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Volunteering and Communication Volume 2: Studies in International and Intercultural Contexts

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As the title indicates, this book is a follow-on to an earlier publication and addresses specifically the issues of international and intercultural dimensions of volunteering. It contains a range of individual contributions across three sections. Section 1 looks at a series of examples of volunteers involved in disaster relief in their home countries; section 2 looks at USA volunteers involved in international volunteering programs; section 3 considers diaspora programs. It is section 2 which is the focus of this review.

Gossett's introduction, while acknowledging academic research contributions, recognizes the narrow lens through which research has sometimes been undertaken (p. 9). "Free will" is the essence of the definition of volunteering which leads Gossett to explore informal and embedded volunteering and she identifies that the historical, political and economic context of any society will shape both the nature *and* level of volunteering. In any given context volunteering is both similar *and* unique to those in other societies (p. 6). Since volunteering is in part culturally determined, no assumptions can be made that others will view the

same action as beneficial. Western oriented "doing good" motivations may not be experienced as such by the recipients of international volunteers (p. 13).

The section on USA volunteers abroad comprises six case studies. Three are recognizable as part of the tradition of long term volunteering for development programs: two of them focus on Peace Corps while one concerns volunteers across seven sending organizations, including five evangelical Christian bodies. The three remaining studies focus on voluntourism, short-term missionary volunteering and Rotary International. These varied and diverse examples perhaps tell as much a story about the USA as international volunteering.

Malleus analyses the intercultural experiences of Peace Corps volunteers in four southern African countries (Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia), through the analysis of their personal blogs while on their volunteer assignment.¹ He explores four

1 Malleus. Voices from the Peace Corps: An Intercultural Communication Study of Blogs from Southern Africa

dimensions – culture shock, interactive challenges, cross-cultural comparison, and intellectual adaptation. The findings appear to confirm previous research and also the historic working hypothesis of practitioners. Culture shock appears early in the assignment while intercultural adaptation appears later. Using the ongoing publication of volunteer experience has significant potential for a different way of organizational learning about intercultural experience.

The blog as a research source is also utilized by Xu in her case study of Global Volunteers teaching (and being tourists) in China.² Using 270 team-based blogs, Xu focuses on how Global Volunteers approach culture shock in the context of a short-term volunteer program. There is less time to develop the personal strategies that Malleus describes, yet adaptive behavior and understanding of different cultural settings are evident in the stories of the volunteers. Her research is more situated in the detail of a single program where the interactions of the volunteers as teachers with students is seen as an important element of meaning. This is possible since Xu is concerned to explore the impact of culture shock on host communities and not just the volunteers (p. 187).

This interest in “meaning” is taken up by McNamee et al.³ Drawing on previous discourses they seek to identify the meanings that long-term international

volunteers assign to their service and whether “they make sense of these experiences as meaningful work” (p. 157). They are also interested to discover how “volunteers draw upon home and/or host community discourses in these meaning-making processes.” Their research, based on 24 “retrospective narratives” of US volunteers in the global South from three months to six years, drew volunteers from seven different agencies. They identify four core meanings: employment/carer; personal development; philanthropy/humanitarianism; and whole life endeavour. Volunteers would move between these to enable “meaningfulness” of their assignment.

There are tangible recommendations for IVSOs,⁴ including how to address the mismatching of volunteer skills/experiences with assignment expectations; enhanced support and development throughout volunteer service; support for volunteers in handling family and friends throughout their period of service; and mentoring models to enable volunteers to explore the different models of meaning during service.

Frederick and Smith’s research on “mission trips” from the USA is a story of massive growth, with 1.5 million participants each year from just 500 in the 1960s.⁵ Their purpose was “to explore how mission volunteers construct and

2 Janice Hua Xu. Bridging Cultural Gaps: U.S. Volunteers Teaching English in China

3 McNamee, Peterson and Gould. How Was Your “Trip?” Long-Term International Volunteering and the Discourses of Meaningful/less Work.

4 McNamee et al. use IVSO (International Volunteer Service Organizations). More contemporary usage might be IVCO (International Volunteer Co-operation Organizations)

5 Frederick and Smith. Making Good: The Identity and Sensemaking of International Mission Trip Volunteers.

perform identity(ies) during service” (p. 194) which is located in the framework of how volunteers engage in assignments by developing multiple identities. The research, using a range of methods, addresses two questions – what identities are enacted by volunteers during the mission trip and how do they make sense of this upon return. While a Christian identity was evident amongst volunteers, multiple identities such as construction workers, teachers, mother figures, and servants were adopted at different times (p. 200). In addition, there were challenges of intercultural experience and the extent to which volunteers retained their American identity in the face of significantly different cultural contexts and experiences.

They draw on the hypothesis that sense-making only happens in retrospect. Volunteer sensemaking on return appeared to centre on the self rather than others; and on a job well done rather than on the worthwhile nature of service or in making sense of the communities where they had been assigned. Yet volunteers do not await their return before making sense of their experiences and the authors recommend components of self-reflection are built into the volunteer journey

Craig and Russo, exploring the volunteer traditions of Rotary International, focus on the issue of disappointment, of the non-achievement of the aspiration of lasting change, by using the concepts of “self” and “other” (p. 214).⁶This

opens up challenging territory. The construction of the “other”, the recipient of the volunteer contribution, serves the purpose of the dominant group’s objectives at a strategic level. The “other” is characterized by the “desired self-image” of the dominant group (p. 215). This in turn frames the justification for intervention.

Their research involved interviews of 32 Rotarians. The outcome indicated an “inconsistency” between “expressed values” and “actual practices” (p. 219) and one where the recipients are described in terms of the self-image that Rotarians have constructed for them. The end result is that the program is not achieving its desired outcome of sustainability and involves some far-reaching proposed changes.

The construction of the self as the expert/worker has wider application. This is a model of international service where defining the “other” is not unproblematic and where organizational practice is not neutral. The implications for international service are far-reaching: “Volunteers should challenge themselves, and challenge each other, on the proposal and design of projects by asking questions regarding categorical assumptions of involvement and expected outcomes. Is the project to fix a problem with strictly imported assets or to work with people in sharing assets and discovering collaborative solutions?” (p. 229).

Taking the case studies as whole, it is striking how the volunteers describe their experience: The shock of how different things are compared to the USA;

6 Craig and Russo. Implications for Constructing the “Serviceable Other”: Desired vs. Actual Outcomes in Rotary’s International Service Projects.

the frustrations of things not working as they should/could; or how sense-making was about the self rather than the “other”. Such anecdotes do not tell a full picture, but they do contribute to it. The discussion in the final chapter of “American exceptionalism” goes to another level – how the overall fabric of American society underpins the international volunteering tradition.

The theory of American exceptionalism – that somehow Americans are “exceptional” – is argued as a philosophy underpinning the formation of Peace Corps as a force for good around the world. This chapter “analyzes the way that American exceptionalism is reinforced and reconstructed in the discourse of returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs)” (p. 233). The hidden assumptions of “whiteness, masculinity and national superiority” are seen as the resources RPCVs draw upon to make sense of their experience. This perspective is illustrated by extensive quotations and

storytelling, sometimes drawn from the author’s own experience, which bring out the subtle ways in which this plays out and the costs of not engaging transparently with the dynamics of power in everyday situations – from using *American* to get a late-night lift or as an emphasis in challenging sexism in a difficult situation.

But the conclusion is by no means negative and provides an optimistic concluding note:

“The particular experience of being a Peace Corps volunteer is also one that opens up possibilities for challenging American exceptionalism [...] the act of international volunteering is one that allows for meeting contradiction head-on, and challenging normative views.”

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