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Travellers' Aid:

Guidebooks and the Motivations of the Voluntourist

Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, has been defined by Wearing as "volunteer[ing] in an organized way to undertake holidays that... involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society" (qtd. in Jakubiak 93). This seems to indicate that volunteer tourists volunteer solely from a desire to help others; however, both altruistic and self-centred motivations are well-documented. Simone Grabowski, in her literature review of volunteer tourist motivation, notes that volunteer tourists themselves stand to gain from the voluntourism experience, such as through skill-building or self-discovery (78). For instance, she cites research by Andereck et al., who divided voluntourists into three categories based on their motivations, which were mainly skill-building, human connection with the host community, and altruism (78). Grabowski concludes that "there is not one single motivation that is more common among volunteer tourists than the others, and in fact the core motivation will vary depending on a person's values, personality and life stage" (82).

It is not clear at first glance how the altruistic and egoistic motivations of volunteer tourists are compatible with each other, or if it is even possible to satisfy both types of desires at once. As such, the study of voluntourist guidebooks, especially those from major tourist guidebook publishers such as Lonely Planet, is interesting for two reasons. They reflect how their authors and editors, and more generally the voluntourism industry, view and prioritise the needs of the voluntourist. Also, as an important reference for voluntourists, especially for first-timers, the way that guidebooks negotiate the boundaries between the altruistic and egoistic motivations significantly influences how voluntourists view the tension between their own motivations.

To this end, we will look at two voluntourist guidebooks — Frommer's *500 Places Where You Can Make a Difference* by Andrew Mersmann, and Lonely Planet's *Volunteer: A Travellers Guide to Making a Difference Around the World* by Charlotte

Hindle et al. — and how they navigate between the two competing types of motivations. I will argue that Mersmann avoids explicitly addressing the altruistic/egoistic tension, by focusing on self-centred needs and discouraging the reader from critical reflection by use of language and tone. By contrast, Hindle et al. prompts the reader to synthesise parts of both motivations, by using his altruistic desire to provide better aid as a platform for reflection and self-discovery.

The introductory section of Mersmann's guidebook, "A Letter from the Author" (viii), suggests that Mersmann would emphasise altruistic motivations over egoistic ones. Mersmann states that the aim of his guidebook is "to awaken your imagination and point out a few projects that might turn you on to listening to your heart and finding a way to make a real difference in the world" (viii). It is significant that self-directed motivations, such as skill-building and travel, are absent from the stated purpose of the guidebook. In the same spirit, Mersmann writes that "Every time you make an effort, you shift the world—and cause change in bigger ways than you imagined possible" (viii). Such rhetoric further increases the expectation that the desire to serve communities is the main motivation of the reader that Mersmann addresses.

However, the format of the guide is inconducive to thinking about the host community, and issues such as the relevance and long-term effects of projects. For instance, the 500 entries in Mersmann's guidebook is followed by a disproportionately short three-page section on "Choosing Which Volunteer Vacation Is Right For You" (449–51). Moreover, only one question in this section concerns whether projects benefit the host community:

> How involved is the local community in determining project goals? What is the local community's recourse if they feel the project is not efficient or beneficial?
>
> Often the local community is the best judge of what is needed, and they certainly know if the desired results are being accomplished—or are not.

The answer neither directly nor sufficiently addresses the question. According to Mersmann, the host community is able to recognise if a project helps them, but

there is no indication that they have the power to change the situation that the volunteer tourist organisations impose on them, or that the reader should even concern themselves with such issues.

More generally, Mersmann does not deal with problems and issues surrounding the altruistic motive critically, for instance on travel:

> A common objection is that there's enough to do at home, that we should work in our own community rather than places far away. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive—there is also great value in seeing every destination as part of our community. (viii)

The question of why one would volunteer abroad rather than in his own community is an important one for volunteer tourists to consider. However, Mersmann avoids engaging meaningfully with the question, dismissing it as unimportant without further comment. Hence we deduce that Mersmann neither expects nor encourages his readers to examine these issues closely.

Questions about the relevance of volunteer training are also unanswered. A common theme in many of Mersmann's descriptions of volunteer projects is that volunteer enthusiasm is more valuable than expertise. The volunteer can "inject new vitality into arts programs and give children opportunities at artistic exploration and expression" (115); "all that's needed is your able hands and energy to work with the locals and fellow volunteers" (229); "a little knowledge will go a long way, and a lot of energy and rapport is the most highly prized quality in volunteers" (289). The message behind all these statements is that the specific skill sets relevant to project placements, such as experience with teaching children, are less important than the willingness to help. Indeed, Mersmann recommends that readers "pick [a project] that you... are really excited about" (449), regardless of expertise or experience.

Thinking about the best way to deliver aid to communities increases the effectiveness and sustainability of aid. Hence, by discouraging critical reflection of issues surrounding volunteer tourist altruism, Mersmann distances the volunteer tourist from the host community. In doing so, he avoids the need to discuss the conflicting motivations of volunteer tourists, so that he is able to discuss egoistic motivations and touristic needs exclusively for the rest of his guidebook.

The importance of egoistic motivations throughout the rest of Mersmann's guidebook is already anticipated by its title (*500 Places Where You Can Make a Difference*). The presence of the word "You" might already point to a focus on the reader and his self-centred needs, though directly engaging with the reader in second person is a feature common to all tourist guidebooks. However, the use of the word "Places" invokes the passiveness of geographical locations, as a site to be visited by tourists. This positions the host communities as static receivers of aid, whereas the volunteer tourist is the only active agent who can "Make a Difference." This is representative of the tone that Mersmann uses.

To Mersmann, his reader is first and foremost a tourist, who also incidentally happens to be a volunteer. For instance, he refers to the reader's community involvement exclusively by the term "volunteer vacation" (449), emphasising the touristic nature of the reader's volunteer tourist experience. This is in marked contrast to how Mersmann refers to his own experiences as "service projects" (v), which also implies that Mersmann sees himself assuming the volunteer identity to a greater extent than his intended audience.

The structure of the guidebook entries is consistent with Mersmann's identification of the reader's primary role as a tourist. For example, here is the introduction to an arts teaching programme in Zambia:

> One of the seven wonders of the world, the large, impressive Victoria Falls won't be far from your hostel door. Nor will elephant gazing, or ample opportunities for excellent fishing. Welcome to Livingstone, where arts education is suffering but tourism is thriving—heres where volunteers can make an appreciable difference. (115)

We can see how the emphasis in the above passage is on the tourist attractions near the project site, rather than on the volunteer project itself. Each entry also contains detailed descriptions of the accommodation, facilities and activities available at the project site, similar to those one expects from regular tourist guides:

> You'll be sharing a room with other volunteers at a hostel in the center of town. Accommodations are basic but quite comfortable, and there is even a swimming pool on-site as well as an Internet cafe. ... Your evening and weekend can be the busiest time of all, as there's so much to do and see in this region. The mighty Zambezi River and Victoria Falls are deservedly known as Wonders of the World... (115)

Every entry also ends with a "Don't Miss" section, giving a brief overview of popular tourist sights in the region.

If Mersmann's guidebook focuses on the tourist identity of the volunteer tourist, *Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World* by Charlotte Hindle et al. focuses on the volunteer, and his relationship with the host community. This is clear from a comparison of how the chapters in each book is organised. Mersmann's chapter headings include "Working with Children," "Sharing Your Knowledge: Teaching Vacations," "Building Better Communities," and "Teaching Through Sport," consistent with Mersmann's stance that the volunteer tourist should choose projects that are suited to his own egoistic motivations. On the other hand, chapters from Hindle et al. are titled "Organised Volunteer Programmes," "Structured and Self-Funding Volunteer Programmes," "Religious Organisations," and "Do-It-Yourself Volunteer Placements." With this structure, Hindle et al. indirectly proposes that touristic concerns are irrelevant in the decision-making process of the volunteer tourist. Instead, readers should find a suitable volunteer programme, which would then select the most suitable project for them.

Hindle et al. thus prioritises the need to provide quality aid to host communities over the personal needs of the volunteer tourist. The guidebook advises the reader that "it's crucial to choose an agency that operates in a way you feel comfortable with and that does its best to place volunteers on projects that are genuinely sustainable and responding to local needs" (23). Hence the choice of sending agency that the reader makes does not directly affect whether his self-centred motives are satisfied. This is also stated explicitly: "Throughout this process [of finding a sending agency] the emphasis should always be on meeting the needs of the host programme abroad, rather than on your own individual requirements as a volunteer" (16).

In order to lead the reader to find a project placement that best satisfies the

needs of the host community, Hindle et al. actively questions readers about their own motivations. For instance, the first section of Chapter 1 is titled "Why Volunteer?" (9), which Hindle et al. calls "a good question[,] and one you need to think very carefully about" (9). The guidebook further states that "Once you know what you might want to do and where you might want to go, there are two things you need to consider[:]. . . what sort of volunteering experience you want, and. . . how to find the right volunteering opportunity for you" (16). To help the reader decide which organisation to work with, Hindle et al. presents questions for the reader to ask organisations, divided into categories such as "Organisation," "Selection process," "The programmes," "Costs," and so on (40–1).

As part of this approach, Hindle et al. also address larger issues associated with volunteer tourism. The guidebook states that "the reality [of international volunteering] may not be quite so charming. The more you find out about international volunteering, the more aware you become of some key ethical issues" (25). Hindle et al. expects that awareness of these issues directly affect the actions of the voluntourist towards helping the host community.

> Q1: How do I know if the host community or country will really benefit from my volunteering?
> . . . there's little point in a one-off placement where you're parachuted into a school, orphanage, community centre etc to work for a month or two then leave. What happens to the work you were doing? How is it continued? Has your departure created a vacuum that no-one can fill, and your work therefore been more of a hindrance than a help? (25)

Here, Hindle et al. explores the very real possibility that voluntourists can bring more harm than good to the community that they are trying to help. The awareness of sustainable development, and the circumstances in which it is feasible, are relevant for volunteer tourists concerned about the well-being of the community beyond their direct involvement. Combined with a frank assessment of their personal motivations, the reader is now equipped to decide the best type of programme for the outcomes that they want, both for themselves and the host community.

Such questions do not only advance the altruistic goals of the reader; they also

help the reader in reflection and self-discovery, both of which are egoistic impulses. Consider the question posed by the text box, "Is International Volunteering the New Colonialism?" (10):

> If volunteers travel in the belief that they have little to learn and a lot to give, then they do risk being little more than 'New Age colonialists'. No-one becomes an international volunteer for purely altruistic reasons: they also do it because it is exciting, because they might learn something, because they want to meet new people who live differently and because, just maybe, they might have something to offer. (10)

One expects that all volunteer tourists acknowledge their own self-centred motivations at least implicitly. However, by bringing them to the reader's conscious attention, Hindle et al. induces them to engage with their volunteer experience at a deeper level, even while planning for the trip.

Our analysis has shown that both Mersmann and Hindle et al. have been unable to indicate how the volunteer tourist can satisfy all aspects of his motivations. For Mersmann, the desire to provide relevant, sustainable aid is compromised by touristic needs; for Hindle et al., the opposite is true. This suggests that these two motivations are fundamentally incompatible, and that volunteer tourists themselves have to choose between them at some point. This echoes research by Callanan and Thomas (as reported by Grabowski), who conceptualised "shallow, intermediate and deep volunteer tourists" (76):

> Those at the 'deep' end tend to think less about their own personal interest and more about the community, while shallow volunteers are interested in self-development and career-enhancement. In other words, the experience does not need to be necessarily a meaningful one for deep volunteer tourists, but the type of project they are involved in is highly important. (76)

Hence Mersmann perfectly caters to the needs of shallow volunteer tourists, and similarly for Hindle et al. and deep volunteer tourists. However, this is not immediately clear before reading the guidebooks, and it might be interesting to investigate

whether each guidebook does reach its target audience, or whether reading Mersmann can change a deep volunteer tourist to a shallow one (or vice versa with Hindle et al.).

To conclude, we will mention the work of Cori Jakubiak on English language teaching via volunteer tourism, and how it exposes deeper problems with Mersmann's guidebook. Jakubiak notes how "the requirements on most English language voluntourism programmes are minimal" (95), and how volunteer organisations claim that only "participants' innate language knowledge skills and their biding enthusiasm" are necessary for the placement (95), similar to how Mersmann describes his volunteer projects. Nonetheless, Jakubiak's interviews with former programme participants reveal a significant proportion of voluntourists who felt that their projects were ineffectual in achieving their stated (altruistic) purposes. This was attributed to reasons such as lack of time, expertise, and continuity or sustainability. This indicates that Mersmann could be setting up his reader for similar disappointment.

We have seen how Mersmann's guidebook situates itself in opposition to sustainable volunteer tourism, gratifying short-term desires of volunteer tourists and neglecting long-term welfare of the host community. However, as Jakubiak suggests, the altruistic motivations of many volunteer tourists can only be satisfied through sustainable development. Hence we can make an argument against the publication of guidebooks of the Mersmann model, independent of (but supported by) ethical concerns behind sustainable development.

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Abstract

Thesis statement: I will argue that Mersmann avoids explicitly addressing the altruistic/egoistic tension, by focusing on self-centred needs and discouraging the reader from critical reflection by use of language and tone. By contrast, Hindle et al. prompts the reader to synthesise parts of both motivations, by using his altruistic desire to provide better aid as a platform for reflection and self-discovery.

¶ 4: The introductory section of Mersmann's guidebook... seems to suggest that Mersmann would emphasise altruistic motivations over egoistic ones.

¶ 5: However, the format of the guide is inconducive to thinking about the host community, and issues such as the relevance and long-term effects of projects.

¶ 6: More generally, Mersmann does not deal with problems and issues surrounding the altruistic motive critically, for instance on travel.

¶ 7: Questions about the relevance of volunteer training also go unanswered.

¶ 8: ... by discouraging critical reflection of issues surrounding volunteer tourist altruism, Mersmann distances the volunteer tourist from the host community.

¶ 9: The importance of egoistic motivations throughout the rest of Mersmann's guidebook is already anticipated by its title...

¶ 10: To Mersmann, his reader is first and foremost a tourist, who also incidentally happens to be a volunteer.

¶ 11: The structure of the guidebook entries is consistent with Mersmann's identification of the reader's primary role as a tourist.

¶ 12: If Mersmann's guidebook focuses on the tourist identity of the volunteer tourist, [the guidebook] by Charlotte Hindle et al. focuses on the volunteer, and his relationship with the host community.

¶ 13: In order to lead the reader to find a project placement that best satisfies the needs of the host community, Hindle et al. actively questions readers about their own motivations.

¶ 14: As part of this approach, Hindle et al. also address larger issues associated with volunteer tourism.

¶ 15: Such questions do not only advance the altruistic goals of the reader; they also help the reader in reflection and self-discovery, both of which are egoistic impulses.

Cover Letter

Prof Lo,

The altruistic/egoistic tension in volunteer tourist motivation has been well-studied in literature. Since one can expect that volunteer tourism guidebooks can yield new insights into volunteer tourism, the **motive** of this essay combines these two ideas, asking about the different ways that guidebooks deal with these tensions, and what we can learn from these differences. My **thesis** is that Mersmann writes in a way so that he can avoid directly confronting these issues, while Hindle et al. propose a partial resolution between certain aspects of these motivations.

I have worked on comprehensive account of the **motive** of this essay, which takes up about one full page. As such, I believe that it has satisfactorily addressed the points raised by your comments to my first draft.

The post-writing exercise was of great help in clarifying the overall **structure** of the essay, by ensuring that the **analysis** in each paragraph corresponds to its topic sentence, and that the topic sentences together make up a larger argument. This directly improves the **stitching** between adjacent paragraphs. I have also tried to stitch together the two major parts of the essay, namely the analysis of the two guidebooks, via ¶12 in a direct comparison of both texts. I think attempting such comparisons in other areas of the texts would have been beneficial to my argument.

One area for improvement that I see is the insufficient **orientation** in the essay, both to **keyterms** such as "sustainable development," and to the two primary texts. I tried to incorporate such elements into the essay (for example, an analysis of Mersmann's "About the Author" section (v)), but these were removed from the final essay as they were not as relevant to the main argument.

This is my first time writing an argumentative essay of this length; as such, I have never sustained an argument over 8 pages, and I certainly had to work at it for this paper. However, I have been rewarded with insights into my texts which would have escaped me otherwise. All in all, I think that writing this essay has been a challenging, yet fruitful, experience.