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VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES ON ORGANIC FARMS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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This article presents an exploration of the understudied phenomenon of volunteering on organic farms, a movement associated with World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Using a hermeneutic phenomenological lens influenced by philosophies of Hans George Gadamer, this article illuminates experiences of volunteers on organic farms in Argentina, experiences we denote as "organic volunteering." Our use of phenomenology provides an opportunity to develop deeper understandings of these lived experiences and what they mean to volunteers. Data collection and analysis of active interviews and participant observation with volunteers revealed a central understanding of opening to living in interconnectedness, which is underpinned by six horizons of understanding: 1) reconnecting, 2) exchanging knowledge, 3) experiencing harmony, 4) bonding with others, 5) consciousness raising, and 6) transforming. Our work suggests that while these experiences are likely similar to volunteer or even alternative tourism broadly defined, organic volunteering encompasses aspects that may extend beyond what has been put forward by volunteer tourism researchers, and is perhaps its own niche of alternative tourism.

Key words: Organic farms; Volunteerism; Alternative tourism; Hermeneutic phenomenology

Introduction

Alternative tourism emerged in response to negative impacts of unregulated mass tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2009). It is associated with tourism characterized by smaller scale and locally owned enterprises, host community participation, and development emphasizing an attempt to minimize negative environmental and sociocultural impacts (Brohman, 1996). This form of tourism also caters to some tourists' desire for alternatives to the homogenizing nature of conventional mass tourism (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Richards & Wilson, 2006) by offering experiences engendering authentic, interactive, and seemingly more meaningful travel opportunities (Taylor, 2001; Wearing, 2001). Richards and Wilson (2006) associated the need for these alternatives with tourists' increasing search for altruism, self-change, and confirmation of their identities. Thus, alternative

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tourism is seen by some researchers as providing an outlet for those searching for ethical and sustainable ways to take a holiday (Mowforth & Munt, 2009).

Volunteer tourism, a fast-growing niche within alternative tourism (Wearing, 2001), offers yet another way to redefine the holiday experience. McGehee and Santos (2005) defined volunteer tourism as "utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regulatory activity to assist those in need" (p. 760). A commonly cited definition of volunteer tourism has been put forward by Wearing (2001):

> Those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment. (p. 1)

Thus, volunteer tourism is portrayed as having potential to change the focus of tourism for tourists (Brown & Morrison, 2003; McGehee & Santos, 2005) and host communities (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Scheyvens, 2002).

Proponents of volunteer tourism describe its potential for fostering cross-cultural understanding, a sense of global citizenry, and a shift towards more responsible forms of tourism (Raymond & Hall, 2008). For McGehee (2002), experiences such as volunteering with Earthwatch can influence a tourist's activism at home. Experiences described in McGehee's study reflect how volunteer expeditions may facilitate resource mobilization and networking, which may lead to increased desire to participate in future social-movement activities (cf. Lepp, 2008; McGehee & Santos, 2005). Despite the growing interest and scholarly attention, volunteer tourism involving organic farms remains relatively understudied. Using Gadamer's (2004) understandings of hermeneutic phenomenology as a guiding theoretical lens, and situated within an interpretivist paradigm, this article reports on research exploring tourism experiences of what we denote as "organic volunteering" on organic farms in Argentina.

The WWOOF Organization

In 1971, World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) was established in the UK. Originally created under the name Working Weekends on Organic Farms, it started "when Sue Coppard, a secretary living and working in London, recognised the need for people like herself, who did not have the means or the opportunity, to access the countryside and support the organic movement" (http://www.wwoof.net/). Maycock (2008) suggests that the inception of WWOOF came at a moment when "back to the land" became a rallying cry for many urban professionals. WWOOF linked individuals interested in organic agriculture to farms themselves. Over the last several decades, WWOOF has grown from a weekend escape to an international movement that provides people with the ability to "travel, volunteer, and share more sustainable ways of living" (http://www.wwoof.net/).

There is no international governing body for WWOOF; instead, each country and region has its own clearing house (e.g., WWOOFHawaii), which connects volunteers, known as WWOOFers, with farm owners looking for help, known as WWOOF hosts. Created as a low-budget network, WWOOFers pay a small fee to the national/regional WWOOF organization they may be interested in, and in turn receive a catalogue of farms. WWOOFers then contact hosts directly to organize their travel. WWOOF can be defined as an exchange where volunteers work and farm for the hosts and in return receive food, accommodation, and opportunities to learn about organic lifestyles (http://www.wwoof.net).

While research on WWOOF might logically be situated within the farm stay and agrotourism literature, researchers suggest it differs from traditional agricultural experiences, and is a neglected area of research (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; McIntosh & Campbell, 2001). McIntosh and Campbell (2001) indicate differences from other traditional farm tourism hosts due to an environmental ethic and a sharing of organic practices. Similarly, McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) assess WWOOFing experiences in rural New Zealand, arguing these experiences are notably different from commercial farm stays. Choo and Jamal's (2009) research examines tourism on organic farms in Korea and employs ecotourism principles to evaluate farm practices and to develop the concept of eco-organic farm tourism. They draw attention to the integral role of care and stewardship of the biophysical world in the farm tourism ethos. Importantly, consideration of

the ethos of volunteering on organic farms echoes research on volunteer tourism as farm experiences may generate an awareness, which inspires future activism (Lepp, 2008; McGehee & Santos, 2005). Furthermore, the relationship between volunteer tourism and WWOOF is considered by Ord (2010), who points to an understanding of WWOOF as a unique form of volunteer farm tourism. Indeed, many gaps remain in our understanding of volunteering on organic farms, including how volunteers view these experiences and how they fit within the broader context of volunteer and alternative tourism. To help address this gap, we adopted a phenomenological approach to illuminate in-depth accounts of volunteers' experiences and the meanings they assign to such experiences.

A Phenomenological Approach

An ontological shift from an objective Cartesian view of reality, phenomenology is rooted in beliefs that the world and human existence constitutes conscious experience from a subjective being (Moran, 2000). Early phenomenological thinkers such as Heidegger (1996), Gadamer (2004), Husserl (1970), and Merleau-Ponty (1962) prioritized descriptions of the *life-word*, and recognized that understandings of life happen only through direct encounters and engagements with the world. Thus, the epistemological task of a phenomenological researcher is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of experiences, firmly grounded in the subjective meanings held by the social actors involved (Santos & Yan, 2010). Phenomenologists seek "essences" or structures of experiences through careful description of conscious experiences of everyday life (Schwandt, 2007). Their research concerns itself with: "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (Szyarycz, 2008). Few would disagree that experience is central to the phenomenon of tourism; therefore, phenomenology is well suited to explore volunteering on organic farms.

As phenomenology presents opportunities to delve more deeply into understandings and meanings of experiences it is gaining momentum as a methodological approach within tourism scholarship (cf. Caton & Santos, 2007; Cohen, 1979). However, there is a variety of phenomenological approaches in tourism scholarship, ranging from positivistic and descriptive (cf. Curtin, 2006; Ingram, 2002) to those drawing on hermeneutic philosophies (cf. Ablett & Dyer, 2009; Pons, 2003). Situated in an interpretivist paradigm, our research framework is informed by philosophical understandings of hermeneutic phenomenology, specifically building from Gadamer's (2004) concepts of historicity or preunderstandings, *Bildung*, and fusion of horizons. The role of these philosophies is outlined below.

Gadamer's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutics or "how one interprets the 'texts' of life" (van Manen, 1997, p. 4) contributes to understanding social experiences by analyzing their meanings to participants and their cultures (Wills, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007). According to Heidegger (1996), human existence or *Da-sien* (being or being there) is based on interpretation and understanding. That is, experience is formed through interpretation of the world and these interpretations are ultimately governed by the concrete situation of the interpreter. Many of Gadamer's (2004) foundational teachings build on Heidegger's notion of *Da-sien* and revolve around the ontological notion of "historicity," the concept of preunderstandings. For Gadamer, consciousness is grounded in our history (our prejudices and preunderstandings) and he argued that we cannot step out of this history (i.e., bracket our prejudices) as early phenomenological thinkers such as Husserl (1970) suggested. Rather, our understanding is determined by the fusion of our present horizon (e.g., what is taking place) with the prejudices of our historical horizon (Gadamer, 2004). Prejudices in this context should not be thought of as false judgments, but conditions of truth, expectations, or projections about the whole that are continually revised as more parts of the picture or story come into view. Pernecky and Jamal (2010) engaged Gadamer's ideas of historicity, suggesting that:

> What in a touristic situation may be for [person] X an encounter with "strangeness," can be meaningfully interpreted by [person] Y due to her socio-cultural-historical background. Here "strangeness" cannot be the essence of that experience, but rather something that "travels" with the interpreting individual. (p. 1063)

Gadamer's (2004) concept of historicity was pertinent to our exploration of volunteers' lived experiences

and contributed to entering into the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle refers to the interpretive process, or circle of understanding in which one looks to the whole (e.g., the entire phenomenon) then to the parts (e.g., individual participants' understandings and interpretations), and back to the whole again. This is a continuous and cyclical process whereby early projections and understandings of the experience are replaced with present, evolving understandings (Gadamer, 2004). We engaged this concept from our researcher positions. Prior to data collection, we reviewed relevant literature and reflected on the research topic by identifying our own understandings and interpretations of volunteering on organic farms. In addition to acknowledging our "prejudices" associated with organizations such as WWOOF, we considered our historicities by asking ourselves questions directed at past thoughts, experiences, and beliefs such as: What did it mean to grow up in a rural/urban area? How have I experienced volunteering roles in the past?

Keeping our researcher preunderstandings in mind, Maggie, the first author, traveled to a small farm community just east of the Andes in Argentina to participate, observe, and conduct interviews with volunteers. Maggie was both a researcher and volunteer, collecting data between mid-October and late November 2011. The community was selected from the WWOOF Argentina catalogue, which listed over 124 farms (http://www.wwoofargentina.com/). Argentina is one of five countries in South America that participate in providing organic farms online promotion through WWOOF websites (http://www.wwoof.net/). Selection criteria included: bilingual hosts, a number of volunteers on site at one time, available space for Maggie to participate and stay, and an interest in being part of the study.

Once on the farm, Maggie engaged with volunteers through active interviews (averaging about 70 minutes) to better understand what it meant to be a volunteer on these organic farms. Interviewing nine volunteers, open-ended interview questions such as, "Who were you/who are you? How does that contribute to what brought you to being here today?" were asked with intentions of exploring participants' historicity and how it may inform meanings they assigned to their experiences. Due to the informal and conversational interview style cues such as, "What is it like to be a volunteer so far? Can you describe a typical day as an organic volunteer?" were only used when necessary to initiate conversation. Further, participant observation was used to understand the daily life and encounters of volunteers by being involved in direct farm experiences (e.g., Maggie was in the garden, cooking, etc.). Maggie documented and reflected on these observations, encounters, and interviews in a reflexive journal.

Once the data were collected, interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed. Though this process was often intuitive, phases within our analysis mirrored components from other phenomenological analysis processes (cf. Flemming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2002; Wertz, 2011). Informed by Gadamer's (2004) philosophies we engaged in six cyclical phases including: (1) revisiting preunderstandings, (2) immersion into transcripts, (3) creating preliminary understandings, (4) opening to new understandings, (5) fusing of horizons, and (6) illuminating findings. Keeping to the hermeneutic circle, transcripts were read and reread, memos and reflective notes were written, and all data were returned to repeatedly. Throughout this process continuous efforts were made to remain open to the data, to see each transcript as it stood on its own prior to trying to assign meaning to the whole phenomenon.

Throughout the analysis and data collection processes it was essential to remain open to what volunteers conveyed about their experiences. This openness is expressed by Gadamer (2004) as *Bildung*. *Bildung* is keeping oneself open to other universal points of view. For example, we began with an assumption of familiarity and proceeded to listen to volunteers (both during interviews and data analysis) with openness to the unexpected. We remained open to revising our own understandings because we acknowledged that these understandings are ever changing (Gadamer, 2004). To facilitate this openness while in the field, reflexive journaling was used. Memo writing techniques (cf. Wertz, 2011) were used throughout analysis and interpretation processes, consciously noting how our researcher's preunderstandings might be affecting our interpretations of what the volunteers were conveying about these experiences.

By attempting to remain open in these ways, it was possible to explore the volunteers' "horizons" (both past and present) and then situate them in relation

to our own researcher horizons (Gadamer, 2004). Horizons refer to the preunderstandings, meanings, and interpretations of the lived experiences of volunteering on organic farms. As we moved towards the fusing of horizons phase, we again considered volunteers' historical and present horizons, while also recognizing our own horizons. Gadamer refers to the act of considering both the participants' and researchers' horizons as the "fusion of horizons." We compared volunteer interpretations and understandings with our emerging researcher understandings about organic volunteering, while acknowledging the preunderstandings that may have informed each and all of these horizons. From this fusion phase, an essential understanding and six underlying horizons manifested. These horizons are represented in the findings section through direct quotations from volunteers. Yet, we remain aware that this conscious act of fusing horizons creates a historical consciousness, which moves and continues to expand. As Gadamer (2004) argues:

> The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. (p. 304)

This approach, however, was not without limitations. First, the concept of an essential understanding (or essence) of experience can imply a universal "truth." Thus, we deliberately chose to align more with Gadamer's (2004) philosophies, rather than other phenomenologists such as Husserl (1970) or Giorgi (1970), because Gadamer's concepts of historicity and preunderstandings reflect our interpretivist worldview, and allow us to stay attuned to multiple subjectivities and ever-expanding horizons. Second, phenomenology involves more time and deeper engagement with participants than other approaches. As such, time in the field permitted an in-depth exploration of the volunteers' experiences, but left the hosts' experiences less well understood. While many volunteers spoke at length about the hosts (and the hosts were observed and engaged in conversation during the research), the analysis concentrated on the volunteers. We believe that a look at the hosts' experiences would offer very different, yet valuable, insights. We confront these limitations below and highlight opportunities for additional research.

Findings: Horizons of Organic Volunteering

The research process generated an essential understanding of volunteering on organic farms as experiences involving participants to opening to living in interconnectedness. Volunteers did not always articulate interconnectedness in the same way but the notion was ever present. Opening to living in interconnectedness is made manifest by the interplay of the following six horizons, which together tell us much about the phenomenon "organic volunteering":

- Reconnecting: Experiencing what was and what could be.
- Exchanging knowledge: Experiencing learning, teaching, and sharing.
- Experiencing harmony: Being in touch with nature.
- Building bonds: Experiencing human connections.
- Consciousness-raising experiences: Creating awareness for future activism.
- Transforming: Experiencing growth.

The underlying horizons were parts of the whole interconnected experience of organic volunteering and each is described below. However, because volunteers' prejudices and preunderstandings informed their understandings, we first introduce each participant, albeit in a rather limited way.

- **Nico** is an avid organic farm volunteer and regular traveler from Washington, US. He grew up on an organic dairy farm and enjoyed waking up in the morning to milk cows and share his products with his community. He does not recall exactly how many farms he's worked on.
- **Xavier** grew up in a village in the West of France. Though his father had a large garden at their family home, Xavier had no interest in gardening or farming as a child. Argentina is the second country where he has volunteered.
- **Hope** is from Buenos Aries and has volunteered on a few other Argentinian farms. She recalls taking

frequent trips to the woods with her family while growing up. Her grandmother constantly reminded her to appreciate the birds and little bugs in these natural environments.

- **Dylan** is from the rural surroundings of Brisbane, Australia. He grew up on a hectare of land alongside a river. His feeling of connection with nature is a large contributor to his search for land to live on. This search is a main reason for volunteering on farms throughout South America.
- **Jade** is an agricultural student who had never volunteered on an organic farm before. Residing a mere kilometer from the farm community, Jade decided to move out of her family home and into a tent on the neighboring farm property.
- **Sadie** is from Eastern Australia and describes a love for the countryside and gardening. Unaware of these loves, much of Sadie's childhood meals consisted of ready-made microwavable dinners, as she had limited exposure to the taste of fresh vegetables and farm produce. This is her first organic farm experience.
- **Clayton** is from Michigan, US, and recently graduated with a degree in sitar from a small Buddhist-run university. He grew up as a competitive athlete and claimed he was not always aware of conscious living. Clayton started volunteering on organic farms a few years ago after a hike in the Appalachian Mountains.
- **Layna** is from Minnesota, US, and believes the experiences on these farms are a continuance of who she already is. Growing up in an active family, the outdoors and principles of living in harmony with nature were instilled at a young age. She's worked with other organizations to learn organic and indigenous farming practices.
- **Avery** grew up in rural Australia and is a chef at a vegetarian restaurant. He also has a music career. On the farm, Avery was reminded of a book called *Ishmael*, and the importance of "leaving," rather than "taking," a philosophy he believes is underlining these experiences. This is his first time volunteering on a farm.

Reconnecting: Experiencing What Was and What Could Be

Volunteering involved connecting to how life can be lived. The study site was in the countryside with no access to a car and volunteers and hosts largely relied on what was around and what they could construct from the natural environment. Wood-burning stoves and water from a trench were deliberate conscious ways to save energy and resources, while fresh produce, the majority grown at the farm or locally, served as the major food source. Xavier suggested living on organic farms is an experience in which

> people have really different lifestyles . . . it's always kind of the same frame of mind for people. Trying to be self-sufficient, trying to give back a little more to nature and escape a little bit the craziness of the cities.

Xavier argued life on these farms can be considered more organic, conscious, and "low impact." The farms were different from, alternative to, and more organic than where some volunteers come from. Similarly, Layna realized people she encountered desired an escape from the city. Layna described meeting a young Argentinian mother who specifically moved with her daughter from the "craziness of the city [Buenos Aires]" to the farm. Layna asked this mother why she moved; the mother claimed this is "a more healthy and alternative way of living." Layna shared how this reflected her own dreams of using organic volunteering to connect with people and learn more about organic, natural, and indigenous practices.

These volunteering experiences were not just reflections on how life can be lived. For some volunteers, organic volunteering mirrored previous experiences and better times in their lives; in particular, times when they connected with nature. For example, Sadie's experience stimulated memories of growing up in Brisbane:

> Even just watching the kids, I remember when we first arrived here . . . they were covered in dirt . . . they were running around and their hair was all matted up and I just went, "holy shit these kids are wild." But the more I watched them, they were probably exactly the same as I was when I was a kid, but you just don't see kids like that anymore because people don't play outside and kids don't want to be kids . . . and it's so important, it's so simple, they're just playing in dirt with bits of bark that are cars.

Watching the carefree children interact with the natural surroundings encouraged Sadie's reflections

on her own childhood and the youth at home. She identified with the children on the organic farm; however, she also became aware of the growing disconnection between youth and nature.

Dylan shared reaching a new appreciation of his past, brought about by his experiences on the farm. Unenthusiastic about the laborious farming lifestyle he was born into, Dylan left his parent's farm for a finance job in Brisbane. As time elapsed, Dylan's childhood experiences and the growing frustration with the corporate world eventually led him to reconnect with his past:

> After working in a corporate environment for a period of time and recognizing that this kind of really materialistic approach to living is not intrinsically satisfying . . . fundamentally there's no food for your soul. I think in some ways that has kind of led me back to here . . . and that initial experience helped me appreciate this lifestyle. Not in a conscious way but in terms of later as I moved from there [parents' farm] and moved to the city and started university and did my business and finance degree and started working in those fields and then realized it's a bucket of shit really.

Exchanging Knowledge: Experiencing Learning, Teaching, and Sharing

Volunteers indicated these farms provided an opportunity for educational exchange, allowing volunteers to learn from the land, the hosts, and other volunteers. Layna considered her experience as going back to school. She stated "My parents want me to go back to school and I'm like 'this is my school,'" and yet the farm experience embodied educational opportunities much different from what is offered in the four walls of an institution. The garden and fields of the farm became the classrooms, places to learn and share. Nico's comments reflect this idea:

> Spending time with Jose at the garden was like a constant flow of knowledge into my head and the crazy thing was that he didn't speak English that well, so it was all in Spanish. So not only did I learn about growing food, I also learned a ton of Spanish, which is very important.

Through engagement with farm hosts, volunteers willingly learned things such as new planting techniques or the benefits of humidor as a natural fertilizer. Volunteers also suggested that hosts are not the only teachers, rather other volunteers offered insights. As Jade stated, "I think it's a path I'm walking together with Melody [farm host]." This idea was also reflected by Dylan, as he had previously learned techniques from other farms that he perceived to be beneficial to projects on Melody's farm. However, he noted making suggestions to a host required an openness and close connection. This openness was apparent when Dylan made his recommendations to Melody:

> I probably have those conversations more with her [Melody] because I know she's not going to take it personally . . . we had a chat about the grapes this morning when I was stringing up things. I'm like "um, I think these wires need to be much higher," and she was like "if that's what we need to be doing then go for it."

While both hosts and volunteers can become the teacher and the student, volunteers suggested this exchange depends on each person, how they are feeling, and whether they possess the willingness and openness to learn from one another. As Clayton shared: "You could have the best teacher in the world and if the student is not ready to learn, they're not going to learn. It's up to the student."

Experiencing Harmony: Being in Touch With Nature

Volunteers described being on these farms as a harmonious experience, which helped them better understand their connections with nature. Though Hope's connection started young, she believed in the importance of ongoing harmony and places like these organic farms. She said,

> It gives you food and you can build yourself a place to stay and you can enjoy. You can feel a lot of beautiful things in places like this. Within the water, everything, with the plants, you are more open to feel this.

And yet, as someone from Buenos Aries, a city of several million people, Hope is fearful this harmony is lost in large cities:

> We live like the blind because nature is in our food, in the places that we can live, the structures and the houses and in health remedies, it's everywhere,

> but you don't have to kill yourself working to get that because if you live in a place where nature is, nature will give you all, so you live with nothing, but you live with so much.

These ideas resonated throughout the interviews. Organic volunteering allowed for learning about the natural environment and recognizing interconnectedness. For example, Sadie learned from a senior volunteer about new ways to incorporate harmonious organic practices into her activities:

> [A senior volunteer] was washing up and I sort of just walked over and sussed it out and he's got a few buckets there and a tray of ashes and that's what he's using to wash up. And I sort of like "oh so like no detergents here?" So, I was thinking a natural detergent, of course, less harmful. "Um, no I prefer to use ash because it doesn't hurt the earth." I was like awesome, cool I'm happy to do that.

Sadie was from Brisbane, and was never exposed to gardening and alternative practices growing up yet her openness to harmonizing with nature was evident.

Volunteers also described how their awareness of their relationships with nature perpetuated desires to continue learning how to connect with the natural environment. Layna described this as "learning how to be less dependent on processed everything, city life, and more working harmony with nature." Nico learned so much about his own connection with nature and food that he recommends organic volunteering to others:

> If you want to change your life and you want to see where your food comes from come here . . . you know people go to the super market everyday and they buy some meat and they buy some vegetables and those vegetables could be from you know 3,000 miles away. So to see your food growing out of the ground and to see your cow smiling eating grass . . . it's super important and nobody even gets that.

Building Bonds: Experiencing Human Connection

Volunteers developed deep bonds with hosts and other volunteers. Life on the farm felt interconnected; the people in the farm community cared for one another. Avery described relationships with volunteers and hosts as "refreshing" when juxtaposed to the "self-serving" atmosphere he experienced in the music industry in Australia. Avery recalled, "Just taking, no helping. There's not, let's help each other out. It's just oh, you've got that, can I have that?" Avery's volunteering experience provided perspective on human connections and he was amazed to see wholesome bonds being created:

> It's refreshing to see people just trying to be happy . . . just trying to be nice to each other, trying to be decent human beings . . . it's sorta like wow, people are just, they're genuinely trying to be helpful and nice to each other.

Clayton recognized the capacity to create deep bonds while volunteering. However, he also expressed concerns about life outside the farm:

> You know, it's like if they [people on the farm] get sick, you're taking care of them. Like so, it's very connected. Which is who we are as human beings and that's why it's very unnatural the world that we've inherited right now, the society the way that it is, it's very unnatural. Human beings are very separated from one another.

Furthermore, volunteers expressed a bond with others who share the same conscious values. Bonds are created while on the farm and despite the separation at the end of the farm stay, volunteers noted bonds remain. Having previously volunteered at three organic farms, Hope spoke about her experience as a whole. She argued the encounters and interactions on farms not only provided opportunities to bond, but also facilitated deep and lasting connections. She stated, "It's like building up a web of people that exchange information because they are in the same vibe. So, it's beautiful."

Consciousness-Raising Experiences: Creating Awareness for Future Activism

Time on the farms engendered consciousness-raising experiences, generally through stimulating and even contentious discussions, but also by having access to thought-provoking literature. Volunteers described becoming more aware of the world they live in and a heightened awareness of the complex nature of societal, community, and global issues. Clayton believed he and other volunteers were on these farms because they were "waking up":

> This is exactly what needs to happen . . . I am speaking to this way of living . . . I feel in one way or another the world as a whole and the culture we both come from will not be able to continue the way that they are living and I feel that whoever does not harness an awareness of how to live outside of that paradigm is doomed.

Similarly, Dylan was convinced humankind must "wake up," claiming the way the majority of the world's population lives is destroying their souls, and capitalistic modality and global issues such as consumerism and resource consumption are not being addressed. Nico described how time on the farms generated thought-provoking conversation. Discussion about world issues inspired new understandings for volunteers, which at times triggered debates concerning responsibility for creating change. Nico insisted the onus is on the socially, environmentally, and politically conscious people, such as himself, organic farm hosts, and other volunteers:

> We talk a lot about corruption of the world government. We talk a lot about corruption in agriculture as well. Monsanto seeds taking over, genetically modified foods, the obesity epidemic of the US, you know? People are so oblivious to the damage we are doing to the earth and no one is doing anything to fix it. So it's up to those conscious people to do things like this to make the change, to make the shift.

These new understandings fostered a desire to become involved with activism in the future, generally in terms of spreading this awareness. Jade began to think about implementing her own projects to help teach children and families how to grow their own food. She noted,

> The conscious farming and these organic farms, they have this goal to show an alternative way of life, and I'm now looking into communicating this way of life and these places for people to know there is another way.

Avery shared a concern about youth and their awareness of the origins of food, perceiving a disconnection between youth and nature, and generating thoughts about solutions for this societal dilemma. Like Jade, Avery wanted to start gardening programs for children upon returning home, as he believed it was his responsibility to inspire people:

> You can only do your little bit, that's all you can do, and sometimes that becomes big and sometimes it doesn't. You just got to find that bit of inspiration in people and tease it out of them.

Transforming: Experiencing Growth

Organic volunteering was experienced as a kind of transformation or growth, which happened over time. Volunteers described not knowing what to expect when they first arrived, and not being completely open to the experience right away. However, exposure to new experiences shifted their perspectives and many described a sense of transformation. Nico recalled he began volunteering 5 years ago because he was a traveler just trying to save money. Acknowledging his past decision, he qualified it as a starting point, and mentioned it did not take long to realize that life on these farms is "more than just a place to drop your bags." Just as Nico was transformed from his first organic volunteering experience, he began to notice the growth among other volunteers he met:

> I watched them transform. They came here from their party circuit in South America and then maybe from speaking with me or speaking with the owner of the farm or other people in the community, have developed a love and a huge interest in this life style and the change it can bring to the planet.

Volunteers recognized personal growth and transformation took time and yet remained convinced that everyone has the potential for this transformation. Xavier explained, he believes change we want to see is already within us:

> If you kind of want to try to have a change of life and you've been living in cities for a long time and you want to try then come and try. As soon as you think about coming and trying, I think you've already made the first big step to organic volunteering anyways.

By taking a step to volunteer, participants described the development of new perspectives, a growing awareness, and a sense of self-discovery. For Jade, volunteering allowed her to examine critically her involvement in other jobs and projects outside of the organic farms. She was then able to assess what was important to her, building her

confidence and skill sets. Jade claimed, "I feel like working together with all the people in a team [on this farm], I am now comfortable and will take other options or positions in my life because of this." This personal growth empowered her to transform.

Organic Volunteering as Opening to Living in Interconnectedness

> This contributes to other people, my work if it contributes to keep having places like this then other people can come because, the tomatoes I've planted I won't see them grow, but other people will see them grow. (Hope)

Volunteering on the organic farm in Argentina, or perhaps "organic volunteering" more generally, is comprised of a complex set of experiences. Nonetheless, there is a central essence: opening to living in interconnectedness. Organic volunteering as experiences of interconnectedness is rooted in the fusion of volunteers' horizons of reconnecting, exchanging knowledge, experiencing harmony, bonding with others, consciousness raising, and transforming. Further, the essential understanding of opening to living in interconnectedness hints at an important distinction between organic volunteering and other examples of volunteer tourism. In this section, we consider how the six underlying horizons contribute to the notions of openness and interconnectedness.

As we analyzed volunteers' accounts it became apparent that the notion of interconnectedness was ever present. This analysis was based on our perception that interconnectedness entails a state of connection that implies ongoing interrelatedness and an idea of oneness. In our research, each of the six horizons affected each other and if one were to be removed the meanings of the others would be altered. Like Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutic circle, all elements—understandings, things, beings, and phenomena—are affected by a shift or change to one or more of these elements.

The notion of interconnectedness with nature is explored in the literature on tourism and organic farming. Researchers have outlined participant experiences including learning about organic agriculture, sustainable practices, and local ecosystems (Choo & Jamal, 2009; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). Furthermore, Choo and Jamal's (2009) findings exposed the importance of human–environmental relationships within the everyday lives of Korean organic farmers. This awareness of harmony through human–environmental relationships was a strong theme in our research and supports the idea of interconnectedness that gives shape to experiences of organic volunteering. Recall the example of Sadie, who learned to use ashes to wash dishes and to prevent water resource contamination from chemical-based soaps.

Moreover, our research supports and expands the findings of broader inquiries into alternative and volunteer tourism experiences. This project foregrounds the idea that consciousness raising is formed by the experiences of reconnecting, exchanging, bonding, and transforming, which allowed volunteers to recognize their interconnectedness to one another, the hosts, and the natural environment. These experiences fostered awareness about economic, social, and political issues and inspired desires to affect change. Thus, support for interconnected living may flow from the volunteer to those back home, as they use their new awareness to inspire others. For instance, Avery's experience left him feeling compelled to return to Australia to start educational organic food projects for youth.

Volunteers also experienced living in interconnectedness on the farms through human connections. Interactions between volunteers and also with hosts sometimes generated strong relationships and lasting friendships, like the ones illuminated by Dylan's bond with the host and Hope's idea of creating a "web" with other volunteers. Our analysis indicates interconnected bonds seemed possible when shared values, or in Hope's words the "same vibe," existed. McGehee and Santos (2005) put forward similar ideas, as they highlighted the importance of like-mindedness in facilitating volunteer relationships. However, it seemed interconnectedness within organic farm experiences was illuminated when openness was harnessed. For example, Dylan offered planting advice to the "open" and receptive farm host, which contributed to experiences of exchanging knowledge. Our work on organic volunteering unlocks the potential to consider the role of openness as part of the experience of being interconnected and leads us to consider whether shared values or like-mindedness can be built or enhanced when openness is present. With

these ideas in mind we ask: Does this "openness" or "like-mindedness" exist prior to, during, or after the volunteers become involved in such experiences? Of course, the ability to be open to these exchanges and bonds is likely shaped by a multitude of factors (e.g., language culture, authority, gender) and future explorations need to take these into account.

Conclusion

Our work supports much of what we are already learning about volunteer tourism experiences. However, the emergence of the notion of opening to living in interconnectedness, a key essence of the organic volunteering experience, demonstrates the need for future research. This research could be undertaken at WWOOF sites but should also continue to include non-WWOOF organic farming experiences (e.g., volunteering with HelpX or similar organizations).

Additionally, the limitations of our work highlight additional avenues for research. One implication of our methodological choice (i.e., to explore the phenomenon of the volunteers' experiences) and the scope of this project (i.e., one Argentinian farm community) is that our research risks portraying experiences of organic volunteering in an entirely positive and romanticized light. Further research is needed to investigate hosts' perspectives as well as additional sites to gain a more holistic view of these experiences and to better assess the power dimensions underlying these interactions. For example, volunteer tourism organizations have been criticized for privileging volunteers' interests over those of the host communities and reinforcing power inequities (cf. Guttentag, 2009; Sin, 2010). Nonetheless, because our work underlines the importance of the notion of interconnectedness, it is clear that hosts, volunteers, and the natural environment are perceived to be respected and vital players. This presents an opportunity to consider whether the experience of organic volunteering holds the seeds to address concerns regarding social, economic, environmental, and political implications of volunteer tourism development more generally.

The intent of this project was to contribute to the alternative and volunteer tourism literature through a phenomenological exploration of volunteers' experiences of volunteering on organic farms in Argentina. The use of hermeneutic phenomenology provided a valuable opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity and the meanings of volunteering in this case. For example, the focus on volunteers' historicity and preunderstandings aided the identification of the underlying horizons, which shaped the organic volunteering experiences.

We now understand that volunteers' lived experiences of organic volunteering extend beyond undertaking "holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society" (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Rather, organic volunteering as experiences of opening to living in interconnectedness are illuminated through and supported by horizons of reconnecting, exchanging knowledge, experiencing harmony, bonding with others, consciousness raising, and transforming, and these elements may indeed make it unique within the broader array of volunteer or alternative tourism offerings. The inclusion of these perspectives encourages us to continue to evaluate the potential of organic volunteering as an alternative tourist experience, which may engender transformative ethos and social transformation.

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