Volunteer tourists in the field: A question of balance?

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on a study of volunteering at a children’s refuge in Mexico. This study explored the relationship between volunteers, their volunteering experiences and the behaviour that resulted. The study findings revealed volunteers were provided with the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the every-day lives of the children at the children’s home. However, the findings also demonstrated that the volunteering experience consisted of much more than just the work duties carried out there, as volunteers also undertook tourist activities. Living in shared accommodation in walking distance from the busy tourist resort of Puerto Vallarta, the volunteers were faced with the difficult task of balancing commitment to their work duties at the children’s home with the lure of more hedonistic pursuits. This balancing act raises questions about the management of volunteer tourists.

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1. Introduction

Volunteer tourism has been the focus of many recent studies in terms of the market, its scope and the motivation of participants. This paper focuses on volunteer tourists in the field and investigates the volunteer tourists’ commitment to their work against the pleasure opportunities offered by the hedonistic environment in the Puerto Vallarta area. The objectives of this study were to identify the reasons behind participation of volunteer tourists in the field and the factors that influenced their behaviour and their role as volunteer tourists. The study employed the method of covert participant observation and data gathered are the results of the principal researcher going undercover among a group of volunteer workers at a children’s home in Mexico. The analysis of the findings leads to a discussion on the nature of the reality of volunteering in a tourist setting and the challenges of achieving an appropriate balance between commitment to work duties and the lure of hedonistic pursuits.

According to Wearing (2001, p. 1), the term volunteer tourism applies to those tourists who

“...for various reasons volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment”

Another definition, provided by Singh and Singh (2001) sees volunteer tourism “…as being more of a conscientious practice of righteous tourism—one that comes closest to utopia. At best, it may be regarded as an altruistic form of tourism, which has the capacity to uphold the highest ideals, intrinsically interwoven in the tourism phenomenon” (as cited in Singh, 2004, p. 174).

A key part of the definition of a volunteer tourist is the absence of pay. Volunteer tourists do not get remunerated while on their trip, instead they often pay for the privilege of volunteering. This payment could either be in the form of a relatively small one-off registration fee or be a larger fee covering expenses and a contribution to the project or organisation involved (Ellis, 2003; Wearing, 2001). Volunteers often pay relatively more than what they would have paid for a ‘normal’ holiday to the same destination (Wearing, 2001) with the extra cost ideally being for the benefit of the cause or project the volunteer will work for, although this is not always clearly the case (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). By its nature volunteer tourism is both sporadic and episodic, perhaps to off-set the high cost of participating (Caan & Handy, 2005). Volunteer experiences offered at the time of writing can extend from short term projects of a few weeks to extended periods of many months but less than a year (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). It has been suggested that the push force of alternative tourism and the pull force of the need for volunteering have promoted this new form of tourism (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). Volunteer tourism has become increasingly popular under a variety of names: “volunteer tourism” (Henderson, 1981), “volunteer vacation” (McMillon, Cutchins, & Geissinger, 2006), “mini mission” (Brown & Morrison, 2003), “mission-lite”, “pro-poor tourism” (Ashley, Roe, & Goodwin, 2001; Hall, 2007), “vacation volunteering”, “altruistic tourism” (Singh, 2002), “service
based vacation”, “participatory environmental research (PERT)” (Ellis, 2003), and “voluntourism” (The Guardian, 2007). From the definitions noted above, volunteer tourism can be viewed as a tourism activity incorporating volunteer services. As a sector it combines environmental, cultural, and humanitarian issues with an intention to benefit, not only the participants (the tourist element), but also the locals (the volunteer element). It could be said that volunteer tourism meets the needs of tourists who prefer to travel with a purpose (Brown & Lehto, 2005) and to make a difference during their holiday (Coghlan, 2006), thus enjoying a tourist experience with the benefit of contributing to others.

There is also a growing provision of volunteer experiences, which in their packaging and timeline, seem to have emulated the commercially successful model of mass tourism packaged holidays (Brown & Morrison, 2003). Currently there are many tour operators, environmental and humanitarian NGOs, and academic groups who offer travellers the opportunity to participate in projects that can assist in community development, scientific research, or ecological and cultural restoration (Wearing, 2004; Wight, 2003).

Such organisations act as brokers of volunteer tourism opportunities and they vary in their size, provision and scope (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Tomazos & Butler, 2009).

1.1. Structure of the paper

This paper began with an introduction to the general topic before presenting the background to this study looking at the concept and scope of contemporary volunteer tourism. This is followed by an examination of the motivation to volunteer which deconstructs the relevant literature and is illustrated in a table. The next section describes the methodology of the study noting the research design, data collection and analysis and the ethical considerations of the study. Section 4 presents the findings, starting with the setting, followed by the volunteer organisation and the realities of the experience. The next section focuses on the relationships between the volunteers and the children and discusses the effects on both the volunteers and the children. A profile of the participants of the study is drawn before a discussion of the key concept of the paper which is the balancing act between commitment and hedonistic pursuits. This paper concludes with a summary of the paper and implications for future research.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Size and scope of volunteer tourism

It is difficult to evaluate precisely how widespread volunteer tourism is due to the difficulty of gathering volunteer tourism statistics. Travel is often officially considered only either business or pleasure, and international volunteers may avoid stating their trip purpose to border authorities for fear of complicated paperwork and problems with admission (Tomazos, 2009). Lonely Planet has attempted to provide an estimate of the market (Lonely Planet, 2007) and recent academic research efforts also have attempted to provide an estimate (TRAM, 2008; Jones, 2004; Tomazos & Butler, 2009). TRAM (2008) found that only 35 organisations published participant statistics, and the annual total placement provided by these organisations amounted to 70,545 (2008, p. 40). If these figures are used to provide an estimate of the placements catered by 300 listed organisations (TRAM, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2009) then the annual level of participation in volunteer tourism can be estimated at 600,000 volunteers. Jones (2004) showed that in the UK alone there were around 120,000 volunteers who went on volunteer placement each year, not including volunteers on unorganised volunteer trips. Value ranges from £290 million to £500 million, depending on the estimated market size (TRAM, 2008). This calculation only includes the value of placement fees (TRAM, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2009). If the average expenditure of a volunteer abroad is included, then the figure is likely to be between £832 million and £1.3 billion (TRAM, 2008, p. 43).

2.2. Volunteer tourism: a hybrid of work and leisure

In order to understand the concept of volunteer tourism and the notion of a working holiday it is important to show how notions of work and play have always been interrelated and how their interplay reveals the ways that work, leisure and life itself have been viewed in different periods of human history. This is significant since the fusion between work and leisure-tourism is at the heart of the volunteer tourism phenomenon. Fusing work with leisure is not a paradox or a contradiction. A fusion between the two is dictated by natural rhythms (DeGrazia, 1962) while the distinction between the two is fuelled by a human invention, the clock. As such, volunteering during holiday time should come as naturally to the participant as singing came to the women depicted on terracotta tiles (Kerr, Person, & Stattn, 2002; Shinew & Parry, 2005). What makes the above eight types of casual leisure relevant to this study is the fact that all could feature in a conventional holiday. Serious leisure on the other hand is the systematic pursuit of an amateur hobbyist, or a volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that they launch themselves on a (leisure) career, centred on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience (Stebbins, 1982, 1992, 1996, 2001). Serious leisure can apply to volunteer tourism provided that the individual in question partakes in volunteer tourism frequently and acquires specific skills in order to participate at higher levels. Project-based leisure according to Stebbins is a short term one-off or occasional though infrequent creative undertaking carried out in free time (2007, p. 43). In contrast to casual leisure, it requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes skill or knowledge. This type of leisure fits volunteer tourism perfectly in its contemporary format, and involves many of its characteristics. A work-leisure synthesis then is required in order to conceptualize volunteer tourism. The fusion between work and leisure means that there are various mixes of work and leisure that may overlap. The relationship between work and leisure could be presented as a continuum, with the one extreme being pure work and the other extreme pure leisure, as devised from the work of Jackson (1989) and Stebbins (2007). Pure work is often strenuous, even
dangerous, involving following orders and fulfilling enforced obligation with a low return (low rewards). Pure leisure can be seen as synonymous with Stebbins’ (2007) casual leisure, a type of activity that does not need any preparation or planning and does not require any significant effort on behalf of the participant to complete. Simple work is carrying out strenuous work but with higher rewards. Comfortable work is work that is enjoyable and under other circumstances could be viewed as a leisure activity. Instead a certain level of talent means that an individual can make a living out of taking part in what is for them a leisure activity. Serious Leisure indicates an activity which takes a lot of effort on behalf of the individual and discipline, just like work, but the difference is lack of remuneration. Career (long term) volunteering is part of this category. Restricted leisure includes leisure activities like DIY around the home or working on a car during free time and is termed restricted leisure because the individual, by doing such activities, in general avoids the cost of paying someone else to carry out the work. The final category is unrestricted leisure, where the individual undertakes similar tasks to those above, but where the avoidance of payment is not a factor. Volunteer tourism can be argued to be both restricted and unrestricted leisure. It can be seen as restricted because in the case of very cheap volunteer tourism opportunities, the individual has to work during free time but in exchange they avoid the extra cost of a different type of holiday to the same destination, just as the amateur plumber, painter or gardener avoids the cost of paying a professional. The restriction in this case is the potential lack of resources which may push individuals towards not hiring a professional or using the same analogy, not choosing a more expensive holiday. There might be cases where resources are not an issue and the DIY participant chooses not to call in a professional, for reasons other than necessity. Similarly, a volunteer tourist may choose a certain volunteer holiday for reasons other than low cost. It can also be categorised as unrestricted leisure when volunteer tourism holidays incur a similar or even a higher cost than a conventional type of holiday to the same destination. In this case there are no financial or resource restrictions and the choice is determined by other factors. Finally, volunteer tourism could also feature as serious leisure, provided that the conditions of frequent undertaking and skills acquisition are fulfilled.

2.3. The motivations to volunteer

The motivations behind participating in volunteer tourism have interested a number of researchers (Broad, 2003; Broad and Jenkins, 2009; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Ellis, 2003; Lepp, 2008; Lo & Lee, 2011; Lyons, 2003; Lyons & Wearing, 2008; McGehee & Andercek, 2008; McGehee & Norman, 2002; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Mustonen, 2005, 2007; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; McGehee & Santos, 2005). The motivation of volunteer tourists can be broken down into three categories based on the relevant literature (Clary & Miller, 1986; Frisch & Gerard, 1981; Horton-Smith, 1981; Latting, 1990; Taylor, 1995) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Volunteer tourism motivation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material/utilitarian</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Broad &amp; Jenkins, 2009; Brown &amp; Lehto, 2005; Wearing, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gaining new skills</td>
<td>Broad, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future employment</td>
<td>Bruyere &amp; Rappe, 2007; Riecken et al., 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased self-confidence and</td>
<td>Bruyere &amp; Rappe, 2007; Bussel &amp; Forbes, 2002; Lepp, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sense of self-worth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity/affective/social</td>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Cnaan &amp; Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Bruyere &amp; Rappe, 2007; Ryan et al., 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting likely minded people</td>
<td>Bruyere &amp; Rappe, 2007; Mustonen, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposive/normative/altruistic</td>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>Bussel &amp; Forbes, 2002; Callanan &amp; Thomas, 2005; Wearing, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving back</td>
<td>Brown &amp; Lehto, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leaving a legacy</td>
<td>Cassie &amp; Halpenny, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/setting specific</td>
<td>Justice/goodwill</td>
<td>Scheyvens, 2002; Stoddard &amp; Rogerson, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Setting/nature/place</td>
<td>Brown &amp; Lehto, 2005; Cassie &amp; Halpenny, 2003; Tomazos, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perks of volunteering</td>
<td>Butcher, 2003; Sin, 2009; Tomazos &amp; Butler, 2009; Wilson and Mussen, 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanderlust</td>
<td>Broad, 2003; Brown &amp; Lehto, 2005; Tomazos &amp; Butler, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adventure/challenge</td>
<td>Broad, 2003; Tomazos &amp; Butler, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Escapism/alterity</td>
<td>Brown &amp; Lehto, 2005; Matthews, 2008; McGehee &amp; Andercek, 2008;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tomazos &amp; Butler, 2009; Wearing, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Material/utilitarian: This principle applies to motivations for rewards that have monetary value or can be translated into monetary value, such as wages, salaries, property value and information. The volunteer may seek to gain knowledge and intellectual enrichment that will equip them to acquire specific new skills which might later generate career opportunities, or to provide an opportunity for them to display such skills to potential employers. Thus volunteers could gain benefits or experiences from their work that could become a springboard for future employment prospects. These benefits could include knowledge, experience, technical expertise, networking and enhanced curriculum vitae, and could directly assist the volunteers in finding employment or improve their salary when they return to the mainstream world. Researchers have underlined educational cultural immersion as a key motive (Broad & Jenkins, 2009; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Wearing, 2001), while others have explored the development of new skills for the participants (Broad, 2003) which may prove beneficial in terms of future employment or career advancement (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Riecken, Babakus, & Yavas, 1994). In this category this paper adds the boosting of self-confidence and an increased sense of self-worth, adding to the participants’ human capital (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Bussel & Forbes, 2002; Lepp, 2008).

2) Solidarity/affective/social: This category applies to motivation derived from social interaction, interpersonal relationships, friendships, group status and group identification. There is a body of evidence that suggests that the social rewards of volunteering are paramount for participants. When Schlegelnich and Tynan (1989) performed lifestyle analyses of volunteers they found that most types of volunteers shared a strong liking for group activities. However, the possible unreliability of qualitative research in terms of social motivations should be noted because it could be argued that it might be considered unacceptable to admit one’s volunteering is
motivated by the desire for social approval, even when that is the case. Volunteers may be trying to fit some normative expectation or behaviour, to gain prestige or social approval, or to expand their social circle. Thus volunteers could realize their self-actualisation ambitions by being accepted by their peers through offering volunteering services. Such motivation also finds an outlet through involvement with charities, social groups or politics. In the literature volunteers have been found trying to satisfy social and psychological needs (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991) and more specifically, strengthening family bonds or bonds of friendship (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001) and meeting new, likeminded people (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Mustonen, 2007).

3) Purposive/normative/altruistic: These are motivations based on global concerns of a supra-personal nature. They appeal to values such as community action and support, civic responsibility and environmental concern (Caldwell & Andereck, 1994). According to Horton-Smith (1981), the benefits to the individual of volunteering are considered to be primarily psychological and essentially altruistic. Some may volunteer out of altruistic or humanitarian concerns, to benefit someone in need, or society in general, establishing value expressive relationships of giver and recipient, reminiscent of the concerns related to charitable donations. These imply that people gain pleasure from doing good deeds even if their actions give them no material benefit. In the literature altruism has been highlighted as a key motive (Bussel & Forbes, 2002; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Wearing, 2001), manifested as a form of giving back (Brown & Lehto, 2005) or leaving a legacy (Cassie & Halpenny, 2003). Other volunteers view their participation as a form of social justice and an expression of good will which also could be linked to the notion of giving back (Schevyns, 2002; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004).

Other motives: There are other key motivations which can be described as more volunteer tourism specific. The setting of volunteer tourism participation and its place and nature have been identified as motivating factors (Brown & Lehto, 2005; Cassie & Halpenny, 2003; Tomazos, 2009) along with the perks of volunteering that could range from wearing a uniform and having authority (Wilson & Musick, 1997) to having a cheap holiday (Butcher, 2003; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2009). Escapism or the search for alterity (Matthews, 2008) also features as a motivation with volunteers looking for a means of escaping from their daily routine and lifestyle (Brown & Lehto, 2005; McGehee & Andereck, 2008) or even from themselves as the experience could transform them as individuals (Tomazos & Butler, 2009; Wearing, 2001).

In general most studies on volunteer tourism motivation have placed an emphasis on developing lists of potential volunteer tourist motives, rather than seeking to advance the existing conceptual or theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Farrell, Johnston, & Twyman, 1998). In terms of volunteer tourism motivation the literature is still far from providing a comprehensive model that would apply to all volunteer motivations and also encompass socio-biological and psychological factors. It could be argued that volunteer tourism participation is self-motivated and guided by a self-developed mission (Searle & Brayley, 1993) for the ultimate gratification of a higher intrinsic need for self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). In the process, the volunteer derives satisfaction from the task undertaken and, as long as the cost is mitigated and the experience as a whole continues to be rewarding and satisfying to their unique needs, they will continue to volunteer (Noble & Rogers, 1998).

The cost to volunteers of their participation could be pecuniary and psychic and also tangible and intangible (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, & Schaps, 1991; Stebbins, 1992; Wilson & Musick, 1997). There is also the opportunity cost of volunteering which may involve wages foregone from paid employment, if volunteer time is time away from paid work. It may also involve the loss of human capital benefits in the shape of missed chances to improve career prospects and increase future earning capacity as well as the loss of the psychic benefit of job satisfaction. There may be out of pocket expenses and there could also be the loss of unpaid work during leisure time (Stebbins, 2007). As such it could be argued that most volunteers not surprisingly try to see both sides of the coin in terms of the benefits of volunteering to them, their family and to society in general, and the actual and perceived costs. Volunteers evaluate what they get out of participating, whether it does any good to anyone and how much pain, hassle and effort is involved. Such a consumption model (Govekar & Govekar, 2003) dictates that an individual’s decision to supply volunteer labour or not arises from an implicit optimisation process in which the willingness to contribute to a cause or organisation is weighed against the opportunity cost of doing so. Researchers have tended to divide volunteer tourists into volunteer-minded and vacation-minded participants (Brown & Lehto, 2005; Mustonen, 2007; Wearing, 2001), but it can be argued that the true volunteer tourist probably exists in a continuum dimension somewhere between these two extremes. It is necessary to put the leisure element of the volunteering experience into perspective as an implicit motivating factor, despite people’s reluctance to openly admit this (Schlenker, 1980). Making volunteering ‘fun’ seems to be one of the main priorities of most volunteer organisations that offer such opportunities, at least in their promotional materials (Tomazos & Butler, 2009). The benefits to these organisations are twofold: on the one hand, satisfied ‘customers’ and one the other hand, increased margins for profit through diversification. This understanding raises certain questions about the nature of the influence of the more vacation-minded volunteers on the ‘volunteered’ (McGehee, 2009; Sin, 2009). A recent study by the Human Research Council (HRC) has found that episodic, low skilled volunteers are “…crowding out local workers, especially when people are prepared to pay for the privilege to volunteer” (The Times, 2010, p. 23) and that this contributes to increased unemployment among locals unable to compete with volunteer tourists. Another issue raised by the HRC and very relevant to this research was the issue of untrained volunteers working with abandoned young children. Richter postulates that the episodic nature of volunteering means that children experience serial abandonment. With reference to the abandonment issue raised by the HRC, there is evidence that children tend to adapt to this reality and replace the departed volunteer with the next volunteer arrival.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The methodology chosen for this study may be described as naturalistic, using what might be most accurately termed a sociological impressionist or auto-ethnographic approach. The specific methodology is that of modified grounded theory in which an interpretive approach is adopted. Data were collected via covert participant observation utilizing a researcher’s diary. Photographs were taken of field locations, activities and participation as an aid
memoire and a portfolio created with documents and mementos from the fieldwork. The methodology is naturalistic as the study adopted an ethnographic approach, meaning that the knowledge socially acquired and analysed is used to explain ‘observed patterns of human activity’ (Gill & Johnson, 1991, p. 92). It is central to this approach to strive to comprehend what takes place within an organisation or activity, on the assumption that this could provide an insight into the rationale of the actions of the subjects under investigation. The methodology employed in this research, particularly the application of covert participant observation, has allowed a relatively novel research insight into volunteer tourists in a realistic setting, with the observed volunteers behaving naturally without their behaviour being ‘contaminated’ or altered by the presence of an overt researcher. The covert observation involved several challenges which were overcome with a combination of good preparation, advice, and some good fortune.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The setting chosen was the Refugio Infantil Santa Esperanza, a children’s home in the area of Jalisco, in Mexico. The setting was purposely chosen due to its proximity to the holiday resort of Puerto Vallarta. There was a considerable range of options open to volunteers in the form of hedonistic pursuits, and thus they could be studied making choices between commitment and pleasure. As part of the preliminary research the author collected information and constructed a portfolio on the children’s home and its activities. The lead author registered on a volunteer vacation assisting children in the company of volunteers in a developing country taking the covert role of a fully participating volunteer. A total of 40 volunteers were encountered during a three-week stay in the summer of 2007. There was no sample selection, the researcher engaged in conversation and observed all the volunteers within the period. All research diary excerpts from the field study were treated in the same way as ‘participant quotes’ because they were derived from the researcher’s written notes and they are an integral part of the author’s “stream of consciousness” based on his feelings, observations, deductions and reflections and thus valid to be used as research data (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

The observations were of a covert nature in order to ensure that there was no change in the behaviour of the volunteers caused by the study. Such a change of is known as the ‘Hawthorne effect’. For the needs of this study, emphasis was put on the observation and actual experience rather than seeking to influence answers or conduct social experiments. Thus the methodology adopted here differed from that of other studies on volunteer tourists where focus groups or interviews have been used (Broad, 2003; Cassie & Halpenny, 2003; Lyons, 2003; McGeehee & Norman, 2002; Wearing, 2001). This study positions itself as an authentic, hands-on volunteer tourism experience aiming to maximise opportunities for interaction with fellow volunteers by being one of them and gaining insight into the rationale of their actions by means of casual conversations likely to yield more accurate and comprehensive results since the subjects would be more relaxed in a social setting than in an interview situation (Gillespie & Morrison, 2001).

Data consisted of informal interviews, field notes, pictures and written documents which were then sorted and transformed into an analysable form (Walsh, 2003) and transcribed verbatim along with notes and information derived from impromptu conversations with volunteers (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003). The goals of qualitative data management are to summarise unsorted data into related themes and patterns and to develop explanations or theses for any relationships (Walsh, 2003). Basic raw data from the field notes must be processed before they are suitable for analysis. Field notes are required to be converted into transcripts, so that they can be read and the researcher ‘might augment some missing content, when it is remembered from the field’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 51). The transcribing of the field notes was done as accurately as possible in the transcription. To ensure the accuracy of data transformation, the processing of the data into an analysable form was done by the principal researcher himself (Paton, 2002). The transcribed data were analysed by the process of coding, and finding patterns and themes (Curran & Blackburn, 2001; Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Paton, 2002). The transcribed field notes were divided into eighty six (86) excerpts, each of which carries a title and a synopsis of its contents. The names of the volunteers encountered were replaced by numbers (V1, V2, V3 etc) in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants’ identities. To manage the large amounts of rich data it needed to be coded to link it to meanings and categories (Tesch, 1990; Walsh, 2003). Codes are labels of abbreviations for assigning units of meaning to the information gathered from the study (Paton, 2002; Tesch, 1990). Miles and Huberman (1994) introduced three types of codes; descriptive, interpretive and explanatory. The descriptive code is simply an attribution of a class of phenomena attached to the segment while the second is more interpretive to represent greater meaning. The explanatory codes illustrate an emergence of patterns and the relation of the text segments to the research. The codes are attached to the segment of phrases or sentences that are connected to the specific category of meanings.

3.3. Ethical considerations of covert participant observation

Sarantakos (1998, p. 218) highlights different perspectives on ethical issues ranging from the position that ethics is not an important issue if the research is conducted for a good purpose, to the view that ignoring ethical issues is not permissible, and that researchers should disclose their identity when entering the private domain of individuals, and disclose their research aims and objectives. Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 128) suggest that in considering the ethical issues of covert observation, the researcher should consider the moral acceptability of the method of observation. In particular, it should be considered whether the findings might be used ‘to manipulate or exploit the subjects’. Throughout the study the researcher avoided any such manipulation, did not interview any of the children, did not record any activity or conversation directly, and took the necessary steps to maintain anonymity and not to leave any “footprints” behind.

4. Findings

4.1. The children’s home

The children’s home, Santa Esperanza was established in 2001 with initial funding coming from various sources but mainly from local stakeholders.

We went from door to door asking for clothes, milk etc…Anything the locals could spare. We also were clever enough to try the big hotels and we got quite a lot of stuff to start with. You see it is the culture here to give generously, especially to children’s homes. The children you see are under the protection of God. Even though we are poor people we are very willing to help. (Conversation with Director, Research Diary, Excerpt: 86).

The children’s home managed to secure support from American child charities which provide $4000 monthly for its operations. This provides invaluable support since the children’s home is not
able to count on substantial central or local government support for operational costs.

We get help from three organisations: Children Shelter Corporation, Hospice, and Ambassadors for children. Approximately $65,000 Mexican ($6,500 US) a month ...we solely rely on donations from predominantly wealthy Americans. But saying that, the Children’s shelter gives us a fixed amount of money ($4,000 US) ...Laughter... The government provides $300 US a month for the needs of the children’s home. So you can understand how we are desperate for donors. Every day that goes by we keep searching for new donors. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 86)

The children’s home houses around fifty children of whom the majority are toddlers between 3 and 5 years old. Almost all of children are local and have been left by their parents, a situation which is not uncommon in this area due to the need of local people to seek employment elsewhere.

Well, the people in this area are very poor and sometimes they need to travel far to find work in the area of Guadalajara. They choose not to take their children with them...they leave them with us...Some of them come back a few years later and they take them back, but most of the time they do not come back for them. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 86)

4.2. The volunteer organisation

Established in 1997, Original Volunteers (OV), is an organisation that facilitates opportunities for independent individuals to volunteer with small organisations and charities overseas which have declared a need for volunteers (www.originalvolunteers.co.uk). OV are therefore brokers of volunteer opportunities. For a one-off registration fee of £125 (price as of July 2010), Original Volunteers can, generally guarantee a placement on a volunteer project in one of sixteen countries spanning Africa and South America. The prices are those suggested by the charities and organisations overseas and as such OV reserve the right to alter them, if so advised. Other costs, such as local services are paid separately, and payment in some cases is due in advance, not later than 60 days before arrival. In the case of a cancellation within 30 days of departure, the company reserves the right to offer no refund. By agreeing to volunteer using the services of Original Volunteers, the participant is not signing on to a package holiday but is committing to being a self-motivated independent volunteer. This status incurs responsibilities including making travel arrangements independently typically using the internet and personal guidebooks, especially when sourcing local travel information for their destination. Although a contact person is usually available for advice in cases of emergencies, when one is not present or immediately available, the volunteers need to accept responsibility for managing their immediate concerns themselves. At the time of this study foreign volunteers had only been present at the children’s home for four months. OV had conducted checks on the management and funding of the children’s home before sending volunteers (Children’s Home Director, personal communication)

Well... Original Volunteers contacted us...they contacted me and said that they could supply us with volunteers. They visited the children’s home, they inspected all the rooms, did some checks and then they left. We later found out that they made enquiries about our budget, our funding and our commitment. Yes that is about right...I am not too sure what you mean by background checks. They just wanted to see, if the children’s home was in good hands and run properly...that donations go towards the children’s benefit and not in somebody’s pocket. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 86)

The arrangement between the children’s home and Original Volunteers is that OV would provide the volunteers while the children’s home is responsible for arranging accommodation for the volunteers which is partially subsidised by OV. The accommodation is basic but comfortable and cheap, even in comparison to the youth hostel in the area, since Original Volunteers cover some of the cost (through the one-off registration fee).

Original Volunteers cover some of the cost for the accommodation and the rest is covered by the volunteers. But you cannot say that $24 US a week is a lot

I: No you cannot and thank you for providing it...do you have the same problem finding accommodation in the winter?

S: No, we mainly rent these apartments from May till October. But there are also volunteers who find their own accommodation. This is a poor country; housing is relatively cheap for you. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 86)

In terms of numbers of volunteers the children’s home seems to have its needs met through Original Volunteers. In the winter, when volunteers are in short supply, the children’s home counts on the support of local ex pats who assist with its daily running. This is not much of a problem according to the children’s home director. Even though winter (older) volunteers (V25 a retired man who lived in Puerto Vallarta) lack the energy and enthusiasm of summer (younger) ones, this is a blessing in disguise, because during the school season the children need to focus on their studies more than in the summer, and the presence of volunteers could prove a distraction. Of course it remains to be seen how the influx of volunteers affects the children. The local ex pats that helped in the orphanage were not examined as volunteer tourists but they aid the discussion in terms of how the needs of the orphanage are met in the absence of large numbers of volunteers

S: Perhaps we could seek to get into the books of more organisations, so we have a greater chance of getting winter volunteers. But on the other hand...no because in the winter the children must concentrate on their studies

I: So you think that the volunteers could become too much of a distraction and have an adverse effect?

M: That is a difficult question. Of course the children will get distracted by the volunteers. Perhaps you could say, they lose the focus they have in the winter with school and such...but it is summer after all. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 86)

4.3. Working at the children’s home

The participants are introduced to the children’s home by means of other volunteers as soon as they arrive and have unpacked. This support was vital on the first day because the children’s home was difficult to find, and there were no signs in relation to where to get the bus in order to reach the children’s home. Upon arrival the volunteers follow the sign-in procedure, noting the time of arrival and then are given tasks according to the needs of the children’s home on any given day. The day is organised in three shifts: 8–12, 12–4 pm and 4–8 pm. The areas of work vary as well as the tasks. The volunteers can choose to work either in the kitchen, with babies, with toddlers, or with the older children.

For instance, if it is time for breakfast, (early shift) then the volunteers are put on children preparation duty, helping the children wash their hands, and depending on numbers, helping prepare the children’s breakfast.
Arriving at around 07:45 in the morning there was a buzz around the place with the children freshly awoken and preparing to have their breakfast. The breakfast was strawberry yogurt with corn flakes cereal. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 40)

After breakfast the children are free to do as they please and play outside on the small children's fort and the push-swings. Older children tend to play basketball or football, but what they all had in common was constantly seeking attention and trying to monopolise the volunteers.

Today I opted to spend 4 hours working with kids between the age of 3 and 6. That involved watching them play, pushing them on swings or just becoming a human 'monkey-bar'. The children seem to have become accustomed to the volunteers and they continually scream 'please' and 'look-look' trying to get my attention or just wanting to be lifted and carried around. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 24)

Some of the volunteers occasionally tried to introduce some order or structure into the children's play and organise activities with mixed success, due to the fact that the children seemed uninterested in any kind of structure in their play and displayed a very short attention span to aspects such as game rules and organisation.

R is a retired police officer and he is a widower. He always tries to get the children to play organised soccer but he gets frustrated when all they want to do is run around in anarchy. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 47)

Later we tried to organise a game of dodge-ball with the older children. It was a disaster at first but with a lot of screaming and shouting, plus keeping stern about the rules, the game was a success and the children had a good time. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 53)

Later during the day the children's home requires some of the volunteers to assist in the kitchen on a variety of tasks including dish-washing, cleaning and food preparation. These tasks seemed to be avoided by some volunteers due to their nature and the heat in the kitchen.

I went to the kitchen were the cook had a new task for me since none of the squeamish girls wanted to do. I found skinning chicken fun and then I chopped a lot of vegetables in order to make salsa. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 44)

The late afternoon shift is perhaps the least demanding one. The only task for the volunteers was to sit with the children involved mostly simple tasks which required minimal or no training. In addition, the volunteers were not under any obligation or pressure to carry out these tasks. If a volunteer wanted to spend the day sitting and chatting with other volunteers outside while watching the children, there was nothing forcing them to go inside and help in the kitchen or in the dormitory. It was left to the volunteers' good will and commitment which arguably could reflect their motivation to participate.

4.4. Volunteers and children

The recycling of volunteers, the demise of the familiar, and the arrival of new faces every other week may have been disturbing for the children. The majority of children had been abandoned or had suffered some sort of trauma before they found refuge at St Esperanza. It could be argued that the frequent changing of volunteers could have provided some sort of distraction for the children from their daily routine, evoking painful memories.

The volunteers themselves arrive at the children's home without any idea of how they will be received or how they should approach the children. The children's home has a website which provides some information, but children are unpredictable in terms of accepting volunteers or not. The first impression of the researcher in terms of being accepted by the children was the enthusiasm with which young male volunteers were received. This can be explained by their relative scarcity and also what young male volunteers had to 'offer' to the children's play. Ability in sports, especially football was much appreciated. Another factor that contributes to the male volunteers' popularity was the fact that they appeared to be able to lift and carry children for a longer time than female volunteers. Overall, male volunteers seemed to be very appreciated for practical reasons such as the ability to carry heavy loads or chop frozen meat. In general, all volunteers were made to feel welcome and were greatly appreciated, but the presence of male volunteers gave a different vibe of energy and enthusiasm to the children. The volunteers tried their best to keep the children interested and occupied but one problem was that the children sought attention by acting 'silly' or trying something dangerous in order to monopolise the attention of a volunteer. This realisation prompted thoughts of how the children adapt to the volunteer presence including their level of understanding and even manipulation of the situation, and how they have been affected when the volunteers are gone.

After a few days it became apparent to the researcher that some volunteers were becoming attached to the children. One of the volunteers, K, suggested that she preferred working at the children's home to teaching in the UK due to the warmth and affection she got from the children. She argued that in the UK constant paranoia about child-abuse results in negative reactions from superiors to expressions of affection from or towards the children, which leaves a lot to be desired in terms of job satisfaction. Other volunteers also indicated that they had clear favourites amongst the children and they took their 'favourites' on short trips to MacDonald's or for an ice-cream (with the permission of the children's home).
“Some of the volunteers said that later they are taking one of the children from the children’s home to MacDonald’s. But I have to say I have my reservations about that. How does that affect the children? Especially the ones who are not selected. Will have to think about that”. (Research Diary, Excerpt 51)

Subsequently, feelings of attachment towards the children or a favourite child, inevitably lead to feelings of sadness and loss upon departure, as in the case of at least one of the volunteers. The volunteers drew comfort from the knowledge that the children were in good hands and that there were new volunteers on the way to replace them. The issues of feelings of loss and sadness on behalf of the volunteers and abandonment on behalf of the children have been raised recently by the Human Research Council (see earlier) and are without question an area of great interest and importance that should be addressed in future research in order to ascertain any implications for both the volunteers and the children.

4.5. Profile of participants

In terms of profiling the participants (Table 2), thirty one of the volunteers encountered were female and nine were male. Most of the participants (22) were between 18 and 25 years of age, thirteen were older, between 25 and forty years of age, and three were between 40 and 55 years of age. Finally there was an eleven year old participant accompanied by her mother and a 60 year old permanent resident of the area. The majority of participants were British (25), eight were Canadians, two Americans, two Indians and there was one participant from Australia and one from the Isle of Man. The marital status of the participants showed the vast majority of the participants (34) being single, three stated that they were recently divorced and one was a widower. Two were engaged to be married and had volunteered as a couple. In terms of occupation, the largest group (18), were students, nine were teachers, seven were categorised as white collar workers, two were ‘care’ professionals (doctors, nurses), two were categorised as other (yoga instructor and mechanic) and two stated that they were not in paid employment (between jobs or retired) (see Table 2). From this group of forty volunteers only one (Volunteer 33) had previous volunteer travel experience, with Original Volunteers in Peru. In terms of the duration of their participation, a large number of (15) stated that they were participating for three weeks, followed closely (14) by those participating for two weeks. Six participants answered four weeks and one suggested that they would extend their stay to five weeks. Three stated that they would be volunteering for the whole summer (calculated to be twelve weeks). The duration of stay and its implications for the volunteers and the children’s home are discussed further below but it should be noted that this study focused on episodic, short term volunteering, as a direct substitute for a conventional type of holiday and not on longer term endeavours, such as gap years.

The vast majority of the participants had organised their volunteering experience through a Volunteer Tourism Organisation/Operator (VTO). “Original Volunteers” (32) featured heavily in the sample as the main operator of choice, while “Outreach” was chosen by one of the volunteers. Six of the participants were independent travellers who had offered their services to the children’s home directly, without the intervention of a medium or operator. In terms of cost, the “Original Volunteers” affiliated participants had paid a registration fee of £300 in order to secure their place. Some of the six independent volunteers who had no registration fee to pay, opted to donate money to the children’s home instead. The average cost of flights paid by volunteers from the UK to their destination was around £800, using a London airport as their starting point. For those volunteers who had their participation organised through the volunteer tourism operator, accommodation was arranged by the children’s home director in coordination with the volunteer organisations involved (Original Volunteers-Outreach). The independent participants had to find accommodation on their own and they made use of nearby tourist hospitality amenities, generally staying in small hotels.

4.6. Volunteer or tourist?

Only one of the volunteers gave having a good time as a motivating factor for participation. Despite this, there is no escaping the fact that Puerto Vallarta as a nearby vacation destination played a part in the volunteers’ level of commitment. Even though this is not expressed in statements, it is supported by their actions. As soon as the researcher arrived at the accommodation and was introduced to some of the other participants, he was initiated into the group’s modus operandi:

“At last some of the other volunteers have awoken and they are planning to go to the beach. As they said it is the weekend after all. Could it be that the volunteers refrain from working on the weekend? Could it be that on the weekends they take off their ‘volunteer cap’ and put on their ‘tourist one’? But let me just quote V2; **This is what we do here, we work hard and we play hard**”. (Research Diary, Excerpt: 14)

This ‘manifesto’ of the volunteers was an excuse for going out, during which the participants put their ‘tourist caps’ on and had
a typical, noisy, alcohol-fuelled night. Alcohol in quantity was a mainstay during nights out, with the volunteers taking advantage of cheap prices and night-club promotions. This behaviour reflects the literature which makes the connection between volunteer tourism and the motivations of having a good time (Butcher, 2003; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2009; Wilson & Musick, 1997). As a consequence they forfeited the ability to undertake early shifts at the children’s home the following day. This behaviour jeopardised the informal agreement between the children’s home and the volunteers and forced the director to take action and have a chat with the group:

“Today the director of the children’s home had a few things to say about the volunteers. After gathering us all present in her office she listed her complaints. She said that the volunteers should put more effort into covering the early morning shifts, because the numbers of volunteers at that time are too low, and then during the day there are too many volunteers doing nothing”. (Research Diary, Excerpt 83)

This behaviour pattern is perhaps not surprising among a group of young people on holiday, short of money and presented with the opportunity of very cheap alcohol and fun and games. Alcohol was the main focus of excursions and days out, reflecting the ‘spring break’ mentality of the tourism market in Puerto Vallarta:

“Most of the volunteers have already taken advantage of the open bar and soon they will have trouble standing, never mind snorkelling. The boat is packed with young people who are getting louder and merrier by the minute. Perhaps they are not familiar with the fact that alcohol and heat are a formidable duo. I joined some of the older, more mature girls and this way I managed to avoid having drink poured down my throat by an over-enthusiastic bikini clad Mexican girl whose job seems to be to safeguard drunkenness”. (Research Diary, Excerpt 57)

There were other types of activities including zip-wiring, dune car racing, and horseback riding, which also featured in the itinerary of most of the participants. These potentially caused friction with the children’s home because participants took advantage of group bookings and sometimes left the children’s home with minimal support:

“Quite interestingly today there are enough volunteers in the morning but around 12 at noon there were only three left. Perhaps the heat has something to do with that. Anyway the reason could also be that quite a few of the volunteers have booked a tour of the canopy. Some of them are planning to zip-wire down the canopy. Those activities are usually undertaken in groups as one of the volunteers explained the organisers give them discount if they buy in groups”. (Research Diary, Excerpt 46)

Another dimension of the leisure and fun element of the experience also linked to social interaction was tension between volunteers which in some cases caused friction, antagonism and bitterness:

“It is also becoming clear that there is tension between two of the volunteers who seem to be competing for the affection of one of the girls. It is quite interesting to see that even though we are all so far away from home, the same rules apply”. (Research Diary, Excerpt 55)

In other cases, some of the female volunteers engaged in relationships with locals. It could be argued that it was inevitable that the mix of young people, alcohol and pleasant surroundings would prove a favourable situation for romance and there have been numerous studies about tourism and sex (Bauer & McKercher, 2003) and about female tourists and beach boys (Brown, 1992; De Albuquerque, 1998; Karch and Dann, 1981; Meisch, 1995; Oppermann, 1998; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Ryan, 1999; Zinovieff, 1991).

There are always choices to be made on holidays as well as in normal life between pleasure and responsibility, and volunteer tourism is no exception to this. In terms of a motivation continuum with altruism at one end and instrumentalism at the other, the implicit motivation of relaxation and fun is positioned at the far right on the spectrum towards instrumentalism (see Fig. 1). This spectrum has been discussed in detail by the main author in a larger study (Tomazos, 2009). The motivation of having a good time in a vacation setting on a volunteer trip is inevitably linked to the unstated underlying motivation of having a cheap holiday. As noted earlier the accommodation offered was very cheap and the cost of living in the area very low.

4.7. Balancing act

A new conceptualisation of volunteer participation as a balancing act between commitment to a cause or project and hedonistic pursuits has been put forward by Tomazos and Butler (2010). This was illustrated by a motivational see-saw which suggests that participants whatever their initial motivations or intentions, when presented with the leisure/fun element of the experience, are vulnerable to succumbing to the hedonistic pursuits available. Volunteer tourists have to strike the right balance between commitment to the project and giving in to the attractions of the destination visited. This is not a problem faced by either conventional volunteers or tourists, but is unique to volunteer tourists such as those discussed here. This balancing act becomes even more complicated when taking into account certain challenges the volunteers have to overcome during their participation. These challenges were both foreseen (language barrier, adapting to a new environment, financial worries) and unforeseen (illness, extreme weather). This aspect of the volunteers’ experience raises several questions in terms of the role and importance of the respective volunteer tourism organisations which facilitate the experience. Such challenges could have an adverse effect on the morale and commitment of the participants and perhaps this is an area where the organisers need to be more involved. In terms of upholding commitment, the project operators and the organisers may face a dilemma. They need to consider whether they should increase the levels of discipline by greater monitoring of and exercising higher control over the volunteers, possibly diluting the ‘fun’ element of volunteering, or keep the existing model intact and

![Fig. 1. Spectrum of volunteer motivations.](image-url)
depend on the informal agreement traditionally relied on. The latter option may leave something to be desired in terms of output, but would not reduce the appeal of the project to potential volunteers, while the former might increase output but reduce the pleasure of the experience for the participants. Given that the root of volunteer tourism is leisure, it is important to put little or no pressure on the participants. Once an obligatory element is introduced, then volunteer tourism ceases to be tourism (leisure) and it becomes ‘semi-leisure’ or obligated volunteering.

Project managers and organisations providing volunteer opportunities should attempt to find ways to monitor the efforts of volunteers more closely. Increased presence of permanent staff on site could act as a reminder to the volunteers of their duty and the commitment required of them. This may have a limiting effect on the enjoyment of the participants and would require a greater commitment of resources by the organisations. However, if the rules and parameters are set and re-enforced from the very beginning, when volunteers are ‘fresh’ and do not know what to expect, greater commitment may be easier to achieve with minimal effect. Another avenue to explore might be for the project managers to offer days off to the volunteers during which they could engage in vacation activities. At the time of writing the children’s home has introduced a five-day working week with two days off to be used at the participants’ discretion. It becomes clear then that the managers are also part of another balancing act, this time between meeting their goals and objectives and pleasing the volunteers. This raises new questions which should become the focus of future research.

5. Conclusion

Volunteer tourism is clearly different to both conventional forms of tourism and regular or traditional volunteering, as it involves elements of both pleasure and work. It can be thought of in both contexts because it contains elements of both concepts, participants travelling on a temporary basis away from home out of free choice and anticipating enjoyment during their leisure time, but also accepting the obligation of providing a personal contribution without payment to those in need. Volunteer tourism has many facets as do conventional tourism and volunteering. In this study the volunteer tourists clearly had considerable opportunity to engage in hedonistic activities in a conventional tourist destination, while at the same time, having an obligation to provide labour and assistance at the children’s home. It is hardly surprising that the behaviour of individuals varied considerably, nor is it surprising that some succumbed to the pleasures of the destination at the expense of their volunteering. Each day each individual faced the situation of having to decide on the level of commitment versus the level of pleasure which they were going to experience, in other words, where on Fig. 1 they would mentally place themselves in terms of sacrifice or hedonism. They were thus deciding mentally where on the spectrum (Fig. 1) of altruism and instrumentalism they would position themselves for the coming day. In this study participants were not asked specifically if or how they made this decision nor if they displayed a consistent level of commitment throughout their time at the refuge. These are topics to be researched further. On the one hand it is important, both for the children’s home and for the volunteer organisation, to determine the general level of commitment of volunteers, and whether this level varies by socio-demographic characteristics or other aspects of the individuals. It is also important to ascertain if there is in fact a daily (or other) mental review of intended commitment by volunteers and whether their level of volunteering varies as a result of changing circumstances, such as weather, health, personal distractions (e.g. romance), availability of financial benefits (e.g. reductions in cost for group leisure experiences) or the nature of work to be undertaken. It may well be possible to modify or mitigate daily variations in commitment such that the refuge is able to maximise volunteer assistance, but it is less likely to be able to modify ingrained predispositions that would determine a volunteer’s commitment over the duration of their experience. The testing of the sacrifice–hedonism balance needs further detailed and extensive investigation if volunteers are to be aided to attain an optimal position on the line to satisfy their needs and those of the recipients.

References


