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Volunteer tourism, development and education in a postcolonial world: conceiving global connections beyond aid

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This paper contributes to the public and academic debate on the appropriateness of young Westerners' participation in projects of volunteer tourism conducted in developing countries. Ethnographic research was carried out in the context of an Australian program that organizes short-term group placements for university students in countries like Vietnam, Mexico and Fiji. The results illustrate that such projects can produce similar benefits to other educational initiatives of international volunteering and service (IVS) in terms of global engagement, career development, intercultural competence and psychological support. However, for these projects to avoid public critiques and negative outcomes, they need to harmonize personal and institutional expectations with real volunteer capacities. Thus, until IVS programs in the university context distance themselves from a development aid discourse, they will potentially fall under the umbrella of "neo-colonialism". The research provides a model of impact analysis and raises challenging questions for universities or similar organizations involved with short-term group placements of volunteer tourism.

Keywords: volunteer tourism; colonialism; tourism impacts; community participation; development theory; education

Introduction

I thought of doing some volunteering. I've been researching because I didn't know what they had to offer out there . . . they call it "voluntourism", where you volunteer at the same time that you are a tourist. They (the company) take you around and have a sort of package created. It costs a lot of money (but) they are not being very transparent, like they don't let you know where the money is being spent. Actually, I am quite sceptical . . . I wonder if the money was really helping the people or if they are kind of making a business out of it.

Sue (undergraduate student – Sydney)

Although Sue only based her doubts on a story she heard from a friend, a wide range of academic papers and media papers would share her skepticism. Academic researchers and journalists have found a number of volunteer tourism cases where experiences do not seem to encourage critical reflections about poverty (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Roberts, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Ver Beek, 2006), where foreign interests are prioritized over local ones and where sending organizations and volunteer tourists alike tend to receive more benefits than the voluntoured[1] (Brown, 2003; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Carey, 2001; Cheng, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Frean, 2006; Klaushofer, 2007; Lindorsson, 2008; Matthews,

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2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2008; Salazar, 2004; Womack, 2007). Generally speaking, the 2000s is a decade full of public hesitation about whether vacation volunteering is a more ethical, critical and pro-poor alternative than mass tourism (Butcher, 2003; Guttentag, 2009; Harrison, 2008).

Sue's doubts about "voluntourism" led her eventually to opt for a volunteer project in the Philippines through her university and discard any other project offered by the travel industry. Just as with NGO tourism (c.f. Spencer, 2010), the university context presents itself as a more legitimate instance in the travel market for those young people who are concerned with the authenticity of the volunteer projects they want to participate in. A university is in many senses a better candidate to run volunteer programs than a simple travel agency: it is more likely to provide accountability, reflection and learning outcomes. However, this paper argues that Western universities need to carefully use a *volunteering* language in international projects and distance themselves from a *development aid* discourse. Otherwise, they will potentially fall under the umbrella of the "neo-colonialism" critique that has been leveled against many other volunteer-oriented tour operators.

This study explores the impacts of an Australian university program choosing to use a *volunteering* language to frame short-term group placements for its students in countries like Thailand, Mexico and Fiji, in contrast to the languages of *service learning*, *cultural exchange* or *educational tourism*. Based on ethnographic research and drawing on a critical reading of development aid, this paper develops an impact model (Figure 1) to illustrate in a synthesized way the challenges that a *volunteering* language represents for universities and similar sending organizations placing young students in developing countries. Indeed, this study expects to be of relevance to many sending organizations, considering that most of the
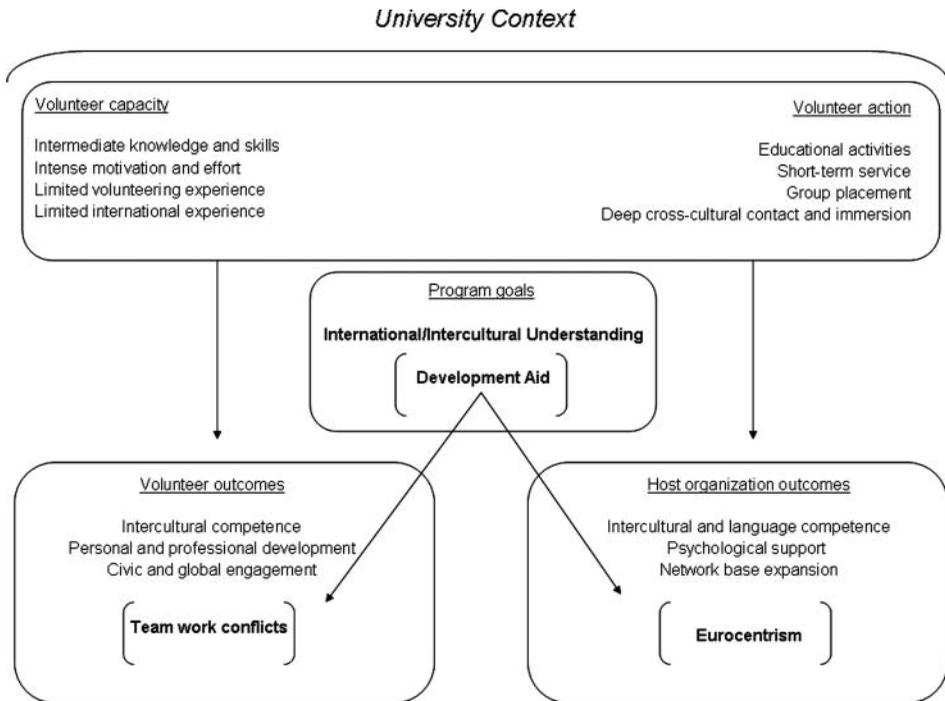

Figure 1.   Conceptual model: impacts of volunteer tourism in the university context.

international volunteer programs are focused on educational services (Sherraden, Lough, & Moore, 2008, p. 404) and flow unilaterally from north to south (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006, p. 169, 175). The research results will illustrate, for the interest of these sending organizations, that *volunteering* is a framework that can potentially be used to support intercultural learning and solidarity but, at the same time, can equally motivate unrealistic expectations, frustrations, teamwork conflicts and problematic assumptions like "they [Western university students] know better than us [local staff]".

Spotting neo-colonialism and competing goals in international volunteering and service (IVS)

Currently, when it is widely accepted that foreign aid provided by wealthy nations during the past five decades has failed to reverse global patterns of poverty and inequality (Ovaska, 2003), Western organizations should start to question the appropriateness of a *volunteering* language before they decide to use it for youth projects in developing countries. In countries like the UK and Australia – where taking a gap year abroad has become a sort of rite of passage for the current generation – a number of papers have repeatedly warned us about the unethical behavior of the tourism industry and have even suggested that young volunteer tourists might be portraying a new form of colonialism.[2] Such public critique, although born out of the gap-year industry, is relevant to any volunteer project undertaken in developing countries by young people from Western countries. Brown and Hall articulate this argument:

> The use of volunteers, who often have little knowledge or experience of the work they are undertaking (an attraction for the volunteers), also calls into question their *ineffectiveness* and raises the specter of *neo-colonialism* in the tacit assumption that even ignorant Westerners can improve the lot of the people in the South (2008, p. 845) (my emphasis).

In the 1960s, when the boom of international volunteering for young Americans started through the Peace Corps program, it was clear that there were political and colonial-like intentions involved (Cobbs, 1997). However, the current literature about international volunteering and service (IVS) rarely comments on the political interests of the donor nations sponsoring IVS agencies (an exception is Sherraden et al., 2006). Instead, charges of neo-colonialism are currently placed on the volunteers themselves and on the "voluntourism" industry. Thus, it is important to understand that the recent comments about colonialism, synthesized above by Brown and Hall, have less to do with elaborated critical theories of development, and more to do with "ineffectiveness" and practical concerns. In reality, what has been at stake in most debates about volunteer tourism is not whether the *help* of Westerners has any relevance in the development of poor nations, but whether these Westerners possess the necessary capacities and motivations to produce *effective* help. Evidence of this can be found in the conclusions of many authors when they suggest that the projects have a low impact in the local communities because the young volunteers do not have enough knowledge (Brown & Hall, 2008), reflection capacity (Simpson, 2004), appropriate skills or qualifications (McGehee & Andereck, 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008), volunteering and international experience (McLeod, 2008), time to get involved with the locals (Roberts, 2004) or altruistic intentions (Salazar, 2004).

Indeed, the ideal impact of IVS in the eyes of journalists and academics alike tends to spin around the notion of *effective help* or *development aid,* a notion that emphasizes "service delivery, and knowledge, skill, and technology transfer" (Sherraden et al., 2008, p. 400). Certainly, to provide *development aid* and humanitarian relief is the main goal of countless IVS programs, but rarely is it the only one. Usually there is more of a – not

always consistent – mix and overlap between this and another main goal: the building of *international understanding*,[3] whose "emphasis is on international experience and fostering crosscultural skills and tolerance, global awareness and international solidarity, civic engagement, personal development, and international peace" (Sherraden et al., 2008, p. 400). This is clearly seen in the Peace Corps model, with its efforts to emphasize a commitment to transfer "technical skills to developing countries" while maintaining a second – and contradictory – objective: "the education of American youth" (Waldorf, 2001, p. 73). Yet, the development aid goal has monopolized the attention of most IVS literature (Sherraden et al., 2006, p. 177), overlooking the other goal and the fact that, even in long-term individual placements sponsored by government agencies (the classic IVS model of development aid), intercultural learning is a major outcome of IVS programs (Devereux, 2008; Howes, 2008).

There is no mystery behind the question of why journalists and academics have privileged development aid over international understanding in their IVS narratives; the use of a *volunteering* – and therefore a *helping* – language in a global context of inequality and post-colonialism directly relates to a history of Western domination and draws public attention to questions of effectiveness, and even desirability, of IVS programs in developing countries. Curiously, an important body of critical literature has been raising similar concerns during the last two decades, but it has taken the questions much further. In fact, it has been studying the rationale behind the whole ideal of *development aid* with skepticism. The basic conclusion of many authors that have contributed to this critical theory of development is that the Western intention of *helping* underlying the development aid goal is humanitarian as much as it is colonialist. However, it tends to reproduce the same global patterns of inequality and poverty, leaving intact – if not reinforcing – the dominant position of the North (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Gronemeyer, 1992; Kothari, 2005, among others). In the light of this critical perspective and of recent public comments about neo-colonialism, volunteer tourism academics should consider reframing their perspectives and incorporate the goals of international understanding and intercultural learning to their research agendas. These goals have the most potential to strengthen global civil society, promote inclusive participation (Sherraden et al., 2006) and, why not, motivate the alternatives to development aid that many critical theorists have imagined (c.f. Escobar, 2005).

This research, although focusing on a "volunteering" program, attempts to address the previously mentioned research bias and avoids the temptation of favoring the goal of development aid over international understanding in its impact analysis. For this purpose, a central conclusion of Sherraden et al.'s longitudinal study of IVS is used as the point of departure: how the balance between the emphasis on one goal and the other can affect the service impacts (2008, p. 400). Waldorf's analysis of the Peace Corps develops a similar argument, when she states that the only option for this program to be successful is to correct the balance between its incompatible goals and choose one or the other (Waldorf, 2001, p. 82). In brief, what this paper does is to explore the balance of goals that a *volunteering* language promotes and the consequences of this balance in terms of impact.

Fieldwork and other research methods

As outlined in the Introduction, this paper is based on ethnographic research. Further details will be given in this section, not only about the site where the ethnography took place, but also about the specific techniques that were employed. In this research, "ethnographic" indicates that qualitative methods along with an exploratory character were utilized. The ethnography was not of the traditional stay-for-as-long-as-you-want type, as the phenomena

of interest were short-term projects of volunteering. Instead, a combination of methods was utilized to compensate for the short-lived nature of the subject.

Over four weeks (in June–July of 2008), the author was a volunteer at KOTO – see below – in Vietnam, along with 16 other university students and two team leaders. The majority of the participants – including the team leaders – were women, with only five men in the group; most of the participants were in their early twenties and were Australian, with the exception of three Europeans, one South African and myself, a Latin-American. The host organization, KOTO, is a high-profile restaurant located in Hanoi providing former street and disadvantaged youth with a wide range of hospitality skills.[4] Throughout our time at this organization, the volunteer group was divided into three areas: English teaching, execution of the life skills workshops and planning of the logistics for the annual field trip. The life skills program, the area of my volunteer team, represents the holistic approach of KOTO that attempts to empower the trainees not only through technical training, but also through integral education, informing them about issues such as stress management, HIV prevention and conflict resolution, among other life skills.

The main source of insights came from participant-observation carried out whilst volunteering in Vietnam, which was materialized in a research journal. During the first meeting that we had as a group, I shared my intention to research the university program, write observations in a journal and gather their opinions through formal interviews, questionnaires and casual conversations.[5] Throughout the participant-observation, I kept a notepad with me at all times and constantly filled it in with jottings and scratch notes that would be waiting there, sometimes for a few days, to be written up in a more detailed way. On many occasions, this notepad reminded the co-volunteers of my researcher role, as well as my bright red audio recorder, every time I was heading off to one of my scheduled interviews.

Before leaving for Vietnam, I interviewed two students who had participated in other volunteer projects through the same university program. Once settled in Vietnam, I conducted a series of in situ face-to-face interviews with three expatriates volunteering at KOTO, two non-Vietnamese senior members of the staff and one fellow university volunteer who wanted to be immediately interviewed as she was returning to Austria straight after the program. With the rest of the participants, the formal questions were asked differently. A month after the volunteer program finished, a follow-up questionnaire was sent and, in order to avoid individual pressure, it was administered in the form of a common email. Fortunately, the sampling was successful as 10 out of 17 were answered and sent back.

One last source of information, crucial for research that constantly talks about volunteering as a language, was the marketing material produced by the university program. This key source helped me to relate the subjective data coming from observations and interviews with a more public and tangible discourse. Any content referring to the objectives of the program was selected, thus giving a substantial reality to the expectations of the program.

Finally, it is important to make explicit the limitations and advantages of the chosen methodology. Any ethnographic work is positioned within an interpretive paradigm and, as such, needs to carefully manage its "commitment to subjectivity" (Bernard, 2006, p. 22) in the production of scientific knowledge. This research tackled this problem by, first, using a diversity of methods that could validate the findings from different perspectives, and second, tracking the researcher's bias by discussing the findings and analyses with a small number of volunteers, university program staff and other academics working in related fields. Additionally, along with the diversity of methods, another advantage of this study is its critical approach, which attempts to both incorporate "an understanding of development's complex history" (Crabtree, 2008, p. 24) and to emphasize not only the

positive but also the negative outcomes, contributing to filling an important gap in IVS research (Guttentag, 2009; Sherraden et al., 2008).

On the other hand, there is also a limitation in the adopted methodology: the voice of the volunteers and foreigners compose the bulk of the evidence, dismissing to some extent the opinion of local people (mainly due to a language barrier). As compensation, the readers are warned about this "one-way" bias in the sample (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008) and about the passive image of the host organization that, unintentionally, it might evoke.

Becoming a "volunteer" for a holiday

In the Methodology section, I intentionally wrote "the author was a volunteer" instead of "the author was volunteering" to emphasize how the "volunteer" denomination became an important social marker of identity during the project. For the first three weeks, while dedicated to intensive volunteer work and briefings with development organizations in Hanoi, each university student was a "volunteer" not only from the perspective of the hosts, but from their own perspective as well. During the last days of the trip, it became evident to me that the project participants never felt as simple "tourists" while they were in the presence of the hosts. This was noticeable when I heard a number of similar comments on our arrival to the relaxing mountains of Sapa, after leaving KOTO behind. Angela summarized them well in her response to the follow-up questionnaire: "After the emotional goodbyes from KOTO I think we all felt a bit lost in our new role as tourists". Although we had spent the last four days on another tour around the northeast coast of Vietnam accompanying KOTO staff and trainees during their annual fieldtrip, it was only on our arrival in Sapa that everyone started to feel like a tourist.

Without doubt, the presence of foreign university students was not an insignificant event at KOTO. Although we were in Vietnam for less than a month, there is no question that our volunteer group received a special and warm treatment. Simple emotional acts stuck in the volunteers' minds. Emily, for example, remembers with amazement:

> **Emily** Seeing Quyet [a KOTO trainee] nearly in tears at the farewell – this made me feel like we really did impact them in some way– [or] having Viet [another trainee] touch my ears – I thought it was weird at first but found out that there was meaning and passion behind it [Jimmy Pham, the founder of this organization, told us towards the end of the trip that touching the trainees' ears is a meaningful act of validation that he often uses].

Jane is also able to transmit the genuine feeling of reciprocity that existed between KOTO trainees and volunteers:

> **Jane** I eventually got to know the KOTO trainees personally. They welcomed and embraced me without any judgment or suspicion at all. I felt a lot of love and protection; they were always willing to learn, help and share everything.

The observation of such emotional interactions leads me to inquire: is a *volunteering* framework responsible for Jane's loving and personal encounter with the trainees? Is this specific framework somehow related with the production of an engaging and emotional cultural exchange?

After all, the "volunteering" connotation of the project played an important role in the shaping of predispositions and subjectivities during the project, as it can be particularly inferred from two specific facts: 1) The fact that the trainees were happy to openly talk about their troubled lives to these strangers should be an indication of the attitudes that were in place during our visit. There was a latent debate during the beginning of the

volunteer program on whether the volunteers should be debriefed with regard to the personal trajectories and problems of the trainees, but soon enough this debate became irrelevant as the kids themselves opened up to the volunteers as soon as they started to share some quality time together. This was precisely the event that Laura pointed out to me as the most significant for her of the entire program: "Being trusted by the students – them telling me about their past or wanting me to read the files about their past".

2) The second fact is that the volunteers interpret their relation with the hosts in terms of *giving* and *receiving*, as the following reflections of two volunteers imply:

> **Cynthia** Going to Trung's house was the most special – I felt really honoured to visit his house and it was a nice way to say farewell to class 13 and koto. Trung's mum was so welcoming and I have never had anyone, not even family, go to such lengths to show their *gratitude* (my emphasis).

> **Kate** All the KOTO staff were so generous and kind hearted and this really showed in their behaviors towards the trainees and towards us the volunteers. They seemed very *grateful* for the *help* we were *giving* them and tried to accommodate us as best they could (my emphasis).

In this context "help" and "gratitude" are notions firmly attached to the meaning of volunteering. Perhaps, the special and open treatment that KOTO trainees and staff gave us was associated with a feeling of gratitude towards us, as Cynthia and Kate reflect. At the same time, the volunteer action of these university students tended to be mediated by intentions of "giving" and "help". Then, it is possible to argue that, when a project is marketed and implemented through a discourse of volunteering, specific relations of power as well as genuine emotional connections are fostered between those perceived as "volunteers" and "voluntoured", between "givers" and "receivers".

In a transnational project of volunteering like this one, where differences of culture and language create constant communication difficulties, volunteering cannot be seen simply as an institutional framework, but more as a powerful frame of action at a personal level. To be labeled "volunteer" has important repercussions in terms of social relations; it is a notion of identity, and as such, it strongly determines how the "Other" perceives and relates with a foreigner. Thus, the influence that a volunteering language has in the development of emotional connections must have a strong correlation with the type of identity (and responsibility) that foreigners are invested with once they put on their volunteer "hat".

However, the paradox is that while a volunteering framework possibly facilitates cross-cultural connections at deep emotional levels, the authority and responsibility vested in the volunteer roles might be unjustified, as foreign students do not necessarily have the capacity to deliver aid or transfer skills and knowledge. In reality, it is not unreasonable to ask if, as Raymond and Hall suggest, "expert" or "teacher" are inappropriate roles for inexperienced volunteer tourists that, by assuming these positions of power, could inadvertently reproduce cultural images of Western superiority (2008, p. 531). In the same way, it makes sense to question if these roles of high responsibility are inappropriate, given the expectations that they foment in the volunteers.

This last question is quite relevant considering that a feeling of frustration is a fundamental component of the short-term volunteer experience. After two or three weeks, when the volunteer is just starting to get involved with the local issues, it is already time to start packing up to return home. Jenna and Emma, for example, told me they felt:

> **Jenna** Disappointment after the farewell that perhaps our entering and leaving the students lives may have been in some way harmful (. . .) I would have liked a longer time with the students/KOTO to make/implement more sustainable changes.

> **Emma** Sad, heavy hearted. I questioned whether we really made any difference in the trainees' lives. I wanted to stay and become part of KOTO; I had a few ideas of what I would like to do there.

This evidence suggests that students taking part in short-term group volunteer placements in developing countries do not dismiss the many limitations that have been found in other volunteer tourism projects. Indeed, neither I nor the rest of the volunteers feel that the time allowed was sufficient to create a significant change or assist with the long-term goals in their training program. In fact, many volunteers and local people realized through the experience that a number of factors prevent young foreigners from helping effectively at KOTO. The staff expressed in the project evaluation that the skills we brought were not always the most appropriate ones for our volunteer roles, especially when technical training in specific subjects like Commercial Cookery was involved. Even if in some activities we possessed the appropriate skills (e.g. there were two qualified psychologists in the group), most of us had little crosscultural, professional or volunteering experience in a project with gigantic cultural and language barriers. Peter, one of the volunteers who was part of the English class team, said, for example, that a "... major frustration was wanting to communicate something to a student and not having the language to do so". Just as Peter did, even the most altruistic volunteer might get easily frustrated when confronted with such an adverse context.

The challenge that the current debate on volunteer tourism presents to university students lies in establishing whether they are able to effectively help, in spite of their limited volunteer capacities, timeframes and culturally diverse work environments. However, such challenges are unavoidable and, as I will now argue, the emphasis on the idea of *effective help* rather leads to misinterpret the role of the volunteer.

Role ambiguity: when latent expectations touch ground

In other IVS contexts, researchers tend to focus on the personal interests and egoism of the participants, devoting a great effort to profile them according to their motivations (Guttentag, 2009). In the university context that I researched, the personal agendas of the volunteers never seemed to be in conflict with their service and exchange interests. The following comment from one of the volunteers is indicative of this trend:

> **Lisa** There are so many underprivileged people all around the world and I'd love to be part of something big in helping in these issues. I love to travel and the opportunity seemed too good to pass up.

This genuine motivation to contribute might be related to the strict selection process applied by the university and to the high demand for places from students wanting to be part of the projects. In any case, I do not consider it necessary for this study to question, as other researchers have, whether the volunteers were genuinely interested in contributing to local development or not (Broad & Spencer, 2008; Kapoor, 2005; Roberts, 2004; Salazar, 2004; Spencer, 2010). Its major interest was to examine the actual chances that these volunteers had to contribute to the KOTO project and, consequently, the pressures that emerged from negotiating day-to-day project activities.

Researchers have looked at the outcomes of the volunteer action, but have paid little attention to how a *volunteering* framework, in contrast to a *service learning* or an *educational tourism* framework, shapes the way social actors behave either as hosts or guests in an intercultural project. According to the university program website, volunteer actions are supposed to "have a positive impact on the community you go to" but volunteers have

to assume this task under great constraints. When university students finally put on their volunteer "hat" to face the locals and start working together, high expectations can become problematic, as two of the students explain:

> **Angela** The KOTO English teachers were very persistent with trying to get our input into their lesson plans and teaching styles . . . however it was a bit awkward telling them how they could improve their organization considering we haven't even finished our degrees.

> **Emma** I found preparation and delivery of Life Skills classes particularly challenging . . . delivering a program on stress management (or) the meaning of a happy family is challenging enough, but having to do it via an interpreter has definitely added another level of complexity. I also felt we didn't have enough knowledge about what level these classes are taught at, what the trainees already know, what the outcomes should be, and what teaching/delivery style we should take. Our intra-group dynamics put a bit of strain on as well – I think Cynthia and I tried to take control of the way things were going too much, I think I could have done more (or less!) to get us to work together better. I think we felt we all had experiences that prepared us to determine what the best course of action is.

When unrealistic expectations give meaning to an educational project and a language of volunteering mediates the interaction between Western foreigners and non-Western locals, there is scope for the development of problematic attitudes on both sides.

Eurocentric attitudes

On the one hand, among the local staff there was a latent *Eurocentric* attitude.[6] KOTO teachers and trainers were constantly asking for the volunteers' input and recommendations. Some of them even attended the volunteer's sessions hoping to learn new techniques, but the truth is that most of the volunteers did not go to any regular class run by local staff and, therefore, it was far too difficult for them to provide well-informed advice. Furthermore, volunteers went through a very short induction about the local teaching style prior to the conduction of the volunteer tasks. Thus, volunteers planned the assigned sessions with very basic information. For example, when my group had to prepare the life-skills workshops, it was left to us to determine the treatment of such sensitive social issues as conflict resolution, future planning or family and relationships. Evidently, behind the great trust and autonomy that the host organization granted us, there was an implicit assumption that "Australian university students" are somehow commensurate with "knowledgeable volunteers".

Indeed, an implicit perception among the local people was that, as we were students of a highly regarded Australian university, we were well trained to give them valuable recommendations to improve their local project. Such a conclusion is clearly biased; it misreads the extent of capacity that young volunteers have, by associating them, as individuals, to an image of advanced Western knowledge and education. It is true that university students expect to have a chance to contribute, but in this IVS context, the motivation to contribute was quickly obscured by the mounting pressure to do it in ways beyond their real volunteer capacities. I still remember the night when:

> Megan was so stressed out because the kitchen trainers were expecting feedback next day from her with regard to their plans and curriculums and [how] she was so worried because, even though she had read about curriculums and education in general, she had no knowledge or experience in that particular field (Personal Journal, 16th of July, 2008).

The perception of these students held locally that they were representatives of superior Western knowledge led many of the volunteers to feel probably welcomed and empowered. Nonetheless, they also felt uncomfortable with the responsibilities attached to such an

"expert" image, considering that, with the information and capacities at hand, they were just not in a position to give sound feedback. There were probably some negative feelings too among the local staff, such as disappointment, after realizing that our academic-oriented feedback would hardly ever be as relevant as their own experience.

Intra-group work conflicts

On the other hand, excessive expectations about the project's outcomes are also translated into problematic attitudes on the volunteers' side, especially in the form of intra-group work conflicts. Unlike in other forms of IVS, these university volunteers had to undertake their assignments as a group and within short timeframes. These demanding work conditions become a time bomb, considering not only institutional pressures surrounding their work, but also the self-imposed expectations that volunteers place on themselves. As one of the university students stated, "every volunteer is working for the glory of being involved" (Kristy).

Conflicting attitudes were not restricted only to the group dynamics of Emma's team, but were shared by the other two volunteer teams. Such conflicting attitudes always appeared when decisions needed to be made about how to adapt the tasks (i.e. classes, logistics or workshops) to the local context.[7] Paula exemplifies this when she states that:

> Oddly enough, I was only frustrated or disappointed if one of my team members did not embrace or adapt themselves to situations or complained about culturally-sensitive issues.

The group tasks tend to operate under strong microdynamics of power because the volunteers are looking for meaningful contributions, sometimes to the point that a helping intention becomes an imposition of directions and personal frameworks. Conflict is not necessarily problematic; conflict is counterproductive only when the space to learn from it is reduced by individualist attitudes. These attitudes have to do with "over-motivated" volunteers, one of the project participants reflected; with people wanting to do too much because they want to feel they are "making a difference".

Role ambiguity

In this case study, the volunteers – as much as the hosts – got sometimes confused and frustrated due to the unclear nature of their role. Teamwork problems and Eurocentric attitudes are both symptoms of this confusion or, as it has been described through organizational perspectives, of this *role ambiguity* (Lyons, 2003). Role ambiguity occurs when the volunteers and voluntoured are unclear about "what specific duties are associated with a [volunteer] role" and "the pattern of behaviors that are expected from them" (Lyons & Wearing, 2008, p. 150). The volunteers visualized themselves as "helpers" but, in practice, this ideal role proved unrealistic, once challenging cultural conditions and reduced volunteer capacities were added to the equation.

When a short-term project in a developing country is organized by an educational sending organization as a "volunteering" program, ambiguous expectations about what kind of impact is feasible within the local community, and what the volunteers are supposed to achieve, can be fostered. Ambiguous expectations can take the form of Eurocentric attitudes among the local staff and intra-group conflicts among the volunteers, making both guests and hosts susceptible to frustration.

What type of IVS program is appropriate for university students?

The role ambiguity seen in this university context suggests that volunteers share with volunteer tourism academics the same bias regarding IVS goals. Both, by prioritizing the goal of development aid, reinforce the disconnect between what is expected from a "volunteering" program and what actually happens during the volunteering practice; mutual intercultural learning is undermined while "help" continues to be the drive of volunteer tourism practice and theory.

I invite volunteers and academics to resist such a disconnect and, to this end, I provide a conceptual model of impact analysis to illustrate my argument that a language of *volunteering* can avoid negative outcomes in the university context by distancing itself from a *development aid* goal, as indicated in Figure 1.[8] Waldorf (2001), when she concludes her analysis of the Peace Corps, leaves the door open for decision makers to improve the program by reorienting it towards one goal or the other, as long as they only choose one. Volunteer programs in the university context cannot afford that luxury. They must balance their goals in one clear direction: international understanding and intercultural learning.

IVS programs that have development aid as their primary goal emphasize the transfer of knowledge, skills or technology (Sherraden et al., 2008). This is the type of impact that, for example, individual placements sponsored by government or multilateral agencies can look forward to as it requires advanced volunteer capacities and long-term service. In contrast, a short-term group placement of university students, who tend to have intermediate knowledge and skills, little volunteering experience and limited international experience, should not expect to embrace the goal of *development aid.* When they do, negative outcomes like Eurocentricism, teamwork conflicts and public critiques are likely to appear, and in worse case scenario, perhaps, be detrimental to the hosts.

Conversely, a group of university students passionate about travelling and gaining cross-cultural experience, combined with the emotional effects of a volunteering language in an educational context, make a perfectly suitable match for an IVS program centered on the goal of building *international understanding.* Although in this case study, it is more appropriate to circumscribe this broad goal from *international* to *intercultural* understanding. University students may not have long-term commitment and their strength is probably not service delivery, but their position has many advantages that long-term volunteers do not. Intercultural understanding is not a natural result of IVS experiences, but it is more likely to occur when close cultural contact and space for reflection become part of these experiences (Raymond & Hall, 2008). The contrast between the following statements of two volunteers undergoing two-year placements at KOTO and one student on a short-term placement reveal the advantages of a university program of IVS:

> **Christie (long-term volunteer)** My job is not really to teach the trainees, it's more to teach the trainer so that when the volunteers go, there are proper trainers in place.

> **Bernard (long-term volunteer)** You [university students] can enjoy Vietnam because you know that you are not stuck here for two years!

> **Jamie (university student)** I am motivated by the opportunity to extend my skills in a way that will be both *meaningful* but also *fun* (my emphasis).

Volunteers like Bernard and Christie are committed to making possible a future where foreign aid is no longer needed and the desired development is achieved; however, such commitment implies that they must focus on the trainers' capacities and devote a significant amount of time away from home. Short-term volunteers, ironically, do have time to share with the trainees, and with the locals in general, because their personal goal is not to be

concerned with technical objectives and fulfilling the requirements of a job description, but to have "fun" and "meaningful" time in the context of an overarching educational tour. In fact, the young volunteers tend to value more the informal encounters with the trainees than the formal ones. When I asked the volunteers about the most significant part of the project, there was a clear tendency towards emphasizing moments when they enjoyed open and genuine interactions with the voluntoured:

> **Mike** When Kong (KOTO trainee) invited me to his village to see his family, I was blown away. What a great day talking with Kong and seeing Vietnam behind the scenes. Again with Trung (another KOTO trainee), we stayed up late every night on the field trip talking for an hour or so. Often, we talked about complicated things and it was very interesting to see Trung's perspective.

> **Jane** The casual moments with the KOTO trainees when we were out of the teaching environment, at the water park, bowling and the field trip. Having conversations with them about their lives and our lives.

> **Sarah** Mainly the times where I really got to know and have fun with the students, like Trung's house, sport nights, social nights and playing games in class.

The volunteer program cannot be properly understood without making reference to personal accounts, unofficial situations and "intangible outcomes" (Crabtree, 2008, p. 30). In other words, the intercultural relationships born out of these micro-scenarios have a significant value. They are more than simple isolated encounters of amiability; rather, actual friendships full of reciprocity and deep conversations are possible as is evident in these statements. Thus, beyond their institutional functions, volunteer tourists accomplish a more encompassing role as they have enough space to socialize and get to know the locals.

The valuable (and realistic) impacts of IVS in the university context

The close cultural contact characterizing the volunteer action in the university context is probably the most determinant factor of project success, particularly for the trainees who are hoping to work in the hospitality industry with international tourists. In this case study, the field trip to Halong Bay carried out in the fourth week was the last of a long list of extracurricular activities that facilitated the socialization between volunteers and locals; extracurricular activities like bowling, karaoke nights and visiting the water park. In concordance with recent international service-learning research (Crabtree, 2008, p. 24), I argue that a close cultural contact with substantive community participation in the context of a self-sustaining host organization produces strong economic, social and learning outcomes for both hosts and students.

On the one hand, deep cultural immersion in the transnational context of university volunteering can generate social and economic benefits for the host community that, due to the short length of the projects and prolonged time between one another, do not lead to issues of dependency and local labor displacement, unlike other types of volunteering (Ellis, 2003; Guttentag, 2009; Laleman et al., 2007; McGehee & Andereck, 2008). As has been seen in contexts of conflict or oppression (VSO, 2002 as cited in Sherraden et al., 2008, p. 406), a close cultural contact can provide (1) *psychological support* to a host organization working with disadvantaged and former street youth. The informal and friendly encounters between KOTO trainees and foreign university students become, in the words of the KOTO founder, "acts of validation and empowerment". They symbolize recognition of the "Other" as a valuable person and when most of the trainees have been through traumatic experiences,

from extreme poverty to physical abuse, these relationships and reciprocities become more significant.

Likewise, a university program that sends a group of students every year means: for the host organization, an (2) *expansion of their network base* and, for the sending community, potential development of their (3) *global and civic engagement*. In a similar way to experiences of corporate volunteering (c.f. Vian, Feeley, MacLeod, Richards, & McCoy, 2007), university volunteering represents for the host community an institutional partnership with important benefits for their organizational capacity in terms of funds and labor. However, the support of university volunteering is not reduced to organizational relationships, but rather is extended to the students themselves.

Post-volunteer involvement can be an important source of social capital for the host community, as other studies have demonstrated (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Spencer, 2010). Indeed, these Australian university students have shown an increased *global and civic engagement* by providing relevant benefits to KOTO after the volunteer program. A number of them have been involved in events to raise funds, negotiate corporate sponsorships for KOTO or motivate students to volunteer at this organization, and one of them has even become part of KOTO staff helping to establish their new branch in Ho Chi Minh. Furthermore, the fact that a number of ex volunteers have kept email contact with many trainees must be recognized as potential social capital for further transnational collaboration in the future. After all, the KOTO trainees passed from being neglected data in an ocean of social problems mentioned in bureaucratic reports, to being subjects of rights within a community-based project with transnational ties; ties that can be activated by each one of them through a single email or a message in the Facebook® group "(University name) + KOTO = Family".

On the other hand, the socialization between these two different groups of youth was extremely desirable given the hospitality training focus of the host organization and the international approach of the sending university. (4) *Intercultural and language competence* were officially the most highly regarded impacts from an institutional point of view. KOTO, for example, left it very clear in its feedback:

> Strong results in social interaction, English language skills and cultural exchange areas. Trainees were exposed to "Western concepts" and participating in new activities with the volunteers took the mystique out of dealing with foreigners and gave the trainees more confidence in English conversation skills (Volunteering program assessment).

Interestingly, cultural training is relevant not only to KOTO, but also to the university considering its continuous attempt to internationalize its curriculums. Most of the students on the volunteer program have attended workshops or conferences about crosscultural communication and even enrolled in subjects or courses dedicated to this topic, as is the case with the popular International Business degree. Nowadays, in an increasingly multicultural global society, intercultural skills are part of the basic toolkit one needs to apply for a job (Nyíri & Breidenbach, 2009). In this sense, a university volunteer program represents an opportunity to improve the chances of future employment for both volunteers and hosts.

Finally, vacation volunteering in developing countries through a university program signifies, as one of the interviewees said, a "safe experience" for the students' (5) *personal and professional development.* University students are attracted to the university framework of volunteer tourism because they perceive it as a supplement to their learning process; as a "safe" way of gaining experience in a controlled situation and in a short timeframe. From these experiences, they not only learn to work in interdisciplinary groups and apply specific

skills in psychology, education and the like, but they also get inspiration and insights about their career planning, including decisions about their future volunteer engagement:

> **Jane** I am thinking of doing longer term volunteer placements and am thinking of doing a masters in TESOL so I can teach English to older students – possibly similar ages to the KOTO students.

> **Cynthia** It has really made me think about doing future volunteering and maybe even working in Vietnam.

Thus, these comments suggest that, similar to the results of most empirical studies on volunteering and service (c.f. Kirlin, 2002; Sherraden et al., 2008), one last possible positive outcome of IVS programs in the university context is that, albeit short-term, they may lead to a longer commitment to volunteering.

The challenges of a *volunteering* language

Considering the impacts evidenced in this paper, it is possible to conclude that a university program of international volunteering can produce various positive outcomes for the host and sending organizations in terms of *intercultural understanding*. Yet, such outcomes are not limited to a cultural exchange. Close cultural contact represents real value and long-term support for the host organization, not in the form of "one-way" aid, but in the form of reciprocal relations of mutual learning; reciprocity and mutuality are the real sources of value production, resembling the conclusions of most service-learning literature (Rosenberger, 2000, p. 27). In contrast, the goal of *development aid* seems to not only be unrealistic in this context, but also undesirable, as it can potentially produce negative outcomes such as role ambiguity and public skepticism. Still, what is not really clear is *how* the university design of IVS can use a language of volunteering for the purpose of *intercultural understanding* without there being high and perhaps unrealistic expectations about what the student-volunteers can actually deliver.

   The advertisement of the university program was explicit about the educational goals of the project: it is an opportunity to "become aware of and involved in global issues and especially those of developing nations" (university program website) or to gain "insight into Asia-Pacific issues including urban poverty, development & conservation" (university flyer). However, a language of "good intentions" constantly mediated the advertisement, by calling university students to "be the difference" and "contribute" (university flyer). As it has been argued in other contexts of volunteer tourism, "'a language of 'making a difference', 'doing something worthwhile' or 'contributing to the future of others'" might be disguising a development agenda and at the same time reinforcing unreflective volunteer practices (Simpson, 2004, p. 683). Confronted with this argument, sending organizations are left with challenging questions: is a language of "good intentions" simply tying the programs to an unachievable goal of *development aid* while adding nothing to the one of *intercultural understanding*? Furthermore, would a language of *volunteering* survive without making reference to unrealistic expectations?

   On the other hand, although clearly there was a disconnect between KOTO expectations and student volunteer capacities, we need to consider that the volunteering discourse was probably responsible for the open and committed intercultural learning that took place in this project. A volunteering framework facilitates crosscultural connections that might not be as productive and emotional under other frameworks such as *service learning*, *cultural exchange* or *educational tourism*. Indeed, many authors have theorized that "volunteering" is a powerful narrative to engage foreigners and locals in less superficial and more intense,

beneficial and genuine social interactions (Broad, 2003; Brown, 2005; McIntosh & Zahra, 2008). The evidence found through this research suggests that, when feelings of "giving" and "gratitude" are part of crosscultural interactions, emotional friendships and solidarities are likely to appear.

Thus, sending organizations are left with even more questions of an ethical and practical nature: should they encourage volunteering instead of, for example, service learning languages, in spite of the excess of authority that volunteer labels invest on young university students? Yet, if university projects of IVS were designed through a language of service learning, would host organizations and university students embrace the experience with the same type of openness, commitment and genuine interest?

These questions do not necessarily pretend to encourage volunteer-oriented sending organizations to transform their language and adopt a service-learning framework. After all, service learning is not a language free of challenges or issues of power either (Butin, 2003, p. 1682; Rosenberger, 2000, p. 35). In reality, the role of these questions, and of this paper as a whole, is to encourage these organizations to recognize the latent challenges and address the colonial connotations of a volunteering language.

Links to issues in sustainable tourism

It is interesting to note that many of the issues raised in this paper were raised long ago in the writings of the pioneers of the concept of sustainable tourism. The need for reciprocity between hosts and guests, for mutual respect, for give and take on both sides, and for the formation of long-term relationships between visitors and the visited, all were keen areas of discussion by writers such as Smith (1977) and Krippendorf (1987). This paper picks up the trail in the new much more global world of the twenty-first century, and tackles the really difficult part of the sustainable tourism concept – implementation and improvement.

Note on contributor

Carlos M. Palacios is currently a PhD candidate at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, based in the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion. His dissertation focuses on the role of critical reflection in crosscultural service learning and volunteering. The research discussed in this paper was carried out while the author was undertaking postgraduate studies in Applied Anthropology also at Macquarie University.

Notes

1. The term "voluntoured" refers to the host organization staff and the target population of the program. For an academic use of the term, refer to McGehee & Andereck (2008).
2. See Barkham (2006) "Are these the new colonialists?", Brodie and Griffiths (2006) "Are gappers really the new colonialists?", Frean (2006) "Gap years create 'new colonialists'", Klaushofer

(2007) "'Voluntourists' Told not to bothe*r*" and Womack (2007) "Gap-year students 'wasting time on projects'", among others.

3. Smith, Ellis, and Brewis (2005), Sherraden et al. (2006) and Sherraden et al. (2008) agree that these two, development aid and international understanding, are the two principal goals of IVS.

4. Specifically, KOTO provides hospitality training with both practical and theoretical components in the fields of cookery, English language, front-of-house bar and service operations. Additionally, the trainees have the opportunity to develop their confidence and capabilities through work experience at restaurants and hotels.

5. It is important to clarify that the consent of the participants was confirmed in writing and also that, in the interest of privacy, their names in this paper were changed and the name of their university is not specified.

6. In Latin America and elsewhere, there is an ongoing debate about how a Western worldview has permeated the desires, ideas and attitudes of non-Western intellectuals, decision makers and educators, among others (c.f. Bahl & Dirlik, 2000; Quijano & Ennis, 2000). As Sardar explains, people from Asia, Africa and Latin America "use the West, almost instinctively, as the standard for judgments" (1999, p. 44). In this debate, "Eurocentrism" is the concept usually used to refer to the bias that non-Western societies maintain in their conceptions due to a Western cultural influence.

7. This information comes from my personal journal and in this case I decided not to mention the specific details of the situation as it is mixed with private information that the participants disclosed to me in a personal manner.

8. This conceptual model is adapted from Sherraden et al.'s international volunteering and service impact research model (2008). Yet, certain dimensions of the original model go beyond the scope of this paper and were not included in the model.

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