective, and what they can contribute to the world:

*I don't see myself as is the big important key but I see myself as part of a bigger cooperative effort.* (11.2) p. 4, l. 110-11

*It was a really.... I never realized this before...it was a complete turnaround in thinking about what I was doing and why I was doing it, and what it was that was directing me.* p. 4, l. 134-6(2.1)

*I stopped and really tried to think about where I have come from, where I have been and what I have done.* (3.1) P. 1, l. 24
It just seemed to me so decadent. We have so much money, and we spend so much money on clothing, when we could do with so much less. (8.1) P. 3, l. 104-5

I think sometimes you can have delusions of grandeur about how important you are! I think realistically I’m not doing something that others cannot do… I’m just fortunate because I have the time. I think that those spaces can be taken by others and I’m sure I could find other things. (11.1) p. 11, l. 368-71

Some reported gaining new self-awareness and deeper insights into themselves:

I learned something about myself and I learned not to judge I learned to be with myself and do things by myself… and the more you do that, the stronger you become. It’s part of the path that I am on now… I can’t stay stagnant. I have to grow. (9.1) p. 10, l. 359

But that whole business about what your role is… I think that there is certainly value to it, but I sometimes worry that I get more out of it than the people that I’m helping… (11.1) p. 9, l. 295-7

Pfahl (2011) concurs that we recreate our identities as we accumulate experiences: “Time does not stand still: we are in a continuous process of becoming something other. As life unfolds in community, and as we learn from the experience of others, our identities develop” (p. 72).

Participants’ responses resonated with the awareness that they were transformed into something ‘different’ as a result of their experiences:

I wasn't the same person anymore either. I know that I had changed. I felt I wasn't really the same person because of all the experiences I had, and all the stories I had heard and all the people I had helped. (10.1) P. 10, l. 316-9

All of those things (I experienced while volunteering)... it's increased my sense of satisfaction in life. I have never really been a person who has had self-esteem and it's only in these last few years that I have felt good. (8.2) p. 2, l. 41-3

Putting it in a nutshell, I feel it has all enriched my life. All of those experiences. (3.1) p. 8, l. 239

It all goes together... Growing... It's about that openness, or that willingness to engage and simply trust in the process. Trust in the process of going out there and doing what you need to be doing... Listening when things are coming at you and just being aware. (2.2) p. 8, l. 72-4

Learning new roles and formulating new identities appear to have the potential to enrich and ultimately preserve cognitive health. (Cohen, 2006; Lawton, 2013). Participants spoke of the
meaning that new learning had for them, and how much stronger they felt having learned so
much about themselves through their experiences:

I learned to be with myself there and do things by myself... And the more you do that, the stronger
you become. (3.1) p. 10, l. 34

Yes, I learned a lot about myself. (9.1) P. 10, l. 348

The memory of it, and the knowledge of it in my being is very, very healthful to me, because I
know I could just go and do it again tomorrow. (7.1) p. 7, l. 243-4

I learned that you can just be there as a whole person. It's fascinating! (1.2) P. 3. L. 93

I remember being blown away by how much impact the people and the places had on me (2.1) p.
1, l. 25-6

Narushima (2005) argues that the self-help and transformative mechanisms embedded in
volunteering provide opportunities for older retirees to sustain their self-esteem and sense of
wellbeing. This was borne out in the data, through participants exclaiming that their self-esteem
and sense of empowerment had increased through adopting the role of volunteer in a developing
country, as they discovered new internal strengths:

I just thought ‘I can do this!’ I can do it and it was fun. (9.2) p. 2, l. 3-7

The experiences in the classroom and in the library were really very empowering for me.
(7.1) p. 3, l. 90-91

And I've been able to use my skills even though I first thought that they weren't quite
enough.(8.1) p. 10, l. 316-7

It's very reinforcing when I just don't give up. (7.2) p. 1, l. 14

I just took myself there! (3.1) p. 2, l. 44

It's been an incredibly empowering situation to be in: to be able to facilitate.....to fulfill this
role between the two worlds: the developing world and the first world. (2.2).p.8, l.278

According to the Innovation Theory of Successful Aging (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007), pursuing
totally new activities (such as volunteering in a completely different cultural environment) in
later life may provide avenues for re-inventing identity:
But nobody else that I know has ever done anything like what I did to volunteer in a Third World country. Nobody. Only me. (9.2) p. 1, l. 21-22

When I take off on a project and go overseas, I'm focused on my role as a volunteer, and that brings a new and very deep meaning. (7.2) p. 2, l. 36-7

That's exactly what I've done... created a new identity along the way. (6.1) p. 3, l. 95-6

A new identity and I'll reinvent myself! (1.1) P. 6, l. 197-200

Two respondents spoke of being reminded of their own privilege, possibly questioning prior values and assumptions:

It just seemed to me so decadent. We have so much money, and we spend so much money on clothing, when we could do with so much less. (8.1) P. 3, l. 104-5

You just cannot ever feel sorry for yourself, if you go abroad and work... and you just realize just how many blessings you have. (12.1) p. 8, l. 262-5

I'm very sensitive now to what it means to be a minority and privileged. (11.1)p. 9, l. 299-300

Claiming agency

One of the most interesting findings of this research project has been the positive ways in which the participants discovered a path to claim or re-claim agency after late life devastating experiences. Sargent et al. (2013), refer to Nesteruk and Price’s (2010) findings that some women, for example, experience an emancipation of sorts when life changes enabled them to put their own interests and desires for the first time. Four respondents spoke of feeling liberated, and this became a beacon to re-claim agency and adopt new roles and identities:

This was definitely a transitional time and definitely a whole liberation thing in itself. (2.1) p. 16, l. 441-2

And I thought I like this feeling of being strong and free! (3.1) p. 10, l. 35

I learned to be with myself and do things by myself... And the more you do that, the stronger you become. (3.1) p. 10, l. 34

The only thing that pulls me back is a search for how can I move forward. (7.2) p. 3, l. 87-88
I had no one to negotiate with, and no one to tell me that I couldn't go there, or question why I was doing it, or oppose it in any way... So it was a symbolic in a way of being able to be who I really was...not the person I had been through a lot of that marriage, but suddenly I was free to be myself, and to connect with what was really important to me. (2.2) p. 16, 443-6

Coping with diversity

For many participants, the decision to volunteer in a developing country resulted in their being exposed, for the first time in their lives, to cultures that were economically and politically challenged. Some reported having to wrestle with some negative emotional aspects to the experience of being exposed to the developing world. Witnessing extreme poverty was one such challenge:

One of the things that bothered me the most at first was seeing all of the poverty, and all of the homeless people and children... and the 14-year-old hookers on the beach. That made me really sad. (3.1) p. 8, l.264-6

And so I cried within myself that this had to be... It shouldn't be, but it is. (4.1) P. 6, l. 173-4

It's so sad...the ones out in the countryside are just subsistence living, and often the kids get pulled out of school to help on the farm (3.1) p. 2, l. 65-6

Anger and frustration was reported over the corruption and seeming inability of governments and international NGOs to address these issues:

“Why can't we find ways that will work? And why is it such a struggle to get people at the top see things from a different perspective?” (1.2) p. 4, l. 114-5

“I look how a lot of the development is being done now, and it's being done in the same way that the colonial people did their work, from a position of power and position of privilege”(5.2) p. 3, l. 101-2.

Many expressed concerns about imposing their Western ideals onto developing countries, and reiterated the primary objective was to meet the needs as expressed by those living in the country.
Many projects have failed. Because that’s not what the people wanted, is was what Canadians thought they should have.(6.2) p. 2, l. 55-6. Our challenge as the Canadian group, is understanding their way (6.2) p. 3, l. 77

I’m going into their culture and not the other way around. When you are going into someone else’s culture, you’d better figure out how to suck it up and fit in so that it benefits both of you and you don’t get suckered (3.1) p. 5, l. 134-6

You are a guest in a foreign country and you don’t criticize. You go very carefully.(5.1) p.10, l.341

We cannot impose our own culture on theirs. We cannot do that. We have to be open and sensitive to their needs (4.1)...p. 6, l. 194-5

**Postcolonial perspectives**

The data produced some interesting findings about how the volunteers saw themselves as subject positions within the context of the developing country in which they forged relationships. Related to the phenomenon of finding themselves accepted (and ‘belonging’) is the paradoxical issue of how they perceived themselves as White, privileged subjects. I approached this issue with an attempt to view their experiences through a post-colonial critical lens, deconstructing them to discover how they negotiated and understood their positioning in power relations there.

The literature contains a good deal of reflection about how the decision to travel and volunteer in developing countries, either with established NGO’s or with privately organizes groups, involves adopting a critical postcolonial perspective. When older adults learn to critically deconstruct their positions of power and privilege, suggests Brookfield (2012), it leads to a deeper understanding of power inequities (as cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Data yielded a range of perspectives concerning the participants’ awareness of their positioning as a privileged White people. Some respondents spoke of their introspective awareness of their position there, and the impact it had on those around them:
And I would have to say that... it made me zero in on myself and the impact that I was having on people around me (1.1) p. 4, l.140-1

But I don't think I presented as a White woman of privilege, but I rather presented as a woman who was struggling with personal health issues but still cared enough to go there. (12.1) p. 6, l. 186-8

Sometimes you got the looks that were quite negative and I think it was because of the skin color. That's understandable but a bit disconcerting at the same time. (10.2) p. 1, l. 28-30

There's not a whole lot of difference... Obviously that's not truly the case, but it's pretty comfortable and I certainly always question things. (11.2) p. 3, l. 96-7

Some were conscious of their discomfort with being treated ‘reverently’, recognizing this came from colonial expectations of the past:

When you do go to the village, they do treat you with some degree of pomp and reverence.. and you are given that status which is often uncomfortable. (2.1) p. 9, 236-7

It's so inbred, about how they are supposed to treat or they will treat foreigners, and Westerners in particular..... It's not comfortable.(7.1) p.1 l.3

Bishop (2002) claims that “unconscious pain is both individual and collective...and we cannot walk away from the injuries of our histories” (p. 96). Two respondents were disturbed by the recollection of past oppressions perpetrated by their own culture of origin:

I see what has happened to these women because of the historical context... Because of the colonists... and because how people have treated them and it... It troubles me. (1.2) p. 3, l. 99-100

Well, it's complicated in (a sub-Sahara African country), which of course is a British invention (11.1) p. 4, l. 132. So it's lovely to be there, but they recognize my accent and know I have a British background..(11.1) .p. 9, l. 300-301

Four expressed worries about ‘re-colonization’ and the long-term effects of their involvement and how the volunteers’ intermittent presence might have negative consequences:

I was worried about going into situations where you're going to be perceived as the external expert; in fact, what you doing is re-colonizing... and the whole voyeururistic aspect of doing good... (11.2)p. 3, l. 85-8

And then they (short-term volunteers) would leave again. They would be put to work doing one of two things, and then ‘poof!’ they would be gone. And so the people there, who are solid and in their own cultural environment, have these people popping in and then popping out (3.1) p. 4, l. 112-15
There are was some real concern about the recipients who are receiving these things. You can’t just drop money (2.2) p. 2, l. 59-60

We thought if we talk to them now, and the next time people will talk to them and does that mean they always have to tell their story? I thought that’s not really none of our business unless they want to share it with us. (9.1) p. 10, l. 334-5

Merriam & Bierema (2014) assert that White privilege goes often unchallenged by Whites who see their viewpoints not as a matter of perspective, but rather as factual data. They are often are unaware of the advantages conferred by their skin color. My research participants’ subject positions as White, privileged outsiders created a power imbalance. (Chazan 2013; Heron 2007). However, when asked questions about how they perceived their own subject position of power, and how their Whiteness impacted their relationships with those with whom they interacted, over half of the participants asserted that rather than being aware of difference, most ‘forgot’ this in the process of developing strong bonds of fellowship and friendship with those with whom they interacted:

I feel that we are equals. I feel on an equal footing, I don’t feel any status... I don’t feel I hold any status over them at all. (2.1) p. 9, l. 233-5

I don’t know whether I was correct or not, but I didn’t feel that they thought of us as being better off than them. (4.1) p. 7, l. 207-8

So you have to be very careful. I think that’s one of the things that I take from all of this, is that it’s just that you have to question your assumptions. Obviously you cannot totally be dispassionate, but just think about who you are. (11.1) p. 10, l. 346-9

I did go there with a feeling of privilege, but that lasted for not too many days, because I saw what was happening. They were happy people, and had a lot of things that we didn't have (8.2) p. 1, l. 16-18

It's about humanity. I feel that my contact with them has opened my heart and that we are all in this together. (1.1) p. 14, l. 505

I think there was a big novelty when we first went, but now I think they see that there are differences between us. We white people are not all the same. (11.1) p. 5, l. 165-6
Rather than being unaware of their positioning in an unequal power relationship, they initially acknowledged the imbalance but it appeared to be a non-issue, given the powerful bonds of kinship they felt.

**Disquiet and Re-balancing**

One of the unexpected themes arising from the data, and related to the theme of discovering a ‘place of belonging’, was a subsequent strongly recurring theme (identified by 8 participants) of their restlessness and feelings of loss and marginalization upon returning home. It came as a surprise to some: “When I moved back I found that I didn't realize that I would feel this way”.

This constituted an echoing experience of disruption which required, again, an adjustment to loss of role, identity and meaning.

*I thought, ‘I have done this incredible thing for five months’, and when I came back it was the ‘same old, same old’. It was disappointing.* (9.2) p. 2, l. 52-3.

*I expected people say it to say ‘Oh, yes, let’s have a coffee and sit down and tell me about Africa!’* And you would say one thing and they would say, ‘That's nice’. And then the conversation would immediately switch to something else and you thought to yourself, ‘Did I say something or do something? What is happening here? Nobody seemed to be really interested. Nobody. No. They didn't ask to see the pictures. (10.1) P. 7, l. 227-32

*Once you get back to the West, you feel disconnected... You know, it's not as ‘hands-on’ anymore when you come back...* (2.1) p. 6, l. 144-5

*I'm not as motivated to go out and find things. I'm a different person* (7.2) p. 2, l. 39-41

Some felt disempowered and marginalized; disappointed over discovering family and friends had very little interest in their activities while volunteering:

*To be honest, I don't think they really interested in what I do. If they ask, I tell them, but they are often more interested in the actual journey, and how I got there.* (11.1) p. 14, l. 462-3

*Surprisingly, I thought people would be interested in what I had done and what it's like, and I would be sharing stories. There really wasn't very much interest at all. Even seeing pictures or hearing about it. I guess I was disappointed in that... Even my children... I guess their lives were busy with their children* (9.1) p. 7, l. 248-9

109
I was away five months and my children greeted me at the airport with just a hug and kiss and 'how are you'....and my friends.... I have put together a huge album and nobody...at least I don't think anybody.... really wanted to look at it except me.

Some spoke of the emptiness they experienced having lost meaningful relationships;

I didn't really feel like I was connected to anybody. (10.1) p. 10, l. 319-20

The bonds there were so strong. The bonds are not the same here somehow. The bonds here are more superficial somehow than there.... I felt very much alone. (9.1) p. 8, l. 275-6

I really miss not being there and being surrounded by those people. (2.1) p. 8, l. 210-1

I don't have any friends here.... I don't know why. I'm just not sure about what it is that makes the difference between people that I try to make friends with here, and the group down there. I don't know what it is (3.1) p. 9, l. 277-9

Not all experienced this disappointment: some did continue to find meaning as a ‘returning development worker’ and were able to maintain this positive identity:

There's feelings from my friends of ‘Oh, you're amazing to have done that! How could you possibly have done all that... we want to hear all about it!’(7.2)... p. 1, l. 52-3

I have some friends in the church and in the community, and they invited me to speak with them about my experiences. They want to see pictures... well, I don't know that they really want to see them, but I show them anyway! (8.2) p. 2, l. 58-61

And all of my Face book friends say ‘Wow that's amazing... Good for you’ (3.2) p. 1, l. 30-31

The remaining respondents attempted in different ways to mitigate against their experience of marginalization and ‘invisibility’ by adopting ways to continue the experience of somehow making a difference through ongoing efforts to fundraise, raise awareness or maintain connection with those with whom they worked while volunteering:

So we relate what we are doing with the fundraising efforts.... it's not something we are doing 'over there', is something very personal. (5.1) p. 3, l. 104-5.

I feel that I have made a lot of connections with people who do great things and so my role is to try and continue to support them in some way (10.1) . p. 1, l. 16-17
Some derived satisfaction from being able to return home and tell stories or describe their first-hand observations of the benefits to the recipients of funding initiatives. “I think that a big part of that is the socializing and telling the stories when we get home”. Others found ways to continue their sense of purpose in a variety of ways: one found a job with the international organization with whom she volunteered and was able to support others when they also felt the same disquiet upon their return, thus normalizing and universalizing the experience for them. Three found other ways to continue in some way to extend the work into activities they could do back home, such as fundraising or connecting people to organizations. One will continue in the role of mentor, going as frequently as she can, even though she admits she is slowing down. The sole male respondent, in particular, spoke about the learning he gained about other cultures, and the telling of stories about this became his focus for connecting the experiences to meaningfulness once he returned: “It’s bringing the stories home, which makes the fundraising easier and more real”, he claims. He will continue in the role of ‘overseer’ of donation enterprises, continuing to share stories with donors in Canada. Only two expressed sadness over feeling they cannot perhaps continue due to aging and frailty, despite their desire to go again.

The following chapter will reflect upon these findings and discuss their contributions to theories of positive aging and the discourse on elder volunteerism and social capital. The impact of development volunteering on elder health and well-being will also be addressed.
Chapter Five: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of significant findings

As outlined in the previous chapter, four core new key properties of the phenomenon of pursuing development work in later life emerged from the data, which I found were not identified by researchers in previous studies. First, what came as an unexpected gift to all twelve participants was the discovery of feeling immediately welcomed into a place of belonging, where each felt instantly at home and connected in meaningful ways, despite vastly different life contexts, with people living in that country. Their understanding of ‘community’ appeared to be about belonging and sharing values, despite the disparate lifestyles and non-shared histories. Secondly, upon their return to Canada many experienced ensuing feelings of marginalization, isolation and loss of relationships and meaning, necessitating a need to ‘re-balance’ their lives and find ways to continue to find meaning. Thirdly, most (9) participants reported that a significant, disruptive event had occurred in their lives, at a time preceding their volunteer experience. They framed it as having experienced a definite existential crisis of meaning, rather than undergoing a life transition: for some, it was life-threatening illness, for others, abandonment by a partner, or sudden loss of both companionship and routines through widowhood. This disruption rendered them disconsolate and restless, feeling the need for a rebuilding of meaning in their lives. Although some of the literature I reviewed referred to life crises and transitions (see Chapter2.3: Theories of Identity, Roles and Transitions/Late-life transitions, p. 22), I found no references that framed it as a life-threatening ‘disruption’.

Some participants further described their experience as two forces coming together to pave the way for an opportunity to seize this choice: the experience of crisis that shattered existing
patterns, propelling them forward, and an almost universal, powerful experience of being guided by that ‘something’ that was urging them forward. This fourth key finding, reported by eleven of the twelve participants was a conviction of being led by a greater force into volunteering in a developing country, although mostly their statements did not indicate any connection to religiosity, but were rather secularly framed. The literature is prolific in its attention to the connection between volunteering and religious practice as a motivating force (see Chapter 2.4: Theories of Volunteerism, Motivators in Volunteering, p. 31), but no research was found that addressed the phenomenon of ‘being guided’ in non-religious or secular terms, that motivated so many of the participants. Two said they had no idea this was about to happen and found themselves propelled forward. Unexpected, unsought, and often in the form of a powerful conviction, however, the pathway was opened and made very clear to them all. Sometimes it came through a serendipitous meeting with a stranger or acquaintance, and sometimes simply a ‘knowing’ that the elements of time, ability, resources and freedom combined at this particular time to create a new beginning.

**Working with the participants**

In the process of seeking answers to my questions, I was given the privilege of getting to know the circumstances of my participants’ lives and appreciate the wonderful, unique qualities that each brought to this experience of volunteering. There was a “profound simplicity and simple profundity” inherent in telling the stories of my participants, and of bearing witness to their valuable contributions to the social capital that older volunteers represent (MacKenzie, 2016).

I wanted to contextualize the phenomenon under study within the life stories of my participants. I constructed a summary of each interview, weaving the volunteer experiences into an interpretive
synopsis of their story, which I returned to them. This served as both a methodological strategy (see Chapter Three), and a theoretical purpose: my rationale was to honour the strengths I had been privileged to hear (see Appendix 5: Participant Profiles).

Current literature about aging speaks to the value of focusing on a strengths perspective as opposed to older problem-oriented theories of aging. Australian psychotherapist Michael White used the tool of story-writing to achieve healing with his clients (White, 2000) The act of returning a client’s story to them functioned as a way of validating and honouring their life experience, and resulted in their ability to perceive and value personal strengths.

Many of the participants expressed disappointment and feelings of marginalization upon their return home, and spoke of how little people seemed to want to hear of the burgeoning sense of excitement and accomplishment they had experienced while working in the developing world. The result was their feeling marginalized and lonely, having lost the precious sense of solidarity that had highlighted their time with others there, with whom they discovered a kinship. My practice of ‘storying’ the participants’ accounts of their experiences, and returning them as synopses of their accomplishments may serve to validate strengths and mitigate against the experience of feeling marginalized and ‘invisible’ upon returning home.

Results indicate that for these participants there were no significant differences in motivation and meaning-making based on socio-economic factors or levels of education. Koenig (2002) contends that, regardless of socio-economic position, satisfaction in later life results not from material gains, but rather from identifying a higher purpose in life. He suggests that volunteering may be one way to acquire purpose and power, viewing later life as an opportunity for growth. Material resources did not factor strongly in participants’ ability to volunteer, nor did it appear
make a difference in the level of meaning it held for them. Socio-economically, they ranged from one who lives in a co-op housing development, who conducts fund-raising initiatives to supplement her pension funds, to others who own their own homes in affluent areas of Vancouver and Victoria. All identified that their experiences meant more to them than financial rewards.

**Contributions of the study to the field**

It is not my intent to offer generalizations from this study to other volunteer initiatives undertaken by older Canadians, nor to the larger aging population, but to increase credibility by thoroughly examining and re-defining themes arising in my data, as well as increase transferability by noting relevance of the findings from the study to existing areas of research (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Some of the data revealed themes that confirm findings in my early literature review: for the majority of the participants:

- Mental health and wellbeing improved
- Physical health was enhanced
- Great gains in self-satisfaction in performing new roles
- Identity was re-constructed
- Motivators to do this work often corresponded to life-long values
- Life transitions and fewer commitments led to the ability to volunteer
Theories of positive aging

My research yielded some significant contributions to the discourse on positive theories of aging, as I suspected while conducting my initial literature review (see Chapter Two: Theories of Aging). Increasingly, theorists have begun to expand their thinking to include the potential for innovation, creativity and transformational learning in later life. Cohen (2006), a pioneer of research that connected creativity and learning to meaning in later life, proposed a model of late-life development based on strengths, including wisdom and creativity. Cohen’s approach focused on the potential for growth that occurred not in spite of old age but because of it: he emphasized that late-life wisdom and creativity played a dynamic role in promoting culture and the common good via intergenerational and community interactions (Agronin, 2013). Results of this study supported these ideas that older age groups are able to engage in creative and transformative behaviors due to their ability to tap into lifelong wisdom and experience.

The relatively recent Innovation Theory of Successful Aging appears to resonate best with the data results of this study. It proposes to consider innovation as a growth mechanism that enables one to broaden and deepen the sense of meaning in life, which leads to greater wellbeing and satisfaction with life (Nimrod & Rotem, 2012; Nimrod & Kleiber 2007).

One of the most interesting findings of this research project has been the depth to which the participants discovered a path to claim or re-claim agency after experiencing an existential crisis of meaning through a devastating experience in later life, and how they re-created identity through finding new purpose in adopting the role of volunteering in developing countries.

I suggest that my research study continues to build on the research of those mentioned above to further theories of positive aging, placing emphasis on innovation, re-creating identity and re-
claiming personal agency, fostering creativity, finding purpose, focussing on zest for new learning in later life, and exploring courageous and positive approaches to seizing late-life adventure.

**Transformational learning across age cohorts**

Literature concerning international volunteering has mostly been focused on young adults: in the recent past, young people taking a ‘gap year’ as part of the transition from school to university has increased opportunities for overseas volunteering. Rochester, Paine and Howlett (2009) suggest that this has spawned a minor industry dedicated to providing them, quoting the British Department for Education and Skills’ (Jones, 2004) statistic of over 800 organizations that offer 350,000 placements in 200 countries.

Gronlund (2011) conducted a study with 24 volunteers aged 21-36 living in Helsinki, Finland. Assuming that young adulthood is a time of maturing identity, he posits that “young adults thus make an interesting group in which the associations between narrated identity, values, and volunteering can be scrutinized” (p. 856). Results of the study described younger volunteers as fighting against injustices and wanting to make the world a better place. These values also gave meaning and motivation to their volunteering. They were very aware of injustices in society and three of them also cited injustices at a global level. Results of this study contain similar themes and patterns to those in my study, suggesting that the data appears to be consistent with processes that happen with other cohorts as well. Therefore it is a question as to whether there is an age-specific transformational learning that results from participating in volunteer development work, or whether it simply results from intrinsic values held by people across a variety of age cohorts.
Another interesting finding in the literature describes the difficulties of readjustment that younger volunteers experienced upon their return home, the same phenomenon that most of the participants in my study also experienced. This ‘disquiet’ has apparently been so prevalent that a support organization called ‘Returned Volunteer Action’ has been formed to assist them in the transition. (Rochester, Paine and Howlett, 2009, quoting Davis, Smith et al., 2005). Perhaps chronological age in itself is simply not an important factor in discussing transformative learning, re-creating identity and finding meaning, and indeed these at any age can occur, given the right set of circumstances and opportunities. In short, research on volunteering could benefit from more studies comparing different age cohorts.

**Social capital and elder volunteering**

My study also builds on existing theory about how older people represent a voluminous body of social capital that I feel is relatively untapped. Pfahl (2011) maintains the growing force of older people is a reservoir of wisdom and experience, and describes older people as “storehouses of narrative potential waiting to be tapped for themselves, family, and friends; for communities where they live and work; and for the common good” (p. 69). Biggs, Carstensen and Hogan (2012) concur that the phenomenon of aging is a cultural as well as a demographic phenomenon, representing accrued investment that has yet to be fully drawn upon.

Narushima (2005), who found that older adults who were involved in a ‘meaningful’ volunteer experience, one that gives them a sense of social contribution and self-growth (as cited in Chappell 2001), creates purposeful roles for older people and promotes transformative learning, citizenship participation and social capital in an aging society. Results of this research study have added to this discourse, by describing another avenue through which older people contribute to
social capital from a global perspective, while transforming their lives and achieving new levels of satisfaction and wellbeing.

**International Volunteering in Later Life**

Current literature is sparse concerning the experience of volunteering overseas in later life: this study adds to the research about the benefits of volunteering in later life by adding the dimension of the ‘Older Global Volunteer’ experience. While there is a proliferation of studies that explore elder volunteering within the context of their own communities (Garland, Myers & Wolfer, 2009; Erlinghagen, 2016; Choi & Chou, 2010; Clerkin, Paynter & Taylor, 2009; Golding, 2011) there is little data about the event of elders exploring opportunities in the larger world.

Some organizations indeed do recruit older volunteers, and they suggest that there are now more early retirees looking for new interests. Although there are socioeconomic differences within this older cohort, and many international NGOs require a substantial financial commitment from potential volunteers, there are many well and fairly affluent older Canadians who are drawn to them. Many organizations, (CUSO, VSO, etc) recruit mostly retired professionals. There has also been a growth of ‘volunteer tourism’ (or ‘voluntourism’) that appears to appeal to older people with time and resources, which is promoted as a cheap way to travel and experience another culture and as a form of personal development. One of the respondents felt this was an avenue she might explore: “I'm hoping and wishing I can continue to somehow connect through voluntouring, because I'd like to see a little bit more of God's good world, but if it can be combined with volunteering I would love that”.

In focusing on elder volunteering in developing countries, I suggest that two waves of opportunity come together. First, people are living longer and healthier lives and there are
increasing numbers of older retired people with sufficient resources who might choose to engage in volunteering. Second, the concept of the ‘global village’, in which knowledge and travel across the world are becoming easier and more commonplace: older people have more access to technology that brings the concerns closer into their own ‘backyards’. Some may want to branch out in further directions, addressing initiatives in other countries, away from initiatives in their own communities to expanding into needs world-wide, as older people become more conscious of global needs. While the practice of donating funds to non-government organizations has been a primary activity of older adults (e.g. The Stephen Lewis Foundation’s ‘Grandmothers to Grandmothers’ Campaign) who have conducted considerable fundraising in the past, some older people may choose to subsidize this experience by going in person to use their own skills, talents and social resources to assist organizations ‘on the ground’.

Applying a critical lens

I wondered about how participants made sense of the development experience, and particularly the relations of power in which they were positioned. This was one of the most difficult things for me to interpret, as I attempted to explore whether the volunteers were challenged by their own privilege and Whiteness, and how they perceived themselves to be seen as they worked side by side with indigenous people.

The key question, Bishop (2002) posits, is ‘Who benefits, and in what ways?’ The benefits to volunteers may include deeper cultural awareness and self-satisfaction, but there are concerns about the value of volunteers’ contributions to the host organizations and to the communities they serve. Widely-held assumptions in the developed world consider developing countries being
in dire need, but he raises the concern but that “such volunteerism may actually reinforce rather than challenge inequities and dependence” (p. 120).

Heron (2005) suggests “our desire for development work can be more accurately understood as a desire for self” (p.157). Quoting Foucault, she claims that in order to resist the reproduction of dominant power relations, it is necessary to be conscious of our own subjectivity:

> How to resist Whiteness is a recurring theme of whiteness studies. Refusing whiteness becomes more complicated than deciding to refrain from exercising privilege, because such a choice does not dislodge internalized dominance. Nor can such subjectivity be easily refused. It can, however, be deconstructed and continually challenged. (Heron 2007, p.11)

When I struggled to interpret and explain their experiences of affinity, rather than difference, with people with whom they came into contact, I concluded that despite the disparate backgrounds, socio-economic levels and all the other concomitants of difference, most of my respondents found they connected almost immediately, on a fairly intimate level of mutual acceptance and shared bonding with others.

Interestingly, in their study of sociality, spirituality, and meaning-making, Cacioppo, Hawkley, Rickett and Masi (2005) found that the need for the company of others “is measurable in the long-term effects of social connectedness on health, well-being and successful aging” (p.44).

Loewy (1996) presents an interesting and original theory of social relationships, describing different obligations humans fulfill to moral strangers, acquaintances, and friends. What I feel pertains specifically to my study is his claim that all humans share an innate primitive sense of compassion and mutual respect. I wonder if this might be at the root of the solidarity and shared understandings that my participants experienced as they interacted with ‘moral friends’ from
widely diverse cultural backgrounds, who often seemed to value them as equals and understood the sacrifices they had made with respect to their contributions;

_They knew we were doing it as relative expense to ourselves and leaving our family behind and going to places that were not familiar. I saw that they could sense that and they appreciated it._ (10.2) p. 1, l. 33-5

_He couldn’t understand why Canadians would pay their own way, and travel a long way to go over there and help his people, and physically to all this hard work, just because we want to help? To him, it was absolutely amazing that people would do that._ (6.1) p. 6, l 192-4

_I don't know whether I was correct or not, but I didn't feel that they thought of us as being better off than them._ (4.1) p. 7, l. 207-8

_I did go there with a feeling of privilege, but that lasted for not too many days, because I saw what was happening. They were happy people, and had a lot of things that we didn't have_ (8.2) p. 1, l. 16-18

_I think there was a big novelty when we first went, but now I think they see that there are ‘’/:/differences between us. We white people are not all the same._(11.1) p. 5, l. 165-6

**Further research**

My research did not examine if there are gender differences in the phenomenon of volunteering in developing countries. I consider gender to be an important factor that this study cannot really address, given that the sample contained eleven women and only one man. Identity, behaviours and socially-construed gender roles are particularly prescribed in this age cohort (Fyall and Gazley, 2015). Patterns of involvement in this study have hinted that the women appeared to relish being with people, within community, while the one male respondent gained meaning from providing resources, or doing for them, such as the delivering of equipment. Further research might attempt to answer the question of gender inequality in elder development volunteering, and why my exploration of the sampling yielded a disproportionate representation of women. Do genders differ in negotiating disruptions in later life? Do different genders re-create identity through innovative choices, or through continuation of established patterns? Are different
genders’ searches for meaning pursued down different paths? These are some of the gender-related issues that require further exploration.

This study revealed that a major precipitating life disruption contributed significantly to the desire to re-create identity and meaning, and to reclaim agency in late life. Research suggests that a devastating life disruption or traumatic event that occurs at any age typically results in growth that comes out of that experience (Joseph and Linley 2006; Yerushalmi, 2007; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). Further research studies might continue to compare the effects of major life disruption on different age cohorts, to assess how it impacts health and re-investment in healing choices to re-construct identity and purpose.

This research initiative was conducted with a convenience sampling strategy, and results are limited to examining those older respondents who are privileged with the resources and skills and desire to undertake this work. A comparative research study might yield further data about the reasons why older people are either unable, or choose not to volunteer in developing countries. Is fear a limiting factor? How do they respond to friends and family who do choose this form of volunteering? Also, future research might focus on the meanings and effect on life satisfaction that may ensue should volunteers be rendered unable to continue this work in later life, due to conditions of resource depletion, poor health, etc.

Another interesting topic for potential research might be a comparative study of elder and younger volunteers who choose to do development work. Are there similarities/differences in transformational learning between the two cohorts? What are the different motivating factors at play? Do younger volunteers find meaning in similar ways as do older volunteers? How is identity reconstructed in both cohorts through experiencing this phenomenon?
Further research might also explore the phenomenon of aging, newly retired partners who, transitioning through changes in life’s routines, choose to travel together to form a new working partnership by volunteering overseas. One respondent in my study lamented that her husband, who had passed away, would dearly have loved to join her in volunteering in the developing world. How might the choice to travel and volunteer together impact partners’ perception of meaning and well-being?

Interesting research for future studies might focus on people who choose to go and live in a different country in later life. One study discusses retired ex-pat Britons who go to live in the south of Spain and find meaning through ongoing projects that serve the Spanish residents (Haas, 2013). Are there similar patterns found in Canadians migrating to other countries, such as Mexico, and if so, what motivates older Canadians to choose such permanent avenues to explore this role? Is there a symbiotic relationship that develops which constitutes new meaning for both ‘permanent’ volunteers and indigenous residents?

Considerable research has been conducted concerning volunteering’s association with religious beliefs and church attendance, finding a high degree of correlation. (Yeary, Ounpraseuth, Moore, Bursac and Greene, 2012; Garland, Myers and Wolfer, 2009; Lim and Putman, 2010). My sampling resulted in only two people who responded from faith-based organizations, and they did not speak at length about their beliefs or church connections as being high motivators. An interesting comparative study could explore the differences and similarities that exist between those who attribute their motives and meaning-making to their religious perspectives, and those who do not. Finally, further research might question the meaning that Canadians derive from helping refugees from other countries to settle in Canada: rather than going out into the world,
the world is brought to them at home. What challenges do they face, and how does their involvement impact their sense of satisfaction?

In summary, I believe there to be a multitude of interesting studies that might be conducted to enhance understanding of the myriad ways in which older Canadians can be involved as active participants in a global context.

**Reflections on the research**

**Supervisory Mentorship**

I begin this section by summarizing my reflections on how my supervisory team guided me through the territory of academia. I realized that at every step of the way I was being challenged by my three supervisors to lead with my curiosity, to surface new ideas and to ‘turn things on their heads’ in order to discover new angles or perspectives about what I wanted to explore, and later what I was finding. I met at regular intervals throughout the last two years with all three supervisors, learning to critically evaluate the literature and choose my topic and methodology (see *Methodological Memo 5: Blending Methodologies, p. 130*), formulate my research proposal, gain Research Ethics Board approval, explore strategies to access my participant sample and begin to collect my data. My research topic and questions underwent many revisions and refinement before crystallizing into what I decided I really meant to do. When collecting data, I expected to unearth answers but instead continued to surface more and more questions, being led by the team into developing more and more curiosity.

My regular conversations with my primary supervisor guided me in the process of shaping and explicating the meaning of the phenomenon as it emerged. (see Chapter Three: Methods/Data
Analysis/ Consultations with Supervisor, p. 61) Our meetings yielded such a depth of material that I became quite anxious about forgetting details, leading to my audio-taping each interview, listening to it several times before transcribing it and returning it to her for perusal and editing. I was then able to read over the material slowly, ruminating over the questions she posed in order to ensure I had understood and incorporated her suggested revisions.

Throughout my data collection and analysis, one of my primary concerns was being transparent and reflexive in my ruminations. As an older development volunteer myself, I have intimately shared in the phenomenon I was studying. While I realized I could not ‘bracket’ myself out of the research, I tried to be very conscious of how I was re-storying the accounts of my participants. I was aware also of my position as a past professional social worker and how I needed to manage the concern about the blurring of this role with that of researcher. In this, my supervisor, as a fellow social worker, was especially helpful (see Methodological Memo 6: Consultation with Supervisor, p. 133)

Reflections on Methodology

Recruitment

I found it somewhat of a surprise that the initial foray into finding participants yielded such plentiful and such speedy responses. In fact, potential candidates, who had heard of the project, through word of mouth, continued to request to be involved long after the desired number of participants were obtained. I felt an ethical obligation to follow up with them, but it was outside of the scope of the dissertation research. These people were asked if they might consider being available later in the fall if needed, and all agreed. A decision was made to conduct interviews with the current respondents before sending out further invitations, in an effort to achieve time-
limited sensitivity, and no further invitations to participate were required, as sampling saturation was achieved (see Chapter 3: Methods/ Recruitment Strategy)

**Interviews vs. Focus Groups**

I had considered using focus groups for my research study; however, I suspected that the presence of multiple voices and the interaction that ensues in focus groups might make it more difficult to ascertain details of individual participants’ lived experiences. However, although using focus groups did not immediately appear to fit my study, at the end of the data collection phase I reflected that it might have resulted in amazing comradeship and solidarity had I gathered the participants together to collectively share their experiences and reflect upon the common (and different) meanings and sense of purpose that they gained from them. A postscript to this research journey may be to hold a celebratory event to which participants are all invited, to allow for a unique opportunity for a sense of ‘community’ to take place.

**Adopting techniques other methodologies**

As I progressed through the early stages of data collection and organization, I began to think about adopting elements borrowed from other methodological approaches: narrative inquiry and grounded theory. My rationale was born out of collecting data via a ‘story-telling’, or narrative, process, organizing them through an iterative, grounded theory approach and ultimately bringing them back into an interpretative phenomenological analytical framework.

When first devising a conceptual model for my research, my initial choice of methodology was Narrative Inquiry, which explores the stories through which people understand and make sense out of their world (McAdams, 2005; Pfahl, 2011; Wells, 2011). Clandinin (2006) maintains that wherever there is the story, there is a study of human experience that can be told and retold many
times. The story, as it is being told, she claims, “becomes a multi-coloured tapestry and a mosaic of sharing. It is in the telling of the story that human experience is grounded in the complexity of life” (p.3). One reason I was drawn towards a narrative approach to the process of collecting my participants’ stories concerns my role as researcher, which from a narrative perspective is unique in that it is characterized by a co-journeying experience. This holds significance for my own late-life transition experiences: through engaging with my participants in the process of data collection, I am also resonating with, and re-telling, my own story. Within the participant’s story may also be an interwoven story of the researcher gaining insight into her or his own life (Creswell, 2014). For all of these reasons, I initially considered a narrative approach to collecting my data was methodologically sound and appropriate.

As I progressed further into my data collection, a methodological dilemma arose, as I struggled with how to manage the concept of ‘emergent design’. Although Smith and Osborn (2004) suggest there is no right answer to the question of the sample size, and states IPA studies have been published with samples of one, several, fifteen and more, most interpretative phenomenological research is conducted with a small sample size. However, I felt that a broad sampling was necessary if I was to discover different and deeper perspectives about the phenomenon of volunteering in developing countries. In order be intentional and strategic in attempting to meet this need, I was concerned about the risk of compromising my phenomenological methodology, which requires in-depth analysis of only a narrow selection of participants (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Kumar, 2012; Creswell, 2014). It became clear that my data collection process was leaning towards a narrative inquiry approach. Both narrative inquiry and phenomenological analysis appeared appropriate and had relevance to my study. I wrestled with this dilemma, exploring it several times with my on-campus peer support group:
Concurrently, as I progressed through the early stages of coding data, my supervisory committee observed that I had begun to naturally move away from my identified phenomenological perspective, to become more in line with grounded theory, in terms of language (e.g. ‘open/axial coding, theoretical sampling’, etc.), techniques and approach. Again, I sought supervisory direction about the wisdom of blending methodologies: using a narrative approach to actual data collection, which allowed a more expanded strategy to collect the stories of a wider sample of participants, employing the constant comparison techniques of grounded theory to code and organize the data, and continuing to employ a phenomenological analysis of the data.

Methodological Memo 4: ‘Thesis Writing support Group’, Example’

‘I want to engage respondents from a wide spectrum of parameters: socio-economic, life skills/experience, gender, levels of involvement, type of volunteering, kinds of volunteer environments, types of ‘triggers’ or life, results of volunteer efforts, cognizance of critical, post-colonial issues, etc. Phenomenology requires only a very limited number of participants...and I have 12 respondents, all of whom represent very different perspectives! How do I avoid compromising my methodology?’

Methodological Memo 5: Blending Methodologies: Excerpt from Supervisory Committee Meeting:

Qualitative research is ‘all over the place’, and results emerge in a MESSY fashion! A continued focus on a phenomenological analysis is recommended at this point. However, a ‘blend’ of methodologies is also appropriate, given the researcher’s decisions are justifiable and defendable. As phenomenological analysis progresses, it is less about the individual stories, and more about the difference or similarity between the codes/ ideas. Frequency of, or repeated, themes influence the choice of what is included, and what become dominant notes.
Reflexivity

One of the hallmarks of good qualitative research is recognizing the subjective nature of analysis itself” (Valandra, 2012, quoting Patton, 2002). At the root of my struggle to assess the most appropriate methodology was to ascertain my own role as researcher, and the degree to which I situated myself within the research. This issue has always been a central concern for me, as I identify so strongly as a co-subject, being a part of the cohort under consideration, and having experienced myself the phenomena under exploration. Nevertheless, my goal was to describe the experiences of my participants’ life journeys through late life transitions, as authentically as possible. My desire from the beginning had been to hear and represent their voices as honourably and truthfully as I could. My challenge has been to articulate my efforts in a coherent, critical voice that met the academic rigour and reflexivity required in qualitative research.

I felt it was my ethical responsibility to be as transparent as possible when considering my positioning within my research, and began a journey of thoroughly documenting my own thoughts, reflections and responses during the data collection and analysis process in my personal journal. I found myself writing about how my presence, my history and my social context influenced my participants’ responses. Valandra (2012) summarizes the dilemma well:

While it is next to impossible to find answers to these reflective questions, raising them, journaling about them, and using field notes and transcripts to account for interpretations represented my efforts to stay intentional, conscious, and transparent in amplifying and privileging the voices of study participants as authentically as was possible during the analysis phase of the research. These efforts also supported the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (p. 302).

A purely descriptive phenomenological approach would have required me to ‘bracket’ my own experiences in order to distill the essence of my participants’ experiences as authentically and
faithfully as possible, without adding any interpretation of my own. It was impossible to bracket out my own experiences and biases, but neither did I wish to jeopardize the authenticity of my participants’ experiences due to over-emphasizing my own interpretations of their stories, as I began to make interpretations about the meaning and impact that volunteering had on their sense of wellbeing and perceived self-satisfaction. I recognized that being positioned as an interpretative researcher, I was involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the participants: Creswell (2014) cautions that this introduces a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues into the qualitative research process.

Having had social work experience in synthesizing clients’ life stories into organized psychosocial histories, I was confident about my ability to analyze the participants’ stories, and then ‘re-story’ them into a framework that makes sense; my career has afforded me the privilege of hearing many stories and I am confident of my ability to listen actively. At the same time, I was aware of the need to be vigilantly reflexive about my own personal perspectives of aging, and my experience in volunteering, which shaped how I would interpret their accounts. Having personally pursued volunteer work in developing countries, I have intimately shared in the experience or phenomenon under study. For the sake of verisimilitude, it was crucial that I employed a thoroughly reflexive lens to my research. Edwards & Holland (2013) inserts a critical perspective: “By its nature, qualitative interview research involves imbalances of power; it is the interviewer who defines the situation and who frames the topic and course of the interview” (p. 78). Consideration of power imbalances led to a concern that surfaced during the interview process was the degree of role conflict between that of my past professional orientation as a social worker and as a researcher. The interviews felt familiar and comfortable, similar to
those I conducted to gather psychosocial assessments in my social work practice. Concerned about overlapping role conflict, I sought consultation:

**Methodological Memo 6: Consultation with Supervisor**

“The very nature of doing the work of social work is getting people to tell us the truth of their lives, while in fact when many times we are occupying a social control role as well as social work role. That particular dynamic isn't the same as the research interview here because you didn't really have any power over them... but you do have power over how you interpret the story and it's just one of those things”.

I concluded that the major difference was in the power dynamics. As a social worker, I was the ‘helper’, and my client the ‘helpee’, creating an immediate power imbalance. My agenda was also very different: my social work goal was to assist in understanding my client with the intention of helping them, whereas my research role and desire was to simply hear, honour and try to interpret my participants’ stories. I gained as much pleasure in hearing about, and resonating with, my participants’ experiences as they said they did in sharing them with me, whereas my goal in social work practice was to avoid inappropriate self-disclosure and simply be present to my client.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical practice is a dynamic process throughout data collection and analysis, requiring sustained reflection and review (Smith, et al., 2009; Clandinin, 2007; Creswell, 2014). Informed consent was gained not only for data collection, but also for the likely outcomes of data analysis, particularly the inclusion of extracts in published reports. Steps were taken, via the Letter of Consent and ensuing discussion at the first meeting, to ensure participants fully understood that they could withdraw at any time, and that their material would remain anonymous. Issues of
anonymity and confidentiality took on added importance as the complexity of lives was made visible in my research texts.

An important starting point for my study was the principle that ‘no evidence of potential harm’ was addressed, as noted in my application to the University of Victoria’s Human Ethics Committee (see Chapter 3.4 Methods/Research Ethics Board Approval p. 47). This principle was not violated in my qualitative research study. Sites for the interviews were selected that did not raise power issues or held in places or with persons who have a vested outcome in the study.

My Supervisory Committee performed ongoing supervision throughout the entire process of sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis. Self-reflexivity during this phase is a vital component in assuring authenticity, truthfulness and transparency: throughout my fieldwork I strove to maintain a critical, reflexive, respectful and caring practice that balanced academic rigour with engaged participation, to construct a credible and sound analysis.

**Veracity, Rigour and Transferability**

**Veracity**

An important question in any research is whether the research data is whether it does accurately "capture" the phenomenon being studied. I would suggest that the first veracity check is the participants themselves. They are qualified more than anyone to assess the findings of the research, and decide whether they are truthful for them. This was achieved through ‘member checking’ during the interview phase. Secondly, I needed to evaluate whether the findings appeared to have verisimilitude for myself and the research committee. Finally, I checked the findings against the current literature and reported how they fit within the body of literature in the area of study.
Rigour

Solid ways to ensure rigour, suggest Baxter and Eyles (1997) are the provision of information on the appropriateness of the methodology, information on respondent selection and a strong rationale for using the research approach. I have achieved this through having carefully assessed the rationale for selecting a qualitative paradigm, an interpretative worldview, and the consistent application of phenomenological analysis methods. I selected participants who were chosen for their ability to relate their experiences of the phenomenon under study. I incorporated member checking through making available to participants both a transcription of taped data, with conclusions, in order to check for accuracy, and a final copy of their story, as I have interpreted it. Peer debriefing, with a team of peer supporters, ensured rigour throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Exposing my data and interpretations to my co-supervisor in order to point up possible sources of misinterpretation similarly increased rigour in analyzing the content (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

I kept a personal reflexive journal to capture my own powerful reflections as I conducted the transcriptions of the data. Engaging in the discipline of memo writing also provided a comprehensive audit trail to my study, as I recorded the analytical decisions and interpretations I made of the data. Triangulation was achieved through using both my observational field notes and research journal notes as a set of alternative lenses when collecting and analyzing the textual data, continually referring to my methodological memos. I also incorporated the perspectives of my peer support group and mentor, and I consistently sought corroboration and guidance from my supervisory committee throughout. Such flexibility, reflexivity and responsiveness contributed to the overall strength and rigour of my data collection and analysis.
Transferability

My analysis provided rich, transparent, contextualized accounts of the participants’ lived experiences. This will enable others to evaluate its transferability to different people in contexts which are similar, and the effectiveness of my study will be judged by the light it sheds within this broader context (Smith, et al. 2009).

However, at the core of phenomenology is the deep awareness of the unique, unpredictable nature of human experience, claims Hycner (1985), one of the very early pioneers of phenomenological analysis. It is the uniqueness of human beings that “will always make the attempt to develop a totally comprehensive theory of human experience an ultimately futile one” (p. 300).

Conclusions

Data emerging from my study revealed that participating in the phenomenon of development volunteering resulted in improved health and perceived self-satisfaction, wellness and general wellbeing. Several participants noted that a serendipitous benefit of their traveling to work in developing countries was an improvement in their general physical health, through exercise, sunshine and a following a stricter diet. Along with physical gains, many participants spoke of the positive social, mental and emotional benefits of their volunteering experience. I suggest one of the most important findings was that many participants found the gains they had achieved in both making healthier life choices and finding a heightened feeling of well-being and satisfaction continued after their return home. This has implications for knowledge translation concerning the value of learned healthful behaviors from the experience of travelling.
Involvement in a new activity, according to Nimrod & Kleiber, (2007) may result in positive psychological outcomes, such as self-reinvention, enhanced sense of meaning in life, and wellbeing. My study both confirms this and adds further important contributions, building on this and other theories about positive aspects of aging, and leading to further theoretical development in the field of healthful aging, specifically with respect to:

a) Major disruption and recovery/reclaiming agency in late life
b) Desire for finding ‘place’ or community in later life
c) Re-investing energy and creating meaning through new roles and activities

To summarize, this research study will be relevant to the discourse about elder health and wellbeing, and volunteering in later life, particularly about the social movement of elder volunteering in developing countries. It will contribute to theories of how, and in what ways, older adults achieve meaning and purpose by positively negotiating life transitions, re-inventing themselves, learning and adopting new roles, and creating new behaviours and identities, all of which can contribute to healthy aging in later life.

Results will also contribute to the body of knowledge about positive aging, which helps counteract the negative stereotypes of ageism. Researchers in the fields of health and gerontology may develop a more comprehensive understanding of how optimal mental, emotional, spiritual health and wellbeing might be achieved and maintained through adopting innovative new pursuits that “stretch” experiences in later life, such as volunteering in development work.

Ultimately, it will add to the discourse about how to understand and capitalize on the motivations and agency of older volunteers. Continuing to investigate elder volunteerism and related
phenomena of meaning will provide global non-government organizations with a fuller understanding of the motives and meanings older people experience in the volunteer field.

Epilogue

A particular signature of interpretive inquiry is self-reflexivity. Writers often make a point of identifying places in their studies where they have become aware of inadequacies of their pre-understandings. . . . Wherever it occurs, this reflection is the thread that holds the research story together. (Ellis, 1998)

The personal story of a researcher’s interpretive account is a powerful way to support a reader’s fusion of horizons with the text, claims Ellis (1998). Such a personal story allows readers’ access to the writers’ perspective and the meanings that words and events hold for them. I conclude by highlighting a part of my own story.

A Heart for Africa?

Several years ago, after I returned from my first year of working in Malawi, my favourite expression was “I have a real heart for Africa!” Upon reflection…how in the name of all the heavens did I assume that my heart was anything close to what Africa needed or wanted? I confess I always reflected about my work in Africa as a life-changing set of experiences for me, without truly acknowledging how my presence there impinged on the African people with whom I came into contact. This is the assumption of superiority that whiteness permits: we assume that what we have and who we are what the world needs, whether it wants it or not (Schick and St. Denis, 2005). I began to question my subject position: permeating everything that I was doing, did my own whiteness and white privilege remained unacknowledged?
I started to really examine why I had begun this work, and why I continued to be so motivated to keep doing it, despite the dangers and discomforts: I broke three teeth while building stoves in rural Guatemala, and broke a wrist and a vertebra in Thailand. How did the work I was doing impact my perception of wholeness and wellness? Was I doing this out of altruism, or was I actually gaining self-satisfaction, while “consuming the exotic other”? (Heron, 2007). How was my self-view as a good person unconsciously perpetrated through seeing myself as being able to change their lives by sending out my loving heart to anyone? These questions emerged only recently, as it has slowly dawned on my consciousness that perhaps the story I have told to myself, about myself, has been somewhat tarnished and incomplete. What are the stories of others, like me, who choose to pursue this kind of volunteer work?

The view through a Critical, Post-colonial Lens

Following is the story of the “slice” of experience that catapulted me into the arena of seeing anew the familiar story of my relationship with volunteer development work.

While travelling in Namibia, I met a man who offered to take me to his township church. What followed for me was an experience that resulted in probably some of the most acutely uncomfortable feelings I have ever had. Unbeknownst to me, my new friend had disclosed to the pastor our prior conversation about my school, my research interests, and my desire to understand more of what it meant to be a grandmother caring for orphaned children. To my embarrassment, the pastor introduced me to the congregation and issued the imperative, “All you old grandmothers... stay behind to talk to her, now!” I had an impromptu, highly unethical focus group on my hands. This was perhaps the trigger that forced me to further delve into my subject position as a privileged White woman who undoubtedly brought with her the entire history of British oppression in Africa.
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145


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Appendix 1: Recruitment Letter

Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life: A proposed research study

I am writing in the hope that there may be people connected to your organization who would like to participate in a research study. The study, entitled: Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life, is being conducted by myself, Sally Hughes, a PhD. candidate in the Social Dimensions of Health Department at the University of Victoria.

The study seeks people aged 55 and over, and who are no longer employed fully in the labour force, who have had experience(s) of travelling to volunteer in a developing country (or nations with a lower living standard, as defined as by the International Statistics Institute).

Many Canadians in mid- to late-life create or join non-government and/or non-profit organizations, where they volunteer to assist with building schools or houses, create educational resources and programs, and work on a vast variety of projects. What leads people to travel and work internationally with these organizations, and what meaning do they get from their participation? Does this affect their health and/or feelings of well-being?

Participation in the study will include meeting with me at a mutually arranged place, to engage in interviews about experience(s) in volunteering in international development work. The initial interview will be 60-90 minutes, and one or two more meetings will, be arranged as needed (and agreed to) to further explore experiences.

I would appreciate your distributing this invitation throughout your organization in the hope that people who fit the study’s criteria will respond. I have attached a poster/flyer that might be emailed to members of your organization, or posted publicly.

The results of the research study will add to knowledge about positive, healthy aging and how older Canadians find meaning through volunteering in international development work

Interested volunteers may please contact me by (insert date):

Sally Hughes, M.S.W., (Ph.D. candidate), Social Dimensions of Health Program, The University of Victoria
Appendix 1a)

Content to be used for flyer/poster (to be disseminated to members via e-mail or posted.

Are you a retired person over the age of 55? Have you travelled overseas to volunteer in a project (or projects) in developing countries? You may have volunteered to assist with building schools or houses, helped to teach or create educational resources, or have worked on a variety of other projects.....

.......If so, would you be willing to meet with me and talk about your experiences and what they have meant to you?

I am a PhD. Candidate at the University of Victoria conducting a research study entitled: “Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life”.

Your commitment would be 2-3 meetings with me, at an agreed-upon time and place, for a total time of approximately 3-4 hours. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time....

Please contact me if you would like to participate......

Sally Hughes, B.A., B.S.W., M.S.W., (Ph.D. candidate)
Appendix 2: Information and Consent Letter

My name is Sally Hughes. As a graduate student in the University of Victoria’s Social Dimensions of Health program, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. You are invited to participate in a study entitled: Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life, a proposed research study that I am conducting. It is being conducted under the joint supervision of Dr. Pat MacKenzie and Dr. Cathy Worthington, and you may contact any of us if you have further questions (see below).

Purpose and Objectives

This proposed research study seeks people (over the age of 55, who are no longer fully employed in the labour force) who have had experience(s) of travelling to volunteer in some way in a developing country (nations defined as by the International Statistics Institute as having a lower living standard). Many Canadians in mid- to late-life create or join non-government and/or non-profit organizations, where they volunteer to assist with building schools or houses, create educational resources and programs, and work on a vast variety of projects. What leads people to travel and work internationally with these organizations, and what meaning do they get from their participation? Does this affect their health and/or feelings of well-being? These are some of the questions that the study will explore.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because the results of the study will add to knowledge about positive, healthy aging, as well as to understanding how elder volunteers achieve meaning through working in developing countries.

What is involved

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include meeting with the researcher at a mutually agreed upon place, to engage in interviews about your experience(s). You will be asked to devote 60-90 minutes for the initial interview, and asked to meet once or twice more as needed (and agreed to) to further explore your experiences. Interviews will be taped, and a transcription will be made of the interviews. You will receive a copy of the transcriptions, and be asked to review them for accuracy in a subsequent meeting.
Photos of your volunteering experience may be included if you wish, although no photographs of other people can be used.

**Risks and Benefits**
There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contributing to knowledge about elder health and wellbeing, and volunteering in later life. Results will also contribute to the body of knowledge about positive aging, which helps counteract the negative stereotypes of ageism.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be included in the final results of the study. In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name and any other data that specifically identifies you will not be included in the report. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by storing the transcripts in a locked area. Data from this study will be disposed of after the study’s completion: electronic data will be erased and paper copies shredded.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in a dissertation presentation and potentially published in a scholarly journal.

For further information, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Pat MacKenzie at patmack@uvic.ca or 250-472-4698, and/or Dr. Cathy Worthington, at worthing@uvic.ca or 270-440-770 (9). In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

**THIS DOCUMENT IS TO BE SIGNED AT THE TIME OF THE FIRST INTERVIEW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix 3: Interview guide:

Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life

1) Tell me about your experience(s) volunteering in a developing country...what was it like for you?

2) What factors led you to choose this volunteer opportunity at this time in your life?

3) What were the circumstances in their lives that enabled them to be able to make this choice?

4) What meaning did (does) it hold for you?

5) In what ways do you think it may have affected your health and sense of well-being?
Appendix 4: Follow-up Interview questions:

Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life

1) What was happening in your life that led you to choose this volunteer opportunity?

2) What factors enabled you to be able to participate in this?

3) What meaning did (does) it hold for you now that you have returned home?

4) Can you think of anything that would help is both to better understand what drives the desire to volunteer?

5) We know that some people feel their privilege ‘gets in the way’ of relating to people in developing countries. How does this impact your experience?

6) Are there other specific ways in which you feel your overall health is affected by your choice to volunteer?

7) Are there ways in which you continue to gain benefits now?
Appendix 5: Participant Profiles

Participant 1: “Kalechye”

Kalechye, a 73-year-old divorced woman, brings to her work a powerful awareness of the social justice issues the widows with whom she works face daily. She states that these women, whose families have been devastated by AIDS, live in constant fear of eviction, and struggle with the profound impact of this and other social determinants of health on their well-being and chances of living a life that has any dignity to it. Finding a way to buy food and pay rent is the main preoccupation of daily life. Trapped in poverty, the women struggle daily to barely survive.

Viewing the plight of the women through a critical, post-colonial lens, Kalechye nevertheless sees them as being rich in other ways.

“To me”, she says, “There is a Western mindset that says ‘We know what is best for you. We want you to do as we say’. I see what has happened to these women because of the historical context... Because of the colonists... and because how people have treated them and it... It troubles me”. She goes on to say, “Yet...I admire the women so much. They have so little, and yet they have so much. They have so much in so many things that are contrary to the Western way of counting things that are important for success”.

Kalechye says she finds it incredible that she has just turned 73, saying, “How I got to be 73, I have no idea, until I stop and really try to think about where I have come from, where I have been and what I have done...” Her early adult years were tension-filled as she negotiated an unhappy marriage for many years. “I’ve always felt disempowered”, she muses. A significant action she took in later life marked a turning point for her: she changed her name, saying to herself, “I’m going to change my name... a new identity and
I'll reinvent myself!” Yet challenges continued to plague her about how to find direction in her life: “And then I turned 50 and had one of my many, many identity crises. Who am I? What am I going to do?” Her decision to travel later in life to help improve life for the widows with whom she works can perhaps be thought of as a catalyst for claiming agency for herself: she became aware that she indeed could access her own personal power. However, when asked how she came to choose this path, Kalechye states she began to realize that perhaps a greater force might be directing her, claiming, “Something tells me when it's time to make the right move....instinct, or survival, or something that I'm tuned into...”

When questioned about the meaning that this work holds for her, Kalechye answers that she derives significant meaning and satisfaction from her discovery of community, and a place of belonging that hitherto had eluded her. She states:

“Those women are part of me and I am part of them...It's about humanity. I feel that my contact with them has opened my heart, and that we are all in this together. I connected more with the people on an authentic level, which is what I really value. Yes, our lives are very, very different but there is an emotional space that we all share. These women... You know, they looked out for me. They didn't know me, but they laughed and they smiled with me. I just feel fulfilled”...

She maintains that involvement in this work positively impacts her health and wellbeing:

“... just my presence in the world and going deeper and stronger is very, very healthful. I can stand up straight...it connects my head to my heart somehow and makes me bigger...and my energy starts to grow... I don't know.... it just feels very different”.

Kalechye’s story is one of a life-long journey to create identity, re-invent herself and re-claim agency and personal power. She has discovered a place of belonging for herself within the community in which she volunteers, and has found continued meaning in travelling to developing countries. These elements of her story-re-inventing her identity, finding herself ‘led’ by a greater force, and ultimately finding community and a place of belonging that gives her great joy and positively impacts her health and wellbeing-culminate in the essence of what this meant to her.

+-----------------------------------------------------------------+
Daphne’s love of South Asia began as far back as her teens: “I know that some part of me was fascinated and really drawn to that place more than anywhere else. But it took me a long time to actually get there”, she states. She first travelled there 15 years ago, on an organized tour. Reflecting upon that trip, she remembers, “It was very emotional, actually... I remember being blown away by how much impact the people and the places had on me... I just felt really at home. It was overwhelming... the magnitude of the impact that it has on me.” She relates feeling that there was a reason why she was drawn there...first of all when she visited as a tourist, and then in December of 2003, when she planned a trip with the intent of becoming more deeply involved. Two days after her arrival, one of the worst tsunamis in history hit the coastal area of the country, where she had freshly landed. Daphne’s reaction was a philosophical awareness of some greater force at work:

“I didn't even have to think for 10 seconds. I knew immediately “This is it: this is what I’m meant to be doing”. It was just a knowing sense of connection. It was actually so strong... The feeling of purpose.....being in the right place at the right time. And that's how it started...”

She instantly became involved with the people who were starting to provide relief to the fishing villages, and had a strong intuition that this was something she really wanted to engage with. She had met another woman with whom she instantly felt connected, and, after hearing from friends and family back home that were anxious to help financially, they decided to hire a taxi driver to assist them in going directly to the centre of the devastation:

“And he was fabulous. He didn't speak much English, but we told him to take us to all the refugee centers along the coast, along all the devastated areas. We asked him to ask the people what it was that they wanted and needed. Then he would come back and say “They need things for their kids... They want schoolbooks, they want, they want crayons, they want rulers”. They just wanted
things normalized. And so we would go off in the taxi that same day, and we would go inland somewhere, where we could find somewhere to buy those things, and then we would come back to the refugee centres where they had established schools, and bring them the supplies. So that is how the whole thing unwrapped...and it was pretty exciting actually, because you had the connection directly with the people, right? And you're giving them immediate support”.

Reflecting on the circumstances in her life at that time which led to this sojourn, Daphne realizes that the time was right for her to explore innovative new ways to redefine her identity:

“This all happened shortly after I got divorced...it would never have happened if I had still been in my 30 year marriage. It was definitely a transitional time...it was definitely a whole liberation thing in itself. I had the freedom then to actually go there. I had no one to negotiate with, and no one to tell me that I couldn’t go there, or question why I was doing it, or oppose it in any way....so it was a symbolic in a way of being able to be who I really was...not the person I had been through a lot of that marriage, but suddenly I was free to be myself, and to connect with what was really important to me”

Daphne returned from that trip, and two months later registered her own grass roots organization. The meaning she acquires from simply being present and immersing herself in the culture is significant: ‘I like that excitement and chaos and intensity because it seems to work together, even though it’s so chaotic, it still works. It feeds you somehow...Something in the soul is fed by being there’, she concludes. Further, she speaks of the experience of connecting on a non-judgmental, human level: “When you do really relate to somebody in their villages, there is a knowing glance: it's as if... ‘yes I see you’. There’s an exchange that happens, which is very deep and is very supportive. I mean, it just feels wonderful to have people just look at you, and realize that they see you just for what you are”.

However, Daphne claims the deeper meaning for her is the awareness of having fulfilled her destiny:

‘Connecting myself with my purpose... It was completely authentic and completely spontaneous... I had no idea it was coming. And yet there was a knowing... This was the right thing for me and what I was meant to do.....and it was more fulfilling than anything else I've ever done, just having this connection’.
Although she feels so fulfilled while doing this work, she laments that she experiences a certain disquiet, perceiving herself to lose something precious upon her return to Canada each time:

“My sorrow is at this point, 12 years down the road”, she states, “is that once you get back to the West, you feel disconnected from it... You know, it's not as ‘hands-on’ anymore. And I miss that...when I go back, I always get this infusion of energy, because I connect again with the people... and I find it hard to adjust to coming back home.”

One of the special roles she has developed was that of functioning as a liaison between two ‘worlds’. When there on the ground, she felt she became ‘like the bridge between the givers, the donors here in Canada that were giving me the money, and the people there. It's a very special function, especially building that trust with your donors, because you really see the need for Westerners who want to give to be really assured that their money is going where they want it to go’, she claims. For Daphne, it's more than just helping lives in developing countries: it's also a feeling of the circle being completed. It's bridging the West and the East, and that's very strong component of Daphne’s role as she sees it; the fact that she can both mobilize here at home, and positively affect the ‘other end’.

When asked how she assessed how her presence was perceived by those she was helping, Daphne states she was well aware of past colonial attitudes having influenced present cultural norms and behaviours. Recognizing that she cannot hide her Whiteness, she nevertheless felt uncomfortable when given special status or being treated with some degree of pomp and reverence. She reflects:

‘I don't think you could change that... It's so inbred, about how they are supposed to treat or they will treat foreigners, and Westerners in particular, and the whole caste system plays a role in that, I guess...which is alive and well, even though it's technically illegal...so that when a Westerner shows up they put you on a pedestal’.

Summarizing her experiences, Daphne again speaks of a sense of destiny, or a greater force that created the right conditions, at the right time, in order for her to set upon the path she feels she was meant to take. She reflects,
“You just know when you're in the right fit. It just fits, like a lot of moving parts that are all lined up and everything is working well. That just feeds you, because you know this is what you're meant to be and doing and you feel a connectedness and the rightness about that situation... and you feel there is a perfection about it, or a state of grace. You feel that you have just connected with something that is so fundamentally right inside your being that you know that you are connected with the right pursuit”.

Daphne ends with her assertion that the meaning she derives from her work not only increases her sense of personal well-being and fulfillment, but has been, in fact, life-changing in revealing her life’s purpose:

“I think that the nourishment and fulfillment from the whole project has truly been amazing. It was the spontaneity, connecting with the calling..., that I knew I needed to do this, to serve this purpose. I feel so privileged to have had this chance. And it was just a chance, right? I mean just total perfection of the meeting between this situation and my availability... It was just the perfect meeting, and it really changed my life”.

Daphne emphasizes how she reclaimed agency after feeling liberated after divorce, to find significant meaning in finding a community of people with whom she felt very connected, and especially having felt a powerful fulfilling of her destiny in being guided to do this work. She also experiences a loss of meaning upon returning home, which she assuages by continuing to function as a “bridge” between the two worlds. All of these experiences reflect what I believe to be the essence of what her experiences meant, and continue to mean, to her.

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Participant 3: Wilma

As a young girl, Wilma wanted to be an artist, but was told by her mother that she couldn't make any money that way, so she completed a degree in linguistics, and a Master’s degree in Speech and Language Pathology. Although this led to a long career in
Canada, she never lost her passion for art, as will be seen in her later initiatives when volunteering in a South Asian country.

In later life, recovering from a devastating, life-threatening diagnosis ("I had cancer, and I had a 50-50 chance of making it, they told me... it had spread through my system and I had chemotherapy treatment and then radiation")...and a subsequent violent dissolution of her marriage, followed by retirement, Wilma knew she needed to find new direction and meaning in her life. She faced the challenges of claiming agency and re-creating identity.

“When I lost my relationship over being sick... (my husband left me because he didn't want a sick wife)...I thought now this really isn't good for me... I will learn to be with myself and do things by myself... And the more you do that, the stronger you become. And I thought I like this feeling of being strong and free... I'd always been codependent and always having to check with the other person. So being free and strong works really well for me”.

When questioned about her motivation to volunteer in the developing world, Wilma responds by stating that it was not necessarily to search for purpose in life, but about ‘social justice’, and her need to offer an opportunity to people who are less privileged:

“It’s about evening out the balance, so society can become more just. We have so much, and they have so little. And I don’t want to say it’s not fair, because it’s simply just the way it is. But if I can take some of my talents and my money, and help them get out of the situation they are in, and help themselves. Sort of like give them a fish and they eat for a day, but given the skills, they can eat forever”...

Wilma began to search for the right combination of factors that would afford her the opportunity to fulfill her need to somehow make a difference.

“I started packing my bag, but I didn't just know where to go yet. So I went online, and I thought I really want to travel, but I don't want to just sit on the beach. I need to do something useful, but because I have a medical issue I cannot work forever for an organization full-time, and I don't want to work for any of those big organizations that tell you where to go... So I poked around online, and found this still very little organization. I said I'd like to help out, and I have a diploma in teaching English as a
second language, and I wondered if that would be useful... And she said yes, yes, yes!”

Although she originally volunteered to teach English, her lifelong passion for art led to her thinking that she would really like to teach people a new art form and upon her second time in this South Asian country, she began a new initiative:

“So I brought an artist with me...a silk painting artist. And we had a class of 10 students and they had lots of creative ideas, and we painted silk scarves. And they enjoyed themselves so much. You just had to show them once and they were off!”

Wilma is skilled at responding flexibly to the stated needs of those with whom she works, rather than imposing her own agenda. She asserts that she consistently respects the fact that she is ‘coming into their space and offering something different, and I cannot decide what it is that they need. They have determined what they need, and so if I offer something, and they tell me they need something different instead, I will listen”. In order to accomplish this, she is also keen to further her own learning, which has always been important to her.

“They asked us to come back again, and they said they didn't want to paint silk scarves anymore, because their friends and neighbors could not afford them, which was legitimate, so I said I would look into either dye or paint and some fabric, and so right now I'm learning how to do painting on fabric”.

Wilma experienced difficulty in witnessing the effects of poverty and corruption:

“They don't have electricity... They don't have phones, and one person will give message to all the others. And sometimes they have to walk an hour and a half to go to the English classes. Seeing all of the poverty (was difficult), and seeing all of the homeless people and children... and the 14-year-old hookers on the beach. That made me really sad”.

The primary reason Wilma keeps going back, despite such challenges, is to dwell in the feeling of community that she experiences there. She states, “The women all teamed up together and I thought it was such a good healthy spirit of community they had, and I wanted to come back and be a part of that”
Discovering a place of belonging was serendipitous for Wilma, who muses, “I didn’t think it would and that’s not why I went, but it was a pleasant surprise”. Upon her return to Canada each time, however, she re-experiences a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

“The local people are so lovely and so appreciative and it's very easy to make friends... they'll always look at you with a happy face and be happy to meet you. It's not so much that way here (in Canada): you don’t even know your neighbors. I've been here six years and only know two of my neighbors. That just feels cold to me’.

A side benefit to her time volunteering was an improvement in health and development of healthful habits. She reflects:

“I knew that going there to a sunny country would help me, because I have a tendency to get depressed when it's raining for 60 days straight! I knew that my mood would improve and I would be more energetic. What I didn’t realize is that because of the unavailability of junk food there, I would start eating better. And I walked everywhere, and I lost weight... And so all of these happy side effects improved my health quite a bit!”

Wilma faced the challenge of re-creating her identity and reclaiming agency after a devastating, life-threatening illness and divorce. Her motivation to volunteer in a developing country arose out of a conviction to attempt to redress the inequities in the world by making a difference in the lives of those less privileged that herself. The primary source of meaning for her is the depth of the relationships she forms with people, and a feeling of ‘belonging’ when there. Her value of life-long learning drove her to experiment creatively within her volunteer role. Although she experiences difficulty and disquiet upon her return home, she benefits from lasting improvements in her health.
Participant 4: Fay

The first time Fay went to a developing country was almost five years ago, just after she turned 75 years old. The opportunity was not one she sought out, but it came to her serendipitously, through a suggestion from her church pastor.

“That was my first official volunteer position overseas. And it came about...we have several ministers here in our church... And one of the retired ministers said ‘How would you like to go to volunteer overseas’? I paid my own way. Whatever the congregation gave me, I took that to the sewing room, to sew uniforms so that kids could go to school”.

Fay reached out in faith and followed the leading... “And when my going came up, I thought well, when the time comes that I’m meant to be going then everything will fit in, and I will be going. And it did!” Her strong faith had always been a source of great strength for her: “Because of my faith, I always think things will work out for the best for me. And without my faith, my life would have been empty”.

Her husband had died fairly recently, and Fay, after many years of marriage, was faced suddenly with consenting to life on new terms. While painful, she faced this with courage and a realistic yet positive attitude:

“All of a sudden, you don’t fit any more. You don't get invited to the same things that you were invited to before. I don't want to say that I resent it... No, I just felt that that a big hole was there. And it was. And to a certain extent it's still there, and always will be. You don't feel included as you were before, but once you accept that, you start stepping out on your own. ....you can’t be isolating yourself or stepping back. That's not me. And you find your own route where you want to go. It's amazing!”

Fay recognizes that part of her identity has always resonated with the value of giving to others through a lifelong desire to do mission work:
“I don't really know. I think that there's something within me. I think I've always wanted to do this. When I was in nursing training, years ago, I wanted to go to Ethiopia as a ministry, and I was in training to be a missionary. ... Yes... It wasn't meant to be then... I don't know how better to explain it. Because I have been a good teacher and I was sure I was meant to be there and do that too!

When asked what motivated her to do this volunteering work, Fay answers that in part it arises from her need to exhibit her gratitude for blessings she feels she has received throughout her life. “I think it's partly out of thankfulness. I had such good life... I mean, when we grew up we didn't have any of that, but we have it all now, and I think for me, it's a thank you... To do for others”

Fay acknowledges that she had difficulty witnessing extreme poverty:

“And so I cried more within myself that this had to be... So what I did, is I left all my suitcases there with all my clothes.. I knew that sooner or later it would fit somebody. That is what I could do to help. It shouldn't be, but it is. No bowls and no stirring spoon... So I went shopping for them. I bought them two tables, and kitchen utensils, bowls and spoons and so on... Thinking that maybe when I get home, I can get somebody interested in going down there and maybe building shelves...”

When speaking of the meaning she gained from volunteering, Fay again refers to the time she was widowed, and how the experience filled a certain emptiness left by her husband’s absence in her life:

“You know, I wasn't angry or anything, but it was just that there was a hole there...an emptiness. But I feel that those experiences just filled it all out again for me. I felt totally fulfilled... I suppose I can say that I discovered I was not useless now that I was on my own. I am still useful to do things”.

What she delightfully discovered was a special instant connection with the other volunteers with whom she travelled:

“I felt I was meant to meet that group and click, just like that. There was no getting to know them... I simply just knew them already... It was just a wonderful experience. I found them so friendly and so open... I wasn't the
least bit afraid in any way... And the next day I met a lady from the States. A nurse, who was also there volunteering in the mountains, giving shots to the people over there, and we are still in contact with each other”.

She also felt an instant kinship with the people living in the area in which she volunteered: “And I felt that the people that are poor, yet they are rich. And it showed in their faces that they didn't feel lost. There was a brotherhood and a sisterhood, right there!”

One of the surprising benefits was the increased level of energy and good health she experienced while there, along with a general sense of wellbeing:

“When I was there we were painting furniture... I was painting right along there with all the young ones. And even the weather didn't feel overwhelming with the heat... No, I felt great....and I felt physically and mentally strong. I really felt very strong. Totally...it was a 100% completely positive experience!”

Her closing remarks attest to her positive attitude towards aging, at 82 years of age: “I have the health and strength to keep doing that, which a lot of people don't want to do. They just want to relax. But I just want to keep going!”

Fay’s amazing resilience, continued desire to grow and experience diversity, even into her 80’s, and her ability to connect immediately and meaningfully with other volunteers are key factors in how this pursuit has afforded her a transformational experience.

Participant 5: Colin

An advertisement appeared in the daily bulletin about a social club, Colin muses. He read that they were sending groups into the international community: the idea was that of international change, that breeds peace and understanding, and less conflict. Travelling
for seven weeks, he recalls being very impressed when witnessing the cataract surgery program sponsored by the organization:

“*It was a very rural area, and they were only doing one eye, because they could do twice as many surgeries that way! But these are not like North American cataracts: these are people who were totally blind, with the ‘white eye’. Totally blind from cataracts, people actually walked in blind, and walked out with vision. It was a miracle!*

From then on, Colin was intrigued, and when he retired he was free to join a variety of other projects. He states, “...seeing the projects, and realizing just how little effort it took to change somebody's life...this was the means for me to do some of those things”.

A way for Colin to retain his passion after returning home seems to be in the telling of his stories to those who donate to the organization. This is an important aspect of the meaning he derives from doing this work:

“I think that a big part of this is the socializing and telling the stories when we get home... We can come back to the other members of our club and then say, ‘You know, remember that bed that we shipped over...or that used baby incubator thing that was redundant here? It will save 100 babies’ lives, and we saw it in the pediatric ward’. So we relate what we are doing with the fundraising efforts.... it's not something we doing ‘over there’, is something very personal”.

Delighting in telling stories of his experiences, Colin feels this gives him a way to continue the work once he returns home. Takes particular pleasure in reflecting upon one story involving a birthing chair which perplexed those he worked with:

“They didn't know what it was, and they thought it was a dentist's chair so they gave it to a dentist...and when they figured out what it was, the dentist wouldn’t give it back! Well, the previous chair that the dentist had was a metal chair, with a headrest welded onto it. Most of the dental work was just extractions, but now she had this reclining chair with stirrups on it!”

He feels that relating such humorous and human stories brings the experiences alive for those at home who crave to hear of the results of his endeavours, resulting, he hopes, in continued philanthropy and a better sense of connection between those who give and
those who receive. Colin was also partially altruistically motivated to ‘make a difference’ to others less fortunate than himself:

“I guess it's partly righting some of the wrongs in the world. It's making a difference... You know, I've had a blessed life... And it's time to make a small contribution back. I'm not sure that I'm out to reform the world, but you can make a difference to a small number of people, and hopefully there's a ripple effect and they help a few other people .....”

When asked about the impact of his volunteer work on his sense of well-being, Colin describes a sense of well-being “that comes from a belonging, or perhaps it is doing good... I don't know... I know that you come back from these trips regenerated and excited”. He values the learning that his experiences have yielded, in terms of increased awareness of issues faced by the people of developing countries. Of special value, Colin asserts, is the intercultural learning that takes place: “I think you get a chance, and you have those opportunities to sit down for tea or coffee and eat with people, and say ‘Why you do that?’ and they can ask you questions about your culture... And some of that misunderstanding fades away”

However, although finding solidarity and similarity of customs when working in the developing world, he cautions that ‘Spending a few weeks in another country does not make you an expert on the country but many volunteers seem to think it does. Culture is deep rooted and cannot be learned in a few weeks or months.

Colin’s continued meaning upon return home appears to be centred in the role of storyteller, conducting the storytelling in such a way that he is able to perhaps place himself as the ‘man in the know’, who can act as a liaison between the two realities.
Participant 6: Lily

Having completed a leadership training program, and learning how to become a community leader, Lily started looking for places to volunteer. At first, she volunteered locally, but began to seek an international volunteer initiative that better fitted her needs. She found a locally based organization and remembers that when she went to the first meeting, it was like ‘a family’. She states, “They are very close knit, very caring of each other and sharing, and I just felt that I belonged”.

Lily asserts her conviction that her being led there was not ‘accidental’, but rather the place she was meant to be. She describes a sense of destiny that seemed to be operating and leading her to do this work:

“It's just so hard to explain! I just get so excited, and people can't shut me up when I start talking about it... I had no expectations going there. I've never traveled to developing countries before so I had no idea what it was like...So I just went. I said ‘Okay this is meant to happen so let’s make it happen’.

Circumstances in her life prior to commencing her volunteer work had combined to make life quite painful for her. Volunteering in a developing country allowed her to gain a different perspective:

“I used to feel sorry for myself a lot, because I was on my own after my husband died. I don't have any friends on the weekends... So I think I was depressed... Not clinically depressed, certainly... but definitely not happy. And so by looking for ways to help other people, it made me happy and kept me busy and I didn't have time to feel sorry for myself, because why would I feel sorry for myself after seeing how the people in the villages lived? And here's where I am... And it's just like I need to be with those people. I need to help them in some way...”

She experienced an echoing serendipitous feeling of ‘coming home’ when she embarked upon her first volunteer trip.
“When we went in 2015, I walked out and I just started to cry. It was like I just came home. It was just amazing! ...and then we were leaving to go on safari and again, I cried. I did not want to come home. I just had such a connection that I made with the people that I met there”

Lily didn't expect to experience the emotional connections that she made with people.

“That was totally unexpected. It's enriched my life in ways I never expected”.

She becomes animated when relating the different projects that the organization has worked on:

“We’re working with the community leaders about building schools, basically for the benefit of the children, because it's all about education. Although we did build our medical dispensary as well, and the first part of the dispensary would be a walk in clinic, and the back part of it is a women and children's center, so pre-and postnatal care…”

Lily’s view is that many past projects failed because they were imposed upon the recipients without sufficient exploration of what the needs were, and were not what the African people wanted, but rather what Canadians thought they should have. She emphasizes the fact that the philosophy of the organization seeks to first discover from indigenous people what their needs are, before engaging in any initiatives. Further, their commitment is to continue to work on projects on a long-term basis.

“So in all of the projects, we have been invited by the leaders of the community... We don't go over and say ‘Oh we think we should do this and this and this the next time...’ We wait for them to say what's needed. So the first school was built, and then they seed money for the second school... we waited until they invited us to come and build that... they invited us to come to build the third school... And next they formed the board that wanted to build a vocational school, and we were invited to help build a vocational school. And they're looking at brickmaking and tailoring, not what we were thinking of, as a technical school... we learned a lot! So we have never gone in and said ‘We think you should build this or that... And we are accepted because these people know us. Two of us have been there seven times. When we went back, we visited all of the previous projects that we did. So our whole team went again, and reunited with those people. They really appreciated the fact that we came back and we care about them and we want to stay interactive with them. ... I guess that our society has the respect of the people so that we are trustworthy and we keep coming back”
Lily sees a need to get small societies together, so that they can then get the word out there as to what they're doing, which facilitates better fundraising…and connecting with each other. Lily derives great meaning, now she has returned to Canada, from connecting people and organizations to each other, a role in which she is particularly skilled.

“Every time I suggest connecting, especially to the other groups that I am working with, I learn something, and I say ‘this society needs to meet that society’. One of the men that I met is a doctor who told me he is now retired. He said ‘I’m looking for local people that could take on projects that I’ve been doing’. And I said, ‘I know someone who needs you; would you like me to connect you?’ And that gives me just such a thrill, to be able to do that!”

When asked what meaning she derives from her continued volunteer work, Lily describes a heightened sense of overall wellbeing. “Well, it really changed me. So my life is energized by all the things that I do, and I just have this joy of meeting people that I’ve never met before”. Although she does speak of the reward of making a difference in the lives of others, Lily focuses mostly on how the volunteering experience meets her own needs for fulfillment. After feeling isolated and lonely after her life was disrupted by divorce, she found a place of belonging for herself, as well as a significant and continuing leadership role back in Canada of functioning as a “bridge.

Participant 7: Delia

Delia’s first opportunity to volunteer in the developing world was travelling to a developing country, in her late 60s, to work in an orphanage. She states that she has always had a leaning towards helping people, always been very busy, and has always been a very energetic person, with a particular love of hiking, biking and running.
As a younger married woman, she committed her time and energies to the needs of her husband and raising her son. Finding herself on her own, she entered the years when her son had grown up and left home... “So then I was retired and divorced and I had the empty nest syndrome, so all of those were a part of things. Huge ups and downs in my life, and a few transitions, and they do disrupt you”...

Making the decision in later life to climb the Annapurna circuit, she reflected that perhaps there might be something else she could do while there, and searched for organizations where she might use her skills. Finding a Canada-based International NGO, she contacted the director in Ottawa:

“He said ‘Well, okay, what do you think you can offer’? I said, ‘Well I don't know really... just my energy I suppose! I said, ‘Well I'm going to do the Annapurna circuit, but I'm also into ESL teaching...and he said ‘Well, stop right there! We really need an ESL teacher’! I realized that I really liked teaching anyway, but now I was going to do it as a volunteer, and with very poor people...the poorest of the poor. So that pulled out something very meaningful for me, which is hard to describe...”

Delia muses that in some way, this particular country “drew” her. ”It just helped my energy forward” And once there, she “came up with so many ideas, so much more than I imagined! And the ideas were very small, but they were all very meaningful for these people” There, she found meaning that helped to assuage the loneliness she had felt after her marriage dissolved.

“Now that I'm single, and on my own, and a part of me that really misses not having a partner... There is that yearning that goes on. When I'm not focused, or when I'm not needed... You know, if you're living with somebody, you're thinking about each other and there's a symbiotic need happening, and that's what was happening over there for me”.

Delia goes on to describe finding a unique “something” that she considers very valuable and cannot be found, for her, in Canada. She describes it as a way of relating with others that she and her co-volunteers were drawn into, finding a special bond or solidarity with them:
“I know that we are all born the same, but over there they have so much more essence in valuing their interrelationships. Even though they're very poor, there is something that they have that we don't have here. And we talk about it, and we want it, but it's hard to make happen in our environment or our culture... There, it is so different, and the leaders or the facilitators and I have something to share in some way that draws us into that oneness”

Delia stayed in touch with the orphanage and literary group, although in quite a minor way. One day, a friend contacted her and said, “You've been once; would you like to volunteer again and come with us?” She chose to return to volunteer with “A small group of nurses...especially midwives. It was a pilot project... and it was in four different hospitals where I was teaching nurses English”.

When reflecting upon the meaning she derives from volunteering, Delia acknowledges that in part, it has to do with the knowledge that she can make a difference in people’s lives, as well as being able to ‘give something back’:

“I have always had the desire to make a difference: connecting with people makes a difference to them. It's just the thrill of sharing and seeing and hearing the difference. It's the memory and the knowledge that I have done it, and done it well, and that I have benefited and so have the people that I have been with, socialized with, taught with, or talked to....”

When Delia returned to Canada, she describes herself as having felt “diminished” and less energetic or motivated, as well as having a haunting awareness that she had lost something precious: (“here I don't have that same feeling... It's not there”) Ultimately, she feels her mental health suffered as well:

“When I take off on a project and go overseas, I'm focused on going over to volunteer and focusing on my role as a volunteer, and that brings a new and very deep meaning. I'm more motivated to stay up later and I'm a much more motivated person. So when you're talking about health... Mental health especially... It's the reverse; I have to be careful living in Canada because when it's not there... When I'm not involved, I'm not as motivated to go out and find things. I'm a different person”.
However, the gains she feels she has made overall through volunteering far outweigh the challenges, and she states her overall health and wellbeing has been reinforced by this. She summarizes her journey in a very positive way:

“Anyway, what is important, I think, is the drive to explore or to move forward as I'm getting older. As I get older in my life, I want to show that I can walk my talk and never give up. Now I'm a 73-year-old and want to live longer and continue these experiences!”

Delia describes significant gains that she achieved in her mental and physical health through her volunteer work. She also treasures the deep relationship connections with the people she met while volunteering. For her, this was the quintessential meaning.

Participant 8: Dora

Fulfilling a career in nursing most of her life, Dora muses that volunteering has perhaps been “an ongoing secret passion”. In 2005, when she turned 64 and retired, she felt very adventuresome and surprised herself by going to a developing country with a faith-based organization, where she went on a discovery tour to look at projects that had been initiated there:

“I had noticed that there was this trip, and I hadn't been anywhere near that continent. ... Well, the person I was talking to said well why don't you just do it? Why don’t you just e-mail them and find out? And all of a sudden I thought, yes maybe I should! So I did that and I was really stepping out of my comfort zone and my routine in life, but at well I was retired and I did have the money to do it.

Upon her return to Canada, after this first trip, she experienced some restlessness (“After two weeks there, I got home and I had a lot of trouble processing that emotionally and
psychologically”). Reflecting upon her time there, she notes that she discovered a way of life that radically differed from North America:

“The people there were happy, and that was kind of a surprise. I expected to see them a little bit more depressed and I don't know, maybe I just expected something a little bit different, but they would spend the whole day walking into town to get what they needed, and then walk home again, and it just seemed to me a lot more relaxing way of life. They would often meet friends along the road, but here in a Canadian city you don't usually talk to friends along the road!”

While on that initial tour, a woman asked her if she'd be interested in doing some medical work in another country. In 2007, one of the nurses who had signed up for the trip had fallen ill and couldn't go, so Dora was asked if she would like to join the group.

“I said yes, with much trepidation! I felt it didn't have a background to help out with these medical clinics, because they were basically medical clinics, like doctors’ office clinics. It'd been a while since I had been in the hospital. But I went along anyway, as I just felt that I did have a little bit of a niche...I was the one that was asked to take a look at the babies and talk to the mothers. So basically that's what I did for three years, for two weeks at a time!

Later, the principal of the local school requested her to come and help us to do health assessments on children By this time, Dora had turned 73, and it was a gated or fenced school, which she felt was a more controlled environment.

When asked about the circumstances of her life that led to her volunteering. Dora answers, “The trigger really was that trip, because that got me involved in a Third World country and I was able to look around and put things into perspective. I was able to get down from the ceiling of privilege”. Dora’s Christian faith is strong, and when she speaks of her motivation to continue volunteering after that initial trip, she recognizes that faith also played a role in this:

“I guess it was the following year, at the church that I'm going to now, we had a seminar on ‘What is God calling you to do?’ I think it's all my life being about God's intervention, and sometimes does take clobbering over the head that is needed to tell you what to do!”
When reflecting on what meaning she derived from her time there, Dora expresses gratitude for having been enriched by it, and how it has positively affected her sense of wellbeing:

“It's increased my sense of satisfaction in life. You know, I grew up and went to university but you know I have never really been a person who has had self-esteem and it's only in these last few years that I have felt good. Then I guess the other thing was it gave me something to talk about…. I don't know why other people don’t do it!

Dora has a strong connection to her church community and with her family, which helps mitigate against any feelings of loss that she may have experienced upon her return to Canada. She is able to continue sharing her story with others.

“People certainly want to know what the experience was like. They ask me about my trip and I usually like to have a few pictures in my purse as well. They want to see pictures... well I don't know what they really want to see them, but I show them anyway! The people at the church I go to are interested in seeing a presentation about my experiences”

Dora continued to feel rewarded, and was asked to share her experiences upon her return home, as people in her church community were excited to hear of her adventures. Her strong connections to her church community gave her a continued sense of ‘belonging’; she declared that her faith was the primary factor that continues to give her great meaning.

Participant 9: Vinnie

Vinnie’s career was as a nurse in long-term care, until she retired at 60. Shortly after, she was diagnosed with colon cancer and was in recovery from this when she chanced upon a serendipitous meeting with someone she had just met while exercising at her gym program.
“I met this lady at a gym, and she was seated opposite to me at coffee, and somebody opposite to her said “What are you going to do now”? Anyway I pricked up my ears at that, and when we went into the change room I asked her where she went... she told me a refugee camp, and I asked her if I if she wanted me to go along with her, and she said yes! I was 63 then”...

At that time, she realized that working in a refugee camp was something she had always wanted to do, and being a self-described procrastinator, she had not done anything about this. She says the other thing she had always wanted to do was go on a freighter...and she plucked up her courage and was able to do both of those things, travelling by freighter to volunteer! This new friend had found an agency for them to travel with and had also organized a freighter: “I thought about it and I realized that we sailed it was only about a year after I had my colon cancer surgery”.

When reminiscing about how this opportunity came about, Vinnie felt a certain destiny that had been leading her there:

“It was not coincidence. What I think is everything had fallen into place. The fact that I had met her and heard that chance remark... and everything fell into place. It all led me going to work in a refugee camp. And I thought this is what it is supposed to be. It is where I'm supposed to be at this time... and I felt so comfortable doing that and so well in myself and so happy about what we were doing that was absolutely correct and right... we were exactly where we should be at that point”

Vinnie discovered that she and her new companion had a great deal in common:

“We discovered that we were so similar, and she's probably five or six years older than me, but she was a lot like me. And so we just got on so very well at the very beginning. We seem to be joined at the hip for the weeks while we traveled, and we never had a word of conflict... Everything was perfect between us. And so off we went”.

They arrived at a camp of 40,000 refugees who had fled their country during a Civil War. The camp was very well established, having been there for 18 years by this time:

“It was not like traditional tents at all. They had housing made out of breeze blocks. There were 16 of us... 16 volunteers, from all over the world. We were the
oldest volunteers they had ever had! My friend had white hair and they were fascinated by that because nobody there lives long enough to have white hair!"

The two volunteers spent most of their time with the children, setting up a library in the high school. Vinnie speaks lovingly about the children: “You only have to appear at the door with a soccer ball and you would have 15 little guys running around looking for you to play soccer with them on the field. That was just a mud patch”.

The conditions at the camp were very different from those at home:

“We got power perhaps every three or four days for a little while. There was no running water when we first got there. In fact, it was the first week that the power came on to the camp for the first time. But as I say they were so ingenious, they would plug the generator into the British soccer games on the radio in the afternoons!

And although their health mostly remained good, they were careful about eating: “There was chicken, but on the other hand when you walk through the market and saw where she had bought the chicken from, we decided not to eat much of it!”

Speaking of the meaning she derived from the experience, Vinnie discovered a surprising and immediate sense of being ‘at home’ when she arrived at the camp. “I just thought when I walked onto the place... But it was just meant to be. We were so warmly welcomed by the other people and they were fascinated to see why these two old ladies from Victoria came” She describes the community there as ‘a very tight, small community that we were a part of, and their sense of family was extraordinary’. Another source of meaning was the awareness that she could ‘give something back’… “I've been so privileged in my life it was one way of getting back”.

Upon her return to Canada, Vinnie experienced some difficulty adjusting to the awareness that people appeared not to have much interest in what she had been doing in Africa, and she muses “I thought, isn't that amazing that I have done all of this. I was away five months...I belong to a couple of groups but none of them seem to be particularly interested in what I have done”.

“Surprisingly, I thought people would be interested in what I had done and what it's like, and I would be sharing stories. ... but there really wasn't very much
interest at all. I guess I was disappointed in that... I thought it was really amazing in terms of that experience, and yet nobody really was interested in sharing it with me”.

Vinnie also experienced a keen loss of relationships she had enjoyed in Africa:

“The bonds there were so strong. The bonds are not the same here somehow. The bonds here are more superficial somehow than there... We used to get lost regularly on the campus. There were roads higgledy-piggledy everywhere and no matter who you asked, we would say ‘We are lost’! They would say, ‘Mother come with me! We would take all these funny little byways and take us back to where we wanted to go. They just knew who we were”.

As Vinnie summarizes her time volunteering, she concludes

“I think it was the whole experience...it was something that I always wanted to do but, as I said, never thought I would have the opportunity to. So I think there’s a tremendous feeling of satisfaction that I actually did it and succeeded. We did come back safe and we weren’t sick. We met amazing people and other volunteers who were just outstanding. The Liberians on the camp were just amazing people and you think of the rest of the world, and all of the angst that goes on...and these people have nothing, and yet they always had a smile on their face and cheerfulness all the time. It was very humbling in many ways”.

Vinnie feels her opportunity to travel and volunteer was wrought through destiny, following a devastating illness. She also found great meaning in finding a place of belonging that was instantly “home”, and upon her return to Canada suffered a sense of loss of meaningful relationship, as well as disappointment that others here were seemingly uninterested in hearing of her experiences.

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Participant 10: Jill

Initially, Jill started volunteering with her husband when they were approaching retirement. Unfortunately, her husband was diagnosed with cancer soon after they retired, and so they were forced to give up the volunteering job. She remembers, “He didn't
really understand that this was not going to work out very well, but I did. We ended up finishing up the work and I was at home with him for two years. Eventually, he died”.

The loss of her husband was devastating and caused a major disruption in Jill’s life. She knew she desperately needed to find healing for herself:

“I remember being in front of my house with a rake, reaching out to these fallen branches... basically I kept crying out ‘There has to be something more than this, something better!’ I just kept crying out. Here I was, just crying out to the heavens there has to be something more than this!”

Jill says she was desperately lonely, and although somewhat skeptical, feels that destiny was at work in some way, in the form of something greater that was operating in the background:

And so yes, how does something happen that I have never heard of before? When I put my rebellious person aside, I would say that it was something bigger than me that was feeding me”.

At this point Jill was working as a dental assistant. Feeling restless, she sat down one day and Googled ‘dental teams’, and found an organization that she had never heard of...and they needed a manager of the sterilization team, and she ended up leaving and spending two years volunteering with this organization.

She relates an interesting story about how she was able to actually afford to do this:

“You have to pay your own flight and your own room and board to do it. I had some money but not enough for the two years... But I just went ahead in faith and decided this is what I was doing. So then I met a man who chopped wood. Because I had trees on my property, he helped me chop the wood. When I decided to go to volunteer, I decided I could sell this wood and it would help me to get there. So I called him up and I left him a phone number and asked him if he would mind coming back and chopping some more wood. I told him I was going to sell the wood and it is not like I was selling it for my own benefit, but that I was going away to volunteer for two years ...and will need somebody to chop it. He said ‘This is amazing and we need to work together on this’. He sat across from me and at the outset said, ‘I want to be your agent’. I asked him what he meant. He said ‘I want to tell people what you are doing, I want to raise the money and tell people what you want to do’. To make a long story short, by the time I left, I had
pretty much all of my funding for the whole two years that I was there. After that, they ended up supporting two men that were in my department that I befriended. Now they are still on board....this group of wood cutters have gone on to fund so many things. The average age of these wood choppers is 72 years old! They have done so many international things now.... But it all started with the fact that I wanted to go to volunteer!”

Upon her return to Canada, Jill initially experienced a second devastating loss of meaning and isolation, feeling she was rendered ‘invisible’:

“I expected people say it to say ‘Oh, yes, let’s have a coffee and sit down and tell me about Africa!’ And you would say one thing and they would say, ‘That’s nice’. And then the conversation would immediately switch to something else and you thought to yourself, ‘Did I say something or do something? What is happening here? Nobody seemed to be really interested. Nobody. No. They didn’t ask to see the pictures. I didn’t speak to a group about going there until about two years after I returned I felt that everybody would totally be excited about continuing support to people there. But when I came back, it was ‘Okay now you’re back and I will find another project to fund’.”

Additionally, she felt she had undergone a radical change in herself, resulting again in intense loneliness: “I wasn’t the same person anymore either. I wasn’t the same person. I know that I had changed. I’d felt I wasn’t really the same person because of all the experiences I had, and all the stories I had heard and all the patients I had helped. Hearing the story and understanding really what happened. I didn’t really feel like I was connected to anybody”. The answer came with an offer of employment with the organization with whom she volunteered. She now has an opportunity to meet with prospective volunteers to prepare them for the work:

“I can talk with new members who are going.. I can share stories that were real. They asked me if I have ever been there and they are just over the moon to hear that I have. I feel my place now is just to support people who are there. I really don’t have a desire to go back, but I feel that I have made a lot of connections with people who do great things and so my role is to try and support them in some way”.

She also meets with volunteers upon their return, when she is able to understand and empathize with those who experienced the same feelings of disappointment and marginalization upon returning home.
“I do coordinate the speakers in terms of the volunteers who have returned, and when I talk to them, I definitely get comments back about it being much harder than they thought it was going to be. ‘I'm disappointed with myself being back and I'm not really sure of where I am’. Those types of comments... so I know they're going through the same thing coming back to Canada that I was”

In summary, she concludes that her ongoing source of meaning now is to support others, rather than working in the field herself.

“I am glad I did it and I think that it's a very meaningful way to give back. If I was in a different place and time I'm sure I would give back more again, but I feel that I am getting back in a way by being here. I encourage other people to do it because I think it really could bring a fulfillment to the next part of their lives”

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Participant 11: Amy

Amy immigrated to Canada from England in 1968, and ended up in a small town that had a largely indigenous population. Looking for a pre-school for her son, she discovered there was only one Indian band preschool that were unable to take her son, as he was not Status Indian. As a result, she began to understand the way services are organized for First Nation families, gaining insights about the separation that exists. Her solution was to start a co-op preschool in this small town for non-indigenous and non-status indigenous children...and thus began her life-long love of teaching.

Amy’s philosophy of teaching and her identity as an educator have remained strong all through her varied life experiences.

“For me as a professional person, it has been very much a part of my core identity to see myself as somebody who is not necessarily going out doing a lot of active things about social justice, but really encouraging others to think about it within their own context and think about what they would do. Really going in and thinking about what works. How can we make our classroom and our school and our community more inclusive...? But it applies wherever you are, whether you are in Armenia or Africa or Kenya, or Nunavut or Arctic Bay. I was never seen as a crusader, but as somebody who really tries to help
others think about their own situation. I was quite leery about what retirement was going
to be like, and what I was going to do now in Victoria. I had a wonderful career and a
very strong identity as a teacher and I think it is that identity as a teacher with a
particular interest in social justice that I still have.

While still employed, she continued her interest in indigenous education by volunteering
in many of the communities in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, working with
teachers and teachers’ associates. Another highlight at this time for her was participating
in an international project involving 28 or 30 different countries. Her work with that
project was supporting teachers in the ex-Soviet Union about how to teach in a newly-
formed democracy. She reflects:

“They are well-educated people in the ex-Soviet system and want to think about teaching
in different ways, and that was very inspiring and very useful. They are now trying to
operate like a democracy, but it’s a very difficult country to work in”.

After she retired, almost four years ago, she received a request concerning a project in
sub-Saharan Africa, in which she continues to participate to this day. She describes it as:
“A national project looking at using children’s literature to teach social justice. There’s
actually been three big grants and this is I think the last one, looking at postcolonial
literature”.

Having now volunteered there eight times, Amy reflects upon the necessary but at times
frustrating bureaucratic requirements of the work she does:

“For instance, last time we were in Kenya, we had to meet the High Commissioner to
keep him informed about what we were doing. This time, when I go, I will have a number
of meetings with local program committees. The meetings are important, and I know they
are... but it’s much more interesting to me to do the actual work with teachers. That I
really enjoy. The idea when you are at schools is that you are trying to support teachers
who are learning how to teach with new strategies. But these schools have not seen a
White person before. Typically, when we do a workshop there are four of us: two White
people and two African academics whom we get to know very well”.

Very aware of her own Whiteness and her own privilege, Amy declares, ‘I refuse to take
pictures....I always am very aware of not being a cultural voyeur’. She describes her time
in a complex environment...
“... so it’s difficult when you go in there as a White person... it's lovely to be there, but they recognize my accent and know I have a British background and there is still a lot of reverence for Britain....

Amy’s sense of solidarity with minority peoples comes from her working class background in the United Kingdom. As a result, she is self-reflexive about her presence, her subjectivity and her role as an ally with those with whom she works. She states she can better resonate with people she connects with in development work:

“You cannot be totally dispassionate, but try to understand what has happened to you. My background in England was very working class and it's only been recently that I've become aware of the facts. I started to look about why I was so interested in minorities, and people who struggle and were judged by others as not capable....and then I remember being selected to go to the local grammar school in town, and encountered teachers who had no idea about what to do with this working class girl. This was from the late 30s until the 1960s, and they just simply didn't know what to do with working-class children. It took a while for them to figure out that even if we didn't have any money, we actually did have brains. So I think that I experienced feeling... certainly at first when I went... excluded. It was partly the way I spoke and partly the way that my school dinners were subsidized because my family couldn't afford it. The uniform wasn't quite right... and I had cheaper school blouses from somewhere else... I would throw away letters about school skiing trips, because I would never take them home......my parents could never afford to send me”.

She worried initially about going into situations where she was perceived as the external expert, and potentially “re-colonizing...and the whole voyeuristic aspect of doing good... but I think because of the people who work with us in the project were actually very strong, from my perspective anyway, so there wasn't a sense of that”. What she found was that she is respected and valued for her presence and skills by those with whom she works. “What you see in schools is that there is a push to use English because it is an international language. Private schools, for instance, really emphasize using English because it's going to get them ahead”. She is further recognized, she contends, for her commitment to volunteering, and that this is not something she is being paid to do, unlike the indigenous educators with whom she works. Wryly, she notes that there are gender issues too: ‘I am a volunteer and the women are amused as to why I am doing it, and does my husband approve.... And I said ‘Well, I think he does, but I didn't really ask his permission!’
Amy describes her physical health as good while travelling, although her energy wanes as she grows older: ‘I get suddenly sleepy at two in the afternoon! But in general, I'm fine and the food is just fine there too. It's quite bland, but it's fine. In fact, I've not had any illness at all. I'm very careful to monitor that very well’, she asserts.

When asked what meaning she derives from her volunteer work, Amy spoke of it as being threefold. The primary source of meaning for her is the opportunity to build relationship and community, building connections and relationship. Although she states she has always been extroverted and socially active, she feels she can now be more selective about choosing which relationships bring her the most meaning, saying, "One of the nice things about being retired is that you don't have to spend time with people you don't want to!"

Speaking of her peer educators in the developing country, she contends:

"We have a shared purpose. Obviously that's not truly the case, but it's pretty comfortable and I certainly always question things. But I think the meaning is in building relationships across cultures and that's one of the things that has kept me doing this project. So these are real people that are involved in the project but I find I have a lot of commonality with and have seen them a number of times"

The reward she described was pure enjoyment, and simply finding satisfaction in the role of volunteer mentor. Finally, she reflects that she derives great meaning from knowing that her lifelong skills and experiences are now continuing to be used. Rather than describing her motivations as altruistic, she derives satisfaction from knowing she makes a contribution to a larger effort:

“The value to me is enormous, I get a sense of satisfaction from doing even a very little...I don't see myself as is the big important key but I see myself as part of a bigger cooperative effort. Altruism is part of it but it's not really all of it. It's more about doing what you can, to be a part of the collective that's working together".

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Daisy, 62 years old, has pursued several career paths, including law and nursing. She’s always enjoyed travelling: “I love adventure, and there’s a lot of self-interest in my trips, because I love traveling and to go to adventurous places. I’ve developed a real fondness for travelling because I’ve always been interested in the flora and fauna and geography. And then the kids are so cute… You just get a real bond with the people!”

Her first experience volunteering in a developing country involved her entire family:

“A nurse I knew was going away on a mission trip and I said, ‘Can I go with you’? She said yes, and then my family, one by one, said ‘I want to go as well!’ Then my husband said ‘Well, I’m interested in going too…’ so we started to talk about all of us going together. So they came and we went there and drove a bus. We were to work in an orphanage. Somebody had donated the bus and we drove the bus. My whole family did this and it was a mission trip.”

Daisy was diagnosed with a devastating life-threatening disease prior to commencing her next major sojourn into volunteer work, but adopted a positive attitude, claiming her recuperation enabled her to capitalize on the opportunity to travel to volunteer:

“I had cancer which is one of the reasons I went…well, I sort of derailed a little bit when I had cancer, which was a big disruption in my life. Because I wasn’t working, and I had just finished my treatment, I had a lot of time so I was able to go. That was in 2010. I was going with little or no hair, and I was obviously under a treatment program.

When asked how she thought people perceived her presence in their country, she answers,

“I don't think I presented as a White woman of privilege, but I rather presented as a woman who was struggling with personal health issues but still cared enough to go there. They were really impressed that I arrived there”.
In addition to the life disruption that followed her cancer diagnosis, Daisy also spoke of other late-life transitions that caused her to reconstruct her identity:

“I think as you get older, you feel kind of useless. You have your self-esteem all wrapped up in your job, and then you retire and you maybe lose your community and something that you do every day... There are a lot of losses in retirement, and growing older as well… there are a lot of losses”.

However, Daisy again transformed these experiences of loss and change into a positive course of action by choosing to expand her volunteer activities. She claims that conditions in her life all came together in a way that freed her to devote herself to fulfilling what had always been a desire:

“Well, actually it was because I wasn't so busy anymore. I can't ever just sit around at home and do nothing. That is the worst thing of all. My kids were reasonably independent and I had the space in my life now to do that. Financially we were more stable than earlier, when we had the mortgage and all these bills and everything... But now I had the time and had always wanted to do it”.

When reflecting upon the meaning she derives from volunteering, Daisy notes that there is an uplifting social benefit:

“When you work on these trips, there is tremendous social benefit. You meet some interesting people and it's very healing. The other thing that means a lot is when I volunteer to be the nurse at camp. And it was so lively and fun, and so full of life... and it was a great antidote to losing all of my hair and that kind of thing”

She also speaks of the personal growth that occurs when witnessing the efforts of other volunteers in the field, and how they inspire her:

“The people that I met working at the initiatives that they have were extremely inspiring. You have all these mentors and role models at all these people that you really admire and you want to be more like them. You want to copy them a little bit. There is a tremendous amount of personal growth that takes place. It pushes you up, and you think ‘Oh my goodness, why am I not taking initiative’, or not doing this or that… look at all these people... It inspires you”.
Daisy spoke of the inequities she experienced in the developing countries in which she volunteered:

“They are the poorest of the poor people, because when you are born on a farm, you don’t have a car and you have no entitlement and you are not registered with the government. Whether they are entitled or not, there is no proper health care and no education for them, because the kids are born on these ranches and they don’t have any schools. They are alone all day because the migrants work all day, and there was not even any supervision in the day. The children are all alone all day. I’ve also done medical work there, where I have worked as a nurse, with the same organization, and sometimes they have outreach medical clinics”

Observing these conditions caused Daisy to reflect upon her own privileged position: “I think those kinds of things that you do help you to focus on what you DO have, as opposed to what you don’t have”. She continues:

“You just cannot ever feel sorry for yourself, if you go abroad and work... and you just realize just how many blessings you have. I am such a fortunate person and why was I so lucky to be born in Canada and have all of these resources? And I know that there are things you can do locally to solve the problem but had just been on this trip, and talking about social problems and reading National Geographic and all these programs on television...everybody talking very intelligently about poverty in the world... but not doing anything...and I think sometimes it just comes down to values. If you don’t have the values then you can talk about solving the world’s problems, but it doesn't make any difference at all. I just think that if I can just alleviate some small suffering for somebody, that’s a beginning”.

When Daisy comes back to Canada, she finds ways to continue to find comradeship and meaning through other initiatives:

“I have communities here. I have the church here, and it just continues. I took a couple of First Nations kids today snowboarding, and so I have that opportunity to participate in things here. I keep it going. And then I go to work as a nurse... I volunteer here”.
Appendices 6a)-6d): Examples of Sampling Sources (Not exhaustive)

Appendix 6a) Local Vancouver/Vancouver Island-based NGOs

Signs of Hope in Africa  www.signsofhopeinafrica.org
433-1575 Begbie St., Victoria BC V8R 1L2  250-514-9192

Project H.A.N.D.S.  http://www.projecthands.org/
P O Box 62, Lions Bay, BC. V0N 2E0  604-628-4433

Mosqoy: Sacred Valley Youth Fund  http://mosqoy.org/  21-21 Dallas Rd., V5B 1S9, Victoria, BC

Nicaragua Children’s Foundation  www.childrenfoundation.com
3855 Bayridge Ave, West Vancouver, BC V7V 3J3 Phone: (604) 926-5323

Love is the Answer (LITA)  info@loveistheanswer.ca
5436 Chestnut Crescent, Ladner, British Columbia, V4K 1J4 Tel – 604.946.5400

Village Outreach Society (di_brown9@hotmail.com)
1500 Georgia St., Suite 1250, Box 62, Vancouver V6G 2Z6  604-683-7006

Common Voice Widows Living With HIV/AIDS  samaya@shaw.ca
3-144 Dallas Rd., Victoria, BC

Eagle Heights Africa in BC  www.eagleheightsafrcainbc.org

Chikondi One Heart Angel Orphanage  www.chikondiorphanage.org
250-204-3612 ia, B.C. CANADA

The Didi Society  www.thedidisociety.org/  2844 Wyndeatt Ave., Victoria

Reachout To Africa  info@reachout2africa.org
PO Box 30052, North Vancouver, BC V7H 2Y8  604-307-1069

For the Love of Africa  ftoa@fortheloveofafrica.ca
813, Claremont Ave., Victoria, BC V8Y 1J9  250 881 0762

Shanti Uganda Society  info@shantiuganda.org
The Shanti Uganda Society, 16-306 Abbott St., Vancouver BC, V6B 2K9  604.716.061
Appendix 6b) Vancouver/Victoria Faith-based Organizations

The Salvation Army  www.salvationarmy.ca

Divisional Headquarters, 103 – 3833 Henning Dr, Burnaby BC, V5V 6N5, (604)299-3908
Victoria Public Relations Office, 201 – 645 Fort Street, Victoria BC, V8W 1G2, (250)386-3366


The Anglican Diocese of British Columbia  https://bc.anglican.ca/

900 Vancouver St, Victoria, BC V8V 3V5, (250) 386-7781

Lutheran Church-Canada Synod 2014 - synod2014.lutheranchurch.ca

80 East 10th Avenue, New Westminster, BC V3L 4R5  (604) 524-1318

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver

4885 Saint John Paul II Way, Vancouver BC V5Z 0G3
Phone: 604 683 0281, Fax: 604 683 4288

The Presbyterian Church in Canada  presbyterian.ca/contact

50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, Ontario M3C 1J7  1-800-619-7301 or +1 (416) 441-1111

Rainbow Community Church
1401 Comox Street, 604-689-2077

Unitarian Church of Vancouver
949 West 49th Ave, 604-261-7204
Appendix 6c) Service clubs and Seniors’ organizations

**Rotary Club of Vancouver** [www.rotaryvancouver.org](http://www.rotaryvancouver.org/)

475 Howe St, Vancouver, BC V6C 2B3 (604) 685-0481

**Rotary Club of West Vancouver Sunrise** [www.rotarywestvancouversunrise.org](http://www.rotarywestvancouversunrise.org/)

c/o Capilano Golf and Country Club, 420 Southborough Drive, West Vancouver, BC V7S 1M2

**Rotary Club of North Vancouver** [www.rotarynorthvan.com](http://www.rotarynorthvan.com/)

c/o MarinaSide Grill. 1653 Columbia St. North Vancouver

**Rotary of Victoria** [www.rotaryvictoria.org](http://www.rotaryvictoria.org)

805 Gordon Street, Victoria, BC V8W 1A4

**Saanich Rotary Club**

PO Box 17 Victoria, BC V8M 2M1

c/o University of Victoria – University Club, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2

**KIWANIS CLUBS**


The Traveller’s Inn, 1961 Douglas Street, Victoria, BC.

**The Esquimalt Kiwanis Club. K08656.**

Gorge Vale Golf Club, 1005 Craigflower Road, Victoria, BC.

**The Greater Victoria Seniors Kiwanis Club. K08784.**

Milton Manor, 2075 Milton Street, Victoria, BC

**PROBUS CLUBS**

**The Probus Club of Victoria, (Men) #18**

N.O.T.C. Gun Room, Work Point, Victoria, BC

**The Probus Club of Saanich. BC.** [hdubas@shaw.ca](mailto:hdubas@shaw.ca)

Uplands Golf Club, Victoria

**The Women's Probus Club of Vancouver, BC** [www.probus.org/15vncvrw.htm](http://www.probus.org/15vncvrw.htm)
LIONS CLUBS

Victoria Central Lions Club  http://www.lionsdistrict19-i.org/zone2/vcentral.htm

Saanich Lions Club  http://www.lionsdistrict19-i.org/zone2/saanich.htm

SENIORS-SPECIFIC ORGANIZATIONS and SENIORS’ CLUBS:

Central Saanich Senior Citizens Association  www.centralsaanichseniorscentre.org/

Volunteering and Older Adults - Volunteer Canada
https://volunteer.ca/content/volunteering-and-older-adults

Senior-Friendly Volunteer Vacations - Transitions Abroad
www.transitionsabroad.com

Volunteer Abroad with Senior Citizens - GoAbroad.com
www.goabroad.com

Finding International or Overseas Volunteer Opportunities
https://www.serviceleader.org/volunteers/international

Volunteer, Research, and Work Opportunities in Africa
www.isp.msu.edu/ncsa/volteer.htm

Canadian Association of Retired Persons

Vancouver, BC  (Ch 45) Robert Swansborough, Chair 604-899-8070  carpvancouver@gmail.com

Victoria, BC  (Ch 19)  -220-5870  carpvictoriachapter@gmail.com

Elder Colleges (Vancouver/Vancouver Island)

Elder College Panorama, Vancouver Island  https://www.crd.bc.ca/panorama/

Elder College Vancouver  ...www.nic.bc.ca

Elder College (North Vancouver) | Capilano University https://csee.capilanou.caAppendix 5d) International Organizations

Canadian Feed The Children  www. canadianfeedthechildren.ca
6 Lansing Square, Suite 123, Toronto, ON, M2J 1T5  416-757-3318

Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO)  www.ceso-saco.com
700 Bay Street, , 8th Floor. Box 800, Toronto, ON  M5G 1Z6  1-800-268-9052

**Canadian Network for NGOs in Ethiopia (CANGO)** [www.cangoethiopia.org](http://www.cangoethiopia.org)

**Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)** [http://www.msf.ca/](http://www.msf.ca/)

**World Vision** [www.worldvision.ca/](http://www.worldvision.ca/)

**Canadian Crossroads International** [www.cintl.org](http://www.cintl.org)

**Oxfam Canada BC & Yukon - Vancouver Office** miriamp@oxfam.ca
Suite 411 – 119 West Pender, Vancouver, B.C., V6B 1S5 Tel: 604-736-7678 Fax: 604-736-9646

**Canadian Food For the Hungry** [www.fhcanada.org](http://www.fhcanada.org)
2320 King George Blvd, Surrey, BC V4A 5A5 (604) 853-4332

**Child Haven International** fred@childhaven.ca
19014 Concession 7 Maxville, ON K0C 1T0

**Future Africa Society** [www.futureafrica.ca](http://www.futureafrica.ca)
7160 11Th Avenue, Burnaby, British Columbia V3N 2M6 Canada (604) 897-5123

**Health for Humanity Service Society** [http://www.h4h.ca/](http://www.h4h.ca/)
PO Box 77028 Kingsway Knight RPO Vancouver BC V5V 5E7

**Mercy Ships Canada** mercyships.ca