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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by William Vaughan Taylor entitled "Short-Term Missions: Reinforcing Beliefs and Legitimating Poverty." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Jon Shefner, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Short-Term Missions: Reinforcing Beliefs and Legitimating Poverty

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

William Vaughan Taylor

August 2012

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Acknowledgments

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It is not good to have zeal without knowledge. (Proverbs 19:2 NIV)

Abstract

Every year more than a million short-term missionaries travel abroad. Many encounter intense poverty. Popular discourse suggests short-term missionaries return home radically changed. Social movement theory shows collective experiences can transform participants. In this thesis I explore the narratives of short-term missionaries to understand how they understand the poverty they encounter abroad. I have found short-term mission participants think about encounters with the poor in ways that produce contradictory beliefs and legitimate poverty. Interviewees consistently employed *deficiency* and *fatalistic* theories of poverty that provide little moral or practical justification for helping the poor. However, these beliefs conflicted with religious convictions. Interviewees reported increased *awareness* of physical and psychic suffering caused by poverty. However, they consistently romanticized poverty and enumerated its special spiritual, lifestyle, cultural, and psychological advantages. Most explicitly eschewed ethnocentrism and paternalism but employed deeply ethnocentric and paternalistic narratives. Short-term missions did not radically transform participants. Instead, the change is a slight amplification of existing beliefs that reinforce the status quo. Religious beliefs and the absence of alternative schemas or groups make it unlikely participants will develop challenging perspectives. This study highlights the difficulty we have developing critical perspectives on ideas that so powerfully support the legitimacy of our own favorable circumstances.

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I

Introduction and Background

In this thesis I present the stories of twenty people who shared thoughts and feelings about encountering poverty on international short-term Christian mission trips. Although popular discourse from mission agencies, ministers, youth leaders, Christian publishers, and participants suggests short-term missionaries return home radically changed, quantitative researchers find scant evidence the trips have much lasting impact (Priest 2006; Ver Beek 2008). Qualitative researchers find poverty is the most common recurring theme during interviews (Livermore 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). I examined existing studies and conducted interviews to determine how participants thought about their experiences and the poverty they encountered. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews uncover belief systems shaped by remembered pasts, perceived presents, and anticipated futures.

I have found short-term mission participants think about encounters with the poor in ways that produce contradictory beliefs and legitimate poverty. Interviewees consistently employed *deficiency* and *fatalistic* theories of poverty that provide little moral or practical justification for helping the poor. However, these beliefs conflicted with religious convictions and voluntaristic behavior. Interviewees reported increased *awareness* of physical and psychic suffering caused by poverty. However, they consistently romanticized poverty and enumerated its special spiritual, lifestyle, cultural, and psychological advantages. Most explicitly eschewed ethnocentrism and paternalism but employed deeply ethnocentric and paternalistic narratives. Short-term missions did not radically change participants but contributed to a *contradictory consciousness*. Participants struggled to reconcile contradictions, accepted them, or were unaware of the tension. Although brief experiences with poverty often conflicted with dominant ideologies, participants rarely questioned the status quo or

existing social orders. In fact, short-term missions seem as likely to reinforce ethnocentric and paternalistic attitudes as challenge them. This study underscores how difficult it is to develop a critical perspective on ideas that so powerfully support the legitimacy of our own favorable circumstances

Personal Background

The genesis of this project was a 2006 short-term mission trip to Honduras that marked the beginning of my intimate relationship with Christian short-term missions groups in Central America. After the initial trip I returned to Honduras as a certified English teacher to live and work at a home for street children. Over the next few years, I routinely led three to five mission trips per year. Many people said the trips changed their life, but it was never clear what exactly had changed. I prayed volunteers would return home with increased empathy and solidarity with poor people they met. I hoped they would understand suffering as the result of a deeply flawed social economic system. It was clear to me this was not happening. I became ambivalent about short-term missions. On the one hand, a short-term mission trip appeared to be an extraordinary opportunity to promote social change by exposing privileged Americans to global poverty. On the other hand, the trips often seemed to reinforce ethnocentric beliefs. I worried about the impact well-intentioned ethnocentric missionaries had on indigent hosts. Hosts seemed trapped by poverty. Participants seemed trapped by the cultural beliefs they carried with them. As the Apostle Paul said of the difficulty of understanding the world we live in, "For now we see as through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). I enrolled in a sociology graduate program to begin understanding these problems. This project is an effort to loosen the cords of the cultural, ideological, and religious traps that bind our consciousness and keep us from developing more critical, liberating perspectives.

Importance

Around 1.6 million US church members travel abroad each year on short-term mission trips (Wuthnow 2009) but the movement has received little academic attention (Priest 2006; Ver Beek 2008; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Popular discourse assumes short-term mission trips radically change participants and hosts but most claims remain untested. Even seminaries and missiological programs have largely ignored the burgeoning phenomenon. By contrast, fewer people participate in study abroad programs yet several major academic journals are dedicated solely to this type of education (Priest 2006).

Lack of research on short-term missions may reflect a growing disconnect between religion and academia (Fowler, Booth, Hertzke, Olson, and Dulk 2010; Wuthnow 2008; Bornstein 2003; Hallum 1996; Sutton and Veritigans 2006; Smilde 2007). Ninety-two percent of US residents believe in God or some universal spirit and most claim religion *very important* in their daily lives (Fowler et al. 2010). Attending church represents the single most common voluntaristic activity but secularization in top universities has meant only a handful of sociologists specialize in the study of religion (Wuthnow 2008). Many questions about the beliefs of ordinary people remain unanswered. We are left to guess most learning about religion takes place outside of academia.

The sheer magnitude of short-term mission trip participation warrants investigation. Such high levels of participation would have been almost unthinkable a generation or two ago and may reflect the changing face of Christianity as a form of globalization (Slimbach 2000; Livermore 2006; Priest 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Religious zeal, convenient international travel, concentration of wealth, and technological advancements in communication allow millions of US churchgoers to experience short visits with some of world's poorest people (Wuthnow 2009).

Although scholars have long noted how poverty in the United States is invisiblized and class distinctions typically receive little attention (Harrington 1962; Katznelson 1981; Weis and Fine 1993; Rothenberg 2004), short-term participants find it difficult to ignore poverty abroad (Livermore 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009).

The study of short-term missions is theoretically and empirically important. Beliefs do not emerge in a vacuum and religious experiences influence participants' political attitudes on poverty (Weber 1930; Smith 1991, Pratto 1994, Barker, and Carmen 2004, Nepstad 2004). In-depth interviews answer calls by Svallfors (2006) and Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) for detailed qualitative studies on the relationship between collective religious experiences and individual political commitments. Political beliefs arise from balancing conceptions of justice and fairness about the responsibilities and rights and expectations of actors in varying positions of society. Incoherent or outright contradictory attitudinal constellations are common, especially in the United States (Svallfors 2006; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lakoff 2008, Merolla et all 2011). Interviews reveal processes by which collective religious experiences shape—and are shaped by—belief systems.

This study is a key to unlocking questions about social change. Why do our best efforts at creating a better world fall short? What happens when deep unexamined cultural narratives conflict with lived experiences? What do we do when our lofty values conflict with ideas that legitimate our comfortable social position? This study helps us understand why short-term missionaries fail to see the structures that limit their own agency, weigh heavily on the people they are trying to help, and constitute major barriers to social change.

Background

International short-term missions include diverse world-shaping activities of burgeoning and loosely defined movement of evangelical Christian volunteers. No universally accepted definition for short-term mission exists. Explicit or implicit definitions of international short-term missions commonly describe temporary, voluntaristic actions that have an evangelical component and are primarily Protestant Christian and originate in the United States. This definition does not include missions by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) or non-Christian groups. The focus of this study is international missions and not domestice missions. Although the movement is difficult to define, researchers have sketched its parameters. The trips are short; the median length of these trips is 8 days (Wuthnow 2009). The number of churchgoers who have participated in short-term mission trips grew by more than 630% between 1996 and 2001 (Howell and Dorr 2007:236). Over the last twenty years virtually every faith-based organization has expanded, and their supporters have become more engaged (Priest 2008; Ver Beek 2008; Wuthnow 2009). Although these numbers are difficult to calculate, major projects by Priest (2008) and Wuthnow (2009) reveal a portrait of the phenomenon.

The popularity of short-term missions may be tied to their short duration. Historically, international missions implied committing to years—if not a lifetime—in another culture. Missionaries traveling to China in the 19th century purportedly packed their belongings in coffins, expecting never to return. Short-term missions require less sacrifice as few trips last longer than two weeks (Wuthnow 2009). Most full-time employees can use their vacation time. For students, school holidays allow ample time to participate. Many retirees also participate in short-term missions. Although short in duration, short-term missions constitute a significant proportion of US missionary efforts abroad. Short-term missionaries contribute roughly 30,000 person-years to US missions abroad (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008); that is about a quarter of the amount provided by professional, full-time missionaries (Priest 2008).

The rapidly increasing participation of young people is noteworthy (Trinitapoli and Vaisy 2009; Priest 2010; Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler 2011). A national study of thirteen to seventeen year olds indicates that 29% traveled on either a domestic or international mission trip, and a follow up survey two years later found the number had increased to 41% (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). At Christian colleges numbers are predictably higher. Priest (2010) found 62% of students in required Bible courses at ten Bible colleges participated in an international mission trip. At Protestant Christian liberal arts colleges like Wheaton College, George Fox University, or Whitworth college the number was 47% (Priest 2010). Catholics appear less likely to engage in short-term mission activities. Roman Catholic college student participation was 7%. Overall participation is increasing as well. Only two percent of those who had been teenagers during the fifties, sixties, or seventies reported having traveled abroad on a short-term mission trip during high school: this proportion was five percent for those who had been teenagers in the 1990s and increased to 12% for those who have been teenagers in the 2000s (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008).

Although much published literature suggests short-term missions consist mainly of young people who have the flexibility of lots of free time, long vacations, and less responsibilities (Howell 2009; Howell and Dorr 2007; Priest 2010) Wuthnow (2009) argues they are not the most typical participants. Young adults who attend church are twice as likely to go on a short-term mission and account for the most rapidly increasing proportion of volunteers, but there are far fewer young people in the church overall. More likely, the typical short-term mission volunteer resembles the average churchgoer: “a white, married, college-educated male in his forties or fifties whose children are grown and lives in a relatively homogenous suburb of the South or Midwest” (Wuthnow 2009:172). More active members are more likely to travel overseas on a mission trip (Wuthnow 2009).

Most short-term mission trips originate in the United States and are facilitated by preexisting

transnational ties. Most travel to Latin America (Priest 2010). Common destinations include Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009; Priest 2010). However, not all mission trips originate in the United States. For example, teams originating in El Salvador have visited places like Kosovo, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, and Vietnam (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008). Often international denomination ties, ties with long-term missionaries, non-governmental humanitarian organizations, campus-to-campus ties, or congregation-to-congregation partnerships facilitate transnational links that make these trips possible (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008).

Short-term mission groups focus on a wide range of issues like evangelism, charitable volunteerism, learning about other cultures, international hunger and relief efforts, sponsoring missionaries, concerns about war, religious freedom, and human rights (Wuthnow 2009; Beyerlein et al 2011). Priest (2010) reports data on megachurches' short-term mission activity that suggests the variety and frequency of specific activities.

Table 1: Short-term Mission Activity Frequency

Number of trips	***Activity on which participants focused***
1.72	building, construction, repair
1.66	evangelism, church planting
1.38	VBS, children's ministries
1.17	medical, health care
1.13	relief and development
1.08	orphans, orphanages
.72	vision trip, prayer walk
.72	music, worship
.66	education: teaching English
.55	education: other
.53	sports
.49	art, drama
.21	environmental or justice issues

(Priest et al. 2010:99)

These data correspond with other observations that suggest building and construction are the most common activity (Jeffery 2001; Koll 2010).

Evangelism is a common motivation for short-term mission participants that distinguishes short-term mission activity from similar forms of short-term international travel like tourism and pilgrimage (Howell and Dorr 2007, Trinitapoli and Vaisey, Beyerlein et al 2011). Evangelism includes directly spreading the gospel by preaching, baptizing, church planting, personal witnessing, and distributing religious tracts. However, churches members increasingly view voluntaristic, humanitarian activities—painting a wall, treating AIDS victims, or installing a water filtration system—as a legitimate form of cross-cultural ministry (Livermore 2009). For Christians, evangelism represents obedience to a Biblical injunction to "go and make disciples of all nations" (NIV Mat 28:19). Evangelism believers desire to share a faith that infuses participants' lives with meaning, fulfillment, and joy.

Participants' motivations for traveling abroad on short-term missions are diverse. Scholars reference "mission highs" or "mountaintop experiences" characterized by feelings of intense spiritual fulfillment (Peterson and Peterson 2001, Ver Beek 2008; Howell and Dorr 2009). Touristic impulses are also common: some missionaries want to learn about different cultures or gain a perspective on their own culture (Priest 2007; Howell and Dorr 2009). Some seek adventure and excitement traveling to exotic places and remote locations (Blezien 2004). Short-term missions may strengthen intra-group bonds in ways that offer valuable social capital. Likewise, short-term mission activity is a visible affirmation of Christian commitment that demonstrates faithfulness to peers and may offer participants significant cultural (Bourdieu 1986; Wuthnow 2002).

Several institutions provided structural support for the growing short-term mission movement. Youth with a Mission (YWAM) was founded in 1960 and by the late 1990s was sending 30,000 students abroad yearly (Wuthnow 2009). Teen Missions International, Campus Crusade for Christ, Operation

Mobilization, and Bethany College of Missions promote and operate short-term mission programs. Priest (2006:433) notes the emergence of hundreds of independent short-term mission coordinating agencies as well as a growing number of full time "mission pastors." Religious denominations, independent congregations, and Christian colleges also provide institutional support. The Southern Baptist Convention sends over 150,000 abroad annually. The United Methodist Churches send more than 100,000 (Wuthnow 2009). By all indications participation numbers and institutional support continues to increase.

A great deal has been written about short-term missions recently. A simple internet search for titles containing *short-term mission* on a popular online bookstore website yields 119 titles. Forty-one new titles containing the phrase, "short-term mission," appeared in 2011 alone. Most published work on short-term missions are guidebooks for practical effective execution. A glance at the 10 bestsellers published since 2010 is revealing.

Table 2: Best Selling Short-term Mission Books Since 2010

Rank	Title
1.	*TransforMission: Making Disciples through Short-Term Missions*
2.	*How to Plan, Prepare and Successfully Complete Your Short-Term Mission: For Volunteers, Churches, Independent STM Teams and Mission Organizations and those Planning a Christian Gap Year*
3.	*Stepping Out: A Guide to Short-Term Missions*
4.	*Don't Forget to Pack the Kids: Short-term Missions for Families*
5.	*How Do I Get There? Raising Funds for Short-Term Mission Trips*
6.	*Bringing It Home: A Post-Trip Devotional for Short-Term Mission Trips*
7.	*Obeying the Great Commission: Preparation for Short-Term Mission Trips*
8.	*Face-to-Face Guatemala: A Comprehensive Country Guide and Destination booklet for short term missions church and youth team trips, and Christian working Vacations*
9.	*Face-to-Face Honduras: A comprehensive country guide and destination booklet for short term missions church and youth team trips, and Christian working Vacations*
10.	*Who Am I That I Should Go: A Guide to Short-term Missions*

Although short-term missions enjoy wide popularity, a growing number of scholars, practioners, and church members have begun to question the value of short-term missions relative to the social and economic costs (Illich 1973; Priest 2006; Ver Beek 2008; Salmon 2009; etc). Short-term missionaries contribute volunteer hours worth $1.1 billion dollars per year, but the cost of transportation alone exceeds the value of volunteer hours (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008). Average travel expenses exceed $1000 per person (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008). Other expenses include food, lodging, projects, insurance, medical care, entertainment, and merchandise. Large churches often pay full-time staff to organize and lead short-term mission trips trips (Priest 2006). Critics point out that only a small portion of spending actually goes towards "helping" indigent hosts (Livermore 2006; Salmon 2009). Salmon (2009) estimates the average group traveling to Honduras spends $30,000 on projects that could be completed by locals for $2000. Other critics point to the self-serving nature, relational shallowness, paternalism, and ethnocentrism, as well as the overall cost involved with short-term missions (Atkins 1991; Slimbach 2000; Van Engen 2000; Friesen 2004). Critics argue participants are not equipped to "help" people they contact and have pointed out similarities between short-term missions and *poverty tourism* (New York Times 1884; Wade 2009; Easterly 2010; Oede 2010). Debates often take on moral tones. However, most moral disagreements are bound by differences of view on factual matters (Benton and Craib 2001). Unfortunately, the debates about short-term mission trips are taking place at a distance from empirically and theoretically grounded critical academic investigation.

Organization of Study

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In this chapter I have outlined the study's import, my own background and motivations for undertaking this study, and background information about the burgeoning short-term mission phenomenon.

Chapter Two is a review of sociological and missiological literature. I discuss sociological theories and research on how religion and collective experiences can either affirm, legitimate, or support status quo attitudes toward poverty or undermine, contradict, and stimulate radical shifts. Also, I discuss the empirical findings of missiologists. The most convincing research suggests short-term missions have little lasting impact on participants. I suggest that short-term mission experiences promote fractional change and contradictory beliefs but fail to produce significant shifts in participants' worldviews.

Chapter Three reviews my methodological approach based on in-depth qualitative interviewing. I discuss how I gained access to research participants and provide information about the demographic characteristics of participants. Also, I reflect on the limits and advantages of my methodology in terms of the effects of the researcher on research participants and on the research process.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present research findings. In Chapter Four I demonstrate how participants employ *deficiency* and *fatalistic* theories of poverty that suggest little *can* or *should* be done to help the poor. I investigate how participants reconcile these political beliefs with a sense of responsibility to help the poor that stems from religious conviction. This chapter highlights how mission experiences amplify contradictory political and religious beliefs. Chapter Five describes participants' emotional responses to suffering and focuses on their religious interpretations of poverty. This section highlights contradictions between materialist cultural beliefs and religious beliefs. In Chapter Six, I address the question of change and reveal how short-term missions and faith allow for, even reinforce, contradictory beliefs already held by participants. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the major findings explain why short-term missions do not produce more critical beliefs. The conclusion addresses the inherent paternalism in short-term missions and highlights the difficult y people have questioning assumptions they carry with them.

II

Literature Review

In this chapter I review literature pertinent to international short-term mission trips' effects on participants' political beliefs about the overty they encounter. Poverty is the most common recurring theme during qualitative interviews with short-term mission participants (Livermore 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Anecdotal evidence suggests trips transform participants. However, it is not clear any lasting change occurs. If transformation occurs, it is unclear if belief systems undergo intensification, radical shift, or increased dissonance. Sociologists have long documented how collective religious practice is a conservative force that legitimates the status quo (Marx 1843; Wilson 1982; Wuthnow 1994; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Bourdieu 1986; Stark and Finke 2000; Sharot 2001; Sherkat 2003; Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler 2007; Moreton 2009). Others chronicle how religion can shape radicalized resistance to dominant ideologies (Cardinal 1976; Bonino 1981; Gutierrez 1983; McAdams 1988; Smith 1991; Nepstad 2004a). Missiologists find mixed evidence for the transformative effect of short-term missions. Although qualitative studies show participants stress the transformative nature of their experiences, quantitative research suggests little lasting change. It seems likely short-term missions increase ambivalent attitudes and conflicting beliefs about poverty but fail to produce significant transformation.

Religion, Collective Experiences, and Beliefs About Poverty

Sociological research suggests intense, collective religious experience like short-term missions would influence participants and their beliefs about poverty but it is unclear what impact short-term missions have. Certainly, collective experiences generate individual commitments (Durkheim 1972,

McAdams 1988 Bourdieu 1990, Joas 2000, Nepstad 2004a, Fenn 2009, Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Social scientists have long been interested in how religion shapes belief systems (Marx and Engels 1878, 1968; Weber 1921, 1922). Likewise, social movements scholars have built on Bourdieu's (1990) explanation of how class-based and political experiences demonstrate the role institutionalized experience have in shaping individual's "habitus" (McAdams 1988, Taylor and Whittier 1999; Neptsad 2004a, 2004b, 2008; McVeigh 2009). However, scholars cite recent failures in social movement theory to incorporate religious movements or understand participants' religious values (Nepstad 2004b; Sutton and Vertigans 2006; McVeigh 2009). Indeed, Priest (2006:434) points out,

> This movement is transforming the way North American Christians are engaging the world. But it is a grassroots and populist phenomenon almost completely divorced from scholarship, from missiology, and from seminary education.

Although it is likely that religion and intense collective religious experiences influence social and political beliefs (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009), it is unclear what impact short-term missions have on participants' worldviews or their views on poverty. Nor is it clear if short-term missions are source of stability that reinforce dominant ideological commitments, trigger more critical perspectives, or produce a contradictory consciousness.

People might adopt religious beliefs because they are politically, socially, or psychologically *useful*, not because they contain inherent truth-value (Weber 1968; Gouldner 1964, Smilde 2007, Magee and Galinsky 2008). For example, Smilde (2007) shows that poor people in Latin America consciously choose to believe religious teachings when they offer practical solutions to persistent life problems. If certain religious beliefs offer social utility to the poor, then certainly the same is true for the wealthy.

Sociologists have described religion as tool of power: an ideology that reinforces social stratification and justifies poverty. Structural functionalist and Marxist theories suggest religion is a

conservative force that legitimates authority and encourages submission to dominant social order (Marx 1843; Durkheim 1921; Nepstad 2004b). Functionalists argue religion maintains social order by producing common social values and punishing deviance. Durkheim (1921,2001) showed that elements of belief translate into identity formation, morals, and collective consciousness through intense, collective moments. Marxists view religion as a tool used by elites to maintain power: famously, "the opiate of the masses" (Marx 1843). More recently scholars have demonstrated how predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures operate systematically, consistently, and predictably to some persons and groups at the expense of others (Gaventa 1980; Bourdieu 1986; Kerbo 2006).

The self-reinforcing nature of power suggests short-term mission experiences stifle change and reinforce beliefs that serve dominant religious and political ideologies (Magee and Galinsky 2008). "Power, related to one's control over valued resources transforms individual psychology such that the powerful think and act in ways that lead to the retention and acquisition of power" (Magee and Galinsky 2008:2). The average short-term mission participant is relatively privileged (Wuthnow and Offut 2008), thus from a conflict perspective he or she has some interest in adopting and promoting hierarchy enhancing belief systems that stabilize current social order and justify their control over resources. Research shows that high-ranking group members endorse inequality more than low-ranking group members (Magee and Galinsky 2008).[1] By endorsing hierarchy as an appropriate social arrangement, they rationalize the place of the poor—and their own social position—believing people get what they deserve. Furthermore, missionaries' churches are echo chambers that solidify beliefs. Consciously or not, people sort themselves into politically similar congregations through self-reinforcing processes (Putnam and Campbell 2011). Furthermore, research demonstrates a consistent correlation between

[1] In the United States the poor are more likely to experience their poverty as legitimate and justified than in other Western nations (Domhoff 2010).

church going and conservative beliefs (Putnam and Cambell 2011). Conversely, reading the Bible correlates positively with more progressive beliefs about economic justice, poverty, criminal justice, and science (Franzen 2011). The most involved congregation members are more likely to go on missions (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008). Such strong intra-group bonds and intensive interactions produce and maintain resilient, stable belief systems (Lofland 1966; Bankston, Forsyth, and Floyd 1981). From the conflict perspective, the self-reinforcing nature of power and self-reinforcing nature of church going suggest little reason to expect short-term mission experiences challenge existing beliefs.

Structural-functionalist explanations describe religious belief as a function of elite political and economic interests. Researchers have documented efforts of conservative corporate elites to meld free market ideology with Christian faith (Wakefield 2006; Kintz 2007; Connolly 2009; Morton 2009; Domke, Domke, and Coe 2010). Researchers note the popularity of many conservative preachers who prioritize economic gain instead of pressing the state or corporations to care for the poor (Connolly 2009; Lee and Sinitiere 2009). Religious beliefs can reinforce corporate interests: "for the emerging Wal-Mart constituency, faith in God and faith in the market grew in tandem" (Morton 2009:5). The product is a belief system that undermines middle and lower class economic status.

Religious beliefs also reinforce ideologies that support powerful state interests. A striking example: missionaries Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) were complicit accomplices of CIA led Cold War intrigue in Latin America (Colby and Dennett 1995). Faith was a product and tool of anti-Communist, pro-oil, capitalist expansion that resulted in the destruction of indigenous cultures. Others have documented a variety of overt, covert, strategic, and intentional means by which elites maintain control over the production of religious symbols to maintain legitimacy and influence attitudes and behaviors about economic, political and social issues in order to facilitate the reproduction of existing social order (Bourdieu 1986; Moreton 2009; Domke, Domke, and Coe 2010).

Beliefs about poverty are an area where we find overlap of religious and political belief (Feagin 1975; Emmerson, Smith, and Skikkink 1999; Hunt 2002; Brimeyer 2008; Connolly 2008; Merolla, Hunt, and Serpe 2011). Studying the relationship between stratification and religious beliefs has a long history in sociology. Weber (1921), for example, described religion's role in theodocies: how people invoke God to explain differentiation in how social life distributes social goods.

More recently, stratification research reveals religious influence on political beliefs. Stratification beliefs have three primary types: individualistic, structuralist, and fatalistic (Feagin 1975, Hunt 2002, 2004). Individualistic beliefs blame poor people for poverty in (e.g., laziness, ineptitude, immorality). Structuralist beliefs locate the source of poverty in social system (e.g., governmental policy, poor educations system, discrimination, economic system). Fatalistic beliefs locate sources of poverty in uncontrollable supra-individual, non-structural forces (e.g., chance, bad luck, destiny, God's will; Hunt 2004, Brimeyer 2004). Fatalistic beliefs are less common and less well understood than more common structuralist and individualistic stratification beliefs (Feagin 1975; Hunt 2004). According to Brimeyer (2004) fatalistic beliefs citing God's will are distinctly Protestant.

Routine religious experiences in general are sources of socialization that reinforce the status quo (Durkheim 1921; Wilson 1982; Wuthnow 1994; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000; Sharot 2001; Sherkat 2003; Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler 2007). In the United States individualism is a deep-rooted, dominant ideology (Lipset 1996; Bellah and Madsen 2007) that legitimates individualistic stratification beliefs that blame victims of poverty (Ryan 1971; Kluegel and Smith 1981, 1986; Wuthnow 2008). If we accept that religion is primarily a conservative force, we expect US short-term missionaries to exhibit highly individualistic stratification beliefs that are reinforced by religious practices. Members of privileged groups like whites and those with higher incomes favor unsympathetic views of the poor based on assumptions about the availability of opportunities and social mobility (Kluegel and Smith

1986). Indeed, white evangelicals and mainstream Protestants are the least likely to favor government assistance to the poor (Pew 2010). It seems routine religious experiences and privilege form political attitudes favorable to the status quo.

Charitable behavior can reinforce dominant ideologies and individualistic beliefs. Charitable volunteerism and charitable giving are a major components of short-term missions (Peterson and Peterson 1991, Purvis 1993, McDonough and Peterson 1999, Wilson 1999, Harris 2002, Peterson 2003, Wuthnow and Offut 2008; Beyerlein et al 2011). The structure of international short-term missions volunteerism results in conspicuous forms of compassionate behavior. Though charity is ostensibly intended to help, visible acts of charity and dramatic intervention also exhibit authority, exact deference, and establish monuments to elite cultural hegemony (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). Historically, arguments in support of charity appealed to paternalistic values that doing good asserts the superiority of one individual or group above another (Heyrman 1982). Paternalistic attitudes are often understood as resulting from overt or covert individual ideology. However, the beliefs of individuals are better understood as the consequences, not causes, of social structures and discursive assumptions (Harding 1998). "Institutional structures, cultural traditions, and inherited ways of thinking and speaking are barriers for even the most informed, up-to-date individuals with the highest moral intentions and rational standards" (Harding 1998:14). Good intentions are not a guarantee against paternalism.

Conspicuous benevolence legitimates hierarchies (Heyrman 1982) and neutralizes tension between Christian spiritual emphasis and the moral taint of materialistic accumulation (Wuthnow 1994). When charitable noblesse oblige is used to validate appropriation as the basis of status distinctions, charitable behavior is assumed to be a requisite of deep social responsibilities within a paternalist social order. However, magnanimous posturing and symbolic gestures by elites may supplant actual responsibilities (Thompson 1974). "The theater of the great," Thompson (1974:390) writes, "is

depended not upon constant day-by-day attention to responsibilities but upon occasional dramatic interventions." The dramatization of personal magnificence asserts cultural hegemony and elite authority while ritualizing the social relations of subordination (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). Short-term missions, as dramatic and isolated incidents of compassion, do not seem to result from community oriented, reciprocal social responsibilities so much as individualistic and voluntary behavior. Unlike the *theater of the great* that demonstrates elite hegemony, short-term participants may perform in a *theater of the middle* by playing paternalistic roles that demonstrate cultural and moral superiority of the US Christian middle class relative to their impoverished hosts. As a self-reinforcing, religious, charitable actions, it appears that short-term missions contribute to individualistic, victim-blame beliefs about poverty and reinforce the status quo.

However, this may be too simplistic. Even leading proponents of structure models concede they do not hold an explanatory monopoly. "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills 1959:ii). Collective processes of interpretation, social construction and attribution are often undervalued (McAdams 1988; Harding 1998). Accurate explanations acknowledge individual agency, competing ideologies, religion's multiple roles, and unintended consequences. Even charitable paternalism can transform into radical, empowering, solidarity (Behrens 2004).[2] Likewise, collective religious action can be a conserving force resistant to change and serving elite interests but it can serve subordinate interests, as is generally the case with Latin American liberation theology (Cardinal 1976; Bonino 1981; Gutierrez 1983; Boff and Boff 1987; Smith 1991; Nepstad 2004a).

Discontented with traditional approaches, some sociologists of religion turned to Pierre Bourdieu (Swartz 1996; Verter 2003; Rey 2007, Turner 2011). Although Bourdieu had relatively little to

[2] Behrens (2004) documents the case of Maryknoll sisters in the 1950s and 1960s whose religious work in Guatemala transformed into subversive political activism.

say about religion, his interpretive framework incorporates power, hierarchy, and structural factors that influence, shape, limit, and amplify individual choices. He expanded the concept of capital and developed a political economy of cultural practices in which individuals and institutions compete for control and production of meaning, cultural capital, and symbolic power in overlapping social fields. Conceptually, Bourdieu offers a synthesis of Marxist and Weberian views of religion (Turner 2011). He also inherits much from Durkheim and Levi-Strauss's structuralism (Callinicos 1999). Bourdieu attempts to situate agency within structural power. Although he offers valuable concepts his theory does not offer a satisfactory escape from the problematic cage of deterministic structuralism (Turner 2011). Ultimately, his conceptual contributions cannot explain how religious experiences produce radicalized beliefs or how social change is possible.

Social actors constantly negotiate religious meaning as they pursue political ends (Benford and Snow 1992; Oleson 2005). Religion is often a source of resistance and liberation (Cardenal 1976; Bonino 1981; Gutierrez 1983; McAdams 1988; Smith 1991; Nepstad 2004a). Stoll (1996) traces the religious genealogy of Zapatista rebels in Chiapas to challenges of the still-colonial Catholic Church by the Protestant Christian Mayan converts. Likewise, Nicaraguan revolutionary, Sandinista official, priest, and poet, Ernesto Cardenal explained, "It was my religious faith that led me to revolution, not my politics" (Nepstad 2004b). Likewise, Leonardo Boff (1987:44) understood authentic Christianity to be "the reflection in faith of the church that has taken to heart the clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor." The work of influential liberation theologians like Cardenal and Boff highlights that idea shared religious meanings are fluid, contestable, and can be used to advance progressive political projects.

To suppose that short-term missions exert a primarily conservative force on participants' beliefs is problematic for two reasons. First, researchers have documented religious experiences as progressive

influences (Cardenal 1976; Bonino 1981; McAdams 1988; Smith 1991; Nepstad 2004a). Second, much of the research on religion's tendency to support the status quo is based on *routine* religious experience: short-term missions are not routine. In addition to being a political resource, religion is the basis of value systems and sacred beliefs that provide "transcendent motivation" to actors (Nepstad 2004a). Likewise, religious traditions that call for altruism and self-sacrifice easily translate into social justice oriented political activism (Nepstad 2004a).

Sociological approaches to understanding transformations often highlight processes of cumulative socialization over long periods of time (Simmel 1910; Meade 1982). However, relatively sudden transformations also occur. Extreme experiences can produce dramatic radical transformation (James 1902/1982; McAdams 1988; Nepstad 2004a). Radical shifts in belief resemble religious conversions (Nepstad 2004a).

The process model of conversion is systematic account of how individuals achieve radical departures from previous beliefs (Lofland 1966). First, transformation is precipitated by a major event, crisis, or new condition that cannot be explained by one's existing belief system. A desire to resolve this tension can lead to seeking out alternative meaning systems. Second, potential converts have contact with another group and form social bonds with those espousing alternative views. Intense, supportive, and warm interaction within the alternative group combined with weak external bonds facilitates radical resocialization. Finally, the conversion process culminates in a public recognition or declaration of new identity (Lofland 1966; Bankston 1981; Snow and Machalek 1984).

Social movement research shows extreme events within a religious context may produce radical conversion to new belief systems. Collective action by US based solidarity peace volunteers in Central America radicalized volunteers (Nepstad 2004a; Behrens 2004). Religious work exposed volunteers to high levels of structurally induced suffering. They found socially unjust conditions incompatible with

their existing worldview and traditional explanations of poverty. Not just a source of inspiration, liberation theology provided many volunteers with an alternative interpretive lens. Religious participation also provided rituals, symbols, networks, and cultural resources to activists who experienced radical transformation. Using an existing *master frame* like Christianity to legitimate their claims, members transform symbols, narratives, rituals and collective identities so that activities become politically meaningful (Benford and Snow 1992; Oleson 2005). Many volunteers left for Central America as conservative evangelicals and returned progressive activists.[3] Converts developed strong social bonds with like-minded groups. Meanwhile, social ties to former groups weakened, and resocialization culminated in new activist identities.

Similarly, privileged college students were radicalized by oppression they witnessed registering blacks to vote in 1964 Mississippi (McAdams 1988). Mild reformers became revolutionaries who laid groundwork for nationwide activist networks from which the women's, anti-war, and student movements emerged. Certainly, political experiences shape individual commitments (Bordieu 1990). But McAdams (1988) points out, in contrast to the typical view of the Sixties activist, many applicants viewed their activism as harmonious with religious values learned at home. The organizing body's overtly religious statement of purpose and values of nonviolence stemmed from Judaic-Christian traditions to work towards a social order of justice permeated by love. "Above all else, volunteers became more political as a result of their experiences in Mississippi" (McAdams 1988:127). Witness for Peace volunteers in Nicaragua, Maryknoll nuns in El Salvador, and Freedom Summer volunteers in Mississippi experienced radical political reorientation.

[3] Nepstad (2004a) cites several extreme examples like that of a young US seminary student who dropped out of school to fight with the revolutionary forces of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation front (FMLN).

This brings us to the question: do short-term missions radically change participants views on poverty (as suggested by Nepstad 2004a; McAdams 1988) or do they reinforce the status quo beliefs (as suggested by Wilson 1982; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stark and Finke 2000; Sharot 2001; Wilson 1982; Sherkat 2003; Uecker, Regnerus and Vaaler 2007)? James (1902/1982) finds extreme religious experiences either result in dramatic religious transformation *or* solidify existing beliefs. This perspective implies dichotomous, static, exclusive effects. However, it seems reasonable the short-term mission trips effects are somewhere between radical change and reinforcement. Perhaps answers need not be *either/or* so much as *both/and*.

Another possibility is that short-term missions cause smaller, fractional changes that *both* reinforce *and* challenge existing beliefs about poverty. A major event like a short-term mission can result in a crisis or situation that cannot be explained. The resulting tension is a necessary yet insufficient condition for conversion (Lofland 1966, Bankston et al 1983, Snow 1984). Fractional alterations are more likely. Potential converts may feel a discrepancy between an imaginable state of affairs and actual circumstances. Even those seeking reconciliation are likely to fail. The absence of an alternative meaning system, lack of intensive interaction and strong social bonds with a new group, or having a high stake and strong bonds with an existing group make significant change unlikely. Fractional alterations can be transitory, verbal, or institutionally structured adjustments (Bankston et al 1983). Transitory adjustments are adaptations that are abandoned as potential converts revert to previous perspectives. Verbal converts might profess or even believe something in one situation but not in another (Lofland and Stark 1965). Similarly, an institutionalized adjustment of self might happen when one is socially integrated with some collective ritual. Potential converts usually end up holding contradictory beliefs.

Short-term missions may increase conflicting beliefs. "The so-called unity of consciousness is an illusion" (Jung 1935:81). Conceptually similar descriptions have referenced the non-unity of *divided consciousness* (Hilgard1977), *ambivalence* (Blueler 1910; Merton and Barber 1976), *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, Rieken, and Schachter 2008), tension (Lofland 1966), *multiple conciousness* (Garson 1970; Gaventa 1980) and *split consciousness* (Gramsci 1971). Whereas psychologists study the individual psyche, social theorists, including E. P. Thompson, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu document the psychological dynamics of structured consciousness. Conflicting values, beliefs, or interests are built into the structure of social relations (Merton and Barber 1976).

Split consciousness is a perspective is rooted in Gramsci's (1971) work on hegemony and contradictory consciousness. Gramsci demonstrated how religious ideology is structured by power (Fulton 1987). Gramsci's concept builds on Marxist theories of *false consciousness* that refer to the systematic misrepresentation of actual social relations. Gramsci's concept is more nuanced. Ideologies are shaped by elite interests as well as lived experiences: this produces conflicting beliefs. Gramsci writes,

> …theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci 1971)

Likewise, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that most never realize the extent that the culture they live in shapes beliefs, values, and norms. Since values are uncritically absorbed, it is no surprise they are inconsistent. For example, although lower status people have more structuralist beliefs, their reliance on individualistic explanations is not diminished (Kluegel and Smith 1986).

It seems likely that short-term mission trips promote conflicting beliefs about poverty for two reasons. First, exposure to poverty and adverse social conditions "simultaneously foster sympathetic and antagonistic attitudes toward the poor" (Merolla et al 2011:205). The result is increased support for *both* individualist and structuralist beliefs (Merolla et al 2011). Second, the mixed religious signals associated with short-term missions are likely to promote discordant ideas. Religion, for example promotes and mitigates US individualism (Bellah 2007). Protestant ideologies contain strong individualistic, anti-government, and even anti-civic elements (Bellah 2007). Yet church going is the most common voluntaristic activity and churchgoers are among the most civically engaged citizens (Wuthnow 2004; Fowler 2010). Although the most religious people are also the most politically conservative and most likely to engage in victim blame theories of poverty (Putnam and Cambell 2010) and fatalistic explanations (Brimeyer 2004), religion is also one of the biggest motivators for people who help the needy (Wuthnow 1994). Religious commitment heightens caring behavior and religious beliefs heighten the importance of compassion (Wuthnow 1994). Paradoxically, helping the poor is seen as religious virtue but not a political one (Wuthnow 1994).

It seems likely that the structure of short-term missions trips promote status quo beliefs while proximity to objective material and psychic suffering associated with deeply structural poverty might promote some discordance. Theoretically, there is little reason to believe participants will be radically changed. Small, fractional changes in consciousness are more likely than radical conversion. Since radical conversion is unlikely, the changes either reinforce existing beliefs or promote ambivalent attitudes towards poverty. Although sociological literature provides a theoretical framework to interpret the culturally, socially, and structurally mediated impact of short-term missions, there is little empirical data upon which to base claims. I will review missiological data on short-term missions to assess the nature and quality of change.

Missiological Literature

Most research conducted on the impact of short-term missions is conducted by missiologists. Missiology is an interdisciplinary field that draws on the disciplines of history, theology, anthropology, geography and sociology. Like an applied theology, missiology addresses practical questions about the most effective, efficient, and biblical methods for spreading the gospel. Notably, most missiological studies focus on the change that takes place in the missionaries themselves rather than the people that these missions purport to help. This literature provides a wealth of empirical data on the effects of short-term missions on participants. I will review the most rigorous studies and explore major tensions between qualitative and quantitative studies of the impact of trips. The discrepancy suggests more work should be done to resolve the inconsistent findings.

Missiological research serves as a background for this study but it is worth noting that missiology, although not antithetical to social scientific inquiry, represents a particular interpretive schema. As a practical branch of Christian theology, missiological traditions view mission work as legitimate response to a Christian calling. Underlying missiological research is a faith commitment that Christians should engage in evangelistic activity. At times this leads to some tension with mainstream academia. Peterson, Aeschliman, and Sneed's (2003) *Maximum Impact: The God Commanded Repetitive Deployment of Swift, Temporary, Non-Professional Missionairies* is an example. The authors deride scientifically acquired knowledge when it contradicts religious beliefs:

> When we give too much emphasis to pre-field academic preparation, we begin factoring out the Holy Spirit. The more a missionary relies on academic head knowledge, the less opportunity the unexplainable wind of the Holy Spirit has to work. (Peterson 2003:27)

The authors suggest pursuing knowledge is often hubristic and argue that the success of the movement relies acting on belief about supernatural phenomenon that may be unprovable, unknowable, or

“incalculable [and] uncontrollable as the wind (Peterson et al 2003:28). Some authors lament research has led academics to “discover” laws and principles incompatible with dominant biblical interpretations (Peterson et al 2003:28). However, there are different cosmologies at work within missiology. Other missiologists place greater value on empiricism and have sought to evaluate short-term efforts based on the results of social scientific research (for example, Howell and Dorr 2007; Livermore 2008; 62008, Priest 2008; Ver Beek 2008). They cite a general failure for short-term missions to achieve stated goals and encourage more critical data driven analysis.

Measuring change in participants’ attitudes and behavior is a major focus for researchers studying short-term missions. Claims that participants will be forever changed justify expensive trips. Missiologists measuring supposed transformation have focused on levels of spirituality, prayer, giving, volunteering, multiculturalism, and compassion for the poor. However, it is not clear week-long mission experiences have much measurable impact on participants’ attitudes on poverty. In fact, it is not clear that the trips have much lasting impact at all (Priest 2006, Ver Beek 2008).

Short-term missions are supposed to benefit indigent host groups in addition to promoting positive personal growth for missionaries themselves (Peterson et al 2003; Ver Beek 2008). Ministers, Christian magazines, mission agencies, mission agency websites, and participants promote this message. Supporters share time, finances, and prayers hoping to achieve lasting change for people touched by missions. Recently, missiologists and a few others have tested alleged outcomes against empirical data. The answer from quantitative missiological researchers is negative.

Quantitative researchers suggest short-term missions have not been effective in achieving lasting change for missionaries themselves (Beers 1999, Priest 2006, Kirby 1995, Wilson 1999; Ver Beek 2006). A comprehensive review of quantitative studies found only 13 studies that met basic methods for measuring change (Ver Beek 2008). Only two suggest significant change in attitudes or behavior.

Interestingly, the majority of qualitative data suggests short-term missions have some impact. Below, I will review the results of missiological research on the influence short-term missions have on participants' attitudes toward poverty, levels of financial giving, cultural sensitivity, and spirituality.

Researchers who incorporate qualitative data have found the issue of poverty to be the most common recurring theme (Livermore 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Curiously, few quantitative studies focus on participants' attitudes on poverty. Missiologists are more interested in questions about spirituality or financial donations. The few quantitative studies provide scant evidence that short-term missions have much lasting impact on participants' attitudes on poverty (Livermore 2006; Ver Beek 2006). Results of qualitative research are more ambiguous. Livermore (2006, 2008) finds that encountering poverty engenders feelings of sympathy and guilt among participants but has no lasting effect on participants' behavior (Livermore 2006, 2008). Wilson (1999) finds a self-reported slight increase concern about poverty in the world and in the United States. There was no follow up to this study to measure the effect over time but Ver Beek (2006) suggests the changes disappear after a few months.

Changed levels of giving might be evidence of some lasting change in short-term mission participants' attitudes on poverty. Increased concern for the poor might be reflected by increased financial support of charities, churches, or mission agencies. However, empirical evidence from the most methodologically rigorous research suggests trips actually have very little impact on levels of giving (Friesen 2004, Priest 2006, Livermore 2006, Ver Beek 2008).

Financial giving to churches, evangelical organizations, or mission projects is important to missiologists trying to calculate the value of trips.[4] Increased giving might justify trips that, even supporters admit, are expensive and inefficient. Some missiologists maintain that short-term missions will change the hearts of missionaries, open their wallets, and lead to increased levels of giving (Peterson and Peterson 1991, Purvis 1993, McDonough and Peterson 1999, Wilson 1999, Harris 2002, Peterson 2003).

Evidence for increased giving is weak. Researchers find increased *self-reported* levels of giving immediately after a trip (Peterson and Peterson 1991, Purvis 1993, McDonough and Peterson 1999, Harris 2002, Peterson 2003, Friesen 2004, Priest 2006, Ver Beek 2008). However, the purported change disappears during follow up studies and cannot be found when triangulated (Kirby 1999, Friesen 2004, Ver Beek 2008). Strangely, Ver Beek (2008) actually found *decreased* giving at the majority of churches. Some researchers argue the trips increase levels of giving and cite as evidence data that shows giving increases for years after a mission trip experience (see Peterson and Peterson 1991, Purvis 1993, McDonough and Peterson 1999, Harris 2002). However, other factors like inflation as well as increased income, age, and discretionary income are the best explanation for the increase (Priest 2006, Ver Beek 2008).

There is little convincing evidence that increased levels of giving can be attributed to short-term mission experience. Significant changes in giving patterns might suggest a change in attitude towards the poor, but research does not support this. It is possible, however, that giving levels stay constant but the attitude with which participants give changes. Unfortunately little research exists about attitude with which people give.

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[4] Missiologists rely heavily on records provided by churches and independent mission agencies. Conceivably, short-term participants could donate to non-mission affiliated organizations like Amnesty International or the Zapatistas but I have found little reason to think this is the case.

Cultural sensitivity is another area to look for a shift in participants' attitudes towards the indigent people they encounter abroad. Increased appreciation for other cultures is a purported benefit for participants of short-term missions and often cited to justify the expense of trips (see Blezien 2004; Friesen 2004; Priest 2006; Livermore 2008; Park 2008; Ver Beek 2008). As measures of cultural sensitivity I have included measures of ethnocentrism, inter-ethnic relations, acceptance of different religious beliefs, global awareness, identification of cultural difference, intercultural competency, interest in other worldviews, paternalism, importance of cross-cultural education, and reconciliation between cultures. Again, the most rigorous research suggests little lasting change (Blezien 2004; Friesen 2004; Priest 2006; Livermore 2008; Ver Beek 2008).

Ethnocentrism decreases immediately following a mission trip but that change disappears in follow up surveys (Priest 2006; Ver Beek 2008). Researchers find no statistically significant correlation between the amount of mission trip experience and inter-ethnic relations (Priest 2006; Park 2008). Disturbingly, several missiologists actually note *decreased* cultural sensitivity following a mission trip (Blezien 2004; Friesen 2004; Priest 2006). Priest (2006) offers a poignant note; "That is, the sheer fact of encounter with cultural difference is as likely to increase ethnocentrism as decrease it" (Priest 2006: 444).

The studies that show significant positive change in levels of cultural sensitivity (Beers 1999; Friesen 2004; Park 2008) rely heavily on self-reported data. Data from follow-up surveys, measures of behavior, or even self-reported behavior suggest respondents' attitudes have not changed as much as reported. Likely, the correlation between short-term mission participation and culturally sensitivity is mediated by other variables. Participants may be self-selected. That is, an ethnocentric individual with little interest in cross-cultural experiences is less likely to volunteer for an international mission trip. The

positive effect of a trip experience probably measures other biographical factors (like wealth or education) that predispose the individual to international travel.

It is important to acknowledge problems using missiological measures of cultural sensitivity in a mainstream academic context. Park (2008), for example, suggests paternalism is disposition that combines benevolence with an assumption of superiority. Park (2008) finds short-term missions are associated with decreased levels of paternalism. Yet evangelists (like any vanguard group) assume superior knowledge about what is best for others. A fair question is, to what degree are short-term missions inherently paternalistic? Acknowledging vast power differential between missionaries and indigent hosts, missionary groups offering material aid and claiming superior spiritual knowledge may be well intentioned but the trips are often implicitly coercive and paternalistic. Disturbingly, encountering poverty during a short-term mission sometimes decreases cultural sensitivity.

Spiritual transformation of participants may be the most studied aspect of short-term mission. Religious beliefs are related to beliefs about poverty (Feagin 1975; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt 2002). However, although the majority (88%) of regular churchgoers hear about poverty, relatively few (10%) cite religious beliefs as the main influence on their views on issues like government aid to the poor (Pew 2010). Education and experience seem to have more effect (Pew 2010). Although lasting spiritual transformation might indicate some significant change in attitudes on poverty, there is little evidence lasting spiritual transformation occurs. Spiritual transformation is a major focus for missiologists. Popular discourse references the “spiritual high” that accompanies a short-term mission experience. Researchers have measured the quality and characteristics of this spiritual transformation (Peterson and Peterson 2001, Purvis 2003, Kirby 1995, Tuttle 1998, Beers 1999, Wilson 1999, Manitsas 2000, Friesen 2004, Ver Beek 2008). Researchers assess spirituality in a variety of ways. The table below shows the array of behaviors and feelings researchers use to measure spiritual transformation.

Table 3: Measures of Spiritual Transformation in Missiological Study of STM

Measures of Spiritual Transformation in Missiological Study of STM	
Behaviors	**Feelings**
Church Attendance	Awareness of Spiritual Gifts
Attitude toward Church	Experience of Spiritual Authority
Time spent reading the Bible	Desire to do missions in future (short-term)
Time devoted to prayer	Desire to do missions in future (long-term)
Time devoted to prayer for missions	Feeling of closeness to God
Time devoted to prayer for specific groups	Feeling of closeness to the Holy Spirit
Time devoted to prayer for specific region	Commitment to Christian service
Time spent worshipping God	Perception of "sacrificial" giving
Return to mission field	Feeling of closeness to the Holy Spirit
Evangelistic activity	Commitment to Evangelism
Level of giving to the church	Enjoyment of worship
Level of giving to missions	Bible as a guide for life
Sexual Purity	Care for creation/environmental concern
Service to Church	Compassion
Attendance at youth group	Identity in Christ
	Materialistic values
	Consumerist values

McDonough and Peterson (1999) find significant change in respondents' levels of spirituality, attitudes, and behavior. However, the study is problematic. The survey asks respondents to estimate attitudes or actions prior to the mission trip in the left hand column and their attitudes and actions after the trip in the right hand column. It seems likely these studies suffer from a response bias by which participants shape responses in order please the researcher, appear in a positive light, or to match perceived expectations (Paulhus 1991). Sociologists, Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009), find that short-term missions are a transformative in that they galvanize religious views. These results of the study are limited to the short-term and do not reflect long-term change.

Other researchers have found similar evidence that transformations are modest and short-lived. Although the *mission high* has been well documented, the change appears temporary and difficult to triangulate. In fact, Friesen (2004) and Bleizen (2004) find an accompanying mission *hangover*: a period

during which some scores actually decrease below levels of the pre-test or control group. Ver Beek (2008) and Priest (2006) find the initial bump in scores disappears after a few months. Kirby (1995) finds that that self reported spiritual transformations are not accompanied by expected changes in any self reported behavior.

Missiological research suggests short-term mission have little lasting impact on participants' attitudes on poverty, giving, cultural sensitivity, or spirituality, cultural sensitivity, giving. We can account for reported changes in several ways. Some reported changes may be due to participant response bias. The process model of conversion (Lofland and Stark 1965) and its successors (Snow and Philips 1980; Bankston et al 1983) also help explain reported changes. Changes may real but they are temporary and slight. The alterations may be *institutionalized adjustments* of self that that happen when one is socially integrated with some collective ritual like a mission trip (Lofland 1966). Likewise, participants reporting transformation may be *verbal converts* who profess and actually believe something in one situation but not in another (Lofland and Stark 1965). The disappearance of the effect may be explained by the structure of the trips. The short duration of trips, language barriers, and strong intra-group bonds ensure exposure to alternative meaning systems is limited, socialization with outside groups is weak, and that existing social bonds remains strong.

As a means to conclude, the best empirical data on short-term missions suggests there will be little change in the way participants think about the poverty they encounter abroad. However, sociological research suggests collective experiences produce individual commitments. Sometimes these commitments reflect radical transformations. The religious nature of the trips is more ambiguous. Religion can stifle change or be a progressive influence (Nepstad 2004a). Christianity has strong social justice elements, but, in the United States, white Evangelical Protestants are among the most likely to hold unsympathetic views of the poor (Brimeyer 2004; Bellah 2007; Pew 2010). The extraordinary

nature of an experience that brings some of the worlds' most privileged into contact with some of the least privileged might challenge missionaries' worldviews by confronting them with high levels of structural poverty that their current belief system cannot explain. However, in the absence of a clear alternative schema or alternative group memberships it seems unlikely that dissonance will lead to significant transformation.

III

Research Approach

Between February and August 2011, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty short-term mission participants. Interviews are qualitative researchers' most powerful tool for descriptive and analytic purposes (McCracken 1988; Fetterman 2010). Qualitative interviewing resembles a guided conversation in which the researcher listens for meaning (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Weiss 1995; Kvale 1996; Warren 2002; Fetterman 2010). The intent of qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations and to understand how respondents view the world and how they attach meaning to their experiences (Warren 2002). I utilized interviews to understand how participants find meaning in their short-term mission experiences and understand the poverty they encounter abroad.

Researchers have used many methods to determine the impact trips have on participants. The impact of intense collective experiences on participants' views has been measured by participant observation, surveys, and interviews (McAdams 1988; Nepstad 2004a; Priest 2006; Ver Beek 2006; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). Stratification beliefs are often measured using surveys (see Klugel and Smith 1986; Feagin 1975, Hunt 2002, 2004). Surveys systematically measure the number of people in particular categories or the relationship between categories (Weiss, 1995). However standardized survey data cannot capture the whole story (Weiss 1995). Surveys have been effective for measuring things like short-term mission experience's relationship to charitable giving (see Priest et al 2006; Ver Beek 2006). Participant observation provides understanding of complex social relationships or patterns of interaction (see Bryman 1986; Nepstad 2004a), but interviews are a window to participants' perception of experiences (Tolich and Davidson 1999; Warren 2002). Interviewing is often part of ethnographic fieldwork (Wolcott 2008; Fetterman 2010), but it offers unique benefits and can stand

alone as a useful tool for uncovering categories, assumptions, and themes (Wiess, 1995; Macracken 1996). Interviews are not limited to present events; they reveal meaning that might include past events and range into the future (Weiss, 1995; Warren, 2002). For this study, I utilized interviews to gather data because the technique allows research participants to construct rich, dense, and full narratives about past events and current understandings. Creating these narratives "is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future" (McAdams 1993:12). Examining narratives reveals interviewees' worldviews.

Access to study populations can be a major obstacle (Nader 1972; Bourgois 2003; Pryardharshini, 2003; Ho, 2009). Most researchers adopt the *study down* paradigm in which the researcher has more power than the researched (Nader, 1972). Partly, studying down reflects epistemological preference for the oppressed (see Piven and Cloward 1977; Zinn 1980; Petras and Porpora 1993; Shields and Rutledge 1993). Often the choice is more practical than theoretical. Skeggs (1994) points out powerlessness includes the inability to refuse being researched. Conversely, the powerful are in position to determine who studies them. Undoubtedly, power and limited access account for some lack of research on short-term missions. Likewise, it is not a coincidence that mission researchers study high school and college students: they are least powerful short-term mission participants (see, for example, Wilson, 1999; Beers 1999; Priest 2006; Howell and Dorr, 2007; Park, 2008; Decker, 2008, Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). My study does not focus exclusively on students. Recently, researchers have endorsed "excavating power," or studying non-marginalized populations to understand how power and responsibility are exercised (Nader, 1972; Sassen, 2000; Ho, 2009).

Research participants for this project are relatively privileged. All were US citizens, white, Protestant, professional, and college-educated. All had social, cultural, and economic capital that allowed the freedom for international travel. Most have been on multiple trips abroad. Twelve of

twenty interviewees were men. Research participants included several successful professionals in health, finance, and industry. Conceivably, this study population would be difficult to access. However, each welcomed my questions and generously offered time and thoughtful responses.

My involvement with churches and short-term mission trips exempted me from challenges posed by *outsider* status. I gained access to short-term participants through three mechanisms. First, I began interviewing acquaintances. Existing connections to faith communities in Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee facilitated initial recruitment. Utilizing existing ties within the researchers own social circle is a common technique to find respondents that fulfill the study's theoretical criteria (Esterberg, 1997; Warren, 2002).

Second, I accessed participants through *snowballing*, a process by which a respondent provides contact to another respondent who fulfills study criteria (see Arksey and Knight 1999; Biernackin and Waldorf 1981; Weiss 1994; Warren 2002). Two friends from my neighborhood were helpful gatekeepers. Their contacts resulted in the largest pool of informants. There were two possible drawbacks to this sampling mechanism. First, relying on friends' friends limited the diversity of the initial sample. The group of eight informants were in their twenties with similar socio-economic backgrounds. Second, increased rapport may intensify the tendency of informants to modify answers in an attempt to please the interviewer (Paulhus 1991). Numerous benefits, however, outweighed drawbacks. First, both friends graciously agreed to subject themselves to my initial, fumbling questions: the low-pressure environment helped me refine questions and gain confidence as an interviewer. Existing rapport and warm feelings helped these interviews flow easily. Second, using established networks made gaining access to more informants easier. For example, Caleb invited my wife and I to a Sunday lunch during which he introduced me to six potential informants. The introductions were invaluable. Third, since I could not live in my 'field' in order to gain the trust of informants I was able

enjoy trust because of mutual friends. The high level of confidence allowed me to gather rich content that might have been otherwise unattainable. Research participants supported my project and offered encouragement. Several even offered contact information for other participants without prompting. For example, at the end of our interview, Caleb offered resources without me ever asking.

> *Caleb*: I'm really like, what's the point of short-term mission trips?
>
> *Bill*: Yeah. I'm trying to figure that out too.
>
> *Caleb*: [Caleb gets up and walks over to a shelf] You have to watch this Steve Saint video. [He hands me a DVD] You should, it might even be good if… let me give Josh Robertson's phone number. You probably wouldn't even have to ask a question. He would be glad to talk to you and I could even shoot him an email. He went on a short-term mission.

The third mechanism of access involved taking advantage of unexpected opportunities. Admittedly, the technique requires some *dumb luck* on the part of the researcher. Responding to unexpected opportunities as they arise during research is a skill and well-documented boon to researchers (Wolcott 1999). Bourgois (2003), for example, leveraged quick wit and unorthodox techniques to gain access to crack dealers in Harlem. His honest description of fumbling through the process reveals the value of flexibility in research. Although my research is less dramatic, chance provided several contacts. For example, I met one short-term mission participant at a doctor's office. The participant agreed to an interview but only after I had recovered from the 'flu! Using multiple mechanisms of access allowed me to select a wider range of mission trip participants than I was able to access originally. This method helped me gain access to a wide range of ages: 18 to 55. Likewise, I increased the diversity of my sample to include participants from Baptist, Presbyterian (PCA), Church of Christ, Methodist, and non-affiliated Protestant traditions.

Although a number of different denominations were represented, the sample was small and included mostly participants affiliated with relatively conservative Protestant denominations. Fifteen participants had some affiliation to Baptist, Prespbyterian (PCA), or Church of Christ churches. Only a few had strong ties to more liberal church traditions like Methodist and Presbyterian (PCUSA). For example, my sample did not include anyone affiliated with traditionally liberal religious groups like Quaker, United Church of Christ, or Unitarian Unaversalist. My study included no one from traditionally black churches. All respondents were white. Conducting a study in Tennessee with small number of white interviewees that tended to have ties to more conservative Christian traditions is a limitation for this study. Although it is outside the scope of this study, future studies might look at the impact that factors like gender, race, church affiliation, educational level, or income have on the way short-term mission participants understand the poverty they encounter.

Finding participants willing to talk can be another major obstacle (Warren and Levy 1991; Warren 2002; Ho 2009). However, I did not find this to be a problem. Several interviews ended like this one:

Bill: Well I better let you get back to work.

Buddy: Man, I could talk about this all day.

In fact, a big challenge was steering talkative interviewees back on track. On average, interviews lasted an hour. The shortest interview was thirty minutes and several lasted more than an hour and a half. Several shorter interviews offered rich data and lengthy transcriptions. (Some people talk faster than others!). All interviews were face-to-face. I asked participants to choose a place they felt comfortable. Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes. Other sites included offices, coffee shops, and my own living room. I conducted semi-structured interviews with a low degree of formality. When possible I began with non-threatening questions embedded in conversation before moving toward more

personal, complex, or pointed questions. I had a series of questions but I encouraged participants to talk freely and tried to let questions emerge naturally from conversation. I sacrificed uniformity in favor of less structured interviews with more open-ended questions, more complete stories, richer information, and holistic description (see Weiss, 1995).

I found participants eager to share and suggest several reasons why this was the case. Methodologically, the most effective interview strategies place informants at ease (Fetterman 2010) and rapport and personal style are essential (Sherif 2001; Weller and Johnson 2002). My insider status, familiarity with missions, sensitivity to the group cultural norms, and shared experiences helped put participants at ease. Michelle, for example, remembered having deep reservations about the value of her first mission trip. I could remember experiencing similar reservations.

> *Michelle*: Yeah. I remember being like, this is wonderful and I can see God working in this. But at the same time I just didn't… I just feel like there's gotta be something better. I don't know.
>
> *Bill*: Yeah, I remember feeling that too on my first mission trip. Because if you, like, do the numbers, it doesn't make any sense.
>
> *Michelle*: I know. We're here for a week and like yeah we're doing [vacation bible school] for a week and who is going to follow up with these kids? What's gonna happen? Like where is the follow up going to be? And I remember being frustrated about that.

I tried to maintain the feel of comfortable conversation in order to create an atmosphere in which interviewees felt safe and free to reflect on personal experiences and values. Fetterman (2010) points out that being natural and honest is more convincing than any performance. Personally, I found the interview process enjoyable and pleasant. I approached interviews, not as an interrogation, but as an

opportunity to learn from the interviewee. Perhaps geniality and genuine interest were my most effective elicitation techniques.

Interview methodology certainly helped, but participants seemed to enjoy talking about their mission experiences anyway. People seem to like talking about their passions. Also, short-term mission trips are fodder for exciting narratives. Participants were excited to tell their stories. Here are few excerpts that highlight common themes: the dramatic, adventurous, and exotic. Chad's narrative was full of drama and danger.

> *Chad*: …well the main visionary that is down there, he flew us around. And so we go to go to Trujillo. And then we went to the jungle. We went way up into the high mountains and he took us to some really crazy places. We got stopped by machine-gunnists in the middle of the woods and all this that and the other.

Jay described an adventurous trek deep into the Zambian bush.

> *Jay*: We landed down in, like Zambia, in Lusaka. Then we just drove our cars until the road ended. And as soon as the road ended we hiked all day and camped out. And the next day we spent all day in canoes just going through, like, the swamps and everything. And it was three days just getting into the middle of nowhere.

Lisa described an exotic nighttime ritual in Haiti.

> *Lisa*: Oh! I heard at night a local witch-priestess chanting to animals every night. And I'm not lying they would, like, respond back to her in unison. Like, she would make a crowing noise and you would here the crows crowing back to her. I just felt like the devil was standing beside me. It was the scariest thing!

Participants like telling meaningful personal stories about themselves, especially when stories are full of excitement and danger in faraway places.

Unfortunately for participants, qualitative research necessarily involves some danger (Bourgois 2003; Petras and Porpora 1993; Shields and Rutledge 1993). Although minimal in comparison to Bourgois' (2003) study of crack dealers in Harlem, significant risk to participants includes exploitation and betrayal. I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants. Still, in-depth interviews reveal private information, can be intrusive, and might leave respondents feeling exposed and vulnerable. Lisa, for example, became deeply emotional as she recalled her experience in Haiti. Haltingly, she struggled to find the right words.

> *Lisa*: I think I just kinda felt overwhelmed and kinda felt inadequate, like, what am I? [Pause] How do I even [pause]… *help* [pause]… something like this out of control like, you know?

Lauren and others opened their hearts to share intimate details about faith, family, love, struggles, and hopes. Elaine had just returned from volunteering at a church camp in an area in southwest Virginia where she used to live. Audibly emotional, Elaine described how the poverty she encountered in Mexico led her to reflect on years she spent in Appalachia and the impact on her family.

> *Elaine*: And I loved the people there. One of the things I was saying last night as I drove back last night, I prayed, *Lord, thank you* for the fifteen years that I had here. I'm so glad that that has been part of my background. Was it good for us to have to move to Springfield when we did? Probably, probably good for the kids. I'm so glad that my children have seen both sides.

No matter how welcome or enjoyable the process seems, the researcher/participant relationship is unequal. Power manifests in different ways. Interviewing a young female college student is obviously

different than interviewing a powerful, financially successful professional man. Yet, in both situations the respondents are expected to expose themselves in ways the researcher is not.

Researchers often stand to benefit more than the community they research (Shields and Rutlegde 1993; Duneier 2001). This research will meet a requirement for a master's degree in sociology, help me achieve publication, and contribute to my own professional advancement. Feminist scholars (Stacey 1988; Shields and Rutledge 1993; Huisman 2008) and others (Petras and Porpora 1993; Duneier 1999) have advocated for reciprocity in the research process to mitigate exploitation. I tried to make the interview process mutually beneficial. For research participants there were several potential benefits. First, as noted above, people seem to enjoy being listened to. Second, several participants indicated the interview provided an opportunity for to reflect on their experiences. My interview with Michelle, for example, resulted is several epiphanies. Here is one she was particularly excited about.

> *Michelle*: Because it's like, we are going to build houses but [whispering] we need to pray for these people because they are *pagans*. It's like, *no!* It's not like that. Pray for your next-door neighbor too. Just because she's not worshiping a voodoo doll doesn't mean she's not worshipping her designer clothes. So I think that they need to find more commonality and there needs to be more education. There's never too much education, I feel like. And I think if you educate people that go on short-term missions there might be better results. [Pause] That is a really good point.
>
> *Bill*: That is a really good point, actually.
>
> *Michelle*: [laughing] I like that idea.
>
> *Bill*: I do too [chuckle]. That's really good.
>
> *Michelle*: I am being ridiculous.

Bill: No. no.

Michelle: I am making great points! [chuckle]

Bill: That's good. Had you ever thought about that before?

Michelle: No! I really hadn't.

Bill: That in itself is really interesting.

Michelle: Okay. Good. I tend to think about things when I talk about them [chuckle] if that makes any sense. I think better out loud than when I am alone in my room.

Michelle found the interview process helped develop her thoughts on short-term missions. She and others seemed energized by the process. I encouraged participants to explore their thoughts on different aspects of short-term missions. Sometimes they came upon questions they could not answer. As a form of reciprocity, I would jot down their questions, bring them up after the interview, and offer to share resources—like movies, books, articles, or websites—that I have found helpful.

However, guiding participants to think about certain issues was not always comfortable or enjoyable. This study examines how political beliefs relate to short-term experiences. If politics did not come up during the flow of the interview sometimes I would carefully try to steer the conversation. However, this imposed a level of artificiality. Thinking about poverty and short-term missions in political terms is not something most participants normally do. Caleb indicates frustration with a question about poverty and its political-economic causes.

Bill: Yeah, so if we go in that direction then, um, would you put that back on culture or is that [poverty] on something else like the economy or politics or…?

Caleb: Hmm. [Pause] First of all I feel so unable to, I know you're like trying to figure this out.

Bill: Yeah I know that's really not fair.

Caleb: I just feel even…[sigh] I'm like why are people poor? Oh gosh, I mean all these things float into my mind of these different factors like, they have a bunch of resources and the rich people exploit the resources and there's no middle class. I feel like this is a very interesting thing that you're writing about. What was the question again? What were you saying?

Questions about the causes of poverty made participants uncomfortable. Perhaps they felt embarrassed they could answer questions that I thought they should know. In these cases it was clear my role as a researcher affected their thinking on short-term missions. However, I decided to impose categories that seemed artificial to participants because often participants have not thought deeply about certain issues. Or they reveal how they separate political beliefs from religious ones. I will discuss this more in Chapter Four.

This brings up another potential risk for participants. The risk exists at the level of the final product. Although I hope that the final research product is mutually beneficial, the final product expresses partial truths set within the researchers' narrative (Shields 1993). Since qualitative interview data can be difficult to categorize, analysis relies on interpretation, summary, and integration (Weiss 1995). Because a researcher cannot and *should* not avoid evaluation, interpretation, and judgment there is a risk of misinterpretation. I have taken steps to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio device. I also took notes by hand during the interview. I followed a process of transcribing, coding, memoing, and continuously rereading and reviewing notes and transcriptions to generate themes and identify consistent, cohesive patterns of thought. Each hour of interviewing took approximately three hours to transcribe. The original transcriptions had many typographical errors so for excerpts included in this paper I reviewed audio recordings to ensure accuracy. After pilot interviews and each subsequent interview I generated, combined, and refined

themes in order to identify important concepts. I used these notes to adjust my interview guide to reflect new insights. This process continued throughout the research process and produced a wealth of rich data, theoretical saturation, and emergence of important themes.

In choosing to perform qualitative study, I assume that certain aspects regarding the fundamental nature of reality can be discerned in ways that are not easily quantifiable (see Locke et al 2007). For example, faithfully recording, interpreting, and describing the body language of a respondent in hand written notes during an interview may add a valuable layer of insight unattainable through quantitative methods. However, there are limitations. Practically, since each informant provides so much information, qualitative interview studies rely on relatively small sample sizes (Wiess 1995). Also, participants were asked to reflect on past events. Retrospective interviews fail to yield accurate data since people tend to forget and filter past events (Fetterman 2010). For this reason my study focuses on the way participants understand those events and reveals accurate data on values and worldviews.

Harding (1987) and Smith (1974) highlight the importance of researcher reflexivity in locating the researcher's own knowledge, values, and biases within the research process. Likewise, Presser (2004) considers the role the researcher has on the research participant and the research itself. Unacknowledged assumptions may have a drastic impact on the research process and results (Kleinman, 1991). I have opinions, values, and emotions associated with the way these trips are done. Being an insider offers certain methodological advantages (Nepstad 2004a). However, this bridge is also a stumbling block. Although it has been a boon in the area of access, familiarity, and gaining the confidence of respondents, it makes it difficult to achieve distance. The difficulty arises from two main sources. First, my own work with short-term missions has left me grappling with the relationship between self and subject. I have strong personal feelings as to what is most valuable about these trips, what is wrong with the trips, how they could be made better, and what constitutes an appropriate

response to poverty. This bias is reflected in the type of questions I ask (and my responses). On other points I am conflicted and have some unresolved feelings about the nature of these trips.

I have also experienced the dilemma that comes with the responsibility of painting an accurate and revealing portrait of my subjects. Respondents have shared self-aggrandizing, paternalistic, and even racist sentiments. But they also reveal sentiments like compassion, empathy, sacrifice, and solidarity. Determining which concepts, themes, and quotations are the most pertinent, significant, and relevant has been a difficult task. I grappled with difficult questions about how to represent these research participants and to what end. They are questions like: Whose story is it? Why am I telling it? Who is it for? What is the impact and how could it be misread?

The following sections represent my best effort to reveal an honest description of complex constellations of beliefs that exists within a group of people that, on some level, sincerely care about poor people yet through their political attitudes and actions consistently reinforce and provide moral justification for the social, economic, and political structures that produce poverty. I hope the final product will benefit short-term mission participants and practitioners by encouraging them to continue reflecting on the work they do with faith, passion, and commitment. Although this research directly examines short-term mission participants, the underlying motivation for the study springs, ultimately, from a love for the people with whom short-term missionaries engage.

IV

Responsibility to God Not the Poor

Unpacking interviews with short-term missions participants offered insights on how short-term mission trip participants' experiences with indigent peoples relate to their political attitudes on poverty. Interviews provided rich data on the intersection of participants' stratification beliefs, values, and religious attitudes. A process of transcribing, coding, memoing, and continuously rereading and reviewing notes and transcriptions reveals several consistent, cohesive patterns of thought. I have identified several cohesive themes and included them based on their pervasiveness and relevance to the research question. In this chapter I show how participants reflect on short-term experiences in ways that reinforce the status quo. Participants justify poverty using individualistic, deficiency, and fatalistic stratification theories. Participants describe responsibility for the poor as stemming from their individual commitment God. For most, compassion for the poor is a religious virtue but not a political one. I conclude the chapter by showing that short-term mission experiences intensify contradictory beliefs about poverty in ways that lead participants to compartmentalize, rationalize, ignore, or alter conflicting beliefs.

Justifying Poverty

I asked participants to explain why they thought the people they encountered were poor. Although beliefs varied widely, several distinct patterns emerged. First, innate and cultural *deficiency theories* were common. Implicitly or explicitly, these theories identify some flaw in the character, culture, or biology of indigent people. Second, respondents viewed *poverty as inevitable*. Rather than seeing poverty as the predictable outcome of specific social arrangements, this fatalistic belief attributes

poverty to supra-individual, non-structural forces like God's will, chance, or destiny. Although all informants actually formulated some structural explanations for poverty, like histories of oppression, absence of a middle class, poor education, and government corruption, these explanations tended to be subordinate to individualistic and fatalistic theories.

Few participants had well developed theories, so questions forced participants to consider short-term experiences in ways they normally would not. The resulting raw responses emerged from complex constellations of values and participants reformulated and refined stances during the interview. Understandably, participants found this line of questioning difficult. Making sense of poverty involved participants forming judgments by weighing values, religious faith, political commitments, education, and lived experiences. Participants described feeling conflicted about issues of poverty but did not adopt critical views of dominant ideologies.

Deficiency theories.

Interviewees explained why they thought the people they encountered were so poor. Answered varied widely but a pattern of *deficiency theories* emerged. Deficiency theories included innate inferiority and cultural inferiority theories and ultimately blame the poor for their poverty. Jay, for example, offers a Eurocentric explanation that there is something inherently different in African culture that has kept it from developing in the same way that Europe has.

> *Bill*: Alright, so you say that that work is not going to lead to a business or it's not going to lead them out of poverty? Is that what your…?
>
> *Jay*: Yeah that's what I'm getting at. You look at Africa, and 6000 years ago you go to Africa and there's people living in dirt huts with straw roofs and, you know, and spent all day farming and

have to go get their own water and everything and you come 6000 years later and it's the exact same way and it's not like *one* of them has sprung into a Blockbuster and now they have movies and TV. But you go to Europe 6,000 years ago and it was… I don't know what was going on. But, I mean.

Bill: Not much. [chuckle]

Jay: Yeah. Well, I mean even like the Roman Empire and all that kind of stuff. Or you go back to the Dark Ages in Europe and they were that low but then you come back and they are splitting atoms, you know, and there's business and its grown up into cities. And like, *these* people are living the exact same way that it's been since it's been the beginning of time. Like, it has not progressed for them one single bit. You know, they're not, have not suddenly become, like, our business is going so big that we had to franchise it or anything. *No!* It's just people trying to survive and they *never* have changed. It has not progressed in any way from what it was. And so it's, it's like you've gone back in time kinda. […]

Bill: Why do you think that is? Like, why do you think they haven't changed in so long or progressed?

Jay: [chuckle]… [long pause]… Maybe because...

At this point during the interview Jay offered an explanation based on a controversial interpretation of a biblical story but asked that I not include it in this research. He offered another explanation.

Jay: Yeah, okay like the Bible. [chuckle] Like you can't talk about that.

Bill: It would be hard to like put that into an economic formula or something.

Jay: I don't know. You know, I think its Africa. And I'm not saying that I hate that or anything. It's *cool* to go back and see, like this, I mean like you're seeing like... It's like the Garden of Eden in some places and your just seeing earth untouched because there's not giant oil companies or giant any companies, you know, doing anything. Like, it's how the earth originally was and these people are just still living that way. And it's not, the thing is, you get talking to them, you know, and what people would say a hundred ago is that race of people is just dumber. It's not that they're dumb, like, at all. You talk to them and it's not their intelligence, it's not their… What they're getting by on: I was amazed. Like the kind of fishing, fishing traps that they had like in the swamps that they made with their bare hands. I couldn't, I never would have come up with that, ever. I would still be trying to like get them with a spear or something. They have figured out how to do it and how to make it. It's just not in them to, to let's build a sky-scraper up to the sky and everyone live on top of each other. It's just not in 'em. It's kind of like they're just content with doing the same, you know, by keeping that heritage and everything.

Jay postulates the people he encountered lack some quality that would allow them to modernize and "progress." Jay also thought about poverty as an individualistic problem. He individualizes a solution for poverty in a way that recognizes his innate superiority.

Jay: I spent the whole time saying, if I were born in this village, and just grew up my whole life, I would run away first chance I got. Made it to Lusaka, you know? Made it to the capitol somehow. You know, and if I survived there, made it down to Cape Town. Just made it to a city, you know? It's not even… and I was looking for someone like, "you wanna get out of here, you wanna run away?" You know, or anything like? And just, "no."

Cultural deficiency theories were the most common form of victim blame. I asked Ben to explain why he thought poverty was so endemic to Haiti. The first explanation he offered was structural.

Bill: So tell me, you said that they have no way of creating an economy and that—

Ben: Yeah!

Bill: —there's this need. Go ahead.

Ben: Yeah it's like, there are very few resources there and the population is so undereducated that there is a very large set of people that has, that just don't have enough skills to like invite, you know, factories in and stuff like that. There is a lot of unskilled labor. Not much people that can manage or do that.

Bill: Right. Why do you think that is?

Ben: [sighs] Man, I don't know. Umm. I know Haiti became officially a nation in like 1804 and since then they've kind of you know, the United States have gone in. The French have gone in. And we've kind of taken resources from them. Probably bribing the government and the government has not always been good for them. [Sighing] I mean, it's hard to say. I mean Haiti grew out of, it was originally a slave, a slave spot. Slaves probably weren't very educated you know, so they don't have a history of like being a Westernized, industrialized country, you know? They came from probably small villages in Africa and they're living in small villages in Haiti now.

Bill: Yeah.

Ben: Not, really, not much has changed. So I don't… I. But all the resources have kind of been depleted. I think that is kind of one of their biggest problems.

Ben initially explains Haitian poverty as a structural problem based on a history of colonialism and resource extraction. However, only a few minutes later Ben offered a very different explanation for poverty when I asked why so many people in Haiti had resorted to begging for money and food.

> *Ben:* People are obviously, I mean they are lazy. Why they are like that, uh, conditioning. They've been conditioned to be kind of just lazy. And that conditioning comes from ah, from a lot of different places. From *always* just having been *given* stuff. And from probably coming from a family that is like, oh don't worry about this, you know? Oh, just wait. Just go ask them, they'll give it to you. You know, we have that here in the States, people that all they do is wait for somebody to give them something. Or they feel *entitled* to be given something. It's hard though when all they're asking for is three cents to go buy a small bag of rice.

He goes on to explain how he feels some individuals are more deserving than others.

> *Ben*: And for some reason, maybe it's just a human tendency of mine, like I really desire to help the people that want to help themselves. And for some reason the people that are just, "uhhh give me this, give me that, give me that uhhh" and, you know, just don't care to do anything for themselves. I had a different attitude towards them. I don't—I'm not sure if that is *right* of me—but I've got a different attitude towards the two different mindsets of people.

Although he acknowledges some structural reasons for poverty, Ben draws a strong connection between work ethic and wealth and makes a distinction between deserving and non-deserving poor. Non-deserving poor have a cultural sense of entitlement. This victim-blame belief resembles the culture of poverty theory (see Lewis 1959; Harrington 1962; Murray 2012). Supporters of culture of poverty theories argue poverty is a learned set of behaviors stemming from a self-perpetuating, unique, and deficient worldview (Lewis 1959). Seeing himself as distinct from Haitian beggars, a hard worker, Ben implicitly justifies the privilege he enjoys as a middle class, college educated, American, white man by maintaining his own moral and cultural superiority. The "psychological reductionist and individualistic interpretation of the persistence of poverty" resonates with popular US blame-the-victim discourse

(Bourgois 2001:11905). As he was getting up to leave at the end of the interview, Ben expressed feeling conflicted distinguishing between deserving and non-deserving poor.

> *Ben*: You know, so I don't think I'm justified in saying that they don't deserve to be helped. In fact, I think it's wrong to say that I shouldn't help them. But [pause] I don't know. [sighs] I mean, I feel like it's important that they learn that they need to be working towards, towards a goal too, you know?
>
> *Bill*: Yeah, yeah.
>
> Ben: But maybe that's where the gospel comes in, you know? Because, like, Jesus teaches you to give, you know. So if somebody becomes a Christian and knows about what Jesus's heart is, they're gonna wanna help other people. I was really conflicted actually with that emotion.

Ben feels tension between political beliefs about the non-deserving poor and Christian faith commitments. Simultaneously, he feels many of the poor do not deserve aid, but that he should provide aid to the poor. I will explore Christian values and commitments to help the poor in more detail in Chapter Five. Attempts to reduce cognitive discomfort often result in observable manifestations of dissonance (Festinger 1956). Commonly, people will change or adjust beliefs, opinions, and behaviors in ways that reduce incongruity of cognitions involved in a dissonant relationship (Festinger 1956). Ben adjusted his beliefs during the interview and attempted to resolve the tension in several ways. In the context of an interview on a religiously-based short-term mission experience, he seemed to reduce the importance of secular, culture of poverty beliefs and elevate the importance of religious commitments. In addition to reducing the importance of secular beliefs, he finds some resolution by endorsing a paternalistic approach. He explains we can blame the poor but not totally because they are like children. Likewise, he places the burden of responsibility on missionaries to support programs that discourage

handouts and reward work ethic in order to reduce Haitians' "spoiled" sense of entitlement to charitable handouts.

> *Ben*: We need to, it's like we are ushering them into adulthood. And a too often we're spoiling them. Creating a spoiled attitude.

In part, we can understand Ben's paternalistic solution as an individual cognitive solution to the tension between conflicting beliefs. It allows him to believe the poor are culturally inferior but justifies charity.

But why does the tension lead Ben to paternalism instead of some more critical perspective? Beliefs have social roots, and although paternalistic attitudes are often understood as resulting from individual prejudice, they are better understood as the consequences social structures and discursive assumptions (Harding 1998). People are predisposed to shared institutional, social, and civilizational belief systems in ways that make it difficult to detect the assumptions that shape thought processes (Harding 1998; Bourdieu 1986). Ben acknowledges some structural causes of poverty but places more emphasis on a culture of poverty hypothesis that conflicts with belief about helping the poor. The discursive strength of the culture of poverty thesis may lie in its wide acceptance and in that it legitimizes Ben's own favorable circumstances by locating the source of poverty in the deficient cultural values of subordinate groups. Although he acknowledges structural limitations, he adopts a framework that minimizes economic, political, racial, and social barriers. The framework justifies successful wealth accumulation as the product of superior cultural values rather than any number of forces like control of resources, political power, strong networks, military might, or technological prowess.

Caleb identifies passive masculine gender roles and a corresponding unwillingness to take entrepreneurial risks as a cultural source of much of the poverty he witnessed during a return trip to Bolivia.

Caleb: I don't know, just going back to Boliva that whole romanticism of [sigh] being in a new country had worn off. And I was kind of like, [sigh] alright, I mean these people are very, very timid people unwilling to take risks. And it, and even just looking at the role of the male in like their culture is like, oh man it's so passive [groaning]. And I almost like, [chuckle] when I went down there as a leader it was just really… One, I was more focused on team unity and focus on investing with our, like the *students* that were down there. So I wasn't looking out to the Bolivians. Obviously, I talked with a ton of Bolivianos but, I don't know, I just wasn't that intrigued or like amazed by the Bolivian people. I was kinda like, you're probably gonna to ask our group for a large sum of money and we're probably going to give *somebody* a decent sum of money and we're going to need to figure out who we give that to. And was I getting to talk to the main trip leader just going over finances and how much money we have. And these four different people have come to us and asked us for money. And just, is that, is that how they view us Americans coming down? As "A" they'll come down and do a little manual labor which we could do anyway. But the big thing is they'll help us buy stuff for our church or for this Bible institute.

Bill: Yeah. What do you think about that?

Caleb: [pause] I kinda hate it. Just because I'm like, almost wherever I go, that's how I'm going to be associated—like that guy has money. Honestly, I do have money and, um, I have access to money anyway. Even if I was down there and I was dirt poor, I got Betsy's parents and my parents and if shit hit the fan, I'd be fine.

Although many missions give charitable donations Caleb, Ben, and others seem to resent indigenous hosts for having a beggar mentality and expecting charity. Caleb, however, recognizes his level of privilege and his situation is objectively different. He worries about how these differences affect missionaries' relationships with the people they encounter.

Bill: You talked a little about how they see you and you worry about that. Just as this rich guy. Maybe that's how they see you. So how are you looking at them? What does that relationship look like, or what should it look like?

Caleb: [pause] Yeah. Um. [pause]

Bill: Maybe we could do it this way. What is your role as a missionary then? Like, what are you doing there?

Caleb: Well I'm there to do missions to them. [smiles]

Bill: *To*? *To* them? [chuckles]

Caleb: Well that's kind of like, I don't really, I don't agree with that. I kind of see that mentality and I think I've even had that mentality of like, I'm going to go down and help and serve and I am the privileged one serving them and they have the chance to learn from me. And so I think a lot of times, we don't go down there with like a humble approach of alright, I'm going to go down and serve in this way but they have a lot to offer me.

Caleb admits having had ethnocentric beliefs and has observed paternalistic attitudes in groups he works with. He goes on to explain the spiritual lessons the poor have to offer missionaries. This was a common theme I will address in the next chapter. He explicitly rejects ethnocentric beliefs and encourages more humility. However, later in the interview he is more ambivalent. Caleb works through several theories as he struggles to answer difficult questions about poverty.

Bill: Do you have a sense of, like, why they are so poor to start with?

Caleb: Mmm. That's a good question.

Bill: I mean just, it make sense if you want to try to work towards ending this poverty you want to have some idea of why it's like that to start with.

Caleb: Maybe because its hot. [smiles] That sounds dumb. But maybe like… Because aren't most poor countries close to the equator?

Bill: It seems like it.

Caleb: It does. But why are they poor? I don't know. Do you know why?

Bill: Well, that's why I'm in grad school. I'm trying to figure it out.

Caleb: Why are they poor? I feel like some of, like with some of the Bolivians, they're just not willing to take risks and, and take like seek out change. Like sometimes the culture is just, in nature, less willing to progress and change and seek out new things that I think our, I don't know if its Western culture or whatever it is that we live in. But people are just very like curious and willing to take risks and I think some cultures are just less willing and less interested. And it's just like, this is how we've done it and lets just keep doing it.

Bill: What kind of risks are you talking about, specifically?

Caleb: Umm…

Bill: I think I know but…

Caleb: I think the simple risk of, hey I'm going to try something new. I'm going to try planning my crops this way or maybe I could. I think this is the risk of doing things differently, um, or maybe even just like exploring and seeking out new resources. And just business risks.

Bill: Mm hmm.

Caleb: And even another, I think a lot of it is just culture and how they think. Um. Just with like with the ability to like look into the future and I mean, I'm even impressed with some people you know, it's like their looking far into the future with their jobs and making these investments. And that doesn't even have to be in the stock market but buying this land and planting trees that fifty years from now you'll be able to harvest and make all this money.

Bill: Is that people here or are you saying…?

Caleb: I would say people here and maybe more educated developed countries, ah, they are just able to look further ahead and like see the value of investing. And why are they poor? I think because they're education sucks. I really think that, that is a big, a big reason. I mean maybe it would be more difficult to do this but I think… I mean I think if I have some land and water and place to live even if I wasn't making much money I feel like I could figure out how to like farm things well and not deplete the land. And have a hard simple life. But I think maybe it comes to just, just distribution of wealth and land. Like these people need to be able to have land to farm on. And if you don't have that. If you don't have any access, like what can you do, almost?

Bill: Yeah. So if we go in that direction then, um, would you put that back on culture or is that on something else like the economy or politics or…

Caleb: hmm. First of all I feel so unable to, I know you're like trying to figure this out.

Bill: Yeah I know that's really not fair.

Caleb: I just feel even… I'm like why are people poor? Oh gosh, I mean all these things float into my mind of these different factors like. They have a bunch of resources and the rich people exploit the resources and there's no middle class. I feel like this is a very interesting thing that you're writing about. What was the question again? What were you saying?

Caleb offers a detailed culture of poverty theory and cites, as evidence, Bolivian men's timidity, present-time orientation, and an unwillingness to "progress." His ideas resemble classic modernization theory of development that contrasts these negative traditionalist traits with ideas about positive Western entrepreneurship, curiosity, future time orientation, planning, and good investment sense. The discursive strength of these explanations may lie in shared assumptions consistent with Western free-market, corporate, capitalist ideologies that have been melded with Christianity in recent decades (Connolly 2008, Morton 2009). However, Caleb experiences some tension between his expressed desire for more egalitarian engagement and his ethnocentric explanations of Bolivian poverty. He attempts to reduce the tension by dismissing the detailed cultural deficiency theory he just related in favor of a structural explanation about poor education, land ownership, and unequal distribution of wealth. However, when pressed, Caleb becomes frustrated and seems either unable or unwilling to explain the alternative he just posited. Perhaps, he has a sense that structural causes of poverty trump culturally based explanations but lacks the language to clearly articulate the alternative.

At a national conference for Church of Christ youth in Gatlinburg, Tennessee I had the opportunity to speak with many short-term mission participants, leaders, and organizers. A short-term mission organizer and I shared frustrations we experienced working across cultures. I mentioned my conception of punctuality often differed from those I had worked with in Honduras. He replied,

> *Randy:* You know what I do? I tell 'em, I'm first world and you're third world and there's a reason for that.

In a sentence, Randy reduces poverty wrought by centuries of oppression, colonialism, resource extraction, and foreign intervention to cultural inferiority around one issue.

Deficiency theories that blame the poor for their poverty have political implications. Blame theories often suggest poverty is cultural trait of "non-deserving" poor and suggest little *should* be done

to address poverty. Deficiency theories either place responsibility of poverty on the poor themselves or encourage a sense of paternalism by which short-term missionaries feel obliged to bestow superior knowledge and values upon inferior hosts. It is the White Man's Burden. Deficiency theories, like the culture of poverty thesis, tend to rely on psychologically reductionist, sloppy, individualistic frameworks that hide the power, privilege and structural advantages enjoyed by the wealthy (Bourgois 2001). The discursive strength of these theories became evident during interviews when tolerant, well-intentioned, thoughtful participants expressed concern about ethnocentric and paternalistic missions, yet easily and often employed explanations that included these same elements. Beliefs about one's own cultural, moral, or civilizational superiority legitimate existing structures of inequality and leaves little room for egalitarian, democratic engagement with indigent hosts (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). Instead of working with hosts to promote social change, deficiency theories encourage missionaries to "do mission *to* them." Missionaries consistently blamed hosts for their poverty and asserted the legitimacy of the economic, cultural, and political values of the dominant group.

Inevitable poverty.

Participants commonly exhibited fatalistic views that locate the cause of poverty in uncontrollable, supra-individual, and non-structural forces. The theme of inevitable poverty takes on three variant forms. First, some view poverty as a social problem that is infinitely opaque rather than the predictable outcome of particular social arrangements. Second, some view poverty as a universal principle that constitutes an inevitable feature of social life. Third, the most common fatalistic belief was that poverty is the result of God's will. Fatalistic beliefs imply little can be done to seriously address the problem of poverty.

Remember that Ben offered both structural and deficiency theories to explain poverty. He also posited that poverty exists as an inexplicably complex feature of society. Obviously effected by the poverty he encountered, Ben seemed frustrated by the complexity and enormity of the problem.

Bill: So I guess, specifically talking about the trip to Mexico a while back and this most recent trip. What really struck you the most about the poverty you saw? I mean what really struck you about the level of inequality? Is there anything that stands out in your mind?

Ben: I don't get why there are people like this and why I am the way I am. Why do I have a nice house and these people don't have shoes? I don't know. The more people I talk to people in Haiti, the more I realize they also *don't know*. I'm not saying [chuckle] they don't know because they're ignorant. They don't know because there's not really much explanation to a lot of it.

Bill: Yeah. I mean that's a—

Ben: There is *just* inequality.

Bill: If you did know you'd get a Nobel Prize, I guess.

Ben: Yeah [laughs].

Bill: So, there is *just* inequality. What do you mean by that?

Ben: About like *just* inequality, like *simply* inequality?

Bill: Yeah *simply*.

Ben: Yeah, there's just like for some reason, we have like everything that we have. We've got like houses and cars and boats and planes and trains but they don't. Um, like, I mean from their

background to the political situation to the corruption of the country to people's attitudes to a lack of education to food, you know.

Here, Ben describes poverty as an irreversible feature of the human condition. When probed he reiterated cultural deficiency theories but emphasized that there are so many factors that the root causes are essentially unknowable. To say poverty is inexplicably complex may be a way for Ben to ease the cognitive tension between ideas that blame existing social, political, economic order and ones that blame the poor themselves. If the phenomenon is an unknowable mystery, it makes little sense to investigate or endorse a particular perspective.

When I asked Roger if he felt he had a responsibility to the poor he explained the difficulty with feeling responsibility is that poverty is inevitable. Thinking about a social problem like poverty in individualistic terms buttresses his belief that poverty is irreversible.

Bill: Do you think then that you have—being aware of poverty in general and knowing a little now about poverty in Cozumel—do you feel like you have a responsibility to those people?

Roger: [chuckles] Uh, such a deep and broad question.

Bill: It is.

Roger: *If* you have a responsibility for one, how do you deal with the fact that you can't be responsible for a million? We feel like we have a responsibility to help others with the blessings that God has given us. We've tried to do that in several different ways. Supporting this orphanage is one of them. Um, the tough thing is always trying to get over the feeling that you've never done enough, but you can't do enough. We had a local Hispanic illegal alien couple at church over the last two years who Elaine and I tried to help. That's totally outside the scope of your—

Bill: I think that's actually really more similar than people think.

Roger: You mean, closer?

Bill: Yeah.

Roger: Yeah. OK. All I'll say is even in that instance—

Bill: And they were from Mexico?

Roger: Yeah. Chiapas, I can show you on the map because we flew 'em home. This guy, the husband was on his third trip to the United States. The last time he came across the border, he was with thirty other people, who once they crossed the border with the coyote that he paid the money too, the coyote took 'em out in the middle of the desert and started shooting and shot ten of them and he escaped into the desert into the night. And yet, these people couldn't make it in America, and living off of donations. He had health problems and a bad back and this that and the other. I don't want to waste your time right now but in other words, the only reason I went down that road, no matter how much we did for that couple—which was actually considerable—we never felt like we did enough or solved any problems for them or had any closure cause you still come out of it feeling like it's just a drop in the ocean.

Roger and his wife are generous and compassionate. They support their local church, help local school children buy school supplies and groceries, donate to missions, and help finance an orphanage in Mexico. Still, Roger mentioned several times feeling like no matter what he did it was never enough. I asked if he there were alternative, less individualistic ways to address the problem of poverty.

Bill: But what is the most effective way to tackle those issues? So are short-term missions a good way to do it, are churches a good way to do it, is political action the way to do it? That would be the next question.

Roger: Where's the question mark?

Bill: Well we can start with um, so that responsibility falls on you as an individual to some degree. You say you feel some responsibility for alleviating suffering to some degree, so is that responsibility the best way to be a good steward? The most efficient, most practical, the best way to go about that responsibility? I feel like I'm stumbling.

Roger: I hear your question. I hear your question. I've been down this road many times.

Bill: Okay.

Roger: By far, you gotta remember you're talking to an accountant.

Bill: That's good!

Roger: You gotta remember where people are coming from. By far and away, I think the biggest responsibility we have and the most cost effective thing we can do is to put money into preachers, schools, and the indigenous population in the country where it's teaching the people. Because our real goal and our real command from the Lord is to go into all the world and *teach*. Not go into all the world and feed, not to clothe, not to go and give them a better house and flat screen TV.

His solutions, like most interviewees tended to be top-down and based on the assumption that missionaries can offer, not only material aid, but also cultural, moral, or spiritual guidance. Roger supports focusing financial resources on teaching Biblical principles for two reasons. First, he focuses on spiritual needs out of obedience to God. The second reason has to do with the futility of alleviating poverty.

Roger: In a lot of ways, trying to alleviate their poverty is a black hole. It is a never-ending saga that you don't have enough money for. […] We are simply not going to be able to help them all live better. It might make us feel better but we're not going to be able to do that for everybody.

Conceptualizing his responsibility to the poor and possible solutions in individualistic and religious terms, Roger feels compelled to donate generously but also sees little hope or need to seriously addressing the problem. If alleviating poverty is expensive, secondary, and impossible then there is little reason to try.

Like Roger, Jay, is not hopeful. He described the village he visited in Africa this way:

Jay: It's like look how these people's great-great-great granddads were living a thousand years ago. You know, it's the exact same. And realistically, it's not going to change. If it hasn't at this point, or at least it's going to be long, long time before it does. You know, but that little dirt village is not going to turn into a city or metropolis. It's always going to be that little dirt village.

Most participants also posited that poverty and economic hierarchies are a part of God's plan. Participants view wealth and poverty as more than a question of economic and political structures. Lisa, for example, explains that God places people in the upper class for a reason.

Bill: One of the things I struggle with is coming back *here* and my life here is very different than their life *there*. Do you have any thoughts, like how do you deal with that?

Lisa: God put me here in this place for a reason. God puts people in classes so they can reach people in their class. Think if you freaked out and just give all your money away? Be careful of that guilt taking away from your purpose.

Lisa explained God places people in social classes and worried that if Christians gave their money away, they risked losing sight of the ultimate goal of evangelism and might not be able to effectively engage the wealthy. If class positions are divinely ordained as Lisa suggests, then there are clear reasons for

Christians *not* to give their money away and *not* to challenge economic hierarchies. At times it was difficult to get participants to talk about something they had not put much thought into. Some explanations tended to be simplistic. Fatalistic explanations were sometimes the least complex, involving little explanation and detail.

However, most participants' theories about poverty as part of God's plan were complex and contained elements of structuralist, and individualistic theories. For most participants, economic questions are also religious questions. For example, although I thought I asked a straightforward question about socio-economic causes of poverty, Buddy struggled to formulate and answer. His supposed concern for the poor and his inability to give me an answer frustrated me. If he cared so much, why not read about it? Finally, I realized he was not grappling with political or economic questions. He was trying to understand something metaphysical about the order of the universe. He was trying to make sense of how an all-powerful and completely good God allows poverty to exist. To some extent, his existing belief system was unable to account for the high levels of inequality he witnessed. My conversation with Buddy reveals how short-term mission participants think about poverty within a Christian worldview.

> *Buddy*: […] I find myself laying in bed at night, when I come home, just like, just like I was wanting to cry out in tears, *why*? Why do we have so much, why do they have so little? Why are we so… why are they so pure in heart and why are we so *not* pure in heart, you know? It's because the culture we live in.
>
> *Bill*: Um. So this is an important question to me too and part of reason I'm in grad school now. Do you have a sense of why they are so poor? [Pause] I know that's a really hard question.
>
> *Buddy*: Why are they so poor? [sigh] Umm. [long pause]

Bill: Because those are the questions that, you know, keep you up. Like why do I have all this stuff? Why don't they have stuff?

Buddy: The answer to that, for me, is first of all. Why do we have all the stuff we have? Every, I genuinely believe that God gives us, I mean, people down there would think I make a lot of money. And, you know, I do. But you look at world incomes and all that… I mean we're, listen, if you make [pause].

Bill: – If you make thirty thousand you're like top one percent.

Buddy: – That's right. So people in the US, they think when the Bible talks about the rich, we're talking about billionaires, right? When the Bible talks about the rich it's talking about people that have food. It's talking about somebody that makes 20, or 25,000 a year: That's the rich, OK? I mean, uh, I think that everything is, and this is one of them: I think a fundamental flaw in the mindset of this country is, you know, it's all about the American dream, you know, everything you have comes from within you. And you have the ability to do anything you want to based on what comes from within you. I believe that every single thing that I have been given is a blessing from God. And part of that, okay, some people would argue, yeah but I've worked hard. And yeah but I've did this in school and I've done this and I'm intelligent and all this but then you've got to take a step back and say okay, sure maybe you've worked hard but every intellectual ability that you've had, every desire that you've had to work hard, it all comes from God. So let's not make a mistake here. Don't start thinking that you've done anything. Everything we have comes from God.

Bill: Mm hmm.

Buddy: – So why do they have so little? I don't know. Why do we have so much? Because it's a blessing from God. And some people will look at, you know, some people will talk about God and

say well why would… if God is so loving why, why would he allow for people to be poor, in Africa? [pause]

Ultimately, Buddy changed the terms of the question and offered an answer that included questioning standard materialistic definitions of poverty. Also, he stopped short of blaming God for poverty; instead he described the religious obligation of the wealthy to do something. Although Buddy's short-term mission trip led him to be more critical of dominant *cultural* attitudes in the United States that justify wealth and poverty, he identifies no reason to question political or economic *structures* since the question is primarily a religious one. Although he was conflicted and torn by the inability of his current belief system to account for the poverty he witnessed, Buddy finds comfort in the same belief system. His simultaneous belief that God has a perfect plan for humanity and that God is unfathomable allows him to maintain beliefs that seem confusing, wrong, or contradictory. Buddy finds comfort in the idea that, directly or indirectly, everything comes from God, wealth and poverty included.

Similarly, Chad locates the source of poverty, ultimately, coming from God. He sees poverty as punishment for sins against God. However, he details how social and economic structures are intertwined with the faith, morality, national histories, and God's will. Although, Chad allows some room for agency and suggests the role of deficiency, his explanation is primarily fatalistic.

Bill: I'm interested in the economic development side too. So where do you see these problems stemming from, the economic problems that they're going through? You mentioned, like, the infrastructure…

Chad: I mean the beginning is *sin*, right? [laughing] I mean that's the beginning.

Bill: Right. [chuckle]

Chad: Just start right there! [laughing] and if you want to go up from there. That because, you know, that paints *everything*. It inhibits you know, the government, you know. And the government's thought process that they're there to serve versus they're there to extract. So the Peruvian government is totally trying to extract from their people versus rather trying to serve their people. There is a lack of benevolence. There is a culture of corruption. Therefore what that does is creates this, um, this *black* market which is basically *all* of Latin America. 'Cause no one trusts the government. And they shouldn't, [chuckle] I'd be black market if I was there and I was Peruvian. Because you're constantly being taken advantage of. And so, um, so that then, then that fuels the lack of infrastructure. Because there's no tax base. You know what I mean? Because it's a cycle. […] You know, there's no infrastructure, there's no roads there's no electricity there's no water so there's no small business that can get things from place to place in an economic fashion beyond just the old you know, dark age trading system and small market system, you know, *mercado* system. And so, which is great and fine if you gonna to stay at that level. But if you want to *advance*, you know, you got to have infrastructure and you gotta have tax base and there's nothing wrong with that. It's a great, God glorifying thing if those tax dollars are being turned instead of into bureaucracy and *waste* are turned into things that can continue to develop the country. […] So you know what I'm saying, is that just, it's a cycle It's a cycle. So then the whole. Then what's so weird. Right now it's a battle. It's a beautiful battle. We're having our own different level of that in the States where there are some folks by God's grace who have who have been grounded in scriptures and moved by the holy spirit who are really *trying* to do the right thing that are [Peruvians]. They're trying to move up in their own system so now there's an internal struggle that's going to take hundreds of years to fix. […] *Hundreds* of years. So it gets, not to be a pessimist but really for it to work itself out it's like where you start is where you finish. That is why in the States, in a lot of ways us starting in a good spot with a moral base, you know,

> the Puritans. And that start has blessed this country for the last 250 years, you know. And so I think Peru is starting in a very poor spot, you know. And then getting compounded with the conquistadors and colonial period and 400 years slavery that didn't get broken until 1917 or so. You get what I'm saying? They rewrote their constitution in 1976. So the imagine 1776 versus 1976 you know. They're 200 years and beyond that. So how much more? It's going to take two or three hundred more years in my opinion. And that's if they stay on the right path in order to get out of a lot of this they're in.

Chad offers an in-depth, complex theory of poverty in Peru in which the role of God and spiritual forces are intertwined with tax structures, bureaucracy, and history. His explanation includes echoes modernization theories, elements of conservative political thought, and corporate ideology. For example, he indicates government subsidies to the business community are not only good for business, but actually glorifying to God. Although complex and broad, Chad's theory is primarily fatalistic because it locates the ultimate source of poverty in uncontrollable, supra-individual, spiritual forces.

Perhaps, in a movement significantly characterized by charitable actions, development projects, and volunteerism directed at the poor it is surprising that actors' beliefs about poverty are tinged with such fatalism. Hopelessness seemed to be associated with tension stemming from inability of belief systems to explain the poverty they witnessed abroad and how to respond appropriately. Lisa describes her feelings:

> *Lisa:* I think that I honestly just felt hopeless. Because it was such immense poverty to the point that people in the countryside would sell their children as slaves—because they couldn't afford them—to the people in the city. Because the people in the city, its just so poor to us but its still a difference between the country. I think I just kinda felt overwhelmed and kinda felt inadequate,

like, what am I? [Pause] How do I even [pause]… *help* [pause]… something like this out of control like, you know?

Katie cites a similar feeling.

Katie: I think the big thing is that I don't know what I can do. But just feeling like anything you do just doesn't make that big of a difference and I don't really know how to combat that.

Caleb also feels hopeless.

Caleb: I just wish there was a simple black and white, like, way to like solve poverty or even just to love people and help people. And I'm kind of just struck of just like, you know the Bible and Jesus—like nothing is like this black and white kind of thing—I'm like why can't things just be more black and white? Because if they are, I'd do 'em. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it. But I'm like that doesn't really leave any room for faith.

Bill: Yeah.

Caleb: We're kind of getting a little off topic.

Bill: No that's actually really good. I wish things were simple too.

Caleb: And I think that's what's like very attractive about like the Mormon religion and other religions because it's like black and white. Its like there's these rules and you do these rules and it sounds actually nice sometimes.

The inability of Caleb's current worldview to explain the causes of poverty is a necessary yet insufficient condition for a significant shift in beliefs (Lofland 1965). He seems uncomfortable with his inability to resolve dissonant beliefs. However, his comments suggest the role religious faith can play in resolving cognitive dissonance. Caleb identifies a need for religious *faith*, or belief based on spiritual

apprehension rather than reasoning or evidence, and expresses a willingness to accept some degree of dissonance, mystery, and confusion. Therefore, there is no reason to think he would seek out alternative explanations or adopt more a more critical perspective.

Fatalistic beliefs about poverty as an inevitable, inexplicable, or divinely ordained condition may help participants explain some of the tension resulting from existing discordant beliefs without seeking alternatives. For example, if a short-term participant becomes aware that shared individualistic explanations are insufficient, adopting a fatalistic view of poverty reduces the some cognitive tension without the participant having to significantly change, alter, or modify beliefs. The belief that poverty is inevitable has profound political implications. Hopelessness is political: it denies the impetus to explore alternative social arrangements that might address poverty. Denying the possibility of alternatives serves short-term mission participants because it justifies, de facto, the existing hierarchies and power structures that they benefit from.

Responsibility to God

If deficiency theories imply little *should* be done about poverty and fatalistic theories imply little *can* be done, then why do short-term mission participants try to help the poor? I asked participants if they felt a responsibility to the poor. There was significant disagreement between as to how religious commitments relate to political commitments. However, several themes emerged from the interviews. First, most short-term mission participants view their responsibility to the poor as a responsibility to God to help the poor. That indirect responsibility is conceived primarily as a responsibility to evangelize to the poor. Caring for the their physical needs is, for most, an inseparable, yet secondary goal. Second, short-term mission participants view responsibility falling primarily on the individual. Most concede individualistic responses to poverty are ineffectual yet do not accept broad-based social responsibility.

Most participants deny the possibility of large-scale poverty reduction anyway, and cite this as a reason for not trying. For most participants, responsibility to the poor, through God is a religious commitment, not a political one.

Participants' desire to help the poor stems primarily from a commitment to their faith. Their responsibility is an indirect responsibility to God. Michelle, for example, expresses confusion as to why anybody would care for people outside of a Christian moral framework. For her, voluntarily donating money is as an opportunity to display a mature, obedient faithfulness.

> *Michelle*: Well. I don't think wealthy Americans in general owe anything. But the thing is, it's like if you're a Christian I think you're called to serve the poor. And I think you're called to give ten percent to the church, like a mandate in the Bible. And if you can give above and beyond that, that's wonderful but, like, I don't… if you have money and resources and time and you're not giving of that to people that don't have it, there's something wrong. And I wouldn't expect people that aren't believers to do that. Because, why would you? Why would you care? It's all for you anyway. You did it. It's all yours. Keep it. Like, that's fine. I can understand that. But like, if you're a believer, then I think that you are, hopefully you understand how much you've been given and out of that, want to give so that other people not only will have food to eat and roofs over their heads but also like will have a better understanding of grace and the gospel and will have a better picture of that because of what you've been able to do for them. […] I think that if you understand how much you've been given you will be compelled to give back. So I don't think there is an obligation but I think that it's a demonstration of your understanding of the gospel and how much you've been given by God.
>
> *Bill*: Do you think that is primarily on the individual, on the church, or on the nation?

Michelle: All of the above. Definitely on the person… church… community. I think if we were a real community we would. And as a nation, I'm not very good at politics. I like the idea, in theory, that our nation gives money to other nations that are poor. But I don't think it works well in practice. But ultimately if you're just giving money and nothing spiritual, your not giving anything. Well no that's terrible, don't get me wrong I want people to eat. But money is just ways to give the gospel.

Bill: But the US owned papaya farm you talked about, how they were spraying the workers to toxins and wouldn't let them get blood tested, that's a very political thing. I mean one of the reasons its cheaper is to grow stuff in Latin America is because, like you said it wouldn't happen in the United States. Well that might be because there aren't as many regulations. And that's really political thing.

Michelle: I don't know. It would be really nice if everybody just treated everybody with dignity and respect. Then we wouldn't have these problems.

For Michelle, the wealthy do not have any responsibility to the poor based on political, reciprocal, social obligations. However, charitable behaviors are markers of Christian spiritual maturity.

Michelle: When they ask you why you're there and why you care. Like, "you're this white person and you're staying in our a clinic for a month" and like, "why?" And it's because I've been given so much. And like my creator has left me and given me so much that I want to give to you like he has given to me. And I'm called to do that and I'm called to love you as I have been loved. And I don't know, just living sacrificially. Because they're not going to get it just based on your words. Like that saying, "preach the gospel: use words when necessary." Like, *yes*! You need to be living a life that shows you care about something more than the world cares about. But at the

same time, like ultimately you are just a nice person unless you tell them why you are doing it, to spread the gospel of Christ.

Here, Michelle accepts hierarchical distinction in the relationship between missionary and host. She takes on the role of God and feels compelled to give to her hosts as God has given to her. Her charitable behavior validates the role of the missionary in which she brings material and spiritual value to the host. The role of the indigent host is to receive that value. Charitable behaviors often assert cultural hegemony of elites while ritualizing the social relations of subordination (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). Later in the interview Michelle expressed more ambivalence about the role of charity and the hierarchical relationship between missionary and host.

Bill: That's a good point. And what I would like to do for a dissertation is go down there and ask folks what they thought of short-term missionaries.

Michelle: Belize was the first time I got to ask someone what they thought about them. And she *didn't* like it. She was like, "come get to know me." "I don't want to be seen as like this charity case because I'm *not*! I have a job. I work in a clinic. I work in the clinic in the pharmacy. I want to get to know you and I want you to want to get to know me too." Which brings back the whole relational aspect of ministry. Get to know the people! Like just because they are poor doesn't mean they're not human. Get to know them. Get to love them. Learn where they are in life, then know how to best love them. Like it is really all about the relationship. That is how God set it up. And yes God can work through little Bible tracks but maybe this is me projecting my feelings on God but I don't think that that's how he intended it.

Bill: So you said she didn't want to be seen as a charity case. Do you think that's how most people you go down there to help feel?

Michelle: They don't want to be seen like a charity case?

Bill: Yeah.

Michelle: No! I don't think they do. That is a horrible feeling. Like, "Yep, I'm gonna go sign up for my welfare check, I'm so excited" And of course there are people that abuse the system but its kind of like nobody…everyone…people get *worth* out of like *working*. Like when I didn't work for a whole summer, I felt miserable. Because like I'm existing. I'm not *doing* anything. I'm not creating anything. I'm not using my talents and my abilities. That's miserable. No one wants to be like that. No one wants to be a charity case.

Michelle conversation with the Belizean clinic employee influenced her beliefs about charity and helped her understand that charity involves a hierarchical relationship that can dehumanize people and ritualize the social relations of subordination (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). Michelle expressed conflicting ideas about the role of charity and short-term missions. Although she expressly rejected paternalistic attitudes, she succumbed to paternalistic ways of thinking and talking about her relationship to the poor and the short-term missions. Feeling more blessed than others and believing to know and understand the emotional and spiritual needs of others exhibit paternalism. Ultimately, she thought about her short-term mission experience in religious terms that color her thinking about poverty and responsibility to the poor. Michelle thought about her relationship to the poor as a responsibility to God to use material aid to share the gospel.

Like Michelle, Jay prioritized evangelism over addressing physical needs. However, Jay places even more emphasis on evangelism and goes so far as to explain why providing material aid is a waste of time and money.

Jay: What you leave, it's always going to be a change to someone's, someone's soul. I mean you leave behind, you give someone the gift of salvation into an eternal heaven. Ah, er, that's a little more important than an ugly, ugly cement church with an ugly roof and ugly walls that they might really love because "now we have a church to have things in" but gosh if you can have it under a tree then do it. You know, I don't care. How 'bout some water, some eternal water? That's a little better to me, and so like… [pause]

Bill – So I guess, like, I would choose eternal salvation over a toilet, right? [chuckle]

Jay – Yeah, you know, we left you more comfortable on this stupid dust ball but your life is never going to be comfortable *ever*. You know, you will die uncomfortable. You know, how much do we really help? Whereas someone just you never going to be comfortable you whole life is uncomfortable, but gosh, when your done with this thing you've got so much to look forward to.

Although participants give priority to spiritual matters, most view evangelism and physical aid as inseparable. However, many participants seemed uncomfortable with the label of evangelism, although that it is clear that is what they are doing. Hanna expresses the importance of combining "discipleship" and aid.

Hanna: So I think it's the discipleship that is the goal.

Bill: Like, uh, so the discipleship, like sharing faith, evangelizing?

Hanna: I think the relationships are the goal, like building strong relationships that hopefully—I mean, I guess your hope is to share—I guess it is evangelizing. I don't necessarily like to call it that.

Bill: Yeah. so evangelizing, I don't necessarily mean that to be standing on a street corner. You know what I mean, there are a whole lot of different forms of it. That may have a bad connotation for some people.

Hanna: I think it's just loving on them and hoping they will see Christ in you and come to know him. Which also means helping them when they have difficult… um.

Bill: So like, difficult? Physically?

Hanna: I mean just like you would with a friend.

Ben finds a biblical justification for connecting evangelism and aid.

Ben: Yeah well. I think, I think I would have to look at looking at a verse, you know where Jesus heals the paralytic man. You know, I believe first he heals the spiritual, then he says, you know pick up take your mat and go. So he does address the man's heart before he addresses his inability to walk. Um, so thank you for addressing that because I actually—I actually just kind of put that together. The spiritual need is greater than the physical need but Jesus addresses both. They are both important.

Katie identifies a pragmatic reason for connecting evangelism and aid.

Katie: Well if someone is starving, they're not likely to listen to you about, you know, their spiritual needs. Because all they can think about is how much their stomach hurts. So, I know that's an extreme example…

But if the primary reason for short-term mission trips is evangelism, a fair question is why evangelize the poor? In fact, Katie had been on a mission trip to Sweden and Ben has spent time evangelizing in England and Japan. Participants acknowledged the importance of sharing the gospel in places like Paris, London, and Nashville but explained that it was *easier* to do missions to poor people abroad.

Bill: … So I guess the question is, why is it that you go to Honduras instead of Rome?

Doc: Right. Yeah, you know I don't know. I think you got to have a… I mean you know, people without Christ they gotta be witnessed to whether they are wealthy or poor. But you know even Jesus said that it's, that it's the people that are without that are gonna be a lot more receptive to the true gospel than the people that have everything the world has to offer. Um, maybe it's easier. [laughs] Maybe that's why we do it. [laughs loudly]

Evangelizing to the poor seems to be easier for several reasons.

Buddy: To do that in the United States it's a little bit different conversation. It's a little bit tougher conversation because people here have suspicion, right? They don't need that.

Bill: Right.

Buddy: But I always come back with, if I do that there, why can't I do that here? And so, I almost think doing it there has helped me do it here. [Pause] If that makes sense?

Bill: No it definitely does and I've heard a lot of people say that. And it's interesting to me because I'm trying to figure out why it's easier for me to go down there and do it…

Buddy: I can say why it's easier for me, um, [chuckle] walking around this poor village in Columbia, you know, when you bump into someone and you ask them you know, my translator says this is Buddy, he is working with the local church, he has come from North America because he has a testimony to tell you about what Jesus Christ has done in his life. Would you like to listen? Um, I was there for a week and I think two people said no. Everyone else said *yes*! And stood there or sat there and took the time. I mean you try doing that in a neighborhood in West Knoxville. But you know, when you do that in the US, I mean, people aren't open to it. People aren't open to it. People are closed off to other people, I mean, there's just an openness these

people down there in those Latin American, South American countries. They're so, I don't know, so open, so pure of heart.

Buddy and others noted the poor were particularly receptive to proselytizing. Many posited that the receptiveness came from something like a spiritual purity enjoyed by the poor. I will discuss this theme in more detail in the next chapter. Only a few posited this apparent receptivity or openness may have had something to do with unequal power relationships between missionaries and hosts.

Jay: And poor people, you talk to them and just hey, you know this is hope. This is real life. This is eternal life. This is everything. And just "who's interested?" And every single hand goes up and they are interested. It's not a question of if you are interested in this, because they'll all buy it. And that's what gave me the most problems because, like, don't just be telling me this just because I'm the first white guy you've ever seen and asked you are you interested. The one time I did speak to the whole village, I said "don't do anything for me because honestly in two days you're never going to see me again." I would love to come back. If I can come back I will. But I'm not. You know, you're never going to see me again. Do it if you want to and if you don't, then don't.

Jay realizes that his status as a wealthy white man had some influence on how his message was received by his hosts. He does not question the legitimacy of his actions or the hierarchical relationship itself, but was concerned that his hosts' conversions might be insincere.

Deficiency theories imply little *should* be done about poverty. Fatalistic theories imply little *can* be done. Responsibility is conceived in religious and moral terms. The implications of these beliefs explanations are profoundly political though most participants don't think about short-term missions that way. Buddy, for example, adamantly opposed viewing his short-term mission experience in political terms:

Bill: I'm hearing you say that we have a responsibility to the poor, which is a responsibility to God to help the poor I guess. But does that translate, where do you draw that distinction between your Christian commitment and your political commitment? I wonder if that responsibility through God to help the poor translates into political responsibility to help the poor.

Buddy: Ummm. [sighs] I, I… I [sighs].. my, my commitment is a Christian commitment. For me the whole political thing is just like stupid, meaningless, pointless, you know. For me it just really doesn't translate into politically. I think, I think ah, that's not another thing in our country where people don't even listen to what a candidate says now, they don't even listen to what the candidate says or stands for. They look at whether he is Democrat or Republican and make their decision. And so we've gotten into this view where it's just completely polarized and for me that whole deal is just kind of like, I don't know. For me it's a whole... it's a, it's a *Christian* commitment. I try to distance myself. I mean, I vote. I go and vote and I vote for… I try to listen, look at the individuals that are running for president and vote for the person that I think would be best as our president. And I mean 9 times out 10 that ends up being a Republican. If it was a Democrat I wouldn't care. That for me it's like, I wish it wasn't so polarized. But for me it's all a Christian commitment and I think it's you know. I don't, don't know how the two overlap because I think, think it's a Christian… everything I do mission-wise or in my life is bound upon my Christian values or whatever… [sigh]

His response was typical. However, the fact remains, short-term mission participants' actions and beliefs are political.

So, why don't interviewees view their beliefs as political? Doc was one of the only interviewees whose religious sense of responsibility translated into a political commitment.

Bill: And that's one of the things I struggle with is how do you have this religious life and this political life. So what do think? Do you think US government does have some responsibility?

Doc: Well I just think from my Christian tenets, you know, with where my ethics, are based from, then my answer to that would have to be, yes. Which would then that would throw me over into being a *liberal* [laughs really loudly].

Doc acknowledged the negative view of liberal political beliefs about caring for the poor in his Baptist church. He identifies some social pressure to conform to more conservative views. He explained.

Doc: I think there's people that would take issue with that. So I think they would think, now well if the church wants to do that, that's fine but for our government to do that—that's a little different. And you know, [speaking lower] there's people in *my church* that are that way. [chuckles]

Bill: Yeah.

Doc: They can see the church. They can see our church—they can see our church—being Christ-like and reaching out to the poor and the oppressed. But they don't want their government doing it! [laughs] Or they don't want their tax dollars going. Which to me is, I'm kinda like I don't know how you separate that. You know?

Yet most participants do separate political commitments from religious ones. The difference for Doc, may be biographical. Doc served in the military in Panama as a doctor. His extended time in Latin America may have had a much bigger impact than the week-long trips experiences of other interviewees.

Deficiency theories outlined in the first part of the chapter suggest, besides a religious or paternalistic obligation, little moral responsibility to help the poor. These deficiency theories buttress beliefs about participants' own cultural, moral, or civilizational superiority and leave little room for

egalitarian engagement with indigent hosts. The fatalistic theories outlined in the middle of the chapter suggest little practical reason to try restructuring society and underscore a distinct hopelessness that denies the impetus to explore alternative social arrangements. The individual religious commitment to God that defines participants' sense of responsibility contributes to the durability of a contradictory belief system. It allows participants to artificially separate religious commitments from their political implications. Based on the results of this research, it is clear that although short-term missions bring privileged people into contact with some of the worlds' poorest, answers to questions about poverty and responsibility to the poor have not revealed evidence that participants seriously question—or even recognize—the social structures that maintain their privilege. Experiences with poverty lead participants to think about poverty in contradictory ways, but they have not led to radical conversions or questioning of belief systems. Instead, participants consistently ignore contradictions, rationalized them through paternalistic or religious justifications, or compartmentalized religious and political beliefs. In this chapter I showed religious beliefs provided the primary impetus for addressing poverty. However, participants' religious beliefs allow participants to romanticize and justify poverty. In the next chapter I will explore, in more detail the how participants understand face-to-face encounters with the poor, how they find meaning in these experiences, how religious beliefs lead them to romanticize the poverty, and discuss how short-term mission trips tend reinforce or intensify existing beliefs.

V

Visceral Responses and Religious Understanding

Although short-term missions do not seem to change previous political perceptions or increase participants' understanding of the structural causes of poverty, participants describe the trips having profound religious and emotional influence. Participants report increased understanding of physical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of poverty. Short-term missions increase *visceral understanding* of poverty as a negative condition. Participants associate face-to-face encounters with the poor with increased empathy, caring, and compassion. However, participants also romanticized poverty. In Chapter Four I noted that religious beliefs affirm obligations to help the poor through evangelism and aid. In this chapter, I explore in detail how religious beliefs also legitimate poverty and deny obligations to alleviate poverty by inverting standard conceptions that poverty is a negative condition and wealth is an advantage. These religious narratives contained explicit or implicit critiques of US culture of consumerism at odds with secular, political narratives that support US cultural hegemony like the ones explored in Chapter Four. Overall, these changes seem to increase contradictory beliefs. Whereas some narratives contain elements that criticize dominant cultural ideologies that blame the poor, other narratives legitimate poverty. In Chapter Six I will explore this tension and show how it has not changed political attitudes, much less radically altered worldviews. Ultimately, it seems, beliefs systems withstand a great deal of inconsistency. In fact, ideologies gain power from incoherence (Gellner 1970; Harding 1998). I will address the power of incoherent ideologies in the Conclusion.

Visceral Understanding: Poverty as a Disadvantage

Short-term mission participants indicate increased understanding of poverty and associate it with increased empathy for the poor. Increased awareness and concern is not so much an intellectual understanding of political, social, economic, or political structures, causes, or consequences as inward feeling and emotional response to the recognition of human suffering. I call it *visceral understanding*: the understanding stems from intense reaction to sensory or surface-level perceptions. Not surprisingly, informants had strong reactions to the stark physical suffering they encountered in urban slums of Mexico and the Zambian bush. Participants were assaulted by the poverty they encountered.

Face-to-face encounters with poor people contributed to participants' understanding of poverty in ways television commercials cannot.

> *Doc:* I think it's when you get out—I mean I would, I can't wait to take my kids. To give them an idea of what the difference is. You know, you said that most people, it's the disparity that's so amazing to them and that's exactly why I would want to take my kids. It's so they can actually visualize that. You know you see it on TV, these kids sitting in mud puddles and stuff like that. But it just doesn't have the same impact as when you're driving down the street and talking to people and stuff like that.
>
> *Katie*: That was one of the first instances that I had really seen a lot of poverty. So I think it changed. It made it a lot more real that this is the way people live. […] That definitely changed the way I thought about it, because there's differences between reading about it and seeing it. That was the first time I'd seen it.

Ben had a similar reaction to the poverty he encountered in Haiti.

Ben: Yeah, I mean I remember like my first thoughts when I got down there was, Whoa it smells. Oh my gosh! That's an open sewer. Wow! People are living right next to the dump, you know? And I kind of heard about that stuff before, maybe seen a minute or two of it on television commercials or whatever; but actually to see it first hand and to become friends with some of the people living there kind of brings it more to reality. And if you have a heart at all for people you realize, these people don't want to live in scum, you know? They're trying hard to, hard to like obtain a *better life*. And I was looking at it like, man if I can do anything to just help them out just a little bit. Like give them an extra step up then that would be cool.

In Chapter Four Ben offered a culture of poverty theory and hypothesized that many poor are unwilling to help themselves: in effect choosing poverty. However, here we see he associates increased empathic understanding of the realities of poverty with realization that people do not want to live in scum. Even for people who know what to expect, encountering human suffering caused empathetic, emotional responses. Roger was not surprised by the poverty he saw on a mission trip to an orphanage near Cozumel, Mexico. Nevertheless, as he got to know the orphans and came understand their situations he was deeply affected.

Bill: A lot of people go and they're like, this totally changed my life. You know, I'm a different person. Did you have that kind of experience?

Roger: No, because I already knew what I was going to see. I'm not saying it didn't affect me. Uh, I sat there and cried several times, thinking about what those orphans were going through but that didn't mean I didn't expect it.

Doc, Katie, Ben, and Roger highlight the difference between being aware of poverty abstractly and the more intimate understanding that come from interacting with people who are poor. However, as Roger

points out, this intensified emotional understanding does not necessarily constitute a life changing experience so much as reinforcement of existing beliefs.

Narratives of poverty as a negative condition were diverse. Descriptions of people living in mud and dirt were common. Jay, for example, refers several times to the "little dirt villages." Others participants like Lisa and Julie share more extreme examples of negative realities of poverty. Julie describes the dangerous working conditions laborers were forced to work under because of their poverty. Lisa recounts how poverty forced Haitian mothers to sell their children. It is clear that close contact with the poor affects participants' by reinforcing or amplifying the belief that poverty is a negative condition.

Witnessing high levels of poverty affected participants but conspicuous disparity threw poverty into stark relief. Becky describes her experience in Haiti.

> *Bill*: So you say there is no middle class?
>
> *Becky*: Um, from what I saw, it doesn't seem so. It was people in the airport walking around with the nicest clothes you've ever seen and then, then the people on the streets and everywhere were living in, you know, no electricity. There was like mansions off on the hillside from a couple rich people and everyone else in really, in slums.

Doc describes being struck by disparity in Panama.

> *Doc*: And poverty, I was you know already aware of that. Was already aware of the different socio-economic groups that are generally in Latin America. I can remember the first time that I ever did encounter it. The thing that struck me the most was how you could [chuckles] have a guy riding a donkey on the same road that some other dude was driving a brand new 750 series BMW on. I was thinking like, jeez oh peez spread the wealth! [laughs] So I guess just the incredible, um,

difference between the haves and the have-nots was just so blatantly obvious. There wasn't this middle class. You kinda had, you know, the extreme poor and then the lower middle class, which would be people like us who worked in clinics and that kind of thing. Then you had the business people who, you know, would be extremely wealthy and people who owned a lot of real estate and that kind of thing.

Participants had strong emotional reactions to extreme economic disparity. They described feeling angry, upset, confused, and helpless. Often, they blamed corrupt governments for the vast inequality they witnessed.

It is also important to note that in the of context interviews, participants used *American* as synonymous with *wealthy*. This language minimizes domestic poverty and normalizes wealth. The phrase "wealthy Americans" or some variation was often referred to during interviews. We might infer from quotes above, a sense that Haitian, Honduran, and Mexican poverty constitutes *real* poverty or *real* suffering. Jenny, for example, describe how even the poor in America were relatively wealthy. Mission trip participants who are wealthy enough to afford international travel may normalize their standard of living and talk about their level of affluence as if it encompassed all Americans.

Although some informants minimized the problem of domestic poverty, a few participants noted the problems they witnessed abroad have made them more sensitive to poverty at home. Yet even for these few, the poverty they encountered abroad had a more intense effect on them. Katie, a public school teacher acknowledged the problem of poverty is not just international.

Katie: And even here, I'm teaching at Jefferson Middle. And this is a side note, but the problem is not just in other countries. The problem is 5 miles away in Knoxville and I don't have any clue how to help those kids and I've worked with them for two years you know?

However, her experience in China had a special influence.

> *Katie:* It made it a lot more real that this is the way people live. […] That definitely changed the way I thought about it, because there's differences between reading about it and seeing it.

Elaine witnessed poverty in Cozumel, Mexico. The poverty had a deep emotional impact on her. In moment of reflection, she admits similar conditions close to home.

> *Elaine:* I think that aspect has been a real change for me: the reality of it all. Yeah my head knew these things before but now I *really* know. And there are places where it would be much worse, I'm sure. But I know, I walked the streets, I'm comfortable walking the streets that are just—[pause]—wondering where on earth the next meal is coming from and little children in the streets asking for money and the whole bit. Which, yeah I could have done that in Appalachia but…[pause] um…

For some participants, poverty in their hometowns appears no more real than the poverty on TV commercials. However, Elaine had lived in Appalachia, worked in the public schools, and been involved with church outreach programs to help poor children and families. I asked what the difference was and why the trip to Mexico had such a big influence.

> *Bill:* Was it easier to do it in Mexico? Like on a short-term mission trip rather than on a domestic—?
>
> *Elaine:* Easier to do? Easier to see the difference? Easier to…? [long pause]
>
> *Bill:* I don't know. Well I guess, I guess, is it more of a stark difference, contrast?
>
> *Elaine:* I think so. And I think maybe another part of it is that, in this country you're sort of conditioned to think, well if those people would work harder they could get out of that poverty.

> [pause] And while I'm not at all sure that that is always true, I think the truth of that not always being true really hit me much harder when I went to Mexico. And again, the contrast in that little island and, you know, this is like an eighth of the island that's even populated. And in that little space of going from that wealth to poverty to jungle. Which, you know, every time I walked it was just… Because we'd fan out on the edge of a few blocks from [the hotel] and they would have fences and all that. But right next door were the fences and thc chickens and all that. But basically we were pretty close to, to the resort area in where we stayed but then we'd walk back and forth every day. And it was just an emotional walk.

Elaine's narrative was unique in that she identified and questioned a common deficiency theory that unwillingness to work is a major cause of poverty. She doubts the veracity of this deficiency theory at home but became more certain it was not true while in Mexico. Elaine's emotional weeklong encounter with stark disparity in Cozumel reinforced her doubts about this deficiency theory more than her years living in Appalachia. Although some of her conclusions were unique, her narrative expresses a common theme that short-term missions evoke strong emotional reactions and a sense of visceral understanding of poverty as a negative condition. It seems that removing participants from normal daily lives and exposing them to poverty abroad elicits a strong emotional reaction. Whereas the exotic and dramatic nature of international mission travel may have special shock value, domestic poverty is often hidden or invizibilized (Galbraith 1998; Ehrenreich 2001).

Participants stressed that their encounters with the poor were meaningful and enlightening cross-cultural experiences. Although most felt like these were self-serving consequences, they connected concrete increased individual awareness of poverty to long-term benefit for indigent hosts. Often, increased awareness is an unintended positive consequence of a mutually beneficial trip:

Becky: The problem with short-term missions is sometimes people going on it—and I mean I'm guilty of it too—it can be kind of a really selfish thing. And kind of something more for our cultural experience and more for our adventure and... But I think at the same time even in people's selfishness people often get there and like are, their hearts are changed about it and they want go back and invest in the area and where they see problems and they are excited about being part of that change I guess. So yeah, I think they take trips selfishly and at the end of the day it's not about the people they are seeing. It's about *their* trip.

Bill: Yeah.

Becky: Half the reason I went on all my mission trips was more for a selfish standpoint.

Bill: So who do you think is the primary beneficiary of short-term mission trips?

Becky: Umm… I think a lot of times ultimately, short-term missions, I think the people on the trip benefit more than the people they are there for. But short-term trips do lead to long-term missions and the long-term missions benefit the community more than the missionaries. So…

Bill: So where do you see the value then in short-term missions?

Becky: I would say the value of short-term missions is um exposing people and educating people so that they either come back or they enact change in their own country… to help change in that country.

Most informants agreed with Becky, that short-term mission trips primarily benefited short-term missionaries themselves but had potential to generate long-term, indirect positive changes for the people they contact. Roger says it succinctly.

Roger: Americans are very, very sheltered and don't understand what the rest of the world's like. So one way shape or form it's worth the investment one time for them to get out. It's great if they can help somebody else at the same time.

Short-term missionaries have strong reactions to the poverty they encounter abroad. Often this poverty is thrown into stark relief by the conspicuous wealth of the elites. It seems that week-long mission experiences can achieve a shock value, that living near domestic poverty. Interviewees find trips meaningful, valuable cultural experiences that help them grow personally and contribute to their visceral understanding of the realities of poverty. Participants narratives of personal, emotional experiences with the poor were less likely to include deficiency theories of poverty than when I asked about their intellectual understanding of the causes of poverty. Strong reactions to first-hand encounters with poor people reflect emotional understanding that poverty is a negative condition.

Religious Understanding: Advantageous Poverty, Burdensome Wealth

Jay: The poorest of the poor are living like kings.

Incongruously, participants consistently romanticized poverty and enumerated its special *advantages*. I have divided these advantages into two conceptual categories: spiritual advantages and cultural advantages. To some degree, the categories are artificially imposed upon participants who generally chafed at questions that implied a distinction between the spiritual world and social world. Participant identified spiritual advantages of poverty consistent with a Christian worldview in which the poor hold special status. Non-spiritual advantages were often enumerated as part of critiques of US materialist culture. Construing poverty as an advantage creates a framework by which wealth

constitutes a burden. In effect, these narratives further support and justify a belief system that minimizes the ethical responsibility to address poverty that I addressed in Chapter Four.

The idea that poverty is a positive condition might be derived from radical New Testament teachings, like the Beatitudes, in which Jesus inverts established orders. In the gospel of *Luke* Jesus says, “blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.” In the gospel of *Mathew*, Jesus turns social hierarchy on its head saying, “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” A founder of the evangelical movement, George Whitefield (1794:189) preached,

> "Not many mighty, not many noble are called." Another saith, "God has chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith." And he who was the Maker and Redeemer of the apostles, assures us, "that it is easier for a camel, (or cable-rope) to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Let not therefore the rich glory in the multitude of their riches.

These sentiments are visible in popular culture as well. In *A River Runs Through It* we hear the preacher echo these sentiments; “The poor without Christ are of all men the most miserable. But the poor with Christ are princes and kings of the earth” (Redford 1992).

Theologians can engage in hermeneutical debates about what Jesus meant by these cryptic lines but this research focuses on how short-term missionaries’ conception of God reveals their intimate moral introspections (Froese and Bader 2010). Although Biblical teachings have been interpreted as implying heavenly rewards for the poor, short-term mission participants clearly articulate the earthly advantages enjoyed by the world’s poorest people. Buddy describes psychic advantages enjoyed by the poor.

> *Buddy:* Really, if you looked at the US versus Latin American countries, versus Africa and you defined it financially, we’re rich. But if you look at—if you really looked at the heart—and looked

at spiritual things, then you would have different definition for it. I've run into some of the poorest people financially that are some of the happiest, richest people possible.

Buddy's comments contain an implicit challenge to material definitions of *rich* and *poor*. He believes standard economic conceptions of wealth are too narrow. For participants, limited definitions of financial wealth fail to measure the spiritual dividends of poverty. Participants consistently cite spiritual benefits stemming from increased reliance on God.

Buddy: Maybe that's, maybe that's what's supposed to be normal. We're supposed to rely on God to meet our needs every day.

Earlier in the interview Buddy described the emotional effect of being a new father while meeting hungry children in Columbia. That high levels of poverty forced children to starve and even led mothers to abandon babies in dumpsters appalled him. However, in a different context he offers a different analysis. In religious terms, he normalizes and justifies poverty. His analysis, that "*we"* are supposed to rely on God for "*our"* daily needs, rings hollow from the mouth of an investment-banking executive. Buddy's ability to hold onto a religious belief that one should live in poverty and simultaneously operate on a daily basis as an investment banker highlights participants' high tolerance for contradictory beliefs.

When I asked Michelle to clarify the relationship between poverty and spirituality she explained that poverty can increase reliance on God and result in a more intimate connection.

Bill: So you mentioned poor people have a greater reliance on God. What do you think about the relationship between money, or the lack thereof, and spirituality?

Michelle: Hmm.

Bill: Or something?

Michelle: OK. Umm. Money makes day-to-day life a lot easier. You can buy groceries. You can buy gas. You can buy medical care. You can buy clean water. You can buy a roof over your head. It makes every day living much easier. I think that it can become an easy idol for people. It is very easy to idolize people that have, not just a house, but a *beautiful* house and not just clothes, but *beautiful* clothes.

Bill: Yeah. We live in Sequoyah Hills.

Michelle: Exactly! [laughs] I think like all good things it can become not good when you give it too much importance… too much whatever. I don't think it's necessarily a larger barrier to spirituality. I think it's just something else that can become a barrier like anything. Like, you know?

Bill: Do you think our lives are better because of the money we have?

Michelle: No. I would say easier. I wouldn't say better. And I think it all goes back to what your definition of a standard of living is. Ours is obviously higher but that doesn't make it *better* than those in Belize because let's be honest the lowest the temperature gets is like fifty and that sounds great to me. And it's sunny ninety-nine days out of the year. There are different trade offs. Like, "Oh you have lots of money therefore you *are* more spiritual." Its more of like, its another way that God can use, its another tool God can use to like show you your dependence on him. Because like, we grew a garden two years ago. It was a huge garden and we all invested in it and there was a bunch of people that invested in it and it was one of those things where we put in each tons of hours. And ultimately we were like, if it doesn't rain, we're not going to have anything to show for this because we can't afford the water bill to keep this huge garden up. So it was like, "this is really cool." We're having to like literally depend on God for rain so we will have something to show for all our work. And so like, it was cool because that is a perspective we don't get a lot of times.

Michelle is compassionate and intelligent but did not contextualize her experience. First, she confuses wanting access to shelter, basic medical care, and food security with idolizing material positions. Second, if her garden failed, she would not go hungry. This is an important distinction that obfuscates a crucial difference between her "dependence" and the dependence of poor people she references. Her narrative hides her privilege and romanticizes the poverty that puts people at risk. Caleb also explained how people suffering from food insecurity enjoy spiritual advantages he does not.

> *Caleb:* In a lot of ways they have, like they're living for their daily bread. And they're praying like Lord, like provide this daily bread. And that's something that I realistically will never experience just praying for daily food. And I think faith. And just the joy that they have in their life. I think I can learn a lot from that.

Like Michelle and others, Caleb finds epistemic value in the lived experience of the poor (and rightly so!). Indeed, valuable insights have come from liberation theology (Cardinal 1976; Bonino 1981; Gutierrez 1983; Boff and Boff 1987) and participatory research models (Petras and Porpora 1993) that prioritize the experiences, knowledge, and worldview of the poor. However, short-term missionaries are poorly equipped to understand the poor people they encounter. The political and social locations of wealthy, white, US missionaries constitute a particular standpoint from which participants interpret the world (Harding 1998). The perspectives, language, assumptions, knowledge systems, and experiences determined by their positions in cultural, social, and economic hierarchies constitute a major epistemological hurdle that cannot be cleared by a week-long mission trip (Harding 1998; Livermore 2006).

After enumerating several advantages of being poor, Caleb goes on to talk about how short-term trips have influenced his beliefs about poverty and his own privilege. During this discussion he introduced the related idea that wealth is a burden.

Bill: So back to that whole thing with poverty and "its not that simple." Has your view of poverty changed at all after…?

Caleb: I think something that has kind of changed—and this is not to bash my dad, but he was like, [deepening his voice] "you could have been born somewhere else and been poor." And I've almost kind of changed that to like, well if you're looking at it as like I have a lot of *things*, I guess I am fortunate because I have a lot of things. But as a Christian, what makes my situation like eternally valued over like some poor person's position. I'm almost like, sometimes I'm like, is this wealthy life that I have more of a hindrance sometimes? So that's just how a perspective that I've had has changed. Well I guess I am lucky in a lot of ways but at the same time, I'm like maybe I would have been more lucky if I was born into a, not an impoverished family but maybe a more average family in South America.

Bill: So you think your life could be better if that were the case?

Caleb: Maybe I would be more joyful and happy. I've had this thought lately of like, just like, the very wealthy elite of this world, like there are so many options that they have in their life. So many decisions to make constantly because they can do almost anything and how those decisions create a lot of like unrest, unhappiness.

For Caleb wealth and opportunity constitute spiritual barriers that, in addition, can adversely affect emotional wellbeing. Interviewees described the burden of wealth extending beyond spiritual matters. In Chapter Four Caleb mildly endorsed classic modernization theories that support the legitimacy of US cultural hegemony and Western economic development. However, in the lines above he expresses beliefs that undermine Western, materialist assumptions about what constitutes prosperity and wellbeing.

When participants romanticized poverty it was often embedded in narratives that included explicit or implicit religiously based critiques of wealth, greed, and US culture. Narratives revealed values at odds with the ethnocentric, political, and individualistic values discussed in Chapter Four. The contradictory narratives reflect a schizophrenic US culture that cherishes religious values of generosity and selflessness but enshrines individualistic greed as social virtue (Rand 1964; Wuthnow 1994). Jay discussed the cultural benefits of poverty.

Bill: Like, what do you think about that lifestyle though? It's like, so you said, they're not living in skyscrapers and stuff like that. I mean, do you think? [pause] I don't know.

Jay: Like its almost better?

Bill: I question that because in some ways it seems like it might be; because you said they seem really happy.

Jay: Yeah! Exactly.

Bill: Because in some ways I feel like it might be. So it's like, what do you do with that?

Jay: Exactly. They are happy people. They smile a lot. They laugh a lot. You know, they're joking a lot. You know, then you look at some of the unhappiest people and it's the richest people, you know and everything. So of course, I think that does have a lot to do with it. You know, it's simpler. It is slower. You're not—they're not having anxiety. And, you know, having to eat every meal in the car while their driving somewhere else.

Bill: Yeah. Have you seen the statistics on that?

Jay: Nuh-uh.

Bill: Oh man. I have a book that talks about food and it basically it talks about, ah—its something crazy—like, something like 25% of all meals in America are eaten in the car.

Jay: While driving?

Bill: It's insane.

Jay: It ruins us. I do it, you know. Do it all the time. It's just difficult. I think they are… with money comes worry and while you do get, you get these comforts and pleasure and you get time to relax because we don't have to grow our own food. We can go to Earth Fare and feel really good about the organic *shit* that we're buying.

Bill: Exactly. [chuckle]

Jay: But like, we miss out on the simple, kind of the simple pleasures sometimes because we just don't think about and we don't even notice them anymore. And these people have nothing else but time to notice them and, you know, think about it.

For harried Americans it may be tempting to romanticize indigent lifestyles as slower, simpler ways of living. My dialogue with Jay shows how short-term mission participants construct narratives that highlight advantages of poverty in relation to perceived deficiencies in US culture.

The idea that wealth constitutes a spiritual burden that negatively affects US culture in ways that contribute to consumerist values, high stress, and greed was a common theme. I asked participants how they reconciled their own wealth with the belief that wealth constitutes a spiritual burden. A fair question is, why not get rid of it? Buddy feels conflicted and describes his dilemma this way.

Buddy: I mean so, it's a spiritual high but you, you really do… It just always leads me to this thing where OK, in this country wealth doesn't have to be bad but wealth has always been the thing

that has the number one potential to stand in the way of my relationship with God. Because we find our security in our wealth and whenever I go to these places always come back with this battle of like, OK what if God took away all this wealth? Then would I, like these other people, like I know I would, but you wrestle with OK would I with no hesitation still praise God for everything he has given me if he took it all away?

Likewise, Ben's answer highlights how precarious and awkward it is to *sincerely* believe poverty is a religious virtue while *sincerely* enjoying his stuff. Ben struggles to reconcile the belief that wealth is a serious burden and his unwillingness to give it up.

Ben: Yeah. It's like I know I should get rid of things in my life that are prohibiting me from enjoying, uh, a good relationship with my Father [God]. But I don't always know what those things are and I also don't know, is that *everything* that I have? Like when He [Jesus] tells the guy to sell everything and follow him. Like is that, is that a rule we are all supposed to do? I, I don't think it is but you kind of read it and go, oh my gosh is that what I'm supposed to do too? But, we're supposed to be good stewards I know of things we have and what we have been given, you know? Like for me one of those things that I have to cultivate is, you're going to be somebody who can aid people in a medical way. Because it has been on my heart for years. So 'A' you have to go to medical school to do that. So currently I cannot go live my life somewhere and invest permanently there yet, you know?

Bill: Yeah.

Ben: But I know when I get up there, like, medical school will be my mission field for four years.

Bill: Yeah.

Ben: I know I'm not really saying anything specific but these are the things I have wrestled with since I've gotten back.

Ben believes God is calling him to be a physician. Although choosing to attend medical school is not generally a commitment to a life of poverty, Ben explains that he feels that he must be open to giving up his wealth if God asks him to. This is a scary prospect for Ben. He met a long-term missionary who did just that: he obeyed an audible voice to leave his life in the United States and move to Haiti to start a medical clinic.

Ben: His experience, his story makes you scared to death to pray, lead me wherever, you know. But he's not regretting going down there, so why should that be a scary thing to pray? I think it shouldn't be scary to know that God will do something with that because I know his heart for people is real. It's like if pray something like that, he's gonna lead me somewhere and there's no guarantee that you're gonna have perfect health or safety or even life. There's no guarantee, but because of my human instinct to stay alive and eat good food, that's terrifying. But I think allowing yourself to be so open to the lord's leading is, is the most…uh… the most freeing wonderful thing you could do you know?

Bill: Mm hmm

Ben: I don't think any of the apostles ever regretted their decision even though some of them lost their lives. […] When the Lord obviously speaks to you or when it's that dramatic or like, *undeniable*, then you're a fool to not listen. But I wouldn't want to, like, convince myself of something because I convinced myself of something you know? I guess in all of it we just have to make sure that like if he does happen to call us somewhere like that, then go! But um I think that, I guess, it may just be me thinking, but I guess that my purpose is to follow him and listen to him and pray for him to lead me. And you know, just do what he says.

Ben's justification was typical. He maintains that so long as he is *willing* to give up his comfortable lifestyle at a later date in an answer to God's calling, then he is justified enjoying it now. Many discussions about wealth had to do with a particular passage from the gospel of *Mark*.

> As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
>
> "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"
>
> "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."
>
> Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
>
> At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.
>
> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (NSV 10:17-25)

My conversation with Roger revealed how short-term participants deal with the obvious tension for wealthy people reading this passage.

> *Roger*: … [The poor people in Mexico] don't need a flat screen TV.
>
> *Bill*: Do you? [I ask quietly. There is quite large flat screen facing us.]

Roger: [Pause] Do I need it? No. Do I think I have a responsibility to not have anything and give it to everybody else? Na, I don't think that either. I don't see that, even when Jesus told the young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, it wasn't because he was telling everybody to do that. It was because he knew the young ruler had a problem with his riches. He didn't turn around and tell everybody that he came in contact with was to sell everything and give it to the poor.

Bill: Yeah, that's a tough passage to deal with. [long silence]

Roger: But you know, there's a line. To follow up with your question, there is a line in there somewhere though.

Roger went on to explain that even if not all Christians are called to give up everything, they should be generous and make some financial sacrifices. According to Roger, for someone making a million dollars a year, "to live on 200,000 a year is pretty darn good sacrifice." Many participants interpret difficult passages like the one above as meaning they should be *willing* to give up their wealth. Obviously, that is much different than interpreting it to mean they should actually give it up. In the face of such self-serving interpretations, it would be easy to accuse interviewees of being insincere. However, as Harding (1998) points out, it is difficult for anyone to critically examine the ideas that support the legitimacy of one's favorable circumstances.

Short-term missionaries consistently shared beliefs that justified the wealth they enjoyed and sooths feelings of upper-class guilt. For example, Lisa cited an ethical responsibility for some wealthy elites to keep their money so they can evangelize people of the same class:

Lisa: I think it's definitely easy to, like, deal with [feelings of] guilt. But I think at the same time, God put me in this place for a reason and like my ultimate purpose is to do his ministry here and I

> can minister to middle-class neighborhood because I'm middle class. And I think some people who are upper-class can feel guilty. But God put them there because they can reach people who are upper-class.

Obviously, ideology that assuages upper-class guilt serves the dominant class. By downplaying and, at times, inverting their privileged status, short-term missionaries operate within a conceptual framework that minimizes and individualizes responsibility to stiff biblical injunctions to care for the poor.

Biblical teachings, in many ways, privilege the status of the poor. There are stiff injunctions to care for the poor. Jesus preached about the ills of greed and wealth. Short-term missionaries often use these teachings to invert standard conceptions of poverty as a disadvantage and wealth as an advantage. Highlighting the special benefits of poverty and the pitfalls of wealth, short-term missionaries create narratives in which they are the disadvantaged. This narrative conflicts with interviewees own descriptions about the negative effects of poverty. The inherent critique of US culture and materialist values also conflicts with many of the political beliefs explored in Chapter Four. Ultimately, narratives that flip standard conceptions of wealth and poverty provide little reason to seriously address problems associated with poverty. The religious nature of the trips and the consistent justification of poverty and wealth supports research that suggest religion and charity are conservative forces that reinforce the status quo and legitimate existing hierarchies (Thompson 1974; Bourdieu 1986; Colby and Dennet 1995; Moreton 2009; Domke Domke and Coe 2010).

Although participants appear deeply emotionally affected by the negative physical effects of poverty they encounter abroad, they consistently identify its spiritual advantages. Informants report increased awareness of poverty. In many ways, thinking about short-term mission trips leads to conflicting emotions and beliefs about poverty and wealth. However, it is clear the tension has not led to radical changes in most short-term mission participants. Curiously, many participants and popular

discourse on short-term missions suggest participants will return home changed. In the next chapter I will explore the shift in perspective participants associated with short-term mission experiences.

VI

Change

Do short-term mission trips transform the people that go? Popular discourse suggests they do. Researchers agree there are measurable affects (Beers 1999, Priest 2006, Kirby 1995, Wilson 1999; Park 2008, Priest 2008; Ver Beek 2008; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009). How do these trips change the people that go? It is a difficult question and one I posed to interviewees. McAdams (1988) asked a similar question to Freedom Summer volunteers. That watershed event figured prominently in stories volunteers told about themselves and their political development. McAdams' research highlights the transformative power of collective experiences. When I asked short-term mission participants this question, I received a broad range of answers. Clearly, short-term missions have not transformed participants to the same extent as was experienced at Freedom Summer. Whereas civil rights activism radicalized participants, missionary work seems to reinforce existing beliefs. However, like Freedom Summer, short-term missions are unique, meaningful, collective experiences that figure prominently in the stories participants tell about themselves. They are sacred markers in the sense that they are clearly demarcated, connected with God, and differ dramatically from profane daily life. It seems they are symbolically significant events that serve as markers in stories that reflect how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by others.

Answering questions about how short-term missions influence participants is difficult for participants and researchers alike. How difficult is it to reflect on events in our own lives and say X event changed my life in A, B, C ways? Even when we say X event resulted in A, B, C changes, the equation seems too simplistic. After all, our identities and worldviews are shaped by a lifetime of experiences with family, school, friends, churches, etc (Nepstad 2004a). To isolate a single event as the

locus of change is difficult. Nevertheless, we often tell stories about ourselves that are framed in narrative terms (Wuthnow 2008). However, we rarely tell these stories in full or explicitly. Narratives often include symbolic language with shared meanings that can serve a rhetorical function, act as communicative shorthand, or express emotions. Major events can clearly demarcate shifts in biographical trajectory, establish an order, and help people make sense of life. Graduations, weddings, deaths, break-ups, engagements are major life events with shared cultural meanings. For churchgoers, going on a mission is a major event that may figure prominently in narratives of moral or spiritual journeys. However, individuals seldom know what guides their behaviors and thoughts. Often people adopt narratives they pick up from classes, political discourse, magazines, books, sermons, or peers (Wuthnow 2008). These narratives link people with social groups and connect them to moral meanings. Individual meanings are inseparable from shared ones. Although it may be impossible to determine exactly what impact these trips have on participants, understanding how participants understand the impact of the trips have is a revealing area of research.

My mission trips experiences in Honduras figure prominently in the way I understand my own moral, political, and religious development. As an undergraduate I was a member of the Young Republican club. Individualistic, conservative, and libertarian ideas dominated much of my thinking about politics and economics. At home these ideologies made intuitive sense. However, in Honduras I found my worldview unable to adequately answer questions about poverty and the possibilities for social change. Witnessing poverty in another country, talking to people, and developing relationships with my hosts had a profound impact that altered the trajectory of my life. I returned often to Honduras and eventually enrolled in graduate school. I have read history, social theory, economic theory, political theory, taken classes in research methods, and had conversations with academics, friends, preachers, and family. All of this has shaped my views on politics, economics, and religion. But in a very real way,

my conversion started with the mission trip I took six years ago. Although the mission trip had a big impact on me, they do not produce radical changes in most participants.

My research suggests the influence of mission trips is small and changes are primarily limited to moral and religious beliefs. The trips do not change participants so much as they galvanize existing religious beliefs and justify existing social economic hierarchies. Often, intensification of religious or moral beliefs contradicted political beliefs or empathic beliefs derived from lived encounters with the poor. However, these contradictions do not appear to weaken the strength of dominant ideologies or lead participants to seriously question the legitimacy of the social arrangements they benefit from. Ultimately, small temporary changes have little impact on existing beliefs systems, belief systems that can apparently withstand a great deal of contradiction.

Pinpointing or measuring short-term mission influence on participants' beliefs is difficult as disparate findings from quantitative and qualitative studies of short-term missions suggest. Ben discussed the difficulty of assessing how the trip affected him.

Bill: So do you think you could honestly say in some way that that experience changed your life?

Ben: Yeah. I mean it, it changed my life in the sense that everything changes my life. Like anything would.

Bill: Right.

Ben: Specifically it changed it to… I mean my first thought when I wanted to go into medicine—which, you know, I'll be starting med school this August—is sweet! I want to spend at least like a month a year like doing important stuff for people that can't, that can't reimburse me.

Of course, there remains a question of whether or not Ben will follow through on his desire to commit significant resources, professional skills, and time. A common theme among the young adults I interviewed was that short-term mission experience had an impact on their career decisions.

> *Michelle*: Um. It showed me that I definitely care. Well for me, being in a medical profession, I definitely care more about giving medical care for the poor than giving plastic surgery to old women. Like, I think that [sighs] it, it made me realize that I want my work to be *meaningful* in life. And that the mission field isn't just necessarily in Mexico, or Belize, or South America, it's *wherever* you are. And I really learned that in Belize.

Lisa describes how her trip to Haiti has affected her career plans.

> *Bill:* Has it changed your life?
>
> *Lisa:* I think it has mainly changed after going to Haiti, I have learned that I think God designed me to work and reach out to kids who are in lower income. I just love to love on kids who need to be loved and are in bad family situations. And so in my internship last semester I worked with kids who had been through abuse and neglect, and I loved it. I'm going to be a teacher now with lower income kids. So I think that in a sense—short-term mission, like I hope that it changed. […] But overall it just kind of pointed me to like what I'm passionate about.

Perhaps in a very real way, short-term missions have influenced Ben, Michelle, and Lisa's career paths. But Lisa's answer to my follow-up question suggests connections aren't always clear.

> *Bill:* So you think you might not have been interested in working with lower income kids if you hadn't?
>
> *Lisa:* Um, I mean not necessarily, I think that, I just remember specifically being with those boys who were orphans. It just showed me that is, something that makes me so excited. And also, like,

so sad. I think I would have learned it another way too. That just happened to be the timing I guess.

Understandably, Lisa was having difficulty pinpointing how specific life experiences have impacted the course of her life. Though her short-term mission experience affected her, the effect seems to have been to reinforce her commitment to something she already wanted to do.

Interviewees described how mission trip experiences have made them more grateful for the wealth they enjoy. Elaine talked about how her short-term mission experience had an impact on her worldview.

Elaine: I think my view of who I am has changed because I can look around and I can see people in lots bigger houses and having lots more things and much nicer vacations and whatever else. And yet my view of myself is that, I am so wealthy. And really my head knew that, buy you know, it's just very real to me now. And the other thing is, I see myself, my place in the world as very, very different.

Carl describes a shift in his normative reference point.

Carl: Well I think the most obvious change, the most dramatic change is, um, is just the perspective. It's a lot easier to look at things in your own life and in your own culture as being normal as what everybody has if that's all you've ever seen. Even if you've seen, if you're aware of other situations from pictures, articles, news, media, all of that its easy to really deep down think that you're just normal. Whereas if you interact with somebody for a week or more, with a family that really doesn't know where their next meal is going to come from or a group of children who have never met their parents, um. And do have to rely on the benevolence of other people to survive, not just because it's their… you know, it shines a whole new light on things.

Buddy describes a similar experience. He says his mission trip changed his outlook on life.

> *Buddy*: It's changed my worldview *immensely*. I mean I read a book now that's called *Operation World* that every day you pray for a different part of the world. I wouldn't be doing that if hadn't gone to Nicaragua and Columbia and places and realized that OK, these other people are people, like us. And they, you know, you talk about the stuff we worry about and the stuff we stress about. The stuff they stress about it *real* stuff. They stress about where are they gonna eat. I know how if feel when I get hungry. And I've never really been hungry.

Buddy also says that his experiences abroad have made him want to adopt a child from a poor country. Other participants cite the desire to take their children on short-term mission trips or to continue to support overseas missions. Participants all described how mission trips made them more aware and thankful for the things they have. Perhaps this is appropriate response but it certainly does not constitute a radical shift in worldview.

Even these mild perspective alterations are often only temporary. As I discussed in Chapter Three, interviews offered participants the chance reflect on their beliefs, values, and mission experiences in ways they do not do in their daily lives. Buddy admits the immense changes he described above can be short-lived.

> *Buddy*: We sink back into our—especially when the TV gets turned back on and we, we its in our nature first of all as humans. And then next of all it's in our culture that we're drawn back into this stuff. And it's all distractions. Yes, it it you know, as much as I'd like to think I'll never turn the TV on again. I don't want to turn the TV on again. I mean we get drawn back into our nature and out culture and it all just happens. For me, I guess the way that I want to offset that is to continually go.

Ben offers a similar explanation.

> *Ben*: And not that it's easy to maintain that different perspective forever just going somewhere for a week. Which I think is one of the benefits of going on semi-annual or regularly scheduled trips, is that group of people maintains that perspective.

Ben and Buddy's explanations highlight the difficulty individuals have adopting new beliefs in the absence of sustained and warm interaction with social groups espousing alternative views (Lofland 1966). Participants were remarkably reflexive about the temporary impact these trips have on their outlook, attitudes, and behavior. Katie describes short-lived effects of her mountaintop experience.

> *Katie*: In the short-term, I think it affected me a lot more than in the long-term. I didn't see it, it was kind of like, I was really intense for like, you know, people have those highs after they go on a mission trip. Like I'm going to change the world, I'm going to go back for years. You know, definitely, I don't know. I mean, I'm probably saying the typical things. It definitely makes you realize what you have more.

Results from my qualitative interviews support Ver Beek's (2006) assessment of quantitative research that demonstrates the effects of short-term trips are temporary.

The ripple effects of my first short-term mission trip six years ago have spread beyond that initial experience. This is probably true for most participants, even if the effects dissipate over time. My experience and radical change is seems atypical and may be related to several factors. When I returned to Honduras to teach in a rural area without access to Internet I was removed from my peer group. The length of time I spent in Honduras was much greater than the average eight-day trip. Learning to speak Spanish helped me communicate, understand, and develop new relationships outside of my existing social group. I have felt lasting effects from my encounter with poverty.

Although participants appear deeply emotionally affected by the poverty they encounter abroad the changes seem to be slight and temporary. Informants report increased awareness of poverty. They also say trips give them a greater perspective on the world that involves appreciating the lives they enjoy at home. In other ways, thinking about short-term mission trips leads to conflicting emotions and beliefs about poverty and wealth. However, even these slight changes do not appear to last long in the absence of connections to social groups advocating an alternative worldview. Short-term mission trips seem to have little effect on participants beyond amplifying existing beliefs and producing some level of contradictory consciousness. Perhaps the trips are transformative but they do not seem to produce transformations that lead participants to question things they already believe. Although this may be the goal of sending organizations, amplifying existing beliefs and values in ways that support the status quo mitigates the possibility that short-term missionaries are learning much from their hosts whose beliefs come from a radically different cultural, class, and ethnic perspectives.

VII

Conclusions

Popular discourse assumes short-term mission trips are life changing but my research suggests such expectations are oversimplified and inaccurate. Exposing volunteers to structurally induced suffering, grinding poverty, and injustice evokes strong emotional reactions but fails to do much more than nudge beliefs and ways of thinking. In many ways, participants walk away from mission trips with what they came. The absence of change contrasts with influence of other intense experiences that have been catalysts of radical transformation. McAdam (1988) documents the remarkable Freedom Summer campaign. Unrelieved fear, violence, and segregationist terrorism seared the consciousness of idealistic Northern college students and left them dramatically transformed. Likewise, Nepstad (2004) researched the human side of the Central America solidarity movement and found participants radically changed. Short-term solidarity trips to Central America played a key role in a movement that turned mild missionaries into radical political activists. Witness for Peace trips brought volunteers face-to-face with suffering caused by a US-sponsored war, and the experiences elicited visceral reactions along with feelings of outrage, joy, shame, compassion, and hope. Participants and organizers channeled the energy of strong emotional responses into political action. The influence of short-term mission experiences pales in comparison. Though mission trips are meaningful, even sacred, life markers (Howell and Dorr 2007), they do not radically transform participants, nor do they cause participants to seriously question their beliefs.

There are several major differences between short-term missions and the events McAdams (1988) and Nepstad (2004a) describe. Despite some similarities, biographical and structural differences distinguish the Freedom Summer campaign and the Central America solidarity movement from

international Christian short-term missions and explain disparate outcomes. Biographically, the Left-leaning elite Northern liberal college students participating in Freedom Summer are very different than the average short-term missionary. However, Central American solidarity organizations like Witness for Peace targeted mainstream, regular churchgoers that are probably not so different than the average short-term participant. The intentions of the movement organizers and participants explain different outcomes.

The Freedom Summer campaign and the Central American solidarity movement had expressly political motivations absent from short-term missions. Organizers structured the trips in such a way as to produce radical responses. According the people I interviewed, short-term mission organizers tended to ignore, deny, or downplay the political explanations, intentions, and implications of their work. It seems short-term mission participants are left to come to their own political conclusions about the poverty they encounter.

> *Bill*: Did they ever talk about why? Like, why those people were so poor? Or anything like that?
>
> *Jenny*: No. They did not do a good job of educating us as like young, high school students as to why it was like that. And, um, so that was kind of… it was just the way it was.
>
> *Bill*: Yeah. I've found that a lot.
>
> *Jenny*: Yeah. It would be nice to know how the country works and why its so poor and if it's always gonna be that way and that type of thing.

Most interviewees indicated they received little education about the country they were visiting. Most also expressed interest in learning more about the political economic causes for the poverty they encountered abroad.

Bill: Do you think short-term missions have any role or any chance or even any responsibility to address this history of oppression?

Michelle: Hmm. I think it would be kind of cool if they did. If you could educate people before they went on mission trips about the economics of the area—you know what? That is what needs to happen on short-term mission trips! You need to educate them about the economy of the area. Kind of like *why*. Address the factors that need to change. Maybe even just have brainstorming session about how to change the economy of the area. Oh, this is different part of the world and this is how this part of the world operates. I *like* that idea! That would give people so much more perspective.

The intentions and motivations that underlie short-term mission trips, perhaps more than participants' biographies, result in reductionist thinking about the complex realities they encounter. They reinforce religious commitments to care for the poor without addressing the political implications of such care. The first step of the process model of conversion suggests major events like short-term missions can precipitate a crisis unexplainable by one's existing belief system (Lofland 1966; Bankston 1981; Snow and Machalek 1984). However, for short-term missionaries who find socially unjust conditions incompatible with existing worldviews and worn explanations of poverty, short-term trips offer no clear alternative meaning system or explanation. In the absence of other interpretive schema, even participants seeking to resolve tensions use their individualistic and religious values to interpret their experiences. In part, this explains why critical reflection and transformation often eludes participants.

Much of the focus of short-term missionaries is on missionaries themselves rather than the people or places they visit. Narratives often revealed more emphasis on strengthening intra-group bonds than bonding with indigent hosts. I asked Michelle what appealed to her about going on a mission trip.

Michelle: It was like, [pause] it was… time to spend with my friends in youth group. Like it sounds so horrible when the purpose of it was so much greater. Or was supposed to be so much greater. I guess I didn't understand, like my view of missions, I didn't have one really. And it was me feeling that out, kind of.

Doc described the enjoyable intra-group bonds developed between missionary football fans.

Doc: And of course, [chuckle] what we always love to do, is I go with a group that has people from Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi. And here I am, you know, from Tennessee. I told 'em one day, we were driving down one of the dirt roads and there was like four of us. One of us was UT one was from Georgia, one was from Louisiana, one was from Mississippi. I said man this would make a great SEC commercial. [laughing]

Bill: That's funny [laughing]

Doc: At football time, you know? All of us sitting in a truck doing mission work.

Carl described the experience as being similar to that of a summer camp.

Carl: It was really fun just like getting to play basketball and hanging out with some of my friends and hang out together. And I talked later to other people about short-term mission trips. And they've kind of said that the short term mission trip has somewhat of replaced like the camp experience—of the kind of a little bit of time ago—so instead of going to camp for a couple weeks during the summer, you go on a short-term mission trip.

The lack of focus I found on the poor people they intended to help, is also reflected in missiological research on short-term missions which focuses almost exclusively on mission participants and ignores the effect of short-term missions on indigent hosts (Priest 2006). Similarly, Howell (2009) finds participants minimize contextual specificity of the trip's destination in favor of a generic short-term

mission experience. Although one of the purported benefits of short-term missions is increased perspective and cultural sensitivity, the intent to reinforce religious commitments and social bonds within the group is not conducive to participants developing critical perspectives about the shared beliefs of the same group.

There are practical barriers to understanding as well. Most participants had only limited language skills with which to communicate with indigent hosts. Many interviewees relied on translators or non-verbal communication. The short-duration of the trips—typically less than two weeks—may also explain their limited influence (Wuthnow 2008). After the trips, participants return home to strong affective bonds of communities, families, and churches. Maintaining strong social ties suggests little reason to expect participants to become resocialized by a some group espousing alternative meaning systems (Lofland et al 1966).

Inherent paternalism exposes deep cultural barriers, unequal power relationships, and suggests intellectual stagnation that encourages shallow and self-serving ways of thinking. Paternalism is a disposition that combines benevolence with an assumption of superiority (Park 2008). In Chapter Four I showed that participants, as missionaries, accept their role as bringing something of spiritual and material worth to indigent hosts. The hosts role is to be the receptacle of the privileged group's valuable offering. In a sense, the hosts become generic objects of participants' moralistic actions and religious beliefs. Although motivations included some mix of curiosity, social pressure, altruism, fellowship, spiritual growth, and adventurousness, interviewees cited evangelism as the primary purpose of short-term trips. Although some participants eschewed the term evangelism and its paternalistic overtones, they made it clear their primary purpose was to share their interpretation of the Christian gospel either through words or actions. Many believed they were being called to share their many blessings with the poor. Often uninvited guests, they assumed the poor had spiritual needs and

believed they understood how they should meet those needs. Even in Latin America where vast majorities identify as Christian (Wuthnow 2008), many of the Protestant missionaries I interviewed viewed Latin American Catholic faith was inauthentic or deficient.

> *Michelle*: It's the whole need for the gospel in those areas. I don't know. Like in strong Catholic countries, like Latin American ones are, it's like this, either they don't really follow that or believe it or they do and it's more like idol worship I feel like.

Privileged missionaries might leverage access to food and other resources as a tool to coerce the poor to convert. We might think of short-term missionaries offering the Bible in one hand and holding aid in the other. Historically, missionaries often offered the Bible and while holding a sword. Although aid may be preferable to the sword, both forms of evangelism are coercive in the sense they take advantage of power differences. Indeed, for some 1 billion people in hunger has a sharp edge (Albritton 2009). As Smilde (2007) finds, people often choose religions based on non-spiritual benefits. Evangelists enjoy a level of power derived from social inequality and use it to influence others' beliefs. They feel justified by the belief they have access to ultimate truth. Short-term mission experiences are distinct from other experiences like Freedom Summer and the Latin American solidarity movement because the point of evangelism is to change the beliefs of others, not change the beliefs of participants through egalitarian enagement. In fact, missiologists explicitly concerned when missionaries *go native*. Decker (2008) enumerates the dangerous consequences associated with losing familiar symbols of social intercourse during cultural transition that results in a disorienting experience he calls *disequilibration*. What Decker identifies as a negative state of disorientation, others might call *personal growth*. Deep paternalistic and ethnocentric dispositions inherent in evangelical activity constitute a commitment to existing values and impede participants' ability, motivation, and willingness to question their assumptions.

Participants' social position constitutes a major barrier to critical examination and reflection as well. Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out most never realize the extent beliefs, values, and norms are shaped by the culture they live in. In order to understand the poor people they encounter, participants would have to question the knowledge systems, values, assumptions and biases that they benefit from (Harding 1998). Sociologists have argued that deep understanding requires both autobiographical understanding and an ability to understand others within the context of history (Schwandt 1999). Weber (1968) used the concept, *verstehen*, to explain the emotional, psychic identification required to understand others. Paradoxically, local knowledge systems constitute both the tools and prison houses of belief (Harding 1998). In chapter Four, I showed how short-term mission participants employ deficiency theories to explain and justify poverty. Indeed, philanthropic doctrines have historically traced the cause of poverty to moral defects (Piven and Cloward 1971). Such degradations evoke images of the shamed able-bodied pauper. Conversely, the benevolent philanthropy of elites, justifies wealth and high social rank (Thompson 1974; Heyrman 1982). These moral justifications serve economic interests and ensure the wealthy can take comfort not only in their godliness but in their profits as well (Piven and Cloward 1971; Galbraith 2002; Magee and Galinsky 2008). For short-term missionaries, justifying the status quo and allows them to continue living relatively comfortable daily lives.

Participants' justifications of existing social structures are not cold, calculating cognitions. Nor are they are insincere. Instead, we should understand them as stories based in shared myths and shared meanings meant to show how the story-tellers are good, just, and deserving (Wuthnow 2008). Personal narratives reveal how individuals understand themselves as well as how our culture understands individuals. In this sense, participant narratives reveal as much about deep, shared cultural, religious, and political beliefs as personal ones.

Although short-term missions do not radically transform participants, they are relevant to the way people think about issues of poverty, wealth, responsibility to the poor, and economic behavior. They promote contradictory beliefs within participants that reflect contradictory cultural values. In Chapter Four I showed how short-term missionaries thought about their experiences in ways that blame the poor and reinforce assumptions about cultural hegemony of the United States. However, in Chapter Five I show how many participants feel trapped in a spiral of materialist consumerism. Narratives relate short-term mission experiences to beliefs that there is something false and empty about US consumer culture. These beliefs, like the paradox between intense individualism and deep altruism reflect incongruent shared myths (Wuthnow 2008).

Many of these contradictions fall along either side of the line dividing political and religious beliefs. For example, in Chapter Four I describe how participants' short-term mission experiences intensify religious commitments to aid the poor while undermining political ones. The religious nature of missions reinforces the edges of mental compartments. Religion distinguishes between that which is pure and that which is contaminated (Durkheim 1912; Gellner 1974; Zerubavel 1997). Religious thinking divides the world into two mutually exclusive compartments (Zerubavel 1997) that Durkheim (1912) identified as the sacred and profane. Participants maintained cognitive partitions between sacred beliefs about wealth, poverty, and materialism that contrasted sharply with the consumerist values reflected in political beliefs and the realities of profane daily life. This separation, explains how Buddy, for example, can believe he should live a life of poverty while continuing to work as an investment-banking executive.

During interviews I asked participants to try bridging mental divides between political and religious beliefs. Some seemed to enjoy the chance to reflect on questions arising from lived short-term mission experiences. Challenging discrete islands of meaning proved a frustrating exercise in mental

promiscuity for others. Interviewees struggled to define the boundaries of disparate values. Roger, for example, believed he had an individual responsibility to sacrifice economically for the poor. He also felt entitled watch football on a large flat screen TV. Understandably, Roger and others struggled to draw definite lines between competing beliefs and values (Wuthnow 1994). These *border disputes* (Zerubavel 1997) became evident when participants answered questions about how far religious responsibilities to care for the poor extend to political obligations. For a few, the edges of religious compartments and political ones were fuzzy, flexible, and plastic. Doc, for example, had trouble separating religious commitments to help the poor from political ones. For most, however, short-term trips only seem to reinforce the edges of rigid mental compartments. Remember, I asked Buddy if his religious commitment to the poor influenced political beliefs.

> *Buddy*: My commitment is a Christian commitment. For me the whole political thing is just like stupid, meaningless, pointless, you know. For me it just really doesn't translate into politically.

Buddy's answer reveals a characteristic unwillingness to bridge the gap between sacred and profane beliefs. The gap allows for participants to hold, simultaneously, mutually exclusive propositions to be true.

Incoherence, or existence of contradictions between religious and political commitments is not enough to produce significant a significant shift in worldviews (Lofland 1966). In fact, there is evidence that incoherence strengthens the social power of an ideology in several ways (Gellner 1974; Harding 1998). Gellner (1974) argues complex societies separate spheres of life. Legitimation gained in one sphere is often transferable or interdependent with that in another (Gellner 1974; Bourdieu 1986). This transfer often maintains legitimacy and social cohesion but does so at the price of logical coherence and relies on the deception of believers (Gellner 1974). Incoherence is evident when people apply moral principles after the fact to justify previously held beliefs rather than employing critical and reasoned

analysis. Other sociologists have noted people's high tolerance for inchoherence (Zerubavel 1997: Festinger 2008). Allowing some incoherence and compartmentalization of beliefs lets people to engage in inconsistent narratives in different spheres with questioning the validity of belief system as whole. Incoherent belief systems allow people to employ different narratives in different contexts. For example, participants echo dominant narratives that suggest the poor are deficient. However, other times participants employ religious narratives that give the poor privileged status. Conservative religio-political ideologies seem to allow for this contradiction. Christian belief commitments involve faith in an incomprehensible and omniscient God. The biblical story of Abraham exemplifies a calling for faith over reason. God asks Abraham to believe contradictory propositions when he promises Abraham that he will be the father of nations through his son Isaac and that he must kill his childless son as a sacrifice. Incoherence may be useful for people living in a social world full of contradictions. Approaching the world from a reasoned, critical, and analytical perspective may make it difficult for many people to keep living "normal" lives. In this sense, incoherent ideologies might actually gain strength from their incoherence.

Religion influences the way participants think about poverty but it is an ambiguous and complex force. Although religion may perpetuate political ideologies that encourage greed and individualism by allowing people to compartmentalize their altruistic social beliefs, religious beliefs are not totally contained. As I discussed in Chapter Five, radical biblical passages that challenge the moral authority of elites are the source of disquieting questions and anxieties about wealth and poverty. Paradoxically, religion is both the source of deep unsettling questions and the source of shallow comforting answers. Spirituality is often a therapeutic device that helps people find fulfillment, feel better about themselves, remain positive, and find satisfaction in the lives they are already living. People usually pray for comfort but rarely pray to be changed (Wuthnow 1994). Religion, like short-term experiences seem to nudge

attitudes and behaviors but in the end does little to challenge the status quo or radically change participants.

> *Robert*: I mean it's hard to pinpoint an overarching change in a lifestyle or even to recognize one but I think I am more thoughtful about what I have and what I want. And even if it, you know, doesn't really affect some of the things I buy or the way I go out to eat a lot—but I think it does—it has served to temper my desires a little bit. Or at least there's is some voice now that says, "that is not necessary." And that voice wins out sometimes. So that's nice.

For Robert, thinking about short-term missions and religious commitments influences his values. But the influence does not significantly altering the way he thinks about poverty or the way he approaches daily life.

This project is an effort to outline, understand, interpret and loosen the cords of the cultural, ideological, and religious traps that bind our consciousness and keep us from developing more critical, emancipatory perspectives. My research assumes that paternalism, ethnocentrism, and deficiency theories of poverty are unjust, unwarranted, and undesirable inputs of short-term missions. These negative inputs may lead to increased susceptibility and a sense of powerlessness that that results in undue apathy, fatalism, and self-deprication in a subjective sense that is in addition to its objective conditions (Freire 1970; Gaventa 1980). Likewise, a so far implicit component of my research is that there is some preferable alternative. I will follow the lead of critical realists (Benton and Craib 2001) who argue sociologists offering explanatory critiques of existing social phenomena should not hide behind the present and past but should offer possible futures.

At the very least, churches, mission agencies, and trip leaders should encourage education and cross-cultural training to help mission participants understand the cultural, political, and economic sources of the poverty they encounter. I propose an educational component that challenges dominant

cultural narratives that legitimate and perpetuate existing social conditions. Less modestly, I imagine radically changing the nature of these trips so that they involve doing work *with* host communities (as opposed to doing missions *for* them or *to* them). This would require increased communication. Effective communication requires intersubjective understading. Achieving meaningful intersubjective understanding with hosts across cultural, power, racial, economic, linguistic, religious, and political lines would be infinitely difficult. Through this process we can begin to imagine reducing ethnocentric and paternalistic tendencies. From this point, creating more egalitarian, democratic, inclusive, pluralistic and cooperative organizational structures might be possible. A more radical vision, is one in which missionaries would consider stopping these trips altogether. I propose that congregations engage in more open, public, inclusive, reflexive debates about values and what it means for privileged groups to continue practicing faith-based engagement with the poor under the current model of evangelical missions. Instead of going to teach indigent hosts about God, would it be possible to learn with them? Even if moral differences cannot be resolved, debates could reflect recognition of the extent to which moral disagreements are bound by differences of view on factual matters (Benton and Craib 2001). Recognizing contradictions between expressed values and factual matters would to be enough to make moral debates about how to live one's faith reasonable, meaningful, and worthwhile.

Conclusions tacitly imply a complete story has been told. However, what exists here is only a partial analysis and interpretation of the stories of twenty people who were mothers, sons, teachers, doctors, and community volunteers in addition to having participated in at least one international short-term mission trip. Their stories are incomplete as is this one. It would be difficult to generalize my findings but I suspect interviewees' narratives are not exceptionally different than the million people that travel abroad on mission trips every year. I think it is appropriate to conclude by sharing a story from one of my own mission trip experiences. The following is recreated from notes I made in a journal several years ago.

Bill: The homes in Mirador del Oriente cling precariously to the steep slopes that ring Tegucigalpa. Our van bounced to a dusty stop and I smiled to see Oscar standing in a doorway. I had known him for several years now and we were about the same age. He told me he had traveled *norte* and just returned home unable to reach the States. He told me his daughter was still sick because they could not afford the medicine. His little boy was almost old enough to start school. He loved them. Oscar hitchhiked, walked, and rode trains through three countries. In Mexico, gang members held him at gunpoint and took what little money he had. Soon after, he was caught and detained by *la migra* then deported. Bruises and cuts still showed on his body and I didn't know if they were from the gangs, immigration officials, or his job as a day laborer. He told me he would try again soon. On the street outside, a group of clean-cut teens from several of Tennessee's most elite private high schools laughed and played and hugged the neighborhood children. The white, *gringa* girls were painting the nails of little girls and women. They snapped photos of smiling brown faces and showed them images that shined on bright digital camera and iPhone displays. They said things like, *te quiero*. They loved them. The boys were checking out the house site. Tomorrow we would build a one-room shack for a mother and her five children to live in. It was the beginning of an exciting weeklong summer adventure. A world away, we had been in a Miami airport just hours ago. With U.S. passports and $30,000 dollars' worth of American Airlines tickets, we could visit Oscar's neighborhood. I don't know if he could imagine visiting ours.

I cannot know what Oscar felt at that moment or what he thought about our short-term mission team. His story is worth hearing. Right now, I can only share my interpretation and analysis of the stories of a few short-term missionaries. The unfortunate results of my research suggest meeting people like Oscar has little influence the way short-term missionaries think about poverty.

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