



THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* EDINBURGH

**Why do People Volunteer?  
A Critical Study into the Motivations of International Volunteers**

Dissertation submitted for the degree of  
MA (Hons) Geography  
at the University of Edinburgh

By  
Clara Ida Bartram Gurrese  
April 2017

Word count: 11,833



## Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this dissertation has been composed by me and is based on my own work

Signature: Clara B. Gurrea



## **Abstract**

International volunteering as a development practice is a contested topic among scholars. In this dissertation, I examine the motivations of international volunteers and the social knowledges and geographical imaginations that inform them.

I begin by examining the concept of development as a discursive construction and explain how 'underdevelopment' became accepted as a social reality. I link this to the changing geopolitical relations during the post-war period and explain how development served to justify interventions by the Global North in the Global South. This is followed by a review of the debates on international volunteering and a discussion on the rise of international volunteering and its role within the development sector. Furthermore, I explain why it is necessary to understand international volunteering within a framework of moral geographies.

I then present my findings, which I gathered from interviews with former international volunteers. This included the use of photo elicitation, which allowed me to explore the meaning-making of my participants. My research shows that volunteers display signs of confliction over the moral basis of volunteering and engage in moral negotiations in order to justify their presence. I furthermore explore the extent to which volunteering is able to expand the geographical consciousness of volunteers and extend the ethics of care to include the distant Other. Finally, I examine the geographical imaginations that inform the motivations of international volunteers, and whether the volunteering experience is able to challenge them.

I conclude that self-realisation and altruism are deeply entangled in motivations for volunteering. I also suggest that volunteering challenges the distinction between 'intimate caring' and 'distant caring'. Furthermore, I conclude that the volunteering experience has the potential to challenge the homogenization of Global South cultures and peoples through a heightened awareness of local cultures

and diversity. However, it can also reinforce essentialist perceptions of the Other through selective attention.

## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors, Julie Cupples and Emily Brady, for their guidance and invaluable advice, without which this research project would not have been possible. To my respondents, thank you for participating and sharing your experiences with me in such an open and enthusiastic way. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their moral support and for patiently putting up with my rants during moments of despair.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *1.1 Development and international volunteering*

In recent years, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of people choosing to engage in international volunteering, of which the majority of volunteers are from the Global North, participating in development related projects in Global South countries (Sherraden et al., 2008). Proponents argue that international volunteering inspires people to get involved in global affairs, promotes international understanding and contributes to people's wellbeing around the world (Ibid). On the other hand, critics claim that it resembles a form of imperialism that reinforces existing inequalities, or in the best-case scenario, provides ineffective contributions to major global challenges (McBride et al., 2006). Part of the explanation for this criticism is that development practices, including international volunteering, have been heavily criticised for constituting a tool of neo-colonialism (Crush, 1995). In order to understand the disputes over international volunteering, it is necessary to begin by unpacking the concept of development and the key debates surrounding it.

In general, development refers to:

*“‘good change’, a positive word that in everyday parlance is practically synonymous with ‘progress’ and is typically viewed in terms of increased living standards, better health and well-being and other forms of common good that are seen to benefit society at large”*

(Power, 2012, p. 178)

As exemplified by this definition, the notion of progress is imperative to development theory. The idea of progress was forged by European Enlightenment rationality during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this deep-rooted Eurocentric idea has since then constituted the basis of development thinking (McEwan, 2009). As such, it has contributed to the construction of modernity as a desirable and unfinished project in the Global South (Ibid). Modernity is envisioned as a unilinear process from

'traditional' to industrialised society, and thereby employs the Western development model as a universal standard (Lushaba, 2006). Western countries and institutions have drawn upon the positive connotations of development in order to promote and justify political, economic and cultural interventions in the Global South, often resulting in damaging consequences for local communities (Ibid). Thus, the concept, and thereby discourse, of development has been accused of constituting a tool for Western imperialism in the face of colonial decline (Crush, 1995).

The development paradigm is maintained through a network of power, consisting of various development actors, that is instrumental in generating and consuming knowledge referring to the developing world (Roberts, 2004). NGOs, and by extension international volunteers, constitute a vital part of this network (Ibid). An analysis focused on them provides an insight into the practices and rationalities of a particular set of actors within this network of power. My dissertation examines this through a focus on the motivations of international volunteers and how they reflect and/or challenge the development discourse and its (re)production of unequal power relations. Understanding their incentives, as well as how their experiences inform their perceptions of development and their role within it, can contribute to a framework on the intersection between geopolitical relations and individual experiences and identities (Smith & Laurie, 2011). I will approach this research from a post-colonial perspective in order to identify how these experiences and identities are connected to, and (re)produced within, the complex matrix of colonialism (Hulme, 1995).

### *1.2 Aims and outline of dissertation*

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the social knowledges and geographical imaginations that inform the motivations of international volunteers. Geographical imaginations refer to how people make sense of the world and how they situate themselves in time and space (Schwartz & Ryan, 2003). The research was carried out through interviews with people who have participated in volunteer work

abroad. Due to the diversity within the label 'international volunteer', I chose to focus on short-term, nonprofessional international volunteers, in order to allow for greater depth in the analysis.

I begin in chapter 2 by introducing the existing literature on discourse and development, including a critical analysis of how development has been utilised as a political tool. Subsequently, I review the debate pertaining to international volunteering as a development practice and discuss it within a framework of moral geographies.

In chapter 3, I discuss my choice of research question and explain the fieldwork methods used to gather my data. I furthermore offer a critical reflection on my own positionality in relation to the research topic and elaborate on my post-colonial and post-structuralist approach.

In chapter 4 and 5, I introduce my findings and link them to the literature introduced in chapter 2. I focus on the ways in which volunteers employed notions of 'moral' in justifying their volunteering, and reflect on the tensions between self-realisation and altruism. Following this, I discuss the geographical imaginations reflected in their narratives and compare and contrast them to the development discourse.

I conclude my study in chapter 6 with a summary of my findings and identify where gaps still exist. I reflect on the multifaceted motivations for volunteering and the ways in which volunteering can either challenge or confirm pre-existing geographical imaginations.

### *1.3 A note on language*

Due to the topic and scope of my research project, the use of binary expressions such as First World/Third World, Global North/Global South and Developed/Developing countries is inevitable. Postcolonial debates have drawn attention to the historic role of discursive binaries as instruments of colonial oppression (McEwan, 2009). In order to justify the subjugation and colonization of peoples of the South, it was crucial for colonizers to self-define in a way that assumed superiority (Ibid). Binaries

serve to homogenize and define the Other in order to mirror the self, and as such they are integral to the logics of domination (Haraway, 1991).

Although I am aware of the problematic assumptions underlying these dichotomous categories, and their material consequences, their prominence in development discourse and geographical imaginations require that I occasionally refer to them in my discussion. However, when referring to developed/developing countries, I am not conforming to the idea of 'progression' towards a Western ideal, rather I use the terms in order to distinguish between countries according to their position within the forces of oppression related to the development paradigm. Whenever possible, I use the expressions Global North/Global South to refer to the latter, as these terms capture the same meaning without implying anything about the capabilities of the countries in question. I am aware that they were originally coined in order to describe a socioeconomic split between the countries of the Northern and Southern hemisphere (Solarz, 2012), and as such resemble the notion of development, however I do not use the terms to refer to countries based on their geographical location, nor their socioeconomic position.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

In this section, I discuss some of the existing literature and academic debates related to the concept of development and international volunteering, in order to provide a context to my own research. I begin with a discussion of the relationship between discourse and power. Secondly, I provide a post-structural analysis of the concept of development and reflect on development as a discourse. This includes a discussion of its underlying power relations and an introduction to post-development critiques. Thirdly, I examine the rise of international volunteering and its role within the development sector, as well as discuss it within a framework of moral geographies and the neoliberalisation of development. Finally, I discuss the motivations of volunteers in relation to an emerging emphasis on 'authentic' experiences and link it to the notion of cultural capital. The overarching argument is the need to consider international volunteering within a wider historical context, and the importance of understanding the geographically articulated social relations and ethics of care underlying development practices.

### 2.1 Discourse and power

According to the Foucauldian understanding, discourse is defined as:

*“ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108)*

Discursive practices are not limited to a particular use of language; rather it encompasses all forms of social practices that we engage in when trying to make sense of the world (Power, 2003). As such, it

“encompasses texts, speeches, dialogues, ways of thinking and actions; bodily practices, habits, gestures etc.” (Wylie, 2006, p. 303).

Discourse is key in the relationship between power and knowledge, as it serves as a medium for the power of knowledge. In the Foucauldian view, people are considered agents, as well as subjects, of discourse, and power is exercised through the ability of discourse to constitute and govern individuals and their behaviour (Weedon, 1987). This happens in two ways; through an instrumental form “where power is something that is held over you and used to obtain leverage”, and an associational form “where power acts more like a collective medium enabling things to get done or facilitate some common aim” (Allen, 2003, p. 5). The latter refers to the creation of shared understandings and acceptance of meaning systems that are considered to constitute the ‘truth’, thereby conditioning subjects in their social, cultural and economic interactions (Andindilile, 2013; Cupples, 2013).

It is important to note that while discourse can be an instrument of power and domination, it can also serve as a point of resistance (Diamond and Quinby, 1988). Foucault (1978, p. 100) highlights that:

*“Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”*

According to Sharp et al. (2000), dominance and resistance are dependent on each other in time and space, and power is always composed of the intimate entanglements of the two. Therefore, they suggest a conceptualisation of power as a “[dominance/resistance] amalgam of forces, practices, processes and relations, all of which spin out along the precarious threads of society and space” (Ibid, p. 20). Following this argument, it is important to distinguish between dominant discourses, with material outcomes such as policy interventions and media representations, and alternative discourses, which challenge the assumptions of dominant discourses and thereby destabilise them (Cupples, 2013). Foucault (1984, p. 113) argues that dominant discourses are based on a major system of exclusion, encouraged by a ‘will for truth’ that forges a discourse while marginalising and subjugating alternative

discourses. However, although dominant and alternative discourses are opposed to each other, they do not necessarily occur in isolation of each other. Discourses are not mutually exclusive and it is therefore possible for individuals to engage in several discursive practices simultaneously, thereby producing complex, intersectional identities that are potentially affiliated with both dominant as well as alternative discourses (Cupples, 2002). This understanding of discourse and power is important to keep in mind as it is key to understanding the role of international volunteers in reproducing and challenging the development paradigm.

## *2.2 Development*

### *2.2.1 The development concept*

In order to understand the significance of the discourses and practices employed by international volunteers we must first gain a critical understanding of the power structures and global inequalities that shape the social, economic and political conditions within which the volunteer sector operates. The changes in international relations during the post-Second World War era, were accompanied by an emerging focus on development as a universal aspiration (Franco & Shahrokh, 2015). Prior to this period, the concepts of 'underdevelopment' and 'Third World' did not exist, but they suddenly gained popularity as they became key concepts in a process through which the West redefined itself and the rest of the world (Escobar, 1995). Many scholars have pointed out similarities between colonial and development discourse and policy (Biccum, 2013), and suggested that the construction of the development discourse served as a strategy to restore a political order that favoured the West and preserved their power in the face of colonial decline (Escobar, 1995). Similarly to colonial discourse, the development discourse draws on the power of Western representations to define the Other in the Global South as different, and utilizes these perceived differences in ways that are linked to own interests (Desforges, 1998; Said, 1978).

Development became a powerful tool of representation, and it is important to acknowledge the geopolitics underpinning it in order to critically examine its practices (Escobar, 1995). The development discourse is associated with a will for spatial power (Slater, 1993), and as such, the production of the image of what constitutes the Third World has been criticised for being defined by strategic concerns and considerations of access to resources by the West (Escobar, 1995). The Cold War was instrumental in this process, due to the importance of the Third World to the superpower rivalry (Ibid). Fear of communism spreading to the Third World, combined with an increasing dependency on their raw materials, encouraged a growing emphasis on development, in order to secure their support for the West (Ibid). Thus, the notion of development can be seen as a result of particular historical events and efforts to establish and maintain power in a changing political climate.

The reason why development was so successful as a political project can be found in the power of discourse. As argued by Foucault (1986), rather than just reflecting reality, discourse contributes to the production of it. The development discourse was able to establish 'underdevelopment' as a social reality, and thereby construct it as an issue requiring intervention (Escobar, 1995). By constructing a particular way of perceiving the world, it was possible to legitimise certain practices that shaped the reality and 'confirmed' the social truths constructed in the discourse (Ibid). As Cupples (2013) points out, conceptualising development as a discourse does not deny its material consequences, rather it indicates that our way of thinking, talking and writing about development affects how development is carried out.

The material effects of development exist aplenty and often with detrimental consequences for local communities. An oft-cited example is that of the structural adjustment policies, which were designed by the International Monetary Fund with the aim of encouraging economic development in Global South countries (Cupples, 2013). In reality, they resulted in increased poverty and unemployment, among other effects, in the countries where they were employed (Ibid). Another example is USAID's \$400 million campaign to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure through the construction of 1,200 miles of

roads in the country's most remote and conflict-ridden areas (Nissenbaum, 2012). The project resulted in the completion of less than 100 miles of gravel road, after a large proportion of the money disappeared in corruption and more than 125 people were killed in insurgent attacks aimed at interrupting the construction work (Ibid).

### *2.2.2 Post-development*

Due to the perceived failures of development, and enabled by post-structuralist critiques of the construction of development, many scholars have rejected the concept entirely (Escobar, 1992). In the first major work widely considered as representative for post-development thought, Sachs (1992, p. 1) thus describes the demise of development:

*“The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work”*

Post-development scholars reject development based on its purpose as a political project, the implications of the term itself, and its discursive construction of a hierarchy in which Western industrial capitalism is regarded as more valuable than other forms of society (Ziai, 2007). Rather than ‘alternative development’, which can never fully detach itself from the issues pertaining to development in its current form, they propose the need for ‘alternatives to development’ (Escobar, 2012). In other words, they “call for a rejection of the entire paradigm, freeing up the imagination for other ways of thinking about development” (Power, 2003, p. 26).

Post-development has been criticised for being based on an over-generalized and essentialised view of development that fails to take into account local contestations of development, as well as romanticising local traditions and social movements (Escobar, 2012). Despite the issues with the concept of development, Wainwright (2008, p. 10) writes, “we cannot not desire development” as it has been adopted by people from the Global South and adapted into frameworks within which they imagine their

futures. This is echoed by Cupples (2013, p. 19) who asserts that “we still have a moral responsibility to respond to conditions of suffering in the world”. Escobar (2012) has responded to anti-post-development criticisms by explaining that an ‘alternative to development’ would reconceive and reconstruct our social reality “from the perspective of, and along with, those subaltern groups that continue to enact a cultural politics of difference as they struggle to defend their places, ecologies, and cultures” (Escobar, 2012, p. 14). Thus, development is a contested concept, with divergent opinions on how to approach it, however this discussion highlights the importance of considering contemporary practices, including international volunteering, within a wider historical and political context.

## *2.3 International volunteering*

### *2.3.1 The rise of international volunteering*

As a result of the political developments in the post-war period, and the increased emphasis on international co-operation, countries classified as developing experienced a huge expansion in both Western and local NGO presence (Roberts, 2004). These NGOs constitute a vital part of the ‘development machine’ (Ibid, p. 22), a network of institutions, consultants, scholars and other bodies, instrumental in generating and consuming knowledge referring to the developing world. According to Escobar (1995), these actors represent local centres in a network of power, which contribute to the promotion of certain behaviours and rationalities. Voluntary agencies, and by extension international volunteers, must therefore be considered within this context of wider structural power relations and networks when examining the sector and its practices.

International volunteer service is a broad term that covers a range of different projects and roles, however, Sherraden et al. (2008, p. 397) defines it as “an organized period of engagement and contribution to society by volunteers who work across an international border”. Its approach to development responds to the criticisms of top-down development models, employed by governments and other large institutions, by combining the use of technical skills with efforts to connect with local

communities (Devereux, 2008). This involvement of local communities in the development process is likely to produce more sustainable results since it allows for the incorporation of local concerns and builds local capacity (Greenwood et al., 2005). Furthermore, Sherraden et al. (2008) suggest that nonprofessional volunteers may be more flexible in their approach to local communities and have fewer expectations to personal gain than professional development officials have. Thus, within the development paradigm international volunteering is considered to provide a positive alternative to other development practices.

While projects involving international volunteers are considered more inclusive than top-down development practices, the question of who is able to volunteer highlights a problematic aspect of the sector. Access to volunteering opportunities is highly unequal as most short-term volunteers (less than 12 months) are affluent, educated, white youth from the Global North working on projects in the Global South (Sherraden et al., 2008). There are growing opportunities for youth from Global South to participate in international volunteering, however, usually in other Global South countries (Ibid). Thus, skill transfers and cultural exchanges are predominantly North-to-South, prompting critics to argue that international volunteering contributes to a “cultural, political, and economic hegemony of ‘First World’ over ‘Third World’ countries” (Brav et al., 2002, p. 8).

### *2.3.2 Moral geographies, development and volunteering*

An analysis of the expansion of international volunteering should be understood within a framework of moral geographies. Morality refers to the practical actions that people perform based on their conceptions of right and wrong, as opposed to ethics, which is concerned with moral theory (Lee & Smith, 2004). Lee and Smith (2004) argue that we need to examine how the concepts of ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ become defined, practised and reproduced through geographically articulated social interactions. Development as a normative concept is concerned with human good and as such, processes of development can be seen as reflections of social norms through the embodiment of

particular ethical positions and moral practices (Ibid). As the world becomes increasingly globalised and distant places become more interdependent, our consumption patterns are having a greater effect on distant places and people (Smith, 2000). Hence, there is a need to extend our ethics of care beyond our immediate social environment, towards “different and distant others” (Smith, 2014, p. 35). The desire of volunteers to ‘make a difference’ contributes to this by constituting an expansion of the geographies of care (Popke, 2006). Slote (2000) suggests the existence of two different types of caring relationships; ‘intimate caring’, based on personal and intimate relationships, and ‘distant caring’, extended towards the distant other whom one merely knows about. However, Li (2000) argues that travelling can contribute to the geographical consciousness of those involved through the creation of spatial and temporal bonds between people as well as places. Thus, international volunteering expands the geographical consciousness of volunteers through its ability to create social relationships between volunteers and their distant others.

The rise in international volunteering can also be seen as part of a privatization and neoliberalisation of development, as it is sustained by the notion of compassion as the main catalyst for social change (Gunnarsdottir, 2016). This view is based on an understanding of neoliberalism as a form of governance and an ideological project that shifts focus from the state to individuals and communities (Mostafanezhad, 2013). Through a process of privatization and commodification of development and social justice agendas, international volunteering works as an extension of neoliberalism by depoliticising development and reframing “the question of structural inequality as a question of individual morality” (Conran, 2011, p. 1454). Thus, international volunteering simultaneously constitutes a resistance to neoliberalism through an opposition to its uneven geographies, as well as an expansion of it by propagating the emphasis on individual responsibility.

### *2.3.3 Motivations for international volunteering*

Motives and benefits of short-term, nonprofessional international volunteers are contested among academics. While some claim that it is altruistically motivated (Singh & Singh, 2004), and highlight the significant financial costs to the volunteers (Roberts, 2004), others argue that volunteers are primarily driven by selfish reasons (Thomas, 2001). To understand the potential personal gains of volunteers we need to look at how experiences are able to be converted into both cultural as well as economic capital. The increased participation in international NGOs since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been linked to the emergence and expansion of the new middle classes, particularly in the Global North (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Bourdieu (1984, p. 91) refers to these new middle classes as the 'new cultural intermediaries' in his extensive discussion on the role of consumption in processes of social stratification, and emphasises their role as key actors in cultural processes and consumption patterns. Within this framework, travelling, and Global South travelling in particular, is considered a commodity that expresses a certain lifestyle, thus signifying social status through a process of cultural capital accumulation (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). This has involved a growing emphasis on the importance of 'authentic' experiences and cultural immersion (Ibid). According to Brown & Morrison (2003), volunteering, as opposed to mass tourism, allows participants to gain a more intimate connection to their host community. Intimacy is considered a foundation for social solidarity, and is therefore deemed morally superior to more distanced social relationships (MacCannell, 1973). Therefore, travellers tend to distinguish between "back" and "front" regions of their travel destinations, based on the idea of a false front and an intimate reality, and long for the "authentic" experiences provided by the "back" region (Ibid). Thus, volunteering experiences in Global South countries can benefit the volunteer through a social process of cultural capital accumulation.

Additionally, international volunteering experiences can be converted into economic capital by developing skills that enhance employability (Desforges, 1998), as well as social capital, by developing networks of people with common interest and values (McGehee & Santos, 2005). Some volunteers stress how their experiences taught them a life lesson akin to being grateful for what they have;

however, Johnson (2015) criticises this as a way of servicing their own privilege. This is part of a discourse that constructs the Global South “in terms of absences, rather than presences, in terms of that which the North has that they do not” (Raghuram et al., 2009, p. 9). There is thus a multitude of ways in which volunteers are able to benefit personally from the experience. This study aims to explore in greater depth the role of the various and multifaceted motivations for volunteering, how they reflect volunteers’ geographical imaginations, as well as how volunteers negotiate their own roles and goals as part of processes of identity formation.

## **Chapter 3: Fieldwork**

This chapter introduces the research that I conducted to explore the motivations of international volunteers and the discourses that they engage in. I begin with an explanation of my choice of research and the methods that I adopted; semi-structured interviews, photo elicitation and critical discourse analysis. Subsequently I offer a reflection on my positionality as a researcher, and show how my research and theoretical approach is embedded within a post-structural and post-colonial approach to development. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations related to my study.

### *3.1 Research methodology*

My interest in analysing development discourse springs from Spivak's (1993, p. 60) argument that a genuine deconstruction requires a criticism of "a structure that one cannot not inhabit", in which she emphasises the importance of a critique from within. This, coupled with an understanding of development as a Western construct (Escobar, 1995) and a high exposure to volunteering opportunities in my personal environment, prompted me to explore the discourses that are often drawn upon in these settings. Due to logistical concerns and limited resources, I decided to focus on the motivations for volunteering, as these could be explored through interviews with volunteers at home, rather than requiring me to travel to a volunteering site abroad. I am aware that by doing so, I am only including voices of Global North actors in my research; however, this is not to imply that subaltern voices and representations are negligible, nor do I mean to attribute passivity to them. Rather, I attempt to

emphasise how Global North representations of ‘reality’ have played an important role in establishing and maintaining practices of domination and exploitation (Doty, 1996).

My study takes a qualitative approach through a critical discourse analysis based on interviews with people who have participated in short-term, nonprofessional international volunteering programmes. As previously discussed, discourse has the ability to confirm, legitimise, reproduce, or challenge power relations and hegemonies. It therefore constitutes a form of social action that can be used to support, or challenge, the power of a dominant social group (Dijk, 2015). A critical discourse analysis challenges the dominant underlying ideologies (O’Leary, 2010) and thus allows me to explore how the participants contribute to, or challenge, the power inequalities inherent in the development paradigm.

I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 respondents who represented a wide range of ages, professions and types of volunteering projects. My respondents can be separated into two categories; 1) people who had already returned from their volunteering, and 2) people who were due to go volunteering<sup>1</sup>. For the latter category, I conducted one interview before they went volunteering, as well as one follow-up interview upon their return. This allowed me to compare their expectations to their actual experiences, and explore the relationship between them. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to maintain a focus in my interviews through a set of pre-formulated questions, while also allowing space to explore unexpected topics and elaborate on relevant points that came up during the conversations (Longhurst, 2003; Gray, 2004). Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the respondents and details of their volunteering:

<b>Name of respondent<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Host country</b>	<b>Duration of volunteering</b>	<b>Purpose of volunteering project</b>
Frances	China	2 weeks	Teaching English

<sup>1</sup> Marked with \* in figure 3.1

<sup>2</sup> Respondents’ names have been changed for the sake of anonymity but their identities are known to the author

Jacob	Tanzania	4 weeks	Working with energy systems in rural areas
Megan	Thailand	3 months	Teaching English
Calum	South Africa	1 week	Painting a school and distributing food and clothing
Julia <sup>3</sup>	Kenya	16 days	Coaching teachers
Caroline	Costa Rica	10 days	Turtle conservation
Sarah	Malawi	3 months	Building a chicken hatchery
	India	1 month	Painting a school
	Uganda	2 weeks	Building a school
Olivia	Various countries in Southern Africa	4 months	Collecting children's art for an international art project
Maria*	Nigeria	3 months	Working with young farmers
James*	Nepal	2 weeks	Building a school and teaching

Figure 3.1: Table of respondents

My interviews included the use of photo elicitation as I asked respondents to bring a picture that they felt reflected their volunteering experience. This had several purposes; firstly, participants are likely to be more reserved at the beginning of an interview, and it is therefore useful to start out with an activity that is related to the discussion topic (Longhurst, 2003). Secondly, the use of photos can sharpen the memories of respondents, thereby generating longer and more comprehensive interviews (Collier, 1967). Furthermore, the use of visual imagery serves as a way to explore the experiences and meaning-making of participants (Frith et al., 2005). 'Looking' is always an embodied act, thus their choice of picture, as well as description of it, can reveal ideas, assumptions and ideologically coloured

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<sup>3</sup> The interview was conducted in Danish and translated by the author

interpretations that would not otherwise come up in the conversation (Bartram, 2003; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2004).

### *3.2 Reflexivity and theoretical approach*

The use of interviews and critical discourse analysis allowed me to achieve a more people-centred understanding of international volunteering and the underlying motivations. However, it is important to recognise that research can never be objective or independent of social constructions since all knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988). To claim otherwise would be to adopt the 'god trick', described by Haraway as the illusion of a "conquering gaze from nowhere" (Ibid, p. 581). Rather, I consider my research to be the result of a set of negotiations between myself, my respondents, my supervisor, and others with whom I have engaged in discussions related to the topic of my research.

The act of collecting and interpreting data is an inherently personal process, thus as an interviewer it is important to recognise my own positionality and adopt a reflexive, self-critical and self-conscious position (England, 1994). I cannot escape my position as a "historically constituted social and political actor" (Katz, 1984, p. 72). This includes acknowledging that by being from a former colonising, European country, as well as being a student of a Western academic institution, I am inherently embedded in the oppressive forces that continue to shape and maintain colonial relations. Thus, rather than drawing an artificial distinction between myself as a researcher, and my participants, I locate my own subject position in spaces of betweenness, as "a position that is neither inside nor outside" the field (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989: p. 33). Furthermore, I cannot claim to investigate an objectively defined field of inquiry, as by framing my field I, along with my personal biases, am constitutive of it (Katz, 1984).

O'Leary (2010) highlights the importance of managing subjectivities by acknowledging one's own worldview, appreciating alternative realities and suspending judgement. This includes listing your own biases and preconceived notions before embarking on a research task (Ibid). Both prior to and during my research I have encountered many critical attitudes towards international volunteering, among my close

network as well as through more distant sources, questioning both the motivations for participating in it and its outcomes. It was partially these attitudes that prompted me to investigate the topic, and I have attempted to keep an open mind to multiple perspectives throughout my research by respecting people's subjective realities and not questioning the authenticity of their accounts of their experiences or intentions.

During my fieldwork, it became apparent to me that the influence of critical attitudes towards international volunteering was not only a potential factor on my part of the research. This happened following an interview, when one respondent expressed unease at talking about her experiences as an international volunteer due to the negative responses she has occasionally encountered:

*"I feel that quite often people can be judgemental and be like "why are you even going to that country, you're just doing it to get a selfie with a child or something" [...]. It's not a very nice feeling when you have gone to try and help and then people roll their eyes and stuff with a typical gapyah<sup>4</sup> attitude." (Interview, Megan)*

I recognised similar elements of discomfort in a few of my respondents, and I discuss this further in my analysis section. It made me very aware of my own role in the interviews and my responsibility to signal neutrality in my questions and my general attitude. I furthermore made sure to communicate the objectives of my research very clearly before beginning an interview. However, despite my efforts, previous negative experiences in response to their involvement as international volunteers can have influenced the way my participants responded in interviews and thereby the data that I collected.

By choosing this particular research topic, I have inserted myself into the 'development machine' described by Roberts (2004) through my engagement with the production and consumption of

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<sup>4</sup> *Gapyah* refers to a series of comedy sketches making fun of people who travel and/or volunteer abroad during their gap years, by portraying them as privileged and ignorant towards local peoples and cultures (Meltzer, 2010)

knowledge related to the developing world. My subject position as a local centre in this network of power brings a responsibility to challenge and destabilise the colonial discourses that exists within it. As such, I adopt a post-colonial perspective, which addresses the issues posited by colonialism by suggesting that its traces continue to persist today (Shome, 1998). It views the concept of development as being rooted in colonial discourse (Spivak, 1990), and challenges its reliance on ethnocentric assumptions in making sense of the world (Gregory, 1994). I furthermore employ a post-structural approach through my attention to the historical production, as well as consequences, of the development discourse and its categories (Escobar, 2007).

### *3.3 Ethical considerations*

Ethical behaviour in research is important for several reasons; it protects the rights of individuals and others involved in, or affected by, my research, and ensures that research can be carried out in the future (Hay, 2003). I ensured this by being transparent about my research methods and aims, which I explained to my respondents before conducting the interviews. I provided all respondents with an information sheet as well as an informed consent form prior to each interview (see Appendix 1 and 2). Interviews were only recorded upon the consent of the respondents, and likewise their pictures are included in this dissertation with their consent. Furthermore, I have protected participants' identities by rendering them anonymous in my analysis. My research proposal gained the approval of The University of Edinburgh's ethics committee prior to embarking on the project.

## **Chapter 4: Motivations and reflections**

This chapter focuses on my respondents' motivations for volunteering, as well as their reflections on the practice of volunteering and attitudes towards volunteers. The overall purpose is to show that volunteers are aware of the inherent issues and challenges related to development and volunteering in the Global South, and to explore how they construct and employ different notions of 'moral' in processes of negotiating and legitimising their volunteering. The geographical imaginations reflected in these discourses will be discussed in chapter 5. My discussion follows the same topical structure as section 2.2; Firstly, I discuss my respondents' reflections on the complex power relations pertaining to international volunteering. Secondly, I examine the moral discourses that volunteers employ in order to construct distinctions between 1) travelling and volunteering, based on conceptualisations of 'authentic' experiences, and 2) 'good' and 'bad' volunteering, with a focus on the notion of 'making a difference'. Finally, I discuss the motivations of my respondents in terms of a desire for new experiences and personal growth, and conclude with a reflection on the duality of self-realisation and altruism.

### *4.1 Reflecting on volunteering and power relations*

In order to contextualise the following discussions on morality and motivations, I begin with a brief reflection on my respondents' thoughts on volunteering. My respondents often expressed awareness of the criticisms raised against development and international volunteering. This included awareness of development as a Western construct (see Escobar, 1995) and consciousness of the issues pertaining to

white Westerners volunteering in the Global South (see Brav et al., 2002). The latter was usually expressed in the form of self-mockery, which indicates that my respondents did not necessarily see themselves as exempted from these criticisms.

To represent his volunteering experience, Calum brought a picture that showed himself together with a child that he had met while volunteering in South Africa, however he felt quite ambivalent about it:

*“I’ve ended up with some very mixed feelings about this picture because on the one hand it looks happy, I was there doing something that was useful to them but at the same time, is it more of just contributing to [mocking voice] ‘oh I had the resources, I went there, look at me, didn’t I do a wonderful thing’.” (Interview, Calum)*

Due to this, he declined to let me publish the picture in my dissertation. It is nevertheless interesting that he chose that particular picture to represent his experience despite feeling so uncomfortable with it. It shows that volunteers themselves are aware of the complex set of dynamics and power relations associated with volunteering. However, it also raises the question of how volunteers legitimise their presence despite being aware of the inherent issues connected to it. A few respondents said that their volunteering experience had made them realise that volunteering interventions are insufficient in addressing the inequalities underlying uneven development and that more structural changes are required. However they would subsequently emphasise the small-scale positive results of their projects for the local communities, or even for particular people they had met, as a way of justifying their own presence. Thus, volunteers display signs of confliction regarding the moral basis of volunteering.

#### *4.2 Moralities of volunteering*

As part of the negotiations through which my respondents legitimised their presence, I noticed a tendency to distinguish between 1) volunteering and travelling, and 2) different types of volunteering, based on different conceptions of morality. Analysing these constructed dualisms as the products of

moral negotiations contributes to an understanding of the ways in which conceptions of ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ become defined, practised and reproduced in the context of volunteering (Lee & Smith, 2004).

#### 4.2.1 ‘Authentic’ experiences: Volunteering and tourism

When asked why they decided to participate in a volunteering project, a recurring theme among my respondents’ answers was the desire for new experiences. More specifically, they often emphasised a wish to see new places and learn about new cultures, however, they clearly distinguished between travelling and volunteering as separate activities. As such, they emphasised that volunteering was *“doing something for the local place where you are”* (Interview, Megan). For most participants, this was key in their decision to volunteer rather than travel, partly because as James explained *“You get to discover a place and the people differently if you bring something there and you work there”* (Interview). Hence, their explanations closely aligned with the argument by Brown & Morrison (2003) that volunteering is considered a way to gain a more intimate connection to host communities. Furthermore, several respondents made a point out of distancing themselves from the people they perceived as tourists:

*“[...] we’d just see this massive bus load of tourists just go past and they were all in their nice airconditioned bus with their binoculars just looking out the window and I feel like we experienced more the real Malawi than they did”* (Interview, Sarah)

To illustrate this distinction they often emphasised how they had been able to experience a part of the place that they perceived as otherwise inaccessible to foreigners, what MacCannell (1973) refers to as the “back” region:

*“[...] they showed us a traditional ceremony that they don’t usually, it’s from this region and it’s quite a hidden ceremony that they do when someone dies [...]”* (Interview, James)

This idea of experiencing the intimate reality was very prominent in my respondents' reflections on their volunteering. They consistently highlighted two aspects of volunteering that they considered as being central to an 'authentic' or 'real' experience; living in simple living conditions and building relationships to locals. While I return to the former in chapter 5, for now I want to focus on the relationships between hosts and volunteers. The importance of social relationships for the volunteers is reflected in the picture that Megan brought, which shows herself with the students that she taught in Thailand (figure 4.1). She explained that:

*"It just reflects the kind of positivity at the end of the programme and the fact that it made me feel like it was a success and that we all really enjoyed being a part of their lives for the last few months [...]" (Interview, Megan)*



Figure 4.1: Megan with the school class that she taught in Thailand (Respondent's photograph)

Her aims with volunteering included *"to build a good relationship to the children"* (Interview) as well as being able to integrate herself in the local community. When asked about her relationship to the local people she responded *"It was really nice, really strong. They just accepted us as part of the family like*

*immediately [...]*" (Interview). Other respondents also stressed their close bonds to their hosts, and used similar analogies to illustrate it with.

These social relationships between the volunteers and their hosts are part of extending the ethics of care to include the distant Others (Smith, 2014), and the fact that volunteers consciously seek them out reflect the moral value that they attach to them (see MacCannel, 1973). However, despite the apparently close bonds between volunteers and locals, none of my respondents had been in touch with their hosts since returning from volunteering. Megan explained that the school in Thailand had a new English teacher now, as the reason for their lack of continued communication. Calum explained that, despite a desire to stay connected, he and other members of his group had experienced a reverse culture shock upon returning home, which kept them from maintaining contact. Thus, the personal bonds between volunteers and their hosts seemed to be contingent on their work as volunteers, as well as the volunteers and hosts sharing the same geographical and cultural space.

Even though the social relationships between them may erode after the volunteers leave, the extension of care resulting from the experience seems to remain. After returning from her volunteering Caroline tried to organise a fundraising event for the organisation that she had worked with, however the rest of the people in her fundraising group, who had no connection to the organisation, voted to donate the money to a local charity in London instead. This illustrates the importance of personal experiences and the social relationships that arise from them in extending the ethics of care. It also supports the argument that volunteering is able to raise the geographical consciousness of participants through social relationships (Li, 2000). Furthermore, it raises questions about Slote's (2000) distinction between 'intimate caring' and 'distant caring'. During volunteering, the notion of 'intimate caring' seems to become extended to include the distant Other. However, upon the volunteer leaving the host community the relationship between volunteer and hosts becomes more distanced again. While it is

beyond the scope of this study to explore how this changes over time, it shows that these categories are not fixed.

#### 4.2.2 Making a difference: 'Good' and 'bad' volunteering

In addition to providing an 'authentic' experience, the act of doing something for the local place was also judged to have an intrinsic value in itself. Thus, Caroline brought a picture (figure 4.2) showing herself weighing recently hatched baby turtles and explained that:

*"This is the only time while I was there when they had actually hatched things when it was my shift so it was quite exciting. [...] Because that was what I wanted to do, to help and [...] kind of contribute to a wider scientific research. So that is why I chose this one, because it shows me helping" (Interview, Caroline)*



Figure 4.2: Caroline weighing baby turtles in Costa Rica (Respondent's photograph)

The fact that Caroline only experienced a hatching once, yet considered it a defining feature of her volunteering experience, shows how important the idea of helping or contributing was to her

perception of volunteering. Additionally, it also reflects the desire of volunteers to see themselves as part of helping. This supports the argument by Gunnarsdottir (2016) that motivations for international volunteering signal a neoliberalisation and privatisation of development through a focus on individual acts of morality. However, as already discussed, the volunteering experience itself has the potential to make volunteers understand the importance of structural change, thus counteracting the neoliberalisation of development.

The notion of helping and ‘making a difference’ came up in all of my interviews, however, respondents approached it differently and I identified two overall tendencies. Firstly, respondents tended to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ volunteering, and secondly, respondents who did not feel that their project made a tangible difference to the local community would usually stress the cultural aspect of their project as a way of justifying it. The following excerpts from my interview with Megan illustrate the practice of distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ volunteering:

*“I hate the idea of just going for one or two weeks to one of those voluntourism things where you just pay and you go on a safari and you help build a room or something or dig a hole. My sister did that [but] I was like, if I’m gonna go somewhere I want to actually be helpful.” (Interview, Megan)*

*[...] when I was in Africa there was a project running out of backpackers, I was just volunteering with the backpackers so I wouldn’t call that proper volunteering” (Ibid)*

Her ideas of “helpful” and “proper volunteering” indicate a moral judgement pertaining to volunteering, where volunteering must prove a positive effect for a specific group of people in order to be accepted as ‘good’ or ‘proper’ volunteering. Additionally, it can also be connected to the desire for ‘authentic’ experiences, as only volunteering that provides a link between the volunteers and the locals is considered ‘proper’.

The practice of volunteering abroad has received a lot of criticism, among other things for being ineffective and for catering to the volunteers' sense of personal self-fulfilment rather than the local communities they claim to help. My respondents' attempts to create a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' volunteering, and actively distancing themselves from the latter, could be a response to this criticism. By constructing the two types of volunteering in contrast to each other, and claiming that criticisms only apply to 'bad' volunteering, they are able to distance themselves from these criticisms (Gunnarsdottir, 2016). Megan expressed discontent with the negative attitudes towards volunteering which she had often encountered, as she felt that they undermined the good intentions of the volunteers. However, in distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' volunteering, and criticising her sister's volunteer project, she employed that attitude herself. Thus, volunteers reflect contradictory views on volunteering.

According to Haraway (1991), binaries serve to mirror the self through a definition of the Other, thereby allowing the viewer to assume superiority. Both the distinctions between volunteering/tourism and 'good'/'bad' volunteering can be understood as binary constructions, which form part of a process through which volunteers are able to self-define in a way that assumes superiority and justifies their presence. This shows that in the context of international volunteering discursive binaries are not only applied to the subaltern Other.

The respondents who had participated in shorter projects ( $\leq 2$  weeks) often felt that their projects had not generated any tangible results for the local communities. Instead, they would emphasise the cultural value of their projects:

*"The point was not to make a difference really, I think we are gonna help but not make a difference with fourteen of us for two weeks you know. The point was more to open to different cultures, to discover their culture and for them to discover ours as well."*

*(Interview, James)*

Similarly to this, Olivia (who spent a short amount of time in various locations) emphasised that her project was not intended to change anything in particular; rather she described the project as being similar to journalistic work through an investigation of cross-cultural values. Cultural exchange is a form of cultural immersion, which is perceived to create an intimate connection to the host community (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). As MacCannell (1973) argued, this is considered to signal social solidarity, and as such is deemed morally superior. Thus, when volunteers were not able to legitimise their presence through the notion of 'making a difference', they instead employed the moral connotations attached to cultural exchange in order to justify it.

#### *4.3 New experiences and personal growth*

As previously mentioned, a common motivation for volunteering among my respondents was the desire for new experiences and seeing new places and cultures. It is worth noting that in this context places and cultures were always referred to as general categories, indicating that motivations were based on a general desire for travelling rather than a pre-existing interest in experiencing the particular destination. The majority of my respondents stated that they had begun by deciding that they wanted to volunteer abroad, and only subsequently found a project that they were interested in doing. Furthermore, respondents emphasised how they wanted a break from their 'normal life' and that volunteering provided an opportunity to do something 'different':

*"I decided that when I graduated I wanted to do something different and that [volunteering] was my opportunity. [...] I think I just wanted to see something new, I was sick and tired of seeing the same places and people." (Interview, Frances)*

Moreover, new experiences were seen as a way of encouraging personal growth. Respondents highlighted how their volunteering had helped them push their boundaries and broaden their horizons:

*“I wanted to [...] see that I could still feel uncomfortable in certain situations because that shows that you’re pushing yourself and that you’re trying something new” (Interview, Frances)*

*“It’s about travelling and expanding your horizon and being curious, both on yourself and others” (Interview, Julia)*

Several respondents echoed this wish for being able to do something on their own and feel a sense of independence. Furthermore, volunteering was seen as an opportunity to build professional skills that would make them *“stand out from other people”* (Interview, Caroline) and signal that they are *“adventurous [and] go-getting”* (Interview, Sarah). Thus, although it was never mentioned as a paramount motivation for volunteering, my respondents were aware of how they were able to benefit from the experience themselves (see Desforges, 1998).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, volunteers were concerned with having ‘authentic’ experiences, which according to Mowforth & Munt (1998) contribute to social status through a process of cultural capital accumulation. Megan showed me a tattoo that she got during her volunteering of her name written in Thai letters. To her it signified a reminder to:

*“always strive to be your best self like you were in Thailand, because that was when I was at my best. Helping people.” (Interview, Megan)*

It reiterates how important ‘making a difference’ was to volunteers, however, it also forms part of cultural capital accumulation through a process of cultural appropriation. Roger (2006, p. 474) defines cultural appropriation as “the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture”. Lohmann (2016) argues that tattoos are a way of representing oneself, as well as one’s perceived interactions with others, and serve to communicate this self-image to others. As such, tattoos involving foreign symbols, such as Megan’s, are a way of displaying that one is well-travelled and cultured (Ibid). This is not intended to undermine her objectives with the tattoo, rather I

want to show that volunteers are able to profit on their willingness to help through complex cultural processes.

The issues discussed so far reveal that self-realisation and altruism are deeply entangled in motivations for volunteering. However, it is important to understand the geographical knowledges that inform these motivations in order to further deconstruct them. This will be the topic of the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Geographical imaginations**

In this chapter, I examine the geographical imaginations reflected in my respondents' accounts of their volunteering. The aim is to understand how volunteers conceptualise and categorise the world, and to what extent that reflects or challenges the imaginations constructed by the development paradigm. As such, I draw on some of the discussions from chapter 4 in order to elaborate on the underlying geographical imaginations. I begin by exploring the categories that my respondents employed, with a particular focus on homogenizing terms such as 'developing world'. Subsequently, I examine the search for authenticity as part of a process of constructing the Other, including the practice of essentialising subaltern cultures. I furthermore reflect on respondents' emphasis on simple living conditions and poverty as a way of servicing their own privilege. Throughout the chapter, I attempt to show to what extent imaginations produced by the development paradigm influenced the motivations of volunteers, and whether the volunteering experiences challenged their preconceived imaginations.

### 5.1 Categorising the world

An important feature of the development paradigm is the discursive homogenization of Global South peoples and cultures, and the construction of difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’ that reproduces separation (Escobar, 1995). My respondents engaged in this discourse while simultaneously expressing disagreement with its representations. Those of my respondents who referred to ‘developing world/country’ during the interviews, all expressed awareness of the Western construction of the concept. One of them was Sarah who used the term several times before correcting herself with reference to its homogenizing nature:

*“[...] in terms of understanding people in the developing world... or people in this specific area of Malawi, because people in the developing world obviously are hugely diverse [...]. I am very conscious that as I am speaking to you I am saying things that are very problematic [even though] I don’t necessarily believe them.” (Interview, Sarah)*

After correcting herself she continued using the term, demonstrating that despite an awareness of the issues related to the category ‘developing world’ it is so ingrained in our geographical imaginations that we struggle to resist it. In addition to this, when asked how she had prepared for going to Malawi, she responded that she had already felt rather prepared because she had been to India and Uganda before and as such *“wasn’t overwhelmed by the thought of going to a totally different country”* (Interview, Sarah). In saying this she was constructing a binary between the ‘familiar’ and the ‘different’, where the ‘different’ comprises highly diverse Global South countries, thereby reproducing the separation integral to the development paradigm (see Escobar, 1995). The fact that she consciously challenged the development discourse’s homogenization of the Global South, while simultaneously reproducing it illustrates the confictions in her geographical imaginations.

James, who volunteered in Nepal, went travelling in India before volunteering, and when we discussed his expectations in the pre-volunteering interview he tended to talk about the two countries as one.

Thus, he would differentiate between the different things he was planning to do, but not where he would be doing them, nor did he at any point allude to any cultural differences between the two countries. However, when I interviewed him after he had returned he made much more clear distinctions between the two countries in terms of cultural differences. Furthermore, in the context of Nepal, he described the cultural differences he had observed between the older and younger generations, and said that he had been surprised by how much he had in common with the younger ones. Thus, his experience was able to challenge his geographical imaginations as it made him recognise the cultural differences between and within his destinations, as well as deconstruct the perceived difference between 'them' and 'us'.

Olivia said that one of her aims with her volunteering project had been to be able to recognise the differences between the Southern African countries that she went to, as before going she felt that "[...] even as an educated person, different regions of Africa still seemed a bit blurred" (Interview). Thus, she acknowledged the diversity between the countries and her own inability to distinguish them from each other, and consciously saw volunteering as an opportunity to challenge her own geographical imaginations. From these examples, we can see that volunteers are aware of the homogenizing construction of the 'developing world', and that volunteering in some cases can contribute to the volunteers' geographical imaginations by challenging their preconceived notions. However, as the example of Sarah shows, these experiences are not always enough to fundamentally deconstruct the separation between 'us' and 'them'. I will explore this further by examining how some respondents used encounters with their host communities to strengthen notions of the Other, particularly through perceptions of 'authentic' experiences.

### *5.2 Searching for authenticity*

Volunteers' emphasis on 'authentic' or 'real' experiences resembles a form of exoticism by implying the existence of a 'genuine' Other that can be discovered (Santaolalla, 2000). Exoticism has been linked to

European colonialism since the act of defining the ‘authentic’ Other serves as a way of confirming the centrality and normality of the viewer and reinforce their own sense of identity (Santaolalla, 2000; Haraway, 1991). My respondents engaged in this kind of discourse through a tendency to essentialise the peoples and cultures of their host communities and emphasising poverty as a defining feature of the places. I discuss each of these practices in relation to the development paradigm as well as reflect on their implications.

### 5.2.1 Essentialising the Other

Many of my respondents displayed elements of cultural essentialism in their descriptions of the peoples and cultures they had encountered in their volunteering host communities. Fuss (1989) describes essentialism as the belief in invariable and fixed properties that define a given entity. Moreover, these properties are usually articulated as binary differences which (re)produce perceptions of difference between groups and neglect differences within them (Ibid). Therefore, Rushdie (1991) argues that essentialism constitutes a form of exoticism, as it defines the Other in relation to the viewer. My respondents would often emphasise a relaxed and carefree attitude as a defining property of the culture that they visited, exemplified by the following excerpt from an interview:

*“[...] if something bad happened, the Thai culture is very much to just be like ‘oh it’s in the past, don’t worry about it’, or like ‘something’s gonna happen but we don’t really care, go with the flow’ [...]. They’re very very relaxed and they just take things as they come, so I think I’m a bit more like that now” (Interview, Megan)*

Several respondents made general statements like this in which they romanticised the host culture by attributing similar properties to it. Furthermore, these properties were presented in a way that suggested opposition to the volunteers’ home cultures.

In addition to the attribution of particular attitudes, essentialism can also be observed in perceptions of what constitutes ‘genuine’ culture. Calum said that he did not feel that he really immersed himself in the

local culture in South Africa until he got outside of the city, since *“Durban is a fairly developed city so it didn’t feel that different from experiences in the US”* (Interview). The effects of globalisation are making distant places and cultures increasingly interconnected and thereby encouraging more similarities (Magu, 2015). Thus, Durban might resemble a city in the US, relative to more rural areas in South Africa where effects of globalisation are perhaps less evident. However, despite the pressures of globalisation, cultures tend to maintain their own distinct characteristics (Ibid), and some scholars have even argued that globalisation enhances cultural identity (Wang, 2007). There is therefore reason to believe that the cultural landscape in Durban is rather different from that of a US city. Furthermore, even if there are cultural similarities between Durban and the US, that does not mean that the culture in Durban is any less ‘authentically’ South African. Calum’s statement could indicate a conflation of ‘genuine’ culture with ‘traditional’ culture. This is a result of the development paradigm’s binary construction of the subaltern Other as backwards and the West as developed (Escobar, 1995). This shows that the meeting with a different culture is able to reproduce essentialist perceptions of the host culture and the construction of binary differences.

### *5.2.2 Poverty and the Global South*

As mentioned in chapter 4, several of my respondents associated an ‘authentic’ experience with simple living conditions. While I do not deny the existence of poverty, and by extension simple living conditions, in large parts of the world including some of my respondents’ host communities, the discursive construction of the Global South as being defined by poverty is very problematic. The fact that Calum perceived Durban’s level of development as an impediment from experiencing local culture could also reflect the idea that the Global South and ‘underdevelopment’ are synonymous, a construction which was visible among several of my respondents. This is related to the previous point on the construction of the Global South as backwards. Frances brought a picture from her volunteering in China (figure 5.1), showing three children walking home from school and said that:

*“it was a humbling experience because you saw these people going to houses that had one light bulb and outdoor toilet and pigs walking around. [But] they weren’t afraid to show us where they came from. You can see it’s a very rural part of China [and] it just kind of reflects how little they had when they were just walking home.” (Interview, Frances)*

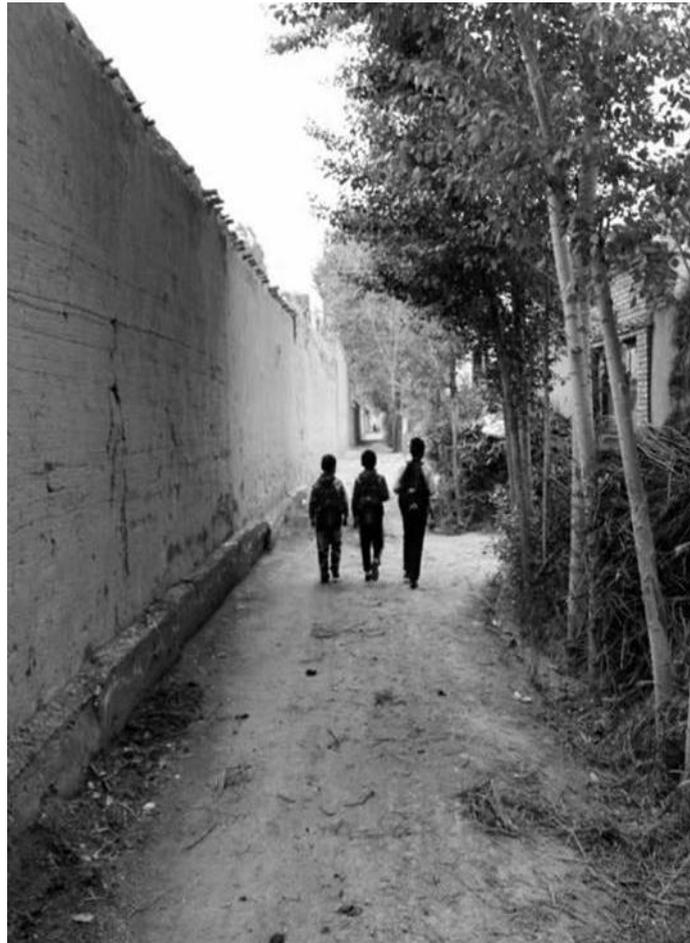


Figure 5.1: Children walking home from school (Respondent’s photograph)

During her volunteering, she also visited large Chinese cities such as Beijing and she briefly acknowledged that she had met some very wealthy Chinese people. However, her general description of her experience was heavily dominated by encounters with poverty. Additionally, her perception of an ‘authentic’ experience of China concentrated on the poor, rural areas. This, combined with her choice of picture and description, illustrates how prominent perceptions of poverty were to her imagination of

China. It shows that encounters with the Global South can be used to confirm pre-existing perceptions through selective attention (Nickerson, 1998).

In addition to the issues pertaining to the conflation of the Global South and poverty, we also need to reflect critically on the way in which poverty is treated in discourse. Wells (2013) has criticised the act of using pictures of people living in poverty as a form of representation since it depoliticises the issue and reduces it to a question of morals. This form of de-contextualisation from wider geopolitical relations confirms the role of Western intervention, such as volunteering, and further promotes the neoliberalisation of development (Batty, 2000; Conran, 2011). Frances' narrative on the poverty she experienced never alluded to any underlying political causes. As such, she engaged in a poverty discourse that renders invisible the structural inequalities underlying global disparities, such as colonial history and structural adjustment policies (Escobar, 2012; Cupples, 2013). This is the form of narrative that has often been utilized to legitimise development interventions in the Global South (Escobar, 2012) and it is therefore a central part of the issue.

The emphasis on, and depoliticising of, poverty is also a way of servicing the privilege of the volunteer (Johnson, 2015). By neglecting to draw a structural link between the distribution of poverty and wealth, the experience of poverty becomes a way of magnifying one's own privilege (Ibid). Frances echoed this narrative throughout the interview but it is perhaps best captured in this statement:

*"It just makes me more grateful every day for what I have because I know that there are people on the flipside" (Interview, Frances)*

In a similar vein, James stated in his pre-volunteering interview that one of his aims was to learn to appreciate his own "luck":

*"[...] by comparing it to something else in the world then I can see more what I'm doing here. I don't know... I tend to think that I'm quite lucky with my life here because I don't*

*have to worry about earthquakes and feeding myself and stuff like that” (Interview, James)*

This shows that the confirmation of privilege not only appears as an effect of volunteering but that it can actually be a motivating factor. While it is easy to criticise this narrative on poverty I think it is important to highlight the good intent of volunteers. Most of the time their perspectives seemed to arise from a feeling of compassion, as many of my respondents displayed very emotional reactions to the poverty they experienced. When Calum described the poverty of his host community in South Africa and compared it to the culture of consumerism he returned to at home in the United States, he was on the verge of crying. However, making a comparison between wealth and poverty alone does not provide a basis for political progress. Siomopóulos (2006) argues that compassion on its own undermines the entitlement of the poor and marginalised to resources. In order to promote change it must be accompanied by criticisms of the political and economic structures that have caused the uneven distribution of resources (Ibid). A few of my respondents did raise these criticisms by pointing to structural injustices as the root of the problem. Additionally, those people also expressed that their volunteering experiences had influenced them to pursue work at the political level in order to address these deep-rooted inequalities. Thus, in some cases volunteering can contribute to an understanding of the structural inequalities underlying uneven development. However, it can also serve merely as a tool to service the privilege of the volunteer and confirm a pre-existing association between poverty and the Global South. This raises the ultimate question underlying debates on volunteering – whether volunteering is beneficial or if it reinforces structural inequalities. My research has started to address this question, however, a sufficient answer would require more in-depth research on which particular factors, experiences or pre-existing biases influence whether volunteers utilize the experience to confirm or question their own privilege.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### *6.1 Summary of findings*

The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore the motivations of international volunteers and the social knowledges and geographical imaginations that inform them. I started by describing the discursive construction of development, and problematized it through a focus on the role that the concept has played in justifying Western interventions in the Global South. I then demonstrated how this is linked to the practice of international volunteering, as NGOs and volunteers constitute an important part of the network of power that upholds the development paradigm. Their motivations and rationalities were explored further through in-depth interviews with people who had participated in a range of different volunteer projects abroad.

My research contributes to an understanding of how concepts of 'moral' become defined, practised and reproduced through geographically articulated social relations in the context of international volunteering (see Lee & Smith, 2004). I have shown that international volunteers are aware of the complex power relations pertaining to development and volunteering in the Global South. Respondents showed signs of confliction over the moral basis of volunteering, and the negotiations through which

they justified their presence reflect different conceptualisations of 'moral'. This was illustrated by their construction of dualisms between volunteering/travelling and 'good'/'bad' volunteering. These dualisms enabled volunteers to distance themselves from criticisms of international volunteering and self-define in a way that constructed them as morally superior.

Intimate relationships to locals and the idea of 'making a difference' were both very important to volunteers, and the moral value attached to these concepts was used to justify their volunteering. As such, volunteering is part of a process of extending the ethics of care to include the distant Other. My study has raised questions regarding the distinction between 'intimate caring' and 'distant caring', and to what extent the social relationships arising from volunteering are able to alter this distinction after the volunteers leave.

The desire of volunteers to make a difference and to envision themselves as part of the development process echoes the increasing neoliberalisation of development, through a focus on individual morality and responsibility (Conran, 2011). However, some volunteers expressed that the experience had taught them the importance of structural change, as opposed to small-scale interventions such as volunteering. Thus, although the practice of international volunteering itself constitutes an extension of neoliberalism, it also has the potential to challenge the neoliberal values and assumptions.

Besides more altruistic motivations, volunteers also mentioned a desire for new experiences and opportunities for personal growth. Additionally, I have demonstrated the various ways in which volunteers are able to benefit personally from their willingness to help through the accumulation of cultural capital and professional skills. This shows that self-realisation and altruism are intimately entangled in motivations for volunteering.

In order to further understand the motivations of volunteers I analysed the geographical imaginations that informed them. I found that despite volunteers' awareness of development as a Western construct and the issues pertaining to development terminology, the geographical imaginations produced by the

development discourse are so ingrained in our way of making sense of the world that we struggle to resist them. Therefore, volunteers simultaneously reproduce and challenge the representations promoted by the development discourse.

The development discourse creates a perceived difference between 'us' and 'them' that reproduces separation. In some cases, the volunteering experience made volunteers deconstruct this separation through a heightened awareness of the local culture and diversity. However, it can also reinforce the separation through selective attention that confirms the volunteer's pre-existing imaginations. Thus, for some volunteers the encounter with their subaltern Others resulted in reinforced essentialist perceptions of the Other. This act of defining the Other is a way of mirroring the self and thereby reinforcing one's own sense of identity (Haraway, 1991). Furthermore, the encounter with poverty often served the purpose of confirming the privilege of the volunteer. In a few cases, it made the volunteer question their own privilege and encouraged a desire to pursue work at the political and structural level. This raises the ultimate question underlying debates on international volunteering of whether volunteering is beneficial or if it reinforces structural inequalities.

## *6.2 What next?*

My study has started to address the question related to the appropriateness of international volunteering, however, a complete answer requires further research into the particular factors, experiences and pre-existing biases that influence whether volunteers use the experience to confirm or challenge their own privilege and structural inequalities. Volunteering has the potential to educate volunteers on the importance of structural change in order to address issues of uneven development, and further research could help us understand how volunteering programmes should be carried out in order to make the most of this potential and avoid perpetuating damaging perceptions of Global South peoples and cultures.

Finally, I have discussed how volunteering contributes to an extension of the ethics of care by establishing social relationship to the distant Other. However, further research is needed in order to understand how it affects the distinction between 'intimate caring' and 'distant caring', particularly over an extended time period after the communication ends between volunteers and host communities.

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## **Appendix A: Information sheet for participants**



INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND THE LIVED ENVIRONMENT

SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES

The University of Edinburgh

Drummond St

Edinburgh EH8 9JX

### **About the study**

**A critical study on the motivations and experiences of international volunteers**

#### **Aims**

You are invited to be part of a study that looks at the motivations of international volunteers. The purpose of the study is to understand what drives people to participate in international volunteering as well as their understanding of development. The study has been reviewed and approved by the ethics committee in the School of Geosciences. The results of the study will be submitted as a dissertation to

fulfil the requirements for the obtainment of the (MA) Geography Honours degree at The University of Edinburgh.

If you have already returned from your international volunteering you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview that should take between 30-60 min. If you are going abroad this summer to volunteer you will be asked to participate in two interviews; one before you go, and a follow-up after you return. In order to make sure that our conversation is recorded accurately I would like to digitally record it however, you may still participate in the research even if you decide not to be recorded. In the interview, you will be asked to describe the volunteer project that you participated in, and discussion topics will include why you chose that specific project as well as its outcomes. Furthermore, you will be asked to bring a picture that you think reflects the project or your experience. The photo will only be used in the dissertation upon your consent.

You may choose not to answer any interview question and you can withdraw from the research at any time. You have the right to withdraw information already provided at any time prior to publication.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected in this study will be treated confidentially and only the researcher and the supervisor will see the names of the participants. The digital audio files of the interviews are kept in order to have a word-for-word copy of the interview and will not be shared. Furthermore, the files will be destroyed upon completion of the written report of the study. No information will be included in the dissertation that could identify individual participants.

### **Contact**

Principal investigator:

Clara Bartram Gurrese, School of Geosciences, The University of Edinburgh

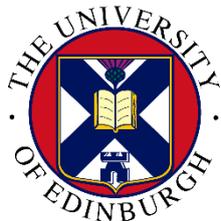
Email: s1227001@ed.ac.uk

Research supervisor:

Dr. Julie Cupples, School of Geosciences, The University of Edinburgh

Email: julie.cupples@ed.ac.uk

## Appendix B: Informed consent form for participants



INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND THE LIVED ENVIRONMENT

SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES

The University of Edinburgh

Drummond St

Edinburgh EH8 9JX

### **Informed consent form**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be part of the study looking at the motivations of international volunteers. Participating in this research is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. You have the right to withdraw information already provided at any time prior to publication. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records.

---

Participant's Signature

Date

By signing here, you give the researcher permission to include the picture you provided in the interview as part of the dissertation.

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Participant's Signature

Date