



VOLUNTEER TOURISM—“INVOLVE ME AND I WILL LEARN”?

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Abstract: Voluntourism or volunteer tourism is increasingly available and popular amongst everyday tourists in different parts of the world. Despite its seeming virtue and it often being positioned as a form of “justice” or “goodwill” tourism, critics in the public media have begun to question and criticize the effectiveness or “real” value of volunteer tourism. However, academic work has not yet critiqued volunteer tourism in the same manner. This paper thus provides a critical and timely review of volunteer tourism, using interviews and participant observation with 11 respondents on a volunteer tourism trip to South Africa. This paper reviews volunteer tourists’ motivations (what prompted their participation); performances of the “self” in volunteer tourism; and the tensions and paradoxes surrounding volunteer tourism. **Keywords:** Voluntourism, volunteer tourism, motivation, performances, Singapore, South Africa. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The pitch is simple. Instead of two weeks sipping wine somewhere comfortable, somewhere scenic, put your money to better use and volunteer your labour to a Third World charity or an aid agency. The idea oozes with virtue. And when something sounds so good, I get bothered. For one thing, I have to wonder what real value volunteer tourists offer their hosts.

The cynic in me suspects that these short-timers take home more from their slumming in the Third World than leave behind for the underprivileged they are supposed to help... There is the cleansing of developed-world middle-class guilt. There might even be the opportunity to use the experience on a college application or job resume (Kwa 2007).

Volunteer tourism (a form of tourism where the tourists volunteer in local communities as part of his or her travel) is becoming increasingly available and popular amongst everyday tourists in different parts of the world. Despite its seeming virtue and it often being positioned

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as a form of “justice” or “goodwill” tourism (see Butcher 2003; Scheyvens 2007; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004), critics in the public media (usually in the form of newspaper commentaries as cited above) have increasingly begun to question the effectiveness or “real” value of volunteer tourism (Bennett 2008; Bowes 2008; Judith Brodie, cited in Griffiths 2007; Kwa 2007; Mahti 2007; Sudderuddin 2007). Between those who applaud volunteer tourism’s presupposed benefits and those who prefer to take a more cynical view towards the phenomena, there is arguably a lack of a middle-ground with substantial research that presents a balanced view of volunteer tourism for what it really is. Most interestingly, there appears to be a dearth of academic pieces that have taken a critical view of volunteer tourism. For the increasing numbers of lay people interested in volunteer tourism and the agencies providing “voluntourism vacations”, there is a critical need for research to provide a firm foundation for a deeper understanding of volunteer tourism—in both its positive and negative aspects. This paper acknowledges this need, and focuses in particular on individual volunteer tourists’ experiences, using fieldwork with a group of volunteer tourists from the student-formed team “Action Africa” from the National University of Singapore.

This paper begins with an exploration of respondents’ motivations for participating in volunteer tourism, followed by a discussion on how particular motivations, perspectives and objectives of volunteer tourism is “performed” on the ground. This research has found that at least within the group of 11 volunteer tourists interviewed, motivations often revolved around the desire to travel or to visit a different or “exotic” destination. Also, while volunteer tourists interviewed did allude to some changes in opinions after their experiences, it was inconclusive as to whether this has led to substantial changes in their value-system, social consciousness, or willingness to volunteer in other arenas after their volunteer tourism experience. This is contrary to earlier findings by other authors that has mostly suggested that volunteer tourism has very direct and tangible positive outcomes amongst volunteer tourists (Broad 2003; Brown and Morrison 2003; Campbell and Smith 2006; Halpenny and Caissie 2003; McGehee and Santos 2004; McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Scheyvens 2002, 2007; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Uriely, Reichel and Ron 2003; Wearing 2001, 2003; Zahra and McIntosh 2007). The aim of this paper is thus to uncover the underlying tensions surrounding these motivations and performances and discuss what indeed the aims of volunteer tourism projects are, who determines these aims, and how differing notions are continually performed and negotiated throughout the entire volunteer tourism experience.

SITUATING VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Central to volunteer tourism is the idea that tourism ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to locals in host-destinations. Mass tourism is often criticized for its failure to deliver promised ben-

efits of developing tourism in developing countries, while reinforcing dependencies. In response to criticisms of mass tourism, many have sought to develop new ways of conducting tourism to reform the industry of its ills. Some avenues include that of alternative tourism (Weaver 1991, 1995), and sustainable tourism (Butler 1990, 1991; Cohen 1987; Pearce 1987).

It is within such paradigms that volunteer tourism is situated—where attempts are made to develop a form of travel that is more benign or beneficial to the local community and the ecological environment. In one of the most comprehensive volumes dedicated specifically to the study of volunteer tourism, Wearing (2001) situates volunteer tourism within the field of alternative tourism and ecotourism (see also Wearing and Neil 1997; Wearing and Neil 2001; Weiler and Richins 1995) and suggests that volunteer tourism has the potential to induce change, specifically “value change and changed consciousness” (Wearing 2003:x). Wearing suggests that volunteer tourism has positive influences on its participants, and this line of thought is echoed in many other academic works—volunteer tourism is frequently seen as an alternative to the ills observed in other forms of tourism (Gray and Campbell 2007) or is at least assumed to bring about positive changes in either the volunteer tourists (Broad 2003; Brown and Morrison 2003; Campbell and Smith 2006; Cousins 2007; Halpenny and Caissie 2003; McGehee and Santos 2004; McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Scheyvens 2002; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Uriely et al 2003; Wearing 2001; Wearing 2003; Zahra and McIntosh 2007) or in host communities (Scheyvens 2002; Uriely et al 2003).

In the context of this study however, many participants may not necessarily see themselves as “volunteer tourists” per se, but describe the activity instead as “international service-learning”. Service learning is defined as

[a] method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, and which are coordinated with a formal educational institution to address and support an academic curriculum (University of Colorado 2005).

Unlike volunteerism that seeks to provide unpaid work on behalf of others, the main focus of service-learning is on learning and personal development. Service-learning is part of a broader set of educational tools termed experiential learning, “defined as a process where the learner needs to reflect upon the experience [in this case, the experience of volunteering overseas] and derives new learning” (Osland et al 1971:67). The primary goal of service-learning is to cultivate responsible citizenship and encourage students’ active involvement in solving social issues (Canada and Speck 2001). Service learning is thus an attempt that “speaks to our sense of duty and fairness in the world: those who can supporting those who cannot, giving opportunities to those left behind” (Butin 2005:vii).

Using existing works on both volunteer tourism and service-learning as a basis for understanding volunteer tourism experiences, this paper

goes further in examining the motivations and performances in volunteer tourism, and argues that individual experiences of volunteer tourism vary from person to person, and what each volunteer tourist takes out of his or her experience often results from a complex interplay between his or her original motivations, the specific context of volunteer work (for example, the type of volunteer project and the approachability of the local community), and the composition of the volunteer team amongst other factors. Indeed, the negotiation of “heterogeneous” spaces “with blurred boundaries (where activities and people mingle, allowing a wide range of encounters and greater expressiveness)” (Edensor 2000:327) is often more than evident in volunteer tourism. In many instances, volunteer tourism destinations are the homes of locals, including those where volunteer tourists simply live with locals in homestay programmes. In these heterogeneous spaces, tourism becomes less of a standard routine where tourists are able to gaze from a distance. Instead, tourists need to continually perform their identities around interruptions and distractions—activities of locals that were often artificially excluded in conventional “tourism bubbles”. Volunteer tourism centers around such “interruptions” and “distractions”, where volunteers’ activities revolve on doing volunteer services for and with local people. Volunteer tourism thus functions within such heterogeneous spaces, and perhaps it is indeed spaces that are heterogeneous that attract volunteer tourists in the first place.

This attraction to heterogeneous spaces can be understood by the modern tourists’ search for a “sensuous experience”, where tourism is “based more on ‘being, doing, touching *and* seeing’ rather than just ‘seeing’” (Cloeke and Perkins 1998:189; Crouch and Desforges 2003:7). Crouch argues that instead of the distanced “post tourist”, the modern tourist is able to embody encounters, and “tourism becomes validated in human practice in relation to knowledge. Knowledge is constructed through encounters, and space is important in informing this knowledge” (Crouch 2002:205). The concept of knowledge, according to Crouch, is no longer “a product or end point, but informed, informing, and continuing to inform, unstable, fragmented and valued” (2002:217). Through tourism, tourists are in a constant engagement with various encounters in spaces, which in turn disturb and reformulate knowledges. Indeed, Edensor argues that in this continual negotiation of spaces and knowledges, individuals also both consciously and subconsciously “perform” their own identities and positionalities through the “strategic ‘stage-management’ of impressions characterize[d by] the ways in which people attempt to convey particular meanings and values in social settings” (2000:323).

The performance of selves in volunteer tourism should not however be assumed to be one of positive nature. As with existing criticisms in service-learning that look into the participant’s resistance towards the learning process, including their unwillingness to engage in service-learning course material and attributing sufferings to the service-recipients’ own fault (see Butin 2003; Clark and Young 2005; Jones 2002; Jones, Gilbride-Brown and Gariorski 2005; Kegan 1994; O’Grady 2000), volunteer tourism experiences may or may not lead to positive

changes in its participants. Indeed, Butin warns that some examples of service-learning (and volunteer tourism in this case) could possibly degenerate into a “voyeuristic exploitation of the ‘cultural other’ that masquerades as academically sanctioned ‘servant leadership’” (Butin 2003:1675).

Volunteer Tourism from Singapore

In Singapore, many youths are actively involved in overseas volunteer or community service expeditions, where participants typically work in a team under the auspices of their school or student organizations. The rise of overseas volunteering expeditions from Singapore was propelled by two developments, the first being a compulsory community involvement programme implemented by the Ministry of Education in Singapore for all pre-tertiary schools in 1997. This has created a greater awareness of the value of community involvement and is now seen as part and parcel of a student’s education. The second related development is the creation of Youth Expedition Project (YEP) in 2000, under the non-government organization (NGO), Singapore International Foundation (SIF, from 2000–2005), and subsequently managed by the National Youth Council (NYC) since 2005.

Under the administration of SIF between 2000 to October 2005, YEP supported over 9,500 youth in 450 community service projects overseas (Youth Expedition Project 2007, statistics since NYC took over are not available publicly). Volunteer services are provided in 10 Asian countries (Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam; and China and India). A typical YEP project would then consist of activities such as the volunteer component, structured reflection sessions, cultural exchange sessions and issue-based learning sessions. How the YEP team is conducted, the choice of location, local partner organization, type of volunteer component and other planned sessions, as well as the recruitment of participants, are largely organized by the YEP team leaders (who are usually student leaders), although YEP does provide some guidelines on what is acceptable or not, and disburse funding accordingly. Investments in YEP then, are built on the aims and expectations that YEP can

give Singapore youth an international experience in the area of the issues they are passionate about. It gives them an opportunity to learn to work together as a team and engage people from a different culture. It helps them to develop a strong conviction about their roles and obligations towards their communities and society at large. The long-term impacts of these YEP teams are tremendous as the goodwill and positive Singapore presence in these countries will contribute to the fostering of friendships and meaningful exchanges especially at the people to people level (Youth Expedition Project 2007).

Action Africa—National University of Singapore, University Scholars Programme

Volunteer tourists interviewed for this paper however, were independent of YEP and were instead from a student-initiated team from the

National University of Singapore (NUS) that had named their group, “Action Africa”. Action Africa was organized under the auspices of the University Scholars Programme (USP)—an interdisciplinary academic programme for NUS undergraduates that was modeled after the Harvard University’s Core Curriculum Programme. Action Africa was initiated under USP’s “Global Programme” and was a community service and cultural exploration trip to South Africa that saw a group of 12 participants (including the researcher) spending 26 days in South Africa in December 2004. The aims of the community service project were to “facilitate the profitable growth of black tourism and to assist home entrepreneurs in creating sustainable ventures” in Melkhoutfontein, South Africa (Action Africa Expedition 2007).

Participants of Action Africa were all NUS students and were recruited by the team leader who initiated the project. Recruitment notices were emailed to all the undergraduate students in NUS. Interested parties then emailed the leader of the team and suitable candidates were invited to a one-to-one interview with the leader. About 25 people turned up for interviews, of which the leader selected a team of 15 participants. Three selected participants dropped out for various personal reasons before the trip itself and 12 final participants (including the researcher) went ahead with the trip to South Africa.

The trip was split up into two major sections, the first being a 12-day volunteer component, where participants refurbished three homes into homestays and cafes catering to local tourists in the township of Melkhoutfontein located in the Western Cape of South Africa. The second section of the trip (14 days) was the cultural exploration component, and the team visited various destinations in South Africa, including the Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Oudtshoorn, Knysna, Port Elizabeth, Pretoria and Johannesburg. At each town or city, participants were met with local (and often independent) travel guides who then explained much of the local social and political contexts in each destination.

Action Africa was organized like YEP trips and had requested funding from YEP. However, YEP rejected its funding proposal as Action Africa was deemed to be outside the geographical scope defined by YEP (ASEAN countries, China and India). Action Africa was instead funded by the USP, Lee Foundation (a charitable foundation in Singapore created to fund programs that promote education and other philanthropic work), and a number of private donors. Each participant received a funding subsidy of \$828 to \$1,175 that was used to offset the total trip costs (excluding personal expenses) of US\$2,649. The different tiers of funding subsidies existed as USP students received additional funding from the USP programme.

Study Methods

As elaborated on earlier, I had joined the team, Action Africa, as a full member, and was involved throughout the 26 day expedition to South Africa no differently from the other members of the team. I

participated in team activities from its initial preparations through to the post-expedition presentations and photo-exhibition. I also worked together with the team in their volunteer services. This manner of research as a full participant was undertaken as I felt that observations and interviews during the expedition reflect a more accurate account of volunteers' experiences, where feelings of discomfort and resistance, or satisfaction and attachment were often most immediate and unpolished.

The bulk of fieldwork for this paper then, were mostly one-to-one interviews in informal settings, most of which were deliberately semi-structured to give respondents the freedom to elaborate on their experiences. In total, the researcher conducted 33 one-to-one interviews with the 11 volunteer tourists. Each volunteer tourist was interviewed on three occasions—the first interview was conducted prior to the trip to South Africa; the second interview was conducted within the first week of the trip; and the last interview was conducted in the last week of the trip. Questions asked included: why they joined the expedition; what were their expectations of the trip; whether their expectations were met; what were some of the things they felt they achieved or failed to achieve; and if the trip made any difference to them in general.

Informal discussions between members of the South Africa team throughout the volunteer tourism expedition were also noted and recorded in the form of a research diary. The researchers also observed the nightly discussion sessions throughout the entire trip. These were initially led by the leader of the team (pseudonym, Jacky) and the researcher (on alternate days in the first eight days of the trip). These sessions usually began with a debrief of the day's activities, followed by the team's thoughts on what they had encountered in the day. The themes discussed in the first eight days included: 1. first impressions of South Africa in general; 2. sharing of "life stories" between participants (each participant drew pictures to share the key moments of their lives with other participants); 3. their impressions of Melkhoutfontein (the volunteer site); and 4. what volunteering in South Africa meant to them. Subsequently, the participants took over the discussion sessions—each member was to lead the discussion every night on a topic he or she felt was important and worthy of bringing up to the whole team. Topics were not vetted by Jacky or the researcher in advance of the sessions, although members could informally discuss their chosen topic in advance with Jacky if he or she wanted to. Themes that were brought up by the participants then included:

1. Social issues they observed in South Africa, for example, the high rate of unemployment, drugs, violence, AIDS, apartheid, racial issues, and South African youths and their aspirations.
2. How does their volunteering in South Africa help? For example, did their volunteering actually make a difference to the people in Melkhoutfontein?
3. Team bonding activities. Games and various activities were conducted to get to know other participants better.

To aid documentation, most interviews and discussion sessions were tape-recorded with consent from the respondents. The recordings were then transcribed under a pseudonym for further analysis. As suggested Cloke, Cook, Crang, Goodwin, Painter and Philo (2004), the researcher always informed the respondents at the start of the interview or discussion session that he or she was “free to switch off the tape-recorder and terminate the interview if the respondent is upset by the issues raised” (2004:164). This was done in hope of empowering the respondents during the research process to give them greater authority over what they thought should be included in research or not. The transcribed interviews were then coded in themes such as “motivations”, “performances of the self”, and “perceptions of aid-recipient” to facilitate analysis.

While joining the team enabled the researcher much opportunity in engendering trust and rapport with respondents, it also brought about significant tensions in the interactions with my respondents. As a full member of the team, I spent almost all my time with my team mates (that were also my “research respondents”) as I lived, worked and played with them. There was hardly a line between what constituted research and what did not. Madge elaborates this tension clearly, highlighting that research involves

playing out a multiplicity of changing roles during the course of research. These roles, which are sometimes complementary, sometimes clashing, and which are contingent on our positionality, will affect the data given/gained and our subsequent interpretations. In other words, they will influence what we produce as knowledge. Personal relationships with people will influence the ethical decisions we make regarding what we create as knowledge. Power, ethics and knowledge are interconnected (cited in WGSF 1997:94–95).

However, Spreitzhofer argues the benefits of being an “insider” in research, as this often translated into a “willingness to answer” on the part of the respondent as a result of mutual confidence between researcher and researched (Spreitzhofer 1998:981). It is in fact this “insiderness” and “integratedness” (Sibley 1995) that allows in-depth explorations of the volunteer tourism encounter in this research. As such, this paper should be read with an awareness of the researcher’s possible biases, and is as much a (re)presentation of opinions of respondents interviewed, as well as a piece of work detailing the researcher’s biases and standpoints as a subject enmeshed and embodying the complex dynamics of volunteer tourism from Singapore.

MOTIVATIONS OF VOLUNTEER TOURISTS

Volunteer tourists often have a multitude of motivations, and altruistic motivations are often not mutually exclusive with leisure seeking or self-development motivations. Broad, for example, suggested that “motivations traditionally associated with volunteering, such as altruism, will be relevant, along with those associated with recreational travelers, such as a search for fun, excitement, adventure, and meeting

others” (2003:64). Many volunteer tourists may be simultaneously prompted by opportunities to learn and enrich oneself, to enjoy the feeling of being part of a team, or to express their individuality and accomplishment through engaging in volunteer work (see [Wearing and Neil 2001](#)). Even though volunteer tourism seems to speak of “justice” or “goodwill” tourism that prioritizes the benefits availed to volunteer aid-recipients ([Butcher 2003](#); [Scheyvens 2002](#); [Stoddart and Rogerson 2004](#)), potential benefits to the volunteer worker are also important motivators. In fact, interviews for this research has revealed that key motivators often revolve around the “self”, most explicitly stated in section headers starting with “*I want to...*”. Also intrinsic in this focus on the “self” is the comparison with the “other”, where the “other” could take on a range a characters, from the “other” volunteer tourist, the “other” peer or member of volunteer’s society who do not have a volunteer tourism experience, or the “other” encountered in the volunteer experience—the locals in host-communities. A study of motivations clearly illustrates desired identities of the “self” in comparison to the “other” and serves as a precursor to consider the tensions between desired outcomes of altruism, aid, and development in the host destination, versus personal development of the volunteer tourists.

“I Want to Travel”

Similar to [Broad’s \(2003\)](#) research in the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project (in Phuket, Thailand), many volunteer tourists interviewed stated the desire “to travel” as one of their main motivations. Volunteer tourists interviewed believed that travelling allowed them to see something new and exotic, to do something fun and exciting, or simply to escape mundane tasks at home. One volunteer tourist, Charlotte revealed her reasons for going to South Africa,

Frankly speaking, [my] secondary [reason] is voluntary work. But coming first is more of like *to travel abroad and get away from Singapore*. What attracted me was the South Africa place which is further away from Asia. You know, I don’t want to go to like Cambodia, India. I mean I would go one day but *if I have the opportunity to go further away from that I would grab the opportunity* (interview in 2004, author’s emphasis).

It is noteworthy that Charlotte’s main motivation is to “get away from Singapore”, and to visit a place “which is further away from Asia”. Similarly, another volunteer tourist, Stephen, said: “I think initially I wanted to learn more about Africa and all along I wanted to come to this country” (interview in 2004). Participants’ geographical imaginations of South Africa was that of a far-away and exotic destination, somewhere “different”, and not frequently visited by other Singaporeans. This makes the choice to participate in volunteer tourism not too different from conventional choices that tourists make in deciding holiday destinations to visit.

To the leader of the team however, the motive “to travel” was related to his desire to immerse in foreign cultures and to experience something very novel. He relates,

I initiated the project because I wanted to experience how Africa was truly like instead of all the simple stereotypes. And after taking the class on Africa and hearing the experiences of the Professor, I feel that the only way to truly understand what Africa truly was, was to see it myself (interview in 2004).

The volunteering activity during the trip was thus seen as a means to better understand local contexts or to develop personal relationships with hosts, making the experience a more “authentic” encounter with what “Africa truly was”.

“To travel” therefore encapsulates differing motivations and desires even between a small group of 11 volunteer tourists. Common amongst these desires however, is the notion that travel is a means in which youths “stretch out beyond the local to draw in places from around the globe” (Desforges 1998:176). Participants’ motivations showed that some had viewed volunteer tourism as an opportunity to perform the desired identities of one who is well-traveled beyond conventional destinations, and who knows and understands the world. Indeed, Munt argued that “traveling has emerged as an important informal qualification with the passport acting, so to speak, as professional certification; a record of achievement and experience” (Munt 1994:112). The clear domination of wanting “to travel” among participants thus shows the desire to gain cultural capital through the collection of knowledge and experience in volunteer tourism, and to perform desired identities that will in turn secure “entry to the privileges of work, housing and lifestyle” (Desforges 1998:177).

“I Want to Contribute”

In contrast, out of the 11 interviewees, only two responded with a strong statement that their main motivation is to volunteer and contribute to the local community. While volunteering was mentioned by all interviewees, it was often mentioned in tandem with the advantages that came along with volunteering (especially in terms of learning). For example, Anne mentioned that

I think it offers me a different avenue to know the country. Better than to go out on package tours. Whereas for an expedition like this, apart from seeing the country and getting to experience it as a tourist sightseeing, there’s an added dimension of doing community service (interview in 2004).

Fellow volunteer, Stephen, similarly reflected that “community service was never a primary objective of this trip. . . My primary objective was to come here to learn, and to learn through community work” (interview in 2004). This attitude of volunteering and getting to know a place better is also reflected in what volunteer Jacky has to say,

Personally I feel that *I'm a bit of both*. When I'm doing my community service, I see myself as a volunteer but after the community service phase, I would see myself more as a tourist than a volunteer *although I wouldn't hesitate to tell people that the reason why I am in South Africa is to volunteer*. Because I feel that it is very important when you volunteer to also *understand other aspects of the country and to get a more holistic view of the country* then just simply seeing a part of the country that is in desperate need of help, and overlooking all else in the country (interview in 2004, author's emphasis).

Volunteering is thus largely seen as an activity that was beneficial to both host-communities and to the volunteers themselves. At least for this group of respondents, their motivations to participate in volunteer tourism are not outwardly centred on contributing to the host-communities.

"I Want to See If I Can Do This"

Volunteer tourists interviewed also tended to see volunteering as a challenge. This is in line with the belief that "people express who/what they are, to themselves and to others, by engaging in action-leisure activities" (Kernan and Domzal 2001). Going to Africa had conjured images of danger and inaccessibility to some respondents (though this itself is another stereotype of what "Africa" was about), and this impression coupled with the demands of physical labor in volunteer work repels some people from the expedition, while enticing others. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the volunteer tourists interviewed tended to see themselves as highly adventurous and motivated by the desire to prove themselves. One volunteer, Betsy, for example said: "Not many people come to Africa, and I have never volunteered before. So it's just something I thought I should try, you know [to] see if I could do it too" (discussion with team in 2004).

Such motivations are very similar to previous research on long-haul travelers or backpackers who see their trip as a challenge or a ritual to signify their coming of age (see Desforges 1998; Desforges 2000). Respondents like Betsy displayed a desire to use the volunteering experience to "realize a different, undeveloped side of [her] personality or to take on a "new" role in a context where no one will make [her] conform to expectations about [herself]" (Edensor 2000:325).

"It's More Convenient This Way"

Finally, another common motivation, surprisingly, was the practical benefits of joining a volunteer tourism trip. Four participants alluded to how it was practical to join the team. Anne, for example said: "I thought South Africa was a very inaccessible place... It's a lot easier to come with a school trip, then to come on my own" (interview in 2004). Additionally, Stephen talked about the subsidies provided by the university and other fund-raisers, saying: "to go as a tourist, you will spend a lot more money. So it's the cost consideration, you come [to South Africa] for almost a month, you only spend about \$1810"

(interview in 2004). This case however, possibly illustrates the expectations of some volunteer tourists who may be interested only due to the fact that it can be a cheap or subsidized holiday. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake an in-depth study on this issue and to ascertain if this situation pertains only to Singapore, it is important for coordinators of volunteer tourism to acknowledge this situation and balance the need for subsidies to enable volunteer tourism to remain accessible to youths, versus the possible outcome that youths are simply making use of volunteer tourism to go on a cheap holiday and have no intentions to help host communities or engage in critical out-of-classroom style learning.

PERFORMANCES IN VOLUNTEER TOURISM

As with all individuals, volunteer tourists are active narrators of their experiences, seeking to perform their “selves” with elements of self-authorship (see Kegan 1994) and self-actualization (see Giddens 1991). Giddens (1991) argues that “for contemporary generations, identity and life-story explications have become an internal affair” (cited in Elsrud 2001:600), and like all other choices an individual makes, the choice of where to travel to, how to travel, and what activities to engage in while travelling are all parts of the narrative about one’s identity. Thus the “self” is continually performed both externally to one’s audiences (friends, relatives, and other people one comes across) and internally to strengthen one’s self-identity. In undertaking a volunteer project during their overseas trip, the tourist is in fact “expressing a story about who he or she is or wants to be” (Elsrud 2001:599), and actively “constructing who one might be henceforth” (cited in Noy 2004:84; Ochs 1997). This section thus relays what sorts of “selves” respondents interviewed desire to perform outwardly in their choice to engage in volunteer tourism in South Africa.

As alluded to earlier in the section on motivations, volunteer tourists interviewed have appeared to desire an “authentic” understanding towards local situations. In these instances, volunteers exhibit a sense that they are developing (or at least performing a “self” that has developed) a deeper understanding of local conditions. For example, Betsy reflects in her journal, saying that, “this brings me to something that’s been bugging me ever since I reached SA [South Africa]. Income disparity here is glaringly wide. It is grotesque” (shared with the author during an interview in 2004). Betsy was greatly disturbed by the income disparity and when interviewed again at a later stage, she shared her revelation about studying Law:

I just went to Law school ‘cause I couldn’t get into Medicine [Faculty]. And for the past one plus year I was just drifting along. But here, I realized how much legal constitutions can mean to a country and its people. I guess coming from Singapore where everything’s prim and proper I kind of took it for granted. Maybe one day I can use my legal knowledge to help other people, like what the volunteer did for Yellow [who had earlier received aid from a previous volunteer

who helped him expedite his legal claims for public housing] (Interview in 2004).

While Betsy did not specify if it was the act of volunteering or the in-depth immersion with working in a local township that brought about such thoughts, it can be observed that through her volunteer tourism experiences in South Africa, Betsy was able to connect her impressions of places and issues with what she was doing back in Singapore. She outwardly expressed that her experience in South Africa had a profound impact on her attitude towards her studies and future career. She also conveyed that she was only beginning to grasp the impact of her experience. Giddens refers to such encounters of anxiety and opportunity as “fateful moments” (1991), or “significant points of transition in people’s lives where reflexivity is heightened because decisions have to be made about the self and self-actualization that will have repercussions for self-identity and lifestyle for a considerable number of years ahead” (Desforges 2000:935). In this instance, Betsy was also subtly “othering” her peers back home, insinuating that through her volunteer tourism experience, she had gained awareness and perception that cannot be achieved by an individual “coming from Singapore” and not venturing beyond these “prim and proper” boundaries.

Jacky, on the other hand, took in his new understanding of places by relating and comparing what he saw in South Africa, with Singapore. When confronted by “others” who are different from himself, he became more self-critical and began to evaluate his own behaviours in different situations. He shares:

what is more salient to me is perhaps the team dynamics and the behaviour and the culture that we bring here ourselves, when viewed in contrast to the locals. . . they were very friendly and as Singaporeans we are generally very unfriendly, very reserved, and very private but these South Africans. . . they are very interested in knowing people different from them. . . and it is impressive that they are so interested in the diversity that the world has to offer, coming from such a history of oppression. . . I think that is something that is quite lacking in Singaporeans who are more apathetic and we do not care much about other cultures. . . (Discussion with team in 2004).

Here, Jacky questions Singaporeans’ attitude towards diversity and finds the curiosity displayed by the South Africans to be highly impressive. He questions the values and behaviours of himself and other Singaporeans through this encounter with the “other”, and engages in the inward negotiation of his “self” in comparison to the South African “other” who was seen to be appreciative and empathetic.

Another volunteer tourist, Jane, shared her personal experience of an internal self-actualization and change. She reflected that

it’s not something that tangible, it’s changed me in certain ways. It’s quite hard to say. . . the most important thing is that the way I see life has changed. In the past I see it as something that you just go through, but when I come here I see that actually part of life is also

to struggle, you have to struggle, overcome difficult things to find the meaning of life. (interview in 2004).

Other than an evident change in her self-perception, Jane also notes that “struggle” or the need to be challenged is a very important part of one’s life. Certainly, volunteer tourism is seen to entail certain risks and challenges, where “feeling scared, exhausted and thoroughly tested is sometimes part of the deal... adventure might involve a certain amount of hardship and unpleasantness” (Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie and Pomfret 2003:8). Volunteer tourists, like adventure tourists and backpackers, then possibly use these risks involved in volunteering overseas to construct and perform their identities (Elsrud 2001). Through her encounter with hosts at volunteer tourism events and her own difficulties and inconveniences experienced as a volunteer, Jane distinguishes herself from “other” non-volunteers, and performs an identity of one who understands and has faced struggles and responded well to these.

The notion that volunteer tourism can be used to perform the “self” however, is also closely related to criticisms leveled at volunteer tourists as they are thought to be seeking opportunities for the sake of resume-building or to appear “cool” or “adventurous” to friends (see Desforges 1998; Desforges 2000). While all the volunteer tourists interviewed agreed that experiences gained would be something they can be proud of and demonstrative of their resilience, tenacity and character, they stopped short of claiming that these are the sole motivations of their volunteer experience. Although many volunteer tourists, including Anne, Joseph and Stephen talked about meeting “real people” through their experience, they also expressed uneasiness in essentialising the locals as “real, authentic tribal Africans”. This is particularly salient perhaps because most of the volunteer tourists on this trip had taken an academic course on “Africa: Communities, Cultures and Civilizations”. In this course, the students were cautioned against stereotyping Africans as “tribal” people or “primitive savages”. It might suffice to say that the volunteer tourists thus displayed and performed a “self” that is sensitive towards the locals, different from “other” mass tourists who are often deemed to be insensitive. However, as tourists, they also displayed an incessant desire to photograph and capture almost everything (ranging from children, to scenery and pictures of the township, to wildlife and flora) they come across. In fact, the group of 11 volunteer tourists collectively took about 14,000 photos in the course of the 26 days. Volunteer tourists do not necessarily shed all characteristics of mass tourists, and are constantly at the crossroads of negotiating and performing their identities as a volunteer and as a tourist.

TENSIONS AND PARADOXES IN VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Learning (or resistance towards it)

The performances of the “self” as a savvy traveler with a verbalized sense of social awareness and openness towards volunteering however,

should be contrasted against the seeming lack of action amongst respondents after the volunteer tourism trip. While there was a sense amongst respondents that the volunteering activity featured greatly in their experience, and that they felt a greater consciousness towards particular societal issues, respondents were not necessarily able or willing to commit to further volunteering activities in other contexts (similar to what was observed in [Sudderuddin 2007](#)). This is in contrast to earlier studies that have suggested that “volunteers are more likely to have denser social networks and to be politically engaged”, and that “volunteers appear to be consistently more active members of society” ([Hodgekinson 2003:36, 51](#)). The tension here then, is whether the objectives of volunteer tourism nurturing “world-ready-youths” with a “strong conviction about their roles and obligations towards their communities and society at large” ([Youth Expedition Project 2007](#)) can be or is actually being fulfilled. Instead of grooming a generation of youths who are passionate about volunteer work, research for this paper seems to suggest that respondents interviewed are instead passionate about travelling and going overseas.

Indeed, in the two years immediately after the trip, the researcher had kept in contact with the interviewees and asked if they had volunteered or travelled overseas in this period. Of the 11 volunteer tourists, only four had volunteered substantially, of which three had conducted their volunteering overseas in trips similar to this one to South Africa. Of these four respondents, one was already a regular volunteer in Singapore prior to joining Action Africa, and the other three were committed to their respective volunteer tourism trips even before the trip to South Africa. This appears to suggest that participating in Action Africa had not significantly altered respondents’ post-trip volunteering activities. Instead, those who were inclined to volunteer would have done so anyway, and this also explains why they had signed up for Action Africa in the first place. Conversely, all participants had gone overseas for travel of significant duration. It should also be noted however, that most participants went overseas for study, language immersions or work and travel purposes. The preferred mode of travel also veered strongly towards backpacking. This emphasizes the original motivations of this group of 11 participants, where volunteering was mainly a means among many others towards understanding local people’s livelihoods and culture. Again, the desire to perform the self-identity of well-travelled individual who understands the world is reiterated, and it appears that within this group of respondents the objective of “travelling” and in turn “getting to know the world” supersedes objectives of volunteering or addressing social injustices through volunteer tourism.

Indeed, the researcher is of the opinion that there is no harm in placing volunteer tourism’s objectives as “travelling” in a meaningful manner where participants are put in suitable positions to encounter “other” cultures and contexts—as long as these encounters are taken positively and reflected upon critically by volunteer tourists. The apparent paradox though, is the possibility that despite the desire to perform “selves” that are sensitive and matured world-travelers, volunteer

tourists could instead end up reinforcing negative stereotypes or misunderstand what their own positions of privilege entails (see next section on democracy or the lack of it).

For example, in the course of volunteer tourism, participants' existing assumptions, stereotypes and privileges may be confronted. While these confrontations acts as an impetus for some to re-evaluate their positions and begin a journey towards change, many others might reject opinions that conflict with their original beliefs. Resistance thus occurs when the volunteer tourism experience exposes participants to what they are not prepared to process. For example, Stephen shares that at times he feels that the locals are not helping themselves. Instilled with values of hard work and conscientiousness, Stephen opines that the South African Blacks are indeed lazy and are poor because they choose to drink and smoke marijuana all day. However, Stephen also says that

But I think maybe it is because I am brought up to believe that as long as I work hard I can succeed. And that is because I am lucky 'cause we have many opportunities. My first reaction is to blame the locals for not working hard for themselves. But maybe there is a bigger problem of society having no opportunities (interview in 2004).

From Stephen's example, we see that some resistance would naturally occur initially. Volunteer tourism should therefore recognize this resistance and address these issues faced by participants.

Democracy (or the lack of it)

Another inherent tension observed is that respondents (whether consciously or not) tended to adopt a "giving attitude". For example, fund-raising events for volunteer tourism are often termed as "*charity* bazaars" or involve "*charity* movie-screenings". Steinback (1951) criticizes this mentality, declaring that "[t]he most overrated virtue... is that of giving. Giving builds up the ego of the giver, makes him superior and higher and larger than the receiver. Nearly always, giving is a selfish pleasure, and in many cases it is a downright destructive and evil thing" (cited in Smillie 1995:29). One volunteer tourist, Jane, displayed this desire to give, saying that, "I thought it'll be tougher, more work. I guess we want to *give* them as much as we can, since we have so much more" (interview in 2004, author's emphasis). Although Jane meant no malice in her statement, and the researcher noted her sincerity in wanting to contribute, her comments bring out the problems when volunteer tourism fails to advance democracy and active citizenship. Jane's desire to give is also accentuated by her awareness of her "having so much more", and this again problematically juxtaposes her position as being superior when compared to the South Africans in the project. Also, her act of giving relieves her of guilt of being in a superior position, but does not in any way change the system of privileges available to her and not available to the aid-recipients.

The paradox herein is that volunteer tourism will almost always involve the "richer" and "better off" providing aid to the "poor" and

“worse off”. Volunteers from Singapore can be easily seen as richer and superior, forming a problematic dichotomy between the volunteers and aid-recipients, where volunteers are in a better position of power to judge and comment on the aid-recipients. “Othering” in this sense could potentially create rifts that hinder the building of strong personal relationships between volunteer and recipient; it can even cause a situation where the volunteer is seen as superior.

Agreeing with this opinion, Voluntary Services Overseas director, Judith Brodie, has criticized that “many ‘volunteer tourism’ trips to developing countries are expensive, poorly planned and unlikely to help local people” (cited in [Griffiths 2007](#)). It is unfortunate in Singapore’s example that despite the widespread use of “service-learning” in volunteer tourism ventures, the underlying concepts of advancing democracy through encouraging open expression of opinions by all levels of society has not been observed. Indeed, volunteer tourism, like community service in Singapore, has tended to be apolitical—largely philanthropic and altruistic, rather than associated with political dimensions of citizenship and advocacy. Volunteer tourists were also hardly encouraged to question why communities in host-countries needed volunteer services. Instead, there is a risk that volunteer tourists can be led to assume that aid-recipients were naturally poor, and failed to understand prevailing circumstances that impede aid-recipients’ efforts to break out of the poverty-cycle (personal observation in 2004). Indeed, “[w]hen viewed as simply helping those ‘less fortunate’, students may fail to see the role that their own privilege plays in the dynamics of power” ([Clark and Young 2005:72](#)). For example, despite motivations and the desire to perform a “self” that is sensitive to local conditions, respondents interviewed may not have an adequately in-depth understanding of the political and social histories of South Africa and this can undermine their ability to appreciate larger issues hampering economic development in South Africa (personal observation in 2004).

Critics have long expressed disapproval towards apolitical community service, declaring that it is purely an institutional means that the state uses to continually reproduce a capitalist status quo while appearing to address issues of inequality in society and allowing citizens to appear concerned and responsible ([Gorham 1992](#)). In this case, participation and support in volunteer tourism might be implicitly accepting structural inequalities and reproducing imparity in current systems without questioning them ([Guarasci and Rimmerman 1996](#); [Rimmerman 1997](#)). While volunteer tourism, especially in Singapore, may appear favourable in enabling the continued stability of the current political climate, it may not fulfill its purpose of achieving greater societal well-being. Instead, volunteer tourism, whether in Singapore or elsewhere, needs to continually evaluate its position and consider bringing in substantial discussions on democracy and active citizenship to achieve its true potential.

CONCLUSION

Through an in-depth study of 11 volunteer tourists from Singapore, this article has highlighted various observations about volunteer tourists' motivations, performances, as well as the tensions and paradoxes in volunteer tourism. Interestingly, this study has found that at least among those interviewed, motivating factors for volunteer tourists were "to travel" rather than "to contribute" or volunteer. Volunteering in the local community was also but one of the many means of travelling to different destinations to "learn about local cultures" or to "go beyond superficial tour packages where you don't see how people really live" (interviews with Betsy, Jacky, and Stephen in 2004). In the section on performances in volunteer tourism, it was also revealed that volunteer tourism was often used as an experience (often reflected in resumes and casual conversations with friends and acquaintances) which volunteer tourists used to perform a "self" suggesting that he or she was a conscious and worldly tourist or individual.

This emphasis on the "self" is perhaps already acknowledged in an understated manner among many involved in organizing volunteer tourism. However, instead of leaving such emphasis on the "self" in the background, it is important to realize upfront that many volunteer tourists are typically more interested in fulfilling objectives relating to the "self". This puts away the altruistic perception of volunteer tourism and allows one to critically assess the nature of volunteer tourism much like any other form of tourism—whether considered as mass or alternative tourism. Indeed, the section on tensions and paradoxes in volunteer tourism highlights the tensions between the differing objectives between funding bodies, versus those of the volunteer tourists themselves. In summary, this paper elucidated that volunteer tourism could indeed be reinforcing negative stereotypes of aid-recipients as inferior or less-able through the process of "othering" by volunteer tourists. Also, if volunteer tourism continues to be organized in an apolitical manner that neglects critical engagement with issues of democracy and active citizenship, it could easily fail to achieve its purported intentions of being "pro-poor" or addressing social inequalities.

Continual and critical reviews of volunteer tourism are thus needed as it emerges with growing popularity. Indeed, tourism forms have been and will continue to tend towards addressing social and environmental "responsibilities" and it is vital for tourism researchers to dwell in detail on the complex issues encountered by tourists, locals at host communities, and businesses or private organizations providing such responsible tourism options. It is hoped that this study has addressed one of the many angles in volunteer tourism and have provided interesting insights on the individuals' experience in volunteer tourism. This paper, however, is but a starting point for further research and discussion. Most importantly, more research focusing on the perspectives of the aid-recipients of volunteer tourism is needed. Further research could, for example explore the power relations arising from volunteer tourism within host-communities, especially in terms of the relations between funding organizations and local partners in host-communi-

ties, and how different stakeholders negotiate their power or lack of it in attaining their own agendas. **A**

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