

Extract from Working Paper

International voluntourism experience in South Africa:
Does it change the volunteer?

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For the past two years, Zoë Alexander & Ali Bakir have been carrying out independent research on the effects of international volunteering on the participants themselves. The results of the research are particularly interesting as the information was gathered solely from **AVIVA volunteers** before and after their visit to South Africa.

This ground breaking study goes a long way to reinforcing what we experience with volunteers every day – **Volunteering in South Africa is good for you!**

The working paper, and subsequent interim papers, will be presented to international travel conferences and to South Africa Tourism during 2010, and will of course be published for wider distribution in academic circles. We were delighted to have been selected for this study when it first began, and can only thank Zoë & Ali for their hard work and dedication, and the many volunteers that communicated with them independently of AVIVA before and after their volunteering experience.

Here you will find extracts from the paper which focus on the results of the study. A complete version of this Working Paper is available to download from the AVIVA website at the following address:

<http://www.aviva-sa.com/files/mytrip/Research Paper - International Voluntourism Experience in South Africa - Does it change the volunteer.pdf>

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present some preliminary findings on the effect of engaging in international volunteer work as a tourist in South Africa, one of the top 10 countries where travellers want to volunteer (Gecko, Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications, 2009).

The results so far suggest significant differences for the group as a whole, between their pre-trip and post-trip. These differences are reflected in six out of the fifteen traits measured, and include significant decrease in depression, vulnerability and anxiety, and increase in emotionality, adventurousness and assertiveness. These differences were significantly different to the control group measured over a similar period of time.

Cheallaigh, Doets, Hake, and Westerhuis (2002) point out that personal development can be motivating and lead to the acquisition of learning attitudes and skills that are essential to the workplace and vital to social cohesion, equality, active citizenship, cultural diversity and general well-being. European policies recognise that personal growth is not only driven from formal and informal education and training, but also through the engagement in cultural and social experiences, and that youth work and volunteering opportunities offer young

people the chance to develop confidence, motivation and skills that stay with them for life (The Scottish Government, 2007).

Furthermore, volunteer tourism has the potential to address some of the key challenges put forward by South African Tourism (2008), such as offering authentic cultural experiences that appeal to the young overseas traveller in areas outside the traditional tourism routes, and this requires effective marketing strategies.

Literature review

Research into the effect of voluntourism on the volunteer suggests that voluntourism promotes personal development and cross-cultural understanding. Wearing's (2001) study of international volunteers in the Santa Helena rainforest reserve found that interactions with other volunteers and the community can change the volunteers by developing confidence, and an awareness of other people and environments. This awareness, he states, 'results in a variety of learning and behavioural changes, such as being less self-centred, more thoughtful and more open' (p.134).

Following Wearing, Broad (2003) observed that international volunteers alluded to some form of personal change, and many mentioned their increased knowledge, confidence and skills, and changes in the way they viewed their lives and the world. These volunteers noted that they had gained confidence in travelling independently, learnt more about themselves, and had developed skills to deal with challenging situations.

More recently Zahra and McIntosh's (2007) ethnographic study of five volunteers found their outlook in life changed; their attitudes changed; there were changes in their behaviour and values; volunteers were prepared to work harder at things; had greater sense of justice, rights, duties and responsibilities. Further Harlow and Pomfret's (2007) ten-week study of seven international volunteers found that the changes to the volunteers included a greater appreciation of the environment; discovering new abilities, increased knowledge, social awareness and increased tolerance and the ability to get on with other people.

Lepp (2008) conducted interviews with six international volunteers three months after their trip and identified further changes: they were able to put things in perspective, plotting a more meaningful course in life; had new life goals and more favourable opinions of others. Lepp (2008), like Wearing (2001), found that it was the experience of interacting with others that helped the volunteers to discover these things about themselves.

Quantitative studies were carried out by Lough, Moore McBride and Sherraden (2009a; 2009b). They studied the impact of voluntourism experiences on the attitudes and behaviours of two hundred and ninety one volunteers in 2008, two to six years after their trip, using 'The International Volunteering Impacts Survey' (IVIS). They found that than ninety-five percent of volunteers reported an increased appreciation and understanding of other cultures; ninety percent reported their experience particularly strengthened their commitment to volunteer service, both at the local and international levels; and seventy percent claimed that their cross-cultural experience was a transformational experience and one that resulted in significant life changes that would not have occurred if they stayed in their home country.

Other changes included developing lifelong friendships, increased appreciation for life, and a desire to live more simply. Some volunteers, who felt strongly that the experience changed them, had difficulty articulating the specific benefits:

“I can't really describe it. I am who I am today because of that time. I have never looked at my life the same way I did before I volunteered. It changed my life in virtually every way. It's difficult to explain the change, but it has had a lasting impact” (Lough et al., 2009a, p.35)

Voluntourists

For this paper, data from 39 participants out of a volunteer sample of 60 participants was used; it must therefore be noted that the analysis of only 65% of the sample's data has been completed. The participants were made up of seven men and thirty-two women. There were twenty-nine 16-29 years of age and ten 30+.

The participants were from a variety of countries including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Europe, United States, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia, and had booked their international volunteering trip through **AVIVA**, a voluntourism provider based in Cape Town, South Africa. **AVIVA** provided the link between the voluntourists and the data collection web-site (www.bucksresearch.org.uk) via their on-line booking confirmation.

Discussion

The results suggest that six out of the fifteen personality traits measured, were significant. There was a significant difference between the pre-inventory score and post-inventory score for the voluntourist group and these differences were significantly different to the control group carrying out their day-to-day lives over a similar period of time. This suggests that it was the voluntourism experience which caused the change. The significant traits were: anxiety, depression, assertiveness, emotionality, adventurousness and vulnerability.

Anxiety

The results show that anxiety levels significantly decreased as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists worry less about things, are calm and generally less fearful.

Volunteer 22 remarked: *“I was always busy (with God only knows what) and now I take the time to breathe and relax, and just hang out and enjoy life a little more.”*

This change in her day-to-day life, interpreted as a behavioural change, she believes, was brought about by taking responsibility: *“working with animals who depend on you every day for their lives and I worked with children who look up to you and rely on you each and every day, they always had unconditional love; they judge you for who you are on the inside and not what you have on the outside.”*

She also wrote of attitude changes: *“It gave me a new outlook on life. It made me realise that I shouldn't sweat the small stuff, I was always making sure that everything was perfect (with work, everyone's comfort, my house needed to be spotless etc). Now I realise that there is so much more to life than that.”*

These changes in volunteer 22 were also a result of a participatory experience, *"I found goodness in people that I was beginning to think doesn't exist anymore."*

Another code that arose in terms of change was emotions; volunteer 23 said: *"I have so much going on in my head at the present time; it was the most thought provoking experience of my life."* A value change was also suggested by this participant: *"It made me think of what I have and do I really need it."* Both these changes in volunteer 23 were brought about by a participatory experience: *"not [being able to] get over how happy the children were although they had nothing material."*

A further code which emerged from the changes described by volunteers was confidence, described earlier in the statistical analysis: *"I feel I could deal with other situations now, which take me outside my comfort zone"* (volunteer 4); *"I am not quite as nervous now in new situations"* (volunteer 21); and *"I have greater confidence"* (volunteer 9). Both volunteer 4 and 9 explained this in terms of taking responsibility: *"I met situations that took me outside my comfort zone"* (volunteer 4), and *"I made the trip on my own and met new people. I arranged a lot of stuff myself during my trip and found solutions to problems"* (volunteer 9).

The emerging codes from the changes described above include changes in behaviour, emotions, confidence, values, and attitudes. The emerging themes from the experiences that volunteers believed caused the change/s included: action, responsibility, participation and interaction.

Depression

The results show that levels of depression significantly decreased as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists feel happier and more positive; and have less of a tendency to feel sad, dejected, and discouraged.

One volunteer (no. 12) said: *"I am grateful for what I have and now have a sense of duty to help whilst I can"*, denoting a behavioural change that was also accompanied by an attitude change, *"I have a lighter outlook on things."*

An emotional change was expressed by volunteer 15: *"volunteering opened my eyes about other peoples' way of life"* and *"I have a sense of accomplishment"*. She explained this change as a result of her participation: *"the children I cared for suffered many disadvantages but they were generally very positive and dealt with things the best way they could."*

Another volunteer (no. 3) indicated an attitude change, *"I realised that no matter how bad things are you have got to make the most of life and live life to the full"*. This, she felt was brought about by her *"encounter with people living with HIV and AIDS who were also warm, kind and happy"* - a participatory experience.

Attitude changes were also evident in volunteer 11 who said, *"I look at the positive side of things now because I realise I have food, clothes and water."* She attributed this to her participating, *"seeing people who had nothing which made me feel very humble"*.

The emerging codes from the changes described above were similar to those described in the anxiety trait and include changes in behaviour, emotions, values, and attitudes. The emerging theme for the volunteer experience was participation.

Assertiveness

The results show that levels of assertiveness significantly changed (increased) as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists are likely to speak out more, take charge, and direct the activities of others; and have more of a tendency towards leading.

One volunteer (no. 21) said, *“By the time I left the children I was quite happy to tell them off if they needed it and to help discipline them”*. She put this down to her involvement with children.

Some of the experiences of volunteers describing their increased assertiveness, crossed over with their experiences associated with their decreased anxiety and depression. These experiences revolved around responsibility and included *“finding solutions to problems”* (volunteer 9) and *“I proved to myself what I am capable of; going to another country by your-self to do something worthwhile”* (volunteer 15).

So, the emerging code from the changes described above is confidence; and the emerging themes, from the experiences, are involvement and responsibility.

Emotionality

The results show that the emotionality significantly changed (increased) as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists have better access to, and awareness of, their own feelings.

One volunteer (no. 13) said, *“I learned a lot especially respect of other cultures and understanding others’ feelings and their individuality”*. This change also suggests gaining knowledge or skills. The volunteer also felt that the experience was one of cultural immersion and taking responsibility for oneself, *“living in a different country, with different people and a different language”*.

Adventurousness

The results show that adventurousness significantly changed (increased) as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists are more eager to try new activities, travel to foreign lands, and experience different things and find familiarity and routine boring.

Volunteers described this change as having increased confidence, *“I am not quite as nervous to try new experiences”* (volunteer 21), *“I feel a sense of achievement and will do more travelling as a woman solo traveller”* (volunteer 3), which for volunteer 21 was due to getting involved in the experience, *“not wanting to miss out on experiences you can't do at home such as shark diving and sand boarding and experiencing different cultures”*. For

volunteer 3, the change was due to the responsibility of *“being placed in a different country for the first time on your own”*. The same sentiment was expressed by another volunteer (no. 2) who said that it is a responsibility *“travelling on your own to a new country”*. Other volunteers described experiences involving participation and immersion: *“I took the opportunity to try new things such as white water rafting, and took the opportunity for cultural immersion”* (volunteer 2). So, the recurring change theme was confidence; and the experience themes were involvement, participation, responsibility and immersion.

Vulnerability

The results show that vulnerability significantly changed (decreased) as a result of the international volunteering experience; the voluntourists generally feel more poised, confident, and think more clearly under stress.

Volunteers noted changes in personal circumstances, *“I have since changed jobs”* (volunteer 6); changes in confidence, *“my confidence has grown dramatically and I take up every single opportunity now”* (volunteer 7); and attitude change, *“I am less caught up and worried about small things”* (volunteer 10). Volunteer 7 put these changes down to the responsibility of *“going to another continent without having much contact with home and being far away for nearly two months”*, and the participation in various projects, *“I saw people and children who were much more vulnerable than me”*, and

“I saw how resilient the children were, they never whined or complained, just got on with things, it made me realise that I am quite a complainer myself. I also saw the care workers who work so hard for so little money; it made me realise how cushy my life is.” (Volunteer 10)

Summary

This study thus indicates that international voluntourism experience in South Africa did change the AVIVA volunteers. There were significant changes in six traits namely anxiety, depression, assertiveness, emotionality, adventurousness and vulnerability. In other words, AVIVA volunteers have a 95%-99.9% chance of experiencing changes in these traits.