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Theorising international youth volunteering: training for global (corporate) work?

Andrew Jones

Ongoing globalisation poses a distinct challenge to how we understand what work 'is' in the contemporary world. Theoretical distinctions between the spatialities and temporalities of work as a practice have become blurred, along with understandings of work purely as an economic rather than a socio-cultural phenomenon. Building on theoretical approaches within geography and the 'new sociology of work', this paper argues that the transformation of work produced by contemporary globalisation requires a more sophisticated and geographically informed understanding of the spatiality of work as a practice. It develops this contention by presenting research into a specific kind of (unconventional) work – international youth volunteering. It argues that this form of work has a complex spatiality, whose constitution and impacts exceed the specific material location of workers in both space and time. Furthermore, it examines how this 'multiplex mode' of work practice destabilises the relationship between work and non-work, and facilitates the development of cultural capital, self-identity and skills in young people. It also contends that this form of voluntary work is embedded in the emerging needs of global labour markets. These arguments are elaborated through the presentation of research from a longitudinal project on the impacts of international youth volunteering. This research consists of data from interviews and focus groups with young people who undertook a range of different types of overseas voluntary work placement, and interviews with corporate recruiters in leading transnational firms concerning their understanding of the value (or otherwise) of international volunteering.

key words international youth volunteering globalisation work transnational firms gap year global business class

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Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between globalisation processes and the changing nature of work has come under increasing scrutiny in geographical thinking (Beaverstock 2005; Jones 2008; Salt 2010). In the social sciences, geographers, sociologists and management theorists have begun to argue that ongoing globalisation poses a distinct challenge as to how we understand what work 'is' in the contemporary world. Conventional conceptions of work as a narrowly-defined paid activity have been increasingly challenged and critics have sought to unpick taken-for-granted assumptions about work's 'boundaries, definitions and spheres of influence' (Parry *et al*. 2005, 3). Work is thus increasingly being reconceptualised not only as a paid activity that exists in isolated workplaces and occurs during specified periods of time, but also as a range of unpaid practices including domestic work, voluntary work and activities embedded in a wide array of other social relations (Felstead and Jewson 1999; Taylor 2005). A 'new sociology of work' has thus aimed to more fully capture the many 'differing modes of interconnection between work activities' (Glucksmann 2005, 19), in a way that blurs the

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theoretical distinctions not only between the spatialities and temporalities of work as a practice, but also its constitution as a purely economic rather than a socio-cultural aspect of social life (cf. Volti 2008).

Yet the globalisation of work – as a socio-economic practice in itself – has only been engaged with to a limited extent by geographers, even when this shift in both the nature of work and how social scientists are seeking to conceptualise it poses a substantial opportunity for geographical thinking. The new sociology of work represents both a response to the changing empirical reality of work in contemporary economies and societies, and also a more sophisticated attempt to understand how work as an economic practice cannot be extracted from the socio-cultural context in which is it undertaken. What it lacks, however, is an epistemological engagement with what Glucksmann terms 'the increasing complexity and density of global interconnection', and how that relates to the many other factors having a profound effect on 'the organization and experience of work' (2005, 20). The purpose of this paper therefore is to further advance the argument that globalisation is producing a transformation of work that substantially destabilises conventional theories of work (cf. Jones 2008), and which requires a more sophisticated understanding of the spatiality of work as a practice than existing theories have yet permitted. It develops this central proposition by presenting research into a specific kind of (unconventional) work – international youth volunteering – that is illustrative of the complex temporality and spatiality of working practices in today's global society.

Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in volunteering in the UK, US, continental Europe and other 'advanced' industrial countries (Milligan 2007). Voluntary work has increasingly entered both public- and private-sector discourses as a key plank of policies around, for example, corporate social responsibility (Muthuri *et al.* 2009), skills training (Pratt 2002), social enterprise (Hibbert *et al.* 2003), citizenship (Zeldin 2004), environmental conservation (Campbell and Smith 2006) and international development (Simpson 2004). This shift has fuelled a growth in international youth volunteering and several trends are identifiable in this respect. For a start, there is the increasing prevalence of the 'gap year' phenomenon in western countries. The idea of a gap year after the end of formal education and before employment has a relatively long history in the Anglo-American context, but it has seen an enormous growth in participation in the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand over the last couple of decades (Jones 2004; Rockcliffe 2005). In the US, a similar 'time out' period has also developed focused around a period of 'international voluntary service' (cf. Sherraden *et al.* 2005) exemplified by the Peace Corps. (cf. Lough *et al.* 2009). Another trend is the rapidly changing nature of international voluntary work being offered to and undertaken by young people. In the UK, international youth voluntary work placements have conventionally been offered by third sector (i.e. charitable) organisations with overseas placements in the range of 1–9 months (Jones 2004; Power 2007), and with a minimal fee to cover administration costs. However, since the 1990s a growing number of 'for profit' commercial firms have been established that offered fee-paying 'voluntary work' placements with, more recently, mainstream tour operators offering increasing numbers of shorter, more vacation-like 'voluntourism' experiences (Cousins 2007; Power 2007). Finally, the policy validation of voluntary work has led to its implementation as an educational tool. Research has identified positive impacts of this activity for young people, including the development of social capital, open-mindedness, international understanding and a range of valuable 'soft skills' that formal educational institutions struggle to engender (Andrews and Higson 2008; Jones 2005; Russell 2005; Tess and Bradbury 2009).

However, the rise of international youth volunteering has not gone unchallenged, with critics contending that a growing proportion of activity is undesirable or even harmful (Lorimer 2009; Power 2007; Simpson 2005). While there is enormous diversity in terms of the nature of international youth volunteering, a number of general critical propositions can be identified. First, it has been argued that the negative impacts of international youth voluntary work outweigh any benefit to society overall. With respect to the global South, for example, the capacity of youth volunteers to contribute positively to development has been a particular focus of criticism (VSO 2007); the contention is that voluntourism represents a substantial misallocation of resources (both financial and labour) that would be better used in other ways (cf. Cleary 2006; Weiler and Richins 1995). Second, the wider policy discourse that international youth volunteering promotes educational development and builds social capital has been challenged. Several studies

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have argued that many current international volunteering experiences have little educational value for young people (cf. Simpson 2004); any educational or knowledge-transfer benefit of such international volunteering is also one-sided since host communities are givers not receivers (Simpson 2005). Third, it has also been suggested that 'altruistic' work amongst gap year volunteers in fact reinforces neo-imperialist and neoliberal discourses (cf. Duffy 2002 2008) that are based around patronising stereotypes of needy communities in the global South. These discourses perpetuate the idea that such communities are unable to help themselves and will benefit from the 'superior' knowledge and skills of volunteers from the more advanced countries of the global North (Ansell 2008; Simpson 2004).

These criticisms have some validity, but also have important limitations: namely, that they tend to group all forms of international youth voluntary work together when there is in fact enormous diversity; they are based on a paucity of empirical evidence with much being selective and far from impartial (e.g. VSO 2007); and utilise a narrow conceptualisation of international youth volunteering as a form of isolated work practice. This last point in particular marks a principle entry point for this paper. Its overarching argument is that international youth voluntary work needs to be understood as a broader phenomenon that exceeds the current narrow terms of the debate about what it 'is' and what impact it has. Building on the social scientific globalisation and sociology of work literatures, the central proposition made is that international youth volunteering represents a novel (or at least evolving) form of globalised work practice that is bound into the changing needs of the global economy in general – and transnational firms in particular. These firms increasingly need 'global workers' (cf. Castells 2009) who have a range of skills, capacities, knowledge and experiences enabling them to undertake work in a transnational context effectively, and international youth volunteering provides an important preparatory experience in that respect. The rise of this phenomenon in global society in recent decades cannot thus be reduced to any of the explanations currently in circulation in popular, policy or social scientific discourses that have variously conceived it to be a new kind of tourism, a revised postcolonial adventure or, more positively, as a horizon-broadening personal development experience (cf. Ansell 2008; Heath 2006; Sherraden *et al.* 2008). International youth voluntary work may be shaped by a postcolonial context, but it also entwines with individual and collective economic rationales and the wider evolution of the global economy and society.

The implication of this is that the practices that international youth volunteering entails are bound into the development of a range of values, knowledges, skills and attitudes that are aligned with and in part equip young people to compete more effectively in increasingly transnationalised skilled worker labour markets. As a form of work it therefore provides a preparatory experience and informal training for employment in paid 'global jobs', whether they be in private- or public-sector employment. Youth volunteers – as actors undertaking these working practices – are increasingly aware of and motivated by the specific and hard-to-acquire values, knowledges, skills and attitudes that international voluntary work experience provides. In temporal terms, this form of global work is thus increasingly a strategic practice, in part bound into its future impacts with respect to subsequent globalised employment and career trajectories. Equally, however, as a form of work the spatial constitution of international voluntary work is also complex. The working practices youth volunteers undertake are constituted through a nexus of co-present and distanciated relations (cf. Held *et al.* 1999) that defy simple scalar classification. Wider globalisation processes have created a context for this kind of work that means the practices undertaken by workers in place are both shaped by and shape a range of other actors at a distance.

The rest of the paper develops these arguments in a series of stages. In the next section, it outlines a conceptual framework for understanding international youth volunteering as a form of 'global work', drawing on three different strands of the social scientific literature. Using this framework it makes a series of theoretical propositions about how this phenomenon illustrates the wider transformation of work in all forms, and how its globalisation both parallels and links to that found in formal transnational labour markets. The third section then explores the utility of these theoretical arguments by presenting research into international voluntary work schemes. The qualitative data presented has two elements consisting of interviews and focus groups with young volunteers who undertook placements in seven countries, and interviews with corporate graduate recruitment

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professionals from transnational firms. The analysis suggested that with respect to many forms of international voluntary work, young volunteers gain a range of skills, capacities and knowledges that are highly relevant and desirable from a transnational corporate employer perspective. Finally, the fourth section draws together a number of concluding arguments about both how this specific form of voluntary work is conceptualised and the wider implications for theorising the globalisation of work.

Theorising the globalisation of youth voluntary work

In order to develop a more sophisticated theoretical approach that can be used to understand the nature and significance of international youth volunteering in the contemporary world, I draw on three strands of theorisation within the social scientific and geographical literature concerned with the contemporary transformation of work, its globalisation and voluntary work.

The first strand has emerged around 'the new sociology of work' (Parry *et al.* 2005) and in particular the 'total social organisation of labour' (TSOL) approach (Glucksmann 1995 2005). Such a framework provides a basis to conceptualise the complexity of practices that surround international youth volunteering as it develops a far more sophisticated approach for understanding the multiple associations that constitute this activity. It does this because, as Glucksmann (2005) argues, the TSOL perspective seeks to theorise 'the differing modes of interconnection between work activities' around four interdependent dimensions. First, work activities are interconnected across 'the processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption', which are also 'likely to be relatively less geographically restricted than previously to particular locations' as well as being 'more nationally or globally dispersed' (2005, 25). These interconnections produce transformations in the form of 'new occupations, skills, divisions of labour and organizations of work associated with them' (2005, 25). The second dimension to interconnection is across 'the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, market and non-market, formal and informal sectors' (2005, 26). Work in contemporary economies becomes an activity that exists in a 'multiplex' mode, crossing all of these categories. Glucksmann in fact points to voluntary work as a key example of this with 'interconnections between ''voluntary'' and other socio-economic modes of work' existing both 'at the personal individual level' and at 'the national societal level' (2005, 30). Third is the 'interpenetration, boundaries and articulations between work and ''non-work'' processes' that address the key question of what work 'is' (2005, 31). This dimension conceptualises how work is 'undifferentiated' from non-work activities or relationships, and includes a significant emotional or aesthetic aspect, or is partially enrolled in 'consumption practices' (2005, 33). Fourth, and finally, there is a dimension around the 'interconnecting temporality of work', including the 'significance of temporality across the other three interconnections' (2005, 19). Overall, these dimensions are seen as being interdependent and any given labour 'process' will in fact 'possess' or be characterised by all four, with each one having its own characteristics that intersect or combine with these dimensions in a specific manner. The point is that 'separating out the dimensions' only amounts to 'slicing the same subject matter in a different way' (2005, 24).

A second theoretical literature spans geographical and social scientific engagements with the globalisation of work itself. Beyond the new sociology of work, theorists within geography, management studies and organisational sociology have engaged with the impact of ongoing globalisation processes on the nature of work as an economic practice. Drawing on the theories of how globalisation corresponds to a distanciation of social relations (cf. Giddens 1990; Held *et al.* 1999) and the development of new forms of relational and temporal proximity (cf. Amin 2002; Castells 2009), the 'global work' approach seeks to conceptualise work as a globalised practice around five major transformations associated with globalisation (Jones 2008): the increasing constitution of work through 'distanciated relations'; the 'scalar transformation in the embodied practices that people undertake when they ''do'' work'; the way in which work is becoming a more 'spatialised experience'; the transformation of power relations in working practice through globalisation; and the transformation of workplaces away from purely discrete physical spaces' (2008, 15–17). Such a framework builds on the insights of work within economic geography, management and organisation studies that has looked at transnational working practices (Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge 2007; Jones and Murphy 2010), worker mobilities and globalised organisational spaces (Dale and Burrell 2008). All of these

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literatures have shown how an increasing number of different forms of paid work in the global economy are enacted through a complex mixture of distanciated relations, physical worker mobility, IT-mediated practices and new material spaces (Beaverstock *et al.* 2010).

The third literature is concerned specifically with voluntary work, its impact on volunteers, host communities and its wider relationship to other phenomenon such as tourism and educational achievement. Several arguments within this existing literature are important. First, sociological theorists have engaged with the many forms of voluntary work, as well as the wide range of activities involved; this literature has assessed the nature, motivations behind and impact of volunteering as a social practice (e.g. Measham and Barnett 2008; Van Den Berg *et al.* 2009). With respect to international youth voluntary work, it is recognised that the motivation of young people to undertake this kind of activity is complex, with research indicating that a range of motivational factors are often behind an individual's choice. These include altruism, but also a desire for self-improvement and the acquisition of cultural capital and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). In this respect, Deforges' (2000) theoretical arguments concerning the closely related activity of independent travel are important. He argues that there exist 'important connections between tourism and self identity' (2000, 942), with long-haul tourism representing a form of consumption practice related to individuals 'articulating questions about identity and life-style at key ''fateful moments'' in their lives' (2000, 942). The accumulation of experience of long-haul tourism is argued to present scope for individuals to 're-narrate and re-present' self-identity in a context of social networks that provide 'a valuation' for that travel (2000, 943). Desforges thus argues that understanding long-haul travel needs to be linked to questions of connecting individual desires to different forms of 'spatial imagination' that represent specific forms of 'investment in travel' (2000, 943). In essence, contemporary international youth voluntary work placements have much in common with this kind of tourism (cf. Sherraden *et al.* 2008), representing a form of long-haul youth tourism with a work component.

Furthermore, independent travel experience is argued to be in part culturally framed in western countries by historical representations of the 'Third World' – young travellers '''frame'' the world as a series of differences to be known and experienced' (Desforges 1998, 176). Munt (1994, 106–7, cited in Desforges 1998) draws on Bourdieu's (cf. Bourdieu 1986) theories of social differentiation to argue that contemporary travel 'is part of a process of distinction, in which western cultures use consumption to mark distinctions between class factions'. For Munt, middle-class youth travel is a means 'to stoke up cultural capital' which is then used to stoke up economic capital (1994, 109; cited in Desforges 1998, 177). In this respect, travelling becomes 'an entry qualification' for some professions. It is an 'informal qualification' where the passport acts 'as professional certification' (see also Mowforth and Munt 1998). Clearly, there is a strong resonance with international youth volunteering arguably acting as a higher value-added form of cultural capital accruing activity (cf. Clarke 2004).

Yet in this paper I want to move beyond the arguments of these existing theoretical literatures. I do this through five propositions concerning how international youth voluntary work illustrates the complex nature of globalised work in the contemporary world. The first proposition concerns the spatiality of work practices involved in international youth voluntary work. This activity corresponds to a complex spatial phenomenon that exceeds the specific material location of workers or a given place. Youth volunteers' work practices are thus constituted by distant actors in both space and time, and produce outcomes that equally are not confined to the place and time at which they are enacted. In the language of TSOL, it is a much less 'geographically restricted' form of practice in comparison to many forms of past and previous work (cf. Glucksmann 2005). Second, and closely related, as with many other contemporary forms of work, international youth voluntary work exists not as a pure form of paid or unpaid, formal or informal activity (Glucksmann 2005). The practice contains aspects of all of these categories, and thus destabilises the relationship between work and non-work, as youth volunteers engage in an activity that is in a 'multiplex mode'. Third, as I have previously examined in relation to transnational business service work (Jones 2008), international youth voluntary work cannot be understood as temporally specific. This activity has multiple ramifications in relation to its meaning as a practice in the present (in the context of the educational circumstances of youth volunteers), and to its

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identity-related significance with respect to future life aspirations and career chances. Fourth, and following on, international youth voluntary work accrues complex forms of social and cultural capital for young (western) volunteers acquired through transnational mobility, and hence it facilitates the development of a range of skills increasingly essential to global corporate labour markets. Such capital has parallels with the career capital accrued by employees in transnational firms who undertake overseas work placements (Beaverstock 2005; Jones 2005). In the case of international youth volunteering, therefore, the cultural capital accrued relates to a more complicated and unpredictable process than theories concerning 'new' forms of tourism have appreciated. This proposition is closely related to a fifth and final one: that the self-identity developed by this kind of global work is central to the formation of 'global worker' and 'global professional' identities. Of particular significance is the emergence of a form of global consciousness among youth volunteers that develops a set of values and identity attributes that parallel the needs of transnational firms and other organisations for 'global workers'. Thus, this kind of global work undertaken by young people cannot be extracted from a wider context of the globalisation of other forms of work they may undertake in future.

Overseas volunteering: training for global corporate work?

Having outlined a theoretical approach that frames international youth volunteering as part of wider globalisation processes evident in many forms of contemporary work, I want now to elaborate these arguments by presenting research drawn from a substantial project that investigated the nature of international voluntary work placements schemes and their outcomes.

The data presented are drawn from two distinct strands to the project. The first strand of data is drawn from over 150 qualitative in-depth interviews and 15 focus groups conducted with youth volunteers between 2005 and 2008 into five different types of international voluntary work undertaken in seven different countries. The youth volunteers in the study undertook a range of different types of voluntary work placements, including language teaching, conservation work and community projects. Table I summarises the types of voluntary work placements, the country location of youth volunteers and the type of provider organisation. The project involved a broadly longitudinal approach with volunteers insofar as individuals were interviewed or participated in a focus group on several occasions before, during and after their voluntary work placement (and over a period of some years in some instances). The youth volunteers in the sample were aged between 18 and 25 and were from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and all were undertaking a 'gap year' of some form in line with the definition outlined earlier. The majority were what can be described as 'graduate track' youth volunteers[1] as the voluntary placement sat in the context of before, during or soon after studying for an undergraduate degree.

The second body of data comes from a more recent subsidiary component to the wider project that examined the value placed on these international volunteering work placements by corporate employers in the UK. These data consist of nine interviews with human resources or senior recruitment staff in 'blue chip' transnational firms with major office in London. The criteria for selecting respondents focused on individuals who would be key informants in relation to graduate recruitment of professional occupations in these firms. Among a number of topics covered, the interviews discussed the value placed (or not) by corporate recruiters on youth volunteering and gap year

Table I Nature of voluntary work placements in the study

Country	*Types of voluntary work*	*Types of provider*
Tanzania	School language assistant, working with children, conservation	Commercial, western charity
Guatemala	Language assistant, conservation	Commercial, western specialist charity
Belize	Conservation, community project	Commercial, western charity
Mexico	School language assistant, community project	Western charity
Vietnam	School/university language assistant, community project	Western specialist charity
Ecuador	Conservation, working with children	Western charity, western specialist charity
Australia	Working with children	Commercial, western specialist charity

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experiences. These interviews were conducted in 2006 and 2007, before the recent economic downturn. The firms these respondents represented were in a number of industries, including banking, management consultancy, legal services, retail and pharmaceuticals. A further element of these data is a number of secondary sources, including corporate reports and graduate careers literature.

The following discussion seeks to develop the theoretical framework for understanding the nature of contemporary international youth volunteering by considering each of the five propositions. While clearly many of these theoretical dimensions are interrelated, the research data presented examine each in turn.

The globality of international youth voluntary work practices

Previous work concerned with how international voluntary work represents a form of 'global work' has already proposed three attributes that distinguish this phenomenon as novel in the contemporary period: how this work is 'constituted through increasingly complex distanciated relationships between a variety of actors at the global scale' (Jones 2008, 22); how 'the practices undertaken by volunteers are themselves shaped by and involved in actively shaping economic outcomes' (2008, 23); and how 'international volunteering is producing a re-imagining of global space and the ability of the volunteer to achieve change in that space' (2008, 23). However, I want here to use the empirical research to further conceptualise the spatiality of the work practices themselves, and elaborate on the implications of Glucksmann's contention that work is becoming less 'geographically restricted'. At least three arguments can be made in this respect.

Firstly, the places in which the material practices of international voluntary work are enacted are less significant than the *spatiality* of its constitutive elements. The globalisation of this work does not mean that the physical places in which young volunteers undertake the material practices of work is suddenly unimportant. It is clear that international voluntary work is strongly constituted through the socio-material context of places where the embodied practices of work are enacted:

> The project we did – building a sports court at the school – was a big challenge. I mean they told at the London weekend [pre-placement induction] what we were going to do, and showed us photos and stuff … but when we got there of course it was very different … doing this in Africa meant it was not at all like I expected. There were lots of problems like the weather, and not being able to get to the school on the roads … we spent half a week trying to buy more tools … (Jo [Male], 19, community project, northern Tanzania)

> I never realised of course how different, like, a university in Vietnam would be. How they do things in completely different ways here, and even trying to get pens and stuff to write on the boards for the classes took ages … We had to work out how the place you know worked, and the room was like a big lecture theatre which was no good for the kinds of things [lesson activities] we'd prepared before we came… (Emma, 22, TEFL university language placement, Hanoi, Vietnam)

Yet international voluntary work is constituted through a mix of material practices enacted in 'overseas' places that are multiply related to distant actors and factors as they are undertaken. International youth voluntary work is globalised precisely because it is partially constituted through factors in material places, but simultaneously constituted through relations with multiple other places. This practice can thus only be fully understood as a balance between practice in place and the constitution of that practice through distant relationships. The descriptions by several volunteers of what work practices entailed is informative in this respect to explain how work practices represent a blend of associations with distant and co-present actors. For example, consider an account given of teaching practice by a respondent working as a university language assistant in Vietnam:

> It was hard starting and I realised I had to adapt what I had brought from home [the UK] to what the students here expect, and also what you can find out once you arrive … I hadn't done the TEFL course because this is like a taster placement and you don't need to but I got advice from a friend at home who had, and in fact I've emailed him a few times since I got here. I even actually called someone back from Uni who'd done stuff in China to get some lesson ideas … and I have been in touch with the guys at [name of provider organisation in UK] for some stuff as well. (Alex, 21, University language class assistant, Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam)

Second, and following on, the degree to which different elemental practices in international voluntary work are globalised (i.e. bound into distanciated relations) is uneven and variable. The balance of place-based and globalised elements of volunteering activity varies between specific components within the wider field of work practice.

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For example, two youth volunteers undertaking teaching assistant work placements in Africa described a mixture of work practices that in many instances are heavily constituted through place-based circumstances while in others are heavily mediated through distanciated relations:

> Laura: Some of the lessons I use all the stuff we brought from home [Australia], the materials and such … like I do a whole class on Australia and what it's like and so on … but a lot of the work here – if you mean what we do – is just what all the staff are doing … there is lots of looking after the kids in lunch breaks, and we help with other stuff that schools here do but wouldn't do … at home.
>
> Interviewer: Can you give some examples?
>
> Jane: Well, they always have local health things for the children they do through the School, teaching them about hygiene and things like that … I think the local government tells the School to do it … we helped one of the other teachers with that … (Jane 19, Laura 19, school teaching assistant placement, northern Tanzania)

The spatiality of this work activity overall is thus indeed complex, and while it is not possible to reduce the multiple spaces they occupy to a specific material place, those material spaces remain highly significant.

Furthermore, more specifically, a third argument that emerges from the research data is that to contend this is 'global work' does not mean that distanciated relations should either be prioritised, or that they are *necessarily* most significant in shaping outcomes and impacts. On the one hand, the research suggests that in some cases the whole nature of an international voluntary work experience for youth volunteers was characterised by distanciated relations. For example, in several environmental conservation projects the discursive framing, organisation and regulation of many work practices had little to do with factors in place at the site where the work was undertaken:

> The project is run locally but in fact it was set up by people from the University of Miami and so a lot of the people they have here are Americans, and they have certain ideas about conservation work. Several have been here before … and there was some disagreement with the Brits and others, cos we had a different view … so you get into this debate and people from different places telling you about how they do it in the US as opposed to Europe and what they did on another project in Asia or somewhere … (Paul, 22, forest reserve conservation project, Belize)

Distanciated relations in these cases are heavily implicated in shaping the nature or practices, and hence in the outcomes. Yet on the other hand, in other cases – and despite the prevalence of similar relations in the constitution of the working practice – place-based factors are much more important than distanciated ones in shaping outcomes:

> I've done conservation work before [in Australia], working in a bird sanctuary, and so I know a bit I guess … They have outside advice of course, but it's run through the government and the projects are monitored by the university [in Guatemala City] … So the guys know a lot about what the issues are with the locals and, you know, it's about habitat preservation so what we do is based on … local knowledge more than conservation you might learn at school. (Jed, 19, bird conservation project, north-west Guatemala)

International youth volunteering: a multiplex form of 'non/work' practice

The TSOL approach posits that work exists not as a pure but rather in a multiplex form that represents – to use the language of the 'global work' framework – an assemblage of practices that cross the categories of work/non-work, paid/unpaid and public/private. This sheds considerable theoretical insight into the nature of international youth volunteering. The research suggests that international youth voluntary work transcends these conventional categories in at least three ways, which is evident across the diverse range of activities covered by the term. The first concerns the blending of practices that de-stabilise the work/non-work boundary. The conventional binary of work being paid, private and undertaken for economic reasons as opposed to unpaid, public and non-economic reasons does not hold. Youth volunteers on many of the projects are being paid to some extent, and their motivation is partially economic, but volunteers also saw this as altruistic 'service' as well as an activity that blended recreation (tourist consumption), education and emotional satisfaction.

> I'm not doing this for the money, but I am in a sort of way as I couldn't afford stay in Asia for six months … the pay you get covers most of living costs. (Ed, 18, community project, South Vietnam)
>
> It's mostly the experience I think, I know that, like I can't save the world or anything on my gap year [laughs] … but it is satisfying to think you are being useful, and I am definitely learning loads about this country [Tanzania] … the travel at the end is also a big reason though. I'm really looking forward to that.

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(Helen, 19, teaching assistant placement, northern Tanzania)

It's about travelling, yes, but it's better than just travelling because you feel you are doing something worthwhile … it's good to have part of the time working as well … and I'm learning a lot, not just about Belize but also … kind of working with people, how to deal with people, that kind of thing. (Al, 19, community project, Belize)

While the existing new tourism literature identifies some aspects of travel, recreation and emotional satisfaction in examining independent travel (Desforges 1998; Munt 1994), their integration with forms of paid and unpaid work through these international youth volunteering placements further complicates the nature of these activities. This is work that for a significant proportion of placements is hard to distinguish from activities that would not normally be described as 'work' by those undertaking it:

The placement is loads of fun … we are definitely all having a laugh. I mean, it is kinds of work I suppose, but we get to spend the day at the beach … and the group has barbeques and tends to hang out together in evening. It's more like a different kind of activity holiday I suppose … (Paul, 21, conservation project, Belize)

Second, in assessing the range of international youth volunteering work activities investigated through the research, it is hard to distinguish between concepts of public/private and formal/informal work. Youth volunteers in the projects studied – at the level of provider organisations – had paid fees to private-sector companies to undertake unpaid 'public service' voluntary work, which, if the phenomenon overall is assessed, makes it hard to categorise this activity as either public or private:

Alice: I paid about two and a half thousand pounds for this, which is the flight and insurance and stuff …

Interviewer: They make a profit though I think?

Alice: Yeah, I know but I think the organisation here [host country school] gets something as well … so we don't get paid as such but they got us accommodation with a family so I guess that is a form of pay … and at the school we get given our lunch and snacks and stuff … (Alice, 19, school teaching assistant placement, northern Tanzania)

Third, and important in understanding the wider relationship to this phenomenon to global economy and society, employers appear to both (loosely) recognise and value this 'multiplex' mode of work. As is perhaps evident in relationship to the growing rationale towards corporate social responsibility, having graduates with some work experience of community projects, conservation or language teaching fits with shifts in corporate discourses towards this agenda:

I think people who do the interviewing [of graduates] are of course sensitive to that [type of volunteering experience] … clearly you have applicants who have gone on one of these short trips, and that's going to be not so relevant when compared to someone who has spent six months on TEFL in Africa or Asia … we would value the latter a lot more in terms of what that experience is likely to have done for them. (Head of Graduate Recruitment, US investment bank)

Temporal embeddedness in a career trajectory

In a contribution to the new sociology of work, Taylor argues that

reducing all unpaid work … to a model of voluntary work enacted by middle classes … does not help us to understand why people do unpaid public work in contemporary society. (2005, 123)

The research suggests that such a point is highly relevant to contemporary international youth volunteering. The entry point, in relation to the research presented here, is Desforges' (2000, 943) finding that there 'are huge personal investments placed in travel and related practices' that are blended with aspects of tourist consumption. While international youth volunteering arguably represents a hybrid tourist/work form at the time it is enacted, the research indicates that for many young volunteers there is a conscious relationship between this practice and future work and career trajectories. Again, three key findings are worth highlighting.

The first is that many young volunteers see international voluntary work placements as important formative experiences in the process of decisionmaking with respect to potentially working overseas in later life:

I am thinking about working for a charity or in development now. I always used to think I wanted to be in fashion … (Ali, 19, community project, Belize)

This whole experience has taught me lots of things I guess you wouldn't learn if you didn't come here … I mean I did a course on development in my degree and … but it's very different to work in another country … so yes, I think that [will be] relevant later on … if I were to work abroad, which is definitely something I

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> now am considering… (John, 21, community NGO placement, Vietnam [paraphrased])

Young people in the sample expressed a broader and less specific understanding of the relevance of international youth voluntary work as pertinent in relation to a more generalised aspiration of later employment with an international dimension:

> Definitely I think this will help with a job … although I have no idea yet, maybe in business, or law or something. I think the travel gives you an outlook on working abroad… (Sarah, 21, teaching assistant, summer camp, Australia)

Second, and importantly, the valuation of (and hence motivation to undertake) this international voluntary work experience was not necessarily closely related to the specific nature of the work undertaken. Interviews with volunteers suggested a recognition of the greater long-term value of the international dimension to these work placements, rather than necessarily gaining experience in a type of occupation. This is particularly interesting given that many of the respondents undertook voluntary work in professional contexts (e.g. teaching, medicine, conservation science):

> It has changed my view. I would definitely want to work abroad after Uni, maybe in Africa. I had never really considered that before. (Anna, 21, hospital placement [medical student], Tanzania)

> I know from this placement I don't want to teach … it's not me. But I have enjoyed being in Asia, and I would absolutely like to work here properly some time in the future. (Jack, 19, teaching assistant placement, North Vietnam)

Third, with respect to motivation, the research provided evidence of an explicit rationale (albeit ill-defined) of the value of *international* as opposed to home country volunteering because of a perceived future career advantage. A number of respondents expressed broad motivations linked to the wider context of an increasing likelihood of having to work for an international firm, and of the increasingly globalised nature of the activities that many jobs entail:

> I think this kind of thing [overseas volunteering] is likely to be something that will help me get a job one day … lots of companies need people nowadays who have travelled and are happy to work abroad… (Ed, 18, community project, South Vietnam)

> A lot of jobs involve travel. Like I have thought about law – partly because I have an older cousin who is a lawyer and he has to work in Asia a lot, so yes, it's definitely relevant. (Jon, 19, community project, northern Guatemala)

Youth volunteers did not of course express this motivation in explicitly strategic terms, but the key finding is the fact that for many young people, international youth voluntary work undertaken now relates to an anticipated likelihood of having to undertake future paid global work of one form or another.

The accumulation of skills, capacities and social capital

The research adds considerable insight to the youth travel and new tourism literature's argument that middle-class youth travel is a means 'to stoke up cultural capital', which is then used to 'stoke up' economic capital (Desforges 2000; Munt 1994). Furthermore, international youth volunteering blurs the boundaries between 'cultural' and 'economic' capital insofar as it represents a higher 'yield' of cultural capital than independent tourism on its own. In this respect, international youth volunteering corresponds to 'independent travel with added value' insofar as it forms a basis not only for class distinction (although in a complex form) and forges new forms of self-identity, but also develops labour market and skills advantages. In that sense this practice *transcends* either pure 'new tourism' or unpaid informal work experience, and is also interwoven with the needs and demands of contemporary globalising labour markets. Notwithstanding the diversity of types of work placement in the research, two key findings stand out in this respect.

First, both volunteers and corporate recruiters identified what can be labelled global skills and capacities that would advantage young people at a later point in the labour market when seeking employment. Reflecting the graduate track nature of the respondents, these skills and capacities were seen as intangible and different to those young volunteers would acquire from formal education, as well as being only acquirable by working abroad (i.e. outside of their home country):

> A good overseas gap year experience is invaluable … where people have been challenged, taken out of the comfort zone … they learn a lot of intangibles – getting on with people, organising themselves, engaging with unfamiliar ideas, self-discipline. (Manager, Human Resources, UK management consultancy firm)

> The kind of graduates who have done that [international volunteering placement] tend to stand out … I

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> mean, that's a cliché in many ways, as anyone in graduate recruitment can tell you, but I think for the people who really have done that tough stint overseas, we find they have a lot more of those skills you want when they work in a global company like this … they have some know-how … they can deal with the likely challenges if you like. (Graduate Recruitment, EU logistics firm)

A body of work already exists outlining the more traditional non-codified skills that young people acquire from volunteering, including interpersonal, leadership, communication and organisational skills (cf. Lough *et al.* 2009; Sherraden *et al.* 2008).[2] However, volunteer respondents did not articulate these skills and capacities in explicitly future employment-related terms, but both the focus group discussions before the work placement and post-placement interviews provide support for the acquisition of these 'international work experience-related capacities' as both a motivation for, and outcome of, undertaking this work:

> Jan: I think it will help when it comes to a job. I don't know what I want to do after uni but definitely something involving travel … I mean like living abroad.
>
> Sam: Yeah [nods] that's part of it for me too…
>
> Jan: And I think this kind of experience [placement in Vietnamese school] helps when it comes to interviews … because you are going to have to learn how to deal with being there [Ho Chi Minh] … and I guess companies want that kind of thing.
>
> Mark: [interrupts, nodding] Yeah, that's one of the things they said at my school … in [the] Careers [Service] I mean. ('Pre-placement' Focus Group 4, Vietnam placement volunteers)

Second, a particular capacity cited by corporate employer respondents falls under the term 'cultural sensitivity'. This represents a good example of the form of cultural-economic capital accrued by young people through this work practice. This generic term 'cultural sensitivity' is not targeted at a specific national or ethnic cultural form *per se* in the view of recruiters, but rather reflects the valuation of a set of skills acquired through the experience of working in a different cultural context overseas:

> It is about being able to apply knowledge, if you boil it down … my view is that, definitely, it is about knowing how to engage with another culture … realising that not only do you have to work differently, take account of another culture's values, but also adapt whatever it is the job entails to that context … so having these experiences [international volunteering] we think is invaluable in beginning that learning. (HR Manager, UK retail company (apparel))

The 'during' and 'after' work placement element of the research with volunteers supported this employer valuation insofar as the evidence suggests young volunteers gain experiential-based knowledge of other countries and cultures that they see as relevant to future life:

> It [the placement] was useful in … well just being somewhere foreign and seeing it for yourself … there is a lot of stuff you learn as you go about places, like how to deal with people from different religions, what is customary in another country … you learn fast that other places are different and that they do things differently. (Karen, 19, teaching assistant placement, Guatemala)

Furthermore, a number of respondents were able to articulate the value of acquiring cultural sensitivity that might both mark them out as distinctive among their peers, and also advantage them in future labour market scenarios:

> Understanding other cultures … that's a really important aspect of this and, you know, like many of my friends haven't been away from Britain much [laughs], and certainly not here [Vietnam] and it probably makes you more interesting in a job interview for sure. (James, 21, community project, southern Vietnam)
>
> I'd say the experience of having worked in somewhere different from home [UK] is helpful on your CV … it shows you can adjust … and deal with other countries and languages and culture… (Andy, 19, community project, northern Tanzania)

The development of a global worker self identity

The research suggests an important and emerging relationship between international voluntary work, the development of 'global consciousness' in volunteers and its desirability in relation to later global work and career paths. Desforges argues that 'connections between spatial imaginations and self-identity are of great importance in understanding … tourism practices' (2000, 943), but the research in this project suggests that as far as the rise of international youth volunteering is concerned, an even more complex set of issues is present. Put simply, as a blended work/non-work and globalised practice, the impact of international voluntary work on values and identity is something both volunteers and corporate employers are aware of and value. Three findings are of particular importance.

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First, while as discussed the acquisition of formal codified knowledge concerning host countries and communities might be limited or poorly contextualised (cf. Simpson 2005), the wider imaginative impact on their conception of the world is substantial. Such a broader imaginative impact might be termed the development of 'global consciousness', which represents a loose but new understanding among volunteers of global society and an awareness of the interrelatedness of human interactions:

> I have learnt loads about the people here, and a lot about what teaching involves … but, the culture is so different, and when we first got here, we had all these stereotypes … they're like … completely gone. I think in a way that is the most important thing. It is hard to describe, but I could never have imagined what being in Africa would be like before I came … I know so much now I would have no idea about if I hadn't done this. (Paul, 22, secondary school placement, Tanzania)

> Being here [Hannoi] gives you a different view … like Britain is long way away, and you realise there are so many other places … like we are only a few hundred miles from the south of China here, and everyone's much more bothered about what is going on in Asia than in Europe… (Al, 21, university language assistant placement, Vietnam)

The development of this loosely-defined 'global consciousness' is something that graduate recruiters unequivocally saw as valuable. Again the valuation of what one corporate human resources manager described as 'global perspective' is an attribute bound into their perceived need for young employees who are not only prepared to travel, but also are interested in and open-minded about other parts of the world:

> What we would see as strong in a graduate who's been overseas is that changed worldview … it shows someone who wanted to go abroad, who is keen to see new places and open to new things … not the kind of awareness that school or university will teach people… (HR Manager, US food, beverage and other consumables firm, London)

Second, the research suggests that in contrast to Simpson's finding in her study that international volunteering was of little pedagogic value (Simpson 2005),[3] many young volunteers in this longitudinal study clearly demonstrated an enhanced understanding of the host country context. This allowed them to develop an informed range of values on issues with a strong normative dimension including the political and economic situation and the interconnectedness of life in the host country with wider world society:

> When I arrived, well, it felt very foreign. I mean really strange, and I knew very little if I think about it, about Vietnam … since then, well, I kind of feel I now know a lot … like I mean we have been involved in classes on Vietnamese history, which got me more interested … and, I guess, made me realise how they sees things differently here, you know, like the view of the [Vietnam] war is so different. (Alice, 19, teaching placement, South Vietnam)

While corporate employers in the study tended to be vague on the issue of what values they sought in future employees, it is clear from the research that the capacity to develop informed opinions based on 'global values', loosely expressed as a positive view of globalisation and an interconnected global society, represents a relevant and desirable capacity for undertaking global corporate work:

> Definitely important is some sense in them [graduate recruits] that the mission of the company is of wider general benefit…, not like we're saving the world, of course … but I mean in terms of internationalising the business, we bring products, contribute to rising living standards and so on … they don't have to be zealots or anything, but if they've been overseas … I think they will understand and have some sympathy… (HR Manager, EU food products firm, London [paraphrased])

Third, and importantly, the research suggests that young volunteers do gain some sense of a global identity (cf. Sherraden *et al.* 2005) and also of their own capacity to participate or intervene in society beyond their home country:

> It's good to be involved in something, even though we know it's only a small contribution … but I think it makes you realise you can make a difference, even if that's small … that's the main thing, 'cos it's not something I think I felt before … I would definitely think about doing another project abroad for longer … after Uni maybe… (Ellie, 19, school placement, South Vietnam)

Again, the research with corporate employers suggests that this apparent development or reassessment of their sense of identity is a desirable characteristic in potential new recruits associated with firms' valuation of employers who identify with being part of a globalised business community. While there are obviously distinct differences between identifying oneself as a global citizen in broad terms and part of the transnational business class in a more specific way (cf. Robinson 2004;

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Sklair 2001), corporate recruiters did clearly regard the former as a potential precursor to the latter:

> A sense of being – and I know this sounds a bit clichéd – but a globally-minded person, is one of the things we would certainly be looking for … someone who is going to be able to identify themselves as part of a global firm, rather than just an employee of [name of firm] in London. (Partner, UK legal service firm, London)

Conclusion: international youth volunteering as a complex form of globalised work

Theoretical understandings of the globalisation of work to date have treated the concept of work itself as relatively unproblematic. The epistemological premise has generally, until recently, been that work is a located practice occurring in specific places and in particular delimited time-frames that are affected, in one way or another, by what we might term 'globalisation processes'. In effect, the approach has been to try to understand how work practices are in some way influenced by distant factors at any given moment. The central theoretical goal of this paper has been to argue that such an understanding of the globalisation of work is inadequate, and that globalisation has further destabilised the concept of what work 'is', along with where and when it takes places as a form of practice. Building on both the new sociology of work, the TSOL approach and a 'global work' perspective, the research presented reveals how contemporary international youth voluntary work transcends existing categorisations of work as a form of spatio-temporal practice. International youth volunteering is a far more complex phenomenon in the contemporary world than has been acknowledged by the existing social science literature. It needs to be understood as part of a developing global civil society, new forms of tourism, the development of a transnational (business) class and the labour market needs of transnational firms. That is not to suggest that it is an activity purely 'caused' or driven by any one of these factors, but rather that this form of work practice is a multi-dimensional phenomenon whose development is a consequence of many different changes in economic rationales, societal values, identities and aspirations, and developing global interconnectedness.

These theoretical arguments have wider resonance in the social sciences. The case of international youth volunteering may be specific and in some respects atypical of many forms of work in the contemporary world, but the broader theoretical arguments developed in this paper offer scope to provide insight into how work is being transformed in the contemporary era of globalisation more generally. The empirical research presented demonstrates how this form of apparently unpaid, voluntary and informal work is in fact increasingly hard to disentangle from private, paid and formalised work in the global economy. While international youth volunteering is perhaps a more extreme example, the blurring of these categorical boundaries reinforces the need for a wider reconceptualisation of the concept of work and its relationship to non-work practices. More important from a geographical perspective, however, is the need to more explicitly theorise the complex spatio-temporality of practices that constitute work. The destabilisation of categories identified by the new sociology of work has only begun to examine the far-reaching implications of the reconfigured geographical form of work, and this is a theoretical agenda that geographical thinking is well positioned to engage with.

With respect more specifically to how international youth volunteering is understood in conceptual and policy terms, the arguments developed in this paper have significant implications. Contrary to much of the popular presentation of this activity as little more than a form of tourism, the research demonstrates how this phenomenon is bound into the development of a range of values, identities, knowledges, skills and attitudes that are aligned with and equip young people to compete more effectively in increasingly transnationalised skilled worker labour markets. As a form of work it therefore provides a preparatory experience and informal training for employment in paid 'global jobs', whether they be in private- or public-sector employment. The research with corporate graduate recruiters provides an indication of the extent of associations that international youth volunteering has with labour markets and future global socio-economic development. While young volunteers may be ill-informed and influenced by postcolonial discourses (Simpson 2005), they are also (in part at least) rational actors whose motivations and understanding of this practice are also bound into awareness of potential future employment, career and life circumstances. Equally, the evidence from key actors in transnational firms is that key gatekeepers (i.e. human resources managers and recruiters) unequivocally value international voluntary work.

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Finally, of course it needs to be acknowledged that the research data in this paper have been concerned with a specific *kind* of international youth voluntary work. The longer term placements undertaken by the cohorts of western young people in the study more closely fit the traditional notion of an organised 'year out' or 'gap year' placement. Clearly, because the concept of international youth voluntary work covers all manner of activities, the relevance of the findings presented here will be variable depending on the specific nature of a given form of international voluntary work experience. Yet future research needs to engage with how we might better understand the relationship between this form of globalised work and the wider (re)production of a burgeoning globalised business class who – as key corporate actors – will increasingly shape the nature of the global economy in the decades to come. For if international youth voluntary work represents another component of training or educational experiences that builds social and cultural capital (cf. Devereux 2008; Lewis 2005), then it is equally likely to reinforce the exclusion of those who cannot participate. In that respect, more is at stake for young people in assessing whether to invest in and undertake this kind of work than simply whether or not to consume a more exciting or challenging tourist experience. It is therefore important that further research takes up the more sophisticated conception of this kind of work practice developed through this paper that moves beyond existing binary categorisations such as work/non-work, production/consumption or tourism/travel.

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Notes

1 Jones (2004) outlines a typology of different forms of 'gap year' activity that distinguishes university-related 'gap years' from those taken from employment or training. Thus, a university-related gap year may include international voluntary work at several points in a young person's university career, including both 'pre-university' and 'post'-university gap years, as well as some degree programmes that facilitate (or even require) some kind of international work placement as an embedded part of the course.

2 And see Bell (2007) on how employers use voluntary work to develop leadership skills.

3 Clearly the impact of such placements is highly dependent on the nature and length of the placement. Simpson's finding no doubt holds for some.

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