Dropping Out or Signing Up? The Professionalisation of Youth Travel

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Leaving school and dropping out of employment or further education was once an act of rebellion by cohorts of young people expressing anti-establishment sentiments. Now it has become a neoliberal market place in the UK. Over the last five years the "gap year" has changed from a radical activity, dominated by charities and inspired by the travel of the hippie generation, to an institutionally accepted commercial gap year industry which helps form new citizens for a global age. This transformation has seen the dramatic growth in commercial gap year companies and in the numbers of young people in the UK taking gap years. Such growth, taking place under an increasingly engaged public gaze, has led to the professionalisation of the sector and to profound changes in its underlying values. Drawing on a range of empirical sources, I examine how the transformation of the gap year through the neoliberal market place has involved the application of corporate values and rhetoric to youth travel. Becoming "professional" has entailed a shift from collective idealism to the infinitely more saleable values of individual career development. While professional values give legitimacy to the gap year industry, its professional gaze is also proving to be relatively myopic—it has yet to be turned on the volunteer development projects through which many companies in the industry make their names, and money.

Introduction

The rise of the gap year has cemented the cult and commercial status of travel for much of Britain's youth and brought youth travel to the attention of the state, educationalists, employers and the tourist industry alike. Such attention has resulted in a revolution in the values associated with youth travel, producing an increasingly corporate focus and professional, self-governing, careerist persona for participants. Here, I argue that the rise of the gap year has professionalised and formalised practices of youth travel, bringing them into contact with neoliberal understandings of education and citizenship, where emphasis is placed on young people's acquisition of global knowledge as governable subjects with market potential.

An estimated 200,000 British people aged 18–25 annually take a gap year.[1] Gap years can involve any manner of activities, though typically they include periods of work, either paid or voluntary, and often some form of travel. The practice of the gap year has expanded considerably in the last ten years, with a corresponding rise in its public and institutional profile. It is no longer a sub-set of the tourist

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industry pursued by a disparate minority of young people. Rather, it has opened up to mass participation, and popular scrutiny. As a result, pressure has been exerted by actors both within and outside the industry to professionalise gap year activities and practices.

Traditionally a gap year represented a break from formal education or employment in order to find time to engage in "extra-ordinary" experiences. However, as I shall argue, gap years are now becoming increasingly incorporated into formal educational and employment structures and institutions. While young people have often been sidelined in neoliberal literatures and critiques, the economic realisation of the gap year is occurring in a context where neoliberal values are increasingly being applied to young people's travel, leisure and educational practices. I argue that while young people are being encouraged to "broaden their horizons" and become better citizens through participating in gap years, this occurs in the context of neoliberal forms of self-regulatory citizenship (Dean 1999). The types of citizenship encouraged through the gap year give primacy to the ability of the individual to compete in social and employment market places.

I concentrate on structured gap year programmes that offer volunteer-tourism activities specifically based in the Third World. While such programmes represent only a part of the gap year market, accounting for an estimated 10,000 participants a year, they are highly visible to the public and play an important role in shaping popular understanding of youth travel. For example, in the year 2000 Prince William took a gap year and received front-page newspaper coverage (for example, see Hardman 2000; Jobson 2000; Kerr 2000). Although his 12-month "gap" included time in Europe, it was his period in Chile with Raleigh International that attracted media and public attention (for example, see Jobson 2000; Kerr 2000; Vidal 2000; Wilson 2002). Gap year programmes such as those of Raleigh International offer participants the opportunity to visit and encounter geographically distant others with the promise that through such encounters their "horizons will be broadened" and knowledge of others enhanced (for examples, see YOG 2001; gap-year.com 2002; World Challenge Expeditions 2002). Below, I illustrate how the historical and contemporary processes associated with colonialism, and the geographies of uneven development that constrain and condition "broad horizons" knowledges of others, appear to be unproblematic for the UK gap year industry. This situation contrasts sharply with similar programmes in other countries, notably Canada, the USA and Australia, which tend to occur at different points in the life course and function in significantly different ways. Crucially, US and Canadian international volunteer-tourism programmes generally form part of structured college courses rather than acting independently of formal education. While influenced by market forces

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(student willingness/ability to pay and the accessibility of suitable destinations) unlike UK programmes, they are shaped more by educational institutions than commercial companies.[2] They therefore include a more considered education dimension than gap years, often prioritising pedagogies that aim to critically examine the historical and socio-economic basis of uneven development.

The research I draw on is from a larger study conducted for my PhD thesis (Simpson 2005), and includes several data sources. Interviews and participant observation were conducted with two groups of gap year participants in South America. I spent six weeks in 2001 with the first group, which included 14 participants, and three months with the second group, comprising 17 participants. All of the participants were engaged in structured volunteer-based gap year programmes run by an organisation that I have conducted research with for a number of years. In addition, data were also produced through interviews with the gap year industry and a discourse analysis of the industry's grey literature and web-based promotional materials.[3] I also examined material from a range of companies, media sources and institutions that have been significant commentators on the gap year.[4]

The next section details the processes that have professionalised gap year practices and outlines the ways in which a gap year industry has come to colonise previously informal practices of youth travel. I argue that the gap year industry has actively sought legitimisation from state and commercial institutions. The following section draws on examples from volunteer-tourism gap year programmes based in Latin America; demonstrating that the industry produces particular geographies in which to locate its practices. Through an examination of the industry's ability to market itself as operating in spaces that are simultaneously dangerous and safe, I argue that the gap year industry is able to create a particular geography for its participants to visit, and claim knowledge of. In the next section I explore issues of knowledge production within gap year programmes, and argue that gap year experiences allow participants to claim authoritative knowledges of distant others, thereby reinforcing patterns of global uneven and unequal development.

The Professionalisation of the Gap Year

Prince William's arrival in Chile represented the pinnacle of institutional acceptability for the gap year. No longer are gap years for rebels, dropouts and "people with nothing better to do"; now they are for hopeful professionals and future kings. Institutional acceptability of the gap year has been achieved through a combination of popular enthusiasm, and the realisation of the potential economic

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value of youth travel. An industry has evolved around gap year practices which functions to formalise, popularise and to some degree police the industry's activities. Fundamental to these processes has been the emergence of a set of marketable values that can be accepted by institutions, desired by parents, and bought by young people. In the following, I first explore the formalisation of the gap year, before going on to examine its growing institutional acceptability. These two processes combined have worked to professionalise the gap year.

Moving into the neoliberal market place has required the gap year industry to develop a set of definable and marketable commodities. Such commodities have concentrated on offering individualised forms of cultural and corporate capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Urry's (1990) application of this to the field of travel, corporate capital in the gap year represents an extension of incorporated or embodied forms of cultural capital. Cultural capital is held by individuals in the form of experiences and education (Hayes 1997; Robbins 2000), yet has specific value to the corporate workplace. Taking a gap year supposedly offers opportunities to enhance one's access to both social spaces and employment. Thus, commodities such as "broad horizons", "personal development", "leadership and teamwork skills" have been marketed and sold to potential participants. For example, Venture Co, which provides three-month volunteer-tourism programmes in South America and India, lists the commodities offered in the following terms:

> Does the idea of travel to far off destinations appeal to you? How about the adventure of joining an expedition into the world's greatest mountain ranges? And I expect you'd like to help a disadvantaged community and acquire new skills while working on an aid project … At the same time you're probably thinking about how your gap year will fit into the broader picture, will it be something to impress future employers and how will it look on your CV? (Venture Co 2002)

Venture Co offers opportunities that range from the corporate capital of an enhanced CV to the promise that one will acquire new skills while helping a disadvantaged community. In so doing, Venture Co neatly summarises the gap year industry's key commodities; commodities that are not only becoming more readily recognised by those outside the industry, but are increasingly being presented as necessities for success in both corporate and social spaces. For example, World Challenge, one of the larger commercial providers of gap year programmes, opens their brochure: "Journey of A Life Time", with the statement that their programmes will:

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> enable you to learn invaluable life skills, as well as introduce you to wider cultures and the genuine challenges of life survival. For people who want to succeed in life, there is no greater graduation. (World Challenge Expeditions 2001:1)

World Challenge is effectively packaging their programmes as a necessity for young people. Furthermore, a language of "graduation" and "success" ties the gap year into education. This process of making the gap year part of, rather than distinct from, formal education and employment institutions is fundamental to its professionalisation and institutional recognition. As World Challenge implies, a gap year has become a requirement for success. It is now a part of one's progression to employability, as necessary in the UK as "A" levels and as inevitable as a degree.

Alluded to in both of the statements above from World Challenge and Venture Co is the fact that gap year industry commodities are not solely targeted at developing corporate compatibility, but also intend to offer cultural capital. The gap year offers young people the cultural capital of experience with its incumbent associations with achieving "broad horizons". Third World travel experiences act as cultural capital, giving one something to display to peers and, according to the journalist quoted below, a way in which to claim new friends:

> It is also hard not to become more interesting after a year of travel. During those first few terrifying days at university, no matter how often people tell you their totally cool and totally identical stories about trekking through Nepal on acid, they're still more fun to talk to than those—how young they seem! who are having the conversation about what "A" levels they got. (Merrit 2000:2)

The above quotation expresses clear expectations about who will be interesting, and who will not. A person risks cultural impoverishment if going to university (and into other arenas) without the capital of Third World travel. In this way the gap year is creating a level of social stratification, where cultural capital acts like economic capital to become a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion (Kaur and Hutnyk 1999). By taking a gap year young people are able to acquire both identity and capital. As the gap year industry's primary products, these are marketed to young people, parents, employers and educators alike. The following quotation by the YOG, an industry organisation for gap year providers, illustrates this point well: "A year out can say as much, if not more about you as an individual as any set of exam results ever can!" (YOG 2001). Fundamentally, what the gap year industry sells in a neoliberal market place is difference, be it difference from one's peers or job market competitors.

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Indicative of the recent move towards professionalisation, the emergence of organisations such as the YOG has contributed to the promotion of a defined and bounded notion of the gap year. Formed in 1998 by 20 of the self-identified key players in the gap year market, the YOG has a specific mandate:

> The Year Out Group is an association of leading year out organisations that was formed in 1998 to promote the concept and benefits of well-structured year out programmes, to promote models of good practice and to help young people and their advisers in selecting suitable and worthwhile projects. (YOG 2003)

The group has now grown to around 30 members and has played a significant role in seeking and publicising institutional support for the gap year. Its formation demonstrates the emergence of a distinct corporate identity around the gap year, and the apparent need to establish boundaries for inclusion and exclusion within that identity. The YOG specifically state that they work to promote structured gap years. Such a statement is a direct rejection of gap years that involve purely independent travel or work, as this form does not support industry-provided packages. This theme will be returned to later, specifically in the context of the institutional legitimation of the gap year; however, here it is important to note that being the provider of structured gap years represents a criterion for inclusion and exclusion that the industry wishes to establish and police.

The emergence of the YOG reflects the growing range of independent and predominantly commercial promoters that are becoming a key part of the gap year industry. Despite an often-assumed relationship between the gap year and the charity and NGO sectors, the majority of YOG's membership consists of commercial companies, reiterating the gap year's position in the tourism market place. The emergence of companies such as gapyear.com and gap-year.com, and the publication of guidebooks to the gap year by, for example, Lonely Planet (see Hindle 2003) demonstrate how promoting, and to some degree monitoring/regulating, the gap year industry is, in itself, a commercially viable profession. A growing number of "added value" providers are also being established. For example, the organisation "Objective" offers safety-training programmes run by former SAS army officers which claim to: "Maximise the experience of your gap year by minimising risk avoid unnecessary hassle, cope with the unexpected, stay healthy, keep kit safe" (Objective 2004). As an organisation, Objective is responding not only to the growth of the gap year market, but also its formalisation and the corresponding need to professionalise its practices. In a similar manner, but targeting a different aspect of the market, for a fee, "Gap Profile" offers the opportunity to gain a "City and Guilds Profile of Achievement" gap

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year qualification. This is not a qualification in a particular skill, rather it is a generic qualification, one that apparently could be taken by any gap year participant on any programme. The perceived need for qualifications to bear testimony to the value of the experience, no matter how participants choose to spend their time, illustrates the gap year's evolving corporate compatibility and focus on professionalisation. Furthermore, as the gap year becomes increasingly bound to certain values and esteemed in specific ways, a hierarchy of gap year experiences emerges. So, as those participants with a formal qualification become more highly valued than those without, the gap year, like school grades, university location or type of degree studied, can act to stratify young people. With the introduction of a qualification, comes the potential to fail a gap year. Thus no longer can the gap year be separated from the mechanisms of formal, assessed education and employment, rather it seems to have become an extension of those same developmentalist tools.

As the gap year has been formalised and established in the public imagination, so too has it received significant institutional recognition. In July 2000 the issue of gap years was raised in the House of Lords during a debate on voluntary service for young people. During this debate Baroness Warwick of Undercliff, the chief executive of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors (now Universities UK) and also the chair of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), expressed her support for the gap year:

> For those thinking of applying to university—again I must declare an interest as chief executive of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals—it is essential that they know that a gap year experience, so long as it is well structured, will be warmly welcomed. (United Kingdom Parliament 2000:column 1574)

Baroness Warwick's comments were reiterated by other peers (see Lord Lucas and Baroness Andrews quoted in United Kingdom Parliament 2000). However, despite such enthusiasm for the gap year, it is unclear upon what evidence or research such endorsements are based. Indeed, to date there has been almost no academic research on the subject.[5]

Beyond debate in the House of Lords, state support for the gap year in the UK has also come directly from government ministers, most notably Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary:

> Taking a gap year is a great opportunity for young people to broaden their horizons, making them more mature and responsible citizens. Our society can only benefit from travel which promotes character, confidence, decision-making skills. (Hogg 2001:1)

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This statement was apparently made for gapyear.com and is used prominently by many providers and promoters of gap years (for example, see Lancaster University Department of Geography 2002; the leap 2003). As with the comments made in the House of Lords, it is unclear upon what evidence Mr Straw bases his confidence in the gap year. What Mr Straw offers in this and other statements endorsing the gap year is an increasingly defined notion of what can and should be gained from a gap year, while also identifying its perceived value to the state. In this way, the gap year fits well with government agendas promoting volunteering amongst young people[6] and citizenship education. However, what forms of citizenship are people in positions of influence like Jack Straw encouraging through the gap year? So far we have seen that official statements expressing support for the gap year predominately focus on the individualised advantages that it offers, thereby endorsing the development of an active, self-regulating, competitive citizen.

As well as support from institutions and figures of state, the gap year has received endorsement from the educational establishment. Tony Higgins, the Chief Executive of the UK's University & College Admission Service (UCAS), in 2001 stated:

> UCAS believes that students who take a well-planned structured year out are more likely to be satisfied with, and complete, their chosen course. The benefits of a well-structured year out are now widely recognised by universities and colleges and cannot fail to stand you in good stead in later life. (YOG 2001)

Baroness Diana Warwick, this time in her role as chair of Universities UK, has also endorsed the gap year from the perspective of universities. The following quotation is taken from the Universities UK website, and formed part of a speech given at the National Council for Voluntary Organisation (NCVO) conference in 2001:

> Gap years can help address the pressing need to improve skills of graduates entering the workplace. Universities generally like to take students who have done a gap year because they are more mature and a step ahead of the rest. (Universities UK 2001)

Baroness Warwick is effectively offering legitimation from the entire UK university system. As with other commentators, she repeats the theme of maturity, though also mentions the principle of competitive advantage and structure. Indeed, the principle of structure appears in the majority of establishment endorsements offered for the gap year. Jack Straw mentioned structure in his statement to gapyear.com, similarly Tony Higgins from UCAS stresses the need for a "well planned structured year-out" (YOG 2001); while for the YOG, promoting structured gap years is a key part of their mandate

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(YOG 2001). Structure, in the context in which all the above advocates use it, implies planning, organisation and ultimately the consumption of industry-produced packages. This represents a move away from the association of youth travel with the "hippie drifter", a figure who sought freedom and mobility through travel as a rejection of Western market-driven consumerism (Ateljevic nd). The promotion of the gap year as a structured experience fits into a broader agenda of making the gap year a market-compatible commodity. Through the need for structure comes, in part, the need for an industry to provide such structured experiences. Furthermore, a hierarchy of gap year experiences can be developed with those experiences that demonstrate structure being valued (by the state and educational organisations) above those that do not. No longer does one simply take a year off from formal education/employment; now one takes a "gap", with its bound notions of value and purpose.

To summarise, the rise in public and institutional recognition of the gap year has produced an increasingly bound and recognisable product. This product represents a transformation of the gap year from a symbol of hedonistic youth travel by individuals and groups of young people into a training ground for future professionals. Simultaneously, this has made the gap year not only institutionally acceptable, but also market compatible. So, the mythical values of structure, maturity and the oft-mentioned "broad horizons" have become products for which there is a commercial market, and no shortage of sellers.

Where in the World? The Contradictory Geography of the Gap Year

International gap year programmes operate in a particular geography, which frames not just *where* participants travel to, but also *how* they travel. The professionalisation of the gap year, and its evolving market orientation, has produced a definable geography of the gap year. That is, it has produced spaces that are constructed through a particular set of imaginations, which prescribe where gap year programmes occur and the activities in which they engage. There are many dimensions to the imaginations that construct gap year spaces. Historical process and perspectives (most notably, colonialism and traditions such as the Grand Tour, as well as missionary and volunteer work) have acted to shape possible gap year geographies. As the industry seeks to establish itself as professional, it has increasingly been required to manage the perceived risks of its activities. Yet, simultaneously, the industry has needed to recognise that to some degree danger is a desired element of its programmes. In the following discussion I first offer a brief guide to the geography of the gap year, concentrating on its

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historically located nature, before going on to examine the contradictory conceptualisations of danger and safety and their role in constructing gap year geographies. I argue that the simultaneous and potentially contradictory marketing of safety and danger is central to neoliberal professionalisation.

While the term "gap year" may be relatively new, the practice itself has strong historical roots, which continue to inform both how and where gap year programmes occur. Historical practices exert an influence on the geography of the modern gap year. Colonialism is of particular interest because of its strategic and lasting impact on both the possibilities and rationale for travel. Colonialism is not just a conquest of territory and resources but also a conquest of the way in which the world has become known; a construction of ideas as much as a construction of States. In *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said (1978) argued that the Orient is not a geographical fact but rather a historical and cultural creation. This creation reflected a distinct set of power relations and cultural imperatives, which told more about the state of Europe than it did about the nature of the area deemed to be the Orient. Geography is therefore not a simple matter of imagination, but rather a conscious construction which articulates, legitimates and maintains power relations between regions:

> Orientalism … is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. (Said 1978:6)

It is this investment that makes Orientalism ideologically robust and part of teachable wisdom (Said 1978). Said's understanding of place as politically and strategically constructed can be extended to the colonial process in general. The need to legitimate colonialism demanded a gaze in which colonisation became natural and even desirable. European colonialism itself has been largely dismantled and deservedly critiqued; however, the colonial gaze lingers on. As a discourse, colonialism, like the discourse of development that succeeded it, "created a space in which only certain things could be said or even imagined" (Escobar 1995:39). This process helped produce a set of norms that continue to inform the way global relations are understood and practised. As I argue below, in turn, these processes have helped shape a geography of the gap year.

The gap year industry expresses both the desire to distance its practices from those of colonialism while also making direct reference to its historical roots. For example, in the opening to the Latin American section of their brochure, the company i-to-i remind participants of their travelling ancestry:

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> Botanists have delved into the Amazonian jungles to pluck plants, explorers have canoed out of sight, and archaeologists have explored the burial rites of the Incas. Now it is your turn to explore Latin America for yourself. (i-to-i 2002:10)

The historical motivations for travel are therefore not a forgotten legacy. Rather they remain evocative and powerful and can be called upon to inspire contemporary travellers. As a result, the geography of the gap year draws direct linage from the geographies constructed through and by colonialism.

Colonialism effectively centred history on a Western view of the world, defining all-else in opposition and creating an endless logic of binaries (McClintock 1995). Dichotomies between civilised/uncivilised, Christian/un-Christian, First/Third World, coloniser/colonised were created not just to define the difference between the Western (colonising) self and the foreign (colonised) other, but also to naturalise and legitimate colonialism. The creation of dichotomies between self and other may not be a process unique or new to colonialism, but the dichotomies of that era continue to populate understandings of others and indeed continue to be mobilised. Binaries and dichotomies between self and other are a defining feature in the presentation of gap year geographies, and in this way produce geographies that are consistent with the colonial constructions of others noted by both Said (1978) and McClintock (1995). Homogenous descriptions of groups of people and cultures are relied upon to produce evocative and recognisable imagery. The three quotations below are taken from different gap year organisations and offer descriptions of Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia, respectively:

> This tropical paradise ignites the Western imagination like no other South American country, and the people of Brazil delight visitors with their energy and joy. (Travellers Worldwide 2003a)

> Often chaotic and sometimes infuriating, it is a beautiful country where the people are unfailingly charming and welcome GAP volunteers into their homes. (GAP Activity Projects 2003)

> With a generally shy and gracious population, Bolivia is one of the safest Latin American countries to visit. (Travellers Worldwide 2003b)

All three of the above statements seek to summarise entire nations of people in simple pairs of descriptors. This process of essentialising others serves the purpose of creating simple, recognisable categories through which such others can become "known", as I illustrate in the following discussion.

In the first of the above quotations, Travellers Worldwide makes a direct reference to the Western imagination, which is effectively what

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all the above statements aim to appeal to. The need to create a simple geography, one that offers the opportunity for consumption, is integral to the global map created by the gap year industry. It is the availability of prescribed cultural experiences, and indicators of their successful consumption, that in part defines the geography of the gap year. This approach to geographical construction is constant with the characteristics of Said's Orientalism:

> The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. (Said 1978:1)

In a similar manner, the Gap Year industry creates a space populated by the existence of consumable experiences of others. So, whether it is the "energy and joy" in Brazil, the invitations into Paraguayan homes, or the "shy graciousness" of Bolivians, a gap year traveller knows what to expect and how to consume the experience. Through these essentialised, textual representations, which are usually supported by evocative visual images, travellers are offered a known geography. That is, they are provided with expectations of the nature of their destinations, with no suggestion that these may not be universal. Thus, a geography idealised for the traveller is constructed. Based on the above statements, travellers can expect spaces that are a "delight to visitors", "charming and welcoming" and, finally, "safe". Such geographies are not offered as fractured or partial, but rather as the essential nature of the places and peoples to be visited.

The geography of the gap year is certainly worthy of more detailed attention;[7] however, here I will concentrate on one particular aspect of this geography, namely the industry's paradoxical relationship with issues of danger and risk. Industry operators need to prove that gap years are safe in order to recruit participants. Yet, on the other hand, danger is also a marketable commodity, one that many young participants themselves actively seek. Here I am arguing that the existence of dangers in travelling, in part, legitimises the development of an industry around the gap year. As a result of perceived dangers, the industry can sell safety. Gap year providers need to convince parents and themselves that participants will survive their programmes, whilst simultaneously allowing participants a sense that survival will at least be a struggle. Consequently, the role played by danger in gap years is ambiguous.

Central to some of the ambiguity around danger is the difference between perceived and actual risk. The gap year industry offers many activities marketed as dangerous, with bungee jumping serving as the archetypal example. However, such activities are probably safer than crossing any average road in the capital cities of popular destinations such as Ecuador or Peru. It is the availability of universalistic and

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simplistic geographies that makes the marketing of such partial geographical imaginations of danger possible. These geographies are exemplified in the statement below, which was made by the parent of a gap year student and quoted in a recently published report on the gap year:

> The world like ancient Gaul, is divided into three parts (well it is for gap year parents like me). The first part has food that can be eaten and hospitals that don't require you to bring your own plasma. This includes North America, Western Europe and Australia/New Zealand. The second part has none of the above but is gentle and civilized. This is India. The third part is like the second, except with violence complimentary. Here we're talking at least 80% of South America. Madeline, my 17 year old daughter, set off for Guatemala, a country which seemed to me (and I may be doing it an injustice), to have civil war like Scotland has weather. If it isn't raining now, just wait 20 minutes. (Michael Tobert, gap year parent, quoted in Hogg 2001:12–13)

The parent quoted above sums up whole continents under the neat labels of "dangerous", "safe" or "gentle", reducing the entire world to three categories and effectively offering a re-imagination of the politicized categories of First, Second and Third Worlds. While the basis of such a process of categorisation is questionable, it is important to note that this statement was published in a report produced by gapyear.com, which, as an organisation, actively seeks to promote gap years. On the subsequent page of the report the author asks the question "Are gap years safe?" and concludes thus:

> We believe that in the future this barrier [the perception of danger] will naturally fall and the issue of safety will assume its correct place, namely in discussions about leaving the home and venturing out as a young adult. (Hogg 2001:14)

Deciphering quite what the author means by this statement is something of a challenge, however the context is relatively clear. Danger is being presented as a present but, crucially, manageable condition of taking a gap year, and as discussed further on, if danger is present then safety becomes a sellable commodity.

Returning to the earlier quotation from a gap year parent, parental perception of a difficult or dangerous country may well increase the allure of going there. A sense of danger is an integral part of a gap year experience for many participants. The ability to survive the experience and successfully negotiate risks and fears are all part of establishing one's credibility, and acquiring the life skills supposedly learnt. When discussing with participants in Peru and Ecuador why they chose particular destinations, issues of risk, difficulty and danger

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were often expressed. It is important to highlight, however, that what is being discussed is perceived risk and perceived danger. Indeed, in many cases participants recognised the prominence of perception and labelling in defining where was considered dangerous. The following conversation was a follow up to an earlier comment made by Peter,[8] where he described South America as "kind of dangerous":

> Kate: So why does it [South America] feel kind of dangerous? [asked in response to an earlier comment by Peter]
>
> Peter: because it is always hyped up in the newspapers.
>
> Debbie: you never hear the good things.
>
> Peter: Yeah actually some parts of Colombia now are dangerous, but the rest of the country, because I was talking to a Colombian chef the other day and he said it is not that bad, it is actually very nice, but people just think that Colombia is dangerous. And now they think Argentina is really dangerous but it is not at all.
>
> Debbie: They are all really labelled, probably they are not like their labels at all but no one has really explored it enough to change those labels.
>
> Jane: It is Third World so people think that is dangerous.

In this conversation, it is acknowledged that a dangerous image is probably just a question of labelling and misinformation by the media. Yet, despite recognising this, the participants still reproduce an image of South America as dangerous. Despite the dangerous label, none of the participants had researched the reality of this issue any further before arriving in Ecuador (where they were at the time of the interview), suggesting that they did not perceive such dangers as real or likely to affect them. Instead, it seems that danger was all part of making Ecuador and Peru desirable gap year destinations for them. Thus dangers, and the ability to survive them, can be an intrinsic part of establishing the cultural capital of travel. According to Phillips (1999) and Sorensen (2003) danger confers authenticity on travel experiences so that suffering and managing not to spend money become key markers that backpackers, in particular, use to attribute value to their experiences.

Given the cultural status, value and appeal of danger to participants, the gap year industry is in the complicated position of both selling danger and selling safety. Earlier in the conversation quoted above, it was mentioned that it was better to go to South America "with someone who knows where they are going". Thus while danger gives value and desirability to a destination, the safety and security of going "with someone" is a key part of the product bought. Though danger and risk may all be integral parts of a gap year experience

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there is little discussion within the industry of the nature of these dangers. Gap year organisations remain equally vague on the dangers of their programmes, preferring instead to stress the safety precautions that they can offer. For example, Teaching and Projects Abroad, a large provider of gap year placements, emphasise that:

> Before we go anywhere countries must be politically stable and safe. If they are not, we don't go. We are in constant contact with the Foreign Office regarding stability and safety and, of course, we have the added security of overseas staff. (Teaching & Projects Abroad 2002)

While violence, coups, terrorists and civil war may be the predominant image of danger, the real risk is more likely to lie in tap water, bald bus tyres and drunk drivers. These risks are out of the control of most gap year organisations, and beyond the spectrum of worry for most 18-year-old participants. Consequently, all programmes involve those risks and dangers that, like bungee jumping, are controllable. Gap year providers may be happy to have their participants perceive their destination countries as dangerous, but it is vital that, as professional organisations, they are seen to run safe programmes, and that they market this to the parents of their potential clients. In fact, as we have seen, selling safety is a key product in the gap year market and integral to its geography.

Selling Knowledge, Becoming Expert

The discussion above has indicated that a gap year is a period of exploring geographies of danger, cultures, others, self and above all difference. One of the purposes of a gap year is to seek out difference, to leave the ordinary in search of the extra-ordinary. The value of the gap year is premised, to a large degree, on the presumed relationship between encountering difference and knowing difference. In this section, I examine two aspects of the relationship between gap years and knowledge production. First, I offer a critique of the way the industry sells education without any specific mechanism for its delivery. Second, I examine how gap year experiences position travelling participants as experts. I argue that, despite the apparent professionalisation of the gap year industry, so far its gaze has proved myopic and has yet to be focused on the industry's basic practices.

Earlier, I examined various statements from important figures in state, education and employment; in the majority of these commentaries reference was made to what participants would learn through taking a gap year. The notion of "broad horizons", as expressed by Jack Straw, encapsulates the idea that learning automatically occurs through travel. At present, the primary mechanism through which the

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majority of gap year organisations presume participants learn about others is through the experience of contact. Such a learning model is encapsulated in Allport's 1954 "Contact Hypothesis" (Pettigrew 1998), in which Allport advocated that contact between different social groups would reduce prejudice and increase tolerance (Amir and Ben-Ari 1985; Pettigrew 1998; Wittig and Grant-Thompson 1998). The assumption was that experience alone (in the form of contact) would be enough to cause a change in values. However, over recent years the Contact Hypothesis has received much criticism, at the heart of which has been a questioning of the presumed positive nature of contact, and also of the way in which experience is processed.

Allport's Contact Hypothesis is based upon the assumption that contact automatically deconstructs false stereotypes and prejudice. However, Allport specified four preconditions for such contact. Namely, that there would be equal status between the contact groups, that there were common goals for achievement, that the groups would need to co-operate, and finally, that there was authority support for contact. This last condition translates into some form of shared value system between groups (Pettigrew 1998). These criteria are relatively taxing, particularly the last, and there is little evidence of their application within gap year programmes. Consequently, the situation is one where mere contact, under any set of conditions, is assumed to produce positive relationship outcomes. While such contact may be beneficial in the relationships between gap year participants from the developed world, in terms of explaining the relationships between Third World visitors and hosts, it appears deeply flawed. The assumption that contact alone breaks down stereotypes directly contradicts research suggesting that far from challenging pre-held views, contact experiences may in fact accentuate deep-seated attitudes (Amir and Ben-Ari 1985; Pettigrew 1998). Stereotypes, in the form of generalisations and simplifications about groups of others, can be deeply entrenched, established over prolonged periods of time, and, consequently, robust (Nederveen-Pieterse 1995). To assume that a short period of contact with the stereotyped other will automatically contradict, and hence unseat, such stereotypes is, at best, naive. The gap year industry's reliance on contact as a source of learning about others needs to be challenged, in terms of the nature of knowledges it might produce and also its validity as an educational strategy. The point I wish to make here is that a reliance on contact is the product not of a deliberate educational strategy, but the default setting when no such strategy exists.

In addition to the apparent reliance on contact, gap year experiences appear premised on the principle that linking experiences across time and space is unproblematic. In the comment below the

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director of a major gap year provider describes the potential for participants to act in the future in more empathetic ways to peoples across the world as the "most important" thing his organisation offers:

> Well the most important thing we do is something that we don't advertise … We have sent the best part of 10,000 people, who are middle-class young people, many of whom will have significant jobs in the years to come and they will have lived in a Third World country, they will have had that experience of the developing world and not just of the beaches of Gambia, not just a bit of backpacking but they will actually have lived, and worked in a Third World country. And I think, actually, that is the most important factor, that there is a generation now that are going through, because of us, a generation that are going to go through and run banks and run big companies and what not, for whom the Third World is not strange and out there and who will have friends in the Third World. That I think is the prime most important thing … I mean how much better it might have been if all the ummm all the people who are middle and high management of Shell had spent some time in West Africa for example, an idealist example, but how differently they would have treated the Ibo people in Nigeria? (Author's interview, UK organisation's headquarters 2001)

While there are multiple assumptions apparent in the above comments, of relevance here is the vagueness of the time scale implied. Social action is presented not as an issue for everyone in their everyday encounters, but as an issue for the few, and for the future. So while much of the gap year industry claims to promote an agenda of social responsibility, it is unclear who is seen as the actors within this agenda. With such assertions, rather than focusing on their own participants, organisations are concentrating on generic and unknown actors who hold identifiable power in the future. Gap year organisations are, in effect, abdicating any direct responsibility for converting experience into action in either the short or long term. They assume an emphasis on macro over micro-level changes, so that action becomes the responsibility of a few powerful individuals, rather than of the powerful masses of the developed world.

A further perspective from which to critique the gap year's reliance on contact is a pedagogical one. A reliance on contact to stimulate learning is also a reliance on experience as an educational process. That is, experience is not treated as part of an educational process, but as an education in and of itself. Experiential education is a well-established pedagogy, however its mobilisation in many gap year programmes represents a misunderstanding of its complexities. As an educational concept, experiential education fits within various pedagogical traditions, including social justice and the work of

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theorists such as Paulo Freire and John Dewey. According to experiential education theorists, experience is more than just a set of physical interactions, instead, it is part of a process of interpretation and critical reflection (Adams 1997). By comparison, in the gap year, the concept of experience has been simplified and transformed from a pedagogical process to a method. So that experience alone, in the sense of social interaction, is promoted as an educational process in its own right. Consequently, as with Allport's Contact Hypothesis, the processes through which participants learn about others remain ignored. In contrast to this approach, recent research on cross-cultural interaction and service learning projects has argued strongly for the management of the various processes involved in inter-group contact (Adams 1997; Bell 1997; Crabtree 1998; Pettigrew 1998). Such processes include learning about one another, generating effective links, and inter-group reappraisal (Pettigrew 1998). These principles are further supported by the work of groups such as the Association for Experiential Education, which emphasise the need for experience to be part of a cycle of action and reflection (Krnas and Roarke 1994). However, despite evidence from both research and practice current in other educational forums, such active processing is woefully missing from gap year programmes. Critically, the adoption of an educational approach based on the presumed value of contact and the value of experience is in fact a result of the almost total lack of educational strategy within the majority of UK gap year programmes. Despite the professionalism of the industry in terms of its marketing and packaging, this gaze seems not to have been focused on one of its key products, namely "broadening horizons".

I now turn to the second point concerning the partiality of the gap year industry's professional gaze by focusing on the construction of experts. Here, I have concentrated solely on international volunteer-tourism programmes which involve doing development work. The gap year industry's relationship with development is complex and beyond the scope of this contribution;[9] relevant to the argument here, however, is how gap year programmes are creating a new generation of development experts. Gap year programmes for volunteers are premised on the usefulness of such volunteers. Situations are presented in which the international volunteer can offer help, advice, support and generally be needed. For example, Teaching & Projects Abroad open the Mongolia section of their brochure with the statement: "a culture older than Genghis Kahn needs you!" (Teaching & Projects Abroad 2003:18). This statement, made seemingly without irony, implies that Mongolia is struggling for want of a few British teenagers. Meanwhile Venture Co is keen to stress that: "We have carefully selected the projects that present the opportunity for you to be of genuine value to an indigenous community and to give something

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back" (Venture Co 2002). A point that Student Partnership Worldwide (SPW) similarly makes with their promise that: "SPW will not send you where you are not needed. You will not be doing a job that a local could do better than you" (Student Partnership Worldwide 2002).

Whatever "genuine value" or "needs" participants will meet, are never clearly identified in the publicity literature from these organisations. What is created, however, are situations and spaces in which the gap year volunteer will be needed and will be able to provide some external expert assistance. Volunteer-tourism places travellers in the position of expert or at least as knowledgeable by locating them in placements as teachers, builders, medical workers etc. Often these are identities and positions not available to the same individuals "at home". The freedom from qualifications can be used as an enticing part of such programmes. For example, Travellers Worldwide, an organisation that offers placements in 16 countries spread across the globe, emphasises in bold type on the opening page of their website: "You don't need any formal qualifications" (Travellers Worldwide 2003b). The freedom from qualifications makes gap year programmes accessible, and provides spaces in which participants can experiment with possible future professional identities.[10] This process has become a major selling point for the gap year industry, which is able to market placements on the basis of the opportunities they offer for professional and CV advancement.

Creating spaces in which the travelling participant can experiment with an expert identity also creates a set of social power relations that frame the encounters between hosts and visitors. The traveller is able to experiment with a new identity, while also being presented to their hosts as an expert, a process that is particularly pertinent given the inequalities through which tourism to the Third World inherently operates (Hutnyk 1996). In creating apparent experts, the gap year industry risks not only permitting practices for which participants are not held accountable, but also establishing exploitive relationships between travellers and hosts. This risk is exemplified in the quotation below in which a volunteer with Teaching & Projects Abroad manages to de-humanise ill Ghanaians into textbooks for his or her own learning:

> The practical experience I got was very rewarding. You can see everything and do see everything. A single patient in Ghana will often have many different conditions to advanced states, which make them textbook examples. Even though I had no experience, just a good deal of interest, I was allowed to be present in operations and to assist in the delivery of babies. (Unnamed participant quoted in Teaching & Projects Abroad 2002:5)

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Though perhaps extreme, the above quote is revealing, articulating a relationship between traveller and host that is, at the very least, troubling. The traveller is presented with an expert identity, in this case medical worker, and is then encouraged to experiment with this identity *on* a group of people.

The gap year industry may be seeking an increasingly professional persona, but at present this seems to have produced a highly myopic gaze. Through programmes participants are presumed to learn about others; to acquire "broad horizons". However, the mechanisms through which such learning is to be engendered remain largely ignored. Deliberate educational strategies remain wanting, leaving the industry dependent on assumptions about the value of contact and the inevitability of learning by experience. Such a lack of a pedagogical perspective becomes even more problematic when the social and geographical frameworks in which participants travel are considered. The uncritical adoption of the position of expert, and with it the practices of experimentation, frame the contact encounters between hosts and visitors within powerful inequalities. These relationships produce the world in which gap year participants can travel and claim knowledge about. Without critical reflection, and with the authoritative power granted to knowledge produced through the supposed authenticity of first-hand travel experiences (Heald 2003), this world becomes a known and powerful reality.

Concluding Comments

Over the last ten years the gap year has evolved from a symbol of rebellion and an escape from the formal institutions of education and employment in the UK into a bastion of those same structures. This evolution has demanded an increasingly professional face for its practices, which has resulted in the establishment of the YOG and a growing rhetoric about what a gap year can and should be. As a result, structured Third World travel experiences are playing an important role in defining "good" gap years. The professionalisation of the gap year has received vocal support from a range of actors, including state representatives interested in promoting particular types of (global) UK citizens. Chiming with a concentration on neoliberal self-regulating citizenship, the growing gap year industry has focused on personal CV development by providing tailored programmes and providing new support services, especially for those travelling to Third World destinations. The increasing professionalisation and diversity of the gap year industry means that paradoxically it has been able to market both safety and danger successfully to its audiences while remaining unengaged with and unreflexive about the colonised and colonising geographies that it reproduces in the process.

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The professionalisation of the gap year is proving to be highly myopic. Despite the fact that one of its primary claims is that it offers opportunities for education and global learning, across the industry there appears to be little strategy for the actual delivery of these goals. Consequently, the industry has left itself reliant on outdated and pedagogically questionable methodologies. If the gap year is to evolve from an eccentric form of adventure tourism into an experience that offers geographically disparate peoples an opportunity to encounter and learn about one another, then the professional gaze needs to be extended beyond marketing and rhetoric and onto the practices of the programmes that the industry operates.

Endnotes

[1] Author's interview: Richard Oliver of the Year Out Group (YOG) (2001).

[2] Although some institutions work with commercial companies, universities usually retain control over curricula design and course credit systems.

[3] I conducted interviews with senior members of five gap year organisations, and analysed materials from 20 gap year providers and a number of support organisations. All the gap year providers analysed are members of the YOG.

[4] These include companies such as the gapyear.com and Objective, who act to promote and support gap years, the University and College Admissions System (UCAS), Universities UK, the House of Lords, as well as a wide range of popular media reports and articles.

[5] While cultural geography research has focused on identity formation among independent travellers in countries which have become important gap year destinations (see, for example, Desforges' 1998 work on Peru), the gap year industry itself has come under little academic scrutiny. What research that there has been has tended to be produced by undergraduates or has come from within the gap year industry (for example, see Hogg 2001).

[6] Between 2001 and 2004 the government have committed to spending £300 million to promote volunteering amongst young people (National Centre for Volunteering 2003).

[7] For a more detailed discussion of the geography of the gap year see Chapter 5 in my PhD thesis 'Broad Horizons? Geographies and Pedagogies of the Gap Year', University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

[8] All research participants' names have been changed.

[9] For more details on the relationship between development and the gap year see (for a discussion of some of these issues, see Simpson 2004).

[10] The freedom from the need for formal qualifications and the ability to experiment with new identities can actually now be turned into a qualification. As discussed earlier, it is possible to receive a City & Guild gap year qualification, which I would argue could be seen as part of the gap year's creation of experts.

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Kate Simpson worked in the gap year industry for a number of years before starting her PhD at the University of Newcastle, UK, which, pending minor corrections, she has now completed. At present Kate is working in Experiential Education in the United States, however when she returns to Britain she intends to continue her research into the pedagogical development of the gap year, with particular focus on the themes of constructing knowledge about others and social justice education.

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