Motivations for Learn/Volunteer Abroad Programs: Research with Canadian Youth

Rebecca Tiessen, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Royal Military College of Canada
Adjunct Professor, Global Development Studies
Queen’s University

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the motivations expressed by Canadian youth who took part in learn/volunteer abroad programs in the global south. The findings indicate that many of the motivations identified by the participants (testing an academic background or career choice, skills development, language acquisition, cross-cultural understanding and even the desire to help others) generally fit under the category of personal growth. The findings also highlight the extrinsic, egoist and self-oriented nature of these motivations and reflect a one-directional flow of benefits from the global south to the northern-based volunteers. A feminist post-colonialism analysis is used to reflect on the implications of self-oriented motivations of Canadian youth travelling to the global south, especially when funding for many of the volunteers who travel to the global south is provided by the Canadian International Development Agency – money that is earmarked for addressing poverty in the global south and not the personal growth of Canadians.

Introduction

In this paper I examine the motivations expressed by Canadian youth who participate in learn/volunteer abroad programs. I distinguish between short-term development internships (which are volunteer work placements usually lasting three to six months and of great appeal to those pursuing academic studies and/or careers in international development) and voluntourism (which is travel tourism combined with some charitable acts while abroad and often lasting one to four weeks). Other examples of people combining work, travel and volunteer abroad in developing countries include long-term development work which involves volunteering in development work for a minimum of one year but often two or more years. To better understand the nature and significance of short-term international development volunteering, I carried out interviews with Canadian volunteer abroad participants and asked them to reflect on their motivations for participating in these programs. Motivations, however, are difficult to measure and to realize. What one imagines as her/his motivations may change over time or be altered through experiences and reflections. Participants may also hold back information about some of their motivations. However, the information collected here enables us to examine some of the implications of the real or
perceived motivations and the ethical issues surrounding these motivations. The findings may be of use to those preparing youth for learn/volunteer abroad programs. For this research, interviews with 68 Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 30 were carried out between 2007 and 2010.

The participants were asked to comment on their motivations by ranking them as very important, somewhat important or not very important. The participants were then asked to identify the motivation for international development volunteering they considered the most important. When asked about the most important motivation for participating in learn/volunteer abroad programs, the most frequent answer was a desire to test an academic background or career choice. Motivations noted by the participants as very important included personal growth, a desire to help and a desire for better cross-cultural understanding. A key finding of interest in this study was that the desire to help others slipped from being one of the most common rankings as very important to one of the least likely responses when asked about the most important motivation. While personal growth was a distinct motivation, the analysis of the participants’ comments reveals that many of the motivations (test an academic background or career choice, skills development, language acquisition, cross-cultural understanding and even the desire to help others) fall within the broader category of personal growth.

The self-oriented nature of the motivations expressed by the participants is analysed in this paper in the context of the one-directional flow of perceived benefits from the global south to the Canadian volunteers. Motivations expressed as a helping imperative or the desire to help others reaffirms the one-directional nature of international development volunteer profits in favour of those from the global north. The discourse and imagined self of “helper” is expressed in relation to the benefits accrued to the ones offering said “help” rather than the “beneficiaries”. The northern-based volunteers thus seek out the “effect that ‘helping’ the passive Other will have on our own life experiences” (Heron, 2007, p. 5). Personal growth as a predominant motivation is examined in great detail with attention to the egoistic, self-oriented and extrinsic values associated with this motivation. The absence of references to other potential motivations such as social justice, solidarity or the promotion of equal rights raises additional questions about the motivations for learn/volunteer abroad programs and the direction in which benefits flow. These findings provide additional insight into post-structuralist critiques of international development assistance and the ways in which motivations of helping and personal growth in learn/volunteer abroad programs reinforce imbalanced power relations. The neo-colonial project of international volunteers from the global north travelling to the global south to assist in the solving of development problems can reinforce – rather than rectify – old geo-political processes of exploitation. The “colonial continuities” in the administration of the international development aid industry (Heron, 2007; Kothari, 2006) that emerge can be found in the emphasis on personal growth among the Canadian youth. Several motivations noted by the participants included a desire to help others and act as a role model for youth in the global south. The comments provided by the participants surrounding their desire to help were generally vague. However, some participants expressed their desire to serve as role models for youth in the global south yet the Canadian participants did not reflect on their own positionality and privilege in relation to race, class and gendered relations of power.

Motivations for international volunteering have been examined in the literature on volunteer tourism (or voluntourism) in relation to both self-oriented and altruistic reasons for participation (Söderman and Snead, 2008; Unstead-Ross, 2008; Wearing, 2001; Wymer, Self and Findley, 2007). Wymer, Self and Findley (2007) argue that volunteering is a form of ‘helping behaviour’, as
well as a type of ‘social consumption’. The former is the social good and benefits society which, they argue, is altruistic; the latter embodies the benefits to volunteers (egoism) and extrinsic benefits. A separate body of literature on international sojourning and international development volunteering is situated in the post-structuralist, post-colonial and feminist theoretical frameworks. Feminist post-colonial analyses, for example, analyse the predominantly white, northern-based international volunteers and their motivations which are expressed as generally egoistic, imperialist or neocolonial in nature (Baaz, 2005; Cook, 2007; Heron, 2007). The helping imperative – a narrative employed widely to reflect a desire to save the world but only in so far as it reflects well on those who wish to “do good” (Heron, 2007) is an example of a motivation that is generally seen as altruistic in the voluntourism literature yet has been highly contested in the feminist post-colonial literature. In an important recent dissertation, Kathryn Fizzell (2012) examines the motivations and perspectives of high school teachers running “voluntouristic” courses and similarly reveals a profound disconnect between appreciation of the benefits for Canadian students and near total disinterest in the supposed beneficiaries in the host communities in the global south.

I return to the debates surrounding altruistic versus self-oriented motivations later in my analysis. The findings raise important questions pertaining to how volunteers are prepared for international development volunteering as well as how these programs are funded. In this study most of the participants indicated they have received funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The specific question related to CIDA funding for these volunteer abroad programs is whether this is the best use of overseas development assistance dollars if the primary motivations centre around personal growth and self-oriented gains rather than more altruistic goals as reflected in CIDA’s mission “to help people living in poverty” (CIDA, 2011).

The Significance of Motivations in the Study of International Development Volunteering

In this section, I highlight some of the key themes in the small but growing literature on learn/volunteer abroad programs. The motivations for participating in learn/volunteer abroad programs are not well-known since the body of literature is small (Lo and Lee, 2010; Unstead-Joss, 2008) and fragmented (Goel, Jong, & Schnusenberg, 2010, p. 249). Few studies have tracked the motivations of individuals who have engaged in international development volunteering; however, a better understanding of motivations is crucial for several reasons: to improve the management of volunteers (Unstead-Joss, 2008); to improve volunteer experience satisfaction (Mott, 1972); and to evaluate the relationship between volunteer intent and impact in international development programming (Tiessen & Heron, 2012). The need for a better understanding of the motivations has also been noted by Majid Rahnema (1997) who has called for field workers, activists, and other Northern players in the development field to interrogate their deeper motivations for their actions, because “often they knew neither the people they were working with, nor themselves” (p. 392). And, in relation to this gap in our understanding is the need for researchers and development practitioners to first examine their own subject position, before embarking on their development tasks (Elabor-Idemudia, 2004).

While the information provided in this paper is specific to the Canadian context, the findings resonate with other research on motivations for international development volunteering. Söderman and Snead (2008) studied the motivations for British gap year travellers who volunteered in Latin
America and found that the responses revealed a mosaic of motivations that are unique to each individual who takes part in the gap year program (p. 118). The authors highlight altruism as one of the motivations but one that must be considered in combination with other motivations reflecting benefits to oneself (Söderman and Snead, 2008, p. 124). Research carried out by Unstead-Joss (2008) also examined the motivations of international development volunteers in the United Kingdom who took part in Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) programs lasting two years or more. Unstead-Joss (2008) argued that underlying the individuals’ intentions to volunteer internationally is an interest in issues of power and inequality between the volunteer and the host community. Research on motivations of non-western sojourners who take part in international development volunteering is even more difficult to locate. In a study of volunteer tourists from Hong Kong, Lo and Lee (2010) note the dearth of information on volunteer tourists from different parts of the world. The motivations uncovered in the study of Hong Kong volunteer tourists include: cultural immersion and interaction with local people; desire to give back and to provide practical assistance to communities in need; a shared experience with family members and an educational opportunity for children; religious involvement and escape from everyday life (Lo and Lee, 2010, p. 332). Lo and Lee’s study reinforce the need for additional research into the motivations for international development volunteering, particularly among non-western volunteers.

Motivations for voluntourism, as expressed in the literature on volunteer tourism, point to altruistic desires to help or give back to communities or a combination of altruistic and self-oriented motivations (Söderman and Snead, 2008; Unstead-Ross, 2008; Wearing, 2001; Wymer, Self & Findley, 2007). The helping imperative resonates throughout many of the studies on motivations for international development volunteering (Heron, 2007; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Söderman and Snead, 2008). The helping imperative was even noted in research with female expatriate employees. Leonard (2010) highlights that the discourse among them “is less to do with personal mobility and more about a notion of ‘doing good’ for others… For many youth, a key motivation to work abroad is to make ‘a positive impact on their host society’” (p.71). Leonard highlights the highly gendered nature of this helping imperative, noting that youth in her study are more likely to live abroad for altruistic reasons of giving back than for selfish ones.

The theme of the helping imperative continues in Cook’s (2007) study of youth development workers in Pakistan who distance themselves from tourists by stressing that they had come not to holiday but to help and “to work for a Western-funded NGO with a goal of improving local living conditions” (Cook, 2007, p. 87). Cook argues that this is the official reason most of her research participants provided when asked why they decided to come to Gilgit. The motivations identified in Cook’s study reflected a perception of their own “luck” to have had a good education. The youth volunteers felt they wanted to share “with the less fortunate people by putting their expertise to work in a developing country” (p. 87). The motivation to help others is examined as a gendered construction in some of the literature (Baaz, 2005; Cook, 2007; Heron, 2007). The beneficiaries of that help are often assumed to be ‘helpless Third World women’ and this reinforces the “dominant discourse of the victimized African woman” (Baaz, 2005. p. 119). In research by Baaz (2005), Cook (2007) and Heron (2007), the identities of white northern volunteers (predominantly women) doing international development volunteer work in the south was often motivated by a perception of self and constructed identities of northern women as emancipated, free youth on a mission to liberate the women of the global south. Given the significance of this motivation as identified in international development volunteering literature, it becomes another question to examine in light
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of the responses of the participants in this study. The “helping imperative” (Heron, 2007) is examined in greater detail later in this paper as I analyse the findings. Yet, as noted above, the altruistic motivations or the helping imperative are often tied to personal and egoistic motivations. Heron (2007) concludes that whatever else may be going on for Canadian development workers, what they find so compelling in the overseas experience is, at core, the making of self in terms not possible in Canada.

International development volunteers are also motivated by personal reasons, aimed at personal growth, including a desire to have a personal experience (Heron, 2007), to travel or have an adventure (Simpson, 2004), to escape from their normal life (Lo and Lee, 2010), or for career or skills development (Tiessen, 2008), to name a few. These motivations reflect extrinsic values and the desire for external rewards that are attached to international development volunteering. Munt (1994) notes that, for some, as long as travel is done the ‘right’ way it becomes an entry qualification for some professions, such as working for the charity sector, overseas development or the travel industry itself. As Munt puts it, “travelling has emerged as an important informal qualification with the passport acting, so to speak, as professional certification; a record of achievement and experience” (p. 112). The focus on the benefits to the sojourner and his/her personal growth suggests that the benefits of international development volunteering are largely one-directional, flowing in a direction opposite to what we might expect: back to those tasked with the delivery of development aid (Goudge, 2003). The emphasis on the benefits for volunteers from the global north may, however, end up doing more harm than good particularly if the profit flows only northward (Epprecht, 2004). I return to this point later in my analysis.

For those volunteers who express more altruistic motivations for participating in international development volunteering, what language and discourse do the participants use to express altruistic motivations? In Stephen Wearing’s (2001) analysis of motivations for volunteer tourism, he notes altruism as the first of the motivation categories in his analysis. Altruism in Wearing’s analysis is linked to the desire to save the world, help others or “do good” (Wearing, 2001, p. 66). For those participating in international development volunteering, key themes pertinent to the field of international development might also be reflected in the comments presented by the study participants including social justice and related notions of solidarity. In Simpson’s (2004) work, she concludes that international volunteer opportunities need to be developed from a socially just perspective. This involves critically examining the social, political and economic position of the project, working with the community and providing structured reflection (Simpson, 2004). Social justice involves the pursuit of equality and solidarity. Solidarity would be expressed in relation to ties that bind people together across cultures and across distances. In the analysis of motivations, I examine references to – and absences of – the desire for social justice, solidarity or related concepts.

As the literature review above has demonstrated, there are different types of learn/volunteer abroad options and several major differences between the popular volunteer abroad programs available today. In this paper, I examine learn/volunteer abroad programs in developing countries lasting between three and six months. In the next section I provide some additional clarification on the observable differences between the diverse volunteer abroad programs to better situate the particular research presented here as specific to short-term learn/volunteer abroad programs in developing countries.
Diverse Programs and Time Frames: Voluntourism, Short-term and Long-term International Development Volunteering

To begin, a distinction between domestic and international volunteering must be made. International volunteers are defined here as those who travel between countries. As noted above, few studies have examined international travel between non-westerners or in South-South exchanges (Lo & Lee, 2010) and most studies have focussed on the international volunteers from northern countries who travel to the global south (Unstead-Joss, 2008). International volunteering is distinguished from domestic volunteering in terms of the desire among international volunteers to immerse oneself in another culture in another country for a period of time. The transaction involved in international volunteering can be an important and distinct period in one’s life (Thomas, 2001). The desire for international development volunteering may be a one-off opportunity or part of a series of international placements or a long-term career.

This paper is concerned with short-term international development volunteering performed by Canadians. Short-term placements are contrasted with the long-term international development volunteering of one or more years spent overseas. Studies of international volunteering by Unstead-Joss (2008); Heron (2007); Cook (2007) and Eriksson-Baaz (2005) all deal with long-term volunteer programs in developing countries. Long-term international development volunteering gained popularity in the 1960s but has been replaced, to some extent, in the past 15 years with a desire, and demand, for shorter-term placements (Heron, 2005).

Volunteer tourism is explained by Lyons & Wearing (2008) as a form of alternative tourism. It is a highly contested term because it is used to describe “a wide range of tourist behaviours and tourism products and services” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008, p. 6). Generally, the term is employed to describe the experiences of those who travel abroad for very short periods of time (often two weeks in duration). Voluntourism is popular among all age groups because it is something that can take place during annual leave or holiday time. It generally consists of travel and adventure combined with a short-term volunteer experience (perhaps building a house or volunteering at an orphanage). The emphasis in voluntourism is often on adventure and travel with some opportunity for charitable, rather than developmental, work.

Stephen Wearing (2001) presents volunteer tourism as an alternative form of tourism which can involve development work. He notes that this alternative form of tourism has the potential to lead to changed lifestyles for the voluntourists and to contribute to community development in the voluntourist destinations. Volunteer tourism is also one of the fastest growing forms of tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). A vast body of literature has examined the potential value and impacts of volunteer tourism (Lyons and Wearing, 2008; Stebbins & Graham, 2004; Wearing, 2001). Another body of voluntourism literature has questioned the proposed benefits of voluntourism, raising ethical concerns around Western privilege (Desforges, 1998), unrealistic expectations of “authentic culture” (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; Kelly & Godbey, 1992; Noy, 2004); the reinforcing of differences through “othering” (Simpson, 2004) and a neoliberal form of development practice in the form of a marketable commodity (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). Several of the themes and analyses resonate with studies of long-term international development volunteering, particularly the emphasis on ethical implications of volunteering abroad, positionality of the volunteer in terms of
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race, class and gender (Heron, 2007) and perspectives on (gendered, racialized and stereotyped) cultures (Cook, 2007; Fizzell, 2012).

Voluntourism is distinct from international development volunteering for several reasons, not the least of which is the amount of time dedicated to living and volunteering overseas. Volunteer tourism can also be distinguished from international development volunteering because of the emphasis placed on alternative tourism. International development volunteering, in contrast, is a form of alternative international development. It is alternative in the sense that it is short-term in nature and is voluntary rather than paid work. A third way of distinguishing international development volunteering from voluntourism is to examine how international placements are funded and by whom. Voluntourism programs are often coordinated by for-profit companies while international development volunteer programs are frequently organized by non-governmental organizations or governmental agencies as an extension of the services they deliver to developing countries. As such, international development volunteering, as is the case in the Canadian context, is often funded (in part or entirely) through government funding made available through channels such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Other countries provide government financial support for international development volunteering. The international aid agency of the United States - USAID - offers paid and voluntary internships for youth and/or students (USAID, 2011). Also, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Development (DFID) in the United Kingdom announced in 2010 the launch of a program called “International Citizen Service” which will focus mainly on youth 18 – 22 years old who will work on projects aimed at improving the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. The international development volunteering programs offered by DFID will last three months or longer (DFID, 2011) and will also provide funding to cover the costs of international placements.

Participants in short-term international development volunteering (or learn/volunteer abroad programs) commit a period of approximately three to six months of their time to engage in development projects. For our research, we define short-term as this time period. International development volunteers are considered by some to be integral to global development (Korten, 1990) and have been described as partners working toward community development (UNDP, 2003). The volunteer-sending organizations involved in international development volunteer placements may receive large sums of money to support their programs. Unstead-Joss’ study of VSO funding from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) notes that DFID has channelled approximately 30 million British pounds in just a three year period to fund volunteer-sending organizations. Examples of short term international development volunteering in Canada include the Netcorps program which enabled Canadian youth to volunteer in a developing country for a period of six months to teach technical skills. The Canadian government provided approximately $17,000 per volunteer to participate in the Netcorps program. The total contribution of funds from Industry Canada to the NetCorps program alone was $29,471,064 for the years 1999-2006. This amount of money paid for 1713 volunteers to volunteer in a developing country (CIDA, 2007). Thus, the financial investment provided by countries like the UK and Canada to support international development volunteer programs is significant.

There are numerous programs like NetCorps offered in Canada including the International Youth Internship Program sponsored by CIDA, the Students for Development program funded through the Association for Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), as well as numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) known primarily by their acronyms (i.e., WUSC, CUSO
and CECI). In addition, funding also gets channelled through organizations such as World Vision Canada to pay for youth volunteers on specific World Vision projects around the world. There are no exact and encompassing figures for the total amount of money spent on funding international development volunteering; however, it is a substantial amount. If we project the amount of nearly $30 million spent on Netcorps alone to the many organizations offering international internships, we can assume that the total amount of spending in Canada on international development volunteer placements is well into the hundreds of millions of dollars. The funding for these programs, especially the money that is channelled through CIDA, is ear-marked for international development and humanitarian assistance so the expectation of the impact of volunteer abroad programs is to provide assistance that contributes to improved quality of life for the recipients of development assistance in the global south.

The question that guides the research for this study is: Do the motivations expressed by Canadian youth who participate in international development volunteering reflect similar goals to development assistance programs offered by Canada? I will return to this question later in this paper.

Within the volunteer abroad literature, there is considerable debate about the significance of the length of time abroad. Kauffmann, Martin and Weaver (1992) suggest that an optimal length of stay is six to twelve months. However, short-term placements of three-to-six months have a wide appeal for those who want to have a more substantial work experience than can be offered in a two-week voluntourism package and still want to fit these experiences into a summer term break, a semester abroad or a short internship between studies and finding full-time employment. For many young Canadians who are interested in addressing the challenges of global poverty and inequality, they see international development volunteering or learn/volunteer abroad as an opportunity to gain an enhanced knowledge of the development enterprise. In a “White Paper” on International Development Studies in Canada prepared by the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development and the North-South Institute: “The steady increase in IDS programs and graduates testifies to the fact that young people are eager to become engaged in this enterprise” (CASID, 2003). However, research to date has not provided ample understanding of the motivations for international development volunteering nor have any major critiques emerged from the literature or White Paper findings. The Canadian White Paper on international development studies is important in the Canadian context and to this study because it highlights known trends among college and university students in Canada. It also raises questions about the impact of these academic programs and related international development volunteering initiatives in which many Canadian youth participate. The White Paper thus underscores the need for a better understanding of this particular group of individuals who choose to volunteer in international development programs for periods of three to six months. It is to this sample that I now turn in an effort to shed light on the Canadian trends in learn/volunteer abroad programs and their participants.
The Study and the Study Participants

The research findings presented here are based on a sample group of 68 Canadian youth (between the age of 18 and 30).\textsuperscript{1} The research is part of a larger five-year study (2007-2011) on “Creating Global Citizens? The Impact of Learning Volunteer Abroad Programs” funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and carried out collaboratively by Rebecca Tiessen and Barbara Heron.\textsuperscript{2}

The interviews included structured questions to collect general demographic information and semi-structured questions to bring out information about the experience. The interviews took place over the telephone lasting approximately one and a half hours for each interview. The interviews were conducted between June 2007 and June 2010. Before commencing the interview, the participants were told that the data would be used in such a way that their anonymity would be protected and confidentiality would be respected. Participants were also informed that material would be tape- or digitally-recorded and that any material could be removed upon their request and/or the interview could be stopped at any point.

The specific questions asked and analyzed in these interviews included: What do you think were your main motivations for volunteering abroad? It is important to note, however, that assessing motivations is difficult and responses have to be considered in light of a number of bias-related challenges. For example, the motivations conveyed by the participants have the potential to reflect what they think the researcher or broader society considers to be the most important motivations. In order to address this, the participants were asked to reflect on a number of different motivations and to say whether they thought the motivation was very important, somewhat important, or not very important. There is still potential for the participants to mask their true motivations in this format; however, it may also enable the participants to reflect on diverse motivations. The participants were then asked if there were any other motivations they thought were significant to their decision to volunteer in international development. The participants were then asked to explain their most important motivation. Some participants noted more than one as the most important but these ones that were listed as most important did not correspond overall with those motivations listed as very important.

The data collected were then transcribed and entered into a software package called Nvivo 7. The analysis of the data involved reviewing the transcripts in his entirety and reading through the responses. Every effort was made to analyze the ideas presented in their appropriate context. Key words and ideas were coded to facilitate quick retrieval of information. Much of the information was quantified to demonstrate the number of responses for each of the categories of motivations (from very important to not very important). The data collected were quantified to demonstrate

\textsuperscript{1} The sample of 68 participants is based on research in progress. Interviewing is ongoing and a larger sample of approximately 110 participants is expected once the interviews are complete.

\textsuperscript{2} The research consists of two components: a Canadian component involving interviews with Canadian youth and an overseas host country component involving interviews with host organizations and overview informants from seven less developed countries (Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, India, Guatemala, Peru and Jamaica). The author would like to thank the International Development Research Centre for funding this project, Dr. Barbara Heron for her thoughtful comments and feedback throughout the research proposal and data collection stages and the many research assistants who have contributed to the collection of data, particularly Melissa Jennings and Kathryn Fizzell.
numerical values for each category of motivation. Examples, quotations and reflections from the participants were used to elaborate on these findings.

Findings

This study is concerned with international development volunteers who go abroad for three to six month placements. Earlier in the paper, I situate the time-frame of three to six months between volunteer tourism (or voluntourism) and long-term volunteering of one or more years abroad. In the interviews with the participants in this study, many considered their postings of three to six months abroad to fall within the category of long-term volunteering. In their justification, the Canadian participants noted that three to six months was long relative to voluntourism which they understood to be a much shorter term of approximately one to four weeks. The participants engaged in short-term placements were reluctant to consider longer-term placements of one year or more because they did not want to be away from home, friends, family, school or career opportunities for that period of time. Additional background information about the study participants that emerged during the interviews is that the majority of the participants in this sample (54 out of 68) said that their international development volunteering program was funded directly or indirectly by CIDA. The implications of participating in a partially – or fully-funded volunteer abroad program are examined later in the analysis.

The participants had a great deal of academic and professional interest in international development studies. More than a third of the participants said they were or currently are majoring in International Development Studies (24 of the 68). An additional 21 students identified with other - but related - fields of study such as International Social Work, Anthropology, Political Science and Languages. The remainder of the sample group consisted of people in the sciences with several of these youth in fields of study that increasingly address international science topics: environmental engineering (6) or medicine-related fields of study (6).

During the interviews, participants were asked to rank their motivations as very important, somewhat important and not very important. They were then asked to reflect on what they considered to be the most important motivation. In my discussion of the findings, I begin by examining those motivations expressed as very important. The most common pre-departure motivation identified as very important by the 68 participants was personal growth (55 said very important), followed by desire to help others (51), gain cross-cultural understanding (51), to develop work-related skills (50), to test an academic background or career choice (41), to get a job or start a career (35), for adventure and travel (29), to acquire a language (14), to join friends who were also travelling (5), or for religious reasons (2). When motivations listed as very important or somewhat important were combined, the ranking for each motivation changed slightly with the desire for adventure and travel reaching the third highest number of respondents noting this as a motivation. See Table 1 for a summary of the data for each of the categories of importance pertaining to motivations as indicated as very important, somewhat important or not very important.
When participants were asked to reflect on what they believed was the most important motivation for volunteering in a developing country, the numbers and ranking of motivations changed. Testing academic background and career choice was the most popular motivation (32 responses), followed by a desire for improved cross-cultural understanding (26), personal growth (17), get a job/start a career (17), skills development (11), adventure/travel (9), desire to help others (5), language acquisition (5), and because friends were travelling (1). The summary of the data related to motivations as indicated as most important by the study participants can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Motivations as Indicated as Most Important**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Most Important</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test academic background/career choice</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural understanding</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get a job/start a career</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills development</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adventure/travel</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to help others</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language acquisition</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends travelling</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The motivation most frequently noted as the most important among the participants was a desire to test an academic background or career choice. As one participant noted: “I guess I just, I wanted to, for the Development Studies part of my degree, to learn development studies from the perspective of the people in developing countries”. The notion of testing an academic background or career choice is not specific to this study. Söderman and Snead (2008) observed this motivation among British gap year participants and found that participation in volunteering activities served as a way of reducing risk factors by experiencing a profession before committing to it. Some participants expressed their motivations in relation to starting a business. One participant noted that he wanted to work with fair trade products, stating: “It would be a phenomenal opportunity to make contact with artisans so that I could start up my own company when I got back to Canada”. In this example, the volunteer was interested in supporting local artisans; however, as Fridell (2007) has argued, fair trade can also fall into the framework of neo-imperialist projects reflecting historical liberal, imperialist and/or colonialist ventures. The lessons to be taken from this example are that the benefits of alternative trade opportunities cannot be assumed, and solutions to complex and historically-significant global relations are not easily formulated, particularly through small-scale changes.

Testing an academic background or career choice can be understood as one aspect of the pursuit of personal growth. The motivation is largely egoistic in scope, reflecting the one-directional benefits of international volunteering flowing from south to north. The participants also made references to personal growth in relation to gaining a broader perspective, skills development, or having an experience or adventure. Those who identified personal growth as a major motivation indicated that they felt the experience overseas broadened their outlooks, a change which they expected would endure over time. Research by Kauffmann, Martin and Weaver (1992) with study abroad students notes that a “first cross-cultural experience is more likely to produce personal growth than to increase in-depth cultural and global understanding” (p.75). Overall, personal growth was the motivation most often indicated as very important. In total, 55 out of 68 participants in this sample said that personal growth was a very important motivation. Personal growth incorporates a range of activities and is not readily defined by the participants. The personal growth to which the participants spoke included several references to an understanding of how lucky they are compared to the circumstances of the people they encountered in the global south. One participant remarked: “If I do in the future have problems in my life, I can sort of put it into perspective … these problems are probably going to be very minimal compared to the problems that face the people of [the global south]”. The “luck” of being Canadian that several of the participants noted was expressed as a realization and extension of their own understanding of the world and their personal growth. Yet, the references to luck are problematic because they speak to a simplification of inequality rather than a better informed understanding of poverty and inequality. The flipside of “Canadian luck” is that the global south is “unlucky”. This simplistic analysis does not take into account the factors (actions, behaviours, attitudes) that produce that “luck” or “unluckiness”, and the complicity of the global north in creating circumstances that are deemed as “unlucky” but are actually the result of attitudes and actions that oppress those in the global south.

When participants spoke of their personal growth, they often made reference to a desire for an experience with emphasis on travel and adventure. While only five participants said that travel and
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adventure was the most important reason for participating in international development volunteering, nearly half (29 out of 68) participants noted travel and adventure as a very important motivation. Some of the participants wanted to “experience culture” while others just wanted “an experience”. The way in which the participants talked about their desire for an experience reflects a kind of consumerist approach reinforcing the idea that there is a profitable exchange taking place. Wymer, Self & Findley (2007) highlight this notion as “social consumption” and list it as one of two major motivations expressed by participants in their study on international volunteering. Young Canadians can ‘purchase’ an experience abroad in exchange for their money and/or time. This commodity can then be cashed in when they return to Canada in exchange for a course credit or for a perceived career advantage when applying for jobs. Many of the study participants noted that an international development volunteering experience also “looks good on a resumé”. Thus, this notion of personal growth reinforces the importance of the experience abroad in terms of the career prospects of those from the global north.

For the second most common motivation noted as “very important” there was a tie between desire to help and to improve cross-cultural understanding (51 said very important for both). The desire to help dropped to 5 out of 68 when the participants commented on what they considered their most important motivation. For several of the participants, the desire to help was directly linked to their chosen field of study. As one person noted, “I … chose Latin American Studies as a major because I wanted to work in International Development to help others, I just always thought, you know you could make a difference”. Another person noted that her desire to help others is why she is studying international development studies. She chose to participate in a short-term international development volunteer placement because she “needed a practicum”. She, like others interviewed, realized that the internship or volunteer placement abroad “would be helping me more in terms of my learning experience”. A desire for reciprocity was expressed in some comments such as “taking the time to give back to communities that, that you can learn something from them as well as give something too”. The comments generally conveyed a desire to help with very vague elaborations. Comments such as “making a difference” indicated a desire to help but did not reflect specifically on how they wanted to make a difference and for whose benefit. The quote by one individual demonstrates this well: I wanted to “try to make the world a better place, as John Lennon said”. There was an expectation in the motivations to help that expressed by the participants that helping involved planning and carrying-out that change with “them” and “for them” (Illich & Rahnema, 1997; Unstead-Joss, 2008) but without any concrete notions of how this help will be delivered and sustained over time or why the participants believe it is their responsibility to do so.

A desire to work with kids also featured prominently into the motivations around helping others. As one participant noted: “for me, I love kids so the thought of working with kids for six months overseas was just too good to kind of pass up.” Such an opportunity would not be possible without specialized training and certification in Canada. For some participants the desire to help people was tempered with the realization that the students or interns did not have as much to offer as they would have liked. One participant commented: “I think that the helping others motivation was sort of a little naïve… I just felt like I was only there for three months and … they probably didn’t get enough out of me as I got out of them”. There is some recognition among the participants, therefore, of the limited impact they had and the skewed nature of the benefits of international development volunteering as most of the profits or benefits flow back to the Canadian youth.
Several of the participants noted a desire for a connection to the world as a motivation for international development volunteering. One woman said: “because it shrinks the world for me in my mind. It kind of demystifies a lot of other places for me. Yeah, it makes me more connected to the entire planet which is already really interconnected but I don’t really experience that day to day if I’m here. You know, finding out how people are and how they’re different”.

The desire for a global connection can be linked to the motivation of cross-cultural understanding which was noted as one of the three top motivations listed as very important to the study participants. In total, 51 out of 68 participants indicated that cross-cultural understanding was a very important motivation and 26 participants noted that it was the most important motivation. Another woman pointed out: “Well I think it shakes your worldview so I think that to go, just in general, any sort of, I guess, exchange like this, I find that, yeah, it changes your worldview a lot, it shapes how you understand things and how you interact with different people”. In this example of the cross-cultural motivation, the participant speaks to her desire for cross-cultural understanding and how it relates to her own personal growth. There are no references to the importance of cross-cultural understanding for the benefit of those in the host countries of the global south. Again, there was clear flow of benefits in one direction with the benefits accruing mostly to the Canadian volunteers.

The desire for social justice or solidarity is not identified by any of the 68 participants in this study as one of the motivations for participation in international development volunteering programs. The absence of this discussion must be understood in the context of Simpson’s (2004) conclusion that social justice must be at the heart of all international development volunteering programs. The absence of a discussion of social justice, equality of opportunity or solidarity can be explained, in part, by an inability to recognize (or discomfort to acknowledge) the privilege experienced by Canadian youth who have the opportunity to take part in international development volunteering.

The privileged experience youth had while volunteering in the global south reflects their status and positioning in relation to the people with whom they worked. Heron (2007) argues that Northern youth can become honorary men because of their privileged positioning vis-a-vis their educational backgrounds, power and ability to access resources. The identities that youth who volunteer in international development are able to construct for themselves while abroad may be distinct from their identities “at home”. In particular, the Canadian participants may experience a greater degree of power and autonomy while abroad as a result of their privileged educational and perceived class status. As such, Canadian youth introduce a new set of power relations in the host countries and experience an altered positioning in the global south that reflects their race, status, class, gendered power relations and perceived wealth of resources they bring with them. Heron argues that this becomes a narrative of white male bourgeois subjectivity that the youth can adopt while overseas and thereby youth can see themselves “as more fully subject” (Heron, 2007, p.112). This perception of self contributes to the youth’s sense of self-worth and perceived power and importance. Three of the participants in my study highlighted a desire for more confidence and independence as important in terms of motivations for international development volunteering. These motivations speak to the privilege of those who have the opportunity to take part in international sojourning but also to the construction of identity through international development volunteering.
Participants in Cook’s (2007) study also commented on their experiences abroad as a way to prove their own independence. Cook (2007) describes these feelings of independence and confidence expressed by youth development workers in Pakistan as a way for them to realize their more autonomous selves. Thus the emphasis in this cross-cultural experience is firmly rooted in the benefits accrued to those who travelled to other places and not those who hosted them. Gender relations become relations of power that can be altered through transnational volunteering. Rather than breaking down spaces of inequality, the Canadian volunteer may exacerbate that inequality through their gendered and class relations of power. In Baaz’s (2005) analysis of European youth aid workers working in Tanzania, she concludes that inequality, difference and power are maintained when the white European youth are represented as modern and capable while Tanzanian youth are described as “bound by tradition, powerless, family-oriented, quiet and oppressed” (p.118). Several of the youth in my study indicated a desire to serve as a role model for youth in the global south. One woman noted that she wanted to show youth in the host country what is possible for youth. The participants were unable to see their desire to be a role model and their positionality within the context of class, gender and power relations. There was an expectation among the participants that the privilege that Canadian youth experience could somehow be transferred to youth in the global south with little regard for race, class, gender and power relations.

While cross-cultural understanding was one of the most popular responses noted as very important, the understanding gained from international development volunteering in this study did not necessarily promote an improved understanding of one’s positionality and relative privilege ascribed through class, race, gendered power relations and access to opportunities and resources. To the extent that cross-cultural understanding actually occurs in these experiences, it evidently does not contribute to solidarity or an understanding of Canada’s and Canadians’ role in common problems.

The findings and analysis provided above resonate with Epprecht’s (2004) argument that the profits (benefits in terms of personal growth, job skills acquisition) rest primarily with the northern volunteers. The positive benefits experienced by the Canadians are rewarding for the Canadians. However, we have a limited understanding of the impacts (positive and negative) experienced by the host communities in the global south. The Canadian participants in this sample did not express their motivations in relation to having a positive impact in the host communities beyond comments pertaining to an opaque desire to help. The recognition among participants in this study of greater benefits to the northern volunteers than to the host communities is presented as normal, natural and not questioned. Furthermore, the desire to help is not explained by the participants in a way that demonstrates a desire (or motivation) for meaningful change for those in the global south but rather in relation to how the participants can see themselves whether as role models or child-friendly individuals who like to work with kids.

Other motivations the youth expressed, particularly personal growth and related motivations (test an academic background or career choice, cross-cultural understanding, skills development, desire for travel and adventure and language acquisition) are largely self-oriented and geared to the benefit of the Canadian volunteers. Some of these programs are funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), using monies that are geared to realizing Canada’s mission to “lead Canada’s international effort to help people living in poverty” (CIDA, 2011). This use of earmarked funds raises the question of whether development funds should be set aside to give Canadian youth the opportunity to experience personal growth and a largely one-directional flow of benefits leading back to the global north.
Conclusion

Several important ethical issues emerge in the analysis of the participants’ motivations for taking part in learn/volunteer abroad programs as I have summarized in the analysis of findings above. Some of the key ethical issues include the self-oriented motivations, the absence of concern for structural change, the superficial emphasis on luck rather than explorations of global inequality stemming from our day-to-day actions, and a lack of motivation based on solidarity and improving the quality of lives of others. All of these observations must be understood in the context of international development assistance funding that enables Canadian youth – and others from the global north – to reap the benefits of development funding that is earmarked for those who need it most in the global south. These findings require us to carefully consider the ethical dilemmas as pointed out in the introduction to this issue. In particular, the ethical dilemmas need to be understood “as a result of economic disparities, cultural differences, historical circumstances and social situations linked, for example, to the legacy of colonialism” (Tiessen & Epprecht, this volume). The motivations expressed by youth do not reflect the ethical concerns identified here. However, the findings provide insight and opportunity for pre-departure and return orientation discussions.

More generally, the findings presented in this paper contribute to a small but growing body of literature which analyzes the motivations of those who participate in international volunteering through voluntourism (Unstead-Ross, 2008; Wearing, 2001; Wymer, Self and Findley, 2007) and international development volunteering. Post-colonial feminist analyses of predominantly white youth international development volunteers from the global north (Baaz, 2005; Cook, 2007; Heron, 2007) has enriched our understanding of the motivations of international development volunteers challenging us to think more critically and carefully about the content and context in which individuals express a desire to help. The findings in the study presented here demonstrate the complexity of motivations and the tensions that exist within and between the desire to help and the desire for personal growth which encompasses, in this study, testing an academic background or career choice, cross-cultural understanding, skills development, adventure or travel experiences and language acquisition. The motivations expressed among learn/volunteer abroad participants are thus largely extrinsic in nature, reflecting the ways in which Canadians are rewarded for their participation in international development volunteering in the form of academic credits, improved job opportunities or skills development. The flow of these rewards is expressed in the motivations which are articulated largely as egoistic and self-oriented rather than altruistic. The balance of self-oriented and altruistic motivations that volunteer tourism literature highlights has been evaluated in this study. The findings point to a much greater emphasis on self-oriented motivations under the broad category of personal growth.

Personal growth and cross-cultural understanding can be important opportunities for increased awareness of inequality and knowledge of the world. It is not clear, however, how personal growth will contribute meaningfully to the delivery of development assistance. As such, we need to consider the value of learning opportunities for young Canadians as a CIDA funded activity in the context of CIDA’s mission to help those who live in poverty around the world.

The true impact of learn/volunteer abroad programs might better be measured in the long-term investments these programs make and the ongoing commitments and actions of the participants of these programs over the long-term. An important question for future research is thus: Does
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investment in youth volunteer abroad programs contribute to international development in the long-run? For example, are those who participate in learn/volunteer abroad programs more likely to commit to a career in international development service; to support increased funding for international development programming; and/or to work toward equality and solidarity with the global south? There is much scope for additional research and longitudinal studies to understand the impact of short-term international development volunteering and if or how that impact relates to the motivations.

The findings from this study on the motivations expressed by Canadian youth reflect a need for a deeper analysis of the motivations for international development volunteering and how those motivations contribute to actions, behaviours and attitudes that shape identities, relations of power and inequality. Based on the findings with a sample of 68 Canadian youth who took part in short-term international development volunteering, a few recommendations can be made.

The first recommendation involves more educational opportunities for Canadian youth to think critically about their motivations for international development volunteering, why they have these motivations, and how they might translate problematic motivations into practice and potentially reinforce stereotypes or entrench differences. A self-reflective process such as this can be challenging, requires ample time and facilitation, and may in some cases be at cross purposes with the objectives of the funders (i.e., profit, propaganda). Ultimately, however, self-reflection and self-critique are essential to begin thinking about more complex problems and inequalities and to ensure the benefits of international development volunteering are felt by the recipients of development assistance and not just the volunteers. Building on Rahnema’s (1997) argument that development workers need to better understand their deeper motivations, the findings here suggest that the participants also require an opportunity to interrogate their motivations and rationales for participating in international development volunteer programs. The critical reflection of international development volunteering could involve questioning whether the developing world should be used as a testing ground for Canadian youths’ career/academic choices. Several academic programs within Canada (including the Queen’s University Global Development Studies program, the International Development Studies program at Dalhousie University, Humber College’s International Development Management Studies program and Centennial College’s Global Citizenship and Equity initiative) have provided opportunities for students, particularly International Development Studies students, to deconstruct their experiences and examine the potential impacts of their learn/volunteer abroad program. In addition to increasing the availability and requirement of such courses or training, we need to begin to measure the impact of these programs beyond the deconstruction of the experience for the Canadian youth and examine how ethical issues are minimized, how structural inequality is being tackled and how notions of global citizenship are contributing to acts of solidarity, reciprocity and social justice.
References


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