

Title: Volunteer Tourism: Subjectivity and Transformation

Author:

Émilie Crossley
Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand

Abstract:

Volunteer tourism provides a means of proximate engagement with usually distant others in poor communities. As such, the practice has come to be investigated for its potential to foster personal transformation, global citizenship, and new geographies of responsibility and care. Coghlan and Gooch (2011) argue that volunteer tourism can be interpreted as a form of ‘transformative learning’ in which the tourist’s social position and naturalised ideologies are critically re-evaluated through shared experiences with others. While the claim that identity and sense of self can alter through travel is certainly not specific to volunteer tourism, what sets the practice apart is the vision of ethical and politicised change that it presents (Butcher & Smith, 2015; Lyons et al., 2012). Zahra and McIntosh’s (2007) retrospective interviews with volunteer tourists document transformations such as rejecting materialism in favour of a greater focus on family, becoming more aware of social justice issues and getting involved in activism, and becoming more giving towards other people. However, longitudinal research on volunteer tourists remains scarce, making it difficult to evaluate the long-term impact and transformative potential of the practice. This paper provides an original longitudinal perspective on personal transformation and change in volunteer tourism by sharing the stories of three young travellers from the United Kingdom who volunteered in Kenya in 2010. I interviewed these volunteer tourists four times in 2010-2011—before, during and twice after their volunteer placement—and then a fifth time in 2018 as part of a follow-up study. The resulting narratives were then analysed using a critical psychosocial approach that foregrounds biography, affect and unconscious meaning. This analysis reveals how volunteer tourism intersects with broader travel biographies and processes of identity construction, being presented variously as a gateway to further travel or volunteering, a way of expressing worldliness against a backdrop of racism and provincialism in one’s hometown, and a catalyst for deep reflection on dissonance between values and lifestyle. Crucially, those volunteer tourists who appeared untransformed as a result of their travel experience when conducting the original analysis in 2011 had undergone significant changes by 2018. This included one participant who went on to train as a healthcare worker to further her aim of helping others and who adopted a more sustainable, eco-friendly lifestyle. These data indicate that meaningful changes to travellers’ lifestyles or perspectives can take years to achieve and that current methodologies may be inadequate in capturing these complex, temporal processes in relation to volunteer tourist subjectivity.

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