Gap Year Saviours - An Analysis of the Role of Race in an Advertisement for Development Volunteering

Jack Hogan

Gap year saviours - An analysis of the role of race in an advertisement for development volunteering

Jack Hogan
hoganj2@tcd.ie

This paper was the award winning entry in the Social Studies category of the 2013 Undergraduate Awards of Ireland and Northern Ireland[i] which the author completed as part of his studies for his degree in Geography and Sociology at Trinity College Dublin.

Abstract
The issues of race and ethnicity are taboo in the realm of development. By critically analysing a representation of race and ethnicity in an advertisement for an international development agency, this paper seeks to open new avenues of discussion to break this silence. The paper examines the reduction of the racial identity through the process of stereotyping, the commodification of vulnerable children from the devloping world through the hidden language of race and the construction of the development worker as a 'white saviour' through the depiction of volunteers as 'rescuers'. The aim of this paper is not to simply dismiss the actions of development workers as inherently racist; rather it concludes that race and development are inextricably linked. A discussion of this relationship is necessary to break its taboo in development praxis.

Keywords: Race; Ethnicity; Advertising; Development; Volunteering.

Introduction
The purpose of this article is to critically analyse a media representation of race and ethnicity. The source that shall be examined is an online advertisement aimed at young students by the organisation Travellers Worldwide (2012, See Figure 1) for the opportunity to "care for orphans in an orphanage". This refers to a fee-paying voluntary care programme in the city of Madurai in southern India, which involves duties such as "changing nappies, teaching basic English and Maths & organising and facilitating games for the children" (para. 8). Such programmes have become extremely popular among young people in North America, Western Europe and Australia, particularly as part of a 'gap year' between finishing school and beginning University (Simpson, 2004). The attraction of such volunteer-tourism is that it allows young people from the developed world to combine travel with seemingly worthwhile community development work. In August 2013, The Irish Association of Development Workers, Comhlámh, published a report that revealed that over 4,500 Irish people volunteered overseas in the year 2012 (Comhlamh, 2013). The increase in the number of volunteers and volunteer-sending organisations from Ireland is indicative of significant growth in the volunteer tourism sector globally. A study of over 300 volunteer-sending agencies around the globe has shown that the market has grown to a total of 1.6 million volunteer tourists every year, generating a value of £832 million to £1.3 billion (Tourism Research and

Marketing, 2008). Travellers Worldwide is just one of hundreds of volunteer-sending agencies around the world; however the imagery and language of its advertisements make it a particularly interesting one to invesitgate further.

The aim of this paper is to carry out an in-depth analysis of this advertisement and to assess the extent to which race and ethnicity play a role as tools of advertising for this volunteer programme. However, my aim is not to simply point out those features of the advert that are inherently racist, rather the aim is to examine this advert in the wider context of the issue of race in international development. With this in mind, a number of other topics such as the ethical issues surrounding development aid, the commodification of 'Third World' adoption and the construction of the stereotyped 'orphan' in advertising for volunteering programmes shall also be discussed.

Figure 1: The online advertisement for development volunteering (Source: Travellers Worldwide, 2012).

The challenge of discussing such issues is that, as White (2002, 407) notes, "talking about race in development is like breaking a taboo." The exclusion of race from developmental discourse has been notable throughout the second half of the 20th century. While the complexities of gender inequality (UN Women), children's rights (UNICEF) and climate change (UNEP) are slowly being addressed within development policy, a history of colonialism and subjugation of the Global South has been widely ignored. Indeed, the tradition of imperialism, exploration of 'the other' and a condescending attitude towards the supposed inability of 'poor' countries to survive without Western influence are at the core of modern-day development praxis. However, race's "determining silence, which both masks and marks its centrality to the development project" (White, 2002, 407), must be overcome if it is to be considered in policy. Therefore, an analysis of how the media portrays race in the context of modern

development outlets such as student volunteering programmes is practical in fostering a discussion of the relationship between race and development.

In order to analyse this advert it shall be divided it into its three constituent parts. 1) the text, which provides a comprehensive description of the programme and gives the reader the practical details such as their volunteering responsibilities. This section also includes testimonials from previous volunteers, which may encourage and inform a prospective volunteer's decision to apply. 2) The pricing information, which stresses the benefit of the programme to the volunteers and highlights the commodification of the experience as "an entry on your CV". 3) The photographs of volunteers smiling with Indian children, who the reader can only assume are the same children for whom they shall be caring, should they apply to this programme. By critically evaluating these three components, with reference to a number of academic texts and to my own experiences volunteering with displaced children in Nepal, a comprehensive analysis of this media representation of race and ethnicity shall be presented.

The text
The opening statement of this advert informs the reader that "if you love small babies and young children this project is for you!" The promise that "you will fall in love instantly with the children with smiles that will melt your heart" serves to grab the reader's attention from the outset. However, one must ask the question: is there something about Indian orphans that is somehow more lovable than Irish orphans or British orphans? What is it that makes caring for orphans in another country so enticing? These questions point to a discussion of what Reas (2013, 122) refers to as "orphanage tourism". This is a form of vacationing that "objectifies poor … children as adorable innocents and commodifies their poorness into a marketable resource." Not only does the objectification of orphans in the Global South dismiss the tragic misfortune of parentless children in the developed world, it also belittles Third World orphans as helpless infants who, as this advert suggests, are in constant need of "love, care and attention". The issue at hand is that these children are in need of such care, not only because they are orphans but also, seemingly, because they are Indian.

For the prospective Irish volunteer, caring for orphans in, for example, the Netherlands (another white Christian country) does not have the same attraction as India. Thus the racial identity of the orphans in this advert must play a key role in its persuasive purpose. That the children in this advert are shown as Indian orphans is an example of what Stuart Hall (1997) calls "signifying difference". According to Hall, the racialised discourse is underpinned by two binary oppositions. There is a strong conflict between 'civilisation' (white) and 'savagery' (black). Thus, the reference to these orphans as Indian adds to the construction of the 'other' - that which is not European, North American or Australian. It is irrelevant whether these children are Tamil, Sikh or Punjabi; these identities are reduced to the homogeneity of 'Indian' (Venn, 1999). The opportunity to explore the 'other' is no doubt an attractive factor for the reader. That the advert informs us that "some of [the orphans] have been found abandoned in nearby churches or temples" only adds to this 'exotic' allure. This is further supported by the use of the word 'they' to differentiate the children from 'we', the readers. The fact that

"they love cricket and football" and that "they're amazing kids", only serves to solidify the construction of Hall's binary oppositions of 'us' and 'them'.

However, one cannot deny that India is different, culturally speaking, to 'civilised' Western Europe (Robb, 1995). However, these differences are often seen by aid workers as an obstacle to be overcome rather than something that can be accommodated in development practice. Indeed, there is a distinctive view from many development agencies and aid workers of developing world societies "as backward, passive and tradition-bound, static and inert, awaiting the penetration of development from the West" (White, 2002, 418). This was something that I also noticed as a volunteer in Nepal. NGO workers from various different organisations often bemoaned the laid-back attitude of the Nepali people and the seemingly chaotic disorganisation of its social infrastructure (compared to our Western standards), which served to hinder development initiatives. In the case of the orphans in this advert, that they "are all in desperate need of tender loving care" serves to patronise not only the children themselves but also the existing state-run and local non-governmental services which seek to alleviate the abandonment of children. There is an inherent assumption in this advert and in 'orphanage tourism' as a whole that Indians are fundamentally incapable of caring for themselves. This is indicative of a wider form of racism found in development work whose implicitness is a key factor in constructing White's (2002) "determining silence" of race.

The pricing information
To avail of this "exciting, never-to-be-forgotten adventure into beautiful India", the prospective volunteer must pay "from £795 for 1 week, ranging to £2,395 for 12 weeks." While such time flexibility is undoubtedly an attractive feature of the programme, one must question its practicality. Little attention is given by Travellers Worldwide to the effect on the children of a constant rotation of volunteers. For a young European student, a week of volunteering in India could be a life-changing experience. However, from the point of view of the orphan, this is just another white person coming into their lives to 'help' for a short period of time and then leaving as they please. Indeed, the focus in such programmes is invariably on the benefit to the volunteer, with less regard for the benefit to the children. The advert promotes the "enormous satisfaction of helping disadvantaged children", "the invaluable personal and professional development" for the volunteer, and of course "an entry on your CV or résumé that will put you head and shoulders above most others in the jobs market". This is symptomatic of a distinct commodification of development work. But how is this linked to race?

According to Bauman (2001), identity is something that we strive towards in the globalising world, rather than something we are born with. It is something incomplete, a 'task' that must be performed. Thus, in the context of race, individuals within ethnic groups are expected to fulfill the criteria that are associated with the group at large – their 'task' is to become a part of the group identity. As such, black people are expected to become what is associated with a black person. This reflects Hall's (1997, 257) view of stereotyping. That "stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes

'difference'" highlights how the features of a few individuals come to represent the group at large. Many Indian children live in poverty, thus the immediate inference of the Westerner is that *all* Indian children live in poverty. This kind of assumption leads to the conceptualisation of the 'other' as an object – a small component of a larger group. The 'brownness' of Indians becomes an identifying feature, added to by the image of the vulnerable orphan that is portrayed in this advert, to create an almost doll-like object of the child that must be cared for.

Racial identity is being increasingly objectified in this manner through the media. The singer Madonna's 2006 adoption of a one-year-old boy from Malawi gained international media attention. While some praised Madonna's act as philanthropic, others criticised it as an attempt to obtain the latest fashion accessory – 'the super-cute Third World black baby'. The cause of much of the media scrutiny was the fact that the child's biological father was still alive and that Malawi's adoption laws, which initially required an adopting parent to have permanent residency in the country for at least one year, were subsequently overturned for Madonna (Tenthanti, 2008). Such adoption was also criticised when actress Angelina Jolie gained custody of a two-year-old Ethiopian girl. Why not adopt a fellow American whose biological parents are unable to care for them? Of course, the ethnic background of the 'Third World baby' is undoubtedly a factor that adds to its 'cuteness' and to the philanthropic respect that is gained by the adopting parent. The exotic doll serves as an accessory. In Nepal, I came across Western couples travelling to adopt children who had been trafficked or orphaned. Something of an industry has developed in Nepal to provide children who have been rescued from such circumstances for hopeful Western parents. While the adopted children are surely living in more comfortable conditions than they would otherwise be in their home country, a critical view is necessary to outline how these children, and particularly their ethnicity, are being objectified and commoditised. In the advert, the 'Indianness' or 'brownness' of the children is synonymous with their 'cuteness' - an important persuasive object in attracting a potential volunteer.

The photographs
There are seven photographs in this advert, six of which feature a white person smiling while holding a small Indian child or posing with their Indian "host family".

Figure 2: Photograph of a volunteer with a child in the advertisement (Source: Travellers Worldwide, 2012).

Figure 3: Photograph of a volunteer with children in the advertisement (Source: Travellers Worldwide, 2012).

These images serve to construct the portrayal of the volunteers as rescuers, as the applicant who sees these pictures can only assume that there is nobody else to feed or hold these children. This is a common media representation of white aid workers. Cole (2012, 1) wrote of a "white saviour industrial complex" which compels Westerners to have "a big emotional experience that validates privilege." According to Cole, white

Westerners no longer carry the 'white man's burden' but feel that they can rectify it by seeking to alleviate suffering in the developing world.

In Figure 2, a smiling white girl with pearl earrings holds a hungry, seemingly needy Indian baby. In Figure 3 we see a pretty, smiling, white woman with four sad-looking, barefoot children. The binary oppositions between the volunteers and the orphans in these images are clear and serve to construct a sentimental and infantilising depiction of the developing world (Mengetsu, 2012). Cole (2012, 1) is highly critical of such patronising images in addition to the glamouristion of overseas development work - "the white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon and receives awards in the evening." This glamorisation is reflected in the advert by the fact that many of the volunteers in the photographs are wearing 'Travellers Worldwide' t-shirts. They may return to their home countries with these t-shirts and tell their friends about adventures in India and the worthwile work they did in the orphanage. This paper's aim is not to be overly cynical of development volunteers; rather it is to outline how this exploration of the 'other' runs the risk of replicating a post-colonial, patronising view of the 'poor' countries of the Global South.

In addition, quite often there is a naïve approach from many development workers and NGOs expressing that white people can solve all of the world's problems. This is replicated in the Travellers Worldwide advert, as the role of Indians in the programme appears to be restricted to domestic responsibilities as "breakfast and dinner will be provided and prepared for" the volunteers. There is apparently no role for an Indian to care for other Indians. On the other hand, Western volunteers "don't need any qualifications to do this project, just lots of enthusiasm". That the problems faced by impoverished Indian orphans can be solved by simple enthusiasm is debatable, raising a question asked by Simpson (2004, 686) - could a developing country "crumble for want of a few British teenagers?" Do gap year volunteers really provide a valuable resource? Would it not be more advisable to hire local, qualified social workers to care for these orphans, to raise them as Indians, rather than Westerners? These questions raise a wider issue in the ethics of development work – the fact that those efforts to allow developing countries to 'look after themselves' still have a white person showing them how to do so. Indeed, from the efforts of International NGOs seeking to alleviate starvation in Africa to the neo-liberal structural adjustment progammes of the IMF in Latin America, there is an inherent assumption in development praxis that the Global South cannot develop without guidance from the 'developed' Global North. This assumption is clearly replicated in the photographs of this advert.

Conclusions

This paper has critically analysed a development volunteering advert by dividing it into three sections, identifying the role of race and ethnicity in each, and linking this to the wider issue of race in development. The advert has reduced the racial identity of these Indian orphans and labeled them as 'other'. This is linked to a racial division between those who co-ordinate development (white people) and those who undergo development (the 'other'). The price of the volunteering programme is indicative of a commodification of development work at large and the children in the advert have themselves been commodified as doll-like objects that must be cared for by Westerners.

Finally, the photographs of the advert construct the image of a white saviour whose duty it is to 'rescue' poor people and instruct Global South development. This paper's purpose has not been to dismiss the work of development volunteers and aid workers as 'racist', rather it has been to open up a wider discussion of how the issue of race has been and continues to be inextricably linked to development. Such a discussion is necessary if White's (2002) "determining silence" of race is to be broken.

Notes

[i] This paper was published in The Undergraduate Journal of Ireland & Northern Ireland, Volume 5, 2013 and we are grateful to the Undergraduate Awards of Ireland and Northern Ireland for permission to reproduce a slightly amended version here.

References

Bauman, Z. (2001). Identity in the globalizing world. *Social Anthropology,* 9(2), 121-129.

Cole, T. (2012). The white savior industrial complex. The Atlantic. Retrieved from: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/1/

Comhlámh (The Irish Association of Development Workers), 2013. *New Evidence on Overseas Volunteering from Ireland and its Socio-Economic Impact in Ireland.* Dublin: Comhlámh.

Hall, S. (1997). The spectacle of the 'other'. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying patterns* (pp. 223-279). London: Sage and the Open University.

Mengetsu, D. (2012). *Not a click away: Joseph Kony in the real world.* Warscapes. Retrieved from: http://www.warscapes.com/reportage/not-click-away-joseph-kony-real-world

Reas, P.J. (2013). 'Boy, have we got a vacation for you': Orphanage tourism in Cambodia and the commodification and objectification of the orphaned child. *Thammasat Review,* 16(20), 121-139.

Robb, P. (Ed.). (1995). *The concept of race in South Asia.* Oxford: India Paperbacks.

Simpson, K. (2004). 'Doing development': The gap year, volunteer-tourists and a popular practice of development. *Journal of International Development,* 16(5), 681-692.

Tenthanti, R. (2008). Madonna 'over the moon' about finalized adoption. People Magazine. Retrieved from: http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20202798,00.html

Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM), 2008. *Volunteer Tourism: a Global* Analysis. ATLAS Publications: Arnhem.

Travellers Worldwide. (2012). Care for orphans voluntary project in Madurai, India. Retrieved from: http://www.travellersworldwide.com/05-india/05-india-south-care.htm

Venn, C. (1993). Occidentalism and its discontents. In P. Cohen (Ed.), *New ethnicities, old racisms (* pp. 37-62) . London: Zed Books.

White, S.C. (2002). Thinking race, thinking development. *Third World Quarterly,* 23(3), 407-419.