

“The Whole Peace Corps Thing”

A Rhetorical Analysis of Peace Corps Volunteer Blogs



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Abstract

➤ This rhetorical analysis will explore the narratives of Peace Corps Volunteers as expressed through blog entries on www.peacecorpsjournal.gov. This specific research will add to the understanding of how individual, organizational and cultural narratives interact and are manifested in language. I use Walter Fisher’s 1984 Narrative Paradigm to analyze 100 randomly selected Peace Corps Volunteer blogs. This analysis should reveal the relationship between individual member narratives and cultural narratives in which the volunteer has been placed.

An Overview: Rhetorical Analysis

➤ Rhetorical analysis is a “process of thinking about symbols, how they work, and why they affect” audiences the way they do (Foss 3). There are many methods or lenses used to analyze these symbols of communication.

An Overview: Narrative Paradigm

➤ Throughout this research a specific rhetorical approach, called Narrative Criticism, will be used to evaluate the cultures of Peace Corps Volunteers and their host countries.

➤ The Narrative Paradigm implies that “human beings are storytelling creatures” where “human decision making involves the sharing of these stories” (Fisher 5).

➤ Narratives, or “shared stories” are a way for people to capture and relate their experiences in the world in the way facts are perceived and values are formed. (Fisher 6)

Rhetorical Method

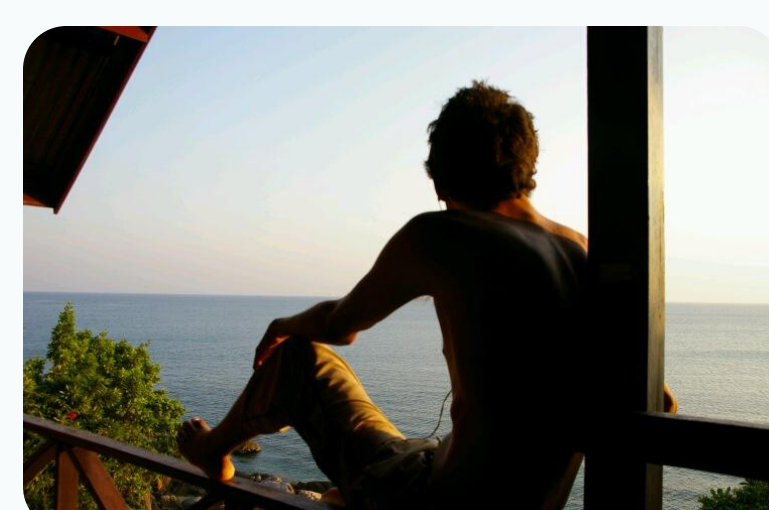
➤ 100 randomly selected Peace Corps Volunteer blogs have been analyzed using Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm (1984). A term used within the Narrative Paradigm called “narrative fidelity,” tests whether the stories experienced by the Peace Corps Volunteers in their host cultures remain relevant to the stories Peace Corps Volunteers “knew to be true in their lives” before service (Fisher 8).

➤ The bloggers’ language determines how they interpret setting, plot and other characters around them. Inclusive language includes the use of “we”, “our” and “my community”. Exclusive language isolates the main character and includes words such as “I”, “they”, “their community” or “their project”.

Elements of Narrative

➤ The characters in these narratives include the Peace Corps Volunteers and the host culture’s community as main characters, while Peace Corps itself is a secondary character.

➤ The setting is the foreign country where the Peace Corps Volunteer serves. The plot involves the Peace Corps Volunteers’ interaction with their community through their individual projects and daily life within the community.



An Overview: Peace Corps

The Peace Corps was started in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy with these three goals in mind. It strives in:

1. Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2. Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.
3. Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. (www.peacecorps.gov)

➤ Peace Corps Volunteers take these Peace Corps narrative plotlines and attempt at applying them to another culture, who may receive or reject aspects of the volunteers’ narratives.



Not So Universal

➤ Narrative fidelity, changes as the volunteer enters another narrative. A volunteer begins to realize that assumed simple solutions like ones suggested in proverbs are usually not so simple given the historical and cultural narratives of other countries that come into direct conflict with the narratives with which the Peace Corps Volunteer were familiar.

➤ A Peace Corps Volunteer from Uganda writes:

“The old proverb goes, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a meal. Teach a man how to fish and he eats for a lifetime”. The Peace Corps Volunteer believes this saying “oversimplifies a complicated situation” in which “poverty, apathy, and death as an integral part of daily life” lead people to “live more on a day-to-day basis” where “instant gratification” or rather “gratification before dying” is more important than long-term goals and capitalizing.

➤ The Volunteer concludes by changing the proverb so it reads:

“Give a man a fish and he won’t starve. Teach a man how to fish, provide him support in his new enterprises...., and you give him the tools to change his life, if he wants” (Kuhl, “Angling”)

➤ Generalized narratives do not pause to consider complexities that alternative narratives may provide, whether it be through plotline, characters or context. The necessity for Peace Corps Volunteers to constantly revamp their own narrative accounts for their sense of accomplishment and belonging in cultural narratives in which they interact.

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Language and Belonging

➤ Notice how the Peace Corps Volunteer uses “we” and “our” which indicates the inclusiveness she feels in the school she teaches at:

“We’re creating the border for a map” , “We didn’t have a ladder..or anyone in the community to borrow one from, so we stacked our wooden desk” (Janice, “A Bit of Campus Life”)

➤ Characters within the community also display outreach towards volunteers, as illustrated in the volunteer’s blog:

“This family is wonderful, to the point of having us join their family for dinner on the eve of our anniversary and in and overnight hike over Easter” (Bultemeier, “Our Anniversary”)

➤ On the other hand, the little understood language of the community’s culture works to separate the Peace Corps Volunteer while witnessing funeral ceremonies in Cameroon.

The Peace Corps Volunteer feels “at ease with the surroundings but still at times only a spectator, the comfortable outsider” (Fleurange, “Heard Around Town”)

➤ Additionally, a sense of purpose determines whether the Peace Corps Volunteer character make themselves feel at home in his or her narrative abroad.

“I’ve reached a point where I’ve identified what I feel is worth working on with people in the community and am trying to just push forward on those projects” (Croft, “Year of the Firey Lantern”)

➤ The differences in character traits among cultures also help to establish differences in plotlines, or the actions of those characters:

“Are people here raised so differently that they are capable of such things whereas I am not? “Maybe there is a...violent...set of behaviors that, if tolerated, could tip over a poor society and turn it into anarchy?” (Blair, “Mob Justice and New Neighbors”)

➤ The Peace Corps member’s own narrative comes into question as conflict between character traits and backgrounds between cultures arise.

Conclusions

➤ While stepping into one story from another story, the Peace Corps Volunteer must change his or her sense of narrative through the way characters, setting and plot interact.

➤ They have to realize that one narrative’s fidelity may not directly translate within the fidelity of another cultures’ narrative.

➤ In order for a sense of belonging, The Peace Corps Volunteers must change their initial narratives in order to better translate within with the narratives of their host country.

