

Embracing Vulnerability in an Age of Fear

Understanding volunteer motivations

“Every time we choose safety, we reinforce fear.”
Cheri Huber

In any discussion of intercultural volunteering it is important to consider volunteer motivations. These vary widely and can have a profound effect on the potential of a given placement to be beneficial to the host community.

Most often people consider a volunteer as altruistic - a benevolent individual who puts aside self-interest to help others. In some cases, this may be true but there are often complementary or alternate motivations operating at the same time.¹ The public perception of volunteers, itself, can also be the motivation to volunteer. Some volunteer because they believe they will gain admiration from others for their sacrifice; others because they believe in some reward in an afterlife or to accrue karma. Guilt over one's own relative wealth, perhaps instilled by a religious or cultural teaching about social justice, drives some to volunteer.

A large number volunteer out of a sense of solidarity, as a method of creating a socially-just world; others because of a sense of adventure, to explore a new culture, though with the security of having a reason for being present. It can be a counter-cultural step, to choose to leave both the creature comforts and simplicity, perhaps naivety, one's own culture provides. It takes either a person who is committed to an ideal, or one who doubts the superiority of their own culture in all matters. The ambitious is another class of volunteer, perhaps linked closely to the adventuresome, who see an opportunity to gain skills and experience unavailable in their home culture. This is directly marketed to by some agencies in their recruitment processes.

Finally, there are those who volunteer out of a sense of superiority. These volunteers believe in their own ability and their own culture's ability to provide all the answers to life's challenges. They have heard the advocates complaining about injustice and inequality, and hold a naïve faith in their own rightness, such that: “if I just show them how to behave, their problems will be solved.” This can often be tied to a belief the world should be just, but will not accept responsibility, or even complicity, in the injustice. Rather than being motivated by a sense of obligation or solidarity, these volunteers look upon their counterparts with pity.

Though some agencies might disagree, individual volunteer motivations are important and must be considered in properly preparing volunteers. They influence how a volunteer views herself in relation to her role, as an individual striving to achieve her own pre-determined outcomes or as a resource available to the community in achieving its goals. They influence the depth of relationships necessary for development - how a volunteer views his hosts, and consequently how they view him.

¹ Clary et al. (1996) identify six psychological functions which serve as motivations for volunteering. The examples of volunteer motivations used here each belong to one or more of these more general classifications.

Volunteers motivated by public esteem, self-advancement or, especially, a sense of superiority are less effective (Fox, 2003) as they more likely to view their hosts and the volunteering process as means to a selfish end. In the race to this end, such volunteers are more prone to accept simplistic generalisations of their hosts and their host culture, as a more complex perspective would delay the individual's progress.

The generalisations available to such a volunteer can vary from the negative – inept, corrupt, lazy, violent, inferior – to those which can be perceived as positive, but still carry harmful simplifications – peaceful, noble, happy, in touch with nature, simple, non-materialistic. Though perspectives often change during placement, volunteers experiencing culture shock tend to favour explicitly negative stereotypes and gravitate to fellow expatriates, who reinforce such ideas (Oberg 1960). While an objective view is available to a volunteer, there exist cultural, political and systemic influences, prior to arrival and while in placement, which pre-dispose volunteers to a distrustful and fearful view of other cultures.²

Fear of others and the environment

“Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd.”
Bertrand Russell

Despite globalisation, national media still tends to be national in its focus.³ The only stories from non-western countries which seem worth the effort are sensational, dramatic and often tragic – terrorism, political instability, civil unrest and natural disasters top the list. International stories which demonstrate the positive aspects humanity shared by all cultures – the desires for meaning, family, safety, joy, humour and a life out of poverty and concern for others – are not so commonly heard. The negative portrayal of “others” in the media reflects the image of cultural superiority propagated by governments seeking to increase national loyalty and blind obeisance amongst its citizens. Even internally, there is a marginalisation of those different cultures seen as undermining the “greatness” (read: whiteness) of Australia (Marr, 2005). Stereotypical images, which generate fear and disgust not of the stereotype but of those stereotyped, aim to reinforce nationalistic sentiment to the point that we attempt to articulate “Australian values”. The values articulated are either not values, such as the question about “Budgie-Smugglers” on the Australian citizenship test, or are actually those human values described above. By claiming humanity as Australian, we reduce others to non-human.

² Examples of commonly held cultural stereotypes domestically are illustrated and challenged in recent campaigns from ANTaR and Reconciliation Australia.

³ A conservative nationalistic bias is more common in tabloids than broadsheets (Hardt-Mautner, 1995; Law, 2001) and in talkback radio over other radio formats (Adams and Burton, 1997; Barker and Knight, 2000). Non-commercial media outlets, such as the ABC and SBS, lack the commercial imperative for populism, so conservative nationalistic bias is less common (Cunningham and Turner, 2002). Smith and Phillips (2006) explain it thus: “Lowbrow genres reinforced exclusive national identities and highbrow genres created more open cultures...” (p. 840). They add that while “higher cultural capital readers” can enjoy the “lowbrow” as a complement to their other readings, “reading up the scale” is not so common (p. 839). So, it seems, the less populist media are also the least popular (FreeTV Australia, 2008).

In addition to the aforementioned fears, volunteers have heard from returned travellers or their sending organisation about tropical diseases, food poisoning, tribal or gender-based violence, cross-cultural misunderstandings and claims for compensation. These may be aspects of a particular context for which a volunteer needs preparation, but poor preparation can inadvertently create an unhealthy fear of the host community and context. For example, when warned they may witness gender-based violence more easily in their new context, a volunteer may project an image of violence onto every male and an image of the victim onto every woman in the culture.⁴ They fail also to consider the occurrence of such problems in our own culture. A volunteer who has generalised such a simplistic view will be able to enter into mutual relationship with neither the women, whom they pity, nor the men, whom they fear. While this topic should be addressed in volunteer preparation for particular contexts, volunteers should be made aware of the root causes, inequality and discrimination, and compounding factors such as ongoing conflicts, dispossession, disempowerment and the destruction of traditional systems of regulating behaviour.

Sending agencies share these fears for their volunteers, though perhaps less out of personal safety and more out of a desire to avoid the litigation and bad publicity that might follow. The duty of care of agencies should not be minimalised, though there are a variety of ways to meet this duty. The simplest way, at first glance, is to wrap the volunteer in cash and cotton wool. Once wrapped in cotton wool, a second glance might necessitate some barbed wire, an insurance policy and some more cash. Finally the agency strongly warns the volunteer not to alter this arrangement. Unwilling to leave their barbed-wire compound, except with an entourage, unable to enjoy local hospitality for fear of contamination, unable to experience any life except with expatriates, a volunteer develops no meaningful cross-cultural relationships and risks falling victim to neo-colonial groupthink. The volunteer fears every local as corrupt, violent and incompetent, and distantly discusses these observations of “the natives” with other expatriates, confirming and compounding their worst suspicions.

With this approach, those who volunteer out of a desire to achieve sustainable development outcomes or a desire to learn about and interact with another culture will achieve neither of these. Faced with their own inadequacy they risk returning home jaded and traumatised by the process and, despite their own ineffectiveness, perpetuating notions of cultural superiority.

Fear of inadequacy

“An outsider can know more about the history, cultural externals, and even language of an ethnic group than its members and still be alien to them because of a lack of empathy.”
Gerald Arbuckle

No volunteer wants to return home and confess that they were unable to make a difference. This is particularly true when their friends and family have praised them

⁴ Examples of such stereotyping are evident since the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention, during which numerous Aboriginal men and women complain of being stereotyped as “drunkards, wife-beaters and pedophiles” (Newhouse 2009).

for their generosity. It is further compounded when prior to departure the sending agency has built the volunteer's expectations of their work. Those volunteers who have a strong need to feel that they've helped, seek praise from others or hope to demonstrate their professional capabilities, are less attracted to agencies that temper their expectations of effectiveness. Further building of expectations can occur through stories in local media or agency newsletters. Agencies have a responsibility, too, to their donors and have promised that they will have demonstrable outcomes within a certain time period. With all this weight of expectation, comes further pressure not to fail, not to be inadequate.

So, the volunteer and sending agency prepare the steps she will take to solve the host community's "education problem", so that she can "hit the ground running" and demonstrate major progress to donors within the month. Designing processes of solution, separate from and without any engagement with the host community, runs counter to the community development principles which are at the heart of any sustainable development work. The pre-determined solution, and indeed the volunteer's ego, does not enjoy being confronted by evidence that in this climate, culture or context their "expert" solution will be inappropriate. They plough on implementing their new database system for the school library, with which they will improve literacy rates in the host community, without considering that computers rarely last more than six months in this school because of overheating, generator brownouts and theft. Neither do they realise that if they weren't there, the power would not be available at the times the library is open because of the rising cost of diesel. The volunteer, of course, should have realised this except they'd been so cushioned from the culture and the people. Those who dissented or didn't seem to be cooperating with the volunteer's glorious vision were obstacles to be overcome in achieving the outcomes.

Volunteers who, because of their fears, are guarded against entering into truly mutual relationships with their hosts, including being challenged by their hosts, will be recognised as such. Their local guide will be more likely to lead him past the disenfranchised, the dissenting or the disabled, so that this latest incarnation of the colonial "Master" sees only what he wants to see.

Fear of being challenged to change

"You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."
Indira Gandhi

Prior to departure, perhaps as part of her preparation or perhaps through her own research, a volunteer will come across an explanation of her host culture. With no criticism or contextualising, such a laundry list of cultural practices, beliefs and flaws forms the basis about what she now knows about the culture. Despite many such descriptions being based upon simplistic, inaccurate, outdated or long-discredited-but-persisting theories of an anthropologist, missionary or other coloniser, she is less able to accept evidence contrary to what she has read. While admirable that she attempts to understand the culture, the belief that she can fully understand and simplify the culture through prior research is either naïve or egotistical. Such simplistic descriptions are less likely to be challenged by those travelling for a short time, or

who have outcomes to achieve in a short time, due to the limited time in which they must achieve their outcomes. Such a volunteer might ask questions about the culture, but they will often be shallow, or designed to evoke a positive response to re-affirm her belief that she understands the context and has adequately considered it.

Mutual cross-cultural relationships are challenging, and must be so if they are to be meaningful. Such relationships require a questioning of one's own culture as much as the other. Volunteers must be willing to accept local knowledge, expertise and wisdom. Their own cultural assumptions will be questioned. So, too, will their culture's responsibility or complicity in the oppression of their counterparts. They may even ask questions about the way their home culture treats its own. Some questions may bear an obligation to change values or behaviours of the volunteer from those endorsed by his culture. This fear is a large one for a volunteer who committed to a two-year placement, but then planned to return to the normality of his own culture. That such changes might be necessary raises questions about the volunteer's right to even be present and whether they could ever hope to be effective.

It is these questions which, when answered, can cause difficulties for returning volunteers. How can one return to normality in a culture they now know is flawed? Returning volunteers are called to be advocates and agitators, at the cost of acceptance. Nationalistic ideas celebrated by politicians and the media, and cheered on by a public drunk on self-satisfaction, no longer ring true and they speak out accordingly. This is an especially difficult idea for the volunteers seeking acclamation, but rather than provide them with an experience in which they never engage in genuine cross-cultural relationships, agencies should ask "are you ready to be confronted?" At the same time, agencies must have processes in place to assist returned volunteers with re-entry and maintain networks and methods of engagement for those who still wish to remain involved.

Governments may be particularly uncomfortable with the idea that they are sending people to learn alternate perspectives, approaches and realities to the ones they promote. Alternatively though, a government might recognise the potential to be seen as one able to respond to criticism through positive, confident action, rather than one which silences, marginalises or ignores dissenters⁵.

Embracing vulnerability

"The moment your vulnerability is complete and you are aware of oneness, there is no fear."
A.H. Almaas

⁵ Weller (2008) observes that two of the major scandals faced by the Howard government, the children-overboard and Australian Wheat Board scandals, involved Ministers hiding "behind the excuse that they were not told". Conversely, "good practice includes always correcting incorrect information as quickly as possible, without being delayed by fear of embarrassment." While, to some, hoping for a government willing to take the risk of being challenged may seem naïve, Julia Gillard has distanced the Labor government from the previous Liberal governments practice of gagging NGOs operating in a "climate of fear" (Franklin and Lunn, 2008).

In essence, all of these fears are fears of not being in control – fears of being vulnerable. They feed off colonialistic notions that the volunteer is going to “help”, “save” or “fix” and in doing so has left “civilisation” behind to travel to a poor, primitive place. The volunteer wants to be in control. The agency wants to be in control, while allowing the volunteer to believe he is. Neither wants to be dependent on the cultural, climatic or other contextual elements they don’t fully understand. Yet this is the culture, climate and context where the volunteer will live, where the project will occur and for whom its benefits are intended.

Being able to relinquish the need for control, in favour of adapting to the new circumstances, is at the heart of intercultural effectiveness. Fox (2003) cites four independent studies of competencies related to intercultural effectiveness and indicates “tolerance for uncertainty” as the most explicit agreement of the four researchers.⁶ Other qualities cited, compatible with our definition of vulnerability, include “high openness”, “low ethnocentrism”, “high acculturation motivation”, “intercultural receptivity”, “low need for upward mobility” and “low security needs” (Fox 2003). Though some professional competencies are listed, there is predominance of personal and interpersonal competencies.

We define vulnerability not as being in imminent danger, but as being unable to control every situation.⁷ Where a person is not in control, there is potential for harm but there is also much potential for growth, joy, love and learning. It is a counter-cultural idea. In Australia we are trained to protect ourselves from situations we cannot control. We attempt to control every situation, pretending that we are not vulnerable, yet still the bushfires and floods come, your employer becomes insolvent and someone breaks your heart. This denial of vulnerability, the aspect of our humanity in which pain can occur, leads us to mechanise and automate our lives to the point of avoiding life, lest it contain feelings we find unpleasant. Overseas, expatriates drive in climate-controlled bubbles to avoid the dust and discomfort of the tropical heat. Meanwhile the discomfort is increased for those on foot because of the dust the vehicles kick up. The locals, vulnerable to the heat and dust, will feel the solidarity with the expatriate who is sharing their reality more than with the one behind tinted glass.

Vulnerability is not stupidity. Measures must still be taken to avoid danger, but how we view danger depends on whether we attempt to be independent of others or interdependent with others. Being vulnerable is being open to mutual exchange, being open to being wrong, and being open to allow someone else control. In choosing to admit, understand and embrace our vulnerability in this context, we are released from our fears.

⁶ The four researchers were Dodd (1994), Elmer (1986), Kealey (2000) and Gudykunst (1994).

⁷ The concept of vulnerability is often wrongfully associated with weakness. Vulnerability is viewed negatively, as something to be avoided. This is, perhaps, reflective of the individualism and machismo promoted in the Australian context. An alternative way to understand the concept of vulnerability is to consider its opposite: “invulnerability”. Few cross-cultural volunteering agencies would agree with either of the statements “volunteers can be invulnerable in their new context” or “volunteers should feel invulnerable in their new context.” Once it is acknowledged that volunteers are not and can never be invulnerable, we are obliged to consider again how we prepare volunteers for their inevitable vulnerability.

Released from his fear of the locals, our volunteer is free to enter into relationships with them. The volunteer admits his vulnerability and asks for assistance from his counterpart, who volunteers to escort him on public transport to the markets. During the trip the host explains the strange vegetables and the process for purchasing them. He introduces the volunteer to friends and extended family, which endorses the volunteer's presence and builds networks of security. If it is not safe or not appropriate to behave in a particular way, the volunteer can ask assistance. It is during these moments of vulnerability, when a volunteer acknowledges they need help, that a host shares more of himself. Realising that this *palangi*, *gubba*, *whitefella*, or even *masta* is different, he'll share a funny story about a previous volunteer who inadvertently wandered past the river where the women wash and was chased away by their brothers or was scared of the falling coconuts or behaved in some other seemingly irrational way.

Released from her fear of inadequacy, our volunteer is free to share the responsibility for the project. She not only seeks local advice, she allows local direction. She views herself as a resource for use in achieving needs they have identified, not as the primary actor aiming to achieve some outcomes developed across the ocean. She encourages her counterparts to demonstrate their methods and only assists where her specific education or experience is required or requested. She better appreciates that she is not the first volunteer the community has seen and seeks to build local capacity wherever possible, knowing that many outcomes will not be achieved until after she leaves. Embracing her vulnerability is embracing community development principles, empowering people and increasing local ownership.

Embracing his vulnerability will not protect a volunteer from being challenged, but will prepare him to understand that he must be. This is a necessary part of the process; we cannot expect to "fix" another culture without considering what is wrong in ours.

Released from his fear of challenging his own culture, our volunteer is free to view the host culture more objectively. His increased empathy allows him to avoid simplistically mischaracterising the culture as lazy, inept or corrupt. His willingness to accept that solutions do not lie in imposing his own cultural judgements, increases his ability to work with the locals on solutions which reinforce the positive aspects of the host culture. His willingness to step outside his own culture, at the risk of being vulnerable, demonstrates solidarity with his hosts by choosing not to be part of a system which reinforces inequitable class structures. The recognition that, in an interdependent world, some aspects of his own culture must also change, changes his work from a charitable project to part of a movement for global justice.

Embracing one's vulnerability is an expression of a desire to enter into a mutual cross-cultural relationship, not from behind barbed wire or an inflated salary, but on as close to equal footing as is possible. It is an empowering process. It proclaims "I'm not afraid to work with you" and contains the undertone "and neither should anyone else be." It is not about ignoring danger, but about recognising the burden of fear. The mutual relationship demands that where one party is more knowledgeable, whether in technical skills or local knowledge, that expertise is respected and sought. If we admit some things remain beyond our control, we question some of the measures taken to ensure volunteer security. Is the volunteer surrounded by expatriate

friends more safe than the volunteer surrounded by local friends? Is the volunteer driving in the project vehicle safer than the one catching public transportation? Does extra money make a volunteer more safe or more unsafe? The answer to each of these, of course, depends on the specific context, but it should be also recognised that blanket worst-case scenario security policies can shield volunteers from their potential to build cross-cultural relationships, develop a greater understanding of the host culture and learn to be effective within it.

Embracing one's vulnerability is an expression of active non-violence. It rejects the barriers placed between cultures, as violent, intimidating and counterproductive. It actively challenges models borne out of colonisation, not by violently overturning them, but by demonstrating a peaceful, more effective alternative. Such an demonstration rejects the notions that aid from overseas must always involve unequal power relationships and that "donors" and "recipients" have specific roles to play. It recognises that the volunteer who attempts to be invulnerable, while surrounded by vulnerable people, is simply reinforcing structural disadvantage. It challenges these notions amongst both groups and empowers the hosts to challenge inappropriate models in future. It says: "let us work together for the best world for each of us; let us not fear those who say it cannot be done".

A volunteer who embraces her vulnerability rejects the top-down models of development which are rooted in a coloniser's framework. Her presence in the host community is only appropriate because she has been invited by the hosts. "Strangers, even guests, have no absolute rights; the initiative belongs to the host." (Gittins, 2002, p. 128). "Barging in as the person with the expertise, intent on 'intervening' and bringing about change from a position of 'superior' knowledge and skills, is to guarantee failure, and will simply perpetuate structures and discourses of disadvantage and disempowerment." (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006, p. 131). The vulnerable volunteer is no longer the expert, but a "fellow traveller" in solidarity on the road to justice. The vulnerable volunteer may enter the "infamous patch", as did the community worker in Ife and Tesoriero's case study, to discover a world reminiscent of "what our suburbs were like in the 1950s, what we have lost because of our fear of others."⁸ (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006, p.137). Such interactions build a volunteer's capacity to be effective, can lead to more effective cross-cultural relationships and may drive the volunteer to pause to question both her own culture and models of development which presume to "develop" towards her culture.

How do we embrace our vulnerability?

"If a newcomer honestly presents herself or himself as a stranger... this facilitates the interaction, even though the price may be some uncertainty and powerlessness on the part of the stranger."

Anthony Gittins

⁸ It should be noted that the development worker in the case study does not romanticise the local culture, noting the problems such as alcoholism. Her presence, though, allows her to gain a better understanding of the complicated relationship between all aspects of the host culture. This, in turn, improves her ability to cooperate on solutions more appropriate for the context.

Agencies must recognise the centrality of volunteer motivations. A volunteer's motivations can indicate what is most likely to hinder his crossing cultures openly. Insulting paternalistic notions should be critiqued. If an applicant insists on maintaining their plans to fix or save a community, the agency must be prepared to reject their application. Similar re-evaluation is needed if the applicant has no intention of engaging with local counterparts. This may mean a decrease in the quantity of volunteers in favour of higher quality volunteers.⁹

The host community must be engaged in all aspects of the program, including devising the role description, assessing the security situation, support of the volunteer and addressing issues as they arise. The position should be at the request of the local community and the volunteers and donors should be made aware that this is a locally driven-project. Through visits and communications between agency and host, relationships of trust should be developed such that each understands the capabilities of the other. Dialogue should be open to both parties and any others with valuable contributions and in any situation locally developed solutions should be preferred. They are more sustainable and usually more appropriate.

Cross-cultural preparation provided for volunteers should not be simplistic, patronising or absolute. It should prepare volunteers to be vulnerable and embrace their vulnerability as a learning mechanism. They should consider how they will feel and act when vulnerable, not just read a list of cultural dos and don'ts. It should prepare volunteers to seek the hosts' advice and question their own behaviour within the host culture. They should be provided with tools to understand their own process of adjustment and how these affect their cultural judgements. The volunteer should also receive development education. This includes instilling realistic expectations. Do not ask them to be messiahs. Quell any thoughts they hold that they can. Provide an understanding of community development principles. Develop big-picture thinking which recognises that long-term sustainable goals cannot be solely their own.

Volunteers should see their freedom to request help as a strength, a learning mechanism through which they can gain more meaningful insight into their work. They should understand the unique opportunities open to volunteers to engage in this way and be proud that they have these opportunities. They should know that many expatriate business people, government employees and aid workers miss this hugely rewarding experience. They should also recognise that their hosts might take some time to trust them because of their prior experiences with expatriates who attempted to be invulnerable. They should understand that sometimes an individual of the host culture will behave in a way which the volunteer finds objectionable, just as an individual in their home culture is capable of doing, but they must not shirk from the opportunity for understanding that their cross-cultural proximity provides.

At every step of the process agency staff and volunteers must respect the human dignity of each member of the host culture. This includes abandoning fears based upon racial or cultural stereotypes, but also removal of the barriers to meaningful relationship such as vastly different living conditions. So far as it is feasible and culturally appropriate, volunteers should live in conditions similar to those of their

⁹ Neo-liberal competitive tendering and quota systems, such as those established by AusAID in 2005, should be questioned for their role in making the volunteer the centre of a volunteer placement at the expense of the host community.

counterparts. So long as an expatriate volunteer earns vastly more than a local counterpart in the same role, the title “volunteer” and any accompanying suggestion of altruism will appear ludicrous.

Conclusion

“And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”
Marianne Williamson

Cross-cultural volunteering for development occurs in a context steeped in a long history of unequal power relationships. Research into intercultural effectiveness suggests that the most effective in their new context are those able to relinquish the power and comfort of certainty and expertise. In order to be effective therefore, volunteers must be willing, able and encouraged to build mutual, equal relationships in their new context. This means both accepting their vulnerability and embracing it. This calls upon many volunteers, agencies and governments to enact a significant shift in their approaches to volunteering if they wish to enhance their effectiveness. Recruitment and preparation strategies should not pander to volunteer egos. The entire process should not aim to isolate volunteers, in comfort, from the realities of daily life in their host country. Volunteers should not be taught to fear the environment or people but to engage and see the potential for personal transformation and liberation from unjust structures. This will allow them to experience true solidarity with their hosts. Only then will the interactions between volunteer and host become steps towards truly sustainable development.

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