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Who Are We Benefiting in Year Long Service Endeavors? (First Place)

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Dr. Mescher

First Year Seminar: From Service to Solidarity

October 21, 2016

Who Are We Benefiting in Year Long Service Endeavors?

Justice requires a sustained effort for an issue that has its roots much deeper than the superficial level problems that permeate present society. Issues of poverty, homelessness, and poor education systems will not be changed overnight and need people to dedicate themselves to development in order to enact radical change. *Toxic Charity* showed me the ways that actions that we may consider to be service actually have charity as their base and cause more harm than good. Charity can promote a one-way form of giving that looks at the poor as lesser and in need of a savior. Service can be viewed as working with the poor to bring empowerment from within a community that will provide long lasting results of redevelopment and self-sufficiency. To me, service means much more than a weekly service project; instead, it means a complete way of life that provides justice for those stuck in an oppressive cycle that continually repeats. Year-long service organization attempt to eradicate these cycles of poverty by engaging volunteers in the community where they do their service. Organizations such as Jesuit Volunteer Corps and the Peace Corps send volunteers nationally and internationally for a year or two years in order to complete service and integrate with the community. As we have explored in this class, not every service organization benefits those they seek to serve. Service endeavors that last a year or longer work towards justice but still have the capacity to negatively affect those being served.

My paper centers around longer service projects because I have considered completing a year of service. My friends and I would discuss what it would mean to take a gap year of

service, the different programs available, and the practicalities of timing. Being surrounded by Jesuit values in a Jesuit high school naturally drew me to researching the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. One of my teachers, Mr. Tony Dipre, spent a year in Saint Louis, Missouri serving in the JVC and spoke highly of it when I had him as a teacher. The JVC appeals to me in the way that the volunteers live among those they serve, with a particular focus on living simply. While it is incredible and honorable to dedicate one's entire life to service, I saw the JVC as an opportunity to devote my time and efforts to service without changing the entire trajectory of my life.

Although I now realize that service is not something to be completed but an ongoing way of life, I still believe that immersing myself into a year of service could have benefits for me and those that I would serve. The JVC requires sustained service with a social justice focus. I wanted to investigate this organization as well as others through the critical lens of Lupton and other authors that we have read in class. Through First Year Seminar, I have developed a desire to complete meaningful service that creates long-lasting results. If I complete a year of service after college or at some point in my life, I want to take part in an organization that works for justice for the people being served. Therefore, I chose to analyze year long service organizations to see their effects on the people being served and the volunteers serving, as well as their effects in the realms of psychology and political science.

The Jesuit Volunteer Corps surfaced in the 1960s, a long time after the establishment of the Jesuits in 1540. Jack Morris, a member of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus, began teaching in a school for Native Americans in Copper Valley, Alaska with some college students (Anderson). The JVC started as a way to recruit lay volunteers for his specific school, yet when it began to succeed, Morris realized the potential for volunteers that could work at the school. The JVC developed as a way for students to delve deeper into service and the ideas of

justice that many had acquired from attending a Jesuit university. Faith and spirituality are highlighted throughout the year to encourage the cross between faith and service.

The 1960s not only ignited the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, but it also sparked the beginning of many other year-long service programs. President Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961 after World War II (Purcell 133). Instead of stemming from a religious organization, this was a governmental program designed to combat the "global war on poverty" after the Cold War (Purcell 131). The goal of the Peace Corps involved permitting America to "participate directly, personally, and effectively for human dignity" (Amin 812). The focus upon the volunteers being personal conveyors of human dignity continues in the mission statement of the Peace Corps. It says the mission of the Peace Corps is "to provide volunteers who contribute to the social and economic development of interested countries, promote a better understanding of Americans among the people whom the volunteers serve, strengthen Americans' understanding of the world and its peoples" (Goldberg 238). The Peace Corps intended to support Third World countries while also gaining a return for the American population. Kennedy wanted the U.S. to play a major role in the revitalization of the world after World War II, especially in the poorest countries. He planned for America to promote its' interests overseas at a time when other major countries in the world were recovering from the devastating losses of the war. Kennedy also expected the American volunteers to return to the U.S. after two years of service to be more cultured citizens that would have a broader world view. While the creation of the Peace Corps certainly came from a need in the world, it also came from the self-interests of the U.S. to culture its' people and serve as a light for the rest of the world. Other organizations followed the model set by the Peace Corps and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, such as Volunteers in Service to America (Purcell 134). The 1960s marked an influx of long-term volunteerism with many consequences.

Consequences of long term volunteerism come in various forms, but a commonly held view is that they positively benefit the community being served. Explicit results of year-long service organizations show success in communities after the volunteers committed themselves to the community. One should expect documented evidence of the success of these programs due to the commitment and time spend on service. A primary benefits is to the people being served, shown by "the eradication of the Guinea worm disease in several African countries, the work in education and health related to HIV and AIDS, and the construction of roads and bridges in many nations" (Goldberg 238). These concrete results of the Peace Corps give organizations a reason to continue working for a cause because improvements are being made. Work in South American countries proved to be beneficial to communities through a focus on community development. Work in Columbia began with 1,456 Communal Action councils in 1961 and "surpassed 15,000 in 1970" (Purcell 143). Columbia already had Communal Action councils in place before the Peace Corps came into the country; therefore, building upon ideas of the community promoted longer-term results due to the collaboration between the volunteers and Columbians. Community development serves people the best in order to create self-sufficiency that will remain after the volunteers leave. When year-long service organizations embrace the community, it becomes an empowering effort that leaves the community with "new feeling and inspiration," as experienced in Chama, New Mexico after the Peace Corps Volunteers left (Purcell 137). Those being served see the opportunities within themselves for growth and development. Whether one is with the JVC or the Peace Corps, members attempt to leave the community capable of working for and organizing themselves. Year-long service programs provide time for volunteers to become acclimated to the problems facing the community and begin solving them. Without the sustained effort over a year or two, communities would not

experience the changes in educational systems or the eradication of diseases. Volunteers empower those they are serving because they live with them instead of above them.

By living with those they serve, volunteers experience many benefits of serving. My understanding of *Toxic Charity* leads me to believe that Lupton does not think volunteers should look for any personal benefit from service. Yet, recruiting volunteers for service organizations relies partially on the benefits to the volunteers. The Jesuit Volunteer Corps stresses the formation of the entire person during the year of service through "pillars of spirituality, simple living, community, and Ignatian spirituality" (Perl 7). By living in community with other Jesuit volunteers, as well as with those being served, volunteers gain an understanding of solidarity. I believe this fosters better service because it begins a gradual understanding of the life of someone who is very poor or who lives on "\$80 a month" (Anderson). Volunteers benefit by broadening their perspective on the world and their potential previous stereotypes of the poor and marginalized. Another effect of year-long service organizations is its' affect on political views of the volunteers. In a study done with Jesuit volunteers before and after their year of service, "volunteers tended to become more supportive of government welfare" after their year of service (Perl 24). Working with the people shows a different side to the political agenda that volunteers may have never considered before. Without personal experience with welfare, it is hard to judge the effects that it has on the poor every day. After international service, Peace Corps volunteers expand their views on democracy and the influence that it has in other countries. A "liberal perspective of communal responsibility for helping the impoverished" develops in the volunteers, changing the way they vote and how our country works (Perl 7). By orienting people to work towards the good of another, our government works for a more just society. Reflection upon service brings greater benefits to volunteers, as they learn from their service how to assist

those in need even more. Volunteers also benefit in the good feeling they receive from helping someone else and feel gratitude for the opportunities they have received. Service becomes a two-way street for the volunteers, as they learn from the poor they are serving and hopefully continue to live a life of service after their year or two. As the Jesuit volunteers say, they are now "ruined for life," meaning they see the world through the eyes of others and have been opened to the suffering of others.

While a plethora of benefits come from service organizations, there are many details of service that may not contribute to the wellbeing of the community. Negative effects influence the community, creating more benefits for the volunteers instead of the poor. Some of the negative impacts affecting the poor include dependency and negative psychological effects. Many service organizations create dependency by continually providing money or services that the people could do for themselves. Lupton describes this in his example about entrepreneurs in Nicaragua. Microlending has the potential to create a system of self-sufficiency in countries such as Nicaragua, but churches from the U.S. continue to donate money to fund regions of Nicaragua. Instead of taking their own initiative, "people say, 'Why should we borrow money when the churches give it to us?'" (Lupton 20). A cycle of dependency is created where the poor never learn how to do things for themselves because they feel entitled to service.

Communities are left worse than when the volunteers arrived since over the year communities have come to depend on volunteers to provide for them. Jesuit volunteers take the place of potentially paid jobs that could permanently be given to a member of the community. Although a year is a substantial amount of time to develop relationships and have an impact, the volunteers leave at the end of the year while the community remains. Another volunteer replaces the previous one in many cases, leaving no room for a member of the community to take part in

that ministry. The continual change of volunteers could have a psychological effect on the community. They wait for their 'saviors' to help them and come to depend on their presence in different areas of their community. Instead of focusing on developing the community, the JVC could promote a cycle of dependency on volunteers. Lupton argues that "giving to those in need what they could be gaining from their own initiative may well be the kindest way to destroy people" (Lupton 4). Being present in the suffering of the poor takes away some of the strict giving, but it still lends itself to providing for the poor what they could provide for themselves. The poor feel incompetent or unable to sustain themselves without the help of volunteers. William Willimon works against this cycle by saying "we must not simply give to the poor; we must give the poor the means to do something about their plight" (77). As much as our compassion moves us to work for the poor, we must work with them to attain change. It is counterproductive to do for the poor what they can do for themselves.

The attitude of the volunteers can negatively impact the poor and harm the potential benefits of the service. For example, many of the volunteers enter the Jesuit Volunteer Corps as a way to discover themselves or decide how they want to spend the rest of their life. A year of service and solidarity does not always translate to a life spent advocating for the poor and marginalized in ways that produce long-term changes. The initial attitude of entering the JVC may be to benefit themselves, the servers, instead of intending to dedicate themselves to working for and with the poor. Lupton argues that organizations focus on "what will benefit *our* team the most--and neglecting the best interests of those we serve" (15). According to Lupton's argument, enhancing our spiritual life and learning to live in a community should not come at the expense of those being served. Instead of approaching service as reaching our needs, Lupton believes that service should focus entirely on those being served. He would be appalled that when

surveyed about the effects of service, "more than 90% of the volunteers surveyed agree that they gained more than what they put into their countries of service" (Amin 816). Volunteers in the Peace Corps felt their impact on the country was negligent when asked about the concrete benefits they spent the past two years trying to create. This could be classified as a huge waste of money attempting to solve problems with inexperienced volunteers.

One of the major issues with year-long service organizations is the unskilled volunteers that they attract. These well-meaning and enthusiastic volunteers come from wealthy or middle class families where working with the poor is viewed as a service. The problems of other countries and our own country need volunteers trained in social justice or agriculture or teaching in order to change the course of a community. One criticism of the Peace Corps explained that it was more of a culture exchange rather than a giving of skills and development to other countries. An agriculturalist in India "realized immediately that the Peace Corps was not a program of technicians and assistance, but rather one of cultural exchange...our problems are too serious for that" (Waldorf 76). Countries and communities expect volunteers to be acclimated to their culture and their pressing problems, so when the volunteers fall short, the disappointment is evident. When compassion and enthusiasm overpowers us, we sometimes neglect to consider the long-term effects of our work and whether it is beneficial for the community instead of just beneficial for our own ego.

Year-long service programs have good intentions of giving young people a chance to "change the world" and leave "a tangible legacy" (Purcell 146). My research enlightened me to the detriments of these organizations and the long-term impacts that they have made. One must decide whether the benefits outweigh the negatives. I believe the strongest points of these programs involve the length of a year to immerse oneself into the community with the poor to

better understand their living conditions and the way they live. Studies have shown that "longer stints abroad resulted in significant cross-cultural adaptability" compared to one month trips (Lough 453). A year is needed to develop significant relationships and build trust among the members of the community. When the volunteers are organized effectively and use their skills to enact change, then community development has the chance to occur. In the 1970s, volunteers of zoologists, botanists, and environmentalists were sent in a "specialized placement program that was well received by host countries" (Waldorf 77). By using our gifts and talents for specific problems and issues that we are passionate about, we have the ability to enact change when we work with the community. If the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and the Peace Corps continued to take into account the skills of the volunteers, they would be able to make a bigger impact on the communities they are serving. The naive way of thinking that untrained volunteers can work in places where they have no experience, such as a school teacher working with agriculture or an engineer working with psychology, negatively impacts the community who may have had competent citizens to do these jobs. The benefits of these organizations can be heightened by listening to the needs of the community and focusing upon the skills of the volunteers and the assets of the community, instead of centering the focus on the experience of the volunteers.

One community at a time takes sustained effort and accountability. The volunteers must produce results with the ideas and support of the people from the community. Beginning with one person at a time, an idea from an *Invisible Thread*, leads us with a fervor for changing unjust systems that weaken communities. Armed with first-hand knowledge of unjust systems and personal relationships that fuel a desire for change, volunteers have the opportunity to radically change communities. Instead of tackling massive issues as a whole, the effort in a single community makes an impact that has a ripple effect across the globe. I believe that "what

ultimately becomes global originates in the local" (Purcell1150). I still have the desire to take part in these service organizations, but I will be insistent that I use my skills in the most beneficial way for the community. I side with Lupton's view that we should above all, do no harm. The poor are not asking for saviors, they do not need people who believe they are superior to cater to them. While this makes service harder and involves more thinking and planning, it needs to be done if we ever want concrete benefits to last. The Jesuit Volunteers Corps remains an option for me after completing my degree, and I am happy that I was able to analyze year-long service opportunities to see both sides. Service organizations may not be perfect, but with intentional thinking and action, they can become the means to bring justice to the poor and marginalized in the U.S. and other nations.

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