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Who are we responsible to? Locals' tales of volunteer tourism

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies have often suggested that volunteer tourism, with strong overtones of "social", "justice" and "pro-poor" tourism, has the capacity to bring about positive impacts to local communities in host destinations. Wearing, for example, advocates volunteer tourism "as a development strategy leading to sustainable development and centering the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitors that all benefit from tourism activity" (Wearing, 2001: p. 12). Indeed, underlying assumptions in volunteer tourism suggest that it is a form of tourism that allows the empowering of locals in host-communities, and when compared to conventional modes of tourism, volunteer tourism allows cultural interaction and understanding to be developed between hosts and tourists in the longer period and more intimate form of contact. This, together with very direct and tangible outcomes of volunteer projects, appears to put in place a platform where locals and tourists both have the power to actively negotiate their identities and relations with each other.

However, despite these deep-seated assumptions about the positive value in volunteer tourism, little empirical research has been conducted to assess the situation on the ground. Existing literature is largely centered on the volunteer tourist, with little works directly regarding the perspectives of host-communities. This places much uncertainty on whether the assumed benefits of volunteer tourism are indeed realized. Adopting a geographical approach, this paper begins with a review of existing discussions on the geographies of care and responsibility, and its intersections with literature on responsible tourism (of which volunteer tourism is often seen to be a part of). Opinions re-presented in this paper are based on interviews with 14 respondents in Cambodia (including local Cambodians, non-government organizations' (NGO) and missionary workers that have previously hosted volunteer tourists in Cambodia. This paper thus explores both positive and negative opinions of volunteer tourism from the perspective of host-communities, and endeavors to contribute a balanced discussion to the limited literature regarding host-communities' perspectives in tourism development.

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1. Introduction

It wouldn't be farfetched to say that we now live in a world of "responsibilities". In the developed world at least, moral exhortations are at every other corner telling us to be more socially responsible, *more* environmentally friendly, or *more* caring towards the less-privileged. From corporate marketing materials to responsible consumption campaigns, messages of social responsibility are blasted at us from all directions – whether we are the mass-market consumer, the policy-making official, or the business decision-maker.

Set within this context of "heightened responsibilities", this paper examines the emergence and ethical dilemmas of an increasingly popular form of travel – volunteer tourism – whereby tourists volunteer in host-communities as part of his or her travel. Central to the rhetoric in volunteer tourism is the idea that tourism ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to host destinations, and through the means of volunteering, tourists can make a direct and tangible improvement to host-communities (or the natural environment) in host destinations. Indeed, Wearing (2001) situates volunteer tourism within the field of alternative tourism and ecotourism, and suggests that volunteer tourism has the potential to induce change, specifically "value change and changed consciousness" (Wearing, 2003: p. x). Wearing also sees volunteer tourism "as a development strategy leading to sustainable development and centering the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitors that all benefit from tourism activity" (2001: p. 12). 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 either in volunteer tourists (McGehee and Santos, 2004; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007) or in host-communities (Scheyvens, 2002; Uriely et al., 2003).

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A cursory glance at existing literature however, shows the obvious skew in works focusing on the experiences and impacts of volunteer tourists rather than that of the host-communities. Indeed, when Wearing (2003) refers to such "value change", it is unclear if this also applies to that of locals in host-communities. While the outward expression of concern towards fulfilling social responsibilities in volunteer tourism is commendable, and perhaps a good start in an industry known more for its irresponsible developments, the lack of research and assessment of volunteer tourism in host-communities places much uncertainty on whether promised benefits are indeed realized. This paper therefore addresses such concerns and re-presents the views of host-communities of volunteer tourism, based on a series of interviews with volunteer receiving organizations in Cambodia.

Adopting a geographical approach, this paper begins with a review of existing discussions on the geographies of care and responsibility, and its intersections with literature on responsible tourism (of which volunteer tourism is often seen to be a part of). This is followed with a discussion of methods used for this research – to situate the positionalities of the author and opinions re-presented here. Fieldwork for this research has shown that, on the one hand, the enactment of "caring relationships" (Section 4) between volunteers and hosts is seemingly positive and compassionate. On the other hand, similar to fields of development and international aid, this has already put the volunteer tourist in a position of power to begin with. Without "equal relationships" (Section 5) volunteer tourism is argued to re-produce the existing structures and power hierarchies that keep the volunteer tourist in a privileged position while continuing to undermine the locals in host-communities despite its stated intentions of empowering and benefiting locals. This paper therefore aims to deconstruct the (often political) nature of such relations from the perspective of the hosts in volunteer receiving host-communities.

2. Responsible tourism and geographies of responsibility

The notion of "responsibility", be it within the ambits of geographies of responsibility and care, or within works relating the ethical and moral responsibilities in tourism, is often shaped and constructed around the view that the privileged "developed world" should be responsible to the less-privileged "developing world". Ascribing responsibility to and only to the "privileged" is often an unspoken and seemingly unproblematic assumption. Works have indicated this position in apparently innocent statements – for example, in Silk, caring at a distance was said to be "in the context of North–South relations at the global scale, taking as a conceptual starting point the construction of Northern actors as carers who are active and generous, and of Southern actors as cared for, passive and grateful" (2004: p. 230). In Lester, it was also stated that "[t]his contemporary sense of global concern is the product of imagined geographies founded on the webs of material connection that link the lives of privileged Westerners to materially deprived others in different parts of the world" (2002: p. 277). As such, from the developed world's perspective, the developing world is often portrayed as a "distant other" that one ought to care or be responsible for, even though most at the consumer-end will possibly never personally encounter those that they are supposedly socially responsible for.

In tourism however, unlike many other (especially product-oriented) industries, the two "worlds" (if they are indeed separate) are brought together into a shared space as tourists act out "care" and "responsibilities" in their travel destinations. This means that as an end-consumer, tourists actually do personally see and engage the "other" that he or she had committed responsibility to when he or she opted to take tours or holidays that are supposedly socially responsible. The nature of the tourism industry is thus a rather unique one, and posits challenges to the traditional view of geographies of responsibility or care at a distance. This section therefore reviews existing literature in both responsible tourism and geographies of responsibility, before discussing the issues put forward in this study.

2.1. Volunteer and responsible tourism

In explicating the notions of social responsibilities in tourism development, many academics have turned to classical ethical theory and analyzed the ethics foregrounding what should be deemed as responsibilities of various parties involved in tourism development. Using existing definitions of ethics with a business perspective, this seen as an "inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality where morality means moral judgments, standards and rules of conduct" (Tsalikis and Fritzsche, 1989). There is no clear definition, however, of what constitutes "ethical" tourism development, and it is suggested that it is indeed because of its complexity that resulted in the lack of a suitable definition that can comprehensively encompass its many dimensions (Butcher, 2003b; Smith and Duffy, 2003). Ethical *forms* of tourism have however, surfaced both in academic literature and popular consumption, with an increasing number of tours offering "ecotourism", "just tourism", "pro-poor tourism", or in the case of this study, "volunteer tourism".

Previous research has suggested that the drive for responsible tourism originated from tourists' demands of a holiday that fulfils "the satisfaction of social needs: contact with other people and self-realization through creative activities, knowledge and exploration" (Krippendorf, 1987: p. 105). Consequently, most campaign material on responsible tourism has outwardly encouraged critical and reflexive thinking on the part of the consumer, who is in turn assumed to pressurize the industry into adopting responsible tourism practices in order to meet his or her demand (Goodwin and Francis, 2003; Tearfund, 2000a,b). In such material, tourists are encouraged to ask difficult questions of themselves and the tourism industry in general, such as "ethical issues about working conditions, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities; about who benefits; about the environmental consequences; and about whether or not travelling to a particular place supports democracy and human rights or undermines them" (Goodwin and Francis, 2003: p. 275).

Central to responsible and volunteer tourism then is the idea that tourism ought to consider ethics, morals and responsibility, and that this is especially crucial from the position of the developed world. Here however, is an underlying (but not always specified) assumption that the origins of tourists, travel agencies and multinational corporations owning hotel chains, airlines and other tourist services, are from the developed world, and that host destinations and "locals" are from developing countries. Responsibilities are thus seen to be that of the "privileged" towards "others", and the overwhelming imperative to be responsible is also due to the great privileges accorded to the developed world. Smith and Duffy highlight this notion of the responsibility in some basic questions about ethics in tourism: "is tourism all about the egoistic satisfaction of those paying for the privilege or should ethics play a part? What does it mean to say that a certain way of behaving, or a particular kind of tourism development, is wrong? Can the tourism industry 'afford' morality?"(2003: p. 7) The privileged – namely the paying tourists who can afford travel, and the large tourism companies who earn profits from ones' travels, are all pictured to have great responsibilities in ensuring ethical tourism developments. The existence of tourists also originating from developing countries is largely neglected (see however, Cochrane, 2008; Winter, 2006; Winter et al., 2009), as is the lack of works relating how

hosts (who are the very people we are supposedly responsible to and for) view initiatives like volunteer tourism.

2.2. Geographies of care and responsibility

In a separate but related field, investigations of the moral or ethical nature of human geography appear to be flourishing in the recent years within what has been suggested to be a nascent "moral turn" (Smith, 1997: p. 38) in human geography. The increasing numbers of published literature related to this "moral turn" suggest a sustained interest in ethics within academic geographic thought (see, for example Proctor and Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000). Within this context, the idea of "geographies of care" (see Conradson, 2003; Parr, 2003) or geography as a "caring discipline" (Lawson, 2007, 2009) has been increasingly used amongst various areas of research in human geography. Such studies have tended to draw their conceptual inspirations from "ethics of care" and emphasize the situatedness of care in familiar places, such as the home, as sites of care provision. As pointed out by Milligan (2001), caring relationships here is constructed on interconnectivities between people with similar identities within a particular locality, and therefore who and what to care for is often based on socio-spatial boundaries between "us" and "them". Key to an understanding of the "geographies of care" then, is to examine care and its complex web of relations in places, especially since caring relationships cannot be assumed to be uniform across time and space. Within these studies, there is an emphasis on how relations and practices of care – tasks such as listening, feeding, and administering medication – are implicated in the production of particular social spaces. What has not been explicitly discussed however is how tourism spaces, especially in volunteer or responsible tourism, can possibly also be examined as sites of care, where "caring relationships" can be formed.

Indeed, sites of tourism are necessarily distant or away from the tourists' homes, making it directly related to the wealth of literature discussing "caring at a distance" and "geographies of responsibility". Early works along these lines have tended to frame care as an ethics of encounter (Gordon, 1999), arguing that extending the scope of care requires the discipline to move beyond the form of partiality favored in feminist theories of care and communitarian value (see Smith, 2000). Rather than caring solely for those near and dear to oneself due to personal sentiments and relationships, Silk (1998, 2000, 2004) suggests that we should and are able to instead "care at a distance", as in today's globalized world, it is increasingly difficult to imagine our communities are local and bounded as these are increasing "stretched out" (Silk, 1999: p. 8) across various boundaries. Caring at a distance then, is based on the argument that people ought to recognize sameness or close similarity between their "selves" and "others" as human beings, and to see that "traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation and the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (Rorty, 1989: p. 196, cited in Silk (1999)). Geographers have also contended that the fundamental imperative for one to extend obligations over distance stems from their understanding of complex causal relationships that connect people living in different places through transnational networks such as market transactions, supply chains, and displaced pollution effects (Lawson, 2007; Massey, 2004; Popke, 2003). Central to this discussion, then, is a widening of our geographical scope of concern, not so much due to the recognition of "sameness" amongst humankind, but due to the "relations [we have] with one another" in this increasingly connected world. This line of thought is reiterated in Massey's (2005, 2004) works that calls for a recognition of the "relational politics of place", which suggests that places that are considered "local" today (and perhaps also in the past, since the days of imperialism) are heterogeneously connected to and constituted by other "global" places. Using London as an example, Massey (2005) argues that the acknowledgement of how a city is connected to the rest of the world through its colonial legacy and today's physical trade, service industries, and manufacturing industries, means also that London ought to take up responsibility towards those places within the networks that are necessary to sustain the city. Echoing this perspective, England (2007) suggests that Toronto, like London, is enmeshed in flows of people, capital, commodities, and information, both nationally and globally, and highlights that importance of addressing how "the distant is implicated in our 'here'" (Massey, 2005: p. 192).

If connectivities and networks with other places make one responsible to distant places, then following this line of thought, all places, whether London, Toronto, or elsewhere, therefore ought to have and should assume responsibilities that extends beyond their "local" boundaries. However, most existing works have tended to speak from a "first world" or "global city" perspective, and have argued that the very reason for which inhabitants of London (or other global cities) are "responsible" for distant places, is the privilege we continue to enjoy at the expense of other distant places. Again using London as an example, Massey suggests that "London is a successful city *and partly as a result of the terms of that success* there are still great areas of poverty and exclusion" (Massey, 2005: p. 156, emphasis in original), and that the concentration of industries and services in such global cities that is indeed one of the propelling forces that continues to produce poverty and exclusion in other places.

This sense of guilt or burden of responsibility is most evidently brought up in references made to the history of colonialism and the injustices it mete out to its ex-colonies – which are argued to continually place countries in the "third world" in a disadvantaged position today. Tronto for example advocates that in the course of assuming responsibilities,

> we need to return to the painful, ugly and yet perhaps redeemable excesses and injustices of the past, perpetrated by women and men, on men and women, throughout the world. Only if we are willing to give the past its due will we have any firm ground to stand upon and pursue hope for the future (2003: p. 133).

Embedded in this discourse however, is the problematic notion that the world is (naturally) divided into a more affluent "first world" or "North", and a much poorer "third world" or "South", and that the former ought to be responsible for the latter as the attainment of its privileges was made at the expense of the latter. The latter is also often deemed to be incapable of eradicating its problems, poverty, and the lack of sustained development, and therefore needs the privileged "North's" assistance and resources (see also Friedman, 1991; Silk, 2004). Such rhetoric however, is largely problematic as elaborated in the discussions below, as forming caring (or responsible) relationships will immediately imply the lack of equal relationships since the carer naturally assumes the position of privilege and power. Indeed, comments from respondents in this study indicate exactly that – clearly highlighting that despite its supposed benefits, caring relationships formed in volunteer tourism are not without political implications and tensions.

3. Methods

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper is based on a series of interviews with 14 respondents in Cambodia, conducted between May to July 2005. Respondents are made up of a mix of local Cambodians (5) and non-government organization (7) or

missionary (2) workers who have been based in various areas in Cambodia for between five to twelve years at the point of the interviews. All respondents have hosted volunteer tourists previously, of which some were contacted by the author initially through personal contacts (the author had previously volunteered in Vietnam, Cambodia and China herself, and obtained the first contacts through the various networks already established). The snowballing technique was further used to get in touch with more respondents during the fieldwork period in Cambodia. As a result of using personal contacts and the snowballing technique however, all respondents' contacted had hosted at least one group of Singaporean (the author's home country) student volunteer tourists. As previous studies have highlighted, volunteer tourists originating from Singapore are unique in a sense as, unlike typically independent volunteer tourists, those from Singapore are usually student groups (of about 20 to 40 students that are mostly 18–25 years old) and their trips are largely supported and organized under the Youth Expedition Project (YEP) run by Singapore's National Youth Council (NYC) (Sin, 2006, 2009). Some respondents in this research have only hosted one group of volunteer tourists (that were Singaporean students), while others have hosted volunteer tourists from other countries as well. In particular, one respondent had coordinated more than eight volunteer projects from Singapore in the past three years at the point of the interviews. It should be noted upfront that as a result of this, there is a particular skew in what is presented in this paper – here the volunteer tourist from a richer and privileged "developed country" was more often than not also from Southeast Asia, instead of the typical (unspoken) assumption that such a character would be from an Anglo-Saxon origin.

Fieldwork for this paper was done in informal settings, with interviews deliberately semi-structured to give respondents the freedom to elaborate on their experiences. Informal one-to-one interviews were used as they are seen to be more adept at "engaging in real or constructed dialogues in order to understand the people studied in their own terms (sometimes described as the insider's view)" (England, 1994: p. 82). These interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes or offices and were largely exploratory in nature, with questions about what their impressions and experiences with volunteer tourists were in general. Each interview lasted between one to two hours and the author interviewed each respondent between three to five times. To aid documentation, the researcher sought respondents' permission to tape-record the interviews, although many of the issues discussed in this paper were also brought up outside of interview settings – these were mostly casual conversations and were usually not tape-recorded. As suggested by Cloke et al., the researcher informed respondents that he or she is "free to switch off the tape-recorder and terminate the interview if the respondent is upset by the issues raised" (2004: p. 164), even though no respondent did actually stop the tape-recorder or terminate any interviews. All respondents did however request to remain anonymous, which also explains why repeated interviews were necessary, as there was a need to create mutual understanding and trust between the author and respondents as some of the issues eventually brought up were highly sensitive. As one respondent said, she was concerned that readers might think that volunteer tourism "is only about bad things" (anonymous personal communication, June 2005). At these interviews, the researcher promised to quote respondents without mentioning their names. Exact places and dates are also omitted as information tends to get passed around rapidly through the close links between the non-government organizations (NGOs) in Cambodia, and revealing the places and specific dates of interviews could indirectly reveal the identity of respondents. As all respondents had hosted volunteer tourists involved in building projects – these included building or extending schools, many respondents were dependent on volunteer tourism (despite its ad hoc nature) to undertake infrastructural improvements, and as such respondents were wary of offending funding organizations. One respondent opined that "it is only natural that we don't want to bite the hand that feeds us. What happens if other people hear what we say... What will they think? And it's not all bad. It's just some things can be better. But they might not see it this way" (anonymous, personal communication, Cambodia, June 2005). While many wished to provide the researcher with valuable insights that might improve volunteer tourism, they were also wary of putting their names to quotes that could potentially be misinterpreted. This observation in itself already alludes to the power distinctions in volunteer tourism, which will be further discussed in the section on "equal relationships?"

4. "Caring relationships

While the nature of how one volunteers as a tourist can range greatly – from constructing schools to teaching English, to animal conservation and so on – the gist of volunteer tourism remains in providing some direct forms of benefits to the host community. In many cases in this research, respondents have indicated that hosting volunteer tourists can be directly beneficial. At times, these could include improvement of physical facilities, such as having groups of volunteer tourists build new or extend existing school buildings (from kindergartens, to public schools and English-teaching colleges), or refurbish weaving factories (to facilitate NGO-supported local cottage industries). Such volunteer projects were often put in place with the aim of contributing to collective and longer-term benefits to host-communities – for example, respondents shared that investing in educational resources were often favored by volunteer tourists as this was seen to have the capacity to improve future employment prospects of youths in Cambodia (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). For example, a respondent summarizes what volunteer tourists did at her school,

> They did a lot of things! We had a big repair of the kindergarten... It was an old house, it was not built to be a kindergarten. It was a house modified as a kindergarten. And so we broke down the walls and the rooms and everything. We fixed the roof and then we raised the level of the ground. They did all the digging and the painting – all the heavy manual work, the dirty work (anonymous personal communication, May 2005).

In another example, as an undergraduate student, the author has personally led a group of students for a volunteer tourism trip in Northern Vietnam, where the team refurbished and extended a kindergarten building in a remote village. The village chief that hosted us told us that this volunteer project increased the kindergarten's capacity twofold (from 25 to 50 children) and allowed more children from the village to attend pre-school, therefore making it possible for children from this village to become as prepared as other children when they enter the nearest elementary school in a neighbouring village. At the same time, we were told that parents can concentrate on farming and earning income for their families as young children were taken care of in the kindergarten.

These projects were often selected as they directly appealed to one's desire as a volunteer tourist to act out caring relationships towards the locals in the host-community, even though one may not be familiar to or with these locals prior to the volunteer stint. The desire to care for (or at least express an image of caring for) the "distant other" is often latent in volunteers' self-expressions, as can be observed as well in numerous other works (Halpenny and Caissie, 2003; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007). Of the many sayings shared amongst volunteer tourists with regards to sustainable development and

responsible tourism, one is often mentioned: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" (Chinese proverb). As such, education-related projects are often favoured as these seem in line with ideas of sustainability and enabling locals to eventually break out of the poverty cycle through the education of younger generations (i.e. teaching a man to fish). Intrinsic in such rhetoric however, is the opinion that the volunteer tourist, despite having little knowledge of local context, and often with little or no working experience since he or she is more likely to be a student in this research, is somehow in a natural position to be able to "teach" their hosts. This is further discussed in the later section on equal relationships.

At the same time, volunteer tourists often interact with locals intensively with hosts and project their caring behaviors towards individuals in host-communities. Interacting with the hosts is often seen as an important aspect of volunteer tourism, since supporting local initiatives and attaining deeper understanding of local communities (beyond superficial tour packages) is part and parcel of what motivates volunteer tourism to begin with (Sin, 2009; Zahra and McIntosh, 2007). Observations in this research have also highlighted that care directed towards children was particularly salient, as most volunteers would play with and carry children, and at times buy them gifts or candy. Most respondents interviewed were receptive to such interactions, as they shared that locals usually have little means of visiting places outside of their own village, province, or country. Indeed, locals and NGO coordinators I interviewed often talked about the knowledge gained on different opinions or ways of doing things from the volunteer tourism experience. For example, on my own volunteer tourism experience to Guang Xi province in China in 2002, villagers in host-communities often stopped to talk to us and asked us seemingly fundamental and unexpected questions. Some examples include whether Singaporeans farmed in fields, or if we hand-washed our laundry. Indeed, contrary to typical host–guest relationships more common in tourism, the position of the hosts/locals here is not so much to meet tourists' service demands, but to be friendly and interactive, and to kindly receive volunteers' performances of care.

The natural disposition of a "caring" volunteer tourist is therefore often at the forefront of the interactions between volunteers and hosts – by living and working together with the community, sometimes up to as long as three weeks, relations of trust are sometimes forged. One respondent shared that he and others in his host-community tended not to judge volunteer tourists harshly as they are aware of the volunteers' good intentions in visiting their communities. He continued, "sometimes they [volunteer tourists] may be quite different, and it's difficult to talk 'cause most villagers don't speak English, but we know they come to do good things for us, the villagers understand that" (anonymous personal communication, June 2005). Another respondent also shared her experiences with volunteer tourists, saying that she was "very very happy with them", and was able to communicate well with the volunteer tourists "because of their shared aspirations and interests" (anonymous, personal communication, May 2005). This is reiterated by many local respondents. Many times, I myself received overwhelming hospitality and enthusiasm from local Cambodians once they knew I was a Singaporean, as many locals welcomed me as a friend because of their prior good experiences and friendship with other Singaporean volunteer tourists.

Another respondent (a school principal) related her students' feelings towards volunteer tourists that had done building refurbishment works and a fund-raising carnival in her school in December 2004,

> The students, they were touched by how they [volunteer tourists] worked hard without thinking of themselves. And when Alex [pseudonym for a volunteer tourist] lost his bag, the students really admired him, because they told me, he worked hard in the carnival without thinking about himself. It's so hot and tiresome… And they feel so hungry and now he lost his bag!… When he lost his bag, the students went around the streets to look for it. They looked around but still couldn't find it… They were touched really, by their service. Being one with them. It's not only like giving donations, but they really involved themselves. They entered into the lives of the people here. And that is something beautiful. (anonymous personal communication, May 2005)

Thus, in this case, volunteer tourism does appear to be a suitable platform in realizing "the role of international travel in promoting understanding and trust among people of different cultures… a foundation on which to build improved relationships towards the goal of world peace and prosperity" (D'Amore, 1988:p. 152). This example also brings up another aspect of caring in volunteer tourism – hosts are equally capable of caring for volunteer tourists, especially since they are more accustomed the local contexts and can often help volunteer tourists – here through the students looking around the streets for the volunteer's lost bag. Locals' care, help, and even protection of tourists is often neglected in the literature on volunteer tourism, even though as the next respondent shows, this is often very salient in their experiences – "at that time, they were doing all the digging and a group there found a snake, a python. All our students say do not tell them! Tell them they will get frightened!" (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). The same respondent also excitedly shared that one of their previous volunteers was about to re-visit the school in August 2005, and that some of her students were planning to bring the volunteer back to their hometowns in another province in Cambodia. The students had wanted to introduce the volunteer as their "foster sister" to their own families back home. Caring behaviors are therefore not privy only to the volunteer tourists, and hosts are equally able to care for volunteers.

What these observations bring up then, is that the impacts in host-communities are not uni-directional but a result of a complex interplay and negotiations between hosts and volunteer tourists. The blurred boundaries between tourists' and locals' spaces in volunteer tourism creates what Edensor (1998) calls "heterogeneous spaces" where volunteer sites become the meeting point and indeed point of exchange between hosts and guests. Contrary to research suggesting that external elements disrupt traditional practices and lifestyles in local communities (see Dann, 1993; Evans-Pritchard, 1993), Edensor (1998, 2000) argues that active interactions occur between locals and tourists, and locals are able to reinforce and perform their own identities to the tourists. Indeed, "local people [can often] situate themselves and their actions in both space and time" (Ringer, 1998: p. 5) by creating an image they deem suitable for tourists' consumption. Desforges thus describe tourism as "an ongoing and never-ending process of identification, rather than as cause of decline in a pre-existing local identity" (2000: p. 928). To the hosts, while the volunteer site is primarily a place in which care is enacted from volunteers to hosts, it is also an arena for the performance of a multitude of identities; those targeted for tourists' "consumption", or those targeted towards other locals or members of their own communities. Indeed, while the locals are possibly presenting themselves as suitable for the caring relationships demanded in volunteer tourism, they are simultaneously presenting images of themselves to their own communities – perhaps establishing their authority over volunteer projects or otherwise.

5. "Equal relationships? Responsibility as power

The ability to also care for the volunteer tourists and/or to perform identities deemed suitable for volunteer tourism however,

does not necessitate equal footing between volunteer tourists and hosts. Rather, it is quite the contrary – one needs to question – how indeed can locals present themselves as suitable for caring relationships in volunteer tourism? What would be a typical "attraction" for the would-be volunteer tourists? To hazard a guess: perhaps this might be a very poor, pitiful, and suffering community? Or perhaps locals need to be entirely receptive to what gifts, aid, and knowledge volunteer tourists bring with them? Having led teams of volunteer tourists from Singapore to Vietnam and South Africa myself, I have to admit – alongside with the desire to enact caring relationships is ultimately the mentality that as volunteers we *had to* go to places and people who were *most in need*, so long as it doesn't compromise our safety and basic wellbeing. This runs in contrast to what has long been argued, that if volunteer (tourists) adopt a "serving" attitude, an equal relationship between volunteer tourists and hosts can be achieved (Butcher, 2003a: p. 116). The question then is – is an equal relationship commonly established? And indeed, what constitutes an equal relationship?

Varying responses from respondents have indicated that despite (or perhaps because of) caring relationships, volunteer tourism does little to bring about equal relationships. Instead, it has been criticized for causing problems or simply replicating existing power hierarchies that continue to undermine hosts in manners not unlike what mass tourism is criticized for (anonymous personal communication, June 2005). One respondent, for example, shared that at times the costs of having volunteer tourists outweigh the benefits: "I don't want to talk about it because it was a very sad story. That's why now I decided no more short term volunteer tourists..." (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). While further details were not provided, the researcher gathered that this was because insensitivities on the part of volunteer tourists created a lot of tensions and unhappiness in her school.

Indeed, as suggested in tourism in general, volunteer tourists have the tendency to "frame" the experience and "shape culture and nature" (including the desire to enact caring relationships) to their own needs (Desforges, 1998: p. 183; see also Urry, 1990). And unfortunately, volunteer tourism, similar to geographies of responsibility and care, has more often than not been framed in the position of the "First world" being responsible for the wellbeing for a "Third world", poor, and marginalized subject. Although academics have observed this in various accounts, little has been done to directly challenge such perspectives. Barnett and Land, for example, have noticed that the "focus of moral agency [is] squarely on the giver, who is ascribed all the active attributes of moral subjectivity, at the cost of the receiver, who is thereby rendered a rather passive subject" (2007: p. 1071). The paradox one can here observe then, is that the call for responsibilities based on universal justice, or "sameness" between people despite the distance, is itself continuously placing the "same people" into distinct categories of the "rich" and therefore ones who need to assume responsibilities; and the "poor" and therefore ones who will always remain on the receiving ends of responsible actions.

One immediately wonders then – do the "poor" or the "third world" therefore have no responsibilities whatsoever? The earlier section has already suggested that hosts are able to "care" for volunteer tourists. But what about their broader responsibilities in areas such as environmental protection, conservation, and poverty eradication? It seems highly counterintuitive that the very people volunteer tourism seeks to be "responsible" for, are also the ones who are left out of the discussion, and have seemingly negligible roles to play. This is highly problematic as it assumes an entirely one-sided view towards the causality in a network of relationships between different places. While some works have brought up a postcolonial critique in the literature on responsibilities (see Noxolo et al., 2008; Raghuram et al., 2009), the pervasive tendency to take on a predominantly "First world" perspective needs to be critically challenged.

Such assumptions of responsibilities of the "First world" already place "us" in an authoritative position of power. Conversely, the lack of responsibilities given to the "Third world" might also mean that "they" continue to be marginalised and disempowered. Volunteer tourism then is perhaps not unlike what Bourdieu argues, that when acts of kindness, care, or responsibilities are

> set up in conditions of lasting asymmetry (in particular when they link people separated by an economic or social gulf too great to be bridged), and when they exclude the possibility of equivalent return or the very hope of active reciprocity, which is the condition of possibility of general autonomy, is [sic] likely to create lasting relations of dependence (1997: p. 238).

In volunteer tourism particularly, it is also important to realize that the tourist destination and the inhabited landscape of locals are one and the same. This, coupled with the tendency for volunteer tourists to have a long length of stay (respondents in this research have hosted volunteer tourists for between two to four weeks of stay) can possibly add to the strain of an apparent unequal relationship even though the initial contact is premised on a caring relationship. This is exemplified in a respondent's comments on her bad experience with a group of volunteer tourists. She describes the volunteers as

> rich kids who have nothing better to do. They don't know anything about the developing world and they are just big guys who think they can develop things in one month's time. I don't like that. They are too spoilt. They are not meant for Cambodia... They don't learn anything because they think they want to change this world. You cannot have this kind of thinking. If you go to another culture, you have to learn from the other culture. You cannot say that this culture is rubbish. If you want to think so, then why do they come? You have to learn from each other, and not think that your culture is better than their culture (anonymous personal communication, May 2005).

While this example may be extreme and the respondent is quick to add that not all volunteer tourists were so insensitive, it highlights the fact that not all volunteer projects are successful in creating or sustaining caring relationships between hosts and guests, and this was at times due to the unequal relationships that volunteer tourism perpetuates.

Indeed, another respondent related her experiences – she had problems hosting a particular group of volunteer tourists as their coordinator (a student leader) had very different ideas of how the living conditions should be during their three week long volunteer stint in a rural village in Cambodia. She said,

> Basic things like this group, they wanted me to get mattress for everyone of them. 29 mattresses. I said you know you bring mattress to the village, its so funny because they all sleep on the straw mats... But to buy 29 mattress, you can't fit it in [the group was staying in a villager's house which was a wooden stilt house roughly 75–80 square metres in area], and it's expensive. So I was thinking that this group doesn't know how to spend their money. A mattress is at least US$10. No, Cambodians don't live that way, so I bought straw mats for them instead. They have to live like Cambodians if they want to stay in their homes (anonymous personal communication, June 2005).

The same group had also decided that it was necessary (despite the respondent's advice) to ship a container of goods from Singapore for their use in Cambodia – this included all sorts daily necessities such as rice, oil, sugar, salt, and so on, and also pots, pans,

plates, and cutlery. Unfortunately, the container load of goods were held back at the customs by the Cambodian port authorities, and at the point of the interview, it was still uncertain whether the goods will be released after a hefty fine was paid. The respondent was clearly displeased with the entire situation, and shared that

> they think you can't get anything here. Like they are going to some poor country with nothing at all. Everything is so much cheaper if they just came here to buy. Now they wasted all the money and they can't even use it [referring to the goods]! When they came the shipment didn't come, so I had to go out shopping with them... That's why I think whether it helps for them to stay in the village. I wonder if it would be better for them to stay in the town and go to the village every day (anonymous personal communication, June 2005).

Here, the different standards and ways of living are apparent, and having volunteer tourists in the close proximity to locals' homes all but accentuate such tensions. In fact, the overzealous preparation for hardship during the volunteering stint, and the attempts to alter host environments to become more comfortable (from mattresses to food from home), suggests some truth in the criticisms YEP has received in Singapore – that is indeed a "government appendage that organizes subsidized 'guilt trips' for Singaporean youth to live among less developed regional communities – a creative 'soft-sell' on how good life is back home" (Yin, 2005). Such examples clearly show the superior positions of volunteer tourists, suggesting that volunteer tourism, at least in these contexts, is indeed far from achieving the supposed equal relationships.

5.1. Structural inequalities

Beyond individual interactions between volunteers and hosts, unequal relationships also pervade larger decision-making processes in volunteer tourism. Although all respondents related that volunteer projects were largely put in place and proposed by the hosts themselves, most respondents allude to the lack of real authority and control over volunteer projects. At the end of the day, the eventual decision of whether to volunteer with a particular place or not still lies in the hands of the volunteer tourists. Two respondents (both NGO coordinators) relate their experience with coordinating volunteer projects – first they had to personally be in contact with people that have the capacity to lead or set up links with potential volunteer groups. Such contacts could include respondents' friends or acquaintances in another country that might be in touch with organizations such as schools or churches that might be interested in sending a group for volunteer projects in Cambodia. Nine of the respondents also indicated that they were dependent on the then coordinator for YEP – the formal umbrella organization that provides support (both in terms of advice and financial support) for Singaporean youths volunteering overseas. For some of these YEP projects, the volunteer work was outside of the respondents' town or organization, and one respondent for example, shared that how he provided the linkup between a village and YEP,

> Because I've been travelling on the road to the village to Prey Veng district for my own work. On the way I saw the school look very old, like almost fall down and don't have walls. And then I can see but I have no ability to help them... YEP have this program to help the community, and build school for children. Then I recommend them to see this school (anonymous personal communication, June 2005).

Indeed this case shows how ad hoc and seemingly random the selection sites of volunteer tourism can be, and the passive role a local community plays in the decision making process. Without someone that has appropriate contacts with organizations like YEP, volunteer tourism in many rural places such as the one described is in fact hardly possible. In fact, throughout the researcher's stint in Cambodia, all of the respondents would ask at some point – would you happen to know someone or some group that can come to build the kindergarten extension/fix the leaking roof/teach English and so on?

Beyond the need to know the right people, respondents also have to put together proposals suggesting possible volunteer projects, which will in turn be considered by contacts such as YEP on whether what is proposed is suitable in their terms. One respondent, for example, shared that YEP required him to write a formal proposal detailing what his proposed project is about, including which sections of the school needed refurbishment and how this was to be done, how many students and local labor the project required, and what the budget for the entire project would be. He highlighted the immense difficulties he encountered in fulfilling such requirements as like him, not many host-communities will be able to put together a proposal of such complexity (especially since electricity was not even widely available in many villages!). On top of that, these proposals were also expected to be prepared in English. One respondent shares the anxieties in the process,

> In Cambodia, when people ask you to do something, you disagree or agree will happen immediately. You don't plan so far away. Like YEP they have plans like after we talk about 6 months. So the school principal almost like hopeless already. Sometimes they say they will come, but in the end they didn't. So now until I know clear about the group that they will come, then I tell the principal (anonymous personal communication, June 2005).

Another source also shared that at least from her experience, at the point of the interview, YEP was most likely to approve a proposed project if it was to build a school. She shares, "it's harder when you want to do something different [referring to longer term projects such as establishing microfinance for villagers]" (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). Hosts therefore only have the power to propose volunteer projects in line with what volunteers have come to expect as "suitable" projects. On deeper probing then, it appears that control and authority over volunteer projects could be superficial, as these still needed to be tailored to the volunteers' perception on which types of projects warranted their volunteer services, or indeed, what types of projects fulfilled their imaginations of caring relationships.

5.2. Encouraging (performed) dependency

The very desire for volunteer tourists to "care" for hosts also brings about a stream of related problems of encouraging dependency. Many volunteer tourists may not be aware of the impact of their actions in host locations and subconsciously create dependency. For example, it has been observed that volunteer tourism, like in tourism in rural places, has resulted in "misplaced generosity in bestowing gifts of money, sweets and pens on children... [and this] has encouraged begging and unwittingly undermined the natural dignity of indigenous people" (Tallantire, 1993: p. 282). Indeed, it is with shock that the researcher sees some advice for travelling in rural places as provided by *The Straits Times*, a local newspaper in Singapore – "do donate any extra clothing and footwear you may not require after your hike", and "do carry along a box of pens to give away to the local village children. It's worth seeing their ecstatic faces upon receiving such a modest gift" (Moledina, 2007). While these advices were not specific to volunteer tourism, the idea that a tourist should bring along gifts such

as old t-shirts and pens when travelling to a rural place is not new. The researcher herself has many times witnessed such gifting by volunteer tourists both in personal experiences and during fieldwork. Indeed, one respondent related that "after that [a volunteer tourism project] the school principal came to ask for more things, like toilets and all that. But we can't keep giving them things" (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). This respondent worries that after exposure to volunteer tourism, locals will begin to expect that infrastructural development would be provided by external agencies for free. This issue of dependency can possibly range from seemingly trivial instances of children asking volunteer tourists for pens or sweets, to larger societal problems with entire communities expecting hand-outs.

Furthermore, gifts and other infrastructural support volunteer tourism provide often bring about tensions as projects undertaken sometimes benefit particular groups in the community more than others. For example, a respondent related a controversial case where volunteer tourists went to teach rural school students computer skills. To do this, they had a donation drive for personal computers and brought these to Cambodia – something rather commonly observed both in volunteer tourism as well as other aid projects. The rural village however, did not have cabled electricity (as was common amongst most rural villages in Cambodia at the time of research), and the respondent relates her frustration at this point

> What would a school that has no electricity need a solar panel? The idea was to build a solar panel so that they can have computer…They brought in batteries all the way from Singapore – they had to hide it to bring it through the customs… [but] it was a real temptation because they [villagers and school staff] could take out the solar panels and bring them back… (anonymous personal communication, May 2005).

While the personal computers eventually made little impact in the community, the solar energy panels became a huge point of contention and source of envy among villagers. Indeed, the respondent related that the village chief thought that as the figure head of their community, he should have control and access over these solar panels. The school principal however, was unwilling to share these solar panels with other villagers, and this in turn undermined the village chief's authority and caused much unhappiness amongst the village. This example clearly shows that while volunteer tourism has the capability of unsettling existing power hierarchies, it could in turn create new power dynamics that may not necessarily benefit the intended its recipients.

At the same time, another respondent also highlighted the difficulties in sustainable planning and development due to their dependence on funding from volunteer tourism and international funding agencies. She relates,

> We will see if we have funds to go on… We ask from international funding agencies [including YEP], but mostly from individual donors [including volunteer tourists]. But funding agencies help a lot also. Now we have the plan to build the elementary school, we have not received response yet… Building A is done already but building B is not done yet… To ask from the funding agencies is not easy, because sometimes it takes years. And you have to follow it up (anonymous personal communication, May 2005).

Many organizations the researcher came across during the course of fieldwork seemed to be in sort of limbo in one way or another – having a particular project in mind which could benefit if more funding and support from groups of volunteer tourists or donors were available, but being entirely uncertain if any of these were coming their way at all.

Indeed, together with the general conception that volunteering involves the privileged volunteer tourist "giving" to the "less-privileged" hosts, volunteer tourism in these illustrations can serve to further reify this "rich-poor divide", where both volunteer and host actively perform their respective identities. At times, some respondents, especially coordinators of NGOs, felt that there was a possibility that locals in host-communities needed to appear "needy" to attract volunteer tourists, or as the previous section suggests, locals need to appear suitable for caring relationships according to the terms set or imagined by volunteer tourists. One respondent for example, revealed that he was handling a school refurbishment project that had been shelved for a year. He had brought several potential volunteer tourists' group leaders on their reconnaissance trip to see this particular school over the past two to three years, but no one, according to him, was interested in taking it up because "the volunteers always decided that another project had a greater need… And it was difficult to explain this to the villagers. How can I tell them that they are not poor enough when they already have so little?" (anonymous personal communication, May 2005). It is indeed such communities, villages, or schools that are not "poor enough" or desolate enough that falls between the cracks, and one then immediately wonders – if schools and communities become more experienced in hosting volunteer tourism, would they then learn to perform such dependencies and desperations so as to fulfill what volunteer tourists have come to expect?

In addition, it is well-known that "there is often much more funding from official donors for short-term emergency relief and far less support for longer-term work on hunger, homelessness and poverty" (Linderberg and Bryant, 2001: p. 102). In line with this view, one respondent related that many supposedly confirmed volunteer projects that should be been conducted between May to September 2005 were canceled or postponed indefinitely as many volunteer tourists' efforts were redirected towards Aceh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami. Another respondent shares,

> there were some more teams, not here, at another place. They say volunteers are not coming to Cambodia because they all go help the tsunami victims. I think the tsunami is terrible, it is good people go help. But the students feel so disappointed, they were looking forward to the volunteers coming (anonymous personal communication, June 2005).

Indeed, both examples show clearly that at times host-communities may have to appear as the poorest or most pitiful destination and there is a very real threat of becoming or appearing "too rich" for volunteer tourism.

6. Conclusion

Oftentimes throughout the course of this research, the author has been asked by many different parties (from respondents to curious friends), "so, is volunteer tourism good for host-communities?" Without a good conclusive answer, I can only reply, "it really depends". On one hand, it does provide some aid and I suppose that is better than nothing at all. Also, something intrinsic in my heart tells me not to stamp down hard on many volunteer tourists' goodwill and genuine desire to do something about the unfair world they see (even when this may mean bringing solar panels to power computers in a village with no electricity at all!). It is perhaps important not to tip over to the other critical extreme of assuming that nothing works and heading the temptation to strike off any value in innovative ideas such as volunteer tourism.

But on the other hand, does the aid provided really amount to anything at all (in comparison to the politics and issues introduced in volunteer tourism)? For example, as the last section highlighted,

becoming "too rich" for volunteer tourism is indeed the ironical situation caring relationships and unequal relationships brings. While volunteer tourism is supposed to act as a development strategy that would bring about an improved standard of living for the locals, the moment volunteer tourism does achieve this, a destination can very possibly become irrelevant (and "too rich") as far as volunteer tourism goes. This brings up the pertinent need to critically question the very basis of pro-poor idea(l)s and practices in volunteer tourism. In the form observed in this research, where individual or groups of volunteer tourists go to a specific place to do some sort of charitable project, the perception that volunteer tourism can actually bring about sustainable changes or eradicate (or at least lessen) poverty in the world, is perhaps but a utopian dream. Instead, volunteer tourism as discussed in this paper is necessarily one-off – once (and if) it achieves its pro-poor objectives, volunteer tourism will no longer be needed in a particular site – and as such the tourism potential and capacity of the site no longer holds. One should then ask the necessary question – how will one-off projects help eradicate poverty? What is the impact of such one-off volunteer tourism projects? This however, is not to say that all forms of volunteer tourism are necessarily one-off. For example those centered around community home stays where volunteer tourists live with and learn from locals, rather than those that attempt to go and help the poorest of the lot, may in fact be more sustainable forms and models (at least in providing an income to locals through tourism). Indeed, there are many variants in volunteer tourism, and new and creative ideas are emerging rapidly as we speak.

Regardless of its form though, it is also shown in this paper that despite intentions to aid or be "pro-poor" in volunteer tourism, the very premises of care posits the volunteer tourist as privileged when compared to his or her hosts, meaning that the relationships formed are unequal to begin with. While caring relationships may very likely be welcome and accepted by both volunteer tourists and hosts, it is still important to highlight the possibility that volunteer tourism may simply be another form of "aid" that continues to perpetuate and re-produce existing power and social hierarchies between the rich and privileged, and the poor and less privileged. Again, it seems ironic that "responsibilities based on sameness" are established upon relationships that separate and distinguish who is privileged and who is not at its onset. While fieldwork for this paper is based specifically on volunteer tourism, these questions on whether a caring relationship can also be an equal relationship also applies within the larger discussions on geographies of care and responsibility, and development. Indeed, one has to question – is the moralization of care and responsibility a suitable starting point in pushing for developmental strategies?

The issues that this paper has discussed therefore highlight the need to look at how volunteer tourism is perceived on the ground by the locals (and other NGO staff and missionaries in places hosting volunteer tourism). This is an area that has not been researched extensively in existing literature, and certainly also an area revealing the open-ended nature and key complexities in volunteer tourism that is yet little discussed. No matter whether we like it or not, whether we think volunteer tourism is good for the communities or not, it is highly likely that it is here to stay – more and more tour operating companies are each rolling out their own versions of volunteer tourism, and more and more tourists, whether they are gap year tourists or retirees, are beginning to take up volunteer tourism options, or are making it a holiday habit and hobby. This paper thus intervenes at this point, not in attempt to stop or reverse this trend, but to highlight the pertinent issues in volunteer tourism, especially those from the locals' perspectives, in hope that as we rush headlong toward attempts to be responsible through volunteering while on holiday, we do not forgot to ask the important questions – who indeed are the ones we are responsible to, and what do they make out of our performances of care and responsibility towards them?

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