Abstract

Volunteer tourism, popularly referred to as voluntourism, is often identified as the fastest growing niche within the tourism industry. International volunteering is no new idea. It is often coupled with ideas of Christian missionizing and colonialism. Large nonprofit organizations were moreover formed in the wake of World War II and along with decolonization, focusing on volunteering internationally. The concept of voluntourism, however, is rather young and can be traced back in academia to 2000, roughly. Initially praised for its altruistic motives and potential benefits such as increased awareness of issues in developing countries and intercultural exchange, more contemporary research has focused on the potentially damaging outcomes of voluntourism. Scholars have pointed to its risk of reinforcing relationships of dependency, structural inequality, neocolonial sentiments, diminishing actual development work, reproducing stereotypes, etc. Moreover, the discursive framing of voluntourism as a form of development aid has also been under scrutiny. Particularly because the majority of volunteers are young and unskilled, travelling to less developed countries with the mission to generate positive change, it implies that they are able to bring about such change simply on the accounts of being Westerners. In this sense, voluntourism contributes to the maintenance of the very unequal system that it aims to dispute.

In this thesis, I set out to determine how volunteers and volunteer host organizations perceive their roles and position vis-à-vis local contexts in the Dominican Republic, and how knowledge about such local encounters can lead to further theorizing in the field of voluntourism.

Collection of empirical data was thus carried out in and around Puerto Plata, The Dominican Republic over the course of two field visits. Here, international volunteers, volunteer coordinators, and a founder from three different organizations were interviewed, with the aim of obtaining knowledge of their experiences and perceptions. This data was then discussed in relation to already established theoretical themes on the subject, as well as in relation to power relations, neocolonialism, and cultural imperialism. These three concepts were added to the theoretical considerations, as they were deemed relevant to this thesis, as well as the overall field of voluntourism.

The findings showed some deviations to existing theories, in the sense of motivations, for example. Moreover, they pointed to areas that would be interesting to examine further, particularly gaining access to host communities’ expectations, perceptions, and experiences would contribute interestingly to the field.

Finally, it was concluded that various factors influence how volunteers and volunteer organizations perceive their roles and positions vis-à-vis a local context. The most beneficial outcome of voluntourism is to prioritize mutual benefits over an unequal power structure between host and volunteer, which can be perpetuated by condescending perceptions and discourse often present in the volunteer encounter. Actively being aware of one’s position and purpose in the local context can contribute to avoiding partaking in such measures. Moreover, neocolonialism and cultural imperialism are central concepts to consider and can contribute with relevant perspectives to the general field of voluntourism.

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1. Introduction

Volunteer tourism, popularly referred to as voluntourism, has become a well-established sector within the tourist industry, and is often described as one of the fastest growing tourism trends (Butcher & Smith, 2010, Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Vrasti (2012), for example, calls voluntourism “the fastest growing niche tourism market in the world, as a response to global economic inequality” (in Miller, 2015: 230). As a result hereof, the phenomenon has become focus of debates in academia as well as in mainstream media. Much like initial studies of mass tourism, early research on voluntourism tended to highlight its positive sides and presented it as a progressive mixture of tourism and social awareness, and potential benefits such as increased awareness of issues in developing countries and intercultural exchange were highlighted. Subsequently, however, scholars have started to point to potential harmful features of voluntourism, such as reinforcing relationships of dependency and structural inequality, neocolonial sentiments, diminishing actual development work, reproducing stereotypes, etc.

Mary Mostafanezhad (2014b) sums up these two opposing sides of the debate when addressing the question of whether or not such alternate forms of tourism can have a significant impact on global development. She states “Its supporters suggest that it can, arguing that volunteer tourism is a ‘win-win’ strategy which contributes to social and economic development, international goodwill and broadens its participants’ perspectives. On the other hand, its critics suggest that it is a superficial endeavor that lacks the means to make material, political or economic changes in host communities” (p. 135).

Covering a broad variety of volunteer practices, voluntourism can be somewhat complex to define. Lupoli and Morse say “in its most basic sense it consists of travelling with the intent of engaging in volunteer work as all or part of the travel experience” (Lupoli & Morse, 2015: 578). Wearing (2001) defined it as “a type of alternative tourism in which tourists volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (p. 1).

As demands for volunteer placements have increased, so has the number of organizations providing volunteer opportunities – both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. The volunteer tourism industry thus appears to be driven by demands from the developed world rather than the developing. This observation implies that the overall focus of the industry lies on satisfying the consumer rather than contributing to host communities.

It appears that there is an overall discrepancy between the discourse surrounding voluntourism and how it performs in practice. Illustrative phrases such as ‘making a difference’, ‘helping those in need’, and similar sentiments are often used in relation to voluntourism, be it from host organizations or volunteers themselves. However, various research point to the notion that self-realization and personal goals are as important, if not more, than altruistic ideals. In extension, this mismatch contributes to differing expectations between volunteers, volunteer organizations, and host communities. In this context, the overall aim of this thesis will be to determine the underlying motivations and expectations of people participating in volunteer tourism, in order to gain insight into how they perceive their positions within the host communities. It will be approached from a global development perspective, with a view to the relevancy of placing voluntourism within the general discourse of development aid. Positioning voluntourism within the umbrella of development work might contribute to the creation of too wide expectations, as volunteers might anticipate being able to make a significant difference in the host communities than what is actually the case. This will of course differ between the different programs, however the loaded promises of ‘making a difference’ and helping people escape poverty are hard to live up to. Even so, this language of development and aiding the less fortunate remains prevalent in the context of voluntourism, not least with the agencies and organizations providing these experiences.

The Dominican Republic is a popular tourist destination, known for its tropical climate and beautiful beaches. Still, more than half of the population is living in poverty and economic inequality is rising. Additionally, there is a continuous influx of Haitians refugees seeking to better their life opportunities by working in the Dominican Republic. They constitute an impoverished population group as well, and are often situated in poorer positions than the local Dominicans due to their status as foreigners or illegal immigrants. Considering these factors, the Dominican Republic is an ideal destination for voluntourism. The place is familiar with mass tourism yet has a sizeable underprivileged population and thereby various opportunities for different volunteer programs. Moreover, it is easily accessible due to the high level of regular tourism.

The focus point of this thesis will be voluntourism in the Dominican Republic and it will be largely built on empirical data gathered through interviews with volunteers and representatives from host organizations located in the Dominican Republic. The overall aim will be to answer the following research question:

*How do volunteers and volunteer host organizations perceive their roles and positions vis-à-vis local contexts in The Dominican Republic? And how may knowledge about such local encounters lead to further theorizing in the field of voluntourism?*

The idea to research further on this subject emerged during my internship in Tanzania in the fall of 2015. Here I met several European volunteers and learned about their perspectives along with positive and negative aspects of their stay. The area was greatly influenced by religion, particularly the Lutheran Church, and so volunteers often came from churches or other Christian organizations. I recognized a certain gap or mismatch between the locals’ needs and the placement of the volunteers. Some, for example, worked at perfectly functioning schools with limited need for volunteers, while other schools lacked teachers and staff. The lack of actual work for the volunteers to participate in was often a source of discontent among them. They had set out with the intention of making a difference in the area and helping out, and so the realization that their help might not be as needed as anticipated was a disappointment.

In this context, I found it relevant to focus on volunteers’ expectations and perceptions of their roles in a local context, as this might be a contributing factor the contemporary understanding of voluntourism. The following chapter will provide an overview of themes discussed in the existing research on the topic of voluntourism.

2. Voluntourism: State of the Art

Voluntourism has increased immensely in popularity during the past two decades. At a global level, an estimated 1.6 million people participate in international volunteer tourism annually (Mostafanezhad, 2013b), travelling to places all over the world in order to contribute in various ways, primarily in developing countries. Conrad (2011) gives the broad definition, “an activity in which people pay to volunteer in development or conservation projects” (p. 1454).

Starting out as a humanitarian niche within the tourism industry, voluntourism is now the largest form of ‘alternative tourism’, which refers to more socially responsible modes of travel or what Butcher (2002) called a ‘new moral tourism’. It is largely associated with ideas of development aid and thus reflects more responsibility and altruistic motivations than the mass tourism industry. It is also referred to as ‘altruistic tourism’ (Mustonen, 2007; Singh & Singh, 2004; Everingham, 2015: 176).

For the most part, volunteer tourists have been classified as well educated, from middle-to-upper class homes, and tend to sympathize with social movements such as anti-globalization, anti-neoliberalism, and anti-imperialism (Conrad, 2011; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Mowforth & Munt, 2009, Wearing, 2001). This demographic is useful in gaining support to social justice agendas. However, it seems hard to overlook the contradictory ideas of wanting to fight structural inequality through commodified and essentially unequal procedures or services, that voluntourism entails. Moreover, as this tourist niche expands, so does the demographic group of contenders.

This chapter will introduce contemporary discussions of the subject of voluntourism. It will be divided into thematic subcategories, which have been identified upon studying the existing literature. The themes that have been deemed relevant are voluntourism as development aid, neoliberalism, motivations, negative and positive impact of voluntourism, elitism and privilege, and highlighted subjects for further research.

2.1 Voluntourism as Development Aid

International voluntourism generally refers to western tourists travelling to ‘third world’ countries in order to ‘make a difference’, ‘help’, and ‘give back’. However, these sentiments are all often-used catchphrases of voluntourism employed in order to distinguish it from regular mass tourism, which has been criticized of being mere consuming and exploitation of the developing world. Associating voluntourism with development aid ideas is not all positive, however. According to some critics, it somewhat expresses neocolonial sentiments of the relationship between volunteer and host community, in which the former is considered the ‘active donors’ and the latter the ‘passive recipients’ (Everingham, 2015: 176). This is particularly harmful in the context of voluntourism, as the majority of volunteers are young unskilled people with limited experience in the field of global development. Positioning volunteers as ‘experts’ coming to help local communities can create simplistic understandings of the complex processes of development and reinforce structural inequality and neocolonial worldviews.

Various scholars have addressed this issue, and the severity of framing volunteer tourism within the discourse of development, especially in situations where volunteers are young, inexperienced, and volunteering short term (Atkins, 2012; Everingham, 2015; Lyons et al, 2012; Lyons & Wearing, 2008, Mostafanezhad, 2013; Simpsons, 2004). This linkage is not only produced through marketing volunteer tourism experiences, but also by journalists and academics who address the subject within this terminology as well, further reinforcing notions of neocolonialism and paternalism (Everingham, 2015; Palacios, 2010). Instead, a different approach is encouraged focusing on potential positive outcomes of the volunteer tourism experience, rather than simply criticizing it on its shortcomings to generate sustainable development in host communities. Cross-cultural understanding and exchange based on mutual gains, rather than an unequal giver/receiver relationship, are often highlighted as potential positive outcomes. Everingham (2015) addresses such alternate forms of volunteer tourism where the experience is based on mutual learning, for example in languages or arts, and argues that such practices have the potential to overthrow paternalistic models that continue to dominate volunteer tourism today.

Another disadvantage of framing volunteer tourism within the topic of development aid is the expectations it creates for the volunteer tourists themselves. Many volunteers have expressed disappointment and frustration when learning that they have little capability to provide help or make a difference the way they expected to (Everingham, 2015).

Mostafanezhad (2013b) addresses what she refers to as ’geography of compassion’ in relation to development discourse, in which certain areas are constructed as main objects of attention, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. She also highlights the gendered nature of volunteer tourism. 80% of volunteer tourists are women, and even more are between 15 and 35 years old (Mostafanezhad, 2013a). Moreover, she argues how practices of volunteer tourism reproduce gender norms. A primary task in international volunteering is taking care of children, a historical women’s job, corresponding with the overwhelming majority of female volunteers. The image of the caring white, privileged woman is further normalized by celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna, who are particularly known for caring for and adopting third world children. Mostafanezhad (2013a) calls this ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ and highlights how humanitarianism has become a pop-phenomenon contributing to self-promotion. A representative from UNICEF has even commented that “when most people think of the UN they now think of Angelina Jolie on a crusade, not the work that goes on in the field […] celebrity is at the heart of every UNICEF campaign these days and the association is being sold incredibly cheaply” (quoted in McDougall, 2006 in Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 332).

Addressing the notion that celebrity humanitarianism is guilty of removing focus from the cultural politics that cause unequal development, by sentimentalizing and depoliticizing the topic, Manzo (2008) asks:

“What if celebrities who want to do more than simply rattle the fundraising tins (as the Beatles were photographed doing backstage) were asked to turn the spotlight on aid’s failures instead of successes? What if they demanded, for example, that any aid project [in Africa] should be conditional on matching funds from African sources?” (in Mostafanezhad, 2013a: 496).

The third world child as an object of compassion is significant in another manner as well, as it somewhat ties in with recollections of colonial times. As Manzo (2008) explains: “The colonial principle of guardianship implicitly contained a parent-child metaphor, with its underlying message that colonized peoples require guidance from “civilized” Europeans in the same way that minors need guidance from parents” (pp. 649-50). The focus on the third world child, then, works to “legitimize the foundational idea of all western-based development – that the global south is inevitably better off with ongoing interventions (in the name of development) than it would be without them” (Manzo, 2008: 652). It is further noted that the child has come to be a symbol of universal human rights. Also, third world children have proven to be an important tool for volunteer organizations and NGOs to attract support and volunteer tourists (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). Effectively, Africa and third world children have become naturalized faces of international development and humanitarianism; the prototypical ‘other’ against which the West can construct its own image (Said, 1978 & Mathers, 2010 in Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 331).

Mostafanezhad (2013b) concludes that volunteer tourism is a feature of the expanding moral economies, which contributes to the construction of a geography of compassion, containing recollections of imperialism and uneven development.

2.2 Neoliberalism and Voluntourism

Although arguably initiated as a counter-reaction to neoliberalism with a focus on softer values such as humanitarianism and social development, volunteer tourism is now well integrated within the neoliberal system. This is particularly evident when studying how these experiences are promoted, often with a substantial emphasis on the opportunity for developing personal skills which can secure a stronger future position on the job market. Scholars refer to this as the professionalization of international volunteering, where “neoliberal values are increasingly being applied to young people’s travel, leisure, and educational practices” (Simpson, 2005: 54).

Personal outcomes are also valued highly by the volunteers themselves. Söderman and Snead (2008) found that international volunteering was seen as advantageous for further study or future careers, through improved language skills or an enlarged network. They refer to this as “reciprocal altruism” in which both volunteers and host communities benefit from the stay (in Lyons et al., 2012: 370). In fact, various research focusing on volunteers’ motivations for volunteering abroad have concluded that self-seeking interests are significant, if not the primary, forces driving volunteer tourists. According to the Moser Report from 1999, a poll revealed that only 25% of UK ‘gap year volunteers’ included “a desire to contribute to society” as a main motivation (Roberts, 2004).

Conrad (2011) argues that the expansion of neoliberal globalization along with an evolving consumer consciousness is an underlying cause of the rapidly growing popularity of volunteer tourism. This is often referred to as the new ‘moral economies’, covering alternative development methods such as buying fair trade products or being environmentally conscious (Goodman, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2013b). Discourses of environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, and cultural endurance have advanced within the neoliberal political and economic climate, and are now capitalized through tourism in the developing world. During Conrad’s study conducted in Thailand, she found that although most NGOs were national, the ones involved with volunteer tourism were foreign. This relates to the general tourism industry, in which an estimated 70% of profits leave the country as a result of foreign control (Conrad, 2011: 1456).

Conrad (2011) argues that although voluntourists might have sincere intentions, their politics clash with these sentiments as their actions contribute to maintaining the very structural inequality they seek to change. As she states, “the cultural logic of neoliberalism suggests that individual power depends on economic capital rather than our contribution to society as a whole” (Conrad, 2011: 1462).

Resistance to neoliberal economic policies is in the context of volunteer tourism paired with neoliberal cultural ideas of commodification and privatization (Lyons et al, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 321). Volunteer tourism thus contributes to the extension of neoliberalism through privatization and commodification of global development approaches. In this sense, volunteer tourism has evolved in the contradictory senses of resistance to and expansion of neoliberalism (Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 321).

2.3 Motivations for Volunteers

Most existing literature on voluntourism focus on people’s motivations for spending time and money on volunteering in a developing country. As mentioned previously, helping and making a difference are often-used idioms on the subject of volunteer tourism. However, more self-seeking interests often play a significant role as well. Studies have found such motivations to be associated with the transformation of self and understanding of the ‘other’, including insight into different cultures, opportunity to travel, networking, pleasure, improved confidence, enhancement of language skills and career prospects (Broad & Jenkins, 2008; Lyons & Wearing, 2008a; McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Wearing et al, 2008). It is thus a general conclusion that motivations are a mixture of self-seeking and altruistic interests.

Self-seeking motivations are oftentimes frowned upon within the discourse of volunteer tourism, where altruistic incentives are highlighted as primary objectives. Sin (2009) however argues that a desire to travel should not necessarily be perceived as a ‘wrong’ motivational factor, as long as the meeting with ‘the other’ is reflected upon critically. Others maintain a critical perspective on non-altruistic motivations, such as Coghlan and Fennel (2009: 377) who have dubbed voluntourism a form of social egoism. It is criticized for being incapable of making a difference relating to global development, but also for being hedonistic when altruistic achievements are not prioritized enough.

Several studies include interviews with volunteer tourists, and oftentimes interviewees focus on how volunteer tourism distinguishes itself from mass tourism. Also, a majority of interviewees do not identify with the term ‘volunteer tourist’ and prefer the label ‘volunteers’. Various studies revealed that interviewees in general were unfamiliar with that specific term and that they identified as non-touristic (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Within the discourse of volunteering, it appears that ‘tourism’ is associated with negative connotations such as mass consumption, superficiality, exploitation, no interest in the real ‘authentic encounter’, and a focus on selfish needs such as leisure over humanitarianism.

Volunteer tourism is gradually becoming a well-established topic in academia, yet the term remains relatively unknown, or at least unemployed, among the people it actually applies to in the field of volunteer tourism.

2.4 Negative Impact of Voluntourism

The overall position that certain people are saviors while others are for being saved, which is somewhat expressed in voluntourism, has often been criticized. The discourse of ‘helping’ and ‘making a difference’ contains the notion of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – the helpful West versus the poor developing world. Critics have linked volunteer tourism with postcolonialism, due to its paternalistic features. Also, as Conrad (2011) notes, intimacy, goodwill, and compassion are used to justify and depoliticize volunteer tourism, much like the colonial encounter (p. 1465).

Even in nations that are not post-colonial, similar power structures are present. As Wilson (2004) observes on the subject of Thailand, “Europeans’ economic and political power intertwined with national and racial identities established an enduring high status to whiteness that informs the experience of white tourists and scholars today” (p. 16). Conrad (2011) continues, “As the most visible sign of difference within volunteer tourism, and international development more generally, the whiteness of the volunteers and development workers has attracted widespread attention” (p. 1464). Such socially constructed notions of whiteness further perpetuate neocolonialism. This concept will be more thoroughly introduced in Chapter 4.1.

According to Conrad (2011) intimacy is an essential part of the volunteer tourism experience. However, she states, “the focus on intimacy overshadows the structural inequality on which the encounter is based and reframes the question of structural inequality as a question of individual morality” (p. 1455). This causes a normalization of the privatization processes of developmental and social initiatives, thereby corresponding to and serving to expand neoliberal ideologies. Ferguson (2010) has made similar observations of an intensification of governmental work taken over by NGOs, voluntary organizations, or private foundations, concluding that “social policy and nation-state are, to a very significant degree, decoupled” (p. 168).

Thus, although volunteer tourism can influence host communities positively, the issue of structural inequality is difficult to manage, especially when the main focus tend to be on the intimate personal experiences derived from volunteering. “Volunteer tourism thereby runs the potential of both accepting and reproducing the structural inequalities that the encounter is based on” (Conrad, 2011: 1463-64).

Another point of criticism also emerges from the notion of unequal donor/receiver relationships. The majority of volunteer tourists are young Westerners with no particular skills or experience in the international development sector; yet travel to developing countries with the purpose of making a difference and helping the less fortunate. Although presumably based on good intentions, this general structure of the voluntourism industry contains a level of Western arrogance and neocolonialism. Tester (2010) addresses this tendency, when noting that volunteer tourism rests on “the vestiges of distinctly imperial mindset, which establishes the West as the only right actor in the world” (in Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 329). Western arrogance is also somewhat reflected in the homogenous perception of Africa. Tester (2010) further states, “The imperial legacy explains the geographical specificity of common-sense humanitarianism. While disasters happen throughout the world, the focus of common-sense humanitarianism is consistently on ‘Africa’” (in Mostafanezhad, 2013b: 328). This notion helps to establish the African continent as a homogenous aid recipient in need of the West, rather than multiple differing political actors (Mostafanezhad, 2013b).

It is implied that citizens from the West are able to help create prosperity in developing parts of the world, simply by going there, thereby constructing the volunteer as superior to people in the host communities. Maintaining that unskilled westerners can make a sustainable difference in developing countries also creates the risk of belittling actual development issues and the efforts needed to handle these.

2.4 Positive impact of Voluntourism

As mentioned previously, cross-cultural learning is often identified as a main positive outcome of volunteer tourism. Although it can be difficult to measure the actual impact in regards to cultural understanding, for example, various studies suggest that if done properly, cultural and linguistic skills can be developed based on mutual learning in voluntourism experiences (Everingham, 2015: 178; McIntosh & Zahra, 2009). Similarly, Wright et al (2007) emphasize the importance of mutuality, as both volunteer tourists and members of the host communities expect to learn something in the process. Ensuring mutual learning and collaboration further serves to limit the distorted power relationship reinforced by the traditional donor/receiver positions.

It is emphasized that although being identified as a main outcome of volunteer tourism, merely travelling to a different culture does not equal cross-cultural understanding and mutual learning. This relationship should be sought and nurtured from the start as a clearly stated target of volunteer tourism. Preparing volunteer tourists for the cultural differences they might encounter would be valuable to a successful stay, along with the encouragement to reflect critically on their experiences. Several scholars (Woosnam, 2011; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2005) note that voluntourism might in fact contribute to strengthening cultural stereotypes rather than reducing them, as voluntourists’ perception of other nationalities or cultures in general do not change. Sin (2009) similarly found that a large part of voluntourists were mainly interested in achieving personal goals, rather than interacting with the local population. And that the process of voluntourism might enforce perceptions of the locals as ‘inferior’ (p. 497).

Other studies (Devereux, 2008; Lewis, 2006) focus on volunteer tourism’s potential to lead to widespread international understanding, solidarity, and cooperation. Devereux links solidarity to the field of development, arguing that mutuality and exchange of knowledge constitute a solid foundation for efficient development work. Lepp (2008) further addresses the importance of determining and recognizing the skills present in the host communities. In a study conducted in Kenya, for example, volunteer tourists were able to rethink predetermined assumptions and thereby move away from negative stereotypes, after learning about work, nature, and wildlife by the local Kenyans (Everingham, 2015: 179).

Conrad (2011) suggests that volunteer tourism can contribute to gaining support for social justice agendas in host communities. Mostafanezhad (2013b) also addresses this possibility for spurring social change, when asking: “what if volunteer tourism and alternative consumer products more generally, focused instead on the deleterious policies and practices of Western nations and its citizens rather than praise the compassionate Western consumer for ‘doing their part’?” (p. 333).

2.6 Elitism and Privilege

As Mowforth and Munt (2009) argue, travel has long played a symbolic role “as social classes seek to define and distinguish themselves” (p. 120).

Also, the cost of many volunteer programs ensures that they are for classes of a certain income level. In this sense, tourism should be understood in terms of a power relationship – particularly in the context of volunteer tourism where a privileged first world citizen visits and volunteers in a developing country. The majority of voluntourists travel from the Global North to the Global South, and so voluntourism can be characterized as a structural unequal process to its very core.

Relationships between volunteers and host communities are virtually always dominated by the ‘better off’ providing aid in some way to the ‘worse off’, creating an unequal relationship in which the giver might be perceived as superior to the receiver (Sin, 2009; Lyons et al., 2012). Such unequal relationships have the potential of reproducing and reinforcing negative stereotypes about the developing world. Another downside is the notion that giving to or ‘helping’ the developing world might relieve the donor of guilt from being privileged, yet does little in terms of changing the conditions causing this inequality.

2.7 Subjects for further research

Most research on the topic of volunteer tourism notes that it is a field that continues to evolve. Therefore, many unexplored features remain. The majority of scholars point to the relatively little focus there has been on host communities – including motivations, relationships, and to what extent volunteer tourism has a (positive) impact.

Mostafanezhad (2013b) poses various questions for further research: “what is the alternative to the current privatization and depoliticization of geographies of compassion in the West? What role can volunteer tourism play in helping to rematerialize political action?” (p. 333).

Kennedy and Dornan (2009) point to the difficulties in measuring international volunteering’s actual impact. As they state “Many millions of dollars are going into host communities all over the world through donations and grants (as well as services rendered), which are considered untraceable and unrecorded by any consistent method” (p. 198). They address the need of developing an established method for measuring NGO impacts, as without certain common standards “it is difficult to ascertain the exact levels of poverty reduction achieved through their initiatives” (p. 198). Lupoli and Morse (2015) also state how “few mechanisms have been proposed or developed to understand, identify or assess the impacts of volunteer tourism in host communities” (p. 577). They suggest developing sociocultural, economic, and environmental indicators engaging both host communities and volunteer tourism organizations and conclude that collaboration between organizations and host communities is needed in order to develop indicators ensuring the best outcome of voluntourism.

Woosnam (2011) also addresses the existing literature’s shortcomings in presenting the residents’ perspectives, and points to the potential misunderstandings that can occur between hosts and guests. The social distance scale is highlighted as a potential tool for better examining this relationship between volunteers and hosts.

3. Methodology

Based on the topics presented in *Chapter 2: State of the Art*, and thus in the contemporary literature, the research design for this thesis took its shape. It was not without obstacles and various differing hypotheses, however. Therefore, before presenting the actual structure of this thesis, the following section will briefly introduce challenges and considerations of the research process eventually leading to the final problem formulation *How do volunteers and volunteer host organizations perceive their roles and positions vis-à-vis local contexts in The Dominican Republic? And how may knowledge about such local encounters lead to further theorizing in the field of voluntourism?*

The structure of this thesis is dominated throughout by its hermeneutic process. Before going to the field, the *State of the Art* chapter was written, in order to obtain a thorough knowledge on the subject of voluntourism and the debates surrounding it. Hereafter, the initial problem formulation focused on mapping voluntourists’ and host community’s experiences and expectations was developed before going to the Dominican Republic to collect empirical data. The research process thus followed a deductive approach. It, however, proved difficult to obtain access to the host community, which led to the formulation of a different hypothesis. The difficulties related to data collection will be more thoroughly discussed in the following section. Upon reviewing the interviews conducted in the light of the existing research, I found it relevant to include three additional theoretical themes – neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and power relations. As voluntourism is a well-established field within academia, claiming to add any revolutionary perspectives to the subject might be an exaggeration. Yet, adding these theoretical themes contributed interestingly to the debate and although generalizing in a far-reaching topic like voluntourism can be problematic, I believe these themes are in fact relevant to the general field. Including these theoretical considerations in the discussion on voluntourism served as a stepping-stone in the research process and contributed to establishing the final problem formulation. I, hereafter, decided to go back to the Dominican Republic to collect additional data, with an overall focus on volunteers’ perception of their position in the local community and the latent power relations. The methodological process of this thesis will be more thoroughly presented throughout this chapter.

As briefly stated, I originally intended to include a focus on members of the host community and their perception of voluntourism, as insights from host communities are highlighted as a largely underrepresented feature within the field in the existing literature. The initial research design was then to outline volunteers’ experiences and perceptions on the one hand and the host communities’ on the other, and compare and discuss these two perspectives against one another. However, gaining adequate information from members of the host community proved to be more difficult than expected. When I came to the villages that the organizations provide volunteer work in, I was associated with the organizations rather than seen as an individual there to gather information from the organizations as well as the locals. Therefore, it was difficult to create a relationship in which the locals felt comfortable talking to me about their experiences with volunteers in their area. As Bryman (2016) argues “gaining access to social settings is a crucial first step in ethnographic research, in that, without access, your research plans falter” (p. 429). This assessment applies well to the research process of this thesis, as the aim had to be altered on the grounds of difficulties in obtaining access. For the most part, it appeared to me that the locals that I spoke to seemed more concerned with providing ‘positive’ responses rather than expressing their own opinion. Possibly, they might have felt uncertain if I would disclose their responses to the organizations or perhaps to appear ungrateful. I was only there for a limited period of time – four weeks, followed by an additional three weeks – and so it is quite understandable that people were reluctant to talk openly to me. In order to obtain more valid data from the host communities, I believe it would be necessary to spend more time there and to build up personal relations and thereby a level of trust with the people. The ‘hanging around’ strategy (Bryman, 2016: 429) could be useful in order to gain access to the host community. Either by being accepted as an ‘ordinary’ person with no hidden agenda, or by establishing relations to individuals in the host community who could serve as sponsor, thereby vouching for my research.

Gaining access to the organizations and arranging interviews proved to be rather straightforward, on the other hand. I had a personal contact in the form of a close friend living in the Dominican Republic, who somewhat functioned as sponsor (Bryman, 2016: 428) when introducing me to Flora Village and facilitating contact here, as she thereby vouched for me and the research I wished to conduct. My contact also introduced me to the other organizations, but here I initiated contact myself. Even so, without the mutual contact, access was somewhat easily achieved and interviews arranged through contact with the volunteer coordinators. It was thus an example of gaining access from management or someone higher in the hierarchy than the people I wished to interview. In this sense, the volunteer coordinators served as gatekeepers (Bryman, 2016: 428). Gaining access to interviewing the volunteers and staff at the organizations were thus easier, possibly because they perceived me as an ‘outsider’ to their work and thus sharing information and experiences with me could be perceived as risk-free. Granted, I have no way of knowing if the interviewees disclosed their every opinion but they did provide in-depth responses and shared personal experiences and considerations as well. I was thus not perceived as an informant placed to pass on information to management, for example.

As Bryman argues, “access does not finish when you have made contact and gained an entrée with the group” (p. 430). Hereafter, creating contact with people becomes essential, in order to achieve access to their honest assessments. Securing the proper access is thus an ongoing process, which is likely to constitute a problem in closed environments as found in these volunteer organizations. For example, it is deemed common for employees to believe that researchers are present to report on them. Therefore, a level of suspicion is common along with the notion that you might be affiliated with management. In extension, participants might worry that their statements will be disclosed to their superiors, causing for a potential sabotage of the research, in the form of misinformation, deceptive responds, and limited access (Bryman, 2016: 430-431).

In order to avoid such misinformation, it is important to come across as trustworthy and invested in the topic. In some instances, a ‘front’ is required, which can help explain your placement in the field (Bryman, 2016: 432). For this research, I made it clear that I was ‘just’ a student conducting research for my Master’s thesis. As the majority of interviewees had Bachelor degrees, and planned to pursue a Master’s as well, it appeared that they could easily relate to this process and were eager to help. I did, however, not go into detail about the problem formulation or the various critical perspectives as mentioned in Chapter 2, as I did not wish to discourage the participants from enclosing their point of views.

As a result of the difficulty in gaining access to host communities, I decided to limit focus to the volunteers and host organizations. One of the main topics I noticed during my research and data collection for this thesis was the apparent mismatch between literature and practice – or the overall perception of voluntourism in practice. Academia places voluntourism in the category of tourism as a mode of alternative tourism, while the more general discourse (including many host organizations as well) emphasizes the altruistic motives of voluntourism and place it in the category of international development (aid). The developmental aspects or potentials of voluntourism thus dominate the more mainstream outlets, while the touristic aspects are emphasized in academic debates. This notion points to the complexity of voluntourism as a concept, but also to a discrepancy between perception and actuality. Additionally, it is likely to contribute to a distorted relationship between volunteers’ expectations and their actual experiences.

Interviews were conducted in organizations offering voluntourist opportunities on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. Several factors contributed to why this location was chosen. The Dominican Republic is a well-established destination for mass tourism, particularly along its coastline. Due to the high level of tourism volunteers have easy access to physically get to the island. Also, it might be perceived as a safer destination than more secluded areas. Simultaneously, it remains a developing nation and more than half of the population lives in poverty. Also, as it shares its geographical location on the island Hispaniola with Haiti, the Dominican Republic sees a continuous influx of Haitian refugees pursuing better living conditions and economic opportunities. However, the majority of Haitian refugees wind up living in ghettos with no or low-paying jobs and poor chances of education for their children. Thus, the actual impoverished population is likely to be higher than the official estimate, due to the number of illegal immigrants. Although voluntourists come from all over the world, the vast majority are from USA and Canada. This combination of a somewhat easily accessible location, the feeling of security through the presence of regular tourists, and a large impoverished population makes the Dominican Republic an ideal destination for voluntourism. Moreover, as mentioned, I have personal contacts in the Dominican Republic who were helpful locating and facilitating meetings with the organizations.

Before beginning this field research, I prepared an interview guide (see Appendix G). The initial plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews, allowing interviewees to add their own thoughts and comments while maintaining a connecting thread throughout the interviews.

Also, a consent form was prepared as well in order to document the interviewees’ consent to record the interviews (see Appendix H). However, I feared that starting interviews with a signed document would serve as a conversation-stopper and thus decided to determine whether to use it or not in the given situation. Therefore, at two of the organizations, instead of getting a signed consent form, I asked for their permission to record the conversation and made sure to record the verbal consent. According to Bryman (2016), the advantages of consent forms “is that they give respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset” (p. 131). It also protects the researcher against any future disputes. A potential disadvantage of these forms, on the other hand, is that it might induce concerns among the respondents rather than comfort them, causing potential participants to decline participating. Moreover, as qualitative studies are less predictable than quantitative ones, being specific about the nature of the research can be challenging (Bryman, 2016: 131).

A predominant feature of the interviews I conducted was in fact people’s motivations and expectations and particularly the importance of managing and being aware of these. As a result of these above-mentioned considerations, the current research design was developed. The following section will present the structure of the thesis along with the purpose of the following chapters.

3.1 Structure

The thesis started out with a State of the Art chapter, introducing existing literature on voluntourism, in order to establish an overall understanding of the term voluntourism as well as the contemporary debates and perspectives that surround the subject. The themes outlined in the State of the Art have served as a guideline for this project’s research design, and so it was found relevant to present as a form of introductory chapter.

Following this section, a short description of the data collection process along with a brief introduction to the organizations and their work will be presented. Hereafter, a chapter introducing the three abovementioned additional theoretical themes of neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and power relations will ensue. It will start out with an introduction to the concept of neocolonialism with a particular focus on its origin following decolonization of African nations. Hereafter, cultural imperialism will be introduced, including a focus on culture. As cultural exchange is an often-highlighted feature of voluntourism, I found it particularly relevant to include these considerations. Lastly, the somewhat broad notion of power relations will be included as well. Neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and to a great extent voluntourism itself are all intertwined with or an outcome of power relations. Therefore it was deemed relevant to include debates on power relations as well. It will moreover be discussed how all three concepts relate to the overall subject of voluntourism.

The analysis will be divided into subcategories similar to those established in Chapter 2 *Voluntourism: State of the Art.* This approach has been chosen in order to provide a simply structured overview of the findings and how they relate to the established theoretical framework. The advantage is consistency and coherence in the project. A potential disadvantage, however, is the risk of overlooking points not highlighted by existing theory. In order to seek to avoid this, a subcategory devoted to findings non-related to these categories will follow. Moreover, the analysis section will maintain a focus on volunteers’ expectations and experiences in regards to their role in the host society in the Dominican Republic, as this is the general aim of this thesis. The thematic subchapters in the analysis will thus include discussions of voluntourism as development aid, neoliberalism, motivations for voluntourists, negative and positive impact of voluntourism, elitism and privilege, and the findings non-related to these categories. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a large part of the existing research focuses on motivational factors. Therefore, this will not be my main area of focus. However, avoiding motivations completely seemed dissatisfying in terms of providing a wholesome understanding of the concept. Also, this thesis addresses the perceptions of volunteers and motivations are likely to be intertwined with this. The discourse surrounding voluntourism, from the language used to advertise volunteer experiences to the actual statements from volunteers and members of the local communities, will also be considered.

Conclusively, main findings and arguments of this thesis will be summarized in order to clearly answer the research question.

The primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and the outcomes of these interviews will function as guidelines for the analysis. The collected data and use of sources will be further elaborated in the two following chapters.

3.2 Data

Due to the social constructivist perspective of this thesis, including interviews in order to access information on volunteers’ actual perceptions and experiences seemed of high relevance. Therefore, the analysis section to a great extent builds on arguments from interviews conducted in March and May 2016 at three organizations providing volunteer opportunities on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. Eight volunteers were interviewed, along with two volunteer coordinators, and the founder of one of the organizations. I chose to do semi-structured interviews, as that would allow for a more conversational approach with room for the interviewees to drift off topic and add their own comments as well. It also created a somewhat relaxed interview setting, in which it became more of a conversation than a mere questioning. On the other hand, having a prepared interview guide ensured that all interviewees were asked the same basic questions and helped keep the interview on track. It also prevented the conversation from stalling when it did not naturally glide on.

Semi-structured interviews was thus the original research design, yet it did not always go as planned. At Flora Village, for example, I was unable to follow this method, as it became more of a group conversation than an individual interview setting. I was also invited to follow some of the volunteers here, in order to gain insight into a typical day at the organization. Moreover, I went to visit the village they work in and to meet the locals there. At Sunrise Project, the volunteer coordinator had arranged for four volunteers including herself to talk to me, and so this was more the setting I had expected and prepared for. All four volunteers had finished their bachelor degrees and were expecting to continue with their master’s eventually, so they might have been familiar with the research process and gathering of information from own experiences. During my second field visit to the Dominican Republic, I met with the volunteer coordinator of Hope Missions who provided interesting insights and somewhat differing point of views than the other interviewees, due to her position as ‘middleman’ between organization and volunteers. The empirical data is thus a mixture of semi-structured and unstructured interviews of a more conversational nature. As previously mentioned, I also attempted to interview members of the host communities, yet this interaction proved rather difficult. While being able to create a level of confidentiality when interviewing most volunteers, where I believe I acquired honest answers to my questions, this was never realized with the locals. In one instance, the founder of Flora Village acted as sponsor for the interview situation. This way, I was introduced as being connected to the host organization, which might have caused the difficulties experienced in gaining access to the local population and their trust. They might have feared that their statements would be reported back to the situation, as was identified as a common concern by Bryman (2016).

3.2.1 Organizations

This section will provide a brief introduction to each organization from which I interviewed volunteers and staff, in order to establish an overview of their work and missions in the Dominican Republic. Bryan (2016) identifies four ethical principles relevant to the field of social research: whether there is harm to participants, a lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved (p. 125). In order to avoid invasion of the respondent’s privacy, pseudonyms will be used in place of any real names. The same applies to the organizations.

Flora Village was established in 1994 and has expanded ever since. It has multiple functions besides volunteer tourism and also functions as a place of accommodation for visiting tourists or travellers. It is situated in a rural area a little outside the city of Puerto Plata and thus somewhat isolated from the more typical tourist destination situated close to the beach. Volunteer opportunities are offered in different manners, from long-term engagements to a day of volunteering as part of your holiday. They have seven different projects for volunteers to participate in: working with adults, with children, helping women start small businesses, repairing housing, agriculture, sewing and knitting, and building a community center. These projects seemed to serve as guidelines or examples for work that can be done, more so than actual organized projects. Volunteers are encouraged to contribute with whatever skills they possess. Some teach languages, for example, and others spend time with the children.

This organization works in small villages – the so-called bateyes – situated in an area referred to as Little Haiti as the majority of people living there are refugees from Haiti. The vast majority are illegal immigrants, resulting in very limited opportunities in owning land or having a job. During my visit to the organization and one of the villages the volunteers played games and other forms of physical activities with the local children.

Sunrise Project was initiated in 1995 and formally accepted as a nonprofit organization in 2002. Starting out by volunteering as teachers and building classrooms, libraries, and so on to improve local schools, the organization has now grown to have their own established schools. Moreover, it is largely run by local staff, as an estimated 40 Dominicans are employed there along with four expats. The focus of this project is education of different sorts: early childhood education, high quality primary education, holistic youth development, and arts, culture and community enrichment. They work in 15 communities in the Dominican Republic with different programs employed. Programs are developed in close contact with the local community as well as research in education, human development, and psychology. In regards to educational programs, learning assessment tests are made prior to and following the programs, in order to track the outcome. Volunteers go through a screening process and are only offered a place if they qualify and if their skills are needed at that particular moment. The volunteering process thus seems well organized and structured compared to other voluntourism outlets.

Hope Missions was established in 2005 by two students who had volunteered in the area through other organizations. The primary focus of this organization is street children, referring to young boys working in the streets by selling food or providing services such as shining shoes. The vast majority of these children are illegal refugees from Haiti. Most have lived in Puerto Plata for a short amount of time and are there to help support their family back home. They are often unable to attend school in the Dominican Republic and have limited schooling from Haiti as well.

The organization has two schools situated in each their community. The schools are taught in Creole (Haitian local language) by local teachers, as most of the street children do not speak enough Spanish to attend local Dominican schools. Voluntourists often come to work with children. They do not teach, rather they do extracurricular activities, such as arts, crafts workshops, and so on. It is a Christian organization with Christian values, and its educational program was developed in cooperation with a local church. Volunteers are thus oftentimes associated with a church or taking part in a religion-based journey.

These interviews were thus conducted from three rather different organizations, potentially contributing to a broad understanding of volunteers’ experiences and perceptions. On the other hand, it meant talking to different types of volunteers, as some where there for two-year fellowships and others travelled to the Dominican Republic for a few weeks. In this sense, differing perspectives and considerations must be expected, perhaps obstructing reaching a general conclusion.

Full transcripts of the interviews will be attached in Appendix 1-6.

3.2.2 Sources

Besides the abovementioned empirical data, this thesis largely draws on articles from academic journals, news articles, and textbooks. The majority of the articles incorporated have all been published within recent years, which contributes to an overall contemporary angle. The amount of literature on voluntourism has increased immensely within the past ten years, making a contemporary perspective the most applicable. According to Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM), the 1990s already saw a remarkable escalation in the number of international volunteer organizations, as a result of the increasing interest in volunteering abroad. As a result, a growing number of NGOs offer volunteer possibilities in developing countries today, but this increasing interest has also led to for-profit companies entering the market. The entering of these corporations in particular marks a shift from traditional voluntary work, in which expenses were low and profit not pursued. According to Tomazos and Butler (2009) this new perception of voluntary work has opened up for the commercialization of international volunteering. The field of volunteer tourism had to be transformed in order to meet the market demands. It is furthermore this shift that has led international volunteering to become categorized as a form of alternative tourism in the literature, where previously it would be framed within the field of international development work (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008: 1). As the market for voluntourism has expanded, so has scholarly focus on the subject.

Voluntourism is an ever-expanding subject which makes it challenging to keep up with the newest tendencies as well as newest publications. It also makes it a somewhat well represented topic in mainstream news media as well as in recent academic literature. This further enables a wider perspective, as newer research has a wide range of existing research to base its findings on. The oldest article implementing the term volunteer tourism found during research for this thesis is Wearing and Neil *Refiguring Self and Identity through Volunteer Tourism* from 2000, making it a relatively young field. I primarily used the online databases available through Aalborg University Library. Preferred databases have been Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JStore, yet others have been used as well. McGehee and Andereck (2009) also mention that the field of voluntourism has only become an interest to academics since 2000.

Of course, many of the implemented topics will draw on older data as well. Established terms such as power relations, neocolonialism, and cultural imperialism, for example, are to a great extent presented through literature from the 1960s and 1970s. The term cultural relativism was initially coined in the 1960s and enjoyed great scholarly attention during the 1970s, explaining the amount of literature from this period. Its origin is often linked with the decolonization of Africa, which mainly took place during the 1950s and 1960s, further explaining its timely relevance. The contemporary understanding and use of this term is still founded on the original theoretical framework, and so using older data does not interfere with the points wished to be conveyed, rather it ensures the continuance of the concept’s original meaning. The same applies to the concept of neocolonialism, which was introduced in the mid-1960s.

4. Theoretical Themes

As described in the method section, this part will introduce the concepts of neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and power relations. These themes have been found relevant to include, as they may help shed light on issues brought out during the data collection process, and therefore they can hopefully contribute to alternate perspectives in the ensuing analysis chapter. Neocolonialism is briefly mentioned in some existing literature, yet neither of these concepts are directly linked to theories of voluntourism, nevertheless, seemed relevant to include in the ensuing analysis because of their relevance to the subject. Neocolonialism, for example, appears particularly relevant as voluntourism becomes a commodified entity. Economic opportunity within developing nations also brings about the opportunity for economic exploitation, linking the two concepts of voluntourism within the neoliberal system and neocolonialism. As previously outlined, cultural exchange is an often-highlighted outcome of voluntourism, which is why a deeper focus on culture would be interesting to include. The power structure of the international volunteer experience draws linkages to the concept of cultural imperialism, and so it would be interesting to discuss voluntourism in this context as well. Both neocolonialism and cultural imperialism build on power relations, which is why this section will include discussions of power relations as well. The often-mentioned unequal structure of voluntourism is for example an expression of distorted power relations. This chapter along with the following analysis chapter will include further discussions of these concepts.

4.1 Neocolonialism

Colonialism is described as the main instrument of imperialism. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically” (2015). Following the decolonization of African nations in the aftermath of World War II, the term neocolonialism occurred, extending on this original understanding of colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana following independence and advocate for African socialism, is believed to have coined the term and it is further elaborated in his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* from 1965. Here he states, “The neocolonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage” (p. ix). “The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (p. ix).

Neocolonialism thus serves as a replacement for traditional colonialism. It can be implemented in different manners, for the most part through economic means such as trade agreements and limitations. Nkrumah found that where neocolonialism is present, the state in control is often the former colonial power, although this might not always be the case. Today, particularly in the context of African nations, this is still a valid assessment, although neocolonial relations have expanded and transformed over the past 50 years. Nkrumah also mentioned: “It is possible that neo-colonial control may be exercised by a consortium of financial interests which are not specifically identifiable with any particular State” (1965: x), using Congo as an example.

According to Nkrumah,

“The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world” (p. x).

This statement is relevant in the context of tourism, as a main point of criticism is that large parts of the revenue generated from tourism in the developing world profits foreign investors rather than the local society. Several of the respondents mentioned this notion in the interviews conducted for this thesis as well – that although tourism generates jobs and income locally in the Dominican Republic, the big profits go to foreigners (see Appendix B: 196 and F: 583).

Disagreeing with neocolonial practices should not be perceived as a wish to banish all investment or activities in the developing world, but it is important to eliminate exploitation and practices used to uphold or enforce the impoverishment of the less developed.

As mentioned above, Nkrumah dubbed neocolonialism the worst form of imperialism: “For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress” (1965: xi). He elaborates that during colonialism, the imperial power would have to justify its behavior abroad to its people at home, and the colony would have a level of protection from the ruling power. Under neocolonialism, none of this applies.

Nkrumah identifies a contradictory nature to the neocolonial idea. In order for it to appear attractive to the developing nation it must be presented as being able to raise living standards. However, the very objective of neocolonialism is identified as keeping those living standards depressed in order to serve the interests of developed countries. Such interests could be lower prices on labor and natural resources for example. International aid in the context of neocolonialism is addressed in this light as well. Nkrumah writes “It is only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable ‘aid’ programmes, many of them well intended, can be explained” (1965: xv). This notion thus also relates to voluntourism, which is often criticized for its inability to generate sustainable change in host communities. It is portrayed as a form of development aid with the aim of disputing inequalities maintained by the neoliberal system, while simultaneously adopting neoliberal features. This will be further addressed in Chapter 5.1. In extension of the above statement Nkrumah explains that local governments’ authority to rule derives from their relations with the neocolonial power and not from the will of the people. This results in little focus on developing social services, such as education or position of the workers employed by foreign corporations, which could influence the colonial structure of trade and production. In this sense, aid becomes a sort of credit given to the neocolonial state and eventually returned to the neocolonial power in the form of increased profits. He believes that multilateral aid is the only effective form of aid, as opposed to bilateral aid, which has the potential of bringing out rivalry between individual states. However, multilateral aid is likely to result in hostility from local businesses within the state of the neocolonial power, as actions to improve conditions in the developing state such as raising prices on resources or establishing manufacturing sites is likely to cause direct or indirect competition with their import and export to the neocolonized state. Nkrumah adds that even investing in the educational sector can be risky to the neocolonial power, as higher education levels are likely to spur resistance among the population. Student movements have been a well-known forerunner in the fight against neocolonialism. As a result hereof, he argues, investing in the military becomes perceived as the only safe form of aid, so-called military aid. This procedure, however, will also prove unfavorable to the neocolonial power. He states,

“Military aid in fact marks the last stage of neo-colonialism and its effect is self-destructive. Sooner or later the weapons supplied pass into the hands of the opponents of the neo-colonialist regime and the war itself increases the social misery which originally provoked it” (Nkrumah, 1965: xvi).

Nkrumah’s overall argument thus maintains that neocolonialism is unfavorable to all its contenders, also pointing to its historic shortcomings in raising living standards or in other ways benefitting its participants. He mentions Marx’s prediction that the growing gap in wealth between the capitalist and labor class would eventually result in a conflict devastating to capitalism within the state, and argues that this conflict has been transferred on to the global stage. Neocolonialism is thus identified as a key factor in maintaining the gap between wealthy and impoverished nations and in keeping the developing world ‘subordinate’.

Voluntourism is criticized for doing just that, contributing to maintaining an unequal international structure, for example by implying that young unskilled Westerners are capable of inducing positive change in impoverished developing communities. On the question of whether or not international volunteering is a new form of colonialism, Simpson (2010) stated,

“If volunteers travel in the belief that they have little to learn and a lot to give, then they do risk being little more than “New Age Colonialists”. No one becomes an international volunteer for purely altruistic reasons, they also do it because it is exciting, because they might learn something, because they want to meet new people who live differently and because, just maybe, they might have something to offer. By acknowledging why you volunteer, you are telling our hosts that they are people you can learn from and with, not that they should be the grateful recipients of your altruism. You ask them to be your teachers, instead of forcing them to be your students” (in Lonely Planet, 2010: 10).

Furthermore, she explains the importance of researching the organizations offering volunteer experiences and encourages people to avoid the ones painting a condescending picture of the developing world or those implying that their work will ‘save the world’ or similar exaggerated sentiments (Lonely Planet, 2010). The central argument is that volunteers should be honest about their intentions for travelling and aware that they will probably be the ones gaining the most from this experience – not the host communities.

4.2 Cultural Imperialism

Merriam Webster (2016) defines imperialism as:

“The policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by directing territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas; *broadly*: the extension or imposition of power, authority, or influence”.

It is also described as “the effect that a powerful country or group of countries has in changing or influencing the way people live in other, poorer countries” (Merriam Webster, 2016). This latter definition contains sentiments relating to cultural imperialism, and points to linkages between this concept and the concept of neocolonialism as described above.

Culture is a rather wide-ranging term, broadly relating to a common set of values, practices, and beliefs shared by the population in a community. Different factors influence the existing grounds for a culture, such as religion or ethnicity. Historically, religion has been a dominant signifier of culture, possibly due to its provision of a moral standpoint for people to follow (Murden, 2011: 416). Barth (2002) defines culture as ‘learned behavior’ and points to Fortes’ definition in which culture is described as “the standardized ways of doing, knowing, thinking and feeling – universally obligatory and valued in a given group of people at a given time” (p.27). Moreover, culture can be seen as being in a continuous flux, further adding on to its complexity. As E. B. Tylor describes, “Culture is … that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (in Tomlinson, 2001: 6).

Culture can be a source of conflict, as it influences the way human beings perceive and judge others and themselves. When people do not act as expected, cultural differences become clear and might lead to a lack of common understanding. Murden (2011) argues that the end of the Cold War brought with it a notion of Western triumph accompanied by a notion of superiority. Since then, Western culture has been highly influential all over the globe; what has been referred to as ‘westernization’. As with globalization, this process is largely seen as a top-down approach, in which one dominant system will impact other parts of the world, causing nations (and thereby cultures) of the world to become more homogenous. This way, globalization is likely to become a form of cultural imperialism, which is largely characterized by cultural exchange between countries of unequal status and leading to powerful states dominating the weaker ones (Heywood, 2011: 145).

When examining human behavior, and perceptions of such as is the case in this thesis, it is crucial to include considerations of culture. Culture influences human behavior as well as thoughts and reasoning. It is intertwined with social constructivism, in the sense that the way we construct our own reality is influenced by our moral and other cultural values. Thus, on the subject of voluntourism which includes meeting different cultures, considering the impact of differing worldviews becomes essential. In extension, the same applies when examining and analyzing voluntourists’ expectations and practices.

The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought defined cultural imperialism as “the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture” in 1977 (Tomlinson, 2001: 3). However, various scholars argue that cultural practices more so serve as instrumental factors in maintaining political and economic dominance. In this context, Barker offers a different take on the concept: “There are hardly any precise definitions of ‘cultural imperialism’. It seems to mean that the process of imperialist control is aided and abetted by importing supportive forms of culture” (in Tomlinson, 2001: 3). It is thus debatable which practice induces the other; economic and political power used to blur out cultural differences, somewhat approaching a monoculture, or the implementation of cultural values to maintain such power. Either way, the essential practice that cultural imperialism seeks to explain largely remains the same. Relating to the overall subject of imperialism, the second notion might appear more feasible as it more so entails the cycle of power present in imperialism. Regardless, a level of harmonious relationship of dependency prevails between the two.

Cultural imperialism holds a central position in ongoing debates on globalization as it is used to highlight the imbalance that occurs in global cultural production and consumption. Herbert Schiller has been an influential theorist on this subject. He argues that dominant players in terms of politics, economics, and culture influence us all (Sparks, 2012: 282). The following excerpt provides Schiller’s (1976) definition of cultural imperialism:

“The concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the process by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the value and structures of the dominating centre of the system” (in Sparks, 2012: 282).

The United States is particularly perceived as dominating and the initial focus of cultural imperialism was indeed on the economic expansion of US capitalism into the Global South. Following this, attention was extended to include the export of American mass media, culture, and communication technology (Roach, 1997; Sparks, 2012).

A central assessment remains the dominance of the West, which is perceived to stem from historical inequalities that have led to economic and political power being concentrated in the West. Its conceptual framework as an instrument for theorizing culture emerged in the late 1960s. It can be seen as a response to Modernization Theory, which broadly holds that developing countries should follow the Western model of development in order to reach the same level of modernization. Cultural imperialism relates to the contrasting Dependency Theory, which highlights the socio-economic inequalities in the international system and states that wealthy nations depend on the developing world to remain less developed in order to maintain their wealth and prosperity (Hendricks, 2000; Roach 1997). The concept thus contains components inspired by Marxist thinking and is linked to the theory of neocolonialism as well.

It should be mentioned that cultural imperialism takes place between developed countries as well as unequal cultural flows are present there too, often referred to as cultural domination. This has however not gained scholarly attention to the same extent, possibly due to the expectation that the impact of cultural domination or imperialism is more detrimental in less developed countries. Also, there might be a greater gap between cultures of the developing and developed nations.

4.3 Power Relations

Both abovementioned concepts of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism are essentially discussions of power relations. In the context of voluntourism, perceptions of power can be potentially damaging to its outcome and to the people involved, perhaps particularly to the host community. In this light, an overall discussion of power relations seemed relevant to include in the theoretical considerations of this thesis.

The term power relations has various connotations. It is not limited to academia, but frequently implemented in everyday conversations, news stories, etc. Chandler and Munday (2011), for example, give three different definitions in the Dictionary of Media and Communication. They first note that “In interpersonal interaction, the relative status, power, and/or dominance of the participants, reflected in whether expectations and behavior are reciprocal, and consequently in communicative style. Power relations are a key dimension in interpersonal communication”. The second point defines it as “Relationships of dominance and subordination between different groups: for instance within stratified social systems or in international relations (e.g. the West vs the rest)”. Lastly, they point to the philosophical work of Foucault: “For Foucault, [it is] the various patterns of domination and resistance in different social settings. He insisted that ‘There cannot be a society without power relations’”(Chandler & Munday, 2011). If power is legitimized on accounts of status, and thus involves no direct coercion, it is referred to as authority. Economic power is based on class, social power on status, and political power on domination. Numerous theorists, philosophers, and scholars have occupied themselves with different takes on the concept. Marxist theory states that power is an outcome of class structure. Weber defines power as “the ability to exert control over people, even against their own will”. Gramsci argues that power is upheld and reproduced through manipulation in ideological hegemony. And Foucault sees power as “a ubiquitous feature of institutionalized discourses which both constitute and control subjects” (rather than something possessed by groups or individuals), according to Chandler and Munday (2011). Moreover, all social and communicative relations are identified as power relations.

Foucault thus to a great extent focused on power relations between individuals and society, especially its institutions. Focus should however not be on the oppressive manner of power relations but rather on how it operates in everyday interactions between people. He further argues that the idea that power is oppression should be abandoned “because – even in their most radical form – oppressive measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviours to emerge”, as summarized by Balan (2010).

In their study on social power from 1959, social psychologists French and Raven define five different bases of power: coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, and expert. In 1965, Raven subsequently added a sixth base: informational power. Nouns such as influence and authority are often mentioned in relation to power, and it is debated whether these are forms of power or means to facilitate the exercise of power. French and Raven argue that influence is brought about by power, which in turn is defined as a person’s ability to bring about influence (French & Raven, 1960).

On the subject of power relations in tourism, Pedregal (2010) argues that tourism represents a form of power, as it entails the process of certain population groups being able to spend their leisure time away from their usual surroundings. As mentioned previously, a main point of criticism in regards to voluntourism is the question of its actual benefits to host communities or if it serves more as an enhancement of volunteer’s self-images. In extension, voluntourism is criticized for contributing to the maintenance of an unequal power structure favoring the voluntourists in expense of the host population (Conran, 2011; McKenna, 2016). If simply the action of traveling is perceived as a form of power, as argued by Pedregal, voluntourists are situated in a position of power from the very beginning, and the voluntourism experience is thereby based on an unequal power structure.

In regards to voluntourism, McKenna (2016) addresses the so-called discourse of deference. This has emerged as voluntourism organizations have had to improve their practices and to a greater extent promote equality among tourists and host communities, as a result of the increased critique of voluntourism. This is for example achieved through involving host communities in developing volunteer programs and promoting a comprehensive awareness of the host communities among the volunteers. The outcome, McKenna argues, is a discourse of deference surrounding the organizations and people engaged in the voluntourism industry. Adopting this discourse of deference entails being aware of and respecting a foreign culture, causing voluntourists to participate in activities or behavior differing from what they are used to, making them feel vulnerable. In doing so they are relinquishing some of their power as they embark onto unfamiliar grounds. This might complicate the power relationship between hosts and volunteers. McKenna (2016) concludes that practicing deference does not have the ability to alter power relations between host and volunteers, or even distribute power evenly between the two. Furthermore, she argues that it might not always lead to a transfer in power, but merely the voluntourist to relinquish some. It is thus questionable to what extent this increased focus on deference toward host communities has an actual impact.

These discussed concepts will serve as theoretical themes in the following analysis chapter.

5. Analysis

This chapter will incorporate findings from the field research and discuss these in the light of the established theoretical themes in Chapter 2 *Voluntourism: State of the Art* and Chapter 4 *Theoretical Themes*. The recurring focus will be on voluntourists’ experiences with the overall objective to determine how volunteers perceive their positions within local contexts in the Dominican Republic. This chapter will be divided into the same subheadings as seen in Chapter 2, in order to provide a simply structured overview of the findings and how they relate to the established theoretical framework. As mentioned in the method section, the advantage of this approach is consistency and coherence. A potential disadvantage can be the risk of overlooking points that do not fit these established categories. In an attempt to avoid this, a final subcategory named Volunteer Reflections will be added. The purpose of this section will be to provide reflections mentioned by the interviewees that go beyond the established debates.

As mentioned in the introductory chapters, no one precise definition of voluntourism exists, making it a wide-ranging term. The same applies to other terminologies used in reference to voluntourism, such as international volunteering. The fieldwork for this thesis supported this perspective, as people engaging in different projects to very different degrees all identified as international volunteers. As explained in the methodology chapter, this resulted in a rather diverse variety of interviewees, ranging from people volunteering for a few weeks to volunteers employed through a two-year fellowship. As a result hereof, reaching general conclusions on the efficiency of international volunteer programs becomes challenging. However, as this thesis aims to reach a conclusion regarding volunteers’ perceptions and experiences, differentiating between the different degrees of volunteer programs seemed less essential. Volunteers will have expectations, perceptions, and experiences regardless of the extent of their voluntary work. It would, however, be interesting to further examine the various modes of international volunteering, and perhaps develop criteria on how to separate them. Is it for example the longevity of the stay or the work structure that should determine how a voluntourist experience should be perceived?

5.1 Voluntourism as Development Aid

As stated in the existing literature, discourse surrounding voluntourism largely works to distinguish it from mass tourism. The majority of interviewees expressed sentiments supporting this perspective, some more overtly than others. Ray, for example, said “When you stay here you don’t go where the tourists go, but where the locals go themselves” (Appendix A: 111), emphasizing an implicit importance of experiencing things the local way, thereby distancing himself from regular tourists. Although not directly claiming to be non-touristic, this statement still expresses a level of distancing from other tourists. As going where the locals go will result in a more authentic and less touristic experience. Furthermore, Karen stated “The people who stay in more rustic places like this have a good heart” (Appendix A: 14). This statement contains the notion that people staying in conditions similar to those in Flora Village are better than, or at least different from, those staying in large tourist resorts that might include more extravagant settings. Also, it implies that the people staying there – to a great extent volunteers – do so because of their ‘good heart’, attributing selfless characteristics to these particular people. This falls well into the discourse of identifying voluntourism as a form of development aid along with the glorification of voluntourist approaches. Thereby contributing to an uncritical view on volunteer practices in developing nations like the Dominican Republic. Similarly, Karen explained that they arrange excursions directly with locals, thereby contributing to the local economy. “And this way, people are not real tourists and they get to know the real Dominican Republic. So the people that stay here are always helping in some way, it’s never only a bad relationship” (Appendix A: 68). First of all, this clearly states that their guests are not ‘real tourists’ and get to experience the ‘real’ Dominican Republic, clearly expressing distance to mass tourism. Moreover, the last comment stating “it’s never only a bad relationship” implies that those traveling without any altruistic intentions partake in a ‘bad relationship’ with the local population. It thus serves to further emphasize the glorified associations of international volunteering, as well as the superficial notions associated with mass tourism.

Throughout the interviews, the word ‘help’ is frequently implemented, in the context of improving conditions to the local population through different means and approaches. Karen, for example, states: “We help in the bateyes in Little Haiti” (Appendix A: 19), Alex said “After seeing the poverty here I decided to come back and help where I could” (Appendix A: 33), Grace explained “I will do surveys in the bateyes to find out how to best help the locals” (Appendix A: 58) and so on. Of course, ‘help’ is a common word employed in everyday conversation, but in this context it is also a rather loaded word. It does not contain the often-mentioned duality of voluntourism in which both the volunteer and host community benefit in a form of cultural exchange (Everingham, 2015: 178, McIntosh & Zahra, 2009, Wright, 2007) rather it expresses the ‘savior/saved’ relationship in which the western volunteer comes to save people in the developing world (Conrad, 2011). The frequent use of ‘help’ in the discourse of voluntourism thus comprises neocolonial sentiments as it maintains the notion that communities in developing countries need guidance from the developed West. This further relates to Mostafanezhad’s (2013b) observed geography of compassion, in which some places are for being saved while others possess the role of saviors.

In the context of framing voluntourism within the field of development aid, this discourse of helping also serves to express a donor/recipient relationship between volunteers and host community. As mentioned previously, seeing voluntourism as development aid is not only perpetuated by voluntourism organizations, but by the media as well (Everingham, 2015; Palacios, 2010). The findings in the interviews conducted for my thesis suggest that voluntourists themselves contribute to framing their experiences within the field of development aid as well. In turn, this shapes future volunteers’ expectations, leading to potentially distorted expectations as to the level of impact they can actually have. Additionally, it highlights the sentimental features of voluntourism, removing focus from the political environment causing the structural inequality it aims at eliminating, as argued by Mostafanezhad (2013b) and Manzo (2008).

Some of the interviewees, however, also expressed concern about these issues. On the subject of giving advice for future volunteers, Gabriella for example stated: “Listen more than you talk. And manage your expectations – don’t think you’re going to change the world or community. I mean, you *can* help, but you’re not going to change the world” (Appendix D: 355). She added: “It’s important too that international volunteers listen to the community. They should not go there to become ‘leader’ of the community. They should listen first and then find out what to do” (Appendix D: 358). Managing expectations were a recurring theme throughout the interviews, perhaps implying that the interviewees had had to adapt their own expectations upon arrival, or at least that they are aware of the risk of misrepresenting the field of international volunteering.

Similarly, Dwayne said: “[…] you have to be mindful of the privilege and abilities you have – and that you’re here to learn not just to take up space. If you’re not mindful about these things, it can be like you’re trying to be their savior and they don’t need that. No one needs anyone to save them” (Appendix E: 412)

Out of the eleven volunteers, founders, and coordinators interviewed for this thesis, four were male. This corresponds well with the gendered nature of voluntourism as mentioned in Chapter 2.1 *Voluntourism as Development Aid*. A large part of the work mentioned by the interviewees is associated with teaching or playing with children, which can be seen as a sector historically occupied by women. As Mostafanezhad (2013b) argues, this has the potential of contributing to the reproduction of gender norms. However, from a different perspective the substantial presence of females might lead to the production of female role models, which could be particularly influential in communities where patriarchy prevails. It would be interesting to further examine the effect of gender roles and their impact in host communities in relation to voluntourism.

Mostafanezhad (2013a) and Manzo (2008) identified the third world child as becoming a symbol of universal human rights, partially perpetuated through ‘celebrity humanitarianism’. Some statements in the interviews contained this sentiment as well. For example, when Valerie stressed that her volunteer experiences had always been related to children: “It’s always been to help children in some way, by building schools or taking care of them in other ways. I have also done voluntary work at home, working with children as well” (Appendix A: 37). This contains a notion of justification, to the extent that working with children further validates her work. She previously explained that she primarily did construction work in developing communities, and so adding children might serve as to further sentimentalizing the experience. As explained by Manzo (2008) this removes focus from the structural inequality and the politics causing it, as development issues become a sentimental issue. Also, this focus on children contains neocolonial sentiments as it implies a parent-child relationship between the actors, in which the host community needs guardianship and guidance from the volunteers. In extension, this further serves to legitimize development approaches employed through Western interference in developing countries, such as voluntourist programs. The third world child as the face of international development thus becomes the figurative embodiment of the need for Western interference, a general justification.

5.2 Neoliberalism and Voluntourism

The neoliberal system is central to the contradictory notions of voluntourism. As mentioned, international volunteering emerged as a response to the neoliberal focus on the market, as an embodiment of a focus on softer humanitarian values. Such softer values of humanitarianism and altruism remain central to voluntourism, particularly to the discourse surrounding it. However, the commercialized aspect of voluntourism has become more prevalent and is one of the main points of criticism. Lisa noted “A problem is that, because they paid money to be here, some people come with a kind of consumer attitude, and feel like they should be treated differently or can demand certain things and so on…” (Appendix F: 553). In this sense, commodification contributes to shaping voluntourists’ expectations and consequently their experience as well.

By positioning the volunteers in a consumer position, the act of volunteering becomes a product that can be measured as satisfactory or dissatisfactory. In extension, the act of ‘doing good’ is transferred to the market, in which it has to live up to certain standards. This is also expressed in the great focus on creating interesting projects that will attract and satisfy volunteers, which was mentioned in the conducted interviews. Ellen, for example, mentioned this dilemma: “It’s challenging to NGOs to empower communities because you have to provide opportunities while balancing available funding. And how do you ensure programs meet community needs?” (Appendix C: 278). Available funding is connected to volunteers, which highlights the importance of providing opportunities attracting volunteers while also benefitting the host community. Ellen continued “Bring something that is not provided in the local community already. And aim to meet the community’s needs” (Appendix C: 281). Lisa also noted “It has to be a balance between projects and pleasure. That way the volunteers get the best experience” (Appendix F: 541). These two perspectives contain similar sentiments but slightly different perspectives. Ellen represents a volunteer’s point of view which is predominantly occupied with the importance of meeting host community’s needs, and avoiding taking work from the local population. Lisa represents the host organization through her position as volunteer coordinator, and thus maintains a focus on accommodating volunteers’ needs.

Lisa furthermore addressed the importance of balancing volunteers’ and host community’s expectations. She stated, “I think, in many nonprofit organizations, because they depend on funds from volunteers, donors determine the projects rather than the communities. That’s the balance of providing volunteer experiences – having projects that are interesting to people and also what the community needs” (Appendix F: 561). This reflection correlates well with the observed capitalization of humanitarian activities often present in the context of environmental sustainability or poverty reduction (Conrad, 2011, Goodman, 2004). Lisa further added, “Because voluntourism is becoming so popular now we see many middleman organizations, which are basically just ‘money machines’. Their only function is to make contact between programs and volunteers so the money stays there” (Appendix F: 565). This way aiding host communities is clearly viewed as a commodity. The sole purpose of the volunteer exchange becomes generating profits, not creating sustainable change in developing communities. This is a side effect of voluntourism’s increasing popularity.

Lisa, moreover, was the only interviewee to speak of ‘voluntourism’. She is the volunteer coordinator with Hope Missions, and thereby posses a different position and perspective than those volunteering. Furthermore, a vast majority of volunteers at Hope Missions come for short-term stays of a week or two. An assumption could be that people investing such short time for volunteering initiatives to a greater extent accentuate the touristic part of voluntourism, than those volunteering longer terms. Her statements somewhat support this view, and point to the conclusion that people going for short-term volunteering abroad are less interested in impacting host societies and more interested in personal gains. She further commented on the disadvantage of having short-term volunteers:

“It’s always a balance between finding projects that volunteers are interested in - and that are worth the cost. When the volunteers are here for a shorter time, it’s best if the project can be finished within their time here – within the week, for example – so they feel like they accomplished something when they leave. That gives them a better experience.” (Appendix F: 463)

In short-term voluntourism, thus, the aspect of consumerism becomes particularly evident as the main focus is on creating a good experience for the voluntourists, more so than creating positive changes in host communities or meeting their needs. Ellen also noted the importance of longevity, when explaining the best part of her volunteer experience: “That I’ve been able to stay for a longer peiod. I’ve learned more in-depth about the country’s history and political and economic structures. I’ve been able to have more of an impact here this way” (Appendix C: 255). She is volunteering for two years at Sunrise Project through a Princeton for Latin America fellowship.

In contrast, Lisa also noted “some of the local kids have said that it’s nice to know that foreigners come here to get to know them – instead of just throwing money at them. In a sense objectifying them” (Appendix F: 551). This entails a different perception, where volunteers’ time and interest are valued over their money. Volunteers’ presence is in this sense prioritized over their ability to generate change in the community, as their intentions and willingness to spend time with the local population is preferred over financial investment. It is an interesting point of view, and indicates the importance of investigating host communities’ perspectives to a greater extent. From an outside perspective one might conclude, or at least suggest, that the sums of money spent on voluntourism globally would have a greater impact if invested directly into host communities. This might of course still be a valid assessment, but it does not include the social aspects associated with voluntourism, as is clearly emphasized in the above excerpt. Gaining more insight into host communities’ opinions and experiences would help outline their expectations and desired outcome of voluntourism.

All three organizations visited, along with others mentioned by the interviewees, are all owned and founded by foreigners – Canadians and Americans. Conrad (2011) noted that in Thailand most NGOs are national, apart from those associated with voluntourism. These are often foreign-owned, much like other companies affiliated with tourism. This was supported in the interviews. On the subject of whether tourism benefits the local society, Nathalie said: “I guess in the sense that it creates jobs. But the big money and prestigious positions are held by foreigners, you know, the hotels and businesses benefitting the most from tourism are all owned by foreigners.” (Appendix B: 195). Lisa similarly noted, “It adds to the local economy in terms of jobs. And also tourists spending their money here, like buying their food in the corner stores instead of in the supermarkets.” (Appendix F: 582). She also added “The locals here are always happy to have volunteers. Like the ones living in my neighborhood in Muñoz they are always asking when people are coming, because they know they will make money off of them” (Appendix F: 584). It is thus small-scale impact that is expected from voluntourism. These observations somewhat relate to Nkrumah’s statement, “Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world” (1965: x), as a large part of profits generated through tourism goes to foreign investors, thereby not further benefitting the local population in the Dominican Republic. A process Nkrumah mentions as well, “foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world” (p. x). As voluntourism initiatives are implemented by foreigners as well, voluntourism can be perceived as having neocolonial exploitative features. For nonprofit organizations, though, generated income is likely to stay in the local setting aiming to further the organization’s work there. It may, however, be argued that volunteers represent an exploitative feature themselves, as they arguably benefit the most from the volunteer exchange and leave afterwards.

Another neoliberal feature often highlighted in the context of voluntourism is its resume-building potential, including the general anticipation that volunteers are partially motivated by improved career prospects. This so-called professionalization of volunteering is an often-used justification for volunteering abroad, and serves as an indication of voluntourism’s adaption to the neoliberal system – its overall aim is to improve one’s skills in order to be attractive to the market. As presented in Chapter 2.2, various scholars support this view and conclude that self-seeking interests are significant, perhaps even primary, forces driving volunteers (Söderman & Snead, 2008; Conrad, 2011). Concentrating on selfish interests is however not in tune with the selfless discourse of voluntourism, and so the mutually shared benefits are often highlighted – the so-called reciprocal altruism.

The volunteers interviewed for this thesis did not essentially express support for the CV-building features of their stay, or at least only under certain circumstances. Rather, the interviewees’ statements pointed to another level of neoliberal values present in international volunteering, namely their focus on the local population profiting from it. This was highlighted in the abovementioned examples focusing on (volun)tourism’s creation of jobs or volunteers spending their money locally. Voluntourism’s contribution to local society is in this sense also measured in neoliberal terms – in its ability to generate value to the market. As Conrad (2011: 1462) stated “the cultural logic of neoliberalism suggests that individual power depends on economic capital rather than our contribution to society as a whole”. As it appears, this logic is also being applied onto host communities in the voluntorusim setting. This, along with other motivational factors, will be further addressed in the following chapter.

5.3 Motivations for Volunteers

A majority of the existing literature addresses motivations for participating in voluntourism. Reciprocal benefits are often emphasized here, as solely focusing on self-seeking interests is frowned upon and associated with mass tourism. A central point of voluntourism is indeed disassociating oneself with regular mass tourism, which is often associated with hedonistic values such as mass consumption, superficiality, and leisure over humanitarianism.

Lonely Planet (2010) identifies the desire to ‘give something back’ as the most common reason for wanting to volunteer. “Wanting to help others, wishing to do good and hoping to make a difference are all important reasons to volunteer” (Lonely Planet, 2010: 9). It is added, however, that for the most part other motivational factors are needed in order to have a satisfactory experience. The ideal is identified as a “well-balanced mix of altruistic and personal motivations for volunteering” (p. 9). Personal motivations are identified as seeing new places, being exposed to different cultures, establishing friendships, and exploring unknown sides of one self. Also, the cultural exchange is highlighted as “a key part of what both you and your hosts will get out of the whole experience” along with the educational aspect of international volunteering, such as the opportunity to learn a foreign language (p. 10).

The interviewees were all asked about what motivated them to go volunteering abroad, or what they believed to be motivating factors. On this subject, Lisa, the volunteer coordinator at Hope Missions, said: “I would say a wish to do good in the world…and to see more of the world. We are a Christian organization with Christian values and therefore also some Christian volunteers. So that might also motivate some of them” (Appendix F: 501). Religion has played a significant role in international volunteer initiatives throughout history. Missionaries from various religions (mostly Christianity and Islam) are employed across the world, including many developing countries. Furthermore, Christianity and colonialism were often closely intertwined, as this was the religion of the European colonial powers. Falola (1998) argues that, in some instances, missionaries saw colonialism as a Christian virtue. At the end of the nineteenth century, Falola argues, Christian missionaries supported the colonialist divide of Africa, as this would facilitate the implementation of Christianity. Reverend Boer, a missionary in Sudan, was for example quoted saying:

“Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on a divine mandate and designed to bring liberation – spiritual, cultural, economic and political – by sharing the blessings of the Christ-inspired civilization of the West with a people suffering under satanic forces of oppression, ignorance and disease, effected by a combination of political, economic and religious forces that cooperate under a regime seeking the benefit of both ruler and ruled” (in Falola, 1998: 33).

Wishing to volunteer in order to extend religious values can thereby be categorized as a form of cultural imperialism, as it entails the enforcement of one’s own values and beliefs onto others. The implementation of own values can be used to maintain political and economic power, which was a clear aim in the above quotation. It thus has the potential of implicitly perpetuating Western dominance. Implementing or reinforcing Christian values contributes to the maintaining of a paternalistic relationship reminiscent of colonial times. Of course, these religious organizations most likely have good intensions and no interest in perpetuating colonial or neocolonial features. Yet, instructing other cultures in adopting one’s faith does not express or extend equality. Rather, it somewhat facilitates a relationship of dependency, dominated by the developed (Western) country, which can be seen in overall accordance with Nkrumah’s predictions regarding neocolonialism as presented in Chapter 4.1.

Also on the subject of motivating factors, Lisa added: “Actually, I heard this one young girl say that it’s just the norm now – like, ‘all students go on international service trips’. It’s like something you’re supposed to do” (Appendix F: 505). This view expresses the level of popularity that voluntourism has reached. In this context, traditional motivating factors, be they self-seeking or altruistic, become somewhat obsolete as no greater considerations apparently apply. It constitutes another level of egocentric motivation, as volunteering abroad is seen as a trend and ‘something you’re supposed to do’. This, however, also marks the approaching end of voluntourism as a niche within the tourism sector by which people can separate themselves from others, as it becomes normalized. Moreover, it expresses a level of privilege in the sense that going abroad for no particular reason is doable.

Various scholars have concentrated on voluntourists’ motivations for participating in international volunteering and have indeed found it to be a mixture of altruistic and self-realizing goals, in general. Some might be guided more by genuinely good intentions while others see it as a possibility for achieving personal gains and obtaining social status (Conrad, 2011; Simpson, 2005; Söderman & Snead, 2008). As previously stated, an often-mentioned motivation for volunteering abroad is the added experience to one’s resume, contributing positively to future career prospects. However, none of the interviewees directly agreed with this assumption. Their general perception more so concluded that volunteering abroad might be an advantage if pursuing a career within international development work. Lisa, for example, said:

“I think for those volunteering longer term…it might add something to their resume. Not really for those who are just here for a week or so. Perhaps more in the sense of career paths. Like many consider to continue with international work or international health, or so on. Maybe this can help them figure out if that’s something they want to do?” (Appendix F: 508).

The vast majority of volunteers coming to Hope Missions are there on short term commitments around one or two weeks. More so than being career-building, volunteering is then seen as a way of determining potential career paths. Similarly, Ellen commented: “I think it depends on what type of jobs they’re pursuing. I know people who volunteered through the Peace Corps and many end up doing completely different things, not related to international development” (Appendix C: 264). She continued elaborating on different ways volunteering abroad can be influential, saying: “But you do learn a lot of important things about poverty, structural inequality, privilege, and systematic racism and sexism. That’s relevant to all – also back home. Sexism is more visible here but it’s also a relevant issue in the US. Just like systematic racism” (Appendix C: 266). Speaking on her on behalf, Ellen furthermore noted “I also want to keep working in an international context and volunteering has helped adding to my skills within development” (Appendix C: 261).

The fact that none of the interviewees believed international volunteering to be CV-building in general was a rather unexpected outcome. This feature of voluntourism is so frequently referred to (see Lyons & Wearing, 2008b; Simpson, 2005; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2010, Wearing et al, 2008) that it appears to be a normalized association when reflecting on volunteers’ motivations. Therefore, the interviewees’ overall rejection of this idea contributes interestingly to the debate.

5.4 Negative Impact of Voluntourism

The ‘white savior’ role is an often-criticized aspect of voluntourism. Dwayne addressed this exact notion when stating:

“you have to be mindful of the privilege and abilities you have – and that you’re here to learn not just to take up space. If you’re not mindful about these things, it can be like you’re trying to be their savior and they don’t need that. No one needs anyone to save them.” (Appendix E: 412).

He outlines the importance of considering the influence volunteers might have on the host population. Not solely in relations to the projects and work undertaken, but in the sense of their behavior. He also emphasizes the aspect of learning and implies that a different mindset might cause volunteers to ‘take up space’ rather than contributing positively. This statement thus supports the view that simply going to a developing nation will not result in the potential benefits that voluntourism is able to generate. Volunteers need to actively seek these beneficial outcomes and being aware of privilege and potentially degrading behavior is essential in this matter.

Another negative feature associated with voluntourism is the perpetuation of stereotypes and the tendency of distancing oneself from people that one perceives as different, the so-called ‘othering’. Valerie commented “I feel very privileged here. I’m invited to come to the local church, or sometimes even to people’s homes. It’s like living among the locals but I feel very secure here” (Appendix A: 71). She focuses on the privilege she feels because of the locals’ hospitality, but also implies another level of privilege – that she does not need to stay where the locals do. Rather, she can stay at Flora Village which provides the authenticity of being among the locals, and still enjoy the safety of a locked gate and utilities such as running water and Wi-Fi.

On the subject of punitive methods in local schools, Karen stated,

“Corporal punishment is normal here. It can be hard to experience, but we’re not here to change them. We’ve had problems with that before; other volunteers have had a hard time seeing this. Some even started crying and refused to go back to the school. So now, they try to avoid corporal punishment when volunteers are there, not because they stopped using it, but to avoid frightening the foreigners” (Appendix A: 84).

First of all, this statement contains a clear dose of ‘othering’, when stating that “we’re not here to change them”. This implies that ‘we’ know the proper thing to do, but at the same time our job is not to enforce it onto ‘them’. The statement in itself, then, contains the sentiment that western values should not be enforced onto the local population. However, in practice it appears that the host population indeed had to alter their practices in order to accommodate volunteers and their worldviews. This way, voluntourism causes a form of cultural imperialism as it implicitly leads to the implementation of foreign cultural values, albeit solely when volunteers are present. It also contains an unequal relationship in which the host community has to abandon own measures and adopt new ones that they do not necessarily agree with, as required by the volunteers. Thereby neocolonial sentiments are present as well, as host communities assume a subordinate and adapting role.

In this context, cultural exchange does not solely lead to positive outcomes in international volunteering. It has the potential to spur cultural understanding and greater tolerance on both sides of the volunteer encounter, yet also possess the risk of doing the opposite and enforcing stereotypes, for example. Karen, the founder of Flora Village, said

“There are definitely culture shocks when you come here. Grace, we also have to take a walk in the batey at night, then you can really see the differences! Children will still be up and out in the streets at 11 pm. There will be loud music and so on. Not the same kind of concern is paid toward children, not like we’re used to in our parts of the world” (Appendix A: 90).

Simply experiencing cultural differences and being aware of the distinctions and similarities to one’s own culture, clearly does not equal cross-cultural understanding. On the contrary, this statement expresses cultural superiority as a notion of ‘knowing better’ is implied. It thereby also somewhat contributes to reinforcing cultural stereotypes, rather than diminishing them. This is in overall correlation with the findings that volunteers’ perceptions of different cultures in general do not change (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2005; Sin, 2009; Woosnam, 2011). The cultural encounter thus not only has the potential of creating cross-cultural understanding but also, perhaps even more so, the risk of perpetuating stereotypes and the portrayal of locals as inferior.

5.5 Positive impact of Voluntourism

As mentioned, the interviewees often identified the creation of jobs locally as a main positive outcome of voluntourism. Also, Lisa and Dwayne both mentioned that the locals are able to practice their English skills, which is a particular advantage in areas where tourism is high (Appendix E: 388 and F: 591). Many aspire to work within the tourism industry, as this is seen as creating the best prospects for one’s future. From receiving higher tips to getting married to a foreigner, tourism is seen as a potential way out of poverty. Lisa noted “You can also see there’s a difference if people are here to care and help out, the locals are more interested in getting to know them” (Appendix F: 594). This statement points to the aforementioned expectation that voluntourism creates a more ‘authentic’ encounter than regular mass tourism, as locals are more interested in knowing volunteers. This might however also simply apply because volunteers tend to stay longer than regular tourists, meaning a greater chance of creating relationships.

Teaching valuable lessons is identified as a direct positive outcome of voluntourism. An example of that was mentioned by Ellen, who manages an HIV awareness program. She stated, “We do assessment tests before and after the programs to kind of measure their effect. We do see a change in knowledge most of the time; just recently we measured a change from 60% to 90% in the assessments before and after a program” (Appendix C: 247). Raising awareness of sexual caution is valuable to the host community and being able to measure an actual change in knowledge afterwards must indeed be perceived as a positive outcome of volunteering. However, simply spreading awareness is not necessarily sufficient. Ellen also notes this when adding, “But that just indicates that people are more aware. It would be interesting to see if the programs actually induce behavioral change too. Like less adolescent pregnancies. But it’s such a difficult area; often there are young girls with much older partners” (Appendix C: 250).

The interviewees also mentioned increased awareness as a positive outcome of international volunteering. Lisa, for example, noted “I think having volunteers here adds to the organization by spreading awareness and knowledge of the issues and the work we do here back home” (Appendix F: 539). Elaborating further on the extent to which volunteers impact the local community, Lisa stated, “I think each individual trip is a drop in the pond. But it does help fundraising […] People definitely leave more invested in the issues and conditions here and more motivated to do something about it” (Appendix F: 544).

In extension, the volunteer experience was also seen as an eye-opener in regards to poverty and structural inequality. Nathalie explained,

“I’ve gained a better insight into poverty and the reasons why poverty exists. For example, here in Cabarete tourism is high so the gap between rich and poor is very prevalent. I mean if you walk ten minutes from here it’s all big resorts and tourists” (Appendix B: 191).

Similarly, Ellen noted “Just seeing the implications of poverty. Like violence in the communities. There are extreme examples of how poverty affects the communities. You see foreigners taking advantage of the situation. The Dominican Republic is a destination for sex tourism for example” (Appendix C: 286). These observations correlates well with the notion that voluntourism is capable of spreading awareness about social issues in local communities, which might lead to greater support for action to improve these circumstances (Conrad, 2011; Mostafanezhad, 2013b).

5.6 Elitism and Privilege

As discussed in Chapter 2.6 *Elitism and Privilege* and 4.3 *Power Relations*, traveling is a contributing factor in defining and separating social classes and tourism in itself therefore constitutes a form of power. From this perspective, voluntourism embodies unequal class relations where international volunteers belong to the elite and the host population is situated in a lower class with less opportunity to travel the world, for example. The voluntourist encounter thus entails a power relationship between these two sides, in correlation with the Marxist view that power is an outcome of the relations between social classes. This also ties in with the Gramscian view, that power is reproduced through manipulation in ideological hegemony, in the sense that the (often Western) ideals of volunteers are implemented in host communities. The general idea of voluntourism contains this notion as well, as it somewhat entails that developing countries should follow developed countries’ ways in order to achieve a similar level of development. It thereby relates to the overall ideology of Modernization Theory, which further emphasizes the contradictory nature of the voluntourism encounter, as this theory has been widely criticized for ignoring the politics leading to the structural inequality that causes poverty. The situation that initially ignited international volunteering is thus somewhat maintained by voluntourism practices today.

Participating in volunteer initiatives abroad is often rather costly, which also contributes to the elitism in volunteering. It is limited to those with the required funds and opportunity. Some organizations are also rather critical when choosing volunteer candidates. Like Nathalie explained,

“becoming a volunteer at the Sunrise Project is not as easy as other places. I had to send three letters of recommendations, writing samples, and then finally had an interview with the founder. Whether you’re considered for a position also depends on your skills and if they are needed at the project at the moment” (Appendix B: 177).

This further establishes an elitist notion among volunteers as only the best suited are offered a position. On a different note, such screening processes with the aim of placing the most suitable candidates based on their skills seems like a progressive method which would be beneficial to implement in more areas of voluntourism – both in regards to its functionality and reputation, as it contains a focus on accommodating local needs over volunteers’ demands.

Moreover, elitism is evident when volunteers are praised by other elite groups, such as the media or simply ‘equals’ from their home country. In relation to this subject, Lisa commented on the glorification of international humanitarian work. She stated,

“Another thing I’ve thought about is that it’s kind of glorified being abroad. Like, even for me, and I’m just a volunteer coordinator…when people ask me what I do, and I say I work in the Dominican Republic. I don’t have to say anything else, it’s just like “oh you’re so good” and so on. That’s the immediate response. So, I think some people are definitely in it for the attention.” (Appendix F: 573)

This statement points to elitism in the sense that two groups who are more privileged than people of the host community are conversing about the initiatives done in this particular community and reassuring each other in their good intentions. Moreover, it expresses that simply going abroad and investing ones time is enough to be admired. She added that this glorification and positive attention is a motivating factor for some volunteers. This depicts an intensified form of self-seeking interests, as more so than improving one’s resume or other aforementioned hedonistic interests, orchestrating a positive image becomes a main attraction of volunteering.

Ellen talked about her friend who volunteered in Bolivia as part of her studies to become a nurse, who felt unsatisfied due to restrictions on the work she was allowed to do as a volunteer. Commenting on this story, she stated “But that makes perfectly sense when you think about it. You wouldn’t want a 20-year-old student doing procedures on your dad, so why would people in a developing country want that?” (Appendix C: 296). This case constitutes a good example of the privilege volunteers are at risk of portraying when they go abroad, particularly in developing countries. Due to the unusual settings it can be challenging to uphold the ethics and principles that one would display in more familiar surroundings. Some volunteer projects can require volunteers to assume more responsibility than they would do at home, especially when given tasks that exceed their skills or training. This has the risk of resulting in a level of arrogance and elitism, as special authorities are assigned to volunteers simply on accounts of their origin. The above example shows that volunteers’ expectations can contribute to this sense of privilege or elitism as well.

5.7 Volunteer Reflections

Two of the volunteers were motivated by personal factors unmentioned by the existing theory on voluntourism. Gabriella and Nathalie are from families that migrated to the United States and both of them mentioned this as a motivational factor in their decision to volunteer in the Dominican Republic. When asked about her expectations, Gabriella said “To get to know the Dominican Republic and explore the country. And feel a connection” (Appendix D: 338). Nathalie similarly stated “My family originates from here, so that’s why I wanted to come and try to live here” (Appendix B: 182). On the subject of whether this experience will help her in the future, Gabriella stated

“Yes for sure […] Also in understanding the whole story of immigration. My parents immigrated so I know that side of the story. And growing up as a second-generation immigrant. But it’s been nice to see the whole story, where it starts, and why people want to leave…because of the lack of opportunity here” (Appendix D: 362).

In this sense, the relationship between volunteer and host population is not based on an unequal donor/receiver relationship and the mutuality, or simply the volunteer’s gain, of the encounter is rather evident. Of course, these considerations are challenging to apply to the general field of voluntourism, and are likely to be more prevalent in certain geographical linkages, such as American volunteers in places with high immigration rates to the United States. However, it does constitute an example of self-seeking motivations for volunteering abroad that remain largely unexplored in relation to the subject of voluntourism.

All interviewees were asked if they had any advice for future volunteers. Managing expectations was a recurring subject often mentioned in this context. Lisa identified the importance of adjusting expectations accordingly: “People come with very high expectations in regards to how much they can accomplish in a week” (Appendix F: 534). She further included cultural differences as a factor that might complicate the experience or lead to unfulfilled expectations:

“It’s also a less organized culture here, which also affects how much you can actually get done. Sometimes we have to tell people that plans have been changed last minute, and they will be working on something different. That makes people frustrated sometimes” (Appendix F: 534).

As advice for prospective volunteers, Ellen said “You should be interested in doing real development work. And also consider your ethical standpoint. The work should not be taking opportunities from the locals. So ask yourself ‘what is your role, what do you offer, and is it unique, is it ethical?’ Be open-minded. Be critical of the community – consider the historic reasons to the conditions there. Like the gap between rich and poor, and the colonial and slave history. Also, think critically of their educational level and capacity.” (Appendix C: 299). Gabriella said, “It’s important to enforce reflection. To constantly reflect on oneself – because it changes while you’re here” (Appendix D: 353).

These statements to a great extent reflect what could be perceived as the volunteers’ own considerations on their positions within the host community. They express a great focus on being aware of your behavior and contribution to the local society. Also, a focus on actively aiming to reach cross-cultural understanding can be found as well, particularly in Ellen’s comment. Moreover, these statements contain features of the so-called discourse of deference, mentioned in Chapter 4.3. Also employing this discourse, Nathalie stated:

“I think…people considering international volunteering shouldn’t have the mindset of ‘changing the world’. The Dominicans are just regular everyday people who are fine on their own, and we shouldn’t feel bad for them. We should give tools that can contribute positively in the community. They’re smart capable independent beings. They don’t need you specifically. I mean of course you can help in the ways you can, but you’re not here to rescue anybody. It should be more of a connection – they learn from you and you learn from them. (Appendix B: 219).

On a similar note, Dwayne commented:

I think it’s important to change or reinforce such mindsets. And to think that you can only have a limited impact in the community, because you have a limited knowledge of that place, of their culture and habits. And how much you can actually save or change a place. Honestly, you gain more than you can give. You develop humility and learn a lot by interacting with people from other cultures. (Appendix E: 417).

Adopting this discourse of deference expresses a level of humbleness and can be seen as an opposing position to the discussed elitism and privilege often present in the voluntourism encounter, due to power relations and distorted expectations. It expresses respect for the other culture and thereby awareness of cultural differences. For example, the abovementioned consideration that “you can only have a limited impact in the community, because you have a limited knowledge of that place” expresses distance to the criticized role of superiority surrounding international volunteers. By implementing this discourse of deference, volunteers relinquish some of their power. However, as McKenna (2016) argues, this does not necessarily mean a transfer in power where the local population gains power instead. It therefore does not alter the power relationship between host and volunteer. Discourse of deference, then, might not have much of an actual impact in the voluntourism encounter, but it must be preferred over privilege, prejudice, or other harmful communicative approaches.

6. Concluding Discussion

The aim of this thesis has been to determine how volunteers and volunteer host organizations perceive their position in relation to local contexts in the Dominican Republic and, moreover, how knowledge about such local encounters can contribute to further theorizing in the field of voluntourism. The research process has largely followed a deductive approach, built on existing theories on the subject as well as empirical data collected through interviews with volunteers and volunteer host organizations, represented by a volunteer coordinator and a founder, in the Dominican Republic.

As with most research based on qualitative empiricism, findings were not unanimous. Generally speaking, some volunteers paid great consideration to their position in the local community, while others were more at risk for perpetuating undesirable sentiments. Not as a result of poor intentions, but more so on accounts of disadvantageous behavior, unintentionally contributing to the reproduction of stereotypes, for example. How volunteers perceive the host community and their own position in this context will directly influence their conduct in the volunteer encounter. Therefore, this is an essential factor to consider when studying voluntourism.

Central debates on the subject of voluntourism were presented in Chapter 2 *State of the Art*, and the categories established here have served as guiding theoretical themes throughout this thesis. Furthermore, after reviewing the collected fieldwork, it was deemed relevant to include the three additional theoretical considerations of neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, and power relations, as these concepts were believed to contribute interestingly to the general debate. The main empirical findings was presented and analyzed in six subcategorical sections, largely established by the State of the Art: *Voluntourism as Development Aid, Neoliberalism and Voluntourism, Motivations, for Volunteers,* *Negative Impact of Voluntourism, Positive Impact of Voluntourism, Elitism and Privilege*, and *Volunteer Reflections*. An overall concentration on determining the interview participants’ perceptions of their position in relation to the host community was maintained. As a result of the social constructivist nature of this thesis, it was deemed relevant to include a focus on respondents’ experiences and expectations as well.

Positioning voluntourism as a form of development aid was established as detrimental to volunteers’ perceptions of their position within the local context. It contributes to the extension of an unequal power relationship between host and volunteer, as a notion of a donor/recipient relationship is created. Support for this perspective was found in the respondents’ frequent use of the word ‘help’, emphasizing the unilateral nature of voluntourism when presented as development aid. Existing literature criticizes media and academia for portraying voluntourism as development aid, yet the empirical findings in this thesis suggested that volunteers partake in extending such sentiments as well, often through uncritical perceptions of volunteer work or glorified notions of volunteering.

Framing voluntourism within the field of development aid thus risks creating unrealistic expectations among prospective volunteers, which might lead to a distorted self-image affecting their perceived role in the host community, for example by expecting to take on more responsibility than provided at the host organization. Managing expectations was a recurring subject throughout the conducted interviews, implying that the respondents had to adapt their own expectations as well.

Voluntourism’s position within the neoliberal system highlights a contradictory nature of the concept, as it initially emerged as a counter-reaction to the increasing focus on the market but now is established within this very system. This mentioned commodification of voluntourism positions volunteers as consumers and volunteering as a product that can be deemed satisfactory or not, contributing to the perception of volunteers’ role in the host community. As it was commented, some people assume a consumer-attitude, which negatively affects their overall conduct and experience.

It was concluded that volunteers’ and volunteer organizations’ positions differ. Volunteers are more likely to focus on the importance of accommodating the host community’s wishes in volunteer projects, whereas the volunteer organization to a great extent focuses on creating programs attracting volunteers. The balance of accommodating volunteers’ and host population’s expectation was mentioned in this context.

Interestingly, respondents to a great extent focused on neoliberal values as indicators of positive change in the community, such as the creation of jobs and the prospect of visitors spending money locally.

Voluntourism is essentially an unequal process to its core, as the act of travelling is used to define and distinguish social classes. Moreover, a sense of elitism is often assigned to the volunteer.

The respondents identified international volunteering as a glorified procedure, where simply going abroad and investing one’s time is enough to be admired. This might lead to an intensified form of self-seeking interests, as orchestrating a positive image becomes the main attraction of volunteering. Neocolonialism and cultural imperialism can be identified in many aspects of voluntourism, and volunteers’ own cultural standards and ethics are often in the way of achieving cross-cultural understanding.

In sum, various factors influence how volunteers and volunteer organizations perceive their roles and positions vis-à-vis a local context. The most beneficial outcome of voluntourism is to prioritize mutual benefits over an unequal power structure between host and volunteer, which can be perpetuated by condescending perceptions and discourse often present in the volunteer encounter. Actively being aware of one’s position and purpose in the local context can contribute to avoiding partaking in such measures. Moreover, neocolonialism and cultural imperialism are central concepts to consider and can contribute with relevant perspectives to the general field of voluntourism.

Throughout the research conducted for this thesis, I came across various concepts relating to the field of volunteer tourism that would be interesting to investigate further. First of all, it might be relevant to develop criteria on how to distinguish between different modes of international volunteering, at least for research purposes. As mentioned, it became evident during the fieldwork for this thesis that people participating in a broad variety of volunteer work all identify with the common denominator ‘international volunteers’. From people spending a week volunteering in a developing country to those employed through a two-year fellowship. Placing them all within the same category might not always be expedient. One suggested criteria to consider could be the longevity of the volunteers’ stay, however, work structure, programs, or other factors might be useful to include as well.

Furthermore, in relation to Mostafanezhad’s thoughts on the gendered nature of voluntourism and the notion that an estimated 80% of volunteers are female, it might be interesting to further investigate gender roles and their impact in host communities. Mostafanezhad argues that it contributes to the maintenance of traditional gender roles, due to the nature of most volunteer work. However, on the other hand one could argue that the substantial presence of females might in turn produce female role models, which could be particularly influential in patriarchic communities.

Another interesting subject in need of attention is gaining further insight into host communities’ perspectives and expectations. This was exemplified in the data when Lisa, the volunteer coordinator, explained how local children appreciate knowing that foreigners are willing to spend time with them and get to know them, rather than ‘just throwing money at them’ (Appendix F: 550). Such perspective was somewhat unexpected, as I would anticipate the population to prefer the investment of money over time, at least when considering the aim of escaping poverty. However, this statement clearly shows that the social aspect of volunteering should not be overlooked, and that including host population voices would contribute interestingly to the debate.

The empirical findings analyzed in the light of existing debates furthermore suggested that motivations might be changing, or at least branching out. The respondents did not agree to the commonly employed notion that international volunteering is largely motivated by the added experience to one’s resume. They did not believe that international volunteering necessarily would contribute positively to one’s resume, unless a person was pursuing a career in international development, for example. This thus has the potential to bring new perspectives to contemporary notions of volunteer motivations. Moreover, it was established that two respondents were motivated by self-seeking interests largely unmentioned by the existing literature – namely the pursuit of greater understanding their own background, as second generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic. This particular observation is, however, not generalizable to the entire field of voluntourism as its significance is geographically determined. It appears, then, as the field of voluntourism expands, the motivational factors broaden as well.

Moreover, it was interesting to observe the importance paid to being perceived as non-touristic. The advantages of voluntourism, as mentioned by the respondents, were similar to the identified advantages of mass tourism – often related to its income-generating features in a local context. However, as mass tourism is associated with selfish and superficial values and voluntourism with altruistic interests there is a clear conflict between the two. In this context, it might be interesting to further examine the extent to which their actual impact in host communities differ.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview at Flora Village on 17.03.2016

Karen, founder of Flora Village, French Canadian

Alex, volunteer, from France

Valerie, retiree and volunteer from French Canada

Jason, son of Karen, owner and general manager,

Grace, volunteer from South Korea, there for two years.

Ray, visitor from USA, there for three months so far

K: I started the village in 1994 and the place has expanded ever since. I used to work in tourism and I’ve taught in different schools as well.

Flora Village offers housing for regular tourists and volunteer experiences too. Many tourists come back here after making friends with the locals, and they always return here to our camp.

The people who stay in more rustic places like this have a good heart.

M: What do the volunteers do here?

K: They contribute with the skills they have. One, for example, gave literacy classes to local women, some teach languages like English and Spanish. Some spend time with the children.

We help in the bateyes in Little Haiti. It’s called that because the majority living there are Haitian refugees. The most part are illegal immigrants, which means they have very limited opportunities here – for example in owning land or getting a job.

K: Let’s do an introduction round, Alex you start.

A: I’m Alex, I’m from France and I’ve been here a month now.

M: And how long are you here for?

A: I’m here for 9 weeks in total.

M: What do you do here?

A: I play with the Haitian children.

K: Yes we do programs with the children to occupy their time.

M: And what do you do at home?

A: I work with children in France too, at a community center.

M: And how come you decided to go here?

A: I’ve visited the Dominican Republic before, as a tourist staying in one of the big resorts in Sosua. After seeing the poverty here I decided to come back and help where I could.

V: My name is Valerie, I’m French Canadian. I’m here for two months.

M: How come you decided to volunteer here?

V: I have worked in many different countries before, like Peru, Guatemala, and Haiti. It’s mainly been construction work in poor communities. It’s always been to help children in some way, by building schools or taking care of them in other ways.

I have also done voluntary work at home, working with children as well.

M: And what do you do here?

V: I do activities with the children here. And I might help out with some construction too.

J: I’m Jason, Karen’s son.

K: He inherited Flora Village last year, so now he’s the owner and general manager of the place. I just help out. With finding volunteers for example.

J: Yea so I have many different tasks. Like picking people up at the airport, showing them around, and stuff like that. I also usually take them to their first outing to Puerto Plata, for example. I answer questions, assign rooms, and then I’m also in charge of the employees.

K: And he studies business management in tourism at the university it Puerto Plata.

Grace, your turn.

G: My name is Grace and I’m from Korea. I’m here for two years.

K: She is sent out by a Korean organization KOICA who send international volunteers based on their talents. We were in Santo Domingo to pick her up and meet representatives and all that. She just came her two days ago.

M: What did you do at home?

G: I have a Bachelor in Social Welfare and I worked with community welfare for three years before coming here.

M: And what will you be doing here?

G: I will do surveys in the bateyes to find out how to best help the locals.

K: And then after the two years, she will submit a project, and if it’s approved, we will receive funding. She will also provide one meal a day to children in the bateyes. The organization, KOICA, represents a Korean-Dominican relationship. Right now we have 38 volunteers here on the island. Last year, we had a volunteer from the same organization. She was a nurse. KOICA sends material and sponsors the volunteers while they are here.

M: So how is Flora Village funded?

K: We do not receive any funding, so we earn our living off of rent income. And then we arrange excursions directly with the locals, which is a lot cheaper than what you get at the hotels. It also contributes to the local economy.

And this way, people are not real tourists and they get to know the real Dominican Republic. So the people that stay here are always helping in some way, it’s never only a bad relationship.

V: I feel very privileged here. I’m invited to come to the local church, or sometimes even to people’s homes. It’s like living among the locals but I feel very secure here.

K: We don’t charge any fees to volunteer here, you only pay for housing. It’s between $200 and $600 a month to live here including everything.

M: So is it mostly volunteers or also regular tourists that stay here?

K: It differs a lot. There are both volunteers and people who are just on vacation. Some also choose to complement their vacation with volunteer activities just for a day or two. Others complement their vacation with visiting the bateyes or participating in some of the activities available.

M: Alex, what has been the best part of volunteering so far?

A: … I don’t know. I can’t think of anything in particular.

K: But you can tell about your experience at the school…

A: Yes, I stopped helping at the local school, because of the punishment methods they use.

K: Yes corporal punishment is normal here. It can be hard to experience, but we’re not here to change them.

We’ve had problems with this before; other volunteers have had a hard time seeing this. Some even started crying and refused to go back to the school. So now, they try to avoid corporal punishment when volunteers are there, not because they stopped using it, but to avoid frightening the foreigners.

There are definitely culture shocks when you come here. Grace, we also have to take a walk in the batey at night, then you can really see the differences! Children will still be up and out in the streets at 11 pm. There will be loud music and so on. Not the same kind of concern is paid toward children, not like we’re used to in our parts of the world.

K: Oh hi Ray, you should introduce yourself as well. This is Mette, she’s writing her Master Thesis on international volunteering.

R: Hi, I’m Ray. I’m here in the Dominican Republic taking a pause from my life. I’ve been here for three months so far but I’ll be leaving soon. It’s my second time visiting this place.

K: He’s also helping out in his own way here. Right now he is in the process of financially adopting a child, in the sense that he’ll take full financial responsibility of a young woman’s child so she can keep it instead of giving it up for adoption.

R: Yea we can all help somewhere. And ourselves too. Volunteers help themselves a lot while staying in the Dominican Republic, because they become a lot healthier – food is really cheap and healthy – and they escape the stressful ways of life back home.

K: He used to be a police officer in New York City

M: What has been your best experiences here?

R: My vacation here has been well fulfilled – I’ve made good friends. The Dominicans are the nicest people you’ll ever meet. I’d take this over a five star resort any day.

M: How do people learn about this place?

K: Most people find us online

R: Yea that’s how I found it. And it’s good. When you stay here you don’t go where the tourists go, but where the locals go themselves. And trust me, Dominicans know where to eat.

K: During summer we have larger groups of volunteers that come here.

We would really like to have a community center where we could meet up with the children and offer different activities. To keep the children off the streets.

We also help mothers open small businesses, for example by encouraging volunteers to spend their money locally. This way local businesses can grow.

R: I always spend my money here in the little shops. It’s better than going to the big supermarkets. This way you help the local population. And they get really happy when they see me. Now it’s like they all know me.

K: It’s important to focus on locals’ needs and volunteers’ skills. Good intentions aren’t always enough. For example, this lady was here volunteering and she bought two pigs for a family. Her thought was that they would grow and procreate and this way lead to a small-scale farming opportunity to the family. But the family didn’t have the money to feed these two pigs and eventually had to sell them. I think that’s a good picture of how things can go wrong sometimes.

That’s why Grace will be doing surveys in the bateyes to understand what the locals need the most.

The majority of inhabitants in the bateyes are Haitians, and they are here illegally. They cannot work officially and end up with low paying ‘black market’ jobs. They also can’t own land or anything else. And on top of that most Dominicans have unfriendly feelings toward Haitians.

M: What about the children, can they attend school?

K: Yes they can go to school, as long as they have their birth certificate and a school uniform.

R: It’s really atrocious living conditions out there, no water, no electricity…

M: Is there a specific place the most volunteers come from, or?

K: Volunteers and visitors come from all over, I guess with a majority of Americans and Canadians. I’m French Canadian, so we have many French-speaking people here as well. Like Alex.

M: Have you seen improvements here in the area since your project started?

K: When we started in 1994 there was nothing out here. Now we have roads, lights, and water for example. There are gatherings in the community every 3-4 months where it’s possible to present wishes to the mayor. The main wish that people always ask for is the need for more jobs. That has stayed the same since we came here. Like I said, a way to help that is spending money locally so the small businesses can expand and hire people.

K: Education is the way out of poverty.

And we always encourage our guests to bring old belongings when they come here, such as clothes, school supplies, books, and so on.

There’s another problem here in our community. The current governor in Puerto Plata is very popular among the poor people because she has built her image on ‘helping’ the poor. So she benefits from having a large poor population and would not want that to change.

It’s a general problem that politicians don’t want to eliminate poverty, because large masses of poor citizens are easier to control – and it’s easier to get their vote. The governor doesn’t really care about creating economic growth, or not among the poor at least. She has said “I have nothing to do with tourism”. Even though tourism has helped the local people in many ways, with jobs and tourists spending their money here.

I often compare society here with old Roman times. Like in Colosseum. Here are cockfights, prostitution, lottery, and booze – just keep these things available and inexpensive to the public that will keep them passive and uninterested in what else is going on – like the inequality in society. Making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Many have the mindset that they just need to work until there is enough money to drink rum on the weekend. But people in general seem very happy and worry-free here. The children are also happy and more eager to go to school and to learn.

The official minimum wage is 12000 peso a month, but many from the bateyes live off of salaries of between 6000 and 8000 a month.

Appendix B: Sunrise Project Interview 1 on 18.03.2016

Nathalie, 26 years old, from New York, USA.

M: How long are you here for?

N: I’ve been here since August and I was supposed to be here for one year. But now I prolonged my stay until December. So around 16 months.

M: And why did you decide to come here to volunteer?

N: Well I graduated from my Bachelor’s in May last year. I’ve always considered joining the Peace Corps, but I also think it’s a long time, being sent out for two years. I knew I wanted to do something in nonprofit work and I found the website for the Sunrise Project.

M: Is there like a screening process, or how did you get the volunteer position?

N: Yeah, becoming a volunteer at the Sunrise Project is not as easy as other places. I had to send three letters of recommendations, writing samples, and then finally had an interview with the founder. Whether you’re considered for a position also depends on your skills and if they are needed at the project at the moment.

M: How come you decided to go here, to the Dominican Republic?

N: My family originates from here, so that’s why I wanted to come and try to live here.

M: Oh okay, do you still have family living here?

N: Yes I do, not too far from here actually.

M: What were your expectations before coming here?

N: I expected poor living conditions – which was not the case. I mean, of course people live in worse conditions than I do here, but it was definitely better than expected.

M: What has been the best about your stay here?

N: I feel like, I’ve been able to give something but I’ve taken away much more. Like, I’ve learnt about their culture and history, and so on. And to understand the education system here…I’ve gained a better insight into poverty and the reasons why poverty exists. For example, here in Cabarete tourism is high so the gap between rich and poor is very prevalent. I mean if you walk ten minutes from here it’s all big resorts and tourists.

M: Do you think tourism benefits the local society?

N: I guess in the sense that it creates jobs. But the big money and prestigious positions are held by foreigners, you know the hotels and businesses benefitting the most from tourism are all owned by foreigners. So it’s a little difficult to answer.

M: Has the volunteer experience lived up to your expectations so far?

N: It has exceeded all expectations! I’ve learned more what is truly important in life – like building relationships instead of focusing on material gains. Here people are humble, positive, and respectful. They share what they have even though it’s practically nothing. Compared to the US there’s more unity in society here. In the US, people care more about what’s mine and yours and who’s entitled to what. Here people share.

M: Do you think this experience will help you in the future?

N: Yea, I think it brings opportunity for education. Here we aim at teaching all different age groups, preschoolers from 3 to 5 years old up to highschool kids between 17 and 24. We help tutoring and reading. Most children have no access to books, so we arrange book fairs where children can get books. There is a big emphasis on education – to learn, to be creative, and to realize one’s potential.

The project work in 15 different communities here on the north coast.

M: Are the communities mostly Haitian or Dominican too?

N: It’s both. Some communities are predominantly Dominican and others are Haitians - the ones they call bateyes.

So, I’ve learned a lot about teaching and might consider a job in education in the future. And I’ve learned how nonprofit organizations work. I would like to do my Master’s in Public Administration and then work in the education system.

M: Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the whole volunteer experience? Or any advise you would tell people future volunteers?

N: I think…people considering international volunteering shouldn’t have the mindset of ‘changing the world’. The Dominicans are just regular everyday people who are fine on their own, and we shouldn’t feel bad for them. We should give tools that can contribute positively in the community. They’re smart capable independent beings. They don’t need you specifically. I mean of course you can help in the ways you can, but you’re not here to rescue anybody. It should be more of a connection – they learn from you and you learn from them.

Appendix C: Sunrise Project Interview 2

Ellen, 24 years old, from Texas, USA.

M: How long are you here for?

E: I’m here for two years. I came in August 2014 and go back home this summer. In June.

M: Wow. That’s a long time. What did you do back home before coming here?

E: I worked with TB patients in Texas. I have also worked in Bolivia and Ecuador. And with immigrants in Texas, mostly also from Latin America.

M: And what do you do here?

E: I’m here on a fellowship with Princeton in Latin America working with a particular program on HIV prevention and sex education. Right now I’m coordinating a pregnancy program that aims to minimize adolescent pregnancies.

I administer a program called Deportes Para La Vida [Sports for Life] that’s present in 15 developing countries. Here it’s sports for HIV prevention. The program’s been going on for 10 years, so long before I got here. One of my main tasks has been to create a curriculum specific to girls. The Dominican Republic is in the top 25 countries with the most adolescent pregnancies – around one in five girls gets pregnant before the age of 20.

We have a 13-point activity curriculum and train local youth leaders to use these programs in their communities. They come here to the Sunrise Project for four days of intensive training and then each program last around two months.

M: Interesting. Do you think these programs have made a difference in the community?

E: We do assessment tests before and after the programs to kind of measure their effect. We do see a change in knowledge most of the time; just recently we measured a change from 60% to 90% in the assessments before and after a program.

But that just indicates that people are more aware. It would be interesting to see if the programs actually induce behavioral change too. Like less adolescent pregnancies. But it’s such a difficult area; often there are young girls with much older partners. And the program started in January 2015 so it might be too soon to tell if it’s had a real impact yet.

M: What has been the best part of this volunteer experience?

E: That I’ve been able to stay for a longer period. I’ve learned more in-depth about the country’s history and political and economic structures. I’ve been able to have more of an impact here this way.

M: Do you think having been here will be an advantage in your future?

E: Yes, for sure. I’ll be doing my Master’s in Infectious Diseases in developing countries at a university in London and I believe this experience will help, for example by getting ‘hands on’ knowledge in public health. I also want to keep working in an international context and volunteering has helped adding to my skills within development.

M: Do you think volunteering abroad adds on to people’s resumes? Like in general?

E: I think it depends on what type of jobs they’re pursuing. I know people who volunteered through the Peace Corps and many end up doing completely different things, not related to international development. But you do learn a lot of important things about poverty, structural inequality, privilege, and systematic racism and sexism. That’s relevant to all – also back home. Sexism is more visible here but it’s also a relevant issue in the US. Just like systematic racism.

Also, it can be beneficial to connect with people from different backgrounds.

M: Do you have any suggestions on how to make international volunteering better?

E: People should ask themselves ‘what are your goals as a volunteer?’. It could be cultural exchange, understanding communities…these are maybe not transferable to the professional world…You won’t be as emerged into Dominican culture…You can develop professional skills, language skills and learn to develop programs.

It depends on one’s expectations.

It’s challenging to NGOs to empower communities because you have to provide opportunities while balancing available funding. And how do you ensure the programs meet community needs?

You have to prepare for the local culture. And bring staff that can offer unique skills. Bring something that is not provided in the local community already. And aim to meet the community’s needs.

M: Did you have any bad experiences?

E: Oh yes!

M: Like what?

E: Just seeing the implications of poverty. Like violence in the communities. There are extreme examples of how poverty affects the communities. You see foreigners taking advantage of the situation. The Dominican Republic is a destination for sex tourism for example.

Also, the nutrition available for children…it leads to lifestyle diseases and you can’t do really anything about it.

And the overall lack of economic opportunities.

M: Do you have any advice for people considering to volunteer abroad?

E: You should ask yourself ‘am I the best person to do this?’ I have a friend who went to Bolivia to volunteer when she was studying to become a nurse. She was very unsatisfied because she weren’t allowed to do many things, like procedures, there. But that makes perfectly sense when you think about it. You wouldn’t want a 20-year-old student doing procedures on your dad, so why would people in a developing country want that?

You should be interested in doing real development work. And also consider your ethical standpoint. The work should not be taking opportunities from the locals.

So ask yourself ‘what is your role, what do you offer, and is it unique, is it ethical?’

Be open-minded. Be critical of the community – consider the historic reasons to the conditions there. Like the gap between rich and poor, and the colonial and slave history. Also, think critically of their educational level and capacity.

Don’t be critical be open-minded. And aim at adapting to local ways.

Be positive, look for ways to grow, get to know the community and the people living there.

Give yourself time to adapt. Don’t expect to fit in right away. Seek out new opportunities to grow and focus on your own growth as well.

Appendix D: Sunrise Project Interview 3

Gabriella, 25, from New York, US.

M: How long are you here for?

G: I’ve been here 6 months now

M: And how long are you staying in total?

G: 10 months

M: Why did you decide to come here?

G: My family is Dominican.

M: Oh so you’ve been here before?

G: Yes just on vacation for like two weeks at a time. I wanted to stay longer…to develop relationships with the community.

M: What have been the best experiences during your stay here?

G: Getting to build relationships with people in the community. And to experience life here…Seeing the lack of opportunity.

M: What do you do here?

G: I work as an assistant teacher here at Sunrise Project.

M: And back home?

G: The same. I’m an assistant teacher in New York.

M: Have you had any negative experience during your stay here?

G: Yea. You can feel stressed by the work here. The students come from poor families and I’m not professionally prepared to deal with different psychological issues. Many children from poor families are very attention seeking…and it’s difficult to handle everybody at the same time.

M: So do you feel it differs a lot from your work at home?

G: No, not at all really. I also teach in a poor community at home and I see a lot of the same issues with the kids there. They are hungry for attention. And just hungry. You can’t be sure they have eaten that day.

M: What were your expectations before coming here?

G: To get to know the Dominican Republic and explore the country. And feel a connection.

M: Did it live up to your expectations so far?

G: No it did not.

M: How so?

G: I kind of feel cut in half. Like I’m one part American, one part Dominican. In the US I’m perceived as Dominican, but here they see me as American, as a foreigner. I haven’t fully been accepted here. I didn’t expect that.

M: Do you think the Sunrise Project has an impact on the local society here?

G: Definitely. I think it impacts society a lot. We focus on all ages, from baby to adulthood. So it’s very broad and includes basically the whole community.

Most employees here are local Dominican teachers.

M: How many volunteers would you say are here?

G: Around 10. And then we also work together with Peace Corps volunteers on certain projects. But they have their own programs and places out here.

M: Do you have any advise for future volunteers? Or people considering to volunteer abroad?

G: It’s important to enforce reflection. To constantly reflect on oneself – because it changes while you’re here.

Listen more than you talk. And manage your expectations – don’t think you’re going to change the world or community. I mean, you *can* help, but you’re not going to change the world.

It’s important too that international volunteers listen to the community. They should not go there to become ‘leader’ of the community. They should listen first and then find out what to do.

M: Do you think this experience will help you in the future?

G: Yes for sure. I would like to finish my degree and do a Master’s in Higher Education Administration. And this will help me working with people. Also in understanding the whole story of immigration. My parents immigrated so I know that side of the story. And growing up as a second-generation immigrant. But it’s been nice to see the whole story, where it starts, and why people want to leave…because of the lack of opportunity here. I want to help immigrant sin New York get an education.

Appendix E: Sunrise Project Interview 4

Dwayne, 25 years old, from Chicago, US.

M: How long are you here for?

D: I’ve been here 9 months now, and I’m here for a year in total

M: How come you decided to volunteer?

D: I’m very interested in working with direct service. I want to do a Master’s in Public Policy, so this seems very relevant. And also to learn about another culture and community.

M: And why did you choose to go to the Dominican Republic?

D: I am here on a fellowship with Princeton in Latin America. So I am here because of the program. I was more interested in this particular program than in the country.

M: What were your expectations before coming here?

D: Well, I have travelled in Honduras before…so I expected little resources and poor housing. Besides that I didn’t really have any expectations.

M: And did it live up to your expectations?

D: I was pleasantly surprised. I have Wi-Fi, water, electricity, and so on. I expected humbler conditions. The work style pretty much lives up to what I expected. I was a little surprised that the project was this well known here and well funded. I mean, of course there are some constraints, but there are still means to do actual things.

M: What have been your best experiences so far?

D: The best have been to teach. I teach English and public speaking to ages between 17 and 24. To see how much they grow even in the short amount of time I’ve been here. The level of education is so different from back home, so you can’t make assumptions about what they know. But you also can’t be condescending. It’s very rewarding to see the change in the students. And in oneself.

M: Did you have any bad experiences?

D: Yea, there have been a few. I’ve seen students get into fights. One time, two kids were getting in a fight, one of them was one of my students. And it’s hard to see that. You think of their safety and you think of your own. I ended up breaking up the fight. It was just my gut instinct to help.

And just seeing the violence in the community is hard. Another time I was sitting outside a colmado [little corner store] and some guys came with machetes to attack another guy. He was stabbed in the head…I didn’t see it, but I saw them when they came for him. And it’s like, you can’t really do anything.

But that’s the complexity of the place. There are many positive gains too. So you have to be good at looking at the whole picture and not just focus on the negative sides.

M: What about you did you have any positive gains here?

D: Oh yes, definitely. I’ve learned a lot about communication and improved my skills. You have to be clear in your communication, because you can’t count on the students to know the same things as you, but you also can’t be degrading. So you have to balance those two. I have improved my Spanish skills a lot. My stay here has also reinforced my passion for educational equity – and for working in that area in the future.

M: Do you think it has an impact on the local community – the work Sunrise Project does here?

D: I think it depends on you as a person. Like, you have to be mindful of the privilege and abilities you have – and that you’re here to learn not just to take up space. If you’re not mindful about these things, it can be like you’re trying to be their savior and they don’t need that. No one needs anyone to save them.

M: Do you have any advice for future volunteers?

D: I think it’s important to change or reinforce such mindsets. And to think that you can only have a limited impact in the community, because you have a limited knowledge of that place, of their culture and habits. And how much you can actually save or change a place. Honestly, you gain more than you can give. You develop humility and learn a lot by interacting with people from other cultures.

And you should be honest about your intentions. I think most people, of course also want to help, but come to gain something personally. And that’s ok, but you should be honest about your intentions. Also to yourself.

And just – be curious and humble. Not be attacking people for what they do. It’s also about empathy.

Appendix F: Interview at Hope Missions on 07.05.2016

Lisa: Volunteer coordinator at Hope Missions. Graduated in 2014 with a Bachelor in International Relations. Worked in public health at a women’s shelter, and has previously done an internship in Bolivia. Worked at a New York child welfare agency and has done courses on service learning.

M: How long have you worked here?

L: I’ve been here since August 2015 and so far I’ve committed for one year.

M: And then after that year?

L: I don’t know…I would like to stay, but probably in a different position. I want to work more directly with the locals, that’s also why I came out here. I don’t think I want to continue as volunteer coordinator when I’m done.

M: Okay. So would you tell me a little about the program?

L: Yeah, we have, or the organization has two schools for Haitian refugees. They are both taught in Creole by local teachers. And then we have the volunteer projects to generate funding. They primarily want to work with kids – the volunteers that come here. When they do that, they do extra curricular activities, such as arts and crafts, workshops, and so on.

M: So, the volunteer program is mostly to get funds for your schools and work here?

L: Yes. We are mostly funded by individual donors from the US and by some churches. When volunteers come for a week, $100 goes for donation. And then we make a little profit on our Art Shop too. Originally the fees for volunteering just covered expenses, but now we’ve increased it so it also supports fundraising.

M: Would you say the volunteers in general are here on short term or longer term?

L: That depends on what you call longer term?

M: Like several months or so.

L: The majority is here short-term. For a week or two. During summer we also have English Immersion Camp, where people stay for the whole summer – for about a month or so. We have a very small budget for volunteers, so maybe that’s why most people come for a shorter period. I would love to have volunteers that stayed longer. For long-term volunteers the cost depends on their skills. Like, their language skills for example. If they speak Spanish, it lessens the time me or Eva have to spend with them, and that way we can charge them less. Eva is the founder by the way. You know, if they don’t speak Spanish, they need someone translating at all times.

We have a lot of groups coming too – school groups or church groups…and even just private groups of friends wanting to volunteer. Like next week, I have these three ladies in their forties coming to volunteer for a week.

It’s always a balance between finding projects that volunteers are interested in - and that are worth the cost. When the volunteers are there for a shorter time, it’s best if the project can be finished within their time there – within the week, for example – so they feel like they accomplished something when they leave. That gives them a better experience.

M: Do people come with their own projects in mind, or is it more up to you to plan?

L: Usually, people have a broad idea of what they want to do, like work with children or arts, or so on, but not a specific project. It varies a lot from group to group – some take more initiative. Like one group that was just here, they arranged an art workshop and taught the kids to make beads out of recycled magazines and make jewelry from that.

M: Oh cool. And how do you think the locals perceive the volunteers that come here?

L: … I think it differs. Like, our school in Padre Granero is more secluded. There are no major resorts nearby and not a lot of tourists.

In Muñoz, on the other hand, they see foreigners all the time. There are many tourist excursions that go through there. So the people living in the bateyes in Muñoz are a little more indifferent to foreigners. They are used to seeing them and accustomed to thinking they can get something from them, like money or candy. It’s actually harder to do workshops there. Because there are many different projects and private people doing projects there – that haven’t come through on their promises.

So there’s a bigger turnout for events and workshops in Padre Granero, people are more interested in participating there.

Because of the many tourists in Muñoz we are careful to not just send volunteers to this community to just look or hang out. And we also advise them to not take pictures in the communities or in schools or churches and so on. It shouldn’t feel like a zoo you know. Also because of social media, I don’t think it’s fair to take pictures of people and their homes without permission.

The volunteer house is close to the batey where the kids live, and sometimes the kids’ll just come to the house. We always tell volunteers don’t invite children in. I mean you wouldn’t do that at home either, without having talked to their parents. It’s just not ethical to do. Also, we tell them not to make promises that they can’t keep. Like, many people get caught up and say things like “I’ll come back” or “I’ll send you this and that” and so on. It is not fair to the children.

People also often bring donations – or connect with someone in the batey and want to help that person in some way. We tell people to give us the donations so we can hand it out in the most fair way. Like, four times a year the children are awarded for their work in school, and earn points they can spend at Little Store. It’s a place where they usually buy treats like candy or soda and stuff like that. Most of the donations go to this, rather than directly to the kids. It benefits more this way.

M: Do you know what motivates the volunteers to come here?

L: Uhm, I would say a wish to do good in the world…and to see more of the world. We are a Christian organization with Christian values and therefore also some Christian volunteers. So that might also motivate some of them. We have a Christian base but it is not something we force on volunteers that come here – but some come because of it.

Actually, I heard this one young girl say that it’s just the norm now – like “all students go on international service trips”. It’s like something you’re supposed to do.

M: Do you think volunteering abroad adds on to your resume?

L: I think for those volunteering longer term…it might add something to their resume. Not really for those who are just here for a week or so. Perhaps more in the sense of career paths. Like many consider to continue with international work or international health, or so on. Maybe this can help them figure out if that is something they want to do?

M: What about culture shock when they first come here?

L: Oh yea, there’s a lot of that. The bugs especially bother people a lot. Like the mosquitos and spiders and so on. Just last week, some of our volunteers had a problem with their toilet. And you could just tell that was really killing moral.

Many are also very shocked by the living conditions out in the bateyes. They tell me that they didn’t realize how lucky they were – and all the convenience they have in the States.

M: Are most of the volunteers from the States?

L: Yeah, most of them are from the US or Canada. There’s actually a pretty big Canadian organization here that offers international service trips to their project in Sosua. It’s called Me2We. We sometimes work on projects with them… You should look them up too, they might be interesting.

M: Oh yeah? Thanks. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve volunteering?

L: I think…having more control of when people want to come. Like now, we just had 60 people here last week and then none now. Then some are coming next week, but you know. It would be easier if people came more consistently. Also in terms of the projects we can do. Now it has to be short-term projects, so it can be finished before the volunteers leave.

I would love to have more long-term volunteers. We could do so much more.

It’s also because there’s a lot of students…so they come in their breaks. Like the ones that were just here for their winter break.

M: What about, do you have any advise you would give future volunteers?

L: They should consider things to do before and after. Like to prepare themselves.

People come with very high expectations to how much they can accomplish in a week. It’s also a less organized culture here, which also affects how much you can actually get done. Sometimes we have to tell people that the plans have been changed last minute, and they will be working on something different. That makes people frustrated sometimes.

M: Do you think it has an impact on the local community?

L: I think having volunteers here adds to the organization by spreading awareness and knowledge of the issues and the work we do here back home.

It has to be a balance between projects and pleasure. That way the volunteers get the best experience. Because many are frustrated and overwhelmed when they come here. So you should also take time to show them around town or take them to the beach and so on.

I think each individual trip is a drop in a pond. But it does help fundraising.

Eva the founder first came here on a volunteer trip…so you never know what it can lead to. People definitely leave more invested in the issues and conditions here and more motivated to do something about it.

I think it has an impact when they teach something valuable to the communities…or help with construction for example – there’s an immediate impact.

Also – some of the local kids have said that it is nice to know that foreigners come here to get to know them – instead of just throwing money at them. In a sense, objectifying them. And it’s nice to experience positive interaction with foreigners.

A problem is that, because they paid money to be here, some people come with a kind of consumer attitude, and feel like they should be treated differently or can demand certain things and so on… They are likely to have a negative experience.

It’s better to be flexible, because like I said plans might change and you might end up working at a completely different project. Those that are flexible and open-minded will have a better experience and will get more work done.

M: Okay, I think that covered my questions…but if you have something to add, you’re welcome.

L: Yes I just thought of something. I think, in many nonprofit organizations, because they depend on funds from volunteers, donors determine the projects rather than the communities. That’s the balance of providing volunteer experiences – having projects that are interesting to people and also what the community needs.

Because voluntourism is becoming so popular, now we see many middleman organizations, which are basically just “money machines”. Their only function is to make contact between programs and volunteers and so the money stays there. They don’t go to any projects or so…

I think it works better when you are as close to the ground as possible. Like another local organization, MAIS, I think their office is right around here…Anyways, they have locals planning their projects to make sure that they are in tune with the communities’ needs and wishes.

L: Another thing I’ve thought about is that it’s kind of glorified being abroad. Like, even for me, and I’m just a volunteer coordinator…when people ask me what I do, and I say I work in the Dominican Republic. I don’t have to say anything else, it’s just like “oh you’re so good” and so on. That’s the immediate response.

So, I think some people are definitely in it for the attention.

L: One thing that is a positive outcome is that it creates jobs. Like we always hire local people for everything – to cook, to translate, to drive, and so on. So in that sense it adds value to the community.

M: What about tourism in general, how do you think it affects the local society here?

L: I think it’s kind of the same. It adds to the local economy in terms of jobs. And also tourists spending their money here, like buying their food in the corner stores instead of in the supermarkets. The locals here are always happy to have volunteers. Like the ones living in my neighborhood in Muñoz they are always asking when people are coming, because they know they will make money off of them.

But the big resorts and so on is owned by foreigners…

I also think, with social media, that it has become so much easier to stay connected. You will see that here too, people always ask about your Facebook or WhatsApp…so it’s easier to actually make friends with the foreigners.

The locals are also able to practice their English skills…and that is a good skill to have, so you can work in tourism for example. That’s why some are very persistent in hanging out with volunteers; it’s a good practice for them.

You can also see there’s a difference if people are here to care and help out, the locals are more interested in getting to know them…I think.

Oh, and one last thing. The language barrier. Many people come here without speaking Spanish, and so they have to rely on locals translating. You can’t always trust that they’ll tell you the truth or have your best interests in mind…so people need to look out for that too. …I guess it’s always like that, when going to a much poorer country than your own – there will be some kind of distorted or imbalanced relationships.

Appendix G: Interview Guide

Name, age, nationality, background

Duration of stay (How long are you here for?)

How come you decided to volunteer?

Why The Dominican Republic?

What are the good/best things about volunteering? (or most meaningful)

And the bad/worst?

What did you expect to gain from this experience?

Has that been fulfilled/lived up to your expectations?

In your opinion, how do you think volunteers affect the host community? (good or bad)

What is your perception of the host community members?

Would you do it again / encourage others to volunteer abroad?

Do you think a volunteer experience like this can improve/add on to your resume/future job prospects?

How so?

Do you have any suggestions as to how to improve volunteer practices?

Appendix H

Consent to Participate in a Research Interview

Master’s Thesis on International Volunteer Tourism

Aalborg University

I agree to participate in the research interview by Mette Helene Christensen from Aalborg University, Denmark. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. I have been given sufficient information about the research project and the purpose of my role as an interviewee.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
3. The interview will last approximately 20 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also allow audio recording of the interview.
4. I have the right to not answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.
5. I have been given the explicit guarantee that the researcher will not identify me (or any organization I am affiliated with) by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
6. I have read and understood the points of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
7. I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

For further information, feel free to contact the thesis supervisor,

Associate Professor Helene Pristed Nielsen, [pristed@cgs.aau.dk](mailto:pristed@cgs.aau.dk)

Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University

Participant’s Signature Date

Researcher’s Signature Date