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To cite this article: Andrea Lee Freidus (2016): Unanticipated outcomes of voluntourism among Malawi's orphans, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, DOI: [10.1080/09669582.2016.1263308](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1263308)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1263308>



Published online: 16 Dec 2016.



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Unanticipated outcomes of voluntourism among Malawi's orphans

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ABSTRACT

Young people engaging in forms of travel that link touristic adventures with volunteering in contexts of poverty has become increasingly popular. Volunteering in the forms of conservation, environmental and development tourism has a long history. The human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic in Africa has led to a flurry of volunteering with orphans that is little studied. This project adds to the newly emerging literature on orphan tourism. In-depth, open-ended interviews and participant observations were conducted over a three-month period with American travelers to a Malawian orphanage between 2009 and 2010. These data suggest that volunteers' experiences and perceptions were shaped by misrepresentations of a generic Africa that both biased and perpetuated misunderstandings of poverty. In addition, a racialized, needy other was understood as needing the benevolent had of the west. Voluntourists often leave with superficial understandings of poverty and culture. In addition, many volunteers expressed new antagonistic perspectives on US poverty, which they felt was not the same caliber as developing world poverty. This re-thinking led many volunteers to miss shared systems of inequality that inhibit the livelihoods of all people living in poverty regardless of geography. The long-term impact on orphans is unclear, but it seems children develop unrealistic expectations about their futures.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 March 2015
Accepted 14 November 2016

KEYWORDS

Voluntourism; Malawi;
orphanage tourism;
misunderstanding poverty;
mythologized Africa

Introduction

On 25 November 2007, photojournalist Massey (2007) published an article entitled "Expedition Good: An Adventure of Altruism in Malawi, Africa" in the *Daytona Beach News Journal*. He presented diary excerpts and photos from his voluntourism trip facilitated by Ambassadors for Children (AFC) to Blessings Village in Malawi. His piece served as an advertisement for the program run by AFC which is a not-for-profit organization that facilitates voluntourist trips for individuals interested in working with disadvantaged children in impoverished contexts. They are just one organization reflective of the growing trend of alternative tourism mainly targeting the developing world. In the article, Massey (2007) defines voluntourism as "humanitarian-oriented trips to places where help is needed the most: Africa, El Salvador, Asia, Eastern Europe and South Africa to name a few". In the scholarly literature, voluntourism is defined as the combination of "travel with voluntary work, attracting individuals that are seeking a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and/or economic environments in which they participate" (Wearing, 2001, p. 1).

The goals of these touristic endeavors often include poverty alleviation, raising poverty consciousness, increasing global solidarity and facilitating cross-cultural engagement and awareness (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2013a, 2013b; Palacios, 2010; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Richter & Norman, 2010; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011; Wearing, 2001). Others have cited education, personal growth and improving resumes as central motivators (Wright, 2013). Africa is one of the most popular volunteer destinations (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014; Rogerson & Slater, 2014).

The literature on alternative forms of tourism has a rich history (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Wearing, 2001). The vast majority of work focuses on adventure tourism (Weber, 2001), ecotourism (Bjork, 2000) study abroad and gap year activities (Ntarangwi, 2000; Simpson, 2004) and conservation tourism (Broad, 2003; Brondo, 2015) with an emphasis on volunteers' motivations, outcomes and host community perceptions (Wright, 2013). Newer studies are being conducted with volunteers working specifically with children, especially orphans (Carpenter, 2015; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2014; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Qian, 2014; Reas, 2013; Rogerson & Slater, 2014; Tomanzós & Butler, 2012; Weaver & Jin, 2016). Proyrungroj (2014) specifically defines orphan volunteer tourism as "a form of short-term volunteer tourism that is undertaken at an orphanage and encourages international volunteer tourists to engage in caregiving activities for orphaned children" (p. 4).

The objective of this study was to contribute to the emerging work on orphan tourism by studying voluntourists and their interpretations of their experiences in an orphanage in Malawi, southern Africa. This article reports on how voluntourists think about Malawi and Africa, understand poverty and racialize their experiences. It also examines the kinds of expected and actualized outcomes that orphans face as a result of orphan tourism. It reports on the unanticipated results that may preclude a genuine understanding of the culture and context that these tourists sought to "know intimately".

Orphanage tourism

Voluntourists stated goals often include "helping", "making a difference", "contributing to the future of others" and "improving on things". These altruistic, primarily young, travelers are headed to the developing world to impact poverty and engage with "development". Voluntourists are now ubiquitous in southern Africa, which can be attributed to various reasons, including globalization, accessibility, celebrity humanitarianism and a new or renewed sense of moral responsibility (Mathers, 2010; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Rogerson & Slater, 2014). As one of the interviewed voluntourists explained:

I think that starting with people close to your age (early thirties) down to college age and high school age, now, we feel a lot more of a push to be something like a humanitarian... Well, it is obvious that we care a lot about that kind of thing and to me that feeling was coinciding with, you know, a duty....

Volunteers are often spurred to action by particular images, promotional materials, advertisements, news stories and personal accounts of volunteer work done by returning volunteers in churches, schools or other community events. For the voluntourists, the imagery of a needy, poor third world country requiring intervention is a central motivator (Coghlan, 2007; Proyrungroj, 2014; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). Two common images relevant to the southern African context are those of seemingly ubiquitous dying AIDS patients and orphaned, hungry children (Meintjes & Giese, 2006; Mostafanezhad, 2013a).

Beyond motivating individuals to action, images can propagate misrepresentations of the developing world. Richter and Norman (2010) and Freidus (2010) have argued that the misunderstandings of African orphans (or the commodification of African orphans) drive much of voluntourists actions (see also Reas, 2013 on Thai orphan tourism). It is assumed orphans are abandoned and without parents or caregivers. In reality, most children in southern Africa are situated within a broad network of extended family or fictive family that take on the responsibility of caring for them (Freidus, 2010; Richter & Norman, 2010). They may be in the care of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins or other family members. This cultural blunder can lead to precarious outcomes for children as they can be

taken from extended family members and placed in institutions that isolate them from their social networks (Freidus, 2010). These fissures can be irreparable.

The image of the backward, pestiferous Africa can lead to other negative consequences for both the orphans and the volunteers. For many voluntourists who participate in orphan-centered programs, new cultural understanding is rarely achieved (Griffen, 2004; Reas, 2013). Conran (2011) introduces the notion of “sensuous” engagement in her work with orphanage tourism. It signals that these encounters are meant to be “intimate” – and this focus on “intimacy” can and does overshadow “the structural inequality on which the encounter is based and reframes the question of structural inequality as a question of individual morality” (Conran, 2011, p. 1455). Tourist encounters often neglect to explain root causes of suffering and disease that affect poor countries. The hope of a voluntourist is often explicit – to understand cultural difference, help and foster cooperation. While the interaction component is often realized it seems that understanding can remain superficial, which ultimately masks root causes of inequality and marginalization. Bearing witness to another culture, or “seeing” it, does not equate to truly “knowing” about the culture, context, history, politics, economics or religion of the place being visited (Griffen, 2004).

Poverty and systemic inequality are the result of complicated, nuanced and often hidden processes that are not easily uncovered by a short experience in the developing world. When voluntourists are not taught about these systems, many default to the notion that those in poverty in the developing world are the recipients of bad luck. This is referred to in the literature as “lotto logic” (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004). Malawians, Cambodians and Thai children are poor and abandoned because they are unlucky victims of random life circumstances. Paradoxically, some volunteers believe that poverty is not necessarily a bad life circumstance. The poor are perceived as ignorant to the problems of the first world’s wealth and materialism. Therefore, they are better able to enjoy each other and life. In this sense, “poverty is romanticized (Simpson, 2004) into an equation where material deprivation equates to social and emotional wealth” (Nederveen Pieterse, 2000 quoted in Simpson, 2004, p. 688).

This is depoliticizing and can trivialize poverty (Nederveen Pieterse, 2000 in Simpson, 2004). It also raises the specter of reproducing neo-colonial configurations that suggest the poor are naïve in their circumstances and allows unskilled westerners the opportunity to “improve the lot of the people of the south” (Brown & Hall, 2008, p. 845). The implication is that westerners are christened more knowledgeable than locals in whatever project they endeavor to complete whether constructing a chicken coop, painting a library, building a latrine or influencing the lives and identities of children. This can reify the hegemony of western cultural authority that undergirds the types of projects volunteer tourists undertake. The actual volunteer activities can take away valuable job opportunities from more qualified, unemployed locals.

The literature on the impact volunteers have on orphans themselves is limited. Richter and Norman (2010) warn against potential psychosocial problems that can result when already traumatized children (traumatized by the very reality of their institutionalization) are then introduced to new caregivers who come and go quickly (see also Tomanzos & Butler, 2012 on Mexican orphanages). Not having done substantive research in the sub-Saharan context, they surmise the potential for associative-dissociative disorders evident in children in similar circumstances that create regular short-term bonds, which become broken quickly. It is unclear if this will be the case in Malawi, but it warrants further research.

There are potential positive outcomes that can be encouraged (Carpenter, 2015). Guiney (2012) in a study of orphanage tourism in Cambodia, identified a few positives that included substantial financial resources being funneled to poor children, children being able to learn English as a route to future employment, children being able to learn about alternative career opportunities from volunteers, and children being able to learn about different cultures. Barbieri, Almeida, and Katsube (2012) in Rwanda found that voluntourists’ experiences were overall positive in terms of the volunteers’ self-development, their engagement with locals and the ability to have a more authentic cultural experience than those traveling overseas as more traditional, mainstream tourists. Proyrungroj (2014) found that voluntourists in Thailand felt a major take away message from their experience was the “minimal

importance of material possessions" (p. 19). The author does not go into substantive detail, but it does touch on the themes emerging from this research that voluntourists felt they were both lucky to be born in the United States and also reported being inspired by poor Malawians who found joy beyond material possessions.

Rogerson and Slater (2014) find that these experiences bring much needed awareness about poverty in the developing world to first world travelers along with precious resources that are difficult to generate in local contexts. Proyrungroj (2014) argues that voluntourists, because they live and work with locals, have an authentic or genuine experience. Finally, Weaver and Jin (2016) suggest that a key motivator of young volunteer tourists is compassion which has the potential to turn good intentions into productive outcomes.

This article contributes to the emerging studies of orphanage tourism in general and orphanage tourism specifically in southern Africa by studying some of the over 200 visitors hosted by Blessings Orphanage in Malawi, southern Africa. No studies on orphanage tourism have been conducted in Malawi and very few studies focus on how volunteers understand poverty as a result of these expeditions – both at home and abroad. Before presenting findings, this article provides some background on Malawi and the orphanage that is the site of this research. Key findings are categorized and presented according to four main categories: (1) mythologized ideas about Malawians as simultaneously diseased and poor, yet joyful in their simplicity and naivety; (2) dichotomization of giver/receiver of AID (west/rest) that includes a reification of the racialized other; (3) misunderstanding poverty in Malawi and the United States; and (4) deleterious outcomes Malawian orphans face.

Background and methods

Malawi is an appropriate site for this type of project because of endemic poverty and relative political stability. Considered one of the countries most affected by the human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic, Malawi has nearly a million people infected with HIV equaling a prevalence rate of 10.3% (as high as 14% during the height of the epidemic) (UNAIDS, 2013). UNAIDS (2013) estimates there are 790,000 orphans (between 0 and 17) as a result of AIDS. This definition can be misleading. Malawi, under the direction of UNICEF, defines an orphan as anyone under 18 who had lost one or both parents. Most voluntourists report their perception that an orphan in Malawi is someone who does not have parents and is abandoned. These definitions are discordant.

Malawi is also one of the poorest countries in the world with 73.9% of the population living below the income poverty line (UNDP, 2013). In 2012, Malawi ranked 170 out of 187 countries on the human development index which rates basic human development achievement for each individual country (UNDP, 2013). Children's health is somewhat precarious with children under 5 registering a 46% rate of stunting, 21% being underweight and 4% considered wasting (UNICEF, 2010).

Orphanages, while explicitly discouraged by the national government, are an increasingly popular response to the situation of vulnerable children in Malawi. It is difficult to estimate the number of orphan care centers in Malawi because many are initiated by foreigners and not registered with the government. At the time of this research, Blessings was not registered with the government.

Blessings Orphanage began in 2005 after the founder had participated in a mission trip to Malawi. He was "overwhelmed" by the number of children he saw that seemed hungry and living in poverty. He decided to start an organization associated with his church that would raise money to build an orphanage. His organization is a registered 501(c) 3 non-governmental organization that has subsequently built orphanages in several developing countries. It is considered a faith-based organization predicated on Christian doctrine.

Blessings is located just outside the capital city, Lilongwe, but would be considered a rural site. It is not situated in a traditional tourist area. It seems out of place when compared to the surrounding landscape that is dotted with small huts on plots of land that are used for subsistence farming and occasionally maize or tobacco production. At the time of this research there were 144 orphans living

in Blessings. There is an on-site Malawian director, but an American Board of Directors makes decisions concerning the orphanage. The children are housed, fed, clothed, sent to school and have access to medical care. Children are taught about Christianity and many of the volunteers that visit the orphanage spend some portion of their time teaching a vacation bible school curriculum. Not all volunteers are Christian and not all projects undertaken by volunteers have Christian content or foci.

Voluntourists are embraced by Blessings because they bring much needed resources and are a tool for encouraging their sponsorship program in the United States. Voluntourists are known to voluntarily fundraise at churches and school events upon their return in an effort to encourage child sponsorship. They generally spend 10 days to 2 weeks at the orphanage. Occasionally, a voluntourist will want to spend a more significant amount of time at the facility, but this is rare and usually lasts only an additional few weeks. During the time of this research, it was estimated that 200 voluntourists per year visited the orphanage, but no records were kept to confirm the actual number. There was no limit on the number of volunteers, although the actual orphanage could only house groups of about 20 at a time. If additional groups wanted to volunteer, then they were encouraged to stay in town at local hostels and take buses or rental vans to the orphanage. The majority of voluntourists came between June and August; however, any group could come during the other months if it better suited their schedule.

The data reported here are part of a broader study on transnational responses to orphans in Malawi by non-professionals or do-it-yourselfers (see NAME EXCLUDED for anonymity). Instead of focusing on larger development organizations such as CARE International or Save the Children, this project examines the work of people intent on making a difference in the lives of children while also maintaining professional careers outside of development. Madonna's work in Malawi is a productive example. She has no background or training in development or child welfare, but has dedicated millions of dollars to orphan work in Malawi and is hands-on in determining the nature of her projects. Work on volunteer tourists was added while the researcher was in the field because of the high volume of volunteers repeatedly showing up at Blessings.

This article reports on ethnographic data collected from fieldnotes, promotional materials, interviews and participant observations that were ongoing during the 2008 and 2009 calendar year with various groups that circulated through Blessings orphanage. Ethnography, using a variety of methods, is a staple of anthropological fieldwork because it allows for the construction of a "thick description" or in-depth narrative of how participants understand and interpret their lived experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Ethnography is an appropriate approach to studying voluntourists because it is "carried out in a natural setting...presents an accurate reflection of participants' perspectives and behaviors, and...uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 9).

Participant observation is a central tool for ethnography because it allows the researcher to become more intimately involved in the research process as they learn about how people make meaning of their experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). For this project, participant observations at the orphanage were the impetus for generating additional data collection among voluntourists since it was not an original component of the larger project. The researcher was living and working at the orphanage during the fieldwork period, and was able to participate in many voluntourists activities before the in-depth interview questions were created.

A total of 15 in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with volunteers from the United States. Ages of voluntourists ranged from 18 to 36 years. There were two main sources of volunteers. One was Blessings primary sponsoring church that is located in Auburn, Alabama. The church sent three different groups from their congregation over the course of the summer. The other main source of volunteers was from a non-profit organization based in Indianapolis, AFC. Volunteers can fill out a web application and independently sign up for a trip that AFC organizes and facilitates. The majority of interviews with voluntourists occurred in the field at the end of their trips and lasted from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. Some of the AFC volunteers were interviewed later at Miami of Ohio University where they established their own student chapter of AFC to encourage students on campus to

both volunteer abroad (they went to several different locations) and locally. While volunteers are not limited to Malawi, the individuals interviewed here all volunteered at Blessings during the year this fieldwork was conducted. Purposive sampling was used because of time limitations in the field. All voluntourists were asked to participate, but only a handful was able to be interviewed because of time limitations while at Blessings (many were only in country for a week). All available and present voluntourists at Miami of Ohio were interviewed. This could be considered a limitation, but interviews were triangulated with participant observations, and analysis of print materials making results more robust.

In-depth, open-ended interviews were also conducted with four administrators at the orphanage. These included the Malawian originator/proprietor of the orphanage who “recruited” orphans and owned the land that the orphanage was built on; the Malawian assistant director who oversaw the children’s daily routines; the Malawian supervisor who oversaw the housemothers and administrative running of the orphanage throughout the year; and the American Onsite Managing Partner who spent 2008–2009 living at the orphanage. In addition, interviews were conducted with Malawian government officials, including the Director of Child Development in the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Principle Secretary of the Department of Nutrition, HIV and AIDS, and the Coordinator of Early Childhood Development. Finally, interviews were conducted with the coordinator hired by AFC to run their Malawian voluntourist trips as well as the Miami of Ohio University’s faculty advisor for the AFC chapter.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher to better familiarize her with the data and more easily identify themes central to the project. These data were triangulated using participant observations, analysis of printed materials and online materials produced by the institution and voluntourists, government documents, and interviews. Points of saturation were considered met when themes emerged across various data sources or multiple times within the same group. These are reported below.

Blessings is a good research site because it is representative of the increasing trend of private, sympathetic individuals that initiate orphanages in the developing world who do not have experience in designing or implementing such programs. They are simply motivated to make a difference and are able to garner resources and use local contacts to implement their vision of an appropriate response to what they perceive to be a crisis situation. Most of these groups work outside federal and local government agencies, because of the perception of corruption, and are considered “illegal” because they are unregulated. Very little research has been conducted with these facilities despite their increasing popularity. One limitation of the study is the length of time between conducting interviews and writing up this research. However, the researcher has maintained contact with the managing partner of the orphanage and was able to visit during the summer of 2011. During that visit, volunteer tourists were still ubiquitous and carrying out the same activities. Little had changed in terms of orientation or general curriculum associated with their trips.

Findings: mythologized Africa: poor, but joyful

A central motivator for voluntourists was the circulating notion of Africa, not just Malawi, as particularly devastated and incapable of being developed from within (Pires, 2000). It is argued that this seemingly timeless myth of Africa was invented to justify slavery and colonization via imperialistic depictions of Africa starting in eighteenth century literature, including travel journals, novels, missionary letters and newspapers (Achebe, 1998; Bohannan & Curtin, 1995; Brantlinger, 1985; Hammond & Jablow, 1970; Harris, 1987; Mathers, 2010; Pires, 2000). Achebe chronicles a vast “arsenal of derogatory images” that present a degraded, ominous and lurid Africa – an “Africa where nothing good happens” that is waiting for Europe to come and straighten it up. Today, voluntourists were aware of images of a desperate and diseased Africa that are common in popular films (Hotel Rwanda, Tsotsi, The Last King of Scotland and Blood Diamond), news media, infomercials and the like. When asked why one respondent was interested in coming to Malawi, she said:

I always wanted to DO something with what I had so I just (pause) seeing on the news they show Africa more than like any other place, like civil wars and everything going on.

The notion of a plagued Africa was reified by voluntourists' experiences once in the country. The landscape itself was determined to be underdeveloped and uncivilized because of a lack of "modern" architecture, urbanization and developed infrastructure. Most voluntourists interpreted poverty as being more extreme than what they had imagined as one respondent explained,

The poverty there was overwhelming. It took my breath away. It makes you feel (pause) it's pretty easy when your there to feel like this is completely hopeless. It will never change.

This respondent, along with several others, said that "seeing" Malawian poverty was striking and they never could have imagined it being "so bad".

The major perception of voluntourists of a diseased Malawi revolved around the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Voluntourists were told by program leaders and in their limited promotional/educational materials that there were 1 million orphans. They were then asked what percentage of these children they thought were HIV positive. One respondent guessed it was 70%, another thought 40% and a third thought 60%. In actuality, at the time of this interview, prevalence was between 7% and 14%. Most also felt that all of them had lost both parents to HIV/AIDS, which would greatly amplify the prevalence rate in the country allowing voluntourists to imagine a more diseased Malawi than was actually the case.

A mythologized incapable or infantile Malawi serves the volunteer tourist industry in much the same way Reas (2013) reports an objectified Cambodian orphan's poorness "satisfies the rescue fantasies" (p. 122) of travelers.

One volunteer explained:

... most of [the orphans] know that I have come to help in some way and they are very grateful for that. I guess they feel like I've come to save them, and in a way I have....

While many admitted feeling overwhelmed by the poverty, it was common for the perception to be that poverty is not an entirely negative experience. Americans believed that avoiding the trappings of capitalist, consumer society allowed Malawians to express more joy in their daily lives. This draws on the notion of a childlike, pure of heart Africa (and Third World) that is close to nature and in need of very few "things". Voluntourists felt the poor accepted and embraced their poverty. Participants believed that poor Malawians "don't know any better" and the ignorance of their poverty and hunger was unimportant or somehow unacknowledged by them. One respondent explained:

I knew they were poor, but I didn't realize how much. How little they had and how happy they were with how little they had... People think that, you know, this place [pause] almost like God cursed this place. And yeah, they are poor, but they're so happy.

In self-reflexive ways, volunteers acknowledged they were not as happy, that they did not have that same "spirit of joy" and they wanted that. Some volunteers also expressed the concern that if Malawians' material circumstances were changed (i.e. improved), it would rob them of their joy and the simplicity with which they experience their lives.

Dichotomized and racialized other

According to Palacios (2010), being labeled a volunteer, especially those with no appropriate professional skills or knowledge, carries with it a specific identity that is infused with authority. One respondent, when asked what made her excited about coming to Malawi, answered it was building a chicken coop. "We talked about how we're going to build a chicken coop, and I was like – yea! I'm gonna build a chicken coop, oh yeah!" She had no known skills in carpentry or chicken-coop building, but she found herself in Malawi with the assumed authority and knowledge to undertake this project.

The “helping narrative” and associated us – them dynamic of the West as giver and Malawi as receiver was evident in a food distribution program that involved the voluntourists. Blessings also had a food processing plant setup to produce vitameal, which is a vitamin enriched porridge meant to help sustain families during periods of cyclical hunger or times of extreme famine. The voluntourists and their sending organizations do not financially support this project, but one of their scheduled activities while in Malawi included going into local villages and handing out bags of this food. Beforehand, the chief of the village determined who would get the food and gave the recipient families coupons to redeem. The American voluntourists are the ones who help facilitate this handout even though they were not directly responsible for procuring or paying for the food. This, in essence, is a staged event that provides a visual representation of a stark racial divide as the white, benevolent hand of the west literally gives out basic necessities to the Malawian, black needy hands of the poor. When asking one voluntourist to reflect on the experience, he said:

So, it ripped me to pieces to stand there and watch that people are so desperate for food and I can't give it to them, even though their very ticket to it is in my hand. That was hard. It was the hardest thing I've done since I've gotten here.

When asked if this respondent was glad he participated in the event he said:

Oh yeah! Because I learned the true extent of poverty. I can drive by and see it, but [in this case] I can actually see how many [are in poverty] if they all come to me and want a bag of food.

While the obvious racial divide was noted in fieldwork observations, this participant did not make a specific reference to race. However, several participants did acknowledge race. One respondent was specifically asked to explain her thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of the orphanage as a model of childcare:

I think there's a lot of great things here. I think they're part of a family. They're given a lot of great opportunities here [at the orphanage], but I wonder...we're always coming in, you know, and they're seeing these white people and I don't know how realistic that is, you know? I think that it's good that it gives them maybe a confidence that they are special enough because I know in this culture being around white people is kinda a big deal. And so I think it's great that they are feeling that confidence, but I guess it just depends on what they did next...if they go off and they do bigger and better things then it was probably a great stepping-stone.

This respondent suggests that by being present, and being white, the children will gain a sense of confidence presumably because they feel special to be in the presence of the racialized other. Another respondent also noted a racial divide and attributed race to benevolent feelings between voluntourists and orphans.

[Respondent] We take the time to get to know [the orphans] and it's not fake. It's not... you know, we remember them. We talk to them. We answer their questions. And they look forward to it, you know? We teach them about the bible and they love that...we sing to them...And we're azungus [Malawian word that translates to foreigner, but refers to “white” people/westerners]. I think they like seeing white people. I think they like to laugh at us too. They like to quiz us on Chichewa (national language of Malawi) and I'm not so good at it.

Several respondents believed that the children were happy to be visited by white people, specifically. Respondents suggested that Malawians had a sense that “white” was somehow special or privileged.

The divide between Malawian orphan and volunteer was also noticeable because of a physical separation. In order to visit the children in their living quarters, which was a gated piece of land that maintained 16 houses, a cafeteria, library, school room, kitchen, storage facility, water pump, small garden and play area, the volunteers had to walk down a steep, 600 yard decline from where they were housed during their visit. Volunteers ate their breakfast at a covered porch that literally looked down upon the orphanage where they could survey the activities and daily morning and evening chores of the orphans. At the time of this research, the orphanage did not have running water or electricity. The voluntourists had access to vastly different amenities. In their living quarters above the orphanage, they had electricity, running and treated water, internet access and a fully working

kitchen. This separation was evident to both volunteers and the orphans that they worked with. One volunteer decided to go against this separation and spend a few nights of his trip in the Malawian male teenager's house.

[Interviewer] What was your most powerful positive experience?

[Respondent] Um, I told you that I go and hang out with the boys at night. Last night I spent the night down there for the first time. That was an adventure. Um, but...it was fun. They loved it. Robin's been spending the night with the girls. They've been asking for a few days. I didn't know if it was appropriate, but then they encouraged me to... Like there's four rooms in each house and two of the rooms had their door shut and lights out when I got down there so they weren't even awake, it seemed. And I didn't even talk to them, but when I woke up this morning they were all like 'THANK YOU SOOO MUCH FOR SPENDING THE NIGHT!' And I was like, 'I didn't even talk to you!' They loved it anyway.

Orphans are aware of the better accommodations available to tourists, and therefore see time spent sleeping in their less attractive quarters as a sacrifice and demonstration of voluntourists desiring to be closer to them.

Misunderstanding poverty in Malawi and the United States

[Interviewer] Why do you think Malawi has these larger issues of poverty?

[Respondent] That's a VERY big question. Why is there poverty in Malawi? Well, I don't know, um, this continent has remained unchanged for a REALLY long time, and why, you know, technology developed elsewhere, I don't know. Why education has been progressing further elsewhere, I don't know. But, it just happened that way. I don't know why poverty is more exponential here. Maybe it's just isolated so much. It's in the middle of a big continent. There's not that many resources around as far as being able to communicate with the rest of the world and being able to travel to the rest of the world.

According to respondents, development is assessed to have passed by not just Malawi, but the African continent. The respondent also suggests it was by chance Malawi was passed by stating, "it just happened that way". "Chance" and "bad luck" were a common response to poverty, inequality and disease. Malawi, and Africa, suffers from isolation and a "lack of resources". This reflects a lack of knowledge about the vast arsenal of natural resources that Africa can claim and assumes a more profound disconnect between "Africa" and the rest of the world that is not supported by the data.

Respondents were quick to acknowledge that Malawians were unfortunate, and Americans were the fortunate, lucky ones. When participants were asked to reflect on how this trip changed them it was a near unanimous response of "I realize how lucky I am. I am so fortunate. I am blessed". Malawians are thus cast as the unlucky and unblessed. No respondents mentioned ideas about structural violence, poverty traps, colonial history, neoliberalism, the development industry, or precarious democratization. Instead, many relied on visceral feelings and false assumptions about what poverty and orphanhood are like in the country. This is commonplace and frustrating to government officials.

The National Director of the Ministry of Women and Child Development explained the issue of uninformed volunteer tourists:

You know [volunteers and donors] come here and confuse the situation. This is especially the case with churchmen, religious organizations, and even tourists who come to Malawi just on vacation or just passing through. They become moved by their emotions and the things they see around them without knowing anything about the situation and how complicated it is. They think they are going to have some kind of impact. These people start these organizations because of these emotions of feeling bad. And the communities accept their money and projects. It is frustrating because we, [in the Ministry of Women and Child Development], know better the situation on the ground, the gaps, the things that will work best to alleviate these situations, but very few people come and chat with the government to find out what to do and the proper channels for going about doing it.

This ministry acknowledges that the response to make a difference, while noble, can lead to misguided efforts since there is an apparent lack of understanding about the local context. According to government officials, this often leads to resources being wasted, projects faltering, and children not

necessarily getting their needs met. The ministry relies on outside donors so it does not want to discourage their involvement. They believe that these missteps can be mitigated if volunteers were better informed about the social, political, economic and historical processes that shape the lived experiences of Malawians living in poverty.

Another unanticipated outcome that results from the voluntourists explicit engagement with Third World poverty is the way in which many respondents use US poverty as a comparative frame of reference (see also Simpson, 2004). As one respondent explained:

Well, the only picture of poverty I had was, you know, homelessness in America and unemployment in America, but even those people have a place to go eat, even those people have soup kitchens to go to, and even those people have places they can go and sleep for a night. And most people in Malawi, that I've seen are not homeless, but I think they are worse off than someone in America that doesn't have a home. You know what I mean? I've seen some of the rural villages and driven through them. It's just, um, nothing... it is a struggle just to make it through. And I think that some of the feelings I've started to have about American poverty is – those people can really help themselves more than these people can. I don't want to be bitter about it. It just seems like you could almost climb out of it a little bit in the United States.

This volunteer suggests poor and homeless Americans were deserving of less sympathy than their poor Malawian counterparts. Masked in these types of assessments are the shared structures of inequality that can transcend borders and force certain populations into poverty. Similar to the volunteers who demonstrate a lack of understanding concerning Malawian poverty, this volunteer is making a moral statement about Americas' homeless by comparing them to Malawians without demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of what leads to inequality and poverty in both the United States and Africa.

Another voluntourist compared her trip to Malawi to her experiences volunteering at a summer camp for at-risk children in Pontiac, Michigan. She explained that the majority of campers were African American children who had at least one incarcerated parent. During the interview she explained that she would tell the children at camp about her experiences in Malawi in an effort to motivate the children. She explained to the children that, "A lot of people have it worse than you do". She expressed frustration with the at-risk kids stating they "were completely at the other end of the spectrum" because "they were both poor, but these little kids (in Malawi) were so polite..." and the at-risk kids would swear, talk about (possibly use) drugs and knew much more about sex. She demonstrated a clear distinction between Malawian orphans and African American campers that demonstrate a moral judgment about poverty and living as an "at risk" child. She articulates a much more positive assessment of Malawian children that also erases any shared experiences of structural violence that transcends borders.

Outcomes: neoliberal subjectivities – 'producing' a type of childhood

The projects that the voluntourists in this research site were undertaking were not about environmental preservation, agricultural extension, or the promotion of human rights, but rather they were there to "develop" orphans. Lives are being influenced in real ways as a result of these excursions. The outcomes of these projects are still unknown since AIDS orphan tourism is a relatively new phenomenon. The notion of forming bonds with children at the orphanage was near ubiquitous when respondents were asked to reflect on both the purpose of their trips and the "most productive aspect" of their time in Malawi. One respondent stated, "I actually formed relationships with the kids and they are close to my heart". Another said:

Spending time with people and getting to know them, you know, just holding their hand, giving them a hug, waving, smiling. None of that can be replaced with a building. Does that make sense?

The data on the respondents' hopes and the orphans' perspectives raise questions about setting unrealistic expectations concerning the types of bonds they form with voluntourists, and the types

of lives they assume they will be able to realize. For example, when asked what one voluntourist hoped the take-home message for male children at the orphanage was, he said:

If I am able to get on a plane and come here, and say [to the orphans] that I have a job in America. I am still a student, but I still have a job. It lets them know, 'well, I am not completely incapable. I can do something for myself.' Not that I should be glorified, not that I should be teacher of all, but if I can come here and let them experience the advancement of society that we have had just from interacting with me with conversation, then I feel that's more real than even [the funding organization in the US] – than even building this house, this well, this building or something like that. They're getting real life, first hand, influence from a person being here.

The general notion captured in this interview is that the volunteer is able to encourage young orphans that if they work hard enough that they, too, can be blessed. There is a sense that success is about desire, persistence, and the assumption that opportunity exists if one is willing to pursue it with the appropriate amount of fervor. One respondent illustrates this notion when asked what his hopes were for the orphans he was "working with":

Right. Well, I've talked a lot with them – I say 'what do you want to do when you leave Blessings?' And you know I remember one of them says 'I want to be a pilot' and I always try to say 'that's great! That's awesome! I think that would be really cool. You should do whatever you can to be a pilot.' One of them wants to be a doctor. Which is amazing, I hope that never changes in his heart because Malawi needs a doctor...So, I really hope that each kid will understand that it is possible for them to be what they want to be. They're free to dream here whereas in other places they may not even be able to dream because they're so caught up in trying to survive. So I really hope that they have the desire to at least pursue their dreams if not obtain them.

In the context of Malawi, a country with an 85% unemployment rate, this is not a realistic expectation.

Orphans are demonstrating an acceptance and internalization of neoliberal messages of individualism and the protestant ethic of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps. When finding work becomes an issue the outcomes for children can be precarious. While interviewing an older orphan about his eminent "graduation" from the orphanage he explained:

Well, my fear is where will I get the stuff [to start his own business]? Where will I get the money if [an international charity assisting children] fails to support me and if they happen to sack me out of this place, where am I going to be staying? How am I going to start [a business and support myself]? Because there is no way they can take me back to my original family [in the village].

[Interviewer] Why not?

[Respondent] I wish I could take you to my family so that you could see my biological relatives...You would not wish me to stay there... If I am staying there it means somebody has just dumped me there because when I am going to see my relatives, my biological relatives, I feel sorry for them...So, even if [the orphanage] may say, 'Tikondani, we are taking you to your biological family,' it means now dumping...Oh, I tell you I don't fit in. I don't! I don't even dream of joining them anymore.

This orphan is caught in a liminal space of desiring a lifestyle akin to that which the orphanage has provided and the reality that jobs are hard to come by. At the time of the interview, he had applied to 18 jobs but was still unemployed. The orphanage had decided to hire him part-time in the interim. It is unclear if the orphanage has adequately prepared graduating orphans for a smooth transition to adult life in an urban area. Since orphanages are relatively new to the Malawian landscape, only time will tell what kind of outcomes children face.

Discussion

This paper has examined the increasingly popular voluntourist activities targeting orphans in Malawi, southern Africa. Many of these young sojourners have altruistic motives expressed in their desire to serve the poor and make a difference. For the vast majority of volunteers interviewed, "[t]he dominant ideology is that doing something is better than nothing, and therefore that doing anything is

reasonable" (Simpson, 2004, p. 685). This research has sought to demonstrate that the desire to do good and actually doing good do not always align.

Like many new studies on orphan tourism (Guiney & Mostanfanezhad, 2014; Mostanfanezhad, 2013b; Reas, 2013; Rogerson & Slater, 2014) unanticipated, negative outcomes are evident when travelers are allowed to build upon an already mythologized idea about the developing world, in general, and Malawi/Africa, in particular. What other studies do not explicitly address that these data have uncovered is the emergence of notions of western superiority that are often racialized. White Americans are deemed experts and able to lead Malawians to a better life. A better life often defined by western metrics. In addition, the goal of increasing cross-cultural understanding and shared cultural exchanges get elided as volunteers demonstrate a limited, if not misguided, understanding of Malawian history, politics, economics and sociocultural practices.

In reality, assumptions are made about Malawi and poverty that fail to capture a more nuanced understanding of systemic and structural poverty and inequality. There is no acknowledgement of the scramble for Africa, colonial history, the period of de-colonization, the precarious democratization process, World Bank and IMF loans/debt, structural adjustment and neoliberal austerity. Social responsibility is thus alleviated. Malawians are deemed "unlucky" in their poverty, yet content in their simple lives that can and often do include periods of cyclical famine and poor health outcomes associated with a lack of access to proper medical care. This is similar to orphan volunteer experiences in other parts of the world (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004). While birthright might be luck of the draw, there are very deliberate systems at work that create opportunities and shape the circumstances of people's lives. This notion of being unlucky precludes the ability to examine the actual processes, structures, and policies that led to greater rates of poverty and inequality in Malawi. An image of a diseased and desperate Africa gets reaffirmed in this work, which is unique in the literature since this is one of the few studies in an orphanage in southern Africa. Rogerson and Slater (2014) report more positive findings in their work in South Africa, but it occurs in an urban and much more economically advanced context.

Moreover, while Malawi is labeled the "warm heart of Africa" and while people, especially the children that volunteers were working with, demonstrate a remarkable resiliency in issues of hunger, famine, inequality, and the like, these issues need to be acknowledged as social injustices. A light needs to be shone on those places of suffering (Achebe, 1998), but it needs to be done with a humanity and in such a way that does not depoliticize the circumstances of poor people's lives. These are exceedingly complicated issues. It is difficult to acknowledge the poverty evident in Malawi, including addressing the 50% of people living below the poverty line and the 20% of children undernourished, without reifying a notion of racial incapability and a mythologized diseased Africa. While a tough task, it is not insurmountable. No studies have demonstrated the ability to transcend superficial understanding of these issues.

What does seem to emerge is a new sense of what poverty "really looks like" that gets juxtaposed to US poverty. No studies on orphan tourism have reported on the ways in which volunteers perceive poverty in both the United States and their volunteer sites. This is a substantial finding with profound repercussions since the final assessment many volunteers make is that the American poor deserve less compassion because US poverty is deemed less severe and more a matter of choice than one of structural inequality. The poor in the United States are not working hard enough.

For many in this research and one of the central implications is that volunteer experiences actually exacerbate the divide between the west and the rest in participants' interpretations about poverty. In Malawi, poverty is so foreign, so vastly different from the poverty they bear witness to in their own backyard. Ironically, this misunderstanding and moral judgment is juxtaposed to the stated goals of most of these programs, which are to break down cultural, racial, and religious borders (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Additionally, it seems many participants are missing the commonality that exists between those living in systemic inequality and the lack of capabilities that exist despite geopolitical positioning. It is possible that someone struggling against poverty and oppression in rural Alabama, downtown Detroit, or Dowa District, Malawi, are confronting similar roadblocks and sharing in the same

cycles of poverty (see Simpson, 2004 on gap year students). These emerging antagonistic relationships can be easily remedied with a more sophisticated understanding of how poverty works in a multitude of contexts. Education, even in a very focused sense around poverty and inequality, can enlighten many of these young people. The passion people demonstrate, both positive and negative, about the poor can be harnessed from those who so desperately want to make a difference. They can and should be taught about poverty in the United States and maybe encouraged to address these issues so prevalent in their own backyard. There is a real opportunity for this type of education and engagement in association with these orphan tourism experiences.

This is not to say that some volunteers didn't end up invigorated to "make a difference" at home and serve the poor in their own communities. In fact, many participants already had a notion of charitable works and actions that were realized in their lives before their trip to Malawi including volunteering at soup kitchens and after school programs. In general, though, volunteers did seem to process their experiences with poverty by drawing on mythologized cultural stereotypes of the incapable and diseased Africa that was juxtaposed to the American Dream idea of the United States ensuring endless opportunities if one was willing to work hard enough.

In a somewhat paradoxical twist, volunteers believe their excursions into orphanages are particularly powerful because they are able to encourage the American Dream of pulling oneself out of poverty. This is in spite of the fact that Malawian socioeconomic and geo-political circumstances are not reflective of those found in the United States (which also tends to be proven misleading as the poor in the United States are rarely able to escape poverty traps, as well). The individualism promoted within this type of discourse tends to ignore any structural and political constraints that might impinge upon material success. This is especially the case in a place like Malawi where the depth of one's kinship structure, predicated on ties to community, define who you are and how you will survive and thrive. What gets promoted by voluntourists is a sense of individual accountability, competition, free market ethics of making oneself amenable to capitalistic endeavors, and a strong work ethic allowing one to overcome poverty.

This research does not suggest that trips in which volunteers are encouraged to work with orphans ought to be abandoned. There are positive outcomes. For example, several respondents said they were humbled by their experience, they intended to reduce their material footprint, and planned to maintain a commitment to the poor, especially in the developing world. One respondent explained that he was "more appreciative and more apt to do with what I have. Um, more apt to care for the poor. To have a heart for the poor". These are positive developments.

In addition, these programs can be improved to alleviate some of the cultural misunderstanding and negative stereotyping that is currently evident in these trips. Palacios (2010) suggests a need to balance goals with a more intentional focus on international understanding and intercultural learning as opposed to technical objectives or framing the trip as humanitarian and development-focused with the associated power-relations that I have described above. A more prepared leadership and pre-departure workshop or course could lead to a more productive understanding of poverty that acknowledges similarity across the different geographies being traversed as well as understanding differing cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Globalization has led to new opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and exchange that can lead to positive engagements and productive development endeavors that allow young people to think critically about poverty, inequality, human rights and development. These data demonstrate that the infrastructure is in place. Each of the precarious outcomes reported on above can be easily addressed. First, mythologized ideas about a diseased and incapable Malawi can be unpacked with an examination of Malawian history and contemporary economic and political issues that inhibit true growth and access to education and financial resources for the vast majority of Malawians. Second, instead of a dichotomization of giver/receiver of aid, all orphan volunteer experiences can be focused

on cross-cultural sharing and partnership. Third, to address the misunderstands and disconnection, volunteers have concerning US poverty and Malawian poverty leaders of these trips can purposefully teach about how poverty and structural inequality work to shape opportunities both at home and abroad. A specific focus on shared experiences can alleviate misperception.

Finally, to address the possible negative outcomes orphans face there needs to be more research conducted on how children interpret and experience voluntourist encounters. Orphans' needs, perceptions and the longer term outcomes (both physical and psychological) associated with the coming and going of volunteers must be more critically examined. The needs of these children ought to be first and foremost in the design and implementation of orphan tourism. Once this is established, encouraging compassionate young people to travel to these places with an emphasis on learning about poverty and inequality is an undeniably productive endeavor.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the constant encouragement and feedback I received from Anne Ferguson and Susan Stein-Roggenbuck. I would also like to thank the reviewers who provided extensive and helpful feedback to strengthen this manuscript. Finally, I would like to thank Immanuel Turner for his steadfast support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was financially supported by Fulbright DDRA [P022A070056].

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