The Ethical Challenges of Volunteer Tourism in Orphanages: Nurturing Good Intentions or Harming Vulnerable Children?

Minh Thu Vo, Simon Fraser University

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Volunteer tourism in orphanages, usually motivated by good intentions and a desire to make a positive impact in the lives of vulnerable children, has grown in popularity in recent years (Rotabi et al., 2016). However, the desire to make a difference often overshadows a complex ethical dilemma behind these altruistic motives. By applying various ethical frameworks such as Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics, this paper aims to examine the moral challenges surrounding volunteer tourism in orphanages, revealing potential unintended harm to the children it aims to support, including various forms of exploitation. This paper argues that volunteer tourism in orphanages, despite well-intentioned motives, often raises significant ethical concerns due to the potential harm it can inflict on children.

Volunteer Tourism in Orphanages

Volunteer tourism, commonly known as "Voluntourism," usually involves individuals from affluent Western countries choosing to dedicate their vacation time to philanthropic activities in developing nations. Notably, voluntourism has found a concentrated niche in orphanages, where individuals devote their vacations to supporting underprivileged children. These initiatives address a variety of issues, such as healthcare, education, and many more. The phenomenon has witnessed substantial growth, with approximately 1.6 million people engaging in voluntourism activities annually (Rogerson & Slater, 2014). Globally, there are over 300 voluntourism organizations, as indicated by Tourism Research and Marketing, and predictions suggest a continued expansion in both size and value (TRAM, 2008). Especially among young travelers, voluntourism has seen exponential growth, fueled by a desire to combine altruistic satisfaction with authentic travel experiences (Rogerson & Slater, 2014). The global South stands as a prominent focus for international voluntourism from the global North (Rogerson & Slater, 2014).

Many advertisements or images from international media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and tourism operators highlight crises in various parts of the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asian countries (Garland, 2018). These advertisements aim to tug at heartstrings and urge people to contribute by engaging in voluntourism programs. Such imagery, combined with the popularity of voluntourism, has attracted individuals in the Western world to take action in providing care for these vulnerable children. Their dedication is grounded in the belief that their participation can offer love, care, and educational opportunities that these children might not otherwise receive. The existence of these advertisements serves as evidence that this industry remains prevalent in today's society, highlighting the need for a discussion on this pressing issue.

As discussed by Garland (2018), scholarly discourse on voluntourism reveals a notable divide between authors who are hopeful about the phenomenon, and those critical of the industry. Advocates of voluntourism, such as Stephen Wearing, argue in his book "Volunteer Tourism: Experiences That Make a Difference" that it is a conscientious and meaningful method of travel that emphasizes altruism over consumerism and profit-making (Wearing, 2001). Advocates see voluntourism as a win-win—it helps make the world better, satisfies tourists' desires, and brings in revenue for tour operators. However, not everyone views the increase in voluntourism with enthusiasm. Those coming from a more skeptical perspective have argued that voluntourism programs might perpetuate existing inequalities, preconceptions, and stereotypes. Other scholars of the topic argue that the industry operates on the premise that someone else's hardships or environmental issues can be seen as an opportunity for adventure and personal development. This perspective views the unequal interactions between hosts and guests as not just incidental, but fundamental features of this type of tourism (Garland, 2018).

Ethical Challenges

Having explored the motivations driving people to participate in voluntourism, recognizing the issues addressed by this industry, and acknowledging the skepticism of some scholars, a more in-depth examination is necessary. As voluntourism rapidly expands, it inevitably encounters various challenges. The risk of exploitation is among the most urgent problems. To elaborate further, 'exploitation' involves the act of unfairly taking advantage of another for personal benefit (Wertheimer and Zwolinski, 2013, as cited in Rotabi et al., 2016). This could cover a range of unethical practices that take advantage of the power dynamics and vulnerabilities that exist in the voluntourism industry. Specifically, in the context of voluntourism in orphanages, exploitation can occur when orphanages take advantage of the surging demand for their services and the popularity of the voluntourism industry to profit off volunteers and children (Csáky, 2009).

In some circumstances, orphanages may view the influx of volunteers as a chance to generate revenue from donations or fees, which could lead to unethical actions such as child recruitment. Contrary to the common assumption that children in orphanages lack parents, a 2009 report by Save the Children found that globally, a minimum of four out of five children in institutional care have at least one living parent (Csáky, 2009). Many families place their children in orphanages because they struggle to provide necessities like food or healthcare. For instance, a 2005 survey of 1,836 children in institutions in northeast Sri Lanka revealed that 40% were placed in care due to poverty (Csáky, 2009). Many tourists and volunteers visiting orphanages are often unaware that these institutions do not necessarily house children who fit the conventional definition of orphans (Rotabi et al., 2016). Referred to as "child finders" in the report by Save the Children, these recruiters convince parents that their children would be better

off living in orphanages. They exploit parental concerns about poverty, natural disasters, and a lack of resources for a child with disabilities to persuade parents to give up their children. These children are then used to attract international donations and volunteers (Csáky, 2009). Essentially, impoverished families can find themselves coerced into giving up their children for financial gain by adoption agencies seeking profits.

Another concern revolves around the insufficient skills and qualifications of many volunteers engaging in these voluntourism programs (Garland, 2018). Not all will have a background in childcare, education, or social work, which poses challenges in delivering adequate care to children who may have undergone trauma or loss. Given that many volunteers are essentially unskilled in the tasks they undertake, for instance, manual construction laborers or childcare providers, they unintentionally compete with local unskilled workers for available jobs. This competition has the potential to lower local wages and deny job opportunities to individuals, often among the most economically vulnerable in their societies (Garland, 2018).

Voluntourism programs also often fall short of providing tourists with the necessary background information to move beyond simplified views and comprehend the origins and nature of global inequalities. A study by Raymond & Hall (2008) featuring interviews with individuals who had participated in voluntourism programs at orphanages shed light on this issue. The study included ten case studies of organizations offering short-term voluntourism programs. Interviews were conducted with representatives from each organization, encompassing diverse program types operating in both developing and developed countries. Data collection involved interviews with volunteer coordinators or directors, representatives from host organizations, and volunteer tourists. The findings revealed that engaging in such initiatives didn't significantly reshape the volunteers' views on power dynamics and poverty. Instead, a

commonly expressed perspective among volunteers is the sense that local communities they encounter abroad seem to accept poverty as a part of their lives (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Volunteers often express the belief that the people they encounter are content with their circumstances due to a lack of awareness of alternative, better lifestyles, and are unfamiliar with the comforts found in more affluent societies. In the words of one interviewee who volunteered in South Africa, "They don't know any better and they haven't had what we have so to them that's quite normal, and they're quite happy being like that" (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Returned volunteers tend to come home with their pre-existing beliefs reaffirmed rather than challenged. Consequently, volunteers frequently resort to a simplistic "lotto logic" to explain the poverty they encounter during their travels; this perspective leads them to conclude that some people are poor while others are wealthy purely by the luck of the draw (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Closing this informational gap is crucial, as doing so is key to helping volunteers develop a more nuanced understanding and reconsider their preconceived notions about poverty, its origins, and the impact their actions can have on it.

It should be acknowledged that the findings from these case studies may not apply to all voluntourism programs, and that not all orphanages are harmful to children. Some orphanages play an important role in providing short-term care for children who need specialized care or are awaiting a suitable long-term alternative (Csáky, 2009). However, it is important to note that not all orphanages provide care that is adequate. Many do not, with poor standards of care resulting in instances of abuse and neglect (Csáky, 2009). This is especially true in the case of more unregistered and unregulated institutions, some of which operate independently and may be unknown to government authorities in many countries (Csáky, 2009).

Ethical Analysis

The unintended harm associated with voluntourism in orphanages is a significant concern. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the moral challenges surrounding voluntourism, an analysis through different ethical lenses is necessary. Using ethical frameworks such as Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics will allow exploration of diverse perspectives and evaluation of the ethical implications from various angles. According to Singer (1972), Utilitarianism is an ideology that centers on maximizing universal well-being and utility. It offers a structured approach to assess the morality of actions by emphasizing their outcomes. Utilitarian thinking measures utility by considering factors such as happiness, pleasure, and general well-being. Singer (1972) states that actions are morally right if they lead to the highest overall utility and morally wrong if they reduce it. In the context of voluntourism in orphanages, a utilitarian perspective requires a thorough examination of its consequences. While the immediate joy and assistance from volunteers can contribute to a child's happiness, the potential long-term negative impacts on mental health and development must be considered. The nature of voluntourism may also disrupt the lives of vulnerable children, leading to emotional instability and attachment issues as they form connections with departing volunteers (Proyrungroj, 2014). Such utilitarian analysis would emphasize the need to move beyond the immediate happiness generated during short volunteer periods and to assess the long-term well-being of children. This raises the question of whether voluntourism can deliver any long-lasting positive impact on the lives of the children involved.

Deontology, as described by Kant (1785), places a strong emphasis on the concept of duty and adhering to moral rules that apply universally to all individuals. This ethical framework believes that the morality of actions is determined by their inherent nature and highlights the

importance of following universal moral laws, like refraining from lying or stealing (Kant, 1785). Unlike utilitarianism, which assesses actions based on their outcomes, deontology requires individuals to act according to universal ethical principles and moral duties, regardless of the potential consequences. When applied to voluntourism, particularly involving children, a deontological analysis may assess actions against universal moral rules, such as respecting the autonomy and dignity of individuals. Consequently, a deontologist might raise concerns about potential child exploitation for financial gain, the possible violation of children's right to safe living environments, and the moral duty to prioritize the child's best interests within the voluntourism industry.

Virtue ethics is rooted in cultivating virtuous traits and emphasizes the role of virtues in leading a morally righteous life (Vaughn, 2020). In everyday life, virtue ethics prompts individuals to develop virtuous habits and encourages continuous self-reflection to better navigate various ethical situations (Vaughn, 2020). In the context of voluntourism in orphanages, virtues such as empathy, cultural sensitivity, and genuine care are crucial. A virtue ethics analysis would question whether volunteers, even with good intentions, possess the virtues for responsibly engaging with vulnerable populations, especially orphaned children. Virtue ethics encourage moving beyond intentions, highlighting the evaluation of moral character as essential for effective and ethical engagement with orphanages.

Common beliefs regarding children's well-being and rights can also shape moral intuitions on voluntourism. There is widespread agreement that children should not be treated as tourist attractions or subjects of temporary charity (United Nations, 2019). Society commonly prioritizes safeguarding vulnerable populations. By aligning with these shared moral intuitions, potential issues in voluntourism practices can be identified and ethical guidelines can be

established. International organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children also express concerns about the ethics of voluntourism, advocating for a shift from short-term, unskilled volunteering to long-term, community-based solutions that prioritize family preservation and community development (Csáky, 2009). This ethical analysis establishes the basis for policy recommendations, emphasizing the need for an ethical framework that prioritizes the well-being, rights, and long-term development of children in volunteer tourism programs.

Policy Recommendations

To address ethical concerns in orphanage voluntourism, the following policy recommendations are proposed to promote responsible and ethical volunteering. The goal is to balance the sincere intent to contribute positively while mitigating potential risks in voluntourism. These recommendations extend a challenge to governments, UN agencies, donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, and other systems connected to institutional care and voluntourism programs to take urgent steps to care for and protect some of the world's most vulnerable children. The first recommendation is to emphasize financial contributions over physical volunteering presence. Advocating for directing financial support to orphanages and communities rather than relying solely on volunteer presence can facilitate the hiring and training of local staff, which fosters long-term project sustainability. Encouraging donors and well-intentioned individuals to support organizations prioritizing financial contributions can ensure a more enduring impact of their intentions. The next recommendation involves launching public awareness campaigns to enlighten potential volunteers about the ethical challenges of voluntourism in orphanages. UN agencies, NGOs, and faith-based organizations should collaborate in developing these public awareness campaigns. Additionally, this recommendation calls for the development of educational materials and training programs

aimed at enhancing volunteers' cultural competence and sensitivity. This includes providing information on responsible volunteering practices and the potential negative impacts on children.

Recognizing the challenges in discouraging voluntourism, the following two recommendations aim to address ethical concerns while acknowledging their persistence. Firstly, governments and NGOs should promote skill-based volunteering by encouraging a shift from short-term, unskilled efforts to long-term, skill-based engagement within voluntourism programs. Volunteers with relevant skills and training can effectively contribute to children's well-being, and organizations should prioritize matching volunteers' skills to specific projects benefiting the local community. Secondly, collaboration with local communities in decision-making for voluntourism programs should be emphasized. Their input can make these programs more respectful of cultural norms and can contribute to a more ethical voluntourism industry.

Potential criticisms and responses

Certainly, not everyone will agree with the viewpoints presented so far. Some individuals may argue that voluntourism programs can have numerous benefits for children, as indicated by a study conducted by Guiney in 2012, which highlights advantages for both orphanages and children, such as substantial financial gains and improved educational opportunities, particularly in English language proficiency (Proyrungroj, 2014). Advocates of voluntourism may argue that these programs offer economic support, leading to improved living conditions and educational prospects for children. Additionally, supporters can claim that voluntourism promotes cultural exchange, empathy, and mutual understanding, broadening horizons for both volunteers and children. Furthermore, one can argue that excessive regulation or discouragement infringes on the personal choices and freedoms of those genuinely seeking to help.

While voluntourism indeed provides financial support, it is incredibly important to weigh the potential harm to children and the perpetuation of unethical practices against these economic benefits. Encouraging alternative support methods, such as responsible donations, may be able to offer a more sustainable approach to addressing economic needs while minimizing risks to children (Csáky, 2009). Although cultural exchange is valuable, it should not compromise the children's well-being. Alternative approaches, such as community-based projects, could achieve positive outcomes without jeopardizing vulnerable children. Regarding the critique of restricting personal choice, the intent is not to limit choice but to inform and educate volunteers about ethical complexities. Volunteers can still choose ethically responsible activities, respecting the best interests of the children and communities they aim to help. In response to these criticisms, it becomes evident that striking a balance is crucial, promoting responsible and ethical volunteering practices without discouraging the desire to make a positive impact.

Conclusion

Examining voluntourism in orphanages reveals a nuanced ethical challenge, highlighting potential harm despite altruistic intentions. This comprehensive analysis argues that the practice raises significant concerns regarding the well-being of children, urging a deeper exploration of systemic issues. These issues include the risk of commodifying vulnerable populations and the industry's potential prioritization of volunteers over the needs of the children. The ethical discourse surrounding voluntourism in orphanages calls for a more extensive discussion involving governments, UN agencies, and NGOs to genuinely examine the complex interplay between altruism, systemic challenges, and the welfare of the children involved.

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