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Wofford College

Intercultural Hierarchy Reinforced through North American Voluntourism Efforts in
Latin America and the Caribbean

Nancy Ford

Honors Thesis

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Prologue

I made my first trip to Latin America as a 16-year-old high school student and member of a short-term mission team. I went with a small group from my church with the aim of sharing the Gospel message in rural villages as well as handing out food and other prizes and performing Vacation Bible School (VBS) activities. Admittedly, I was enamored with the possibility of helping in the context of a different culture. As I prepared for the trip, and even upon arrival, I saw myself as a benefactor and the Nicaraguan villages and orphanage as beneficiaries—myself as a “have,” and them as “have nots.” Naturally, because of my perceived hierarchical positioning and political, economic, and religious status, I also saw my role in the equation as a key helper to the poor.

However, I distinctly remember a moment toward the end of the ten-day trip when I realized that I could not actually change anyone or free them from chronic poverty with games, lessons and handouts. Therefore, I took several measures to better understand the complexities of culture and effective poverty alleviation in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). I began by immersing myself in LAC culture and language through academic study and volunteer work stateside. Then, I founded a 501(c)(3) non-profit ministry, Set in Motion, to support and empower rural Nicaraguans. I participated in a team to oversee microfinance initiatives in Haiti. I interned at a grassroots organization that operated an orphanage founded and staffed by Dominicans. Finally, I conducted research –interviewing hundreds of people – both Latin American beneficiaries and other North American benefactors, like me.

Abstract

In this thesis, my goal is to share the insight I have gleaned from my academic, professional and personal involvement in the region. The most dominant theme I have observed is the rising trend of North American volunteer tourism (also referred to as “voluntourism”) in LAC and unanticipated consequences it involves. This trend reinforces an intercultural hierarchy, which will be the focus of my study.

I will begin with an overview of the intercultural, hierarchical mentality and explain two key aspects it involves: the North American “Planner” or “fix-it” tendencies toward the region, and the region’s developed dependence on North America. The second section of my thesis will discuss the way North American communication reinforces hierarchical thinking. Finally, my thesis will culminate with guidelines for bridging the gap between North American providers and LAC recipients.

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I. Overview of hierarchical structure of LAC relations with North America

A. Establishing Historical Context for Intercultural Hierarchy in Voluntourism

Beginning with Columbus's arrival in 1492, Latin American and Caribbean people inherited an internationally-recognized identity: poor, vulnerable and primitive. Until this point, both indigenous Latinos and white Europeans had completely different and separate cultures, unaware of each others' existence. However, for the next century after the European arrival, proximity forced these cultures to interact. As they mingled and clashed, the Spaniards dominated the indigenous Latinos creating a hostile, hierarchical environment.

By 1600, Europeans had effectively conquered almost all of Latin America and the Caribbean – systematically transforming the region into colonies existing to service the pleasures of the European motherland. Through exploitation and insurmountable social and economic inequality, European values and systems set the pace for Latin American life. African captives poured in while the numbers of indigenous grew fewer and fewer, both populations summoned to slavery and dependency on whites.¹

After centuries of uprisings and war, famine and drought, changing politics and globalization, in the 1700-1800's, LAC countries broke free from their European, parent-like masters. The remaining, co-existing mix of cultures bled together to form unified national races, unique to particular regions and countries.

¹ See Chasteen, especially the introduction and chapters 1 and 2, for a deeper historical overview of the pre-independence LAC region.

However, hierarchy remained, but with a new actor in the top position: the United States. The US continued to see them as a poor region, striving for the lifestyle held by their Northern neighbor.²

The hierarchical relationship exists to this day both in politics and voluntourism, if one could separate the two. Regarding the dynamic of small NGO, humanitarian volunteer and mission group contributions, I have noticed a theme of interaction and aid provision that lines up with the concept of an implicit intercultural hierarchy, or categorization of people into distinct and unequal social groups. In its most concrete form, I have divided this hierarchy has two levels: the benefactors and the beneficiaries.

The benefactors represent the “goers,” “vacationaries,” “voluntourists” – the “charitable,” cultural group who are “fortunate” and “blessed,” generously helping those below them on the hierarchy.³ The beneficiaries, on the other hand, represent both individuals and grassroots NGOs on the receiving side of the equation. Beneficiaries are considered the bottom of the intercultural hierarchy and are, or at least *feel*, dependent on North American benevolence. While benefactors are considered “haves,” LAC beneficiaries are considered “have nots.” They are economically poor, “developing,” and deemed by the North, “un-“ or “less-fortunate.”

Naturally, cross-cultural aid goes one way – from one person/group to another, from North America to Latin America, from the *developed* to the *developing*. Additionally, in situations of cross-cultural aid there is a clear gap between the

² See Sweet for historical accounts of obtaining independence.

³ See Butcher and Smith, especially chapter 1, for categorization of “volunteer tourists” and “developing world recipients”

actors. Benefactors dictate the relationship while beneficiaries comply – without a voice to express their true needs.

Easterly, Wearing, and other, relevant authors would likely characterize the benefactor position as the individual, culture, or service team who *has, serves* and *gives*, and the beneficiaries as ones who *do not have* and who *receive*.⁴ Many perceive the benefactor as *wise* and *knowledgeable*, making the beneficiaries *uninformed, incorrect*, and potentially *needing of instruction*. Thus, when interacting, our mentality would suggest a one-way relationship built on dependency between the two groups rather than a two-way partnership built on dignity and mutual respect. Naturally, North American plans and actions are a product of their mentalities and, in Latin America and the Caribbean, tend to result in handouts and over-simplified solutions to symptoms of large-scale problems.

Also important to understanding this hierarchy is acknowledging its pervasiveness. I argue that both actors recognize their status according to this hierarchy as well as their respective roles. The more the cultures interact in these roles, the more the beneficiaries see themselves as dependent on their benefactors, and benefactors see themselves as “white saviors” – using a planning and fix-it mentality to impose solutions on beneficiaries.⁵

⁴ See Wearing, especially chapter 1, for more details distinguishing the roles of North American and LAC actors.

⁵ See Teju Cole’s complex on the White Savior.

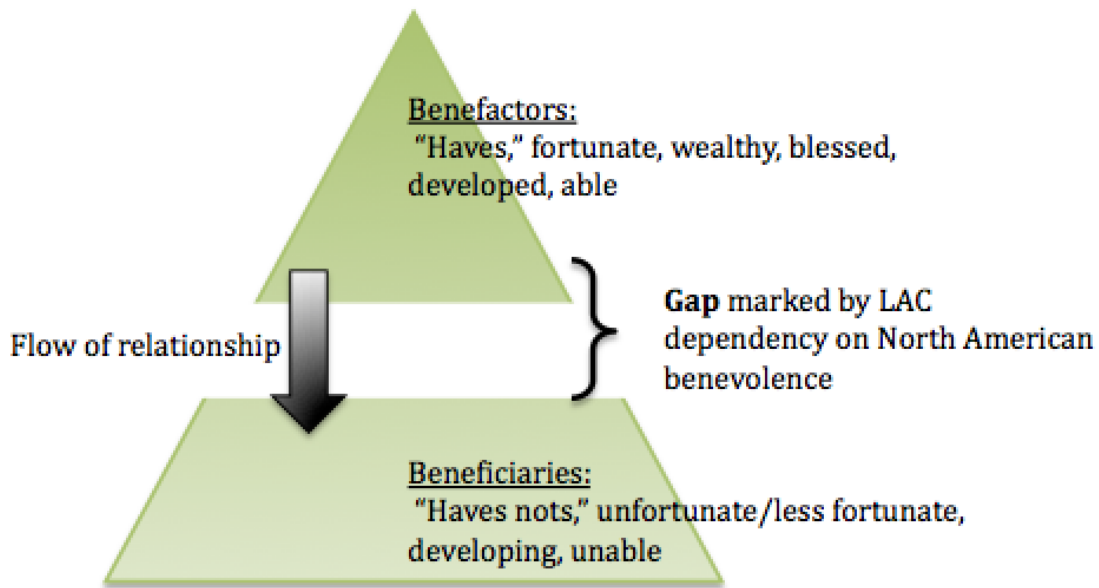


Diagram explaining the actors within my theory of intercultural hierarchy.

* * * * *

Focusing now on the present trends in aid efforts conducted by North American NGOs and individuals (principally from the United States), we find that developing countries have experienced an incredible rise in mobilization of North American humanitarians between the ages of 17 and 29. In fact, the National Public Radio (NPR) reports that the current generation "goes," or travels, in all-time high levels, both on Christian and non-religious humanitarian service trips. In fact, high school and college institutions offer options for "alternative spring breaks" and "summer service trips" combining vacation and volunteer work.

Interestingly, the NPR also claims that voluntourism, i.e. alternative spring break and summer service trips, is one of the most popular and fastest growing

travel phenomena, as it is forming its own sector of the tourism industry. It is reported to involve more than 1.6 million volunteer tourists and over \$2 billion each year. Ken Jones, owner of volunteer tourism company, Maximo Nivel (“Highest Level” in English) located in Antigua, Guatemala, states that young Westerners hunger for rich cultural experiences where humanitarian efforts can be provided, worldviews can be expanded, and goers can feel engaged, as “*part of something bigger.*” Further, they receive tremendous support and admiration from extracurricular organizations, family members, academic instructors, and friends to contribute to these worthy causes; and, in some cases, obligation. Many, including some volunteer tourism companies, label these travelers “voluntourists,” but the travelers themselves often refer to themselves as “goers” or “international volunteers.”

In his best-selling books, “Toxic Charity” and “Charity Detox,” Robert Lupton uses other labels for the voluntourism industry, which include “compassion industry,” “benevolence business,” and “religious tourism.” He also labels participants as “vacationaries,” “tourists on mission,” and “economic missionaries.” Other Christian sources provide labels like “short-term missionaries,” “servant workers,” and “laborers.”⁶

In her article, “Giving Back, Doing Good, Feeling Global,” Jennie Molz supports this growing mentality toward humanitarian efforts claiming it to be incredibly valuable for families. She explains that voluntourism, at its core, operates to deepen the emotional capacity, adaptability, open-mindedness, and gratitude among

⁶ See Matthew 9:38

American youth. Taking a more critical stance, however, she also asserts that voluntourism often concerns itself more with the American consumer mentality of *getting something out of it* than it does with truly impacting poor communities. The central objective of these trips, she found, is “equipping middle-class children from the Global North with the emotional skills they will need to live in the uncertain and unequal world of neoliberal globalization.”

As a frequent goer and researcher of the voluntourism phenomena, I agree with the central objective Molz boldly presents, and believe that this way of thinking – catering to North Americans – fosters and reinforces a hierarchical mentality. It unashamedly acknowledges LAC communities as “have nots” and generally impoverished while simultaneously elevating North Americans, the “haves,” to a position of higher importance. Further, it can widen the gap young people see between the two cultures as it blatantly portrays and teaches North Americans to see LAC people as different and in need of our help and support.

B. The Religious Niche in the Voluntourism Industry

Christian missions, as explained by Baptist pastor and author of “Let the Nations be Glad,” John Piper, ought to be focused on *spreading God’s glory* and showing compassion toward others. According to Piper, the biblical call to missions is a component of the larger call to partnership with God in restoring His glory to the earth. Piper holds that this happens by loving people through the act of sharing the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Nowadays, however, Christian ministries and the broader Christian missions sector have not stuck closely to these

aims. Instead, many have followed suit of secular volunteer trends, emphasizing short-term, humanitarian projects, and goers' personal growth, over other goals.

By emphasizing short-term service trips, the voluntourism phenomenon dulls Christian missions in a broad sense. Before the rise of voluntourism, Christian aid was less focused on and legitimized by short-term projects such as building bridges, digging wells, painting walls, and playing with (and instagramming) poor children (Kascak). When Christian missions shift focus from the Gospel to simply cultural immersion with a service component, they no longer fulfill the Christian calling discussed by Piper.⁷

Some contend that Christian mission work no longer holds true to its Biblical focus, but has inadvertently shifted its focus to the popular mindset bent on gaining international exposure. Corbett and Fikkert's book, "When Helping Hurts," and Lupton's "Toxic Charity" and "Charity Detox" would affirm this stance. Corbett and Fikkert, for example, express that the core purpose of Christian missions is not to engage in unsustainable, goer- or "giver-" centric cultural learning experiences, but instead to help alleviate poverty. They explain that material poverty alleviation is not mere provision of resources to meet physical needs. Instead it ought to emphasize "empowering people to earn sufficient materials and capabilities through their own labor, to glorify God by living as the dignified humans God created them to be: productive, and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of their work (Corbett and Fikkert 74)."

⁷ See Piper's book, "Let the Nations be Glad" for his well-received interpretation of the Biblical call toward Christian missions.

As Christian ministries continue to follow practices of secular volunteer work trends, the intercultural hierarchy remains applicable. As mentioned previously, current LAC culture is rooted in European culture, and therefore, is predominantly Catholic. And unlike the political situation in North America, there is not often separation of church and state. Catholic values and beliefs do influence political decisions, positions, and budgets.

However, since the upper-level position on the hierarchy has extended beyond Europe to North America, and protestant mission group visits have increased, LAC communities have begun adopting Protestant belief systems. According to a 2014 *Economist* article, in 1970, 92% of LAC people identified themselves as Catholic, and as of 2014, only 69% claim Catholicism. Meanwhile, Protestantism has grown from 4% to 19% and the non-religious population has grown from 1% to 8%, though most still believe in God.⁸

Interestingly, perhaps influenced by North American Protestant missionaries, LAC Protestants often take conservative stances on political topics such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Traditional Catholics in the region, under less influence of Christian mission groups, on the other hand, have grown increasingly liberal on such issues. As stated by the *Economist*, this situation points to, and flows from, “American-style culture wars.”

If this religious conservatism is due to North American influence, it becomes clear that the North American culture is indeed dominant, and believed by both

⁸ See “A Southern Reformation” for more statistics regarding shifting religious trends in LAC.

parties to be such – convincing and appealing enough to be preferred over traditional Catholic belief systems.

C. Challenges of the Hierarchy: Unintended Consequences of North American Voluntourism to LAC

William Easterly pioneered the written world of humanitarian aid in his book, “The White Man’s Burden,” and brings to light harmful results of Western aid. Other authors frequently reference his provocative work as they learn about and address benefits and consequences of humanitarian efforts.

Among those who go, Easterly distinguished between “planners” and “searchers.” According to Easterly, planners are Westerners who believe involved, centrally controlled campaigns backed by cash can *fix* what they consider *technical* problems of poverty in the developing world. Their efforts are then marked by unattainable expectations, unreasonable assumptions, a shortage of practical knowledge, and a complex, layered system of personnel and processes between recipients and management. Further, they apply simplistic, irrelevant answers to large and intricate problems, and thrive when not held accountable. Easterly poses that in their combined arrogance and ignorance, planners prematurely impose their foreign ideals on poor, non-white communities and end up wasting time and money, unable to bring prosperity. Though planners present flashy models and speak with promise of great achievements, Easterly holds that they bring about the “second tragedy of the world’s poor:” ineffectiveness of aid (Easterly 7).

Additionally, planners have a high need to control and an inability to see issues beyond their particular initiatives, such as unintended negative consequences of their efforts. Easterly holds that Planners rarely, if ever, produce lasting benefits but do, often times, bring about major consequences of waste, discouragement, corruption, worsened income distribution, empowerment of dictators, and confusion. They also produce dependency, which I believe reinforces the planners' fix-it mentality and actions because it "leaves the ball in their court" to take care of the needs of the developing world.

One example of unintended consequences stemming from a planner's activity comes from an interview with Peter Greer, CEO and President of Christian Microfinance Institution (MFI), Hope International, by Jerry Bowyer in a Forbes magazine article, "Your Help is Hurting." Greer describes a World Bank survey, where 60,000 of the world's impoverished were asked to define poverty. Answers ended up including "an empty heart," "voicelessness," "powerlessness," "feelings of inferiority," and "feelings of being dirty." Greer then points out that these answers address emotional, spiritual and psychological issues and do not mention bare feet or lack of clothes. He continued to explain that merely providing shoes or hand-me-down clothing items would not deeply affect the way people feel about their own poverty. In this situation, a shoe-providing organization, offering a band-aid solution to a particular manifestation of poverty, would be an example of a planner (Bowyer).

On the other hand, Easterly defines searchers as people who ask questions, adapt to difficult and unexpected situations, address roots of problems, follow up,

offer better incentives, and reap better benefits. They care in holistic ways for the needs of the poor and work diligently to meet these needs. He says that searchers collect feedback, operate through trial and error, prioritize the poor and operate flexibly to accommodate their needs. Because they care deeply, work humbly and think innovatively, searchers show tremendous promise for effective aid programs, and have in fact delivered some tangible benefits (Easterly 7).

Finally, Easterly laments that due to the dominance of planners, searchers have not had the opportunity to deliver in the area of global poverty. He acknowledges that planners have a rhetorical advantage of promising plans to end poverty, but unfortunately, lack the flexibility to see them to completion. What planners have against them is the second tragedy of the world's poor. Easterly claims that "poor people die not only because of the world's indifference to their poverty, but also because of ineffective efforts by those who do care" (Easterly 7).

Easterly describes a second harm of Western aid as the creation of political orphans, or aid recipients abandoned by their Western, parental helpers. To explain this concept, Easterly poses the problem that aid recipients lack a voice. Efforts, likely conducted by planners, do not incorporate two-directional communication, which I argue evidences a hierarchical mentality dominated by the top and *imposed* onto the bottom.

As noted in various examples dispersed throughout "Toxic Charity," many Western aid efforts think up solutions to particular, easier to solve symptoms of poverty without consulting their recipients (Lupton). A few years ago, on an

airplane from Nicaragua, a young man gave me the following example concerning a Christian well-digging initiative.

Knowing that many people lack drinking water in Sub-Saharan Africa, one Christian church group thought they would fund and install a well.⁹ They developed a proposal and began funding. Within a month they were able to start drilling, and one week later, there was one more American-made well in Africa. Unfortunately, the first problem happened almost immediately when the planners did not teach the well recipients how to use the American equipment. By the time the well was ready for use, no one knew exactly what to do, so for its first six months it was only used as a safe zone in a children's game of tag.

Six months later, a different American team passed through this village and noticed the well unused by the villagers. Without asking the community members, this team assumed it did not work. So they built another one. The second well also went untouched for several months. Finally, a third team stopped at the community and taught the people how to use the well. However, because both of the wells were unintentionally located in a politically tense area of the community, half of the community did not feel welcome or permitted to use them. Therefore, the wells were only used by half of the town. Additionally, when a well finally broke, none of the villagers knew how to fix it or had the tools and pieces necessary to fix it.

In my view, this example reveals underlying problems of dependency and ineffectiveness. These two characteristics of planner influence ultimately hinder the

⁹ This anecdote comes from a conversation I had on a plane, travelling from Nicaragua to the US.

community – keeping it from learning the tools it needs to become self-sufficient. Because each of the community's North American benefactors left after such brief trips, the aid recipients did not have the chance to develop sufficient trust to express their concerns. The beneficiaries also did not have the opportunity to request instruction such as how to use and maintain their new wells. Naturally, when the humanitarians left, the community felt abandoned, helpless and somewhat orphaned.

Connecting Easterly's ideas to the intercultural hierarchy concept, the benefactors occupy a place of felt privilege, or right, to determine the problems and solutions of the beneficiaries without accountability. The beneficiaries, in turn, occupy a place of passive submission and acceptance of Northern blessings and help. The beneficiaries grow dependent on their parent benefactor and when cut off or deemed too inconvenient to continue helping, are left orphaned and defenseless. Planners, in their well-intentioned efforts, create and govern a one-way relationship with their beneficiaries, and their efforts may never have the impact intended. Even worse, planners may do more harm than good.

Easterly and other authors base their theories on concrete situations of failed aid in the Compassion Industry. My thesis, on the other hand, highlights my on-the-ground experiences with voluntourism as well as my close readings of project campaigns, flyers, and websites, not analyzed by Easterly, Corbett and Fikkert, or Lupton.

* * * * *

As a goer to LAC, CEO of a small, poverty-fighting ministry, student of culture, and friend of beneficiaries, the reality of these stories hurts me deeply and even haunts me as I ponder the unintended consequences of North American influence in the region. Unfortunately, I cannot escape discussing these discouraging and all-too-frequent accounts. The greatest problem I face in recounting these stories is that I cannot do justice to the character of those involved. In other words, while factual, the presentation of these stories minimizes North American motives and, in my opinion, unfairly depicts benefactors as villains in the developing world. More specifically, seemingly unavoidable, loaded language, such as the words “abandoned,” “helpless,” and “orphaned,” portray aid workers as unkind and ignorant, beneficiaries as stupid and helpless, and written critiques as depressing. Interestingly, I actually disagree and believe that the opposite is closer to the truth. While aid workers might be ignorant, they *are* generous and *do* have honorable intentions; and beneficiaries are human beings, intelligent and capable of learning and helping themselves. Further, their portrayal in many written accounts as “undignified” denies them of their human right to “dignity” as described by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁰

Finally, these scenarios hurt the “*ánimo*” (Spanish word that describes a person’s esteem, spirit, mood, or emotional well-being) of both parties. The critical accounts can inspire guilt in Western givers and goers, while simultaneously leaving a key question unanswered: “How should they help?” Additionally, common

¹⁰ See Article 1 of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

language and wording would deflate the *ánimo* of many beneficiaries, perhaps making them feel burdensome and belittled in the eyes of their helpers. As I empathize with both benefactors and beneficiaries, I know the stories must be told and change must be ignited. I would love to see productive change in the “Compassion industry,” with givers continuing in well-directed generosity and beneficiaries recognized as the intelligent, capable, and dignified human beings they are.

D. NGO Worker and LAC Employee Responses to Voluntourism

While most NGO workers express deep thankfulness and excitement on receiving volunteers’ aid, they sometimes must make a trade-off to arrive at this state of enthusiasm. Literature reflects a consensus that Western, mainly North American, efforts – both Christian missions and other humanitarian initiatives – often hurt more than help.¹¹ However, because of Western ethnocentric blindness to this fact (Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” 69), and inefficient, largely Western-dominated and -manipulated role in relationships with NGO workers and recipients (Lupton, “Toxic Charity,” 69), problems of inefficiency and hurtfulness of aid do not get conveyed.

Easterly considers this dynamic – genuine thankfulness for aid despite its problems – as reinforcement of ineffectual aid patterns. He holds that when the

¹¹ See Lupton, “Toxic Charity” and “Charity Detox” as well as Corbett and Fikkert, “When Helping Hurts” and “From Dependency to Dignity.” Also see Schwartz, “When Charity Destroys Dignity” for examples of North American volunteer tourism groups hurting more than helping.

sincerity of recipients' thankfulness meets the sincerity of North American desires to help, the problem snowballs; benefactors re-assume the planner mentality and beneficiary dependency grows (Easterly 18, 23). Given their hierarchical positioning, LAC aid recipients simply do not have a choice but to accept whatever handouts become available to them. And they do so graciously. When these handouts do not necessarily match up with actual needs, they do not have the confidence nor platform to request a different kind of aid, as they fear losing current support and the benevolence-filled relationship with the North American partner.

Last summer, I helped host American tourists-on-mission groups that visited the Christian orphanage, Red de Misericordia (Spanish for "network of mercy") in Santiago, Dominican Republic. I served as the intermediary between the organization's Founder and Director, Olga, and the incoming teams of servant workers. One day, a team from the US contacted Olga and let her know they would be coming down to help. Even knowing that this would require diverting the time of her staff on hosting an American group rather than applying for a pressing USAID grant and coordinating a doctor visit with the children, she hesitated, sighed, and graciously agreed. Because Olga is not very confident in English, she asked me to write back, welcome the team and find out a few major details: when the group would arrive, how long they would stay, where they planned to stay (in a hotel or in our orphanage facility), how many volunteers they would bring, what activities and services they planned to provide, and what they needed from us to make it happen.

Chase's use of the English language and imposing statements made it clear who sat in the seat of power, and it was not Red de Misericordia's director. Their

email exchanges, particularly Olga's (my) response to Chase, signaled both the one-way nature of their relationship, and a clear beneficiary submission to its powerful benefactor. Clearly North American benefactors make plans, and beneficiaries comply.

Sure enough, I received a response with already scheduled hopes and expectations of their trip. The group was fourteen members in size, all hoping to stay in the orphanage facility (unknowingly stretching on its housing capacity, and stepping into the possibility of conflicts or issues with traumatized children under its care), scheduled for one and a half weeks when due to the time element of the Caribbean culture, lack of forward planning – addressing needs at hand in the moment they exist, determining a future need is nearly impossible, providing construction services for the unfinished facility they hoped to stay in, and in need of the following materials: proposed trip budget, a more specific construction assignment, list of construction tools and materials to bring, a translator, and someone to drive them to tourist spots in the evening.

For the sake of brevity, I will now focus on only one element of this scenario: the construction project itself. Unknown to the team, Olga had hoped to have the facility entirely finished within a month from this email exchange (July 2015); Olga already had a system for employing a marginalized population of undocumented Haitians (providing skills, training, and experience as well as a sense of community in her home church), and the tools and resources used in the DR are very different than those used in the US. Clearly, she found herself in a bind. She instructed me to find a minor project for the team, possibly building benches or a fence that wouldn't

take away jobs from her existing Haitian employees, and ask the team to buy materials in country and use Dominican tools we already have, and do all of this in a gracious and diplomatic tone. Essentially, Olga wanted me, a go-between within the cultures, to influence the team of benefactors to consider Red de Misericordia's true needs. Through me, Olga hoped for a voice, because she wanted, and even dared, to compromise the hierarchy.

I include this personal example because it encompasses similar issues presented by other authors, as well as demonstrates the time and energy required to manage and host eager vacationaries. In fact, many internationally located organizations, already strapped for resources, also have to maintain a salaried position for a cultural intermediary and host of benefactor visitors. Additionally, this example demonstrates my position that the problem stems from a power dynamic that encourages hierarchical behavior, North American planner mentality and LAC dependence.

Incorporated in most relevant, existing literature are examples of tragic, failed aid attempts. The examples Easterly gives are largely rooted in the problem of the pervasive and dominant Planner mentality. Stemming from Easterly's position, examples offered by Corbett and Fikkert give reasons rooted in ethnocentrism (a dynamic of the Planner mentality) and misunderstanding of recipient culture.

From my interviews with different NGO directors and employees in Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic (DR), I came to a conclusion similar to those of Easterly, Corbett and Fikkert, and Lupton. LAC aid recipients do experience

a confusing, emotional and political dynamic between thankfulness and frustration, but they express almost only thankfulness as they strive to maintain the benevolent, and potentially valuable, support of their benefactors. Further, I argue that this beneficiary reaction strengthens the North American mentality, which, in turn, gets communicated to and praised by the North American public, including large donors, and results in reinforced and replicated patterns of aid. The replication of this aid pattern is what keeps the hierarchy in place.

II. North American Communication and Wording Reinforces Hierarchical

Thinking

In all stages of mission trip organization, including initial trip motivations, advertising, trip preparations, and coordinating with LAC beneficiaries, the North American benefactors impose their planner mentality on their beneficiaries who quickly become dependent on them for support. To illustrate this point, I include an example from my first trip to Nicaragua.

Just five words stood between a sixteen-year-old American girl and what would potentially become a lifetime dedicated to service in Latin America: “You can make a difference.” Webster Baptist Church’s first annual Nicaragua mission trip opportunity shined brilliantly in my eyes as I imagined dirty, little hands in mine as we walked down dusty roads, painting small finger nails in front of a one-room cinder-block elementary school, and child giggles as I entertain them in Vacation Bible School (VBS) skits.¹² I longed (and still do long) to “*make my life count*” by helping alleviate global poverty and positively impacting even a small corner of the world. And given my deep passion for both service and spreading the Christian Gospel message, as well as my love for adventure, I felt convinced that this trip was my golden opportunity. After all, trip coordinators advertised the trip objectives as “impacting lives through sharing the Gospel” and “being Jesus’ hands and feet in Nicaragua,” two of my life dreams.

¹² VBS is a typical mission trip activity included in at least a quarter of mission trips I have been on and heard about in conversation with others traveling to a Latin American countries.

At this point, it is fair to say that I was enamored by an inappropriately glamorized portrayal of the compassion industry. I was drawn into the appeal of difference making across cultures. Through photographs of economically impoverished children and families, makeshift homes, and informal, street side vendors, a humanitarian desire to help was invoked. Then, through descriptions of the neediness of Nicaraguan families, I felt connected, or “called” to get involved. And finally, through the simple phrase, “*you can make a difference*” I was mentally committed.

Although, unaware of it at the time, my motives revealed a hierarchical lens for viewing my identity and purpose as a benefactor. Specifically, while I could not have pinpointed how, I believed I was in a position to help improve their lives, that I could deliver resources I thought they needed, and that they would benefit tremendously – perhaps were depending on – the arrival of my mission team. My hierarchical lens was influenced by the photographs and other messages beckoning me in the seven months prior to my decision to go to Nicaragua.

While most mission trips complete one to three in-country projects, this mission trip involved six different projects, or activities, during our five days of service in this rural community – half of the projects appealing to children. Our 14-member team planned one VBS lesson, kids sports activity and women’s Bible study meeting for each afternoon, and filled our mornings with one ongoing physical project (painting a bridge) and daily “porch talks” (or door-to-door evangelism). Additionally, on Sunday, our last day in the community, we hoped to hold a festival

with an organized community-wide soccer tournament, bike races, Sunday morning message, hot dog feeding program, and a funny clowning skit.

Though this may be an ambitious schedule, we deemed it impactful, for the recipient community. We hoped the recipients would feel honored, thankful, and excited, not only by what we had to offer but also in themselves and in a relationship with God. In reflecting now, I can see how well this manifests an embedded hierarchical way of thinking.

When not out in the community, our team planned to stay at the local Globe International orphanage site. We would eat breakfast and dinner there, complete morning devotionals, take afternoon breaks, and have evening meetings to debrief, plan and practice VBS and clowning skits. The workers at Globe would also prepare picnic lunches for our team that we would eat on the side of the road a few kilometers away from the village. This type of accommodation is very common for short-term mission trips.

* * * * *

I included this personal story to demonstrate the way that language and communication reinforces the North American planner mentality, LAC dependency, and ultimately the intercultural hierarchy. The next section of my thesis will emphasize the influence of communication on voluntourist motivation, trip advertising and preparation, and initial communication between benefactors and beneficiaries.

A. Communication Influences Voluntourist and Vacationary Motives

Like me, many goers find themselves enticed into the compassion industry in search of falsely promised purpose. This section of my thesis will recount several voluntourist motivations ranging from the appeal of helping others, becoming a more global citizen, and even padding a resume.

Examination of applications received by my church's mission committee will reveal typical motivations for Christian vacationaries emphasizing *making an impact for Christ*. Beginning in 2012, as an active member of Webster Baptist Church (WBC), I sat on the church's missions committee. The committee helped the church coordinate missions projects and fundraisers as well as maintained contact with the missionaries WBC supports financially. Our largest annual task was arranging the church's annual mission trip to Nicaragua, and arguably one of the most important sub-tasks was selecting the mission team members from a pool of applicants. Picking out this team took about two hours of reading out loud each application and sorting the applicants into three categories.

In 2012 we had to sort out 20 applicants for an 18-member team. Reviewing these old applications with fresh eyes, I can see how the individuals' responses reflected the theme of making an influence in Nicaragua. The application had 3-5 short-answer style questions, one of them being, "Why do you want to participate on this trip to Nicaragua?" Interestingly, the committee received close to 20 versions of the same response: "to be a part of what God is doing there." Or, in other words, "I

have heard about the impact of your trip, and I want to get in on the action of Christian service in Nicaragua.”

On occasion, the committee conducted interviews with interested applicants and when asked the next question, “Why? Why do you want to be involved?” we receive responses like, “because our number one job as Christians is to spread the gospel, preaching it into ‘all corners of the earth;”¹³ “because I think it is important and would be meaningful to help an *impoverished* village and ‘love on’ the children there;” “because we have so many resources, it’s the least we can do – to go down and put our resources and personal strengths and abilities to good use;” “because I believe it glorifies the Lord to serve ‘*the least of these*;”¹⁴ “because I want to learn more about God, and other cultures while simultaneously serving them;” or “*I feel called* to love and serve people *less fortunate*.” All of these answers supported the existence of an intercultural hierarchy as they emphasize two distinct actors in two distinct roles: themselves as the benefactors, and LAC people as the beneficiaries. Applicants also seem to truly believe that Nicaraguan villagers need, or depend on, our help.

A personal example of this planner, fix-it mentality strengthened by a sense of LAC dependence comes from my first trip to Nicaragua, in 2010, which I referenced earlier. When walking around a rural, Nicaraguan village, my mission team couldn’t help but notice high levels of hunger, especially among children. Therefore, we decided to dedicate the leftover portion of our personal food budget

¹³ Reference to Mark 16:15

¹⁴ Reference to Matthew 25:40

to hosting a community-wide hot dog lunch and sponsor a few food packages to select families. In our benefactors' pride and ignorance, after the hot dog lunch, we handpicked our food package recipients who, not surprisingly, happened to be families who had made a positive impression on us and appeared especially needy to our untrained eyes.

Within moments of my return the following year, I reunited with Juana, one of the previous food bag recipients. Upon initial greetings in a public space, she invited me back to her home, which I had not previously seen, for coffee and sweet bread. Quite honestly, her seemingly generous and special invitation inflated my pride and belief in my church's involvement in this community. Her thankfulness struck me as an expression of dependency, which I interpreted as affirmation that I had "planned well" as a benefactor, and therefore reinforced my hierarchical mentality. At the time, I did not realize that in Latin America and the Caribbean, an invitation to a small beverage and snack in someone's home is a customary, hospitable gesture extended to both local neighbors as well as visitors. Therefore, Juana's invitation was not necessarily a special thank you for helping her in her poverty, as much as it was a show of traditional hospitality.

I must admit, I was not mentally prepared for what I would observe in my visit with Juana. As we approached her home in the center of the village, I noticed it was of cinder block construction, which surprised me. Cinderblock is considered expensive material for homes in Nicaragua. In this community, families usually build their homes out of scrap wood and metal and sometimes plastic tarps. Also, greeting me in the entrance of her home, sat three prized and expensive methods of

transportation, two of which I did not even know existed in the community – a parked motorcycle, pickup truck, and bicycle. Behind these gadgets, I saw a storefront connected to the home. Within about 20 minutes, my stubborn, want-to-believe-we-did-good mentality relinquished and I accepted the fact that Juana represents the wealthiest family in town. I also accepted that our eyes were largely untrained at recognizing and evaluating poverty; therefore, we made poor judgments when handing out food bags.

I was ashamed that, rather than meeting the deepest physical needs within the community, we had rewarded an already thriving family based on a woman's outgoing personality and physical characteristics, while accidentally overlooking several less-obvious but more impoverished candidates. Looking back, given Juana's economic positioning within the community, she might naturally feel more confident and willing to engage with North Americans. She may feel less shame knowing that she looks wealthier and more impressive in the eyes of North American visitors. Additionally, Juana's appearance is very typical to a villager in this community. She has the same physical traits and dresses in the same hand-me-down clothing as other members of the community and so do her children. She also has gold, silver, and missing teeth in her mouth, just like other community members.

Without much prior exposure to Latin Americans or Latin American poverty, North Americans, in this setting of somewhat uniform, impoverished living, tend to struggle with distinguishing among different embedded levels of poverty. When launched with untrained eyes into an impoverished, rural, Nicaraguan community, without prior exposure or insight into community dynamics, all the people look the

same and thus appear to live the same as well. We missed clues embedded within the lifestyle and culture that would lead us to an accurate sense of judgment regarding who might be at a deeper level of poverty or hunger than their neighbors.

In short, the problem embedded in this scenario was poorly distributed aid. This mistake occurred because of the our, the benefactor's, fix-it mentality – ignorant of community dynamics yet imposing a simple solution that only seems effective from the perspective of other benefactors.

* * * * *

Transitioning into other language-inspired motivations for short-term service trips, we find responses such as persuasive wording or obligation as well as personal growth and praise from others.

Returning to the discussion of motivations for missions, in October 2015, while on a return flight from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, Katie, a twenty-four-year-old nursing student from Tennessee gave me a valiantly honest, often unspoken reason for taking her mission trip: “I honestly felt obligated by modern church culture that this was the most honorable way to spend my time and money. However, I was also inspired by all of my friends’ exotic Instagram pictures; overwhelmingly praised and admired by my extended family; enamored by several blog pages; and ultimately, easily convinced by my social circles that this would ‘change my life’ and that I would ‘make a difference in the world.’”

While refreshed by her humble yet brave response to me, a complete stranger, I could not help but ponder why this seemed so novel. I believe my surprise stemmed from two main realizations: first, that the Christian mission culture *is*, like Katie implied, pervasive in the United States; and second, a point which I will later explain in more detail, the language and media advertisements used by churches and mission organizations create a degree of “hype,” or momentum, that entices persons to participate. These two factors work together to elevate the mission trip goer to a higher moral status and suggest to participants that “You ought to go take part in this enriching and meaningful experience. It will change lives, including your own.”

I also lack surprise by her answer because as I recognize the product of spiritual passion that translates into genuine compassion for those in the developing world, especially considering the outgoing, adventurous personality common in many voluntourists. Further, when endorsed by exotic photos shared by celebrities such as David Archuleta and Carrie Underwood, volunteer tourism trips appear as a trendy way to spend a few weeks.



While celebrities glamorize international service trips, NGOs advertise them, and academics encourage service learning and civic engagement, volunteer work abroad, is becoming more of a norm in our culture. Outside of Christian mission endeavors, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (USBLS) and the World Volunteer Web (WWV) offer statistics that capture the allure of volunteer work, especially among the younger demographic. In 2015, the USBLS states that 62.6 million, or 25%, of Americans carried out a volunteer project; nine years prior, in 2006, the WWV announced that 83% of high school and college students had performed volunteer work (domestic and abroad) that year.¹⁵

¹⁵ See United States Department of Labor Report on “Volunteering” in 2015.

Common secular service trips include medical initiatives, “care” efforts (child-centered volunteer work), teaching (usually English classes to children and teens), and construction projects. This broad, humanitarian sector of the compassion industry attracts a wide variety of goers whose motives, as mentioned above, overlap significantly with those in the Christian mission sector. Again, these motives usually emphasize general good wishes for the “*needy*,” desire to “do something productive,” and recognition that humanitarian service work *is* important because poverty faithfully robs people of their human freedoms and basic rights.¹⁶

Other common, North American motives for humanitarian service originate from an even broader range of reasons less verbalized in the missions sector. Examples are to “fill time” over a break from school, and to enhance a resume. Volunteerforever.com alone has compiled a network of 685 international NGOs that facilitate volunteer service trips around the globe. Of these 685 organizations, hundreds of them advertise alternative breaks for both individuals and groups of friends and/or families. Recently, one of my friends went on a family vacation service trip on a cruise ship throughout Mexico and the Caribbean. Also, in a continuously globalizing world, abroad (or cross-cultural) experience has become more desirable for hiring companies, and volunteer service activities are becoming more commonplace on resumes. So naturally, in efforts to make oneself more

¹⁶ Personal conversations with college students attending different universities.

marketable, a volunteer vacation trip would be all the more desirable and, in the end, profitable.¹⁷

Underlying shallow motives for service, I find an equally shallow understanding of what Lupton might call “vacationary” impact and opportunity cost of service as a whole. Opportunity cost is an economic term referencing the forfeit of potential gain from another alternative when an action is taken. For instance, potential gains from not making a vacation trip of service could be donating thousands of more dollars (that would have been spent on plane tickets and lodging alone) toward the very group of beneficiaries the vacationary group had planned to serve.

When contemplating and carrying out a temporary solution or aid plan, benefactors mainly consider the immediate good their solution will provide and neglect evaluation of long-term effects. For example, in June 2016, Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC, will take a group to Peru with the tasks of minor construction, such as painting, and/or Vacation Bible School activities, and/or medical help. The needs, or surface-level symptoms of poverty, presented to the American team include an unfinished building, a variety of treatable ailments, and potentially un-entertained or academically un-engaged children. Unfortunately, while the vacationaries worry about these symptoms of poverty by painting the un-painted building, providing vaccines and ibuprofen, and leading crafts, they fail to realize the unsustainability, or worse yet, the *harm* of their actions. These well-

¹⁷ See Kimberly Franklin’s article “Long-Term Career Impact and Professional Applicability of the Study Abroad Experience” for an analysis of professional benefits of volunteer work abroad.

meaning individuals unintentionally foster a *one-way*, belittling, and *dependency-enforcing* relationship between beneficiaries and benefactors. They also may jeopardize beneficiary dignity and identity as intelligent and capable contributors to society. Ultimately, their activities champion the idea of intercultural hierarchy and all that it entails.

Let us look closely at potential unintended consequences of common volunteer projects. In completing construction projects on their own, volunteers may unwittingly (1) imply that conditions are sub-standard when in some cases they might not be; (2) embarrass local men for their lack of provision; and (3) subvert the beneficiary's authority over their own project. Additionally, after North American medical service trips, when the recipients get sick again, they may not have a solution or know how to relieve their problem on their own. Finally, VBS activities carried out by American voluntourists would likely attract many children and families, *making any local, grassroots efforts uncompetitive and unattended*. In attempting to bring help, North Americans often unintentionally bring harm.

B. Communication through Advertising Reinforces Hierarchical Thinking

My first trip to Nicaragua happened to be the first trip Sally, member of Webster Baptist Church, had planned, and the first team our church had sent. Therefore, Sally had to start from scratch in facing two primary objectives: collect donations to cover the costs of the trip and recruit volunteers to serve on the team. In efforts to successfully secure this support and team members she needed to build awareness and sensitivity to the cause.

Sally's first trip advertisement and announcement occurred during the general announcement period at a Sunday morning church service. Verbally, she explained some of the symptoms of Nicaraguan poverty, and pitched the need for our involvement. While speaking, she provided a PowerPoint visual aid of rolling photos that demonstrated her points, as well as a brief, written paragraph in the church bulletin reiterating her announcement. Further, in each week leading up to the trip, the church bulletin included another paragraph-length statement endorsing the trip. This statement usually included a running count of dollars raised and volunteers listed, next to goal figures for both categories: \$25,000 and 15 volunteers. This statement also included a sentence highlighting the trip's importance and potential impact, as well as a sentence or verse that would inspire others to either donate or sign up. Her key underlying message was consistent, "*You can make a difference,*" and this message appealed to me and to others with a shared role as benefactors.

Six years later, within the mission sector of the compassion industry, I have come to observe similar mission trip advertisement strategies focused on building awareness and sensitivity and collecting social and financial support. For instance, to build awareness of mission trip opportunities at Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church – highlighted earlier for its upcoming trip to Peru – the church uses a mission-specific information table set up in the church lobby. This is eye-catching, interesting, and awareness-building, as it incorporates road sign-like signals of where each geographical mission location is in relation to the church itself and presents handouts associated with each church-sponsored trip and initiative.

Supplementing the information table, the church also uses a bulletin board filled with photos of missionaries and previous mission trips. The photos advertised a fun, engaging, and deeply impactful trip experience. The impact was portrayed through photos of water coming out of a spigots into an indigenous person's hands, and images of rural villagers eating food provided by the church.

For illustrative purposes, let me now provide a close reading of one mission trip flyer advertising a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico.

Mexico

When: July 9-16

Where: Juarez

Team size: 10-20 people

Ages: All ages including kids

Estimated cost: \$1100

Missionaries: Jamie & Jennifer Burkemper (MTW)

Ministry: We are going to be building a new church for Torre Fuerte and with your dates being later in the summer, we hope will be working on the interior of the church. English camp will be in the evenings with 4 to 5 stations (crafts, Bible, English, sports and the adult class)

Lodging: We stay at a very secure and very modern (US standard) hotel: La Quinta Inn.

As you can notice in the advertisement above, this trip will help two American missionaries, Jamie and Jennifer, accomplish organizational (Mission to the World) objectives in the developing country of Mexico. I immediately notice that from the first to the last line, this trip emphasizes ease and comfort for the vacationing servant. The trip will last seven days beginning and ending on a Saturday, a standard period when taking off of work and/or enrolling children in a summer camp. The standard, seven-day segment of time further complements the

American task-focused mentality as even this length of time implies a clear start and finish to activities and tasks.

Next, I notice that the team will travel to Juarez. Church members familiar with Mexico would note that Juarez is a large, modern Mexican city near El Paso Texas on the US–Mexican border. It is known for American influence through maquiladora factories. Therefore, this trip presents comfort of resource availability – grocery and other stores, as well as proximity to the US.

The line describing team size gives a number range with a generous degree of freedom to involve whoever may be interested. This range gives parents the opportunity to go and bring their children and/or spouses. Further emphasizing family travel, the age requirement notes that children *are* indeed welcome to join and help. Interestingly though, the ministry description of interior building work and leading an English camp does not sound especially child-friendly.

To describe trip activities, the church uses the word “*ministry*,” defined as “the service or function of ministers.”¹⁸ “*Ministers*” are then people who provide services, comfort, or aid that improves well-being. So to describe mission trip activities as ministry suggests profound impact, meeting needs and enhancing lives through participation.

The first mission team activity is *contributing to*, not starting and completing, a larger building project. We can assume that “Torre Fuerte,” translated to “Strong Tower,” is the name of an existing church in Juarez. This church name serves also as a reference to Proverbs 18:10 which titles the Lord as a strong tower, and place of

¹⁸ See dictionary.com

safety for righteous men. Because the effort is to build a *new*, better church, readers can gather that the church either used to, or currently, operate in a sub-standard facility, and helping the church begins with this physical and essential need of a gathering place. We also learn that the project ought to be underway during the summer and that later in the summer, the Burkemper couple will need people, even children, to help with work on the interior. Involvement of children implies simple tasks like painting. Again, the possibility of simple, child-friendly tasks contributes to the ease and do-ability of the trip for all.

The second ministry task is leading an evening English camp. This camp includes a range of activities such as “crafts,” “Bible,” “English,” “sports,” and the “adult class” appealing to a wide range of benefactors and beneficiaries – benefactors capable of teaching children, teaching adults, or playing with children, and beneficiaries ranging from children to adults ready to be informed and entertainment.

Alas, we also notice a seemingly feasible fee, easily collectable through mail solicitations and fundraisers. The bulk of this money will go toward airfare while the rest of it will support food, water, translator fees, and $\frac{1}{4}$ of a hotel room per night. Regarding the lodging accommodations, by descriptors such as “*very secure*,” “*very modern*,” and “*US standard*,” vacationing missionary benefactors are ensured that by signing up they are not making a large sacrifice and could also feel comfortable bringing their children.

As a researcher, I conclude that this ad was designed to win social support from American families looking to vacation with a purpose. Interestingly, this

theme of vacationing with a purpose and without guilt is commonly emphasized in most mission trip advertisements and descriptions, and the flyer I described, although it lacks descriptive photos, I note is very similar to most other flyers I encounter.

Shifting from the informative, paper advertisement, I will now analyze an informative, video advertisement for a humanitarian NGO providing drinking water systems in Haiti, called Charity Water, operating in Haiti. Opening with energetic, celebratory, Haitian Creole birthday songs, this video immediately engages the viewer. The camera zooms in on several smiling faces within a crowd of dancing Haitian children and a man begins casually describing the scene around him as if he were a reporter. There are leaves waving in the air to the rhythm of chanting in celebration of Charity Water's third birthday at Cabastor, Haiti, and the narrator's thirty-fourth birthday spent celebrating Charity Water's.

Several different camera angles depict Haitians of all ages using the water system, playing drums, working with American volunteers, embracing each other filling cups, and operating pumps. Along with joyful faces, these images and clips show abundant lush foliage and working water systems. They give the impression of life, health, prosperity, and joy in Haiti and thus inspire eagerness in the viewer.

To boost this emotional response of eagerness, the narrating reporter explains the ways volunteers and Haitians work together to assemble the pumps and wells. He explains that this project serves as a source of pride for the Haitians as it resembles an accomplishment and a huge mile marker along their journey to improved livelihood.

The featuring of American volunteers in the video suggests that this work is indeed doable by ordinary, North American citizens. It serves to excite and persuade potential volunteers to engage in meaningful ways to empower Haitians. By one minute and 47 seconds, the reporter thanks those who have donated and served and proudly announces Charity Water's achievements via donations and American support. Ironically, through video footage of appreciative Haitians deeply valuing the involvement of their white benefactors, the video validates the North American planning and fix-it mentality toward aid and service projects, which capitalizes on Haitian dependency and ultimately reinforces an intercultural hierarchy.

Listening to the reporter thank North American benefactors inspires American viewers to continue financially supporting the celebration-worthy cause of clean water. When the thank you is over, happy, electric sounding music crescendos and the screen shifts from Haitian dancing to a written challenge: "Give up your birthday. Run. Swim. Walk. Dance." I interpret this as a call to celebration and livelihood for humanity.

A second video for a different type of charity, ProjectsAbroad, reinforces similar themes. The video captures a short scene of children working diligently on reading and writing assignments in a Latin American classroom. It then transitions directly into a clip of Genevieve, a young volunteer from New Jersey, introducing herself and her interest in Argentina. Genevieve describes herself as "*lucky*" for the ability to take time off of work to teach English in Argentina. She feels *lucky* because she has the opportunity to fulfill a purpose – to teach the uninformed.

Next, when Genevieve shared about her daily routine, the video camera depicts smiling children raising their hands in class while she writes on the board and calls on them. With a smile and enthusiastic, yet professional tone, Genevieve explains that each day is different, as each day her work involves interaction between different teachers and different grade levels of students. Maintaining her smile, she transitions to explain all the ways she gets to help students improve pronunciation, reading, and writing skills.

From these trip and cause advertisements, a benevolent North American might feel engaged in the well-being of others in developing nations, motivated, inspired, and ultimately, with a desiring to *make a difference*. By learning about needs in developing LAC nations through advertisements and promotional resources, benefactors simultaneously learn to help. Through the materials, benefactors' awareness and sensitivity to the necessity of support within the LAC region increases and their builds belief in an attainable cure is fostered.

Building on the inspirational call to help, most ads continue by empowering the benefactor, suggesting that they *can* personally address an attainable, fixable, and solvable problem or project. This word, "*can*," falls into phrases like, "you *can* provide," "you *can* influence," "you *can* inspire," "you *can* introduce hope," "you *can* contribute," "you *can* make a difference," and most importantly, "you *can* join us." Volunteer tourists need motivation and empowerment, and through the use of "*can*" they receive just that and they believe in their power to generate good and become part of "us," part of the solution.

Other common phrasing used to motivate a benefactor's effort include "it costs *only*," "*worthy* cause," and "life changing effort." When using the word "only" along with cost, the benefactor adjusts to believe that the cost is comparatively minute compared to either other costs or the benefit. Additionally, when putting the cause high on a scale of worthiness, benefactors can be swayed to "buy in." Finally, to describe an effort as life changing is the ultimate endorsement. Once benefactors know that they are able to make a low-cost difference, to imagine that difference as able to change lives adds significant ammunition to a desire for involvement. The opportunity cost here could be devastating if lives would not be changed and suffering would persist.

Clearly, promotional communication efforts place great importance on North Americans carrying out plans and projects to fix LAC problems, and portray LAC recipients as dependent on benevolent North Americans to fix these problems. This then, implies two distinct roles within the initiative – benefactor and beneficiary – illustrating the intercultural hierarchy.

C. Communication throughout Preparation Imposes Intercultural Hierarchy

Loaded language and framing techniques used to prepare goers establishes a tone and understanding of benefactors and beneficiaries according to the identities and roles I previously described.

1. Trip activity planning

Regarding personal preparation for a cross-cultural service trip, I have, in the past had to read books like: *Vacations With A Purpose: A Handbook for Your Short-Term Missions Experience*, and *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*. These books certainly helped different team members understand that they would, indeed encounter a lifestyle significantly more simple and filled with different norms and traditions. And, as basic as it sounds, they also briefed our group on the value of each human life and the legitimacy of all human ideas. Finally, the books offered tips and examples of how to respond to cultural without accidentally belittling or disrespecting the beneficiaries.

WBC's mission team enjoyed biweekly team meetings to supplement the readings with group discussions and planning sessions. During the preparation process, the team focused tremendously on the *what*, that is, what we hoped to accomplish. For instance, discussions often led to goal setting, role play exercises, and VBS skit practices. Some of the team goals were: hold gospel-related conversations, entertain and love the children well, make each child feel special, and increase understanding of God through time spent in a developing country.

Interestingly however, the team did not address the *why* behind our actions. We did not discuss and decide why a VBS program and women only Bible study meetings would be a good idea. In fact, we had no idea if they would be even be appropriate or not. Instead, it was somewhat assumed that because these were familiar ways to meet our *North American* needs of Biblical entertainment for our children and meetings for our women, Citalapa would love them too.

2. *Financial preparation*

Six months of trip preparation flew by as I prepared paperwork, got hepatitis shots, and frantically called and wrote relatives for sponsorship donations. My total costs were \$1,400, which I found relatively easy to reach. In fact, my family members, schoolteachers, and coaches seemed excited to give as they told me they were proud of me for “*doing the right thing.*” Once I met my financial need, I agreed to donate any extra funds to others traveling with me on this trip.¹⁹

The principal source of my funding came through money I raised by writing letters to relatives and family friends. Like the other forms of advertisement, this solicitation letter also served to build awareness and foster a spirit of generosity among Americans. My personal solicitation letter, though, came pre-drafted from Sally who provided them for each member of the team.

The letter opened by informing the recipient of my “exciting decision to go” from North Carolina to rural Nicaragua for the purpose of “helping a small community called Citalapa.” By framing my involvement as an “exciting decision,” I announce that with an eager and totally convinced mind, I believe that “going” is the right thing for me to do. Further, by stating my purpose as “helping” draws attention to the object of my help, Citalapa, as helpless, or struggling, otherwise. And, in using the descriptive “small” and placing it in the context of a developing nation, struggling becomes a natural view of the community.

¹⁹ This is a very common way to handle additional funds that come in. Some churches and organizations even include a form of agreement that additional funds will go to this purpose.

The rest of the paragraph devotes one sentence to our activities in Citalapa and two to Globe International – where we will stay and what we hope to do there. In efforts to increase legitimacy of our trip, Sally/I introduce our team’s activities as a “calling” from the Lord. By using the word *calling*, we in effect proclaim that this activity serves not only great, but also divine, purpose and is therefore, of utmost importance. Interestingly, the reader quickly learns that this divine activity is “evangelizing through hosting VBS, repainting a school building and playground equipment, hosting feeding programs, and staying at Globe International.”

Each activity in this list meets a need that North Americans often view as commonplace, and by recognizing them as unfulfilled needs emphasizes the importance and legitimacy of our trip by silently depicting beneficiaries as *poor*, and *as have nots*. *By unintentionally degrading them to this status, we simultaneously, elevate ourselves to benefactor-, have-, fortunate-status, and lay the foundation for a hierarchical view of intercultural society.* We also depict ourselves as “white saviors” – recognizing, and in some ways fixing their lack of children’s activities, paint on a school building, and food (Cole).

The letter describes Globe International (the NGO orphanage where we would stay), as a “well respected safe house for children.” To the American audience, the organization’s level of respect implies legitimacy and thus justifies our reason for going and using their facilities. It also could incline donors to give knowing they would contribute to something impressive and effective. In other words, they can trust the end result and rest assured believing they spent money well. Additionally, children are generally recognized as dependent, and to a degree,

helpless members of society. Because of this special status (dependent), society recognizes a need to care for, feed, clothe, shelter, and in other ways help them grow. Imagining children in the context of an orphanage, or “safe house,” adds urgency to society’s responsibility to have a presence in their lives – the exact task we aim to fulfill. Therefore, from the very beginning of the letter, I was legitimizing and attempting to make important my trip in American eyes.

The next paragraph mentions the dates during which we will be serving and the cost (a little over \$1,000 per person) required for our service. Immediately after, we depict ourselves as humble, acknowledging that we “cannot accomplish this task alone” and petition for social and moral support through thoughts and prayers.

Further, I included a twofold written prayer request to involve my audience, or supporters, in my efforts. First, that God would “touch our hearts and the hearts of those we encounter,” – acknowledging our own dependency on God; and second, that our beneficiaries would “feel and understand God’s love for them” – implying that the special event of our coming could potentially allow them to experience God in a deeper, more meaningful way. I hoped that this prayer request would engage, encourage, and even excite supporters to continue donating to my trip.

D. Communication between Benefactors and Beneficiaries Promoted

Hierarchical Thinking

Beginning with the initial conversations between benefactors and beneficiaries, US mission groups and aid teams often impose their planner mentality

through a tone of dominance. To illustrate this point, I will remind you of the example of the construction team helping a Dominican orphanage.

On one, seemingly normal workday, while I was seated at the plastic conference table in the front of the office, Olga summoned me to her desk. She softly asked, “Nancy, traducelo para mí por fa. Creo que quieren visitar y ayudarnos, pero no sé... ¿Piensas que puedas manejar esto para mí?” That is, “Nancy, please translate this for me. I believe they want to visit and help us, but I don’t know. Do you think you could handle this for me?”

I quickly shifted my attention to her desktop computer and read over her shoulder my impromptu Spanish translation of the following email:

“Dear Olga,

We would like to make a trip this spring to work on construction for your orphanage building ...We have several able-bodied men who would like to contribute their skills and tools to your efforts in the Dominican Republic...We will need to know, though, what dates are best for us to come, what exactly we will be building, which tools will be available and which we should bring from the states, and where we will stay. We are not picky and can stay anywhere from a hotel to in the orphanage building with the kids. Thank you, I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Warmly,

Chase”

First, in his rather assertive email, Chase uses a statement rather than question to set up his trip. He, then, imposes a gift of service-ready men and then tries to insert into her schedule the time and effort to make in-country, arrangements and accommodations on his team's behalf.

From their hierarchical positioning, benefactors like Chase, the construction trip coordinator, know that they must only identify projects guaranteed to generate enough social and financial donations. He needs to select a project that he and his team are able to complete, and that generates enough excitement to convince people to sign up for. Additionally, beyond just appealing to the goers, he must appeal to project donors. Chase must establish a project that North Americans can and would view as valuable. (In this case, a large, quantifiable facility benefitting children would certainly appeal to donors.)

After identifying the ideal project, Chase must find a location in a developing nation to carry it out. If he has any preference or existing connections in Latin America, he is likely to write to them as a first choice. Luckily for Chase, his church had a long-standing partnership with La Iglesia Bautista de la Gracia (Grace Baptist Church), the church Olga's husband pastors, making his decision easy.

Interestingly, benefactors tend to believe that all LAC organizations, in their dependency, are excited by and welcoming of the announcement of their arrival and help.²⁰ Benefactors often overlook the hassle, organizational goings-on, and

²⁰ See Lupton, "Toxic Charity," for descriptions of North American misunderstanding of graciousness for dependency.

potential consequences as they see their aid as absolutely essential and foolish to pass up. Hence, his email to Olga imposing a new project on her orphanage foundation.

Responding to benefactor project requests and notifications often proves challenging. I could either welcome them and address their questions, deny their trip (meaning also their potential funding), or offer some sort of compromise. As an incredibly diplomatic – dare I say, “*professional*,” aid recipient – Olga instructed me to take the third route, initiate a compromise, which essentially means, maintain financial support and general attention (that could lead to more donations in the future), and simultaneously preserve the jobs of the locals already hired for the construction work and on track to finish it months before the team will even arrive. Specifically, her hurried, verbal response to me, translated to English, was the following:

“Create a somewhat needed project that would not interfere with the construction efforts already underway by a team of Haitian workers, and instruct the team not to bring tools...I know! Tell them they can build benches and picnic tables outside that the kids can use to sit on and eat snacks at. They can also build wall dividers out of wood that we can use to section off playrooms (if necessary). Let them know how this will help us – by giving the children opportunities to eat snacks outside and also not interfere with each others’ games sometimes.”

As a fundraiser for grassroots NGOs and advocate of aid recipients in LAC, I empathize with beneficiaries and beneficiary NGOs as I understand their difficult hierarchical positioning. They are trapped at the bottom, yet dependent on the top – paradoxically unable to receive North American help unless they identify a deficiency that a North American can fix and willingly comply with the North American’s expectations.

At the time, her words took a frustrated and rushed tone. Olga was in the middle of arranging the next governmental facility evaluation and simply could not devote the time necessary to crafting an appropriate response through the Google translate tool. On one hand, she found the email exciting as it signaled promise, or at least interest, of US benefactor support. However, she also considered it a bother, cluttering her mind and schedule and needed to delegate the task to someone else.

Her request to simply “create a *somewhat* needed project” that would not interfere with *her* plans and vision for employing Haitian workers, reinforces a sense of suppressed desire for autonomy. She felt trapped between her dependency on benefactor support, and her strategic vision. However, because of her rare, strong personal resolve and dedication to her vision, she does not even entertain Chase’s ideas.²¹ Therefore, she asked me, an insider, to tactfully identify an additional, not essential but purposeful, project the benefactors could get excited about carrying out.

²¹ Many beneficiaries do not have resolve like Olga’s and do not stand up for their ideals when it could jeopardize potential funding. See Lupton’s *Toxic Charity* and *Charity Detox* for additional examples that support this position.

Luckily, her quick wit and innovative mind, common among LAC beneficiaries, lead her to a brilliant conclusion.²² She would suggest outdoor benches and picnic tables for children to use for eating snacks. She offered this solution because it implied providing for the children. She knows that providing for children makes aid groups feel more impactful, and therefore more willing to donate time and resources.²³ Interestingly, by giving the purpose, or specific use, of the tables – eating snacks – benefactors could assume that children relied on them to provide tables so that they could have a typical snack time experience. This portrayed dependence feeds belief in an intercultural hierarchy.

By giving another suggestion, wooden wall dividers, Olga essentially says, “We are needy. We have multiple needs for benefactors to fill and would love to depend on you to do it.” It also suggests an organizational willingness to cooperate and receive support despite the fact that she proposes a completely different project. This could even be a strategic move – Olga’s attempt at compromising the one-way nature of the hierarchy.

Further, the option itself, wall dividers for playrooms, also imply providing for children – enhancing their play time experience. Interestingly, Olga also gave the condition, under her breath, “if necessary.” These words imply strategy. Olga recognizes that playroom wall dividers probably will not be used, but she mentions

²² Because of their felt dependency, many beneficiaries must have traits such as quick wit and innovation as it allows them to better cater to benevolent, North American partners.

²³ See “It Takes a Global Village: Troubling Discourses of Global Citizenship in United Planet’s Voluntourism” by Margaret Zeddies and Millei Zsuzsa for deeper analysis of trends in aid focused on children as ultimate beneficiaries.

them anyway in hopes of providing options for benefactor to improve her odds at winning their support; after all, she did not quickly accept their first suggested building project.

Finally, Olga instructs me to explain the way that their support helps. She wants the gracious benefactors to feel needed. She wants the attention and the praise to constantly be divided between the benefactor group and the God who provided them. She feels confident that if they feel needed, they will carry out the project and potentially even provide more support – something she cannot afford to pass up.

As an observer and student of Olga, Red de Misericordia, and North American Voluntourism more broadly, I believe Olga's response was 50% strategic, 30% rehearsed and generic, and 20% genuine. Her multiple project options, centered on the children, implying her strategy. However, the quickness of her idea generation and her willingness to assign the task to me with only a few short comments, indicate the routine nature of this type of interaction. Finally, I do believe that Olga's response was, at least in part, genuine. On other occasions, when she *hears of* benefactor teams coming to help, she does feel honor and genuine thankfulness that, in her words, "in His faithfulness, the Lord is responding to her prayers for provision."

* * * * *

As an observer, I can draw two conclusions from this scenario: first, Chase, the North American benefactor dominated the exchange; and second, Olga handled the situation well and *did* challenge the hierarchy to assert an opinion. To be more effective, she solicited the help of an insider and then provided two appealing options. Although she and Chase did not settle on a truly necessary project, she did assert her voice to a degree, and Chase ultimately complied.

III. Minimizing the Harmful Effects of the Intercultural Hierarchy from the Perspectives of both Benefactors and Beneficiaries

The problem of inefficient aid exists largely because of the intercultural hierarchy, which capitalizes on inequality of North American benefactors and their LAC beneficiaries. Characteristics of the hierarchy such as the benefactor's fix-it mentality and the beneficiary's dependence ensures that the relationship between the actors is largely one-way, preventing beneficiaries from having a voice in determining the aid they receive.

Because inefficient aid problems have arisen largely due to one-way solutions, it is illogical to believe that they will disappear through one-way efforts. Instead, I argue that the intercultural hierarchy must be overturned – establishing benefactors and beneficiaries with equal value and power. I hold that benefactor-beneficiary equality will allow for the two-way, collaborative relationship necessary for positive change.

A. Benefactors Overturning the Hierarchy to Avoid Detrimental Miscommunication

The tragic story of miscommunication between Olga and Chase highlights the North American benefactor's planning mentality and LAC beneficiary's dependency, ultimately reinforcing the intercultural hierarchy common in voluntourism. To avoid this type of miscommunication in the first place, Chase would not have merely asked what Olga needed; instead, he would have had to initiate a strategic

conversation. Because of the hierarchy's pervasiveness, Olga's response remained largely strategic – still presenting a more “donor-friendly” accommodation of the inevitable, unspoken conditions on Chase's support. However, if Chase had overturned the hierarchy, he would have fostered a truly beneficial, collaborative effort, perhaps causing an even greater impact in the long run.

In an alternative situation, overturning the hierarchy might manifest in several ways. First, Chase might have tried engaging Olga in a friendly way. Warmer, less imposing language would have affirmed Olga's value, as a beneficiary, which could have led to a more honest and productive conversation of Red de Misericordia's true needs. Second, guaranteeing his support would remove anticipated, unspoken conditions on aid and would give Olga the freedom to request true needs. This would require a degree of sacrifice for the benefactor as she might prefer his funding over his physical help; he, in turn, would need to respect her wishes. And third, offering her a platform for expression. Allowing a beneficiary to express him or herself suggests a two-way relationship. This two-way relationship would elevate the beneficiary to an equal hierarchical status, where he would feel less uncomfortable communicating his needs.

B. Beneficiaries Must Learn to Receive Well

To “receive well” does not mean beneficiaries willingly accept, and in some cases, welcome, all North American aid, as if it were handouts; this would not suggest meeting beneficiaries' true needs. Instead, receiving well would mean beneficiaries graciously receiving empowerment to break free from dependence and

meet their own needs. Receiving well involves not only the manner of receiving, but also the type of aid being received and the extent of the benefactor-beneficiary relationship.

Often subject to the whim, and/or plans of benevolent, North American visitors, beneficiaries must learn to interact in ways that reverse this pattern. Instruction must be given to teach recipients how to collaborate with their North American benefactors in a way that forms true, two-way partnerships. To begin this process of receiving and collaborating well with their benefactors, beneficiaries can initiate change in the tone of their conversations with their benefactors. They can ask questions to gauge their benefactors' levels of dedication to their mission and vision and proceed in a diplomatic way – expressing truer needs to their benefactors. They can continue by reforming their network – seeking out benefactors who can equip them with the skills and understanding they need to carry out their mission.

Although, I offer a couple of strategies here, given the abundance of literature critiquing North American aid strategies there is a glaring lack of literature directed toward empowering beneficiaries—reinforcing the problem of one-way solutions. In and of itself, this imbalance suggests that North Americans can—once again—fix this broken and harmful system, by changing what *they* do and then imposing a new system for their aid. Even if North Americans improve their mentalities and processes of creating initiatives, this progress would still be North American-led rather than collaborative and therefore undermine potential recipient responses and their ability to change.

Therefore, in the future, I hope to conduct new studies aimed at teaching and learning how to teach beneficiaries to advocate for and obtain their needs. Not only would this improve collaboration in the nature of aid moving forward, but it would also help recipients better understand Western worldviews and ways of thinking. This knowledge and improved relatability could foster deeper, more productive partnerships between North America and LAC nations.

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