Volunteer tourism: On-the-ground observations from Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer tourism is the combination of leisure travel and voluntary work. Although it is increasing in popularity, one area that remains underexplored in the literature is the centrality of project facilitators in the on-the-ground experiences of volunteer tourists. This study, therefore, interrogates the relationship between facilitation and implementation of volunteer tourism experiences and the volunteer tourists' lived experiences. By placing in conversation on-the-ground volunteer tourism experiences in Nyaki-nama, Rwanda with current literature in volunteer tourism, this study finds that volunteer tourism is a gratifying experience, especially as it relates to self-development, bonding with local people and experiencing of local lifestyle. The study, however, suggests that certain managerial actions and transparency measures must be introduced so as to maximize the social role of volunteer tourism.

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1. Introduction

The maturation of tourism as a social activity has lead to the increasing diversification of the tourism product. One of the many outcomes of this diversification has become known as alternative tourism; small scale tourism that is people-centered, community led, and pursues spreading benefits to hosts, guests and the surrounding cultural and social environments (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Singh, 2002; Wearing, 2001). One genre of alternative tourism is volunteer tourism, an increasingly popular activity in which individuals combine travel, leisure and recreation with voluntary work (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Singh, 2002, 2004; Wearing, 2001). Generally, volunteer tourists are portrayed as being driven by more than pleasant diversions and alternative experiences; they are devoted to poverty alleviation and to meliorate social and environmental conditions within local communities (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; McGehee & Santos, 2005). In response, the growth in the provision of volunteer tourism opportunities has been considerable. Indeed, beyond traditionally thought of organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Voluntary Service Overseas and the United Nations, there are currently countless other NGO's, charitable bodies, and commercial tour operators that offer volunteer tourism opportunities (Tomazos & Butler, 2010).

The rise in such opportunities has been accompanied by a growing body of literature focused on understanding the attitude and behavior attributes of volunteer tourists, as well as crucial facilitators for successful links between volunteer tourists and the local communities in which they volunteer. Nonetheless, while current literature has focused on issues related to how and why tourists seek volunteer experiences, as well as the extent to which volunteer endeavors impact host communities, there has not been as much attempt to interrogate the relationship between facilitation and implementation of volunteer tourism experiences and the volunteer tourists' on-the-ground experiences (Gray & Campbell, 2007). This study is devoted to interrogating such a relationship so as to shift the discussion from how and why tourists search for volunteer experiences into an examination of their lived experiences. At the onset, it should be noted that it is not the intent of this study to engage in a debate regarding the altruistic and/or self-developmental nature of volunteer tourism; this study responds to calls for a better understanding of how to proceed and develop volunteer tourism experiences (Gray & Campbell, 2007; McGehee, 2007) and to posit a more critical inquiry into this form of tourism (Guttentag, 2009). Methodologically, this study approaches auto-ethnographic research as a valuable tool for understanding the lived volunteer tourism experience. Specifically, it draws from data collected through direct and participant observations, as well field accounts of one of the author's lived experiences as a volunteer tourist in Nyakinama, Rwanda; an area severely affected by the 1994 genocide and the 1996–1998 war against infiltrators.

2. Literature review

Volunteer tourism has received some academic attention (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; McGehee & Santos,

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2005; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Sin, 2009; Singh, 2004; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001, 2002), which has positioned volunteer tourism as an emerging area in tourism studies and illuminated its potentially transformative nature. Although there are many different definitions of volunteer tourism, to date there is no single definition that is widely accepted (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Wearing, 2001, 2002). The most commonly used definition was coined by Wearing (2001): "the generic term 'volunteer tourism' applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment" (p. 1). In this sense, volunteer tourism involves the leisure and recreation component associated with tourism, along with the desire to contribute to solving deep social illnesses such as poverty, gender inequality, and parentless childhood. It should be noted, however, that this activity includes those travelers for whom the volunteer work may or may not be the main travel purpose, but excludes those volunteering for over a year (Guttentag, 2009). Volunteer tourism, therefore, has steadily grown during the last few decades, growth that Butcher and Smith (2010) suggest to be associated with the current "life" politics in which individuals, especially young adults, search for their individual identity by seeking to make a difference in the world.

Currently, there are several world-recognized organizations including Youth Challenge International, Voluntary Service Overseas, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Earthwatch, as well as many other NGO's, charitable bodies, and commercial tour operators that offer a variety of volunteer tourism opportunities. These operations and their projects vary in location, size, participant characteristics, purpose, and even image (Coghlan, 2007). However, they all promote their ability to facilitate volunteer opportunities to those tourists seeking on-the-ground experiences that will not only contribute to their own personal development, but also to the communities in which they volunteer (Wearing, 2001, 2002), while at the same time provide traditional vacation pleasures (Butcher & Smith, 2010). For the purpose of this study, we refer to these organizations as facilitators. While programs and opportunities are certainly global, popular regions for volunteer tourism are located in Africa and Central and South America where different volunteer opportunities including scientific research, conservation projects, medical assistance, cultural restoration, and economic and social development are available. Moreover, although there is a diversity of volunteer opportunities, in general experiences and activities are promoted as conferring a close interaction with local lifestyle and community activities (Wearing, 2001, 2002).

Volunteer tourism is often suggested to benefit all social actors involved. Indeed, although volunteers contribute much time, money and work to benefit a foreign community, an often highlighted benefit is the intrinsic rewards gained by the on-the-ground and interactive experience of the volunteer tourist with a local community. These intrinsic rewards translate into gaining a greater awareness of self, causing a change in values and personal consciousness that can inevitably alter one's lifestyle (Wearing, 2002; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). Such argument stems from the belief that by living with and learning about other people and cultures (on-the-ground experiences) in an environment of openness and cooperation, one is able to engage in a transformation and development of the self (Wearing, 2001). Indeed, some have concluded that volunteer tourists are different from other tourists because they pursue a close person-to-person interaction with the host community, as well as enabling experiences that blend with their social values (Singh, 2002, 2004; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). For example, in their study of a Maori community in New Zealand,

McIntosh and Zahra (2007) found that the nature of interactions and cultural experiences volunteer tourists gained were rich in authentic cultural content, genuine and reflective of modern Maori life in New Zealand society. In a later study, the same authors (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007) found that these experiences were also cathartic in the lives of those who participated.

Nonetheless, while potentially transformative, not every aspect of volunteer tourism is positive or desirable (McGehee, 2007). Wearing (2004) warns that, "one fundamental danger is that volunteers can reiterate the ethos of the 'expert,' thus promoting deference in the local community to outside knowledge, therefore contributing to the curtailment of self-sufficiency" (p. 211). Moreover, attitudes toward volunteer tourists also seem to be dissimilar from other tourism experiences. In examining attitudes toward volunteer tourists in several small communities in Tijuana, Mexico, McGehee and Andereck (2009) found that volunteer tourists are often not viewed as tourists, either by local residents or by other tourists. This study also found that volunteer tourists tend to be different in that they often require more sustainable forms of accommodations, transportation, and food as opposed to their mass tourist counterparts. Moreover, although most extant studies focus on the benefits of volunteer tourism, criticisms over this form of tourism, especially related to who really benefits have also been highlighted albeit to a lesser extent (Guttentag, 2009).

Studies have also examined the role of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as crucial facilitators of a successful link between volunteer tourists and local communities (Wearing, 2004; Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005). NGOs are certainly regarded as a suitable catalyst toward the decommodification of tourism as they care for the social and environment implications of tourism development rather than just the increased efficiency and profits single target (Wearing et al., 2005). Furthermore, NGO's contribute to the furthering of alternative philosophies in tourism such as feminism, ecocentrism, community development and post-structuralism (Wearing et al., 2005). This concept is particularly central because it is believed that decommodifying tourism and advancing alternative philosophies will help to completely shift future tourism to a more socially responsible activity. Nonetheless, as Raymond and Hall (2008) suggested, the development of cross-cultural understanding should be perceived as a goal of volunteer tourism rather than a natural result of sending volunteers overseas.

3. Elements of the volunteer tourism experience in Rwanda

3.1. The facilitator: Amahoro Tours

The first step toward arranging for a volunteer tourism experience is identifying a facilitator to arrange for the travel and volunteering operations. In this study, the project facilitator is defined as the person or institution that establishes in advance, as well as coordinates and facilitates the on-the-ground volunteer work and activities. An extensive internet search was conducted to identify volunteer tourism facilitators; the search was guided by three main criteria: 1) facilitators operating in recognized and established volunteer regions; 2) facilitators operating in cooperation with locally-run programs; and 3) facilitators operating solely within one region (as opposed to powerhouse facilitators that provide opportunities in a variety of continents/regions). After conducting an extensive search, Amahoro Tours, a company operating locally within the Musanze district of Rwanda, was agreed upon by the authors as the best facilitator option largely due to its location in a recognized volunteer tourism region, its philosophy and volunteer goals as promoted on its website, and its widely acknowledged role as a leader in facilitating volunteer tourism in the region—to date, Amahoro Tours has facilitated numerous volunteer

experiences for such groups as Yale University college students and faculty to Rwanda. *Amahoro Tours* provides volunteer opportunities in Rwanda through community-based tourism and ecotourism. The goals of *Amahoro Tours* are to display and promote Rwanda's beautiful natural landscape while maximizing tourists' intimate and immersive experience with locals. Their website reads: "Our primary goal is to promote a high-quality visitor experience in an environment which benefits an increasing number of local people directly, as our partners, yet without compromising the very assets upon which the destination depends; namely, a spectacularly beautiful natural environment amid a largely unspoiled cultural environment" (Amahoro Tours website). In line with their name (Amahoro means "peace" in Kinyarwanda), *Amahoro Tours* facilitate experiences based on the principle that local people should be equal partners in the development of tourist activities that will be of mutual benefit to both hosts and guests. As part of their community-based tourism approach, they introduce volunteer tourists to Rwandan people and their traditional activities such as healers, brick makers and banana bark weavers. Their main ecotourism activities are gorilla trekking, volcano hiking and observation safaris.

Amahoro Tours is a member of the Amahoro Integrated Development Program (AIDP), an extensive network of community organizations, international NGOs and private companies striving for the conservation of the natural environment and the preservation of cultural assets through sustainable development (AIDP website). The role of *Amahoro Tours* within the AIDP is to provide technical tourism knowledge to local people and to coordinate with local leaders to maximize tourism contribution to the community's economic development. Five percent of the fees that AIDP collects from their numerous services go to the community in different forms including cash donations for community projects, goods (e.g., books and notebooks) for child education, promotion of community activities, sustaining the local orphanage, supporting and empowering families in distress, and housing development. *Amahoro Tours* permanent staff (i.e., project coordinators) have a key role in the volunteer operations as they are mediators between the AIDP and the Nyakinama community. They hire local people based on their skills and experience as well as on the scale of a project, and they supervise local labor and organize volunteers, amongst other tasks.

3.2. The volunteering lived experience

The AIDP markets to and attracts two types of volunteers. Short-term volunteers are tourists whose primary purpose is gorilla trekking. They usually come in groups of five to twelve individuals and spend on average one to three days total volunteering. Long-term volunteers are tourists primarily motivated by their desire to assist the local community and they often stay between one and three months. The AIDP typically hosts nine long-term volunteers per year.

Following the identification of volunteer tourism opportunities and final selection by the authors of *Amahoro Tours*, one of the authors – from here on referred to as the observer – embarked upon a 10 day volunteer tourism journey facilitated by *Amahoro Tours* to East-Central Africa (Rwanda and Uganda). Specifically, the observer worked in Nyakinama, located in north central Rwanda; an area severely affected by the 1994 genocide and the 1996–1998 war against infiltrators. Nyakinama is a community with 25,000–30,000 people mostly engaged in agricultural work (growing bananas and potatoes), as well as manufacturing a very popular banana-based liquor, and several handicrafts. The renting, fixing and providing of bicycles and motorbikes, as well as other modes of transportation for residents and visitors alike, are also important sources of employment for many local people. This region has a beautiful and fairly unspoiled landscape, shaped by numerous hills devoted largely to agricultural practices. Nyakinama is close to the Muhabura volcano and the Sabyinyo Mountain, which are two popular areas for gorilla trekking. The observers' on-the-ground volunteer tourism personal experiences included teaching basic English, introducing a variety of games to young children at the local orphanage, and helping to build a house for a local family.

During the volunteer experience, the observer, along with an English graduate student in her late-twenties, were the only two longer-term volunteers; the remainder of the tourists whom the observer interacted with and observed, were short-term volunteer tourists. It should be noted that an American journalist also joined the group as a volunteer tourist; her volunteering activities were, however, strictly devoted to taking photos to post on the *Amahoro Tours*' website in order to inform the public and attract future volunteer tourists.

On the first day of volunteer work, the observer met the project coordinator and one other volunteer tourist at the *Amahoro Tours* office and all three headed to Nyakinama for a tour. The observer was charged RWF 500 (US $0.88) for the 10-min motorbike ride; considered by locals as a significant amount of money. The tour included visiting two houses built by the AIDP, a third house still under construction, and the interim care center where orphans welcomed the project coordinator, the observer, and the second volunteer tourist with a dance. At the end of the day the observer was assigned to assist three master builders in building a house. He was informed that he would be working alongside other community members and volunteers, as well as the family who would eventually live in the house.

As a construction assistant, the observer's primary work was to perform manual labor such as passing bricks to the masters and kneading clay and water together to make a sticky, red mortar for stacking the bricks. The observer traveled twice to a nearby community in the highlands to load a truck with locally made bricks and clay after which he unloaded them upon returning to the construction site. He also helped peel the bark off trees, cut wood into pieces for the roof, and covered the walls with a mix of mud and bark. All of these activities helped to enrich the observer's cultural experience in Rwanda. For example, while visiting the mountains he had the opportunity to observe how community members crafted the bricks, and working alongside them for several hours, he interacted with them and one other volunteer tourist while helping to shave red clay off the mountain's face so that it could be later used as mortar.

Once the bricks were stacked and plastered with mud, the observer and his co-workers had to leave the construction site to let the walls dry. During that time, the observer was assigned to work in the interim care center. The center is staffed with an English teacher and a local volunteer "mother" who takes care of the youngest children, cooks, washes clothes, and tends the vegetable gardens and the rabbit corrals. In the center, the observer worked as an English teacher and as the play facilitator by introducing a variety of games to the children and playing with them. Unfortunately, the observer was unable to participate in the finishing touches on the house, such as placing the roof, door and windows, because this last construction phase started well after the observer left the country. This situation was experienced by the observer as a significant disappointment and de-motivating; conversations with other volunteer tourists revealed that they too experienced similar facilitation issues which also resulted in their own feelings of disappointment with their on-the-ground volunteer experiences.

3.3. The tourism component of the volunteer lived experience

During his travel-related time in Rwanda, the observer had the opportunity to visit different places and tourism destinations. He

visited a handicraft shop in Kinigi, Musanze where volunteer tourists from a variety of tour companies come to start their gorilla trekking. This area has become a cultural showroom as local artisans craft and sell their art. Most of the crafts consist of baskets weaved by women while the few men involved carve wood sculptures, walking canes, kitchen utensils and small figures. Almost all of these crafts have a gorilla-related theme. The observer also traveled to Gisenyi, a well-known resort on the shores of Lake Kivu, where he enjoyed a bath and mingled with local people. He also attended an official ceremony to name a newly born gorilla; an event that attracted several country and local dignitaries, representatives from other countries, and many local people and tourists.

A highlight of this tourism experience was a visit to memorial sites in the Gikongoro and Kigali districts, built to commemorate the 1994 Rwanda genocide, and where a collection of belongings, clothing, coffins, and even skulls and bones from the victims are displayed. The observer was awed as he toured the Murambi Genocide Memorial Center in Gikongoro, the site of the genocide's single bloodiest day. At the site were displayed the exhumed bodies of the genocide victims, laid out in the very rooms in which they had been massacred; the strong smell of lime that permeated the room is unforgettable. The visit finished with a very emotional story-telling by a genocide survivor at a nearby Gikongoro orphanage, which strengthened the observer's desire to assist the victims of such terrible tragedies by, amongst others, remaining involved in volunteering opportunities. It should be noted that conversations with two other volunteer tourists who also reported visiting the Murambi Genocide Memorial Center in Gikongoro revealed the same deep desire to become further involved.

4. Study methods

Methodologically, this study is located within an auto-ethnographic approach, which reveals "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Auto-ethnography, therefore is "the process by which the researcher chooses to make explicit use of [his or her] own positionality, involvements, and experiences as an integral part of ethnographic research" (Cloke, Crang, & Goodwin, 1999, p. 333). This approach is increasingly used in performance studies, sociology, mass and interpersonal communication, as well as management studies. In the current study it was employed as it allows for contextualized understanding of the volunteer tourism lived experience; while being particularly careful not to fall prey to narcissism — a common concern regarding auto-ethnographical approaches. As Schwandt (2001) states, auto-ethnography is a "form of writing that seeks to unite ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one's own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one's self) intentions" (p. 13). The goal, therefore, was to embrace personal volunteer tourism experiences, thoughts, stories, and observations so as to understand the social context of volunteer tourism; in particular as it relates to the relationship between facilitation and implementation of volunteer tourism experiences and the volunteer tourists' on-the-ground experiences. In particular, it allowed the core practice of the lived experience of being a volunteer tourist to guide and develop the process of reflective writing and development of ethnographic narratives, as well as guide and organize other sources of evidence that served to triangulate collected data. Therefore, an auto-ethnographical approach allowed us to move beyond a reflexive account of the observer's volunteer tourism lived experiences by further positioning the data collected as a cultural accounting (Jones, 2005); in the process, allowing for an opening up rather than closing down of the conversation (Ellis, 2004). Indeed, "when talking about their lives, people lie

sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past as it actually was, aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truth of our experiences" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 261).

Necessarily, direct and participant observation served a central role in this study and in so doing it facilitated the immergence of the researcher into a specific context; gleaning the most insightful information from a specific group or circumstance (Babchuk, 1962; Becker, 1958; Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002; Jorgensen, 1989; Kluckhohn, 1940; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Patton, 1987). Kluckhohn (1940) coined what is now a well-known definition of participant observation stating that it is "a conscious and systematic sharing, in so far as circumstances permit, in the life-activities and, on occasion, in the interests and affects of a group of persons" (p. 331). Vidich (1955) believes that the participant observer is in the best position to draw up meaningful conclusions because of their close involvement with a locale (Vidich, 1955). In this particular study, the intensity of the volunteer experience as an assistant builder and helper in the local orphanage, allowed the observer to be completely emerged in the field and draw insightful observations fulfilling the purpose of this study. Furthermore, from a critical-realist perspective, participant observation is not only useful for what it is observed, but for the "complex underlying structures [these observations] reveal" (Ryan & Martin, 2001, p.145). Thus, this method is often employed to observe cultures and behaviors of groups when there is a concern that observation will change individuals' or group behavior (Vidich, 1955; Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2008), such as in the case of volunteer tourism.

However, participant observation carries some limitations, mainly associated with perceptions of lack of objectivity and reliability (Babchuk, 1962; Bruyn, 1963; Kluckhohn, 1940; Sommer & Sommer, 2001; Vidich, 1955), thus it provides a partial understanding of the phenomenon researched (Ryan & Martin, 2001). Because participant observation places so much emphasis on the observer, data garnered from an experience is based almost exclusively on the observer's interpretations (Becker, 1958; Bruyn, 1963; Vidich, 1955). Observers may lose their sense of objectivity during data collection and interpretation as they become ingrained into the event or society and can either diminish or exaggerate the importance of certain observed events, losing perspective (Babchuk, 1962; Bruyn, 1963; Hunt, 1985; Sommer & Sommer, 2001; Vidich, 1955). To reduce objectivity bias, observers must enter the study environment without any preconceived notions (Bruyn, 1963; Cozby, 2008) and discuss observations and findings with other people (Palacios, 2010).

The current study draws from data collected through direct and participant observations, as well as field accounts including free-flowing conversations with other volunteers. Andrews (2009) employed similar research methods to collect information on the tourism experience from his own observations and conversations in Spain. Similarly, Palacios (2010) used participant observation within the ethnographic framework to report his observations while volunteering, himself, in Vietnam. Recognizing the "debate over secrecy" (Mitchell, 1993), our team decided on selective disclosure. Specifically, *Amahoro Tours* permanent staff (i.e., project coordinators) operating in Nyakinama were aware of the focus of the research project and knew the full extent and purpose of the participant observer. However, other volunteers as well as community members were not informed of the research project or of the fact that observations were being conducted. This approach sought to avoid the possible *observer effect*, where the observed group modify their behavior as they would likely grow suspicious, especially when the observer asks questions or take notes, thus reducing spontaneity.

The observer kept written detailed and descriptive field notes including reflections on day-to-day encounters, personal experiences, observations of other volunteer tourists, stories, and personal observations so as to understand the social context of volunteer tourism. Taking of field notes was largely determined on a daily basis. Indeed, it was not always possible to participate and take notes at the same time. For example, as a construction assistant the observer had the opportunity to work alongside and interact with other volunteer tourists and community members while performing manual labor activities; during such periods/experiences it was not possible, nor advisable, to stop working to take field notes. Therefore, as it relates to such experiences, observations were taken as soon as the observer was alone or not working; in most cases, at the end of the day. Other times, for example while strolling through the town, the observer was able to jot down notes. All field notes were then examined by: 1) identifying trends and reoccurring discourses and behaviors, and 2) reflecting on the extent to which the observers' experiences merged with others. Next, extant volunteer tourism literature was drawn upon and cross-referenced so as to assist in discussing and contextualizing the study findings/observations. The goal was to discuss study findings/observations as they relate to the relationship between facilitation and implementation of volunteer tourism experiences and on-the-ground experiences.

5. Study observations and discussion

5.1. A mix of work and tourism

An element flowing from the name and the various definitions of volunteer tourism is the mix of volunteer (i.e., work or service) and travel-related (i.e., tourism) activities (Lepp, 2009; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001, 2002). Overall, peer volunteer tourists were satisfied with the proportion of the time dedicated to their volunteer and tourism activities during their on-the-ground experiences. They were also very satisfied with the quality of their tourism experiences such as sightseeing and visiting local attractions. However, observations and informal conversations with peer volunteers suggest that there were some distressful feelings on the part of the volunteer tourists regarding their working contributions as these were not seen as being maximized. For example, while working at the interim care center, the observer and one of his fellow volunteers found it particularly difficult to understand instructions and subsequently perform their duties due to language barriers. As a result, volunteers had to improvise and help as best as they could, either playing with the children or making up some class activities, which confirms the sense of obligation reported in the extant literature (Lepp, 2009). Beyond what may have been a combination of facilitation logistic issues and language and cultural barriers, another cause of frustration aroused when several volunteers reported not being assigned any task; a situation that has also been evidenced in the existing literature (Palacios, 2010). As a case in point, the observer spent several afternoons walking around the village without any assigned task; this was not uncommon for several of the observed volunteer tourists and was often expressed by volunteer tourists as a disappointment. However, this situation may also be interpreted as the "reciprocal" − "giving and receiving" − nature of this type of activity in which volunteers benefit from intrinsic rewards, enjoyable visits, as well as non-demanding flexible work tasks in exchange of their fees and labor activity (Palacios, 2010; Tomazos & Butler, 2010), and the free-choice and no-coercion associated with volunteer tourism (Lepp, 2009).

5.2. Desire to assist others

Another element of volunteer tourism is the desire to assist others, largely aiming for the alleviation of poverty or other social illnesses (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001, 2002). The observers' experience, as well as field observations and casual conversations with other four volunteer tourists confirmed that although they were assisting local institutions and projects in different ways (e.g., construction, education, medical services, advertising) they were motivated by this spirit of service, either by teaching a new skill or by providing a service. For example, those working at the interim care center often expressed their interest in engaging in teaching activities as inspired by their belief in the potentially transformative and liberating role that education can play in helping Rwandans emancipate from poverty. It is also worth noting the case of the professional photographer mentioned earlier who took photos for Amahoro Tours website; her desire was to call attention to issues facing the region by providing images that improve upon Amahoro Tours website, and consequently increase awareness and promote volunteer opportunities in the region. Field observations further affirm that such spirit of service sustains the manifestation of current "life politics" among volunteer tourists by which young adults search for their own identity through helping others rather than a continuation of neo-colonialism as previously reported (Butcher & Smith, 2010).

5.3. Intrinsic benefits for Volunteer tourists

Overall, tourism experiences can create greater awareness of the "self" and "others", ultimately translated into a [desired] identity (Andrews, 2009; Sin, 2009). Specifically, it is widely suggested that volunteer tourism is capable of bringing several intrinsic rewards to volunteer tourists, usually summarized as a greater sense of self, personal growth, and even as a cathartic experience (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Wearing, 2001, 2002; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007), to the extent that volunteer tourists have been portrayed as heroes (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). Field observations revealed a fulfillment of personal aspirations among volunteer tourists. For example, experiencing firsthand the living conditions of this disadvantaged community has increased the observer's sense of social responsibility as a human being and has instilled a new purpose: working toward poverty alleviation.

Furthermore, field observations confirmed that some of the intrinsic benefits that volunteer tourists experienced stem from their close interaction with local people as several studies have suggested (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Singh, 2002, 2004; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001). For example, observations and informal conversations with other volunteer tourists suggest that their strong bond with Nyakinama locals started from their very first volunteer day (e.g., welcoming dance performed by the children at the interim care center) and was nurtured throughout their whole on-the-ground experience (e.g., daily interactions with the local "mother" who cooked for the volunteers and the master builders). However, observations also suggest that these strong relationships were facilitated in Nyakinama mainly due to the openness of the local community. For example, although local builders possessed only a rudimentary grasp of English, it was remarkable their effort to teach traditional construction techniques to the observer and other volunteer tourists. In part, these observations may be associated with attitudes of local residents who do not perceive volunteer tourists as tourists (McGehee & Andereck, 2009) or perceive them as special type of tourists because of their work in the host destination, and their altruism, desire to learn, and involvement with locals (Gray & Campbell, 2007).

5.4. Tangible benefits for the host community

It is suggested that volunteer tourism is capable of providing tangible benefits to the host community and local people in varied and numerous ways, and field observations suggest that to a certain extent these benefits occur in Nyakinama. As Butcher and Smith (2010) suggest, having donated the cost of the volunteer tourism experience (approximately US$ 3000) directly to the interim center or the housing project may have benefited local people to a greater extent. However, such form of assistance would prevent the intrinsic rewards for volunteer tourists, which beg the question of who the beneficiary in this form of tourism truly is. Providing for the construction of houses for local people and supporting the interim center are two evident benefits provided by AIDP. However, field observations suggest that greater effort and resources are needed to provide continuity in pursuing some of these social benefits. For example, an unsteady supply of teaching volunteers at the interim care center has caused the cancellation of class sessions for resident children on several occasions; this was discussed by those involved as impacting learning since students must start and stop their lessons quite frequently.

Volunteer tourism in Musanze through AIDP, especially construction projects, also benefits the local economy by increasing sales for local brick makers and job opportunities for local builders. Although we recognize that such economic impact may be minute, as it has already been reported in other volunteer-related studies (Clifton & Benson, 2006; Gray & Campbell, 2007), AIDP housing projects have certainly help to increase the demand for building materials and labor. Bricks are crafted by local associations formed by community members. Each brick costs about 20 Rwandan Francs − RWF (US $0.035) in the dry season and 30 RWF (US $0.052) in the rainy season (personal communication with Amahoro Tours project coordinator). The amount invested in bricks for each house ranges from RWF 7000 to 12000 (US $12−21) depending on the season and the size of the house. Building one traditional house in Musanze takes about three months, mainly because of the time needed for the bricks to dry once they have been stacked. After the wall structures are dried, additional time and labor is required to add other house features such as doors and roofing. Thus, AIDP house building projects increase job opportunities for master and assistant builders for a relatively long period of time. Master builders are locals with enough knowledge and experience to design and supervise a house's construction, while assistants carry materials, mix clay for stacking the bricks, and assist in other manual labor tasks. The daily wage for the master builders is about RWF 2500 ($4.4) and about RWF 1500 ($2.6) for the assistants. The number of builders hired depends on the size of a house, usually comprising around three to four master builders and fifteen assistants. Furthermore, project coordinators of AIDP building projects made a great effort to distribute employment opportunities within the local community; for example, hiring different master and assistant builders for each house project.

Field observations suggest though that the economic benefits of volunteer tourism in this area could probably be maximized beyond direct employment stimulation. For instance, the observer was the only volunteer tourist hosted by a local family while the other volunteers stayed at a hostel; a situation that has been reported in previous literature (Wearing, 2001). Indeed, living expenses in Musanze were very reasonably priced at about $30 per day, which covered room, board and the 5% AIDP fee. In the observer's experience, such money went directly to a local family. Thus, greater effort encouraging volunteer tourists to stay with locals could increase and/or spread revenues directly to Nyakinama families rather than diffuse them through longer distribution channels associated with formal hospitality facilities such as hotels and restaurants. Locals hosting volunteer tourists is a common practice in other localities receiving volunteer tourists (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Lepp, 2009); thus encouraging volunteer tourists to stay with locals should not be an arduous task, especially since this type of tourists tend to require lesser amenities than mainstream tourists (Gray & Campbell, 2007; McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

5.5. Use of discretionary time and money

McGehee and Santos (2005) incorporated the use of discretionary time and income as a defining element of volunteer tourism. While both are equally needed to engage in volunteerism, timing shaped by individuals' circumstances is suggested to be a paramount enabler of volunteer tourism (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). With this in mind, AIDP has found ways to accommodate for short-term volunteers so as to reduce time and money constraints. Indeed, during the time the observer spent as a volunteer tourist, several tourists visited for short period of times to volunteer their work. Moreover, overall money invested in the volunteer tourism experience greatly differs depending on the characteristics of the experience, such as remoteness of the site, living expenses, and length of the experience, among others. In the particular experience of the observer, the overall expenses (not including airfare or tourism/recreation related expenditures) were approximately US$1500, which included immunization shots, transportation, lodging and boarding fees, and other miscellaneous expenses. In addition, it would be appropriate to include as a cost the number of days working in different tasks without a stipend. Although the extent of the time and money investments can range from slight to burdensome depending on the characteristics of the experience sought, this was not an emerging topic among volunteer tourists in Nyakinama but rather the intrinsic rewards volunteer tourists were experiencing; highlighting once more, the reciprocal nature of volunteer tourism (Palacios, 2010; Tomazos & Butler, 2010). Indeed, this topic deserves further academic exploration and discussion, as observations suggest that the economic estimates of engaging in this form of tourism should seek to include the intrinsic rewards received.

6. Recommendations and limitations

Field observations suggest that although volunteer tourism is overall a satisfying and rewarding experience, there are a number of areas that project facilitators can improve upon to support on-the-ground experiences, and broaden intrinsic rewards for volunteer tourists as well as tangible benefits for the host community. As Guttentag (2009) suggests, raising awareness of the weakness and potential negative impacts of this form of tourism is not intended to diminish it, but to facilitate the increase of benefits to the host communities and volunteers. Although it is recognized that not all volunteer tourism experiences may be extremely gratifying (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Raymond & Hall, 2008), these on-the-ground volunteer tourist experiences in Rwanda suggest that four elements reducing satisfaction could be improved.

The first, there is the issue of the lack of a carefully developed and facilitated structured volunteer work plan and tasks. This resulted not only in long stretches where volunteer tourists did not actually work, but also in miscommunication when it came to establishing times for task completion; highlighting the necessity to carefully develop and manage volunteer tourism projects. Since volunteer tourists seem to be driven by their desire of servicing others through a sense of altruism and philanthropy, not having a structured volunteer work plan and tasks greatly diminishes intrinsic rewards. For this reason, it is recommended that

facilitators of volunteer tourism experiences structure a clear work plan with specific tasks for volunteer tourists as part of the package they promote and offer. When structuring volunteer tasks though, it is also important to recognize that enjoyment of volunteerism seems to be associated with flexibility and non-coercive tasks (Lepp, 2009). In addition, although for the observer it was a personally gratifying experience going through the learning curve of some manual tasks (e.g., mortar mix) most likely because such task was quite different from his day-to-day work (Lepp, 2009), it might be advisable to consider developing volunteer tasks information to be shared with volunteer tourists prior to their arrival, especially when language barriers force them to learn mainly from watching locals. For example, including general information as well as possibly a video demonstrating how the mortar mix for stacking bricks is prepared on the Amahoro Tours website, would not only be informative, but also appealing for future volunteer tourists. Somewhat unrealistic, although much desirable, would be to match volunteers' skills with the needs of the host community as McGehee and Anderek (2008) suggested.

A second, and expected, observed aspect diminishing the bond and mutual cultural understanding between participants and local community members was related to language barriers. Although Palacios (2010) suggested that cultural differences place volunteering "as a powerful frame of action at a personal level" (p. 867), such barriers could nonetheless be reduced. In the case of this study, in Nyakinama there were some locals working in AIDP projects (e.g., construction) with some English knowledge. When possible, facilitators should consider including and rotating members with predominant foreign language skills (e.g., English) among different volunteer task groups so as to foster a quicker integration of the volunteers with the local community. This practice can serve to diminish on-the-work-site confusion and miscommunication and increase intercultural communication opportunities. Moreover, such practice can also contribute to more effective volunteer–local relations, as well as increased productivity.

A third critical issue affecting the impact of volunteer tourism, and this AIDP project in particular, was related to the lack of continuity in the supply of volunteers, primarily affecting the education sessions in the Interim Care Center. Although the authors recognize the nature and size of the organization and project as well as their undersized resources as compared to other volunteer organizations with a greater international scope, expanding networks and building partnerships with other organizations could increase the impact of social programs as other studies have suggested (Wearing et al., 2005). In this particular case, Amahoro Tours may want to seek an educational partner to provide teachers on a long-term basis in order to provide primary education to the village orphans. Although the authors acknowledge that finding educational partners is not an easy task, Amahoro Tours could embark in such endeavor by accessing and activating in their favor the extensive network of community organizations, international NGOs and private companies that AIDP hosts under their umbrella.

Finally, with regard to the promotion of volunteer tourism experiences, field observations suggest that facilitators should seek to increase transparency and improve customer service so as maximize their volunteer tourism operations. Improving transparency regarding the programs and activities promoted as well as organizational procedures for impact in the region can help to advertise programs and operations among potential volunteer tourists, make intrinsic rewards of volunteers much more tangible, and increase social legitimacy among local people. For example, the relative large number of local builders hired and the intentional rotation of builders to benefit a larger number of local people are procedures worth disseminating amongst those involved and those interested in volunteer tourism. Indeed, while we found out about such practices — mainly because of our interest and investigation — our field notes reveal that most of the volunteer tourists were still largely unaware of such practices, nor are they discussed in the Amahoro website. Overall, the system that facilitators utilize to hire local builders, the way in which organizations such as AIDP allocate funds for projects, as well as how volunteer fees are allocated are not readily available to most volunteer tourists creating some unintended confusion, and at times, mistrust. It is also recommended that facilitators of volunteer tourism experiences provide more detailed information of local services and options to volunteer tourists. As a case in point, the Amahoro Tours fee for a 2-h roundtrip from the airport to Kigali was US $100, while such trip costs around three dollars in public transportation. Although it is understandable that volunteer tourists may prefer to take such private transportation mode because of safety concerns or to increase facilitator revenues, providing an array of options may increase transparency perceptions, thus increase volunteer trust of the facilitator.

Facilitators of volunteer tourism experiences may also want to consider integrating customer service initiatives into their current programs to enhance volunteer tourist satisfaction. For example, it would be advisable to develop channels to consistently monitor potential and current volunteer tourists. By knowing in advance volunteer tourists' goals and work experiences, facilitators can further tailor volunteer activities in line with these goals and work experiences, thus maximizing volunteer tourism experiences as well as local impact (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Facilitators can also implement a system in which tourists can evaluate their volunteer experiences upon completion of their travels; such information can then be used to improve upon services offered to future volunteers. The same should be done with local community members so as to identify community-generated pressing needs requiring volunteering time and efforts; these can then be shared and promoted to tourists so that they know that part of their work and efforts are going directly toward needs identified by the community. Facilitators should also consider creating a system of social recognition to award the hard work of both the volunteers and of the workers hired from the local communities as it has been already suggested (Wearing, 2004). Field observations support the implementation of this practice as it was found that both, volunteer tourists as well as workers, would greatly enjoy and welcome such recognition as well as updated information regarding the progress and impact of volunteer projects.

Observations gathered in Nyakinama, Rwanda and the discussions that ensued also identified many opportunities for further research into volunteer tourism. More information is clearly needed to ascertain the level of satisfaction amongst volunteer tourists as high satisfaction levels may warrant a sustained volunteerism. Based on field observations, at least two satisfaction indicators are in need of assessment: 1) the degree to which the volunteer tourists perceive their goals accomplished; and 2) the degree to which they feel satisfied by the return on their monetary and physical investment. Although the potential of volunteer tourism as a means for poverty and other social illnesses alleviation is widely recognized, it is still not yet fully understood as to what extent volunteer programs promote living conditions of locals. Thus, further research is required to reveal the impact of volunteer tourism on local areas by implementing a consistent mode of evaluation. Particularly in volunteer efforts in the region observed, further understanding is needed on the impact of volunteer tourism in local employment generation and education enhancement. Further research is also needed in identifying ways to promote better communication between local people and volunteer tourists. Despite the recruiting efforts of Amahoro Tours, this study found that a small number of volunteer tourists (five to ten

per year) come to Musanze, suggesting that future studies should also examine alternative ways to promote these programs in remote and marginalized areas.

Two main limitations are associated with this study. The first limitation is associated with the research method used as auto-ethnography and participant observation are often criticized for their objectivity and reliability. Although the observer embarked into his volunteer tourism experience without pre-conceptions and striving for somewhat objective observations, he recognizes that his deep desire to help alleviate social pressures in developing areas may have biased study observations. Furthermore, recommendations stated in the literature to reduce these types of bias such as recording and cross checking personal observations by various field researchers or alternate settings to compare observations (Hunt, 1985; Sommer & Sommer, 2001) were not feasible. However, a close discussion of field observations and insights among the authors, was intended to reduce such limitation (Palacios, 2010). In addition, although the observer placed effort in registering his observations while they were occurring (Sommer & Sommer, 2001), many times this was not possible because of the nature of the work he was doing (e.g., mixing mortar or interacting with children), a situation that has also been reported in studies employing similar methods (e.g., Ryan & Martin, 2010). The second study limitation is related to the study setting. The remoteness of Nyakinama and the reduced number of volunteer tourists in the area limited the number of observations. Furthermore, the cultural remoteness between the observer and local people in terms of language inhibited their inclusion in this study, a situation that Palacios (2010) also reported. Despite these downfalls, study results are still regarded as important and useful. In particular, field observations made during this study were pertinent as they further assisted in identifying areas of improvement for small volunteer tourism project facilitators and open new opportunities for further inquiry in this emerging and potentially transformative area of study.

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