Child sponsorship, ordinary ethics and the geographies of charity

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ABSTRACT

Charitable donation, far from being done in a vacuum, is practised inseparably from the messy spatialities of everyday life. Drawing on literature from the geographies of care, this paper analyses the practices and experiences of giving that surround child sponsorship, a popular charitable scheme that directly links each donor with a child somewhere in the Global South. Through this, the paper argues for a more nuanced approach to the spatialities of charity. It affirms the significance of donation not just as a one-off response to a tear-jerking campaign, or as a mundane regular commitment, but also as a deeply personal engagement that draws into play multiple different aspects of people's everyday lives and intersects with existing identity- and community-building projects. Throughout, therefore, the paper focuses specifically on the micro-geographies of donation, engaging with the messy details of everyday performances of charitable ethics and identity. To achieve this, it draws empirically on interviews with a small number of British sponsors, most of whom expressed an affiliation with the Christian faith. The paper therefore foregrounds a particular focus on the dialogic relationship between the spatialities of charity and the landscapes of faith, religion and spirituality.

1. Introduction

Every act of giving to charity involves a constellation of decisions, values, strategies and practices. These form part of the very fabric of social life and yet (or as a result) often go unnoticed. This research draws attention to ways in which charity is ethically and practically embedded in everyday life. It explores this with examples of faith-based giving drawn from a study of child sponsorship, an attractive charitable scheme for people in the Global North that has enjoyed enduring, indeed increasing, popularity since its inception in the 1930s. Utilising recent work on care, the paper contributes to slowly-developing connections between geography and charity (see for example Bryson et al., 2002).

Child sponsorship is a significant player in the landscape of international development (recent estimates suggest there are at least 8 million 'sponsored children' worldwide (Buchanan, 2011)). It usually takes the form of long-term commitments to monthly remittances that cover the medical and educational requirements of individual children in the Global South, though many programmes invest instead in community-scale projects. Additionally, donors are encouraged to strike up a correspondence-based relationship with 'their child', usually through letter-writing and the sending of photographs and gifts. Many charities even offer donors the opportunity to visit, promoting this as a thoroughly transformative experience for both parties.

Child sponsorship schemes are organised predominantly by charitable NGOs such as World Vision or Action Aid. Their promotional campaigns gather support from across the Global North, utilising television, print media and the internet, as well as more traditional methods such as leaflet drops and local advocates. Nearly 40 charities currently offer sponsorship in the UK, over half declaring some form of religious affiliation (usually Christian, but Islamic variants exist).[1]

Child sponsorship provides a useful and interesting window on the geographies of charity, not least because of its personal connotations. Its fostering of donor–child 'relationships', whilst highlighting some interesting congruencies and contestations in the context of neo-liberal landscapes of international development, also provides a thought-provoking entry point into discussions of the very concept of charity. Accordingly, this paper uses an analysis of child sponsorship to broaden notions of the charitable, affirming its significance not just as a one-off response to a tear-jerking campaign, or as a mundane regular commitment, but also as a deeply personal engagement that draws into play multiple different aspects of people's lives and intersects with existing identity- and community-building projects.

In order to explore this further, the paper purposefully steps away from analyses of international charity that focus specifically on contexts of distribution. These undoubtedly provide a vital perspective, evaluating deployment and probing deeper ethical questions about aid and development. Bornstein (2001), for instance,

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[1] Web-based enquiry.

provides an insightful anthropological critique of the distribution of child sponsorship in Zimbabwe. Her analysis complements work within development geography and development studies (e.g. Bebbington, 2003; Bebbington et al., 2008; Bradley, 2009), as well as recent geographical scholarship which critically examines the ethico-politics of generosity, responsibility and care, in the context of their translation over distance (e.g. Silk, 2004; Bosco, 2007; Clark, 2007; Korf, 2007; Korf et al., 2010). These bodies of work offer significant insights for geographical understandings of charity networks. Similarly, the engaging critiques of giving, aid and development situated within postcolonial theory, particularly at its interface with development geography (e.g. McFarlane, 2006; McEwan, 2009; Glassman, 2010), are also noted. These foreground emphases on the politico-historical, the power of discourse and the contestations of interdependency, as well as other trajectories.

This study instead focuses specifically on the micro-geographies of donation, utilising geographical work on care to engage with their messy spatialities. Additionally, work from within the geographies of religion is used to support the empirical focus on faith-influenced giving. Structurally, the paper is divided into five sections. After an exploration of relevant literatures, the empirical work is introduced. The subsequent three sections present and discuss the data, considering the ethics of charity, its practice, and its situation with regard to everyday networks and spaces. Some conclusions are then presented concerning the implications of the study for wider theorisations of charity.

2. The geographies of charity

Charity is usually treated as synonymous with philanthropy, comprising altruistic acts done for public benefit (Bryson et al., 2002). However, it is rarely (if ever) as simple as this, being situated in practice within complex socio-political settings. Moreover, this definition fails to adequately address the more personal, intimate and self-orientated dimensions of charity, or the intricacies of its geographies. Accordingly, this analysis moves beyond this simple conceptualisation, demonstrating that charity is a socially situated practice, inseparable from wider relational contexts, as well as more intimate geographies within bodies, minds, hearts and souls.

Little geographical work exists that directly addresses the topic of charity, even less the specifics of donation. Recent interest in the geographies of voluntarism approaches charity through topics like welfare provision and public policy (e.g. Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Milligan et al., 2007; Conradson, 2008). Some work also exists examining the discursive strategies of charity organisations, particularly in spaces of retail (e.g. Gregson et al., 2002; Goodman and Bryant, 2009). Explorations of charity at an international level centre on the ethico-politics of aid and development (see previous discussion), or the political possibilities of concepts like global civil society (e.g. Anheier, 2007; Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2011). Again, the more intimate geographies of personal giving remain relatively untouched. These resonate more with work on ethical consumption, which shows how consumption practices are caught up in everyday ethics and situated, place-based contexts (e.g. Barnett et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2008; Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Hall, 2011). Barnett et al. (2005) highlight the importance of the taken-for-granted constellations of ethics that infuse social life, such as everyday care for family and friends. These 'ordinarily ethical' contexts are used to propose a broadened conception of the 'ethical' which accounts for the importance of the quotidian. Here, this broadened conception is applied to the entanglements of charity in intricate social webs and the working out (or 'working up' (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 29)) of charitable action in relation to everyday social networks. This analysis draws particularly on two

Foucauldian-influenced concepts used by Barnett et al. (2005) to describe the regulation and management of consumption. The first conceptualises how consumers manage their own ethical subjectivities, using the term 'governing the consuming self'. Transferring this to the practice of charity, this paper refers to practices and strategies of 'governing the charitable self' shaping individual ethical involvements with charity. Likewise, just as Barnett et al. conceptualise the array of regulatory and facilitative strategies used by businesses as methods of 'governing the contexts of consumption', so here the term is applied to the strategies of sponsorship charities, as ways of 'governing the contexts of charity'.

In addition to these conceptual resources, the concept of care is particularly relevant. As a material, dialogic and personal way of caring for both distant and (as this paper demonstrates) proximal others, as well as the self, sponsorship provides an interesting empirical route into work on care. Silk defines care principally as benevolence (caring *about* someone or something) translated into beneficence (the act of caring *for* them) by some catalyst (1998, 2000). Overviews abound tracking the progress of debates on care within geography (e.g. Lawson, 2007; Milligan et al., 2007; Cox, 2010; McEwan and Goodman, 2010; Milligan and Wiles, 2010), acknowledging its centrality to human existence (Cox, 2010). Though some theorists remain critical of its potential (e.g. Beasley and Bacchi, 2007), it is argued here that care provides a helpful resource for understanding charitable giving. The rationale behind this argument is subsequently explored, through discussion firstly of care at a distance, and then of the relation between care and everyday lived experience.

2.1. Caring through charity: care at a distance?

Many of the connections drawn between care and charitable giving concern the plausibility of effectively extending care to distant strangers. Aid relationships enable donors to transcend Western 'Russian doll' discourses of care (Massey, 2004) that emphasise nearest-and-dearest, implying that care is best provided at a local level (Jaggar, 2000). These models, encapsulated in the adage 'charity begins at home', sit well with the neo-liberal privatisation and localisation of care. Lawson (2007, p. 5) argues that this "*bolsters our contemporary world order of privilege, which rests on [careless] unequal relations across the globe*". Geographical discussions of care 'at a distance' have thus sought to reconceptualise care in a way that does not rely on distance-related assumptions. Instead, relational conceptions of space and scale are used to build care around notions of attentiveness and responsiveness (Barnett and Land, 2007, see also Fisher and Tronto, 1990; Tronto, 1993), and a valuation of *encounter* rather than obligation. It is recognised that care has its highest political and ethical purchase when applied in the context of humility and solidarity.

Whilst these relationality-based arguments effectively bolster discussions of care 'at a distance', they also invigorate discussions of proximal caring. Massey's arguments for a relational approach to global spaces and scales emphasises the importance of local spaces and relations to their production (2004, 2006). Moreover, the significance of local context to assessments of ethical responsibility is acknowledged by many (e.g. McKie et al., 2002; Raghuram et al., 2009), sitting neatly with Gibson-Graham's reminder that the local is not a space of weakness (2003). McNamara and Morse (2004) have called for a focus on the personal in analyses of aid networks, reflecting a broader acknowledgement that minute details concerning people and place *matter* to geographical theorisations of seemingly 'bigger' phenomena (in this case international charity schemes). With the aim of exploring these everyday dimensions of charity throughout the rest of the paper, I now turn to resources provided by the care literature that will aid this task.