Connection and Disillusion: The Moral Economy of Volunteer Tourism in Cusco, Peru

Aviva Sinervo
asinervo@ucsc.edu

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Introduction
12 year-old Lucia and I were walking down the street that leads from the children’s centre to Cusco’s Plaza de Armas. It was late and Lucia was eager to meet up with her mother who was waiting for her in the Plaza. I was trying to continue a conversation we were having about my research. ‘Do you know why I am working here?’ I asked her. ‘To take care of us’, she replied laughingly and ran off.

Although this response made difficult my attempts to explain my role as both volunteer and researcher at the centre, Lucia’s words concisely illustrate her perspective of why a foreigner would choose to spend time with her and other children who work in the city’s plazas as vendors. This particular centre, one of many in Cusco that offers assistance to poor children, caters specifically to child vendors who sell souvenirs such as postcards and finger-puppets. Lucia and her peers interact with tourists both in the streets where they work, and in centres where tourists volunteer for periods ranging from days to months.

When discussing with Lucia and other centre attendees the role of tourist volunteers, they elaborated on the forms of ‘taking care’ in which foreigners participate. ‘They teach us our homework’, 7 year-old Rosa explained. ‘They bring us things we need’, Fidela, also 7 years old, added. ‘They bring us gifts’, clarified 10 year-old Mariana. ‘The [tourist] friends teach us English,’ agreed 15 year-old Carlos and his
friend, 14 year-old Adrian. ‘They give us affections’, emphasised Estela, 8 years old. ‘They play with us’, other children responded.

These comments indicate that volunteer tourists ‘take care’ of them in varied ways: by providing affection, companionship, and educational enrichment, but also by supplying financial support in the form of ‘things we need’ and ‘gifts’. Indeed, this framework of adults caring for children reflects common models of care-giving articulated in other global contexts; adults provide children with both economic and affective forms of caring. Yet in Cusco’s volunteer tourism industry, the economic and the affective frequently clash, engaging participants—children, volunteers, volunteer coordinators, centre directors, and parents—in contestations over notions of childhood, aid, and forms of ethical tourism.

Economic and affective forms of caring do overlap, albeit in messy ways. I propose that it is the uneasy intersection of affectivity and economy that provides opportunities for connection between tourists and children, but also disillusion. Situating the mechanics of the volunteer tourism industry alongside the narratives of its participants, I emphasise that relationships between children and tourists must contend with apparent tensions between hopes for children’s assistance and goals for volunteering and tourism in Peru. Theorising volunteer tourism and children’s assistance as ‘moral economies’, I argue that actors navigate their conflicting perspectives on the relationship between affective and economic forms of care in disparate ways. Foreigners rely on particular constructs of childhood and poverty to justify their interventions in aid projects, while children both challenge, and cater to, tourists’ expectations of them, even as they also negotiate their own expectations of—and participate in reciprocal affective caring for—volunteers. Although economic exchanges have long been recognised as playing a role in creating and maintaining intimate social ties (for example, see literature on the gift emerging from the Maussian tradition), it is the preoccupation with their intertwined nature that creates feelings of disjuncture (Zelizer, 2005).
My approach highlights the importance of situating children’s perspectives, roles, and choices within the context of their interactions with the other actors who affect possibilities for work, assistance, and tourism in Cusco’s streets and centres. My 17 months of anthropological research, based primarily on participant-observation and interviews, focuses on how children actively shape the ways tourists perceive and engage the moral economies of child labour, children’s aid, and volunteer tourism. Concentrating here on the latter two topics, I track back and forth between predominantly tourists’ and children’s points of view, providing ethnographic anecdotes and excerpts from formal interviews to demonstrate that children both accommodate and rework volunteers’ desires for engagement, even as they are also influenced by such encounters and targeted as particular types of aid recipients.

I first provide background on the volunteer tourism industry in Cusco, and then outline several scholarly approaches to its study. I continue by suggesting that we bring together theories of tourism, aid, and emotion in order to frame volunteer tourism as a moral economy, simultaneously affected by financial and affective considerations. Presenting several examples of children and tourists contending with their expectations of each other and the volunteering experience, I analyse how concerns of sustainability, motive, and control inform how participants in this industry find meaning and value in their relationships with each other, ultimately creating connection while still coping with disillusion.

The Volunteer Tourism Industry in Cusco
Volunteer coordinators report that many of Cusco’s growing population of philanthropic tourists—primarily Americans, Canadians, Europeans, and Australians—hope to work with poor children, although some participate in construction projects, medical care, or other development initiatives. Aid projects for children in the region range from educational preparatory programmes, orphanages, dormitories, and penal institutions, to the after-school centres where I did the majority of my research. After-school centres themselves have discrete motivations and clientele, but many of them propose to help ‘poor children’, ‘abandoned children’, or ‘child workers’. I use the words project, centre,
and programme interchangeably, but they actually indicate different visions of how to distribute aid to children: through integrated social projects, centres where children can drop-in, or structured programmes with specific end goals. All of these assistance programmes provide support for children in the absence of public, state-funded alternatives.

Although volunteers report a diversity of supposedly ‘selfish’ motivations for seeking out these opportunities—from the desire to gain Spanish speaking skills and non-profit experience, to more ‘intimate’ encounters with local people and culture—volunteers also explain that they want to ‘make a difference’ to the children and their community. This difference is sometimes narrated on a macro scale, helping to alleviate global poverty, but is often framed as a directed mission to give children the opportunity to play, smile, and be happy—in short, to help them access a certain vision of childhood. Tourists articulate their aspirations to positively affect children’s lives, yet their narratives indicate assumptions about childhood and poverty in Cusco: a perception of childhood as a time of universal innocence and vulnerability, concern over the supposed non-childhood of poor and working children, and expectations about the disjuncture between not just poverty and happiness, but also play and work. These common stereotypes, while critiqued by scholars of childhood (see for example, Green, 1998; Montgomery, 2009; Nieuwenhuys, 1996 and 2005; Schep-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Stephens, 1995; Zelizer, 1985 and 2002), influence tourists’ perceptions of Cusqueño children, their visions of the work they want to do, and the ‘difference’ they might make.

Acting on these assumptions about childhood and poverty, volunteer tourists arrive with a sense of expectation and morality, and a willingness to dedicate time, energy, and passions. But they also bring economic support in the form of donations and volunteering fees. Money and supplies are rarely distributed directly by the volunteer to the children. More such resources are passed from an international sending organisation, which the volunteer has paid to arrange their placement, to a local Spanish school whose coordinator provides the volunteer with accommodation,
language classes, and a volunteering orientation. Occasionally money is then provided to the project at which the volunteer is placed.

**Volunteer Tourism as Moral Economy: Theorising Tourism, Aid, and Emotion Together**

‘Voluntourism’ is a growing international phenomenon in which travellers combine leisure and touring activities with volunteer work (Elliott, 2008). However, it is only in the last decade that international philanthropy efforts via volunteering have been contextualized as a form of ‘tourism’. Indeed, there is a longer history of analysis on volunteering as a kind of altruism, similar to understandings of charity and gift economies (see Cheal, 1998; Hammack and Heydemann, 2009; Martin, 1994; Smith, 2005; Titmuss, 1971). Allen Jedlicka (1990) contrasts volunteering efforts and bureaucratic approaches to development, claiming that volunteer motives are less corrupt because they do not involve self-gain or reciprocity. In addition, volunteering aid is seen as more direct—person-to-person—and comes ‘purely from a sense of humanitarian obligation’ (ibid:3).

Yet its widespread popularity has generated critique as well, raising important questions about impact, intention, and what ‘best practices’ should be used to facilitate ‘mutual benefit’ for both volunteers and recipients (Raymond, 2007). Stephen Wearing (2001) takes a classic tourism studies approach, emphasising that volunteers gain from their experiences, returning home with a greater awareness of self. While volunteers might be motivated by the potential for self-transformation through travel, they are also inspired to ‘make a difference’ to the communities with whom they are working. In direct contrast to the oppositional framework of Jedlicka, scholars note that such possibilities primarily come through the non-governmental organisation (NGO) apparatus, which is necessarily bureaucratic and business-oriented (see Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Fisher, 1997). This highlights concerns about how volunteering aid is administered, as well as about the extent to which locals can be involved in defining what they want from the foreigners offering their assistance. Both these issues are relevant for the case of
Cusco, where the volunteer tourism industry is one of the largest growing economic sectors, and where local Spanish schools and international sending organisations facilitate volunteers’ integration into the NGOs that provide children’s aid.

Moving beyond a development or tourism studies approach to ‘voluntourism’ requires that we give equal weight to the perspectives of tourists—or the businesses that facilitate the volunteering experience—and so-called recipients, in my case, the children who attend these programmes, their parents, and NGO directors. I build upon the imperative advocated by childhood studies scholarship (see for example, Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, 2007; Hecht, 2002; James, 2007; James and James, 2002; Schwartzman, 2001) to argue that paying attention to how children frame and mediate their relationships with tourists helps us to better analyse the possibilities for connection and disillusion that all participants experience. In addition to examining children’s points of view, I investigate how tourists feel about their encounters with children and the structuring of these interactions within the volunteer tourism context. This allows for an exploration of how children are active in reshaping the ways in which volunteers, volunteer coordinators, and others negotiate their own sentiments of idealism and cynicism. The centrality of children emerges both in their own understandings of connection and disillusion, and in the emotions they elicit from others.

To undertake this analysis, I explore volunteer tourism in Cusco as a moral economy, a tangled circulation of money, people, labour, and emotions that creates complex webs of possibility and connection, but which also contains points of friction and disillusionment. The ‘moral economy’ concept originates from studies of how disenfranchised peoples (peasants or the poor, for example) have historically rebelled against perceived unjust economic frameworks (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). Ideals of economic justice inform the moral implications of reciprocity and the ethics of redistribution. Others have used the term to think about child labour in the context of family economies (see for example, Nieuwenhuys, 1994 and Offit, 2008). I here use ‘moral economy’ to highlight the discourses of participants in the intertwined economic spheres of children’s assistance projects and the volunteer tourism industry. Such
actors continually refer to the moral and ethical contradictions of aid’s dependence on tourism revenue and business practices, in particular how financial support and emotional transience influence the relationships between children and tourists.

My concept of moral economy probes the entanglement of economy and affectivity, and the ethical frameworks and claims that circulate around the blurred edges where they meet and overlap. Economy comes into play primarily in the donations and fees that volunteers bring to their placements. Project directors explain that volunteers’ dollars are often more important than their labour, yet this reality sits uncomfortably with volunteers who contribute their time, in addition to (or in lieu of) their financial aid. For reasons narrated as moral, volunteers sometimes refuse to ‘pay’ for their volunteering experience. Concerns about morality focus on the mechanics of the industry and potential for corrupt use of money, as well as on a volunteer’s righteous sense of self-purpose. Responding to these concerns, some directors and Spanish schools are marketing their placements as free of volunteering fees, thereby trumpeting volunteering as the world’s last form of altruism. However, this perspective is problematic, as volunteers, children, and directors alike recognise that successful collaboration ideally involves all participants feeling like they are at once donors and recipients (see Allahyari, 2000; Caldwell, 2004, and Poppendieck, 1998). Altruism cannot be a motivating factor if all participants gain from the interaction. Even if there is no equal economic exchange, there is reciprocity of feeling.

I define affectivity as the complex meeting of emotion, affection, and intimacy, as expressed physically and psychologically, and as internalized and narrated in discourse and sentiment. My framework builds on the sociology of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979, 1983, 2003) and performance studies (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1969), as well as research on compassion and empathy within aid relationships (Bornstein, 2005 and 2009; Bradley, 2005; Caldwell, 2008; Clark, 1997; De Waal, 2009; Leutloff-Grandits et al, 2009). Affectivity is apparent in the physical demonstrativeness of children and tourists toward each other but also in hopes for emotional connection and ways that physicality stands for a long-lasting and strong commitment of mutual care. While
tourists and children might be similarly concerned with the ways that relationships develop and are sustained, tourists are likely to worry about the merging of economic and emotional interests—or not being in control of which interests are prioritised—whereas children and their parents often encourage the overlapping of such agendas.

**Mixed Feelings: Successful Programmes versus Selfish Tourists versus Happy Children**

It was a warm September day when I interviewed Sabrina, a tourist completing her volunteering placement at a children’s educational preparatory program. We were sitting in a small field next to a railroad, watching children play with a ball, chase another volunteer, and swing on a metal goalpost. Sabrina and I sat in the dirt, Sabrina cuddling a little girl in her lap, and a slightly older girl peering at me and cautiously reaching out to play with my hair. A few other children sat nearby, playing with the sparse patches of grass, and asking Sabrina questions about lunch or going to the bathroom.

In between conversations with the children, I asked Sabrina what part of volunteering she found most rewarding. ‘It’s their smiles’, she said, smiling herself, ‘it is so wonderful to see how happy they are with even just a little bit of attention’. Sabrina wanted to work here—helping truant children gain the social and academic skills to reintegrate into the national school system—in order to do ‘something good’ with children. She thought that volunteering would get her out of the rut of her 15-year career in finance. I asked her what she felt was her most significant contribution to the programme, and she looked baffled:

I don’t really know. I am not always sure that I matter. But I went on a trip in the middle of my time here. When I left, the children seemed disinterested, but I was so distraught to be leaving them. I felt a little comfort, because I was glad that I wasn’t hurting them by leaving. But when I came back, one boy seemed really happy to see me again, but then he got angry all of a sudden. ‘Where have you been this year?’ he accused me, even though I had only been gone for a month. So I felt like I had really affected him by coming and going, and that maybe this wasn’t
good. It’s good to feel like your work matters—that you matter to them—but bad to feel like its hurts the children for you to leave.

Sabrina mused that short-term volunteers are not healthy for the children because frequent staffing changes affect them. Nevertheless, she wondered, what if there were no one to staff and fund the programme, except tourists who can’t stay very long? Perhaps, it is better to use these volunteers than to have no one working at the programme. She continued:

So, I have mixed feelings about volunteering in general. [The children] are happy, and I am happy, so it feels right. The children were so relaxed when I left, but I was a wreck. My comfort and sadness came both from them not being affected by me leaving. But when I came back, I experienced this differently with the boy’s anger. You think that you help them, and on reflection, you really do help them, not just through financial benefits but through the attention you give them. But on the other hand, this work is selfish. I could have done something that affected me less, but this experience is good because it makes me feel like there are actually things in the world that will affect me, and that I can’t keep walled out from those things. I can’t fool myself here, it is impossible to pretend that I don’t care. I cried for five days when I was in Quito, away from the children for the first time.

I asked Sabrina about her expectations coming into her volunteering experience and she explained: ‘I was ready to try to make a difference to myself and to others. Everything at home feels unimportant in comparison to my work here…but I know once I get home I will become normalized to that life again’.

Sabrina’s words offer a poignant example of the intense emotional connection that volunteers often forge with the children in their placements. Although this programme was not my primary field site and I did not talk with the children there, Sabrina’s description indicates—at least from her perspective—that the children are also emotionally invested in their relationship with her. As we talked, Sabrina expressed her caring for the children in a physical way, by cuddling the little girl. Yet, even as
Sabrina basked in the children’s ‘smiles’ and ‘happiness’—tangible expressions of affection that made her feel as though caring was reciprocal—her comments expressed ambivalence about whether the ‘something good’ she desired to do by spending time with them was hurting them instead. Sabrina struggled with the need to feel like she mattered—not only that she was making a difference to the children, but also that they cared about her. She reported feeling relieved yet distressed when the boy demonstrated the depth of his feeling for her by reacting with anger to her absence.

However, Sabrina also shifts our conversation from her particular experiences to a critique of the economic nuances of volunteer tourism. As she measured the pros and cons of volunteers who stay for short periods of time versus no volunteers at all, Sabrina reflected on the role funding plays in volunteers’ relationships with the children and in the choices of programmes to accept volunteers—even if for only a short time—because their money is needed. She ended our discussion by wrestling with the ‘selfish’ aspects of volunteering vis-à-vis the ‘difference’ she makes not only to herself, but also ‘to others’.

Sabrina’s narrative illustrates both her connectedness to the children and her disillusion with volunteer tourism as a structure within which these relationships form. She is simultaneously concerned with her own experience (as tourist) and the children’s reactions to her presence (as aid recipients). Above all, she is apprehensive about how she perceives the programme’s economic viability as pitted against the children’s emotional well-being.

**Merged Motivations: Lingering Attachment and Necessary Support**

I spent many afternoons sitting on the steps of the centrally located after-school centre attended by Lucia. Sometimes children would gather around me to play Uno or do their homework, but I was often braving the cold Cusco stones in order to talk with 15 year-old Sandra and 10 year-old Mariana, siblings who have attended the centre since they were toddlers. They help their mother to sell a range of products from a tarp located
near the centre’s door, but they are also active participants in the project’s programming.

Despite having met countless volunteers, they have forged strong attachments to some of them. Sandra once told me about David, a former volunteer who is a soldier in the US army. For months after his departure, David sent her emails or they had brief phone conversations. He said that he was eager to come back but as the months passed his emails became less frequent. After months of no communication, Sandra found his phone number disconnected. Although her last interaction ended several years ago, she still worries about him and she wishes that she knew he was okay. Sandra’s mother told me a similar story about a volunteer who had worked at the centre three years ago, promising to come back within two years. The children acknowledged when the deadline passed, yet they still look at photos this volunteer gave them and wonder when she might return.

In contrast to Sabrina’s concession that ‘once I get home I will become normalized to that life again’, Sandra and her mother emphasise that children often want volunteers to keep reaching out to them, even after the volunteering experience is over. Volunteer tourism is a part of children’s everyday lives in a way that tourists do not experience once they leave, especially since tourists usually have definite beginnings and endings to their time abroad. Children remembered and spoke with me of past volunteers, outlining their own expectations and aspirations for continued friendship. Children and volunteers sometimes stay in contact via email, and occasionally volunteers revisit. However, it is more often the case that a volunteer tells the children that they will come back or be in touch, but do not follow through. Sandra and her peers narrate volunteers’ expressions of long-term interest as relationship commitments, explaining that a volunteer like David ‘promised to return’.

Children and mothers often attempt to codify longer-term relationships with volunteers using the kinship framework of *madrina / padrino* (godparent). In my last month of fieldwork, Sandra and Mariana’s mother asked me if I would serve as the
madrina for Mariana’s First Communion ceremony. Mariana explained that she already had a padrino for this occasion: a former volunteer from Scotland. He was there earlier in the year and had bought her a dress. He had left Cusco, telling Mariana that he would come back for the ceremony, but they hadn’t exchanged contact information. Mariana had been expecting him, but as her Communion was the following week, the family decided to ask me to step in to assume this honour and responsibility. Since we had developed rapport, I welcomed the opportunity to participate. Here, Mariana and her family manage their disillusion with the Scottish volunteer by making a different connection, with me. This connection was motivated by both economics—there were items that I, as madrina, was now expected to purchase—and by a desire to recognise a meaningful relationship with a foreigner.

In a sense, Sabrina’s anxieties about the negative effects of the volunteer industry were correct. She simultaneously challenges the dependency of children’s aid projects on tourist dollars and the psychological effects of brief yet intense emotional relationships between children and volunteers. Sabrina recognises that both affectivity and economy are important—‘you think that you help them, and […] you really do […], not just through financial benefits but through the attention you give’—and she wants to mediate the economic and emotional needs of children and the programmes that serve them, without having one focus negatively affect the other.

But for Mariana, economic and emotional needs cannot be separated. Mariana requires a godparent to serve ritualistic, financial, and affective functions. Mariana’s strategic replacement of her absent Scottish padrino shows that Sabrina’s preoccupation with the depth of relationships only goes so far. Yet Sandra’s concern for David indicates that it is not the short-term connection that makes volunteering morally messy for children’s well-being, but it is also the lingering hopes for connection that go unreciprocated.

Mariana and Sandra are not passively affected by volunteers coming and going, but are actively seeking ways to negotiate their relationships and expectations. In turn,
their mother welcomed my participation, and recognised me both as a conduit for vital monetary resources and as someone who had formed a friendship with her daughters. While volunteers in Cusco are predominantly female, and often narrate desire to help children through idioms of motherhood that are attached to their cultural conceptions of childhood (cf. Burman 2008:190), the children’s mothers never expressed feeling threatened by volunteers’ overtures of caring. In contrast, children and their mothers propose godparenting as a way to express their mutual affection for volunteers, even while they strategically reframe the nature of potentially short-term bonds into long-term—both economic and emotional—relationship investments. For locals, volunteer tourism is a moral economy that creates opportunities for reciprocal and continuing obligations of care.

Defining Investment: Conditions of Volunteer Participation and Aid

Relationship negotiations between children and tourists take place within the volunteer tourism industry, itself a space of intertwined yearnings and contradictions. Many variables affect the kinds of interactions tourists and children can have. I have already mentioned several: the length of time a volunteer stays, frequency of return visits, and keeping in touch. Often volunteering is only one piece of a tourist’s itinerary. Some tourists have the time and financial resources to commit to longer placements. While Sabrina worries about the effect of connections volunteers try to form within short time frames—and the examples of Sandra and Mariana demonstrate children’s eagerness for sustained contact—children do not always establish these kinds of relationships and not all children are eager for joint affection and attention. Sometimes children quickly adapt to new volunteers and perhaps as quickly forget tourists who do not linger.

The conditions at the project also play a role in what kinds of relationships can form, and how economic and emotional motives appear to clash. Some placements are highly regulated, with volunteers having little say over their responsibilities. Others have less structure, giving volunteers the opportunity to manage their own time, donations, and relationships. There is also economic disparity between projects, in terms of actual cash resources and support staff for volunteers. Children take on diverse leadership
roles, from helping to orient new volunteers to routines of centre life, to suggesting activities. The boys at one centre frequently had tourists accompany them to a near-by park and watch them play *futbol*.

I first encountered Suzanna one evening in February when I was the only volunteer at the after-school centre. I was struggling to simultaneously play chess and complete puzzles with three separate children. When Suzanna came in, activities were abruptly abandoned as the children greeted her enthusiastically with hugs and questions. I learned from a staff member that Suzanna had been a volunteer in December, but had left to go travelling. I did not get a chance to talk to Suzanna, as she handed out crackers, passed a big bag of food to the woman in charge, and departed. Suzanna returned a week later. She introduced herself as Swiss, asking if there were any other volunteers besides me. I said that there had been volunteers coming and going, and Suzanna said abruptly, ‘*Don’t they pay lots of money to work here? Why would they pay and then not come regularly? I paid thousands of dollars to be able to work here*’.

I learned more about Suzanna’s volunteering philosophy when we went out for tea. She had come to the project via a German tour operator who had set her up with a local Spanish school, and provided her with a list of programmes to choose from. In the end, her choices were limited to this particular centre because of lack of space in others. She ranted against the Spanish school that had placed her here, complaining about their lack of organisation and the volunteer coordinator Brie, who was ‘nice’ but ‘unhelpful’. Suzanna had raised money in Switzerland to repair a park for the children, but when Suzanna asked Brie to help with arrangements, Brie had explained that the school would have to go through the government with no guarantee that the money would be used for that purpose. Brie instead encouraged Suzanna to pay for the salary of the centre’s psychologist, who would leave at end of summer if no further donations were forthcoming. Feeling that her money could go to better use, Suzanna hired her own carpenter, effectively cutting Brie, the Spanish school, and any government intermediaries out of the loop.
I asked what Suzanna thought about the centre itself. She said that she enjoyed working there, and that the children ‘give you so much’. When I asked what it was the children were giving, Suzanna emphasised that they are so happy and have so much energy, even though they have nothing. She made a frantic noise and hand motion to indicate the hectic tempo of centre activities and children’s movements. She asked me about my work at the centre, concerned that I articulate the ‘things I wanted to change’. As I tried to explain my researcher role, she reassured herself of my intentions by nodding, and saying, ‘But you would change things, if you could’. Gesturing to the waiter for our bill, she left me with the clear impression that she felt Cusco’s volunteering context creates more obstacles than opportunities, as it puts certain conditions on a volunteer’s participation and aid.

Conflicting Visions of Need: Intermediaries and the Distribution of Economic Resources
Sabrina’s critique of encounters with volunteers as potentially emotionally damaging for children was not the most commonly cited concern. Other volunteers, like Suzanna, more often raised questions over the use of their economic resources. There is a common tone to the volunteers’ frustrations about how economic aid structures the volunteering milieu. For volunteers like Sabrina, it is problematic when financial gain is a driving force for placements. Some aid programmes (and Spanish schools who place volunteers) have attempted to mitigate this problem by designating set minimum time commitments. But as Sabrina points out, what is a project to do if there are only short-term volunteers around: say no to lingering money because of a concern for fleeting emotion? For others like Suzanna, there is dissatisfaction with the complicated and obscure pathways by which volunteering money reaches targeted children. Although resulting in a struggle over who gets to control the distribution of aid, this tension is also rooted in a contestation over how to satisfy tourists’ needs (as clients) while also meeting children’s and projects’ needs.
In her first conversation with me, Suzanna mentions the ‘thousands of dollars’ she paid for her placement and expresses bafflement about why other volunteers would pay for the opportunity to spend time with children and then not show up consistently. While Sabrina worries about how this unpredictability affects the children, Suzanna wonders about the motives of volunteers who attend irregularly. Suzanna’s preoccupation with the use of her volunteer fees is accentuated by her frustration with Brie’s suggestion to pay for a psychologist. Instead of viewing Brie as a local contact who might have a different perception of children’s needs, Suzanna is upset with Brie as an intermediary who is not supportive of her dreams to renovate a park. Suzanna roots Brie’s inability to help in the disorderly operation of the Spanish school, and in a complicated and unresponsive local bureaucratic climate.

Interestingly, I had observed that the children themselves seemed to prefer a new park to a psychologist; they eagerly helped Suzanna work on the park, but complained about attending the psychologist’s classes. However, neither Suzanna nor Brie brought up the children’s wishes, but instead narrated their conflict in terms of what Suzanna felt entitled to do with her own donation, and what Brie felt was necessary based on her discussions with the centre director. What is best for children appears to be decided by adults, based on assumptions about childhood poverty rooted in their own standards of development and economic well-being.

Suzanne wants the children to have a park—a place to play and be out of the streets—where children can express the only things they have: ‘happiness and energy’. While children are eager to have the park, they do not necessarily view the street as less of a play space. They capitalize on Suzanna’s conceptions of their ‘need’ for a park, yet they also challenge her perception of them as ‘poor children’ who shouldn’t be in the streets. For example, when they meet her while vending, they emphasise their multiple motivations for working, which include familial necessity, enjoyment, and education. As children are invested in relationships with tourists for both affective and economic reasons, they may share intimate details of their lives that counteract
stereotypes, while they simultaneously emphasize a stereotypical caricature of need—for a park or other forms of economic aid.

In my interviews with volunteer coordinators like Brie, they expressed how their own aspirations are often hampered by volunteers’ attitudes. Coordinators felt better positioned to understand global networks of travel and aid, local projects’ requirements, and volunteering as a social endeavour. They also expressed a heightened sense of moral responsibility to projects and children in addition to the volunteer tourists, their primary clients and source of income. Another coordinator, Amanda, explained to me her organisation’s efforts to operate as both business and charitable organisation. Many volunteers mistake coordinator or NGO bureaucracy as a consequence of volunteer tourism as business venture, rather than acknowledging that locally positioned adults might be necessary to mediate volunteers’ economic and affective relationships with children. Brie vigorously defends her own ethics and sense of best practice; she tries to assign volunteers to projects that can make best use of them; she monitors the use of volunteering fees to purchase materials; she maintains relationships with project staff who communicate their needs to her directly; she offers a volunteer orientation, providing activity ideas and preparing volunteers for potential difficulties, such as cultural nuances and likely mistranslations.

Suzanna is not alone in her disenchantment with the complicated pathways her money traversed. The most common complaints I heard from volunteers centred on the lack of transparency and accountability, overlaid with a surplus of bureaucracy and caginess, encountered in dealings with Spanish schools. While Suzanna was originally given her choice of placement, she actually had little control over where she ended up, as coordinators place volunteers in projects based on volunteers’ preferences, but also on the fit of their skills, language abilities, and duration of stay with the needs of the project. Other volunteers are frustrated by underfunded and understaffed projects that do not offer defined roles or give the volunteers roles they prefer. For volunteers like Suzanna, the volunteer tourism industry becomes morally suspect when intermediaries cannot simultaneously take into account the desires of their tourist clients, the profit-
driven motives of Spanish schools, and the economic needs of children’s assistance programmes.

Conclusion
Connection can be immediate or long-term, and while my brief examples may have seemingly rendered it as easy, it actually takes on-going translations, negotiations, and compromises. Like connection, disillusion occurs amongst all parties for many different reasons. Even as volunteers and children are seeking enriching relationships of mutual benefit, the structure of the tourism industry makes affectivity and economy seem at odds. Unmet expectations foster disappointments regardless of attempts to make encounters meaningful and valuable.

I theorise the volunteer tourism industry as a moral economy because all actors struggle with the moral implications of marketing ‘experiences with poor children’ as a commodity, to be bought and sold in Cusco’s tourist marketplace. Sometimes, volunteer coordinators try to circumvent this perception by focusing specifically on the experience and not the children themselves (see Sinervo and Hill, 2011:142). Yet this runs the counter dilemma of defocusing emphasis on the potential for deep interpersonal relationships between children and volunteers, and instead, taking us back to the business model of ‘making a difference’ through volunteering as practice. Volunteering is also laden with moral implications for children’s well being, as pointed out by Sabrina, and for volunteers’ sense of fairness, as demonstrated in Suzanna’s critique.

Moreover, children themselves play key roles in mediating what kinds of relationships they have with tourists. They are not just ‘victims’ of volunteer forgetfulness and eventual neglect, but they are also strategic about who they befriend. Often, children will compete with one another to become a new volunteer’s ‘favourite’, recognising that valuable social and economic resources are on the table. Children choose to invest themselves in long-term connections with volunteers: they initiate and try to maintain relationships. They are comfortable with the dual importance of both money and feeling, and claim that they cannot achieve one without the other. Finally,
children negotiate the stereotypes that adults—particularly volunteers—have of their needs for aid as ‘poor children’.

Affectivity and economy are not separate realms but are intertwined and mutually necessary to produce reciprocally beneficial relationships. Volunteers recognise this too, but are more likely to feel morally torn between necessities of economy and affectivity, which seem to be separate goals that should not be confused with each other, lest the genuineness of friendship be mistaken for the strategy of income. They are also apt to use their expectations about childhood and poverty to justify their own development interventions. On the other hand, volunteer coordinators recognise that these negotiations are also political, and that volunteer tourism, as an industry, has to keep its eye on both income and generative social change in order to be successful.

I do not want to leave the impression that the binary of tourist versus local is necessarily useful to understand the complexities of connection and disillusion. All actors feel both these emotive pulls, and are involved in on-going processes of defining just what it means to participate in a moral economy: What kind of connection is harmful and what kind is ‘good’? Where should money move and how? What responsibilities do volunteers and children have to each other after the formal volunteering encounter is over? Who should control what aid looks like? Is volunteering selfish? Should caring be reciprocal and how should that be demonstrated? Participants in Cusco’s volunteer tourism industry continue to struggle with such questions, and in working through the answers they change the face of children’s assistance, international volunteering, and tourism in Peru.

Notes

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i See also Huberman (2008) on tourists’ desires to use interactions with local children to enrich their travels.

ii See also Tronto (1993) on how care work is gendered.
References


Offit, T. A (2008), Conquistadores de la Calle: Child Street Labour in Guatemala City, Austin, TX: University of Texas.


