

International Service Learning: Decolonizing Possibilities?

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ABSTRACT: International Service Learning (ISL) programs are now ubiquitous, and the concept seems immutable: well-meaning young people from the North visiting “host” communities in the South in order to provide “service” and “to learn.” The adulatory literature is replete with the purported benefits of these programs, both to those participating from the North and to the communities in the South. By comparison, more critical follow-up of participants from the North suggest otherwise—that they serve mainly to reinforce values of charity for the “other” and do little to aid in understanding the reasons for the unequal relations of “underdevelopment.” Similarly, a number of more recent studies have raised questions about the impact of these programs on communities in the South, and the extent to which they may serve to (re)instill neocolonial economic and/or cultural relations.

This paper presents and discusses findings from a multi-year study in a number of rural communities in Nicaragua that have hosted ISL programs, undertaken with the express purpose of exploring the modes and effects of the interactions between the visitors and the community residents. Through field observation, interviews and focus groups, a complex picture emerges of community engagement with, and reaction to, these Northern visitors, and the impact they effect on their Southern hosts. Of particular interest, we examine the possibilities these programs may have for interrupting traditional knowledge-power relations and understandings on both sides.

Introduction

International Service Learning (ISL) programs are now ubiquitous, and the concept seems immutable: young people from the North visit “host” communities in the South in order to provide “service” and “to learn.” As described in more detail below, the literature that uncritically supports ISL argues on behalf of the purported benefits of such programs both to those participating from the North and to the host communities in the South. By comparison, a more critical literature suggests otherwise—that these excursions serve mainly to reinforce values of charity for the “other” and do little to explain reasons for the unequal relations of “underdevelopment.” Similarly, a number of more recent studies have raised questions about the impact of these programs on communities in the South, and the extent to which they may serve to (re)instill neocolonial economic and/or cultural relations.

This chapter presents and discusses findings from a multi-year study of the impact of ISL programs on four rural communities in Nicaragua that have hosted such projects. We conducted multiple interviews with village residents and NGO officials, along with field observations before, during and after ISL participants’ visits. Among other research questions, we explore the possible effects of these programs on either maintaining or disrupting traditional North–South (neo)colonial relations. Our interest in this research stems partly from some understanding of the history of colonization of the South by the North. In that regard, it is our hope that international experiential education (IEE) programs, including ISL programs, could lead to deeper understandings of the unequal power relations—evident at all levels of interaction, individual to national—that underpin colonization in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Interestingly, our study was considerably enriched when we ascertained that one of the four villages under consideration had explicitly decided to discontinue hosting these Northern groups after years of hosting ISL programs, for reasons very similar to those enunciated by Vanessa Andreotti’s (2016) political framework. These will be explored in detail in our analysis following our overall findings.

In brief, our findings and analysis portrayed a complex picture resulting from these North–South interactions. Organized thematically into major areas of impact, we found that relations of affection featured significantly, perhaps even more powerfully than the import of material support provided by the Northerners. In addition, enhancement of cross-cultural understandings was often noted by interviewees. At the same time, there is no question that the presence of Northern groups within traditional villages in the South significantly interrupted the daily routines and underlying social relations among the residents, often in negative ways. We conclude our report with some discussion of the possible significance of our findings—both in relation to current debates on ISL as well as how these programs might better promote anticolonial North–South relations.

Literature Review

Every year thousands of secondary and post-secondary students from the Global North travel to countries in the Global South in one or another form of IEE (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap, 2012; Kolb, 1984; Pagano & Roselle, 2009; Tiessen & Huish, 2014a). For Tiessen and Huish (2014b), IEE involves programming that “generally takes place in the Global South” and many, albeit not all participants, are encouraged to focus on “an improved understanding of inequality, poverty, and global justice” (p. 5). The methodology to achieve such an outcome is attributed to the work of Kolb and Fry (1974) who wrote about a process of close observation of and reflection on the experience, coming to understand through such reflection the concepts arising from the experience and then drawing conclusions and repeating the process (as cited in Tiessen & Huish, 2014b). This methodological approach is closely associated with best pedagogical practices of all forms of IEE.

Included within the IEE framework are study abroad programs (Lewin, 2009), internships (Engstrom & Loring, 2007; Walters, Garii, & Walters, 2009), and international service learning (Borland & Adams, 2013; Crabtree, 2008; Ellis, 2016; Kiely, 2002; Larsen, 2016). ISL is the form of IEE that is the focus of this chapter. Crabtree (2008) defines ISL as a combination of “academic instruction and community-based service in an international context. Objectives of linking international travel, education, and community service include increasing participants’ global awareness, building intercultural understanding, and enhancing civic mindedness and skills” (p. 18). Typically, students who participate in ISL programs spend anywhere from a week to several months, often living in rural villages with host families and engaging in some form of volunteer work (e.g., playing with children in preschool programs, building schools or other community structures, working on environmental projects or assisting with farming activities). Such programs are increasingly popular with educational institutions in the Global North, with continuing calls by universities and both government and nongovernment agencies to increase participation in various forms of IEE ranging from very short-term, tourist-oriented *voluntourism* (Elliot, 2013; Van Deusen, 2014; Wearing & McGehee, 2013) to both short- and long-term ISL and study abroad programs (Lewin, 2009). Not surprisingly, there has been a parallel rise in research in the area that celebrates the value of these experiences for the visiting students and host communities alike (e.g., Keilberger & Keilberger, 2009) and a literature that, for the most part, does not reject ISL outright but instead raises critical issues about current practices (see, for example, Jackson, 2011; Jefferess, 2012; Pashby, 2011; Tarc, 2013; Tiessen, 2013; Tiessen & Huish, 2014a). The rise in the amount of literature on the topic is reflected in a rise in the number of international conferences that provide the opportunity to disseminate and critique this research.

The literature provides evidence that at least some of the participants from the North have undergone “transformative” experiences (Mezirow, 2000; O’Sullivan, 1999) in

relation to their understandings of North–South power relations and the underlying causes of underdevelopment in the South (Cameron, 2014; Crabtree, 2008; Heron, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Kiely, 2002); however, the literature also points out that many ISL programs fail to be transformative, whatever their intentions, and for many participants these trips serve mainly to assuage their own guilt, their beliefs in a “poor but happy” syndrome and/or the need for more charity (Epprecht, 2004; Thomas & Chandrasekera, 2014; Van Deusen, 2014). This is particularly true for those that fall into the category of voluntourism, characterized as visits to the Global South where participants spend a very limited time in a village (often only a day or two), with the rest of the travel time spent visiting local tourist sites (see Elliot, 2013; Van Deusen, 2014). San Ignatius (see below) is an example of a host organization in a village that took the decision against hosting more trips because of their concerns about the visiting students’ motivations and attitudes.

Some research has suggested that host villages and villagers benefit in various ways from these programs (see, for example, Smedley, 2016). Certainly, as we report in detail below, many residents spoke very favourably about them; however, significant questions also have been raised in the literature about the longer-term effects of these visits. Some suggest that they serve as instruments of neocolonialism (economic or cultural) and/or instil new dependency relations (see, for example, Jefferess, 2012; Pashby, 2011). Others view the emotional connections established (usually) between host mothers and visitors as having the effect of reinforcing neocolonial ties (see, for example, Angod, 2015), the argument being that affection blinds the participants, be they host community members or visitors, to the unequal power relations inherent in these exchanges.

By comparison, Andreotti (2011) among others notes that postcolonialism challenges “the ability to naturalize and normalize Western/European perspectives globally”—a condition which is directly “related to European colonialism” (p. 3). This pedagogical challenge involves being able to “imagine the world differently” (Andreotti, 2016, p. 1) in order to challenge the traditional “production of knowledge about the Other and the (Western/European) self” (p. 3), one which “champions a form of solidarity enacted as an ethical imperative toward the Other” (Spivak, 2008, as cited in Andreotti, 2011, p. 3). In relation to spelling out a pedagogical regime which both describes contemporary approaches to formulating ISL programs and spells out what a “postcolonial” approach might look like, Andreotti (2016) posits a four-stage schemata of “audience orientation” ranging from a “surface-level overview of the issues that can inspire people to get involved in basic initiatives often related to charity or awareness raising” through to an orientation which is “very seldom addressed in educational work,” one which is:

driven by a critique of ontological hegemony geared towards the uncertain exploration of different possibilities of existence beyond the modern subject, modern institutions (including the modern nation state) and of global capitalism—beyond the modern onto-epistemic grammar and the (contested, but enduring) modern/colonial imaginary. (p. 106)

In undertaking our exploration of the realities and alternative possibilities of ISL programs, we are certainly influenced by Andreotti's (2011) considerations in this regard, "to expand their imagination, to rearrange their desires, to establish a more nuanced relationship of solidarity, and to pluralize the future of all communities" (p. 8).

Methodology

As noted above, the purpose of this research has been to explore the impact of ISL programs and their North American youth participants, on the host villages and in Nicaragua where these programs take place. In formulating our methodology, we believe that this impact can be understood in a variety of ways. Examining the economic or developmental impact leads us to question whether the projects invariably associated with ISL visits contribute to the enhanced well-being of the community; examining the interpersonal impact raises the issue of the nature of the relationships established between host families (particularly the host mothers) and their Global North visitors; and examining the impact with respect to cross-cultural issues leads us to ask if there is a transfer of cultural knowledge between the hosts and their visitors and to what extent that transfer is simply one-way (invariably to the benefit of the visitors), or one which also allows host residents to enhance their understanding of the life and culture in the home country of the visitors.

Finally, what are the political implications of these programs? This latter aspect is complex and can include, broadly speaking, at least two fundamental sets of relationships, namely those: (a) within the village between what Toomey (2008) calls the *power rich* and the *power poor* residents of the village (i.e., those who are involved in decision-making and those who are marginal to, or entirely absent from, local decision-making); and (b) between the host community organization and the Nicaraguan (or Nicaraguan-based) facilitating organization and/or the foreign sending organization.

In the final analysis, we seek to develop an understanding of the actual or potential transformative impact of ISL visits on the host villages and their inhabitants. In short, is it possible to envision that the villagers will have a transformative experience that many sending organizations, at least rhetorically, hope their Northern participants/clients may have? Or, are the villagers merely providing to their visitors a quasi-touristic service, which is invariably monetized? Finally, if it is not a transformative experience for the host communities, do ISL visits and the attendant projects contribute to or reinforce a neocolonial mentality and dependency?

Typically, the ISL programs in our study involved groups of about 10-15 senior high school students who, accompanied by their teachers, spend about 7-10 days in Nicaragua, including 5-7 days in a rural village. During the community visits the visitors stayed in local residents' homes, assisted in some sort of "service" project (e.g., building/repairing a school, working in a daycare centre) and engaged in a number of additional "learning"

activities (e.g., meetings with local residents and officials, visits to social-support centres of interest).

Our research in this area began in 2013 and at that time involved interviews and focus groups in five rural communities in Nicaragua which had hosted ISL groups, along with interviews with a dozen ISL program coordinators located in Nicaragua (for a detailed description of this study, see O’Sullivan and Smaller, 2016). Our more recent research, for which the fieldwork took place in 2015-2016, allowed us to deepen our 2013 initiative and was carried out by a research team made up of the two authors, along with Xochilt Hernández—a Nicaraguan anthropologist who conducted the interviews in the communities—and Ashley Rerrie, a Canadian graduate student in international development studies.

Four Nicaraguan villages were selected for this research phase, only one of which had been included in the 2013 study. Villages were selected based on the authors’ long-standing involvement in solidarity and ISL programs in Nicaragua and in consultation with local informants.¹ In each case, prior arrangements were made through village contacts and community meetings were held to allow Hernández to explain the purpose and methodology of the research. Typically, Hernández visited the communities three times—once for the preliminary meeting to explain the purpose of the research and twice to conduct interviews—and spent approximately five days in each host village. These visits occurred before and after the ISL visits, and on two occasions she was also in the village during the student visits. She conducted interviews with over 100 residents in the four villages and made extensive field notes. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, based on questions relating to the project objectives. Of particular interest were questions sounding out residents’ reasons for being involved in the project (or not, as an effort was made to interview villagers who were not involved with the visits) and why the host mothers agreed to having student visitors stay in their homes. The host mothers were asked about their impressions of the students with whom they came into such close contact, and all of the respondents, including those not directly involved with the visits, were asked to express their opinion of the ISL programs’ advantages and disadvantages for the community. Standard ethical research procedures were followed and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and downloaded on NVivo.

In addition, during January/February 2016, the authors and Rerrie (the Canadian research assistant) conducted individual interviews with 10 Nicaraguan residents, located mainly in Managua, who were directly involved in developing and coordinating programs in Nicaragua for Canadian and U.S. students. About half were native Nicaraguans; the

¹ Three of the four villages discussed here have received ISL groups through Casa Canadiense, a Canadian NGO founded in the early 1990s that promotes and supports ISL programs. Both authors of this chapter have a long-standing association with Casa; Smaller is a co-founder of the organization and until recently served as a member of its Board of Directors while O’Sullivan is currently a board member.

other half were American expats, all of whom had lived in Nicaragua for periods ranging from six to 30 years. All had significant Nicaraguan community field experience, working directly in rural villages with local residents on community development and/or ISL projects. In each case, these individuals were involved with education/development organizations—some faith-based, some non-profit. Interviews were generally held in the homes or workplaces of these interviewees and ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in length. In the text below, these individuals are referred to as coordinators. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The data analysis was treated as an ongoing process. Transcribing the interviews served as a preliminary exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2013), which allowed us to acquire a general sense of the data. Then, an inductive approach was used going from detailed data to the general codes and themes. Before coding the data, a list of priori codes for the two sets of participants was created based on the research objectives and research questions. The list of codes was expanded as new emerging themes were identified. After all transcripts were coded using NVivo, a final list of codes was prepared and grouped to a more manageable number of themes. Diverse strategies were used throughout the process of data collection and analysis to determine trustworthiness of interpretations and findings.

One significant limitation to this mode of inquiry relates to the understandable concern of community respondents not wishing to say anything critical about a program that they deemed beneficial to their communities—this in spite of the interviewer’s attempt to assure them of anonymity, and that the research was intended solely to help improve the programs, not to downgrade or eliminate them. Similarly, it is certainly possible that the comments and reflections of the program coordinators themselves might well have been shaded, however unintentionally, by their own structural connections to these programs.

Descriptions of the Research Sites

All four villages in which we conducted field work during 2015-2016 were located in rural areas in the western half of Nicaragua, and all generally shared similar economic modes—small individual family plots for subsistence farming, supplemented by seasonal day labour undertaken for larger farmers in the area, and in some cases, by remittances from family members working elsewhere either seasonally or full-time (e.g., on a coffee plantation or working in one of Nicaragua’s larger cities, or abroad in Costa Rica or elsewhere). In other ways, however, they were quite different from one another, which allowed for useful comparisons in relation to their respective responses to ISL programs in their communities.

First, the geographic location of the communities ranged considerably. San Ignatius² is located within 15 kilometres on good roads to two large urban areas (Jinotega and

² All names are pseudonyms.

Matagalpa) and is serviced by local buses. Santa Clara is located about 40 minutes by car (far longer by public transportation) south of Nicaragua's capital, Managua. It is approximately five kilometres from the main road. The village is not served by public transit and trekking to the highway where the secondary school and some stores are located or to catch a bus to Managua involves a long and steep walk for those who do not have a vehicle (almost everyone in the community). Los Sureños, too, is located several kilometres from the nearest bus route, requiring the inhabitants, none of whom had a vehicle, to walk the distance. Pueblo Arriba was by far the most isolated of the four villages studied. It is located more than 100 kilometres north of Managua. The final leg of the trip from the capital involves travelling from the regional administrative centre which is the municipality closest to the village where public transportation and most services are located. This approximately 12-kilometre trip on very poorly maintained roads through the mountains can take as much as two hours in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Pueblo Arriba is composed of four self-identifying entities that are spread over a large, mountainous area with individual homes that can be as much as 30 to 40 minutes walking distance apart. Pueblo Arriba is the most geographically dispersed and isolated of the four communities surveyed in the 2015-2016 study.

Secondly, while three of the villages consisted mainly of *mestizo*-identified populations (dominant Spanish colonial background), the people of Pueblo Arriba self-identified as Indigenous and considered themselves a part of a much larger regional municipality, which is coordinated/governed by a regional Indigenous organization. Thirdly, while all four of the villages surveyed were each part of larger formal regional political/administrative structures that involved electing representatives to municipal councils, these centralized structures were routinely viewed as not meeting the basic needs of the rural communities outside of the municipal centre. In practice, the internal decision-making structures and processes—both formal and informal—seemed to vary considerably from village to village. As noted above, in Pueblo Arriba much of the decision-making (certainly related to the ISL program) was undertaken by officials of the regional Indigenous organization with headquarters located at a considerable distance from the village itself. An example of this centralized decision-making is reflected in the fact that in the case of their first two ISL groups, the host village was informed about the visits only after the sending organization had negotiated the logistics of the visit with the leaders of the Indigenous organization

Decision-making in the other villages for the most part took place “closer to home” but still involved diverse modes of interaction, particularly as it pertained to accommodating the ISL programs. For example, decisions about hosting ISL groups in Santa Clara were made by a small group of women who led a formal village-level cooperative organization. In Los Sureños, where all the families were related, decisions were made in meetings to which all of the adult population was invited. In San Ignatius, the host organization was a Solidarity Committee, established in 1996, that coordinated the visits to

the community in collaboration with host families and other community organizations. The work of this Solidarity Committee will be described in more detail below.

Findings

This section will report on the results of our data collection that encompassed the some 100 interviews undertaken in the four identified villages, and the interviews held with the ten NGO coordinators in Managua. Overall, we found considerable congruence between the comments of the two groups; however, as will be noted, in some cases there were differences—some simply in nuance, while others reflected considerable divergence.

Three Villages

We begin with a survey of our findings in three of the four villages (San Ignatius will be dealt with separately, given its significant differences). The residents we interviewed in these three villages, including those who were marginal to the program, were unanimous in their opinion that the programs were very positive, benefited the community and everyone involved and that they should be continued.

Reasons for the interviewees' strong views seemed to fall into three categories. First, many spoke of the ways in which they saw the visiting students benefiting from their experiences in a very different cultural setting. As one host mother expressed it, "They like to share and they like to learn, learn from our experiences." Another younger woman stated, "[They come] for an intercultural experience and also to do service in the community. ... We want their support and to share with them about our community, what we do here and to find out what they do in Canada, as well." Many recognized the importance, for visitors and residents alike, of the interactive nature of the program, which does suggest the concept of working in solidarity. As one father put it, "Well, the young people came, I think, with the objective of seeing and knowing how *campesinos* live and to know of our necessities and our difficulties that we have. They come to learn certain things and this taught us certain things as well."

Related to this were the ways in which residents commented on their own enhancement of cross-cultural understandings. This benefit was often defined in terms of spending time and sharing with their guests, enhancing cross-cultural understandings about their respective life situations and experiences. Typical comments included:

"We put them up because they come to collaborate with us; to teach us things; to help move us forward, so we gladly welcome them into our homes."

"We almost never leave the community and all we see are each other. We want to see people, both from Nicaragua and elsewhere, other countries. It is good to have this opportunity and to make new friendships."

“To learn about other aspects of life because at night they talk to us about their lives—it’s not at all comparable with what we have here.”

“We spent lovely moments with them. They taught us and we learned from them as we taught them. Sometimes language was a problem but we’d write notes and come to understand ... it was lovely to be with them.”

Affective relations also figured strongly in interviewees’ comments, in spite of what seems like quite short-lived encounters. In the words of one mother, “They play soccer with our kids ... it’s a happy week, we are distracted and it is sad when they go; sharing time with them, walking with them ... they bring love and affection during their stay.” A second mother noted, poignantly, “I cry because of the affection I develop. I see empty rooms after they leave.” As yet another mother expressed, “It is a well-organized community and they feel very happy here, and us too, we are happy when they come here; the entire community is united and when they leave some even cry because we miss them.” One author of this paper, in attendance at a *despedida* (farewell party) for a group of Canadian students on a separate occasion, observed that the delegated spokesperson for the village, a very elderly woman, was unable to say more than a few words before she broke out in tears.

Finally, the topic of material contributions that visitors provided to the community was central in the interviewees’ analysis. In all cases, the community project work which the visitors undertook—building needed schools, community centres, latrines, preparing seed gardens and so forth—was highly praised. In addition, a number of comments were made about materials that the students brought with them, including funds to purchase building materials and equipment for the community project, school and medical supplies, and sports equipment for the community to distribute. While respondents did express gratitude for the material benefits associated with the ISL visits, these were invariably mentioned within the context of how much they appreciated the social interaction with their young visitors. Appreciation for the material benefits struck us as being less important to the villagers than the emotional and social ties that occurred during the visits.

For the most part, the NGO officials’ comments echoed what we heard from village residents themselves. These coordinators saw villagers benefiting significantly in all three core findings noted above: affective relations, intercultural exchange and the benefits of material contributions. Coordinators strongly believed that community residents (particularly women) very much appreciated the intrinsic value of these programs, and the ways in which residents personally and communally benefited socially from students living in their homes and engaging in their communities. As well, a number of comments were made that these visits seemed to enhance not only residents’ personal global understandings and perspectives but also their belief that these exchanges raised the status of their communities (and perhaps country). In addition, at the personal level, some coordinators related that residents had told them that merely interrelating with these foreigners helped them become more confident in working with their visitors. One

coordinator spoke about a resident who described her experiences in attempting to converse with students who could not speak Spanish. Initially, this made the resident very anxious and nervous; however, recognizing that students were also having trouble expressing themselves, she soon realized that “now I feel I’m just like them; I feel we’re just the same, we’re just people.”

Other community benefits were also cited by individual coordinators. Two separate interviewees expressed the belief that village youth having direct contact with others their own age but with very different cultural backgrounds might also widen their perceptions of life’s possibilities (notwithstanding material and cultural realities). A third coordinator speculated on the value of these visits in simply providing a kind of “entertainment” for local residents—an appreciated divergence from what the coordinator described as “an otherwise mundane day-to-day village existence, particularly in areas with no television or even electricity.”

Did residents voice any concerns about the ISL programs or the visitors associated with these programs in their villages? In fact, village-based interviewees were very reluctant to respond, even after some encouragement by the interviewer, when asked specifically if they had any problems with the program or its visitors. Only a modest number of concerns were eventually raised by individuals. The most common response by far from residents of the three villages was that their visitors should stay for a longer period of time (particularly in cases where students remained only for about a week). Their reasons for requesting that the visits be longer were related to how they saw the demands of their own working lives interfering with the time they had to spend with their visitors. As one man noted, “They should stay longer; we aren’t even in the house until 4:00 [p.m.] because we are working.” Similarly, a host mother speaking on behalf of the resident youth of the village noted, “The [local] boys work ... [and] they haven’t got a lot of time to spend with the students to teach them local dances; there isn’t time to teach them that.”

Language differences understandably made it difficult for many to engage in the level of conversation they desired, although some did note that basic communication through hand signals, body language and notes helped somewhat. Furthermore, two facilitators who provided assistance with translation accompanied each group. In certain villages, concerns were raised by some mothers about the availability of what they perceived to be appropriate food for their visitors. As one mother noted, “We give what we can, what we have, but at the same time we want to give some salad, those who are vegetarians want their salad, their vegetables.” A few respondents commented that occasionally it was difficult to provide these “extras” given the level of per diem payments they received for hosting and feeding visiting students.

By comparison, a number of coordinators did raise concerns about some aspects of ISL programs in villages, many of which were not voiced (for whatever reasons) by village residents themselves. More than one coordinator believed that the “home stay” aspects of these ISL programs raised divisions within communities, particularly the matter of host

families being seen by other community residents as receiving disproportionate advantage (material or otherwise). In addition, some coordinators reflected on the potential divisiveness of procedures used in assigning homes for this purpose; as one put it, “You end up having competition in the community.” Directly related to this issue was the matter of the per diem amount paid by the NGOs; in the case of the villages we observed, initially US\$10.00 per day was allotted for room and board, which was raised to US\$15.00 partway through our study as a result of concerns raised by some village residents. To be sure, in relative terms, US\$15.00 per day (doubled in the frequent case of assigning two students to a house) does seem disproportionate to the average daily salary of a rural farm worker (reported as being approximately US\$5.00 per day), which may well explain the reported tensions in the community between families who are assigned students and those who are not.

Whether or not host residents are “overpaid” for their efforts, one Nicaraguan coordinator who was very experienced with and sensitive to rural community life described the ways that she believed ISL-program hosting took a toll on local residents, whether or not the latter ever mentioned let alone complained about these situations:

I noticed that for the community that received the group, it was very hard. It was like a burden for them because many people have to work. I mean the community had to change their life during those days. They have to stop doing many things... It was more work for people here and it was really tiring; they were supposed to come here because they wanted to help, but it was the opposite.

When probed as to why the community put up with this, the same coordinator explained:

The people didn’t want to make them feel bad, they would say yes or they would do all kind of things to make things happen and organize things, because they didn’t want to make people feel bad. They wanted to welcome them and in spite of the work, yes.

As one village resident confirmed, “One thing, if a house isn’t clean I’ve noticed that people get worried and tidied things up, keep the house clean so it looks good—that I have noticed. They tidy up in the street near the house.”

Interestingly, while these concerns about extra work were not raised by many respondents, a number of villagers and coordinators emphasized the perceived importance of offering hospitality to visitors (from near or far), insisting it very much reflected a national value. In the words of one leader, “The sense of hospitality is very embedded into the culture.” In that context, it is perhaps understandable why the work involved is very much overshadowed by this national mandate, and it too may explain its highly gendered nature. It also might help explain host residents’ interest in feeding their guest as well as

possible, although there was also indication that, for some groups at least, NGO officials also promoted the “need” for “proper” nutrition among the village residents.

Another issue of considerable concern, voiced by most coordinators, was the bringing of gifts to families and individuals (in spite of strong prohibitions leveled by the NGO program organizers), which again was something that raised jealousies within the village.

San Ignatius

As compared to the other three villages examined, San Ignatius, or certainly the Solidarity Committee (the host organization), had a very different perspective on ISL programs and the expectations they had of their visitors. Based on the interviews with residents of San Ignatius (some of whom are active Steering Committee members, while others are less closely involved), the village had initially welcomed ISL groups and had appreciated their commitment to the host organization’s stated interests in promoting mutual respect, understanding and solidarity. A number of respondents expressed the same kinds of positive experiences as noted above by their counterparts in the other three villages. Those interviewed were also very clear regarding what they wanted out of these ISL programs and participants: “What we wanted was for the visitors to integrate themselves into the work of the community and relate to the people in their host family and in the community.” In the words of another, “The most important thing for us is your presence, the work you are doing and the friendship that we have.” As a third resident noted, “If groups wanted to come, they would be welcome, not only to stay with a family but to involve themselves in the work of the community.”

However, over the years, the members of the Solidarity Committee discerned a dramatic shift in the philosophy and values both of the sending organizations as well as of the participants from the North. Several specific issues were noted. First, in the words of one resident, “We were concerned with the attitude of the visitors.” Further, another noted, with considerable regret, that they began to experience:

A loss of culture in the community because the youth here became accustomed to the life that they brought—they brought other customs and our youth lost their sense of where they came from, their customs, their roots and all that.

This change of attitude was characterized for a number of our informants by the insistence of some of the visiting groups to engage in practices clearly in opposition to village values (e.g., visitors bringing their own bottled water and food to the village ranked high in villagers’ minds). As one resident expressed, “As for the food, some were vegetarians and didn’t eat what we eat and others simply didn’t like the food. Others wouldn’t drink the water. What kind of world is this?” Another resident explained,

Then they wanted to bring food. No, we said, no food; you will eat what we eat in the village. The other thing was the containers of water. We did not want them to bring containers of water to the community because we have water.

Delegations also began demanding their own hosting/sleeping arrangements in the village homes. The Steering Committee insisted that only one visitor stay with each family, arguing that this ensured a closer relationship between the students and their host family members. As one resident expressed, “For example, they were afraid to stay alone in a house and they said if the problem was lack of beds, they’d bring a hammock. We said no.” Bringing unrequested and undesired gifts also became an unresolved and contentious issue—“We didn’t want people giving things to the hosts either upon arrival or departure...The gift-giving gave rise to conflict, bad interpretations, and the loss of friendship”—as was visitors’ demands for changes to traditional visitor accommodation routines. Another concern was that some visitors engaged in amorous relations with local young people.

Even more problematic for the Steering Committee were the responses of the sending organizations to their expressions of concern, and their attempts to discuss possible changes to the routines:

At first we couldn’t say anything but there came a point where we sat down and said that there was something happening that we couldn’t ignore and we had to discuss it with the [sending] organization. We said that there were things that we didn’t like and if you accept what we want, keep coming, but if not, we cannot continue working in this way. We did this with several delegations but there were no reactions; they just listened to us, which bothered us. For example, the issue of [the visitors] dating [local young people]—they observed that too—they didn’t say anything [to their people], they just drew apart from us.

As a result, the Solidarity Committee terminated their participation in this ISL program. As far as the leaders of the Steering Committee are concerned, groups are still fully welcome to continue coming, but on the terms that they have established. As one expressed it, “It was the delegations that had to solve the problems. We just received them and share with them but the biggest responsibility comes from them. We came through with what we offered.”

Understandably, these stark differences between San Ignatius and the other three villages required us to think deeply about what they meant.

Discussion: Decolonizing Possibilities? For Whom?

Intercultural exchanges do not happen in some neutral, ahistorical space, but are enacted on a landscape formed by past historical relations, from ongoing dependencies and, sometimes, from out-and-out exploitation. (Tarc, 2013, p. 15)

These global encounters ... may not be consciously present in the minds of the actual participants in the exchange or encounter, [however] they are there epistemologically in the inherited paradigms of unequal language and meaning-making which constitute the interlocutors on both sides of the encounter. (Menezes de Souza, as cited in Tarc, 2013, p. vii)

Among the many findings in this study, perhaps one of the most intriguing relates to the seemingly contradictory reports from village residents on the one hand, and the NGO coordinators on the other, as to the overall value and impact of ISL programs. Every resident interviewed in three of the four villages thought the programs were very worthwhile, with the only significant concern being that the visits were too short in length. In comparison, a number of concerns were raised by coordinators and the residents of the fourth village: assigning of host families and gift-giving raised jealousies and animosities in the community; increased community dependency on Northern largesse; increased labour for village women; and the detrimental influence of Northern cultural practices among the village youth. At the same time, many coordinators did laud positive benefits which accrued: enhancing material conditions in the village; provision of new contacts with foreigners, thus enhancing cross-cultural perspectives; and the affective nature of the relationships between visitors and villagers.

Based on her study of a Costa Rican village, Smedley (2016) argues that some host families have, in effect, converted their homes into informal lodging for foreign visitors. Several of our informants indicated their desire to attract eco-tourists to their villages; one man even told us that based on his experience with the first-ever ISL visit to his community, he wanted to train to become a professional eco-tourist guide. The hosting of ISL programs has become a direct strategy for economic and material gain (whether realized by the entire village or disproportionately by specific individuals within it), and these actions should be understood, if not lauded, on that basis. Therefore, it is perhaps understandable why village residents might downplay or refuse to divulge any perceived negative aspects of these programs to enquiring foreigners (or, in our case, to a local research assistant working for such people).

However, other researchers (Andreotti, 2006; Jefferess, 2008; Zemach-Bersin, 2008), along with at least some of the NGO coordinators interviewed, argue that many of ISL programs, especially those demonstrating little interest in exploring critical aspects of traditional North-South contexts, generally do little more than reinforce dependency and neocolonial relations. In this regard, our discussions with residents of San Ignatius did

much to strengthen our understanding of such concerns. As they found, even ISL groups that espoused objectives of solidarity in their discourse often seem to display, intentionally or otherwise, the more traditional relations of inequality in undertaking their programs in host villages. This was perhaps most pronounced (or at least most noticeable) with regards to issues of food, water and housing arrangements and the activities undertaken by the visiting participants. Even some of the most “well-meaning” organizations (those with progressive-sounding claims of purpose) seem to request or perhaps even demand conformity by the community to “Northern expectations” in this regard. As we found during our visits with the other three villages, these arrangements are usually agreed to by residents and can be seen as reinforcing the dominance of the Northern partners to the relationship.

The issue of ISL programs creating economic dependencies and furthering traditional colonial relations did evoke differential comments from various respondents in our study. A San Ignatius resident spoke strongly in support of the village’s ban on programs, arguing that:

We do not seek financial resources from away. Resources are important but it is the communities themselves that have to seek alternatives ... we have to demand from the authorities that which we need. ... In the long run if [hosting ISL visitors] becomes a project, but if the students cease to come, what is going to happen? The family will be accustomed that they come, they pay me, and I’m happy. If we remain accustomed to live as we do and share what we have, it is more beneficial for the families because in that way we will seek survival mechanisms within our own community.

However, we were certainly cautioned by at least one informant (a program coordinator) about not “victimizing” residents and their purported inability and/or powerlessness to understand or change underlying power relations between themselves and ISL participants. He reminded us of the traditional culture and material conditions in which they lived, and the need to take these into consideration in understanding both the reasons for stasis and the possibilities for change:

But that kind of frank dialogue between the organization and the community is very well needed. It is difficult to have because the community...they have a need, yet they know this is a way to also promote community development and getting some income for the families. But people are a little bit afraid to be frank about issues that might arise because they might think that they can lose the income. So that’s the part that I think takes time.

Finally, while not the central focus of our present research, it is clear from earlier research we have undertaken (O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2013) along with many other studies, that

these programs have very limited or no effect on “decolonizing” the values and beliefs of participants from the North (Jefferess, 2008, 2012; Tarc, 2013; Zemach-Bersin, 2008). To be sure, there are some reports of a minority of students returning home having been “transformed” in their beliefs—as evidenced by their changed discourse, their subsequent community activities in relation to solidarity and/or their changed educational and career plans (Gough, 2013; King, 2004; O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2013). For the most part, however, the evidence seems to suggest reinforced (and even enhanced) beliefs in the superiority of the North and the legitimacy of the “poor but happy” syndrome, as well as the “need” to help and/or save the “poor”.³

In sum, as noted by several San Ignatius residents, we are left with the thought that these programs—at least the short-term stays that we have observed—seem to cause more harm than good, both for the participating students as well as the host villages.

Conclusions

Clearly, the example of San Ignatius’s eschewing of traditional ISL programs, as part of their overall determination to disrupt traditional North–South (neo)colonial relations, is to be lauded.⁴ However, to our knowledge, this is the only community in Nicaragua to take these steps; in fact, many others are not only continuing but also actively promoting increased ISL activity in this area. Given the current economic realities and the presumed right of individuals and communities—particularly in rural areas—to make their own (hopefully informed, free) decisions about matters such as these, it could be suggested that if there is to be significant change in the effects of ISL programs (both on their participants and host villages), then such change will have to be contemplated and initiated by the ISL programs themselves. But how might this happen?

In short, it would involve these ISL programs seeking to promote an *epistemological rupture* (Althusser, 1965, 2006) among its participants—first by interrogating their own motivational claims in the light of their activities to date, then revising all components of their overall program (before, during and after the village visit), and then seeking to establish relationships with communities that can help (or as with San Ignatius, insist on helping) the visitors to experience an alternative world view. Pedagogically, this would involve ISL officials and coordinators taking seriously Andreotti’s (2016) schema (outlined in the literature review above) for provision of a program that serves to “rupture” these traditional understandings and beliefs.

³ One complex issue, raised by residents of San Ignatius and other villages, is the matter of Northerners insisting on bringing their own water and/or food, and/or insisting on food being provided other than that which village residents normally consume, and/or insisting that more than one student be housed with each host family. This certainly intersects with colonial continuities around perceived safety, health and expectations of the “dangerous other,” and remains an issue for ISL programs to grapple with.

⁴ Clearly, a much more complete story about this community is necessary in order to explore in depth and evaluate the historical and contemporary conditions and relations that have led to the actions which they have taken in relation to ISL programs. The authors are presently engaged in further research in this regard.

Very briefly, it would be important that the pre-trip activities involve a serious exploration of the historical realities of North–South relations and their contemporary effects on life in the South, particularly for rural villagers, and the ways in which these relations of dependency and power imbalance are maintained through contemporary political, economic and cultural regimes in the North. Whether or not village visits would involve a “service” component, much more emphasis should be placed on “learning.” Our own experience with ISL programs has shown us that most receiving organizations and communities are quite willing to introduce an explicit content that would draw upon their lived experiences to expose their visitors to something much more than simply seeing how their hosts live from day to day. Attention should also be paid to ensuring participants’ continued engagement post-trip—in reaching out to others to challenge much of the existing beliefs and ideologies about the reasons for the historical and contemporary conditions in the South and the role which the North has played, and continues to play, in maintaining these circumstances.

In this way, it is hoped that these re-envisaged ISL programs might actually assist in significantly altering North–South relations in the North at the individual, community and even national level; in short, “decolonizing” relations for all concerned.

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