
Saving Africa: A Critical Study of Advocacy and Outreach Initiatives by University Students

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ABSTRACT: This exploratory qualitative study reports on the perspectives of students belonging to campus clubs at one Canadian university who conduct advocacy activities on issues that relate to Africa. Our study focuses on a particular social action (advocacy) that takes place in a particular social site (university campus), with the aim to critically examine how students think about their advocacy work, what they see as appropriate practices, and their sense of the ethical issues around advocacy. Five themes emerged from our analysis of the interviews: (1) knowledge about the issues; (2) oversimplification; (3) homogenization; (4) trade-offs and competition; and (5) ethical engagement. Our findings suggest that motivation for success and popularity became influential factors in the way that student-led advocacy initiatives were set out to be effective in the university setting. Advocacy activities thus became fraught with the oversimplification of issues, resulting in work that reinforced prevailing stereotypes about Africa. Such approaches to advocacy can propagate

paternalistic and totalizing images of Africans as helpless and waiting to be “saved.”

Introduction

University students are participating in increasing numbers in international engagement activities that are seen as promoting global citizenship and effecting positive change in the world, many with an expressed interest in issues that affect developing countries (Cohen, Vega, & Watson, 2001). To this effect, university campus clubs and student societies provide students with advocacy related opportunities as a way to “make a difference” and to enhance their university experience. Students who participate may make new friends, learn new skills, and become passionately engaged in various social change activities. Student-led campus clubs usually focus on particular areas of interest with specific concentrations: for example, clubs may take a scholarly focus (e.g. Archaeology Club), arts (e.g. Music Club), cultural (e.g. Asian Cooking Club), health and wellness (e.g. Yoga Club), advocacy (e.g. Fight Homelessness Club), and the like. Examples of student-led advocacy related activities might include fundraising, awareness campaigns, signing petitions and writing letters to political representatives about a particular issue, such as homelessness, and what policy makers can do. The popularity of campus clubs is also a testament to the scale and dynamism of student-led initiatives.

The study reported here elicited and examined the experience and viewpoints of student leaders of campus clubs, at one Canadian university, that conduct advocacy related activities on issues that relate to developing countries in Africa, a continent that continues to remain of considerable interest to many students. Using a criticalist lens, we focused on a particular social action (advocacy) that takes place in a particular social site (university campus), aiming to understand what, if any, colonizing epistemes may be at play – that is, how students who are out to “save the world” situate themselves and position others in the enterprise of advancing a particular social mission.

Background: Saving Africa

“Saving Africa has rightly become a popular concern, uniting Bono and Bill Gates, Angelina Jolie and Pope Benedict XVI. Despairing of academic scepticism, the intellectual force of this movement, Jeffrey Sachs, appeals directly to the people promising \$110 per head to end destitution and disease in Africa. Who could resist such a humanitarian bargain?”

Gregory Clark, *How to Save Africa*, 2007

The 1MillionShirts humanitarian campaign (1millionshirts.org) controversy in the United States in the spring of 2010 is a clear example of the types of approaches to advocacy that are a cause for concern. The stated goal of the campaign was to collect one million t-shirts to send to “poor people” in Africa. The campaign stirred up heated discussions on aid and advocacy activities, and the perils of humanitarian aid as a development mechanism. Criticism came from various high profile bloggers.¹ Rasna Warah, a newspaper columnist responded that good intentions have, in effect, turned Africa into the “greatest dumping ground on the planet...” (see Wadhams, 2010). The campaign is one among many initiatives that raise questions around the ethics of advocacy and need to be examined critically.

A detailed analysis of the work and policy decisions undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) points to some of the social responsibility and accountability issues affecting

advocacy initiatives. Public criticism of Western NGOs calls for “more thorough, rigorous, and objective” approaches to advocacy initiatives, with a need for stronger evaluation frameworks to assess impact (Anderson, 2000, p. 3-4). Concerns around power imbalances between NGOs and aid recipients in developing countries are surrounded by criticism of the propagation of “human rights” by Western organizations in ways that undermine local control and cultural values (Bell & Coicaud, 2007). Unequal power relations between stakeholder groups can also result in resource allocation and policy choices that do not always benefit the most vulnerable groups (Nabacwa, 2010). Prominent and powerful NGOs may evade accountability as the pace of their growth exceeds local government monitoring mechanisms – an issue recently highlighted by highly publicized scandals affecting some NGOs (Siddiquee & Faruqi, 2009).

Technology-enabled social networking sites contain a growing body of critical discussions on advocacy practices. Social media tools, such as Twitter, Facebook and dedicated blog sites enable prominent development professionals and academics to openly question and comment on various international advocacy efforts (see Mamdani, 2009; Taub, 2009). Discussions explore a range of critical topics: implications of good intentions and the quality of advocacy and aid (Schimmelpfennig, 2009); unaccountable aid practices and skewed perceptions of the poor (Easterly & Freschi, 2009); perpetuated stereotypes of Africa (Doh, 2009); and the unintended negative consequences (i.e., perpetuating structural inequalities, charity vs. social justice approaches, neo-colonialist forms of exploitation, and power imbalance) that can arise from advocacy (see Tiessen, 2012; Perold, Graham, Mavungu, Cronin, Muchemwa, & Lough, 2012; Crabtree, 2013; Seay, 2005).

The Study

Informed by Carspecken’s (1996) work on critical qualitative inquiry in educational research, we approached our study using a criticalist lens, focusing on issues around power, privilege, othering and human agency (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). We explored how these factors may influence the approaches university students take in their advocacy work on issues that relate to developing countries in Africa. We used the concept of episteme here to convey particular ways of knowing and relating to the world. Colonizing epistemes are framed “through imperial eyes” that convey “a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of [Other] peoples – spiritually, intellectually, socially, and economically” (Smith, 1999, p. 56).

Our choice of critical methodology positions us to not only think about and understand oppressive practices; it positions us to also unmask these practices, challenge taken-for-granted perspectives, and influence change in the way advocacy related work is done. Hence, our research is not meant merely to increase knowledge about these issues, it is also meant to bring about critical consciousness and action.

Our study takes place at a Canadian university, identified as one of North America’s largest public research and teaching institutions, housing over 3,500 faculty members and over 45,000 fulltime undergraduate students. There are over 350 student clubs hosted by the university’s Alma Mater Society (AMS). Each club is required to have an executive committee comprising a president, treasurer, and vice-president. From the AMS website, we generated a list of campus club organizations that conduct advocacy activities concerning Africa. Seven clubs were identified, all indicating that they were doing advocacy work and that they were affiliated with national or international not-for-profit organizations that were engaged in issues concerning Africa. Student executive members of these clubs were contacted to confirm that they indeed do advocacy work

pertaining to Africa, on the basis of which they were invited to participate in the study. Executive members from five clubs agreed to participate, three were male and two female, all undergraduate students. To ensure anonymity, we decided not to collect details about the student's major, year of study, or other identifying features. Approval for the study was received from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the university where this study was conducted.

We conducted in-depth interviews with each student executive that lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Before beginning the interview, the participants were informed about the aim of the study, explaining that the ethical issues around student-led advocacy initiatives have not been fully examined and that we wished to explore the potential threats and benefits of advocacy. Each interview began with each participant describing the mandate of the club they represented and the type of advocacy they do. The discussion then moved to open-ended questions about why they do this work, what motivates them, how issues are identified, how advocacy strategies are developed, the type and quality of contributions the student members make, and how they know that they have been successful. During the interview discussion, we focused on how the participants described and explained their beliefs, reasoning, experiences, and values in relation to their advocacy work. We listened carefully for narratives pertaining to the perceived need for advocacy for Africa, and followed-up with open-ended questions that prompted detailed explanations of the reasoning behind the perceived need and corresponding student motivations for advocacy. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We conducted a line-by-line analysis of the transcribed text, coding and categorizing the narrative accounts of the key participants in our study, and organizing the categories into key themes.

Results

Our detailed analysis of the transcripts involved: searching for ideas that reflected the objectives of the study; examining, categorizing, and testing assertions for reliability; and recombining evidence from the different interview transcripts with regard to description and interpretation of the emergent themes (Kvale, 2008). Informed by a criticalist orientation, we sought to gain a better insight into: (1) the students' experience of advocacy; (2) what they think about their advocacy work; (3) what they see as appropriate practices; and (4) their sense of the ethical issues around advocacy. Analysis of interview data sets from individual participants involved comparing within and across the sets to further clarify and interpret the initial tentative themes that reflected the above objectives. It should be pointed out that the above objectives are intertwined and therefore the emergent themes were considered to respond to all the four objectives holistically. We individually and collectively reviewed the interview transcripts by reading back and forth as we searched for emergent themes that cut across interview data sets.

Five themes emerged from our analysis of the interviews: (1) knowledge about the issues; (2) oversimplification; (3) homogenization; (4) trade-offs and competition; and (5) ethical engagement. Each theme is elucidated below with representative narratives extracted from the interview transcripts. The names used for representative quotes are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

Knowledge about the Issues

The most common advocacy activities on campus were tabling, posters, rallies, pamphlet distribution, petition-signing, writing letters to political representatives, and organising fundraising events. Much of the information used for advocacy efforts is passed down from larger national and/or international (parent) non-profit organizations that affiliate with the campus clubs. However,

not all of the clubs receive direct mandates and advocacy information from the parent head offices. Some are relatively independent with regards to campaign choice and event planning. Consequently, we became particularly interested in the source and quality of information that informed advocacy activities. We discovered that having and presenting accurate and valid information to the public was seen by the key informants as less important than the act of advocacy in and of itself.

First, our key participants indicated that there are varying levels of knowledge among the student members in each club about many of the issues being advocated for:

Gary: There are times when people aren't as aware as they should be. Not all students will be able to answer questions when perhaps they should. [...] We don't expect everyone to be an expert [...] There are times when people should know more probably, at least the stuff we're promoting directly.

At the very least, the club executives were expected to have a strong foundation of knowledge and could guide the membership on the issues at stake; however, this was not always the case as represented by John, one of the participants:

John: I just find that even for a lot of clubs, the execs themselves don't know enough about the issue – if they get questions about it, they don't really know what they're talking about. They know the general gist of it, why it's a good thing, but if you ask them more, they're a little blank.

As a result, on occasion, awareness raising information could be presented without substantiation. In this case, the general expectation was that it was not the advocate's responsibility to ensure that the provided information was entirely accurate; it was up to the individual consumer to account for and verify the accuracy of the information that was being presented, a viewpoint eloquently expressed by Mary:

Mary: It's up to the individual to decide, I think, how you interpret the information. It's up to you to do the research. Maybe it's society's role and responsibility for education and critical thinking. I don't think you protect people from lies. Where there's a fair ability to do it yourself, then I think it's up to yourself.

Validating the information was seen as important because what is received from the parent organization is sometimes inaccurate, however, not everyone took the effort to correct the information. Instead, erroneous information was simply ignored:

Anna: One thing I've noticed is that, especially when the [organization's] website lists factual information, like numbers and stuff, every once in a while you'll have a number that makes no sense at all or a number that's completely taken out of context. [...] Honestly, I usually don't take the effort to do the research, to double-check. Usually, if something on the website seems incorrect, then I just don't mention it.

Lack of knowledge about issues and attitudes toward information accuracy led to the oversimplification of the issues, which emerged as another prominent theme.

Oversimplification

The complex political issues addressed by student advocacy groups in the study were often “simplified” in order to make it easier for students to understand. Our key informants indicated that they usually only have a short window of time to get their message across to other students, hence the need to “simplify” issues. Given the understanding that most students generally have little knowledge about world issues, our key informants suggested that it was considered important during advocacy activities to use “simple messaging” that employ “hooks” or “one-liners” as a way of grabbing the attention of students:

Kathy: You need the simplification to get the general message out to a larger group of people, because if you make it too complicated, attention spans don't catch on to that as easily as to a short, striking message that you can instil into their hearts.

Ensuring that the message was short, emotive and commanding was seen as particularly important, even if it only told part of the story or made the issue seem larger and more problematic than it actually is:

Mary: They use great language and vocabulary, but I'm very conscious of the fact that you can use this vocabulary because you're surrounded by it, but how much of it is real and how much of it do you really understand yourself?

Ultimately, the responsibility was placed on the target audience to take the time on their own to delve more deeply into the issues:

Gary: It's something that draws people's attention. Whether it's ethical...I'm ok with that method of advocacy, because I think there's a place for it. I don't think it's ethically wrong to tell, as long as you're not lying, I think it's OK to show a part of the story, for your advantage, even if it's not the whole story. You weren't claiming it to be the whole story. You want to give people the resources to find the whole story if they want to; encourage them to, but it's ok to show a part of the story as a starting point.

Nevertheless, oversimplification was also acknowledged as being problematic even if unavoidable. Presenting issues in this oversimplified way enabled students to feel that they did not have to do very much to effect change. There was also a sense that oversimplification led to the problem of thinking about complex issues as having simplistic and paternalistic solutions that do not properly address the complexity of contextual and historical factors or the need for long-term solutions:

John: Clubs approaching issues in a really simplistic way can be problematic. Here's the problem, here's the issue, here are maybe some solutions or here's a way we can maybe get it out there [and] without addressing the colonial/political history. I believe that's often still a factor in projects. I think sometimes it's easy to forget that stuff and focus on what is the thing we're trying to fix, or even, the idea of trying to fix something that's not yours to fix.

As a specific outcome of oversimplification, the problem of homogenization was consistently referred to as a corresponding problem.

Homogenization

Homogenization is the use of broad strokes for characterizing complex issues. Our key informants acknowledged the tendency to portray Africa as “one big place,” with each country having very similar cultural beliefs and practices, and facing similar issues:

Anna: They [students] just think it’s one big problem spot, Africa. That’s where all the poor people live and that’s why we need to help them.

It was readily acknowledged that their advocacy campaigns do use particular stereotypical images, particularly of “starving children.” A tendency to portray solely negative issues was also noted as an attempt to create a perceived and immediate need for students to take action:

Kathy: I think [the representation is] more skewed towards “Africa has problems” and a lot less on the positives and the progress that has been going on there.

The predominant view of a continent in perpetual distress was thought to lead to an imbalance in the positive and negative representations of Africa. Concern was voiced about a tendency to also present a stagnant conception of African cultures:

John: I think sometimes there’s a tendency when we celebrate those cultures, we think about the really traditional rather than contemporary aspects of those cultures.

Our key informants readily acknowledged the use of oversimplification and homogenizing strategies during their advocacy work and, at times, defended this practice as reasonable and justifiable. It allowed them to create an “easily marketed” message capable of attracting more attention about the issues at stake. Moreover, they also saw this as normal and acceptable advocacy practice:

Anna: When people hear about fundraising clubs, this image of starving children in Africa, that’s what the media bombards them with. To be honest, that’s what a lot of [our club’s] own promotional materials have; African children looking very thin, very fragile, and that’s how they promote [an event]. A lot of people grew up with that perception and that’s pretty much their limitation of what Africa, as the entire continent, is like.

Nevertheless, there was acknowledgment that homogenization was an important ethical issue that needed to be addressed. A few respondents also remarked that African students often took issue and felt uneasy with the “clumping together” of African countries.

Despite the critical stance that our key informants took and the ethical concerns that were acknowledged, they accounted for this as a part of the problem of “trade-off and competition.” In other words, there was simply too much competition demanding the attention of university students — not just between clubs, but also with other interests in students’ lives — and taking the “ethical high road” was seen as a threat to the club’s survival.

Trade-offs and Competition

A recurring concern dealt with having to choose between taking a more ethical approach to advocacy versus choosing strategies that would potentially maximize support and funding for club activities. For some clubs, the primary focus was to garner support from as many people as possible and to raise as much money as possible. The bottom line was that there are “a lot of good causes and they’re all competing for the same student dollar.” This compelled students to focus on strong fundraising campaigns using compelling messaging, even if the messages resulted in oversimplification and stereotyping:

Mary: Homogenization is kind of a problem, but it’s a trade-off. Easy marketing message equals homogenization, but if you try to make it a little more complicated, you don’t know how well the idea will sell.

These sentiments were echoed by participants who emphasized that it was more important to focus on convincing the public that they should support a particular cause than to worry about ethical issues underlying the messaging and how affected populations have been represented.

Despite the ethical risk of misrepresenting the roots of conflict in some countries, or challenges to development by oversimplifying the issues, the students felt that a simplified and easily understood message was desirable and justified when competing for the attention of students on campus.

Ethical Engagement

When asked to reflect on what ethical issues, if any, emerged around advocacy work and how the clubs address them, there was general acknowledgment that there is not very much time to focus on the way the clubs carry out their advocacy campaigns. Much of their meeting time is devoted to the logistics of events and fundraising. There was little time left over to properly learn about the issues or to critically examine the possible ethical implication of their actions. Advocacy work is done mostly for the sake of advocacy in and of itself. The informants indicated that they certainly wished that more time could be spent on the educational and reflective aspect of advocacy. A few said that they personally had thought about the issues and had tried to increase the educational and reflective activities in their clubs but found that the “other members had little interest and time.”

Yet, there was also a strong consensus on the need to integrate topics on ethical approaches to advocacy and international engagement into higher education curricula:

John: It seems to me that this is stuff that you could pretty easily incorporate it into a first-year course. Just get people to write an essay on the ethics of developmental work.

Gary: I do think it would be fantastic to have a group come in to do a workshop, even a focus group, just to find out more about what their needs are, to help them move forward, because obviously ethics is huge.

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to examine how some students at one Canadian university attempt to make sense of the ways they approach advocacy related work on issues affecting African countries. The students we interviewed described advocacy as those efforts that can positively influence the lives of people whom they viewed as vulnerable and marginalized and who cannot protect their own interests. Advocacy related actions were framed as speaking and acting with and on behalf of others in an effort to promote positive change in people's lives, and engaging in struggles with powerful interest groups that exploit people and resist change. However there emerged, at times, a disconnect between how the students defined advocacy and how they went about doing advocacy work.

The motivation for success and popularity became influential factors in the way that some student-led advocacy initiatives were set out to be effective in the university setting. In efforts to gain maximum attention around the advocacy work they do, the student clubs, at times, appeared to focus their presentations to the public in ways that resulted in stereotypical portrayals of the issues, thereby risking misrepresentation, oversimplification, the homogenization of African people, countries, and cultures, and a totalizing vision of Africa. As a result, advocacy efforts become a contentious undertaking where advocacy activities appear to aim to bolster popularity and recognition of the advocates at the expense of the people that advocacy activities are meant to serve. Advocates must be mindful of the adverse outcomes that may result from their advocacy efforts. Although they may have benign intentions, advocates are no less obliged to critically reflect on their work. Yrjölä speaks to this idea of hidden adverse consequences,

Colonialism's strength lay not only in systematic and naked violence towards the colonised land and physical body, but on its invisible violence targeting the natives' minds, their imaginations of themselves as well as their understandings of their histories, present and future possibilities. (Yrjölä, 2009, p. 18)

Advocates who make an effort to reflect on their work through a critical ethical lens can limit the potential for similar "invisible violence" to occur as a result of their advocacy efforts. Our analysis also suggests that advocacy on campus could be seen as a politicized activity and an act of self-interest, and using language that signifies privilege and paternalism. The African Other, through a lens of the "white man's burden," embodies a stigmatized and stereotyped image that becomes central to the noble and altruistic humanitarian enterprise (see Kapoor, 2004). Stereotype-guided initiatives and oversimplification of issues that affect developing countries in Africa result in advocacy activities that misinform the campus community and reinforce prevailing negative biases. The use of graphic images of African individuals and communities affected by poverty is a common practice that some critics have interpreted as a compromise of human dignity, even if done with the justification of fundraising (Tiessen, 2012). Other similar issues include implications around speaking for, rather than with, people who are vulnerable (Holmén & Jirstrom, 2009); focusing on human rights in developing countries, but ignoring the complicity of institutions in home countries that perpetrate human rights abuses (Ibhawoh, 2002); and using "corruption" narratives as a scapegoat when advocacy projects fail, turning an otherwise "complex constellation of phenomena into a simplistic explanation" (Smith, 2010, p. 244). The commodification of suffering and poverty is also of particular concern. Poverty as something possessed has been conveyed in the literature since colonization. It appears this has continued to manifest in a diversity of programs supposedly intended to reduce poverty in Africa. The creation of slum/poverty tourism (Frenzel, Koens, & Steinbrink, 2012), charging a premium for fair trade products with little real

benefit going back to the producers (Valkila, Haaparanta, & Niemi, 2010), and charity versus social justice approaches to development (Rugasira, 2013), are just a few troublesome examples.

When faced with ethical concerns around how African people are portrayed, the students we interviewed expressed a wish to do advocacy work in ways that are, more often than not, reflective of a genuine desire to ensure respect for human dignity. The students felt conflicted by competing interests and acknowledged that they did not always take the time to do advocacy work in ways that were always respectful to the people for whom they were advocating. The pressure toward success and popularity resulted in a compromise around how the issues are represented and possibly an appropriation of the plight of vulnerable people for the benefit of the club. The perception that ethical reflection and communication must be compromised in order to be a successful advocacy group is problematic.

While most universities require ethical guidelines for research initiatives, student advocacy initiatives have no such requirement. On including an emphasis on critical reflection, Kassam (2010) argues that, “to educate without causing students to reflect on consequences is tantamount to making machines out of humans” (p. 207). Given that a number of leading universities have undertaken the goal of “internationalizing” both their curricular and extra-curricular activities in recent years, critical reflection and ethical considerations are seen as essential (Dharamsi et al., 2010). Advocacy efforts must ask self-critical questions. Good intentions are not enough (Schimmelpfennig, 2010). Over the last 20 years, misguided advocacy and relief initiatives have been subject to widespread scrutiny. In light of more serious issues such as the opaque use of relief funds after the Southeast Asia tsunami (Walker, Wisner, Leaning, & Minear, 2005), annexed humanitarian aid in post-genocide Rwanda (Prunier, 2009), and the distribution of free malaria nets in Malawi (Easterly, 2006), the projects of student groups on university campuses may appear inconsequential, but they are not. In each of the above situations, the issues were handled based on an oversimplified view of the people affected. Solutions were designed based on single-dimension conceptions, with little attention paid to contextual complexity. Advocacy campaigns frequently make the same types of mistakes. It is our hope that this study and similar work will inform student advocates to examine their efforts through an ethical lens, leading to efforts that help instead of harm. Such initiatives are already underway and have shown to positively impact on the work of students interested in advocacy.ⁱⁱ

Lastly, it is important to note the limitations of this small case study. Our analysis is based on the experiences of a small group of students representing a handful of campus clubs. We do not claim that our findings are widespread to all such advocacy efforts and groups. The operational philosophies of these clubs will likely change from year-to-year. Some clubs are explicitly required to uphold the mandates of affiliated parent national or international organizations on the form and function of advocacy; others are not. Future studies may critically examine the mandates of these organizations, how they relate to campus chapters, the potential biases exhibited in the framing of advocacy content, and how they identify and manage ethical issues that arise at national and international levels. There also remains much to be studied in relation to international engagement initiatives of the university, and the work of faculty members and their influence on student-led advocacy initiatives.

The findings from this study are being used to support a series of workshops – “So, you want to ‘save’ Africa?” – made available to interested university students who wish to develop a critical consciousness around doing advocacy work. The workshops are student-led and are designed to examine many of the issues that arise from this study. Students are taught to understand themselves as active agents, capable of either perpetuating or changing oppressive sociopolitical constructs.

Student-centered dialogue is an essential feature in facilitating the development of critical consciousness with a focus on ethical engagement.

Endnotes

ⁱ *AidWatch*, William Easterly and Laura Freschi, *Texas in Africa*, Laura Seay, and *Good Intentions Are Not Enough* Sandra Schimmelpfennig, are weblogs written by academics and development practitioners that analyse issues related to development, foreign aid and Western intervention in developing countries, particularly on the African continent.

ⁱⁱ See <http://blogs.ubc.ca/ethicsofisl/>

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