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Facing the pain of others: perspectives on international volunteer tourism between agency and spectatorship

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Facing the pain of others: perspectives on international volunteer tourism between agency and spectatorship

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the on-going academic debate on volunteer tourism by reviewing the volunteer tourists' experience in light of their encounter with poverty and sufferance. Through the analysis of data collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews with a group of 29 young Italian adults the author examines the different ways in which volunteer tourists construct and negotiate their role as agents of change during their vacations abroad. Results show that the expectations of providing effective help to the local communities is often challenged by the limitations and constraints of the volunteer tourism experience and, as a consequence, volunteer tourists need to find new ways of making sense of their experiences abroad. Looking at the work of French sociologist Luc Boltanski (1999) on the ways in which spectators respond to the distant suffering of others this paper argues that, in order to avoid an over-simplification and a trivialisation of the volunteer tourism experience, the volunteers' participation needs to be addressed primarily as a matter of spectatorship, rather than as a question of agency.

Keywords: volunteer tourism, poverty, altruism, spectatorship, agency

Introduction

Due to its nature that couples travelling and volunteering, volunteer tourism is often regarded as representing 'tourism at its very best' (Guttentag, 2012). In particular, volunteer tourism is deemed to improve the living conditions of local communities, reduce poverty, enhance cross-cultural exchanges between hosts and guests (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004), and provide tourists with the opportunity to experience a profound personal transformation (Chen, L. & Chen, S.C., 2011; Crossley, 2012a, 2012b; McGehee, 2011; McIntosh & Zahara, 2007; Rehberg, 2005; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2001). Key to this specific form of tourism is the possibility to combine the experience of travelling with the opportunity to 'assist others in needs' (Chen, L. & Chen, S.C., 2011; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Rehberg, 2005; Sin, 2010), thus introducing an altruistic dimension to an activity that has traditionally been connected to leisure and privilege. Yet, volunteer tourism has also attracted critiques. For example, some scholars have raised concerns on the actual benefits gained by the local communities involved in volunteer tourism programmes (Guttentag, 2012; Hall, 2007a, 2007b; Simpson, 2004), while others have questioned its capacity to promote a critical understanding of poverty, structural inequalities, and development (Crossely, 2012a; Palacios, 2010; Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2009). Accordingly, volunteer tourism has been described as just another

expression of a liberal ideology built around the celebration of a moral project of self-realisation of the tourist that powerfully connected with the colonial and neo-colonial discourse (Butcher, 2012; Caton & Santos, 2009; Lozanski, 2011).

Moving from these premises, this paper aims to explore these contradictions looking in particular at how volunteer tourists construct and negotiate their role as agents of change in short-term volunteer tourism programmes. The premise from which I move is that the capacity of volunteer tourism to provide access to impoverished communities plays a pivotal role in granting tourists with the opportunity to fill-in the ‘emptiness’ of mass tourism (MacCannell, 1992), while engaging them in a pro-poor tourism agenda set to promote development and social justice (Crosselly, 2012a). However, experiencing poverty is not a sufficient condition to fully sustain the expectations of the tourists involved in this form of travelling. As a matter of fact, the volunteering framework implies for the volunteer tourists the possibility to act and provide *effective help* (Palacios, 2010) to those in need, a condition often disobeyed in the volunteer tourism practice. Building on Boltanski’s work (1999) on the engagement of spectators on the distant suffering of others, it is here argued that, especially in contexts of short-term volunteer tourism, the resolution of the volunteer tourist experience should be found in a condition of close-spectatorship, rather than in a context of agency. As research results will show, this interpretative shift is not forced on the tourists, but it naturally emerges from their narratives, reflecting their own struggle to make sense of their experiences abroad.

Saviours and those in need to be saved: the politics of pity

The impact that the experience of poverty has on volunteer tourists is still largely underexplored, leaving ultimately open the debate on its outcomes. If on one side it is argued that the emotional engagement resulting from the encounter with poverty could ‘foster a sense of altruism and social responsibility’ (Crossley, 2012a, p. 236), on the other is noticed that the experience of striking scarcity could become a definer of difference (Gius, 2012; Simpson, 2004). In particular, it has been argued that the encounter with poverty, rather than engaging the volunteers with issues of social justice, leads them to simplify and dismiss the experience of the marginalised communities they visited, while sustaining a neo-liberal and neo-colonial discourse on development based on the idea that Westerners in order to ‘save the world’ are entitled to interfere in the political and socio-economic agenda of the communities in the Global South (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Palacios, 2010).

This unresolved tension in the volunteer tourism debate leads to the necessity to provide a theoretical explanation to the recurrent use of specific discursive constructions made by volunteer tourists while discussing their experiences abroad (Crosselly, 2012a; Gius, 2012). In particular, it is important to further investigate the recurrence of a helping narrative (Crosselly, 2012a; Dove, 1994; Sin, 2010), built on inequality and privilege (Sin, 2010), constantly used in their accounts to separate humanity among saviours and those in need of being saved.

Looking at how spectators are engaged to react at the spectacle of distant suffering, Boltanski (1999) recognises the dominance in the Western discourse of a ‘politics of pity’ that distinguishes the humanity among two classes of people: the fortunate and the unfortunate. Accordingly to the author the distinction proposed in the ‘politics of pity’ differs greatly from that affirmed in the idea of ‘compassion’ as proposed by Arendt (1990). As a matter of fact, differently from compassion – which presents a strong relational dimension - the politics of pity is anchored to a universal moral cause and, as such, it does not need to be directed to anyone in particular. If compassion is developed inside of a caring relationship, the ‘politics of pity’ is produced by a moral stand of

responsibility often grounded in the geographies of privileges (Sin, 2010). As a result, the ‘politics of pity’ does not require spatial proximity, as its universality establishes an emotional relationship even at a distance (Boltanski, 1999).

Method

The present research is based on data collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews with a group of 29 young Italian adults who participated in short-term volunteer tourism programs in various regions of the ‘Global South’ (11 participants volunteered in projects set in the African continent; 6 volunteered in South America; 2 in the Middle East; 9 either in the Balkans or in Eastern Europe; 1 in South East-Asia). It is relevant to notice that in this research a broad definition of the expression ‘Global South’ is adopted. In particular, ‘Global South’ is used as an umbrella term to indicate all the destinations where the participants in this study volunteered, without making any specific reference to their actual geographical location. The unifying principle behind the use of ‘Global South’ is the idea – put forward by the interviewees in their narrations– that all the destination communities needed to be supported in their development efforts, thus creating a highly stereotyped distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’ based on modernisation and economic development. In order to relinquish from this perspective the researcher has decided to adopt ‘Global South’ as a more neutral option, as opposed to ‘developing countries’ or ‘Third World Countries’.

Each participant was interviewed in person one time. The interviews were held only a few weeks after the respondents had returned from their vacations. Most of the interviews were collected at the participants’ convenience, in bars or public places in their hometowns. In a few cases the interviews were collected during one of the restitution meetings organised by two of the sending organisations. All the interviews were conducted in Italian. The decision to conduct retrospective interviews was made in reason of the distinguishing nature of volunteer tourism. In particular, as a form of travelling, volunteer tourism comprises a crucial narrative dimension (Neumann 1992; Noy, 2004, 2007; Wearing, 2001). It is through the storytelling of their journeys that travellers complete the process of making sense of their experience, while relating it to their personal lives and life trajectories. Through narration, tourists select aspects of their journeys that they consider important, thus (re)producing and (re)circulating specific understandings of their experiences to others (Noy, 2007; Urry, 1990). In order to enhance a narration as much natural as possible, the interviews were specifically designed to evoke the three main stages of a journey: the preparation and the departure; the arrival at destination and the time spent there; the homecoming and the re-entrance into ordinary life. Each of this moment was introduced to the participants by a broad question aimed to solicit an open-ended and fluent narration. Once engaged into the storytelling the researcher guided the interviewees’ narrations mainly through the request for further elaboration over specific points they touched while recounting their experiences.

The researcher did not take part in any of the volunteer tourism programmes alongside with the respondents, and – whenever interrogated by the participants about her experiences as a volunteer tourist – positioned herself as an ‘outsider’ (Noy, 2007). The decision to adopt this specific position was taken in order to stimulate a fluent narration. In fact, as noticed also by Noy (2007), since the act of telling a story is socially produced and performed, the capacity (or incapacity) of the listener to relate to the experience of the interviewee has important implications on the overall *genre* of the narration. In this case, the fact that the researcher was perceived as someone that needed to be ‘initiated’ (Noy, 2007) to volunteer tourism has played a pivotal role in creating a favorable space to stimulate an extensive discussions of every aspects of the respondent’ experience, thus

helping the researcher to leave as little narration as possible in the realm of the ‘taken for granted’.

All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach. In particular recurrent themes in the interviews were identified, compared and regrouped into a specific data set. Data triangulation included the use of the field notes collected in occasion of a few overt participant observations held during the restitution meetings organised by three of the sending organisations. Field notes were also used to record reflections after the interviews, or to note conversations held with the staff of the different organisations. Moreover, in order to further expand the understanding of the substantial reality of the projects (Palacios, 2010), it was made extensive use of the marketing materials produced by the different organisations, and of the working materials (such as leaflets, flyers, mails, short readings) circulated to the volunteers prior to their departures.

Study Context

It is relevant to notice that in Italy volunteer tourism programs are largely designed to fit into what Callan and Thomas (2005) define as *shallow volunteering*. As a matter of fact, the large majority of the proposed programs are based on small-scale short-term projects (usually between two weeks and one month in length), and are mostly organised during the summer, the season of the year when Italians go on vacation and schools are closed. In order to participate into the programmes extensive training prior to the departure is usually not required, and volunteers come from a rather wide range of professional and personal backgrounds. Nevertheless, most of the participants are young adults with little or no previous expertise that might proven useful on a development project, scarce knowledge of the local context or of the languages spoken in the local communities. In order to comply with the diverse backgrounds of the participants the sending organizations are generally required to design top-down projects to accommodate the volunteer tourists: children’s animation camps, small carpentry projects, and basic construction works are among the most common activities organised within short-term volunteer tourism programmes. All these activities present several advantages: they do not require specific qualifications and can be easily carried on by less experienced participants simply by observing and shadowing others; they only require a basic use of a foreign language; and – most importantly – they are all activities that can be organised in cycles that starts with the arrival of the volunteers and ends with their departure, thus providing them with a sense of closure. Despite volunteering appears as a central component to the experience, an important part of these programmes is represented by the provision of cultural activities designed to provide the volunteers with a better insight into the local culture, while promoting forms of cultural exchange between host and guests (Brown, 2005). Usually this type of activities are constructed as an integral part of the experience, and are presented to the volunteers as fieldtrips or visit to be enjoyed (usually during the weekend) in order to break down the routine of the life on the projects. More rarely, the cultural activities are organised as an entirely separate moment (i.e. a whole week dedicated only to sight-seeing and visits). In this second case the time spent outside of the projects is usually defined by the sending organizations as an experience of sustainable tourism.

The situational and the over-situational dimensions of volunteer tourism

Although the possibility to provide aid to local populations emerges in the interviews as just one among others motivations to the experience, all the participants in this study stated that they had chosen this specific type of holiday because they wanted to *make a*

change, or provide some benefit to the hosting communities. The following comments are indicative of this foretaste:

Alberto My expectation was to go there and give a remarkable help. I wanted to give the 100 per cent every day. I wanted to do tangible things. I wanted to leave a mark.

Giorgio My expectation was to do something good for the others, I wanted to give my contribution to improve things.

Volunteer tourists held specific expectations connected with the idea of making a difference into the life of the communities they visited (Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Palacios, 2010; Sin, 2010; Tomazon & Cooper, 2012; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing 2001; Zahara & McIntosh, 2007). As a consequence, being capable to act accordingly to an altruistic agenda, and being recognised as volunteers by others, emerge as pivotal aspects of their volunteer tourism experiences. Altruism (Tomazon & Butler, 2010) and social recognition framed the volunteer tourist expectations (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004), and shaped the construction of their relationship with others (Palacios, 2010). Luisa, a very young volunteer who participated in a project in a remote Eastern European village, provides an example of this aspect while commenting her relationship with a group of beneficiaries:

Luisa The point is that we had a role to play on behalf of the girls participating in the project. It is difficult to explain, but what I mean to say by this is that we were not there because we met some of the girls by chance and became friends with them. We went there to volunteer for those girls, and only after we befriended them. But I cannot have the same relationship with them as the one that I have with my friends in Florence.

Interestingly, for the participants in this study their capacity to perform their volunteer identity emerges as one of the most troublesome aspect of their experiences abroad. This predicament appears to be connected to the specific dimensions that constitute the volunteer tourism experience. In particular, the analysis of the accounts discloses that volunteer tourism comprises two distinct dimensions capable to determine very different outcomes for the volunteer tourists: the *situational dimension*, and the *over-situational dimension*.

The *situational dimension* of volunteer tourism is defined here as the context of action that has been specifically crafted on behalf of the volunteers. It comprises all the volunteering activities that the sending organisations put in place in order to allow the tourists to perform their volunteer role. These activities are generally conceived to accommodate the expectations of the volunteers, while overcoming the difficulties that the management of low-skilled and largely heterogeneous groups of participants, working only on a periodical base, could present. Despite the very limited impact that this type of projects might have on local communities, the *situational dimension* creates a space conceived specifically to allow the tourists to perform their volunteer identity, while enabling them to act in an environment where their humanitarian action is not only authorized, but also expected.

On the other hand, the *over-situational* dimension of volunteer tourism comprises the reality that the volunteers face every time they find themselves outside of the carefully planned stage of the projects. Essentially, the *over-situational dimension* is constituted by the larger social context where the projects are set, thus providing the wider framework for the volunteer experience. Unlike what happens in the *situational*

dimension, where the presence of the volunteers is carefully negotiated and organised, the *over-situational dimension* can not be controlled by the sending organisations and, as a consequence, it engages the volunteers with situations that have not been specifically designed to accommodate their presence. It is in the *over-situational dimension* that volunteer tourists encounter for the first time poverty as experienced on a daily base by the local communities, and face the complex system of inequalities and shortages that shape the existences of their hosts. The impact of the *over-situational dimension* is well explained, for example, in the words of Annalisa after her visit to a hospital in Nairobi:

Annalisa That day I realised that there are human beings who live in a way that until that very moment to me seemed both inconceivable and unthinkable. It is true that maybe I had seen something similar on TV before, or on some magazines, but when you see human beings in the flesh that live in such a neglected reality it is something that kicks you in the guts, and you can just say to yourself that it is not possible that there are people living like that.

As her words well summarise, when the volunteer tourists engage with the *over-situational dimension* of volunteer tourism they often face realities of poverty and pain that until that moment they had known only at a distance, confined, as they were at home, to the role of spectators of the sufferance of the distant other (Boltanski, 1999).

An impossible action: volunteer tourists facing a moral drama

Once the volunteers are finally facing that type of poverty that they had previously knew only at a distance, they are suddenly pushed to challenge their altruistic expectations, while questioning the actual impact of their humanitarian action. As in the words of one of the participants in this study, volunteer tourists recount the sight of poverty as the encounter with a ‘trumped humanity’ (Nora, personal communication, 22 November 2011) whose sufferance often appears to be astonishingly unbearable. It is in this moment that the ‘politics of pity’ (Boltanski, 1999) becomes central to their accounts, and the figure of the ‘unfortunate’ emerges as part of that humanity that needs to be helped and assisted. Moreover, the encounter with poverty also corresponds with the moment in which the volunteers start to question their capacity to act as agents of change. In particular, while confronting poverty, the scope of the action that is made possible for them inside of the *situational dimension* shows its limitations. The altruistic presumptions of making a difference suddenly collapses under the abstract universalism of the sufferings, as the words of Nora, Livia and Renato recount:

Nora It has been really hard. Now that a little time has passed since I came back I am starting to feel a little bit better, but the feeling I had while I was there was of being the witness of a humanity that had been stepped on, reduced to nothing in respect to our Western standards. While I was there, while I was walking in the streets of the slum among the rivulets of dirt and the wastes, I felt nothing but a lousy tourist of misery. I was just a nobody looking at the lives of those people without any right of intruding in them, without any right of looking at them.

Livia For me the worst moment has been right after we arrived at the school on our first day on the project. On that occasion I saw for the first time that some of the children were kept in a corner, while their teachers hit them badly. I couldn’t stand that view, and so I started to cry. What I really wanted to do was to go there and tell those teachers to stop, but I knew I couldn’t because I didn’t have the right

to do so, because that is their culture, and I have to respect it. (...) In that moment I felt completely useless.

Renato The moment in which I really understood how fragile could be the existence in a place like that has been while I was holding the medical oxygen cylinder [for that man]. The point is that they do not even have the right equipment. (...) That was the moment I felt completely useless and powerless: there was nothing I could really do besides holding the cylinder and be there for him.

What appears clear from these accounts is that the distinction between the *situational* and the *over-situational* dimensions in volunteer tourism is not as clear-cut as it might have appeared at a first sight. In fact, the projects do not exist in a vacuum and, as a consequence, the volunteers are obliged to face and confront themselves with the wider social context surrounding them. When this happens the volunteers appear to be incapable to apply a distinction among the *situational* and the *over-situational* dimensions, and transfer their altruistic expectations from the well-structured reality of the programmes to what they are witnessing in society at large. The necessity to bring help in order to heal the sufferance of those who live in misery is the second element that emerges in the accounts. When the volunteers make their first encounter with poverty they feel pressured to respond to what they are witnessing: they want to help and give their contribution to foster change and overcome social injustice. In this situation, the work that the volunteers have been doing inside of the projects loses relevancy, and is replaced by the consideration that more urgent and important problems require their attention and concern. The urgency to act (Boltanski, 1999) is pressuring them to find an answer to that feeling of pity that connects them with the unfortunate, and makes them responsible for his or her wellbeing.

However, once the volunteers step outside the projects and face reality at large they rapidly realise that their capacity to become agents of change is outside their scope. Structural inequalities and power relations are way too complex to ask for simple and fast resolutions. Therefore, despite all the miles covered with their travelling, the volunteer tourists are still inevitably at distance, forced in a situation of close spectatorship that leaves little room for incisive action. This condition of distant-proximity, combined with the frustration generated by their incapacity to act, leaves the volunteers powerless and speechless, while opening up a moral drama provoked by their incapacity to find other meanings to justify their presence beside that of observing what is happening right in front of their eyes. If in the spectacle of sufferance at a distance the problem of the efficacy of the humanitarian action did not present itself (Boltanski, 1999), in the moment in which the volunteer tourists face poverty and sufferance without being able to act a painful disruption of their role is generated, as Dario synthesise:

Dario I am... everything I do is like a drop in the ocean. They say that that a drop is useful as it little by little helps to raise the level of the ocean. However, I don't think that a single drop raises the level of the ocean. A drop keeps the ocean the same. What would really make sense would be a storm, or a gigantic glacier melting down. That would help change things. I can't stop feeling bad about this.

In a way, for the volunteer tourists, the sudden realisation of their inability to act appears to be equally dramatic than poverty itself, and is recalled in the accounts as the worst moment of the whole experience. Deprived from their role, unable to perform their

volunteer identity, the volunteer tourists lose their legitimisation to act, while suddenly becoming, using once more Nora's world, just 'lousy tourists of misery'.

Normalizing uselessness: responses to the volunteer tourist moral dilemma

Once the volunteers face poverty, they suddenly realize how little they can do to improve the situation of the unfortunate. Their incapacity to act leaves the volunteer tourists powerless, requiring them to find new ways of making sense of their experiences abroad (Crossley, 2012a; Zahara & McIntosh, 2007). If, on one side, the volunteers still aim to have their role recognised, on the other, they do now realize that their action is utterly limited. This symbolic fracture requires the volunteers to 'save their faces' (Goffman, 1959) in order to legitimate their presence abroad not just as mere tourists: an identity that they strongly refute. The interviews reveal that, in order to re-establish a sense of utility for themselves, the volunteer tourists adopt three different strategies: 'the sympathetic response', 'the overturn' and 'the take in charge'.

Sympathetic response

The first strategy used by the participants to re-establish their role as volunteers matches the idea of helping with that of 'being there'. In order to make sense of the volunteer tourism experience, the accounts of the volunteers focus on the emotional relationships they have been capable to establish with the beneficiaries of the programmes, and on the sense of gratitude that their presence was capable to raise. For example Petra, commenting some of the doubts she had regarding her utility, re-establishes her role as a volunteer by switching from a dimension of action, to one of emotional participation:

Petra I discussed my doubts with the other volunteers in occasion of the mid-term review, and I was surprise to discover that many of them had the same feelings [of powerlessness] that I had. So, we spent time discussing and we reached out to the conclusion that by giving them our time we were already doing something. Since that moment I held to this idea that my time was something valuable, and that even a smile, or some time spent listening to someone was a big help I could give.

In the sympathetic response what matters the most is to give time and benevolent attention to those who suffer, shifting the benefits of the volunteer work from an idea of practical utility to a moral one. Through the sympathetic response the volunteers re-establish their role in the situational dimension of volunteer tourism, and focus their attention on the people they reached out through their experiences abroad. The humanitarian action is not intended here as something capable to lift the unfortunate from his or her misery, but is translated in a more abstract feeling of support and care. In the sympathetic response the volunteers offer to the unfortunates the opportunity to experience a temporary breach from daily routine, and a benevolent hear capable to listen to their sorrows.

In this response the volunteer identity is preserved through the internalisation of the humanitarian action. It is the gratitude of the unfortunate for the presence of the volunteer tourists that resumes the value of the experience, as Lisa explains:

Luisa They made a poster for us, writing down how grateful they were for having us there, and asked us to come back the following year. They wrote that they loved us, and that was the first time they have ever done something like that, and we were touched. (...) Before I was negative, I tough that I was useless and

that my presence there for three week was pointless, but after that moment I realized that my presence meant something.

As a consequence, in the sympathetic response poverty is naturalised as something inescapable and absolute, while the poor are condemned to remain ‘on the receiving ends of the responsible actions’ (Sin, 2010, p. 980). Since power hierarchies are neither discussed nor challenged, the idea of being helpful to someone just by being temporarily part of his or her life leaves no room for a proper intervention, implying that any action could potentially benefit those who are suffering. In the sympathetic response the ephemerality of the volunteers’ experience recalls the dynamics of an act of consumption, and suggests the lack of a proper engagement with the structural factors of inequality (Hall, 2007b; Simpson, 2005) that cause poverty. This disengagement could ultimately reinforce stereotypes, while participating to a further ‘otherisation’ of the visited communities (Hall 2007a; Sin, 2009).

Overturn

The second strategy adopted by volunteer tourists to make sense of their experiences abroad is centred on the gains they obtained by participating in the programmes. When the overturn is employed, the value of volunteer tourism is reclaimed not on the account of its capacity to bring help to the local populations, but in light of the impact produced by the experience on the life of the volunteers themselves, on their personal biographies (McGhee and Santos, 2005; Noy, 2004; Sin, 2010; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2007;). As for the sympathetic response, also in the overturn the possibility to witness closely to the sufferance of the unfortunate appears to be of primary importance. However, in the overturn the condition of spectatorship is central for the volunteers as it offers the opportunity to re-examine their privileges and foster their personal growth, as Lucia and Beatrice recount:

Lucia I can just tell you that for me the most important thing I have taken out from this experience is to truly understand how lucky I am, and how many things I tend to give for granted as, for example, having a bus stop in front of my apartment!

Beatrice After I have seen all those youngsters that have so little fighting with all they got in order to make their dreams come true, it just made me think so much at all the opportunities I have got, and to how lucky I am.

In the overturn, the value of volunteer tourism is re-established by affirming the prominence of a moral project of self-realisation (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Wearing, 2001) over the provision of practical aid to those in need: the possibility to witness to the life of those who have less, and to their daily struggle to uplift their condition, provides the volunteer tourists with the opportunity to achieve a better understanding of their place in the world (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). Accordingly, the volunteers decline their role as agents of change, and recognised themselves as the main beneficiaries of the experience (Simpson, 2004). The idea emerging in the accounts is that – in the end - they were the one who benefitted the most from the programmes, being able to receive more than what they were able to give back. In the overturn the volunteer role is virtually dismissed, and the relationship between the volunteers and the local community is turned upside-down. In this strategy the unfortunates held an active role in the relationship with the volunteer tourists: they are the ones helping out the volunteers to gain a better understanding of what is important in life.

Viviana What I discover, in the end, is that I received more than what I was able to give back. If you consider this experience at a human level, or at a level of 'truth' or of 'resilience' we have met some extraordinary people.

As a consequence, also the understanding of poverty is transformed. Despite the harshness of the visited contexts, in their accounts the volunteers promote a romanticised representation of the miseries they had witnessed. Poverty is evoked as an opportunity for the unfortunates to exercise their resilience and, bottom line, celebrate their *joy the vivre*, as Giorgio explains:

Giorgio Even if they have to walk long distances to go to school, they are happy to learn. Even if they don't have anything to play with, they can create amazing toys from nothing. This changes your perspective from focusing not just on what they don't have.

If on one side this strategy gives back dignity to the condition of the unfortunate, who is not anymore understood as an object of care for the volunteers, but becomes an agent in their life histories, on the other the recurrent use of the 'poor but happy' (Crossley, 2012a; Simpson, 2004) narrative suggest a still simplistic understanding of power relations, which could bring about in the volunteers that 'redemptive appreciation' (Crossley, 2012a, p. 244) for poverty functional to defend, in a guilt-free way, their Western lifestyle and privileges.

Take in charge

Finally, the third strategy that volunteer tourists put in place in order to make sense of their experiences requires them to take charges of what they have witnessed when they return to their homes. As for the sympathetic response, in the take in charge the humanitarian action resumes importance and centrality. However, in this case the focus of the accounts of the volunteers moves from the aid they were able to give while abroad, to the different forms of engagement that they can identify to help those who suffer, once they finally land back home. In the take in charge the volunteers understand the limitations of their direct action, but rather than dismiss their experiences abroad, they recognize their condition of spectators and act accordingly to a moral imperative that pressures them to 'care at a distance' (Silk, 2004).

Nora What has really helped me to fight this feeling of being useless and injustice was meeting up with this Combonian Father. He told me how important is to look at those miseries and get those images, those faces, those people imprinted in our mind, because what is important – even if we can't do anything materially as we are just passing by – is that we can witness what we have seen once we get back home, we can work to raise other's people consciousness.

In the take in charge, the volunteers are left with those two forms of actions that Boltanski (1999) typically identifies for the spectator at distance when it comes to humanitarianism: either talk, and bring witness to others of what they have seen during their vacations abroad; or pay, for example by donating to a specific organisation, or by organizing and coordinating fundraising events to support a cause or a project. Once returned from their experiences abroad, the volunteer tourists identify a moral responsibility to engage in some kind of action in order to help those in need, but, as it happens for the spectators at distance, they need to find someone else capable to act on their behalf to bring direct and effective help to the unfortunates. In fact, both talking and

paying ‘presuppose the existence of a chain of intermediaries between the spectator and the unfortunate’ (Boltanski, 1999, p. 17). In most cases, the chosen intermediary is identified with the organisation that has organised and promoted the volunteer tourism programmes, establishing a direct link between the experience and a consequent engagement in its activities.

Luisa The joy for having been given the possibility to participate in such programme has lead part of our group to get together once we came back and now we organize fundraising events in order to sustain the activities of the organisation.

Laura Once I came back I have decided that I had to do something on my own and so I have started a long distance adoption.

In the take in charge the value of the volunteer tourism experience is re-established through the commitment that the volunteers shown towards the unfortunate at a distance. The dimension of action is handed back to those who have the capacity to sustain it, while the volunteers make their part by supporting their activities. In front of the realisation that they cannot change the world, the volunteer tourists do not dismiss their responsibility towards the unfortunate, and do not consider their contribution to be over by the end of their vacation, but they re-negotiate their role by supporting change through the tools they have at their disposal (Butcher & Smith, 2010; McGehee, 2012). The feelings of frustration and powerlessness the volunteers felt while abroad are normalised in the decision to become ambassadors for the unfortunates by speaking on their behalf, and by supporting those organisations that act in order to promote change.

In this strategy poverty and sufferance are represented as plights that need to be exacerbated, and are objectified to elicit a response capable to reach out also those who did not had the opportunity to closely witness to the sufferance of those in need. However, the take in charge can also be intended as part of top-down understanding of development and humanitarianism (Butcher, 2012), that could reinforce the moral notion that the most affluent part of the world is responsible to care at a distance for the less fortunate (Silk, 2004), encouraging dependency (Sin, 2010) and sustaining the idea that development should be intended as an ‘individual act of charity’ (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 34) rather than as a long-term systemic process.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the on-going debate on volunteer tourism by looking at how volunteer tourists make sense of their experiences, focusing in particular on issues of agency and spectatorship. Findings suggest that volunteer tourism comprises two different dimensions to the experience: the *situational dimension*, constituted by the staged reality of the projects, and the *over-situational dimension*, represented by the wider social context where the projects are situated. If in the *situational dimension* the volunteers find satisfaction to their desire to help, once they encounter poverty in the *over-situational dimension* they realize that their action is mostly ineffective. Trapped into a condition of spectatorship in a distant-proximity, volunteer tourists face a profound moral drama, questioning their identity as volunteers, as well as the overall value of their experience. In order to overcome this deadlock and restore their faces, volunteer tourists rely on what Boltanski (1997) defines as the politics of pity, and adopt three specific strategies to make sense of their experiences that proclaim, depending on the cases, the importance of being present, the value of the experience in terms of individual gains and personal growth, and the possibility to promote change at a distance through bare witness

and donation. Through the use of these narrative devices, the volunteer tourists act as close spectators, while reaffirming the peculiarity of their position and distancing themselves from the tourist's identity.

Most of the volunteer tourism programmes that were taken in consideration for this study thoroughly prepared their volunteers to the experiences, actively trying to prepare them to the potential delusion they could face once at destination. Either by organising preparatory meetings, or by suggesting and proposing specific readings, the sending organisations worked actively in order to promote reasonable expectations in their volunteers. However, despite those efforts, all the volunteers interviewed for this study went through the same circle of illusion, disillusion, and re-negotiation of their expectations while participating in the programmes. The recurrence of this process, and the ways in which the volunteers try to make sense of their experiences abroad even after having faced severe frustration, reveals the pervasiveness of the international volunteer discourse. As a consequence, addressing the volunteer experience in terms not only of agency, but also of spectatorship could bring long term positive results, especially in order to avoid naturalised or romanticised understanding of poverty, and poverty-porn. In particular, the capacity to act and engage with the projects should be preserved and enhanced, as it creates and sustains the volunteer identity. On the other hand, the dimension of spectatorship needs to be acknowledged and directed, as it potentially represents the terrain where volunteer tourism could obtain the biggest results in its search for a more just and equal global society, and where the sending organizations' social capital could potentially benefit the most by creating a solid base of long term supporters and volunteers for their activities (Tomazon & Cooper, 2012).

The importance that volunteer tourists assign to their identity shows an important aspect of their experience: they care about it, and they care about how they live it (Palacios, 2010). This consideration for the experience should be addressed as a way to initiate a pedagogic process aimed to overcome individualistic approaches, and promote a wider understanding of the inequalities and the challenges faced by development and humanitarianism (Crossley, 2012a; Hall, 2007b; Simpson, 2004). More importantly, the volunteer engagement could be used as an effective way to suggest to the volunteers suitable ways to sustain change, working with them to promote a global civil citizenship (McGhee, 2012), and promote those forms of action that could produce a positive impact on the Global South also at distance.

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