Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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“International Volunteering and Meaning-making in Later Life: An Interpretative Phenomenological Exploration of the Ways in which Older Adults find Personal Meaning through Volunteering in Developing Countries, and How this Impacts Health and Wellness in Later Life”

Social Dimensions of Health

Monday, December 12, 2016
9:30 AM
University Centre Building
Room A207a

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Patricia MacKenzie, School of Social Work, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Catherine Worthington, School of Public Health and Social Policy, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Eric Roth, Department of Anthropology, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Peter Donahue, School of Social Work, University College

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Eric Higgs, School of Environmental Studies, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

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

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

What are the factors that led some older people to choose to travel to volunteer in a developing country at this particular time in their lives?

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

What meaning did/do they derive from it?

In what ways did this experience impact their perceived life satisfaction, health and well-being?

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

Interview data gathered from the study were initially analyzed using coding techniques of the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The interpretative phenomenological analysis led to the discovery of core categories in the data, which were then clustered into a conceptual framework.

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

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