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International volunteering, faith and subjectivity: Negotiating cosmopolitanism, citizenship and development

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyse the short term mission experiences of young UK Christians volunteering in Latin America to explore the relationships between international volunteering, faith and subjectivity. We draw on understandings of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism as processes rather than end points to reveal the contingent and multilayered ways subjectivities evolve and are performed through international volunteering. We particularly explore how faith based and secular imaginaries come together to shape a cosmopolitanism that smoothes over inequality and injustice. We highlight the need to acknowledge the multiple ways global subjectivities are expressed by analysing research diaries kept by the young volunteers. These reveal how volunteers' negotiation of their faith, public imaginaries of development and everyday encounters with inequality, produce instabilities that have significance for thinking about cosmopolitan sensibilities and global citizenship.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we analyse the short term mission experiences of young UK Christians volunteering in Latin America to explore the relationships between international volunteering, faith and subjectivity. Whilst retaining connections to histories of colonial exploration, mission and development, in the UK international volunteering has become an increasingly popular practice, particularly during the recent financial crisis (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). In attracting an increasingly diverse set of social groups, including socially excluded young people, members of diaspora and faith communities, 'gap year' students, retirees and employees engaged in corporate social responsibility activities, international volunteering plays an important role in shaping mobilities and subjectivities across unequal global spaces. This is evident in the ways international volunteering is increasingly promoted and researched through reference to developing new forms and expressions of 'global' citizenship (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Lorimer, 2010, p. 313), activism (McGhee and Santos, 2004) and cosmopolitanism (Rovisco, 2009), based on claims to foster enhanced engagement with poverty and inequality. Whilst there is a growing literature on international volunteering, particularly

within geography (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2008, 2011; Lorimer, 2010; Noxolo, 2011; Simpson, 2005a) "relatively little research addresses the influence of volunteer religious affiliations and practice, even though large numbers of volunteers serve abroad with religious organizations" (Sherradan et al., 2008, p. 398). This means we have little understanding of the ways faith based international volunteering connects with issues of poverty and development or discourses and practices of global citizenship. The short term mission experiences analysed in our research were not explicitly promoted and defined through these terms. However, the emphasis on expressing religiosity through encounters with geographically 'distant others' connects short term mission to discourses of global citizenship and development in different and important ways. We focus on the ways young volunteers' 'global' subjectivities are shaped by faith based imaginaries of global community, public imaginaries of development, discourses around the 'gap year' (Simpson, 2004) and everyday negotiations of cultural and religious difference and inequality, producing multiple and shifting citizenships in relation to development and poverty.

Our research highlights the need to work beyond and across often institutionalised imaginaries and to explore processes of subjectification more relationally. By acknowledging the ways faith based and secular imaginaries of development, volunteering, charity and justice unsettle, contradict or reinforce each other, we show how the relationships between the seemingly disparate factors that shape subjectivities, are critical to conceptualising global and cosmopolitan citizenship. This highlights the need for, and

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implications of, thinking about (global) citizenships and subjectivities processually (Desforges, 2004; Staeheli, 2010). It problematises scholarly focus on being “a citizen or not” (Arneil, 2007, p. 314) and the creation of global citizens or cosmopolitans through international volunteering, and instead encourages consideration of volunteers’ multiple subjectivities in the context of particular social groups’ experiences, relationships and identities. Through this we develop an understanding of global and cosmopolitan citizenship that builds from the contradictions that make up individual subjectivities over time. This demands we work across disciplinary silos. We draw on sociological interrogations of the social relations of citizenship and its grounding in the “everyday practices of individuals” (Richardson, 2000, p. 106) and insights from the sociology of religion on issues of transnationalism, identity and subjectivity (e.g. Levitt, 2008). But we bring these into dialogue with debates within geography, politics, anthropology and other disciplines, around the institutions, imaginaries and practices of international development (e.g. Kothari and Wilkinson, 2010; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; McEwan, 2008), and the ways these can articulate with religion (e.g. Alkire, 2006; Bornstein, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Green et al., 2010; Olson, 2006; Rakodi, 2007). To connect these sets of debates, we approach religion as “a set of social relations”:

Such relations have the potential to empower those who enter into them, often in ways which would not be otherwise socially available. Religion is a modality of power in the late-modern world, a domain which engages in local, national and global levels and struggles with a range of powerful ‘secular’ (anti-religious) and religious actors and competitors (Woodhead, 2009, p. 118).

Working from this definition, we use the concept of faith to indicate the intellectual and spiritual underpinning of the social relations generated in and through religion. Faith can be either individual or shared through worship and witness, and can provide the motivation for particular forms of social relations, including international volunteering. Religiosity links religion and faith together, emphasising the ways that personal faith becomes transformed into and interpreted through the social relations of religion. We explore short term mission in terms of emergent religiosity, the relationships and interactions it shapes at local and transnational scales, and the ways it is negotiated in relation to powerful and popular ideas of development. This enables us to understand the social relations of subjectivities and mission as they emerge across unequal global spaces.

In the first section of the paper we consider how international volunteering and mission are positioned in relation to debates around citizenship and cosmopolitanism. We then argue that, as the young volunteers draw together faith based and secular discourses, a particular iteration of cosmopolitanism is produced which smoothes over the histories and specificities of the countries being visited. In the final section, we suggest that attention is needed to the languages and performances of subjectivity, focusing particularly on volunteers’ diary accounts of their experiences.

2. Methodology

The data analysed in this paper were collected as part of a project investigating what happens to the religious identities and spiritual understandings of young Christians as they participate in faith based international volunteering in Latin America.¹ Taking a case study approach, we worked with a non-denominational

charity attracting young people from a variety of UK churches, including the Anglican Church, Church of Scotland, Baptists, Presbyterians and other non-conformist denominations. The charity, whose name we have removed for the sake of anonymity, provides opportunities for young people to work with Latin American churches on projects, including building work, youth and community work, and music and drama projects. The relationship between the terms ‘mission’ and ‘volunteering’ is not straightforward. We principally use the term ‘volunteering’ and refer to the young people undertaking short term mission as ‘volunteers’, since this is the language used by a number of the volunteers, stakeholders and staff to describe their activities and the organisations that facilitate it. Our use of these terms also reflects the positioning of our case study organisation in relation to the ‘gap year’ and international volunteering industry, and the meanings this can give to the organisation’s and young people’s work, as we discuss later.

The case study organisation is one of a number which offer short term paid for mission/volunteering opportunities. It organises a variety of longer term mission opportunities, but our particular focus was on teams which visited Latin America for between 4 weeks and 3 months. Under normal circumstances, participants in these groups need to be aged 17 or older. The vast majority of participants are in their late teens or early twenties with most teams comprising of 8–10 young people of this age. Team leaders tended to be slightly older than this (mid-twenties) and a couple of teams had a member who was in their late twenties or early thirties. One of the teams comprised of members of a local Church and included parents of three of the young people and a couple of older members of the congregation. Data were collected through: 10 stakeholder interviews with key figures in organisations connected to faith based volunteering and international development; 22 pre-departure interviews with individual volunteers on their motivations, expectations and hopes, including the team leaders who were part of the team and a similar age, but usually had past international development or mission experience; 14 field diaries completed by young people in the field, organised around the themes of interactions, observations, and moments and meditations; 22 follow up interviews once the volunteers had returned home; 4 focus groups with returned volunteers. Participants’ names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

There is a growing literature which discusses the use of diaries (e.g. King and Hemming, *in press*; Latham, 2003; McGhee and Santos, 2004; Meth, 2003), and these were particularly important to this paper since triangulation between them provided important insights into the multiple layers through which subjectivities emerge and are expressed. Alongside interviews and focus groups, the diaries ensured we captured how, “social life acts to complicate the process of identity formation, requiring different presentations of the self in response to these changing subjectivities” (King and Hemming, *in press*, p. 1). The diaries were solicited by the research team and as such, we need to recognise them not as authentic accounts of participant voice, but as constructed between researchers and researched. As they were completed whilst the volunteers were in Latin America, the diaries offered “an opportunity for the recording of events and emotions in their social context” (Meth, 2003, p. 200) – or at least, one of the social contexts with which our research engaged. It is also worth noting the particular setting for diaries in this instance. It would be usual for many of the young people participating in a Christian volunteering program to keep a prayer diary as part of their everyday Christian practice, with these providing a space to record reflective moments in their life’s spiritual journey. Therefore asking them to keep a diary for reflections on the issues of interest to the project whilst they were away did not seem to be an unusual request to them. We would argue that this influenced the high levels of diary completion among the sample. Whilst Meth argues that diary data can reinforce “analyses of

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