‘The white helper’ narrative in the context of marketization

A postcolonial analysis of the construction of meaning in non-profit and for-profit volunteering – a case study of Volontärresor and Church of Sweden

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PREFACE

I wish to express my gratitude to Maria Eriksson Baaz, my supervisor, for bringing clarity and for supervising this thesis in a most supportive and encouraging manner. I also wish to direct thanks to supportive family members and friends for proofreading.
INTRODUCTION

When we think of gruesome events from the past, we usually wish to refer to them precisely as having ended. Inayatullah and Blaney (2012) describe this phenomenon as ‘the social construction of deflection’ and mean that there is a continued political effort at trying to forget one’s own painful past, such as colonialism. Instead there is a focus on good progress that has been made, on good norms that have taken hold. The authors point to the possibility of harmful, underlying continuities as a result of this tendency. When regarding colonialism and colonial stereotypes and identities, many of us would very much like to place them in the past. In spite of this, what if there are in fact continuities of colonial, unequal relationships? What roles do we all play in that? In what ways do these ghosts from the past show themselves today, and how can we make them stop?

Those questions, in particular the latter one, are all monumental questions that I will not cover in this thesis. What I however wish to contribute with is possibly increased awareness of underlying continuities in our very present day that have historical pasts, as well as point to the fact that we all play a part in constructing group identities and may either challenge inequalities or reinforce them.

What will be analyzed in this thesis are two Swedish organizations that provide opportunities for volunteering in the Global South. The two choices, a for-profit and a non-profit organization, stem from an interest in the neoliberal, marketized world that we live in, which has had consequences for several fields, such as development. Through neoliberalism and marketization, new actors have entered the development field and there has been a blurring of lines of who is supposed to be an actor in development (Schech, 2017; Ponte & Richey, 2014a & 2014b). For example, businesses have entered the development field and development has then increasingly become associated with consumption of ‘ethical’ products; it has also become more accessible for the public to engage in development matters and ‘help’. However, the blurring of lines occur in multiple ways, as in addition to the rising involvement of commercial actors in development, the non-profit organizations have also come to show increasing signs of marketization (Maier et al., 2016).

Blurred lines also occur regarding the very role of the development worker and the volunteer. While international development work and volunteering for development, whereby Western experts and volunteers engage in development work in the Global South goes long back, a rather novel phenomenon is volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, where commercial
actors sell the idea of working for development and combine it with travel and activities (Schech, 2017).

There are consequences and criticisms raised both with regards to the marketization of aid and to voluntourism. Among other issues, scholars point to that marketization of aid means that the sense of accountability for development outcomes is often missing, and that simplified versions of development are sold to customers in order to sell the products that contribute to a good cause (Ponte & Richey, 2014a). Some argue that these practices distance the ‘Western consumer’ from the ‘poor Other’ and that the poor become part of an attractive story that is sold to consumers (Ibid). Voluntourism specifically has been criticized by many scholars as explained by Palacios (2010) due to that volunteers are usually unqualified for the work as well as inexperienced, and hence, it could hardly contribute to development in the first place.

A further part of voluntourism that has been criticized, and which has previously been applied to the phenomenon of ‘Western’ development workers and aid work, is the stereotypes and hierarchies it upholds through the ‘white helper’ narrative. Such critique has since long been articulated by postcolonial critics of the field of development and its practices, whom have highlighted the inherent, racialized inequalities, ideologies and the divisions between the developed Northern helper and savior and the underdeveloped, backward and passive South. While (non-profit) development organizations to some extent has acknowledged and debated the risks of reproducing these colonial stereotypes in development work (Eriksson Baaz, 2005: 169), the increasing marketization of aid and the entrance of commercial actors in the field open up new questions about potential effects of it and if there is a relationship between marketization and the reproduction of inequalities and classic stereotypes in aid.

In this analysis I seek to probe into these questions by analyzing two Swedish organizations that offer volunteering: Volontärresor, a commercial volunteer organization, and Church of Sweden, a more traditional, non-profit aid organization. With the thought that a non-profit would be less marketized and more aware of internal criticisms and afraid of reproducing the ‘white helper’ narrative, I will analyze how the two organizations present or make volunteering attractive to the potential volunteer.

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Drawing on postcolonial theory, this thesis aims to analyze and compare a commercial organization and a more traditional, non-profit organization with the hope to contribute to
increased understanding for the volunteer phenomenon in the current stage of marketization, where commercial actors partly have seized the role of the volunteer worker. By analyzing a for-profit and a non-profit organization, I also aim to shed light on the potential link between increased marketization of aid and the upholding of stereotypes that have characterized aid organizations for a long time. I will search to fulfill this aim through the following two research questions:

- How is volunteering presented and sold by Volontärresor and Church of Sweden and in particular, are there traces of the ‘white helper’ narrative, and in that case, in what way?
- What differences can be identified in the ways in which volunteer work is sold by Volontärresor and Church of Sweden? In particular, does the white helper narratives appear stronger in the documents by Volontärresor?

CONTRIBUTION AND RELATION TO OTHER RESEARCH
This thesis aims to contribute to several scholarly fields related to development studies. In particular it seeks to contribute to fields addressing the marketization of aid, as well as volunteering. On a more general level it seeks to contribute to postcolonial development studies. The unique contribution of my thesis lies in that two inherently different organizations are analyzed – one a new, commercial actor and the other a traditional, non-profit actor. Analyzing two different volunteer organizations of this kind in the context of the marketization of aid has, to my knowledge, not been done.

DELIMITATIONS
The limits of this study are found in the fact that only two organizations are analyzed and therefore, the findings cannot be generalized but merely regarded as indications. Further, the differences found could relate to several other factors than the level of marketization.

OUTLINE
The thesis will be structured in the following way: First will follow a theoretical overview with previous, relevant research and the theoretical framework for the study. After follows a section about the methodology of the study, with sections about how cases and data were selected and the chosen method for the study. The analysis will then be conducted, which is divided into three main parts. Lastly follows a section with conclusions that can be drawn.
THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

In the following, I will give an overview of the theoretical framework of the study. I will first provide an overview of research on the marketization of aid, situating voluntourism within such processes. Then I will continue by giving an overview of volunteering and voluntourism more specifically, and point to some criticisms. Lastly, I will go into the main field of postcolonial studies, and regard volunteering from that perspective.

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE MARKETIZATION OF AID

In setting the stage for my analysis, it is important to give substance for my interest in commercial versus non-commercial actors. As demonstrated in research, there has been a shift in global approaches regarding what should take the lead in development, from states to the market. Wilson (2017 & 2011) refers to the turn from developmentalism to neoliberalism and that the encouragement of markets is now thought of as the solution to development problems. According to Ponte & Richey (2014a & 2014b), development and aid has increasingly become connected to consumption. Some refer to the ‘marketization of aid’, whereupon businesses have adopted development agendas and connected their products to a good cause. They improve their ethical profile while also contributing with money to development projects. In other words, there are new actors and alliances in development, where also consumers and celebrities have been given further space and importance (Ibid).

As Maier et al. (2016) show, neoliberalism has not only meant the prioritization of markets and new actors in development, but also that more traditional non-profit organizations, since the 1980s, have started to become more business-like. The processes of becoming business-like may be traced in any dimension – such as adapting business-like goals or rhetoric, despite being a non-profit organization. In short, one could talk of a blurring of lines in the field of development and aid, where even the whole role of the aid/development worker has been appropriated by commercial actors, as reflected in the case of Volontärresor analyzed here.

Scholars point to certain issues related to the marketization of aid and the focus on neoliberalism. Ponte and Richey (2014a) coined the term ‘Brand Aid’ partly in reference to how it contributes to aid, but also how it is ‘aid to brands’ by improving their image. The fact that matters of aid and development are being linked to products has meant that there has also been a form of production of development stories that are simplistic and manageable in order to sell the products well (Ponte & Richey, 2014a); the products are sold both as a contribution to development but also for consumers to feel good, as it follows a form of purchase-contribution logic. It is argued that this logic distances consumers from faraway, poor
‘Others’ (Ibid). Ponte and Richey (2014b) also stress the lack of accountability and sense of who is responsible for good development outcomes in these scenarios, and that there is seldom real pro-poor commitment. Wilson (2017) further argues that the shift from developmentalism to neoliberalism leads to the silencing of resistance to present types of imperialism and a downplaying of issues of inequality, oppression and exploitation that might still continue, due to the emphasis on neoliberal ideas.

THE VOLUNTEER PHENOMENON – BLURRED LINES BETWEEN VOLUNTOURISM AND VOLUNTEERING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Let me now turn to volunteering and voluntourism, since this is the area of scrutiny in this essay. Linked to the present day volunteer phenomenon is the fact that “doing good” has become much more accessible to each individual, but also requested. Awareness of development challenges has increased through the global development goals, media, and through the processes of marketization, and everyone is presented as able to do their part in development (Schech, 2017). Ponte and Richey (2014a) labels this the ‘privatization of helping’ where it has become popular to engage with development practices and contribute in some way.

Volunteering goes into the above discussion as a field that has undergone changes due to neoliberalism and the marketization – from being a phenomenon of the non-profit development establishment, it has now also been appropriated by commercial actors. It is part of the marketization of aid since commercial actors, as in commercial volunteer organizations, are a type of business new to development that take the role of the aid worker and sell it to consumers as something attractive. Volunteer tourism is argued to be part of the commoditization and privatization of development and global justice agendas (Mostafanezhad, 2013b). McGloin and Georgeou (2016) talk of the experience of volunteering precisely as a commodity, where poor people and poverty have become part of this marketization of “doing development” as something appealing to the ‘Western’ consumer. In summarizing this phenomenon in the current context, Schech (2017: 5) writes with clarity: “Volunteers are led to believe that buying the right holiday enables them to exercise global responsibility and make a difference in disadvantaged communities in the Global South while still having fun and seeing the world.”

According to Schech (2017), there has been a fast expansion of international volunteering in the 21st century, wherein people from the Global North go to the Global South. International volunteering for development is in itself not a new thing, but what the author sees is a blurring
of lines between the traditional international volunteering for aid and the new voluntourism as a business. Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, in contrast to the traditional type, can be seen as a package of activities and development work during a shorter period of time that consumers pay for (Schech, 2017; McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). The traditional volunteering for development is usually a longer placement where the development impact is at the centre and the volunteer has expertise, usually as an educated professional. To further blur the lines, governments have also started to finance similar short-term international youth experience programs (Schech, 2017).

Voluntourism has come to be criticized from different angles in terms of its outcomes. It is argued to mainly benefit the volunteer in different ways rather than the host since placements are short and the volunteers usually unqualified, and this could then hardly contribute to development (Palacios, 2010). Some argue that it is even harmful as a practice, since it might create dependent relationships and poor communities are sometimes forced to “stay needy” in order to appeal to volunteers (Sin, 2010).

THE POSTCOLONIALISM ASPECT

After having situated volunteering in the context of marketization, let me now account for postcolonial perspectives and critiques of development, which provide the main theoretical framework guiding my analysis. Here, I will give an overview of theoretical ideas regarding colonial stereotypes and identities, as well as to the colonial legacies in development work. As will be seen, voluntourism, development and aid are like most things not unproblematic fields.

The reason why a postcolonial analysis of volunteering and voluntourism is so relevant is because these practices are attached to ideas of ‘helping’ and because it is mainly people from the North going to the South. Going to volunteer is part of, or connected to, the broader field of development and aid work, which has long been criticized from postcolonial angles as reproducing colonial identities, such as articulated by Escobar (1995). According to postcolonial studies, colonization did not only shape the identities and images of the colonized and the colonizers, but has had a global impact in terms of identities (Eriksson et al., 1999: 16-17). Thus, Sweden can be regarded as no exception. The field of postcolonialism is an attempt at looking past boundaries and identities that were created during colonialism, and analyze how traces of such images still shape contemporary societies.

As a background, Osterhammel (1995: 108-112) points to a few main ideas that shaped colonial discourse. Central was the idea of the colonial subject as an ‘Other’, as inherently
different and inferior both mentally and physically to the colonizer. Relatedly, colonialism was regarded as a mission, as guardianship, where the colonizers acted upon their responsibilities as a higher race. The author writes: “Colonial rule was glorified as the gift and act of grace of civilization”.

As several postcolonial scholars have argued, the very idea and practice of development is shaped by colonial history. Escobar (1995: 6) for instance, described development as a “historically produced discourse” and refers to “the invention of development”, a field full of European constructs of other parts of the world, for example as underdeveloped, and meant that “representations of the Third World through development are no less pervasive and effective than their colonial counterparts. Perhaps even more so.” The author argued that the development discourse is governed by the same principles as colonialist discourse and wrote:

“It has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise over, the Third World. This apparatus came into existence roughly in the period 1945 to 1955 and has not since ceased to produce new arrangements of knowledge and power, new practices, theories, strategies, and so on.” (Escobar, 1995: 8).

In his influential book, Easterly (2006: 21) similarly linked development to colonial history by maintaining that the “uncivilized” became the “underdeveloped” and “savage peoples” became the “third world”. According to Wilson (2011), development is firmly rooted in ideas of race, as people of the South tend to be regarded as objects, as receivers of development, from mainly white ‘experts’. When the so-called development industry begun after 1945, the European model was regarded as having moved further on the evolutionary scale; with this logic, other societies were automatically regarded as backward, as childish, as something of the past (Eriksson Baaz, 2005: 36-40). Escobar (1995: 8) similarly discussed development literature with features of the ‘third world’ and its peoples such as:

“powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the (white) Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently hungry, illiterate, needy, and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative, and traditions.” (Escobar, 1995: 8)

Not all too different, “natives” during colonialism were often regarded as: “lazy, shiftless, cruel, playful, naïve, dissolute, duplicitous, incapable of abstract thought, impulsive, etc.” (Osterhammel, 1995: 109).

Easterly (2006: 21) argued that the colonial mentality of ‘the white man’s burden’ to civilize and aid the colonized peoples continued into development assistance. Despite a change of attitudes after 1945 when colonialism formally ended, the idea of the ‘West’ transforming the ‘Rest’ continued as the West took it upon themselves to help the poor develop through big,
utopian plans and coercive top-down planning with little regard for the poor themselves. As the author wrote about this period: “Soon was born the development expert, the heir to the missionary and the colonial officer.” With some historical insight then, it is not strange that development and aid practices have been tainted with colonial ideologies.

According to Easterly (2006: 22), the ongoing delusion among people from the West is that they, simply for having been born and studied in a ‘developed’ society, have the inherent knowledge to help others develop. Schech (2017) similarly describes an ‘aidland’ – a field with certain logics, ideologies and language constructed around the idea that the North holds the power and expertise in development.

Regarding volunteering and voluntourism specifically, Schech (2017) places international volunteering within this ‘aidland’ of certain ideas and ideologies, and several authors criticize voluntourism due to the colonial images and identities it reproduces, hence from a post-colonial angle. It is argued to reinforce colonial relations of the superiority of the West and inferiority of the South as volunteers are presented as able and with the power to provide needy others with what they ‘lack’, and this leads to that local efforts or knowledge are then regarded as inferior and locals as ignorant (McGoin & Georgeou, 2016). Mostafanezhad (2013a) similarly points to the inherent hierarchy and the division between the savior and helper at the one end, and the recipient to be saved at the other. Through voluntourism, the ‘West’ is continually portrayed as the responsible and caring developed world whereas the receivers are part of a more passive ‘third world’ in need (Sin, 2010). Some scholars outright link voluntourism to neo-colonialism (Palacios, 2010).

Most of the stereotypes I am interested in have been mentioned, and as the title of this thesis reveals, the overarching one can be viewed to be the idea of the ‘white helper’ or ‘savior’, a recurrent conception in colonialism and aid work. To conclude, connected to the ‘white helper’ is the belief in the West’s superiority and automatically then the inferiority of the South. There are inherent capacities of ‘Westerners’ to help ‘Others’ develop, often as ‘experts’ despite being unskilled or inexperienced. With the ‘Other’ as passive, helpless, needy, as the past, backward etc., it is the ‘Westerner’ that is in focus whereas the Other is reduced to an object, a receiver.

The most common stereotypes often come in pairs as opposing, hierarchical dichotomies applied to the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. Eriksson Baaz (2005: 43) lists these rigid dichotomies as: “nature/culture, reason/emotion, irrationality/rationality, body/mind, passivity/innovation, feminine/masculine, civilization/barbarism, unrestrained sexuality/control, etc.” Apart from the classic degrading stereotypes of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Rest’, imagining the ‘Other’ in
positive, romantic or exotic ways was also common during colonialism (Ibid: 54-56). In a romantic way, the ‘savage’ could also be portrayed as noble, living a simple and innocent life in nature, as someone holding on to something simple and desirable that the ‘West’ had/has lost. As shown and articulated by numerous scholars, still today people of the ‘third world’ are more often than not represented as “poor but happy” and presented in positive ways, although this is just as stereotyping as negative representations (Schech, 2017; Crossley; 2012).

Worthy to mention for this analysis is a shift in the development discourse in the 1980s that scholars have highlighted. Criticism of Eurocentrism, paternalism and inequality in aid and development practices as well as the decades of failed, big development plans led to changes (Easterly, 2006: 53; Escobar, 1995: 5-17). There was an introduction of a partnership discourse that in part emphasized equality, partnerships, cultural exchange and the professionalism of the aid worker instead of the classic donor-receiver relationships, and this affected and affects development organizations and actors (Schech, 2017; Eriksson Baaz, 2005: 6-27, 169; Mason 2011). However, paternalism and classic stereotypes with colonial legacies have persisted even in the partnership discourse itself as well as in voluntourism as brought up previously.

METHODOLOGY

In this section, I shall explain by what method I have sought to answer to my research questions. I shall also explain how I have chosen the organizations and cases, as well as provide some initial information about the structure of the material analyzed that might be important to understand before reading the analysis.

DEFINITIONS

When embarking on this study, I aimed to find a commercial and a non-commercial volunteer organization in order to analyze their discourses and potential inclusion of the ‘white helper’ and discern potential differences between the two. Interested in my home country, Sweden, I chose to search for Swedish institutions and my criteria was to find instances when individuals from the Global North go to the Global South to do unpaid volunteer work in some way (Schech, 2017). As a commercial option, Volontärresor emerged immediately, appearing to be the largest commercial volunteer organization in Sweden through its online material. As for a non-commercial actor, the Church of Sweden emerged as a suiting organization, being one of the rather few non-profit institutions in Sweden that still sends volunteers to the Global South. The Church of Sweden, compared to for example other
churches offering volunteering, was the state church until the year 2000 and is the largest denomination in Sweden (Church of Sweden, 2017). Although it is interesting in its own right to analyze the largest organizations, an additional reason for choosing these is that they provide more material to analyze and one can imagine that they are more aware of criticisms as they receive more attention than a small organization.

What should be explained is that Church of Sweden’s volunteer opportunities are referred to not mainly as volunteering. While these positions, same as Volontärresor, involve going to do unpaid volunteer work in the Global South, Church of Sweden refers to them as “internships” and volunteers as “interns”. Yet, and as I will show, despite the difference in name the basic criteria are the same for the two organizations and the work that is done by volunteers/interns is highly comparable. For this reason, Church of Sweden’s internships can be conceptualized as part of the volunteer phenomenon. What might be confusing is the fact that both the terms voluntourism and volunteering are used in the essay, this for the fact that ‘voluntourism’ – commercial volunteering combined with travel – is the more common term used for the commercial version of volunteering. The volunteer element is equally present in both cases, but the difference in marketization is, as explained, the element of particular interest. Finally, what should be mentioned is that Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, finances Church of Sweden’s internship programs.

DATA SELECTION
I chose to analyze the organizations’ webpages with information about the volunteering or internships since this is where the organizations mainly present, or sell, their volunteering. The amount of material found points to the fact that this is where they try to attract volunteers, as Internet is increasingly important for most actors wishing to stay relevant in a digital society.

What have been analyzed are five web pages including information about internship programs by the Church of Sweden, which are administered by different dioceses, as well as six pages with varied volunteer projects by Volontärresor. Also included are what I call the two organizations’ ‘main pages’. In the case of Church of Sweden it is the first page with information about the internship program, which then directs the reader to the respective dioceses’ pages. In the case of Volontärresor, the main page is the home page of the website.

What should be mentioned is that the pages are in Swedish and I have then had to translate citations used in the analysis into English; although I have done my uttermost to translate
most accurately, this is of course an element that is affected by the author’s personal interpretation and ability.

**Church of Sweden’s cases**

Since Volontärresor has a large amount of volunteer projects, Church of Sweden, having fewer projects than Volontärresor, came to set the standard for the study in the number of projects analyzed. I wished to select a reasonable amount of cases in order to conduct a proper discourse analysis. Out of the 13 dioceses of the Church, six of them have internship programs and every diocese provides its own web page with information about its internship abroad. Out of the six, one has been excluded (Uppsala diocese) since its page was being updated at the moment of case selection.

The dioceses with internships included in the analysis are: Stockholm diocese, sending interns to Tanzania; Västerås diocese, sending interns to Tanzania and Moçambique; Växjö diocese, sending interns to Costa Rica; Lund diocese, sending interns to Tanzania; and Luleå diocese, also sending interns to Tanzania. To conclude, five pages with internships have been analyzed in the case of Church of Sweden, as well as the main page.

The structure to the pages is varied. Some of the texts are simple accounts where the organizations present volunteering. Yet on some pages, parts of the texts consist of accounts of volunteers themselves about their experience or with information about them. While these accounts certainly reflect the views of individuals, the fact that they have been chosen by the organization to be presented at the webpage means that they do not only reflect individual views but form part of what the organization wants to and deem appropriate to present.

**Volontärresor’s cases**

Six volunteer projects at Volontärresor were chosen, in order to analyze an equal amount as on Church of Sweden. Since this study relates to human relations and identities, projects related to animals were excluded. Volontärresor provides a list of themes to which the varied projects belong, and in order to receive a mix of projects, I narrowed down the search to the following themes: *Children & youth; Human rights; and Health care*. For diversity and balance, I included projects from different continents.

For the theme *Children & youth*, three projects were chosen: one situated in the Himalayas, India; one in Ghana; and one in San José, Costa Rica. The project in Ghana situates volunteers at a local school in Ghana and involves teaching. The project in India holds multiple opportunities concerning teaching, working at a daycare and within health care. The project in Costa Rica situates volunteers at a daycare centre for children. Regarding the theme
Human rights, I chose only a project in Ghana, since the theme merely included five projects in total (and most were situated in Africa). In this project, volunteers hold lectures in the subject of sexual assault. Regarding the theme Health care, two projects were chosen: one in Namibia and one in Ecuador, both involving the provision of health care or working within health care related projects. Conclusively, a mix of human-centred projects have been analyzed, situated in the countries of Ghana, India, Costa Rica, Namibia and Ecuador.

Apart from the main page, the pages with the six projects at Volontärresor hold a similar structure. Apart from an introduction, there are four main headings in the texts: The role of the volunteer, including tasks, the purpose of the project, information about the receiving organization and answers to how to book the trip; Your days, including where the volunteer will stay and ideas about what to do during free time; About the country, which is a descriptive section about the host country; and lastly Practicalities, with practical information such as how to book and information about vaccinations. Despite the fact that the page as a whole can be seen as a package directed towards the volunteer, relevant for this study will mainly be all the headings apart from Practicalities, since that section provide little textual substance to analyze for the purposes of this thesis.

CHOICE OF METHOD: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

As I was intrigued by unquestioned ‘truths’ and certain fixations of meaning that have been recurrent over time, and as I was interested in how volunteer organizations present volunteering in light of this, discourse analysis was an appropriate choice of method. The post-colonial field is heavily influenced by poststructuralism and its language theory, which focuses on the role of language in the creation of identities, institutions and politics (Eriksson et al., 1999: 17-22). Language can be described as a “machine” that does not neutrally mirror reality, but continually constructs identities and relations, and it is in speech or writing that discursive patterns may be reproduced, or changed and can therefore be analyzed in these contexts (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999: 16). It can be argued that there are no objective laws that divide society in different groups, but that this is always a discursive process, always happening (Ibid: 40).

According to poststructuralist theory, language and the construction of meaning are understood as relational – as constructed through difference, which in turn create and uphold power relations. Examples could be the various dichotomies brought up earlier, such as reason/emotion or rationality/irrationality. Discourse can be understood as a certain way of speaking of and understanding the world and then also as an exclusion of other possible
meanings (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999: 34). With this ‘constitutive outside’ of excluded meanings, a discourse is never fixed but may always be challenged; the aim of having unambiguousness is never completely successful. That it is possible to change the way we think and act and that our identities are never wholly fixed or ‘given’ may be regarded as key in postcolonial writing (Ibid: 40). Both the structure of language as well as societies and identities are changeable.

With this discursive idea about the constant struggle over meaning in mind, the idea in this study is not to analyze only one discourse per se, and identify so-called nodal points in a specific identified discourse. As Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) argue, there may be different discourses at play in a context, and ambivalences and tensions are as important to try to trace as partial fixations of meaning. Instead, I am doing a discourse analysis in the sense that I am analyzing the construction of meaning around volunteering, precisely in one type of context in which the construction of meaning of volunteering can be analyzed.

The following analysis will be divided into three parts: the first two relate to the first research question in connection to Volontärresor and Church of Sweden separately, and the third part relates to the second research question about differences and similarities between the two. The way the organizations present volunteering and if there is a potential ‘white helper’ narrative has been analyzed in the chosen texts by focusing on asking a more detailed, explicit question to the web-texts, and by searching for themes and words theoretically central to the analysis. A more operationalized, simple question has been asked to the web-texts: Who is presented as benefitting from the volunteering (eg. the volunteer her/himself; the receiving organization; the sending organization) and why/in what ways?

Focusing on the benefits that the volunteering is presented to have to different actors on the pages has suited both the question about how volunteering is presented or ‘sold’ and if there is a ‘white helper’ narrative. It has led to clearer indications on the focus of the organizations and what their volunteering projects are presented to accomplish. Through asking about benefits, it has been easier to discern whether the volunteering is constructed in terms of a ‘white helper’ type of project, where the host is to benefit through the help of the volunteer or if other discourses with other objectives are present. The operationalization has also been able to detect the appeals to the volunteers, and this is important since it is a major part of voluntourism and marketization.

Further, what has been central is the idea of meaning as relational, and I have thus searched for how the volunteers are constructed in relation to the receiving organizations, analyzing who emerges as what in the texts and in what ways in relation to the interconnected classic
dichotomies. With regards to discerning a ‘white helper’ narrative in particular, I have searched for if and how concepts such as helping, making a change, making a contribution, or assisting are used, and analyze who is helping, assisting and so on and to whom, what and in what ways. Like said, I have kept in mind the classic dichotomies helper/helped, developed/underdeveloped, active/passive, subject/object and how they emerge in the texts, as well as ideas related to the partnership discourse about cooperation between equals and exchange and if these ideas are present.

ANALYSIS

VOLONTÄRRESOR: “A TRIP THAT CHANGES!” – BOTH VOLUNTEER AND HOST

Benefits to the volunteer

Regarding who is to benefit through Volontärresor’s volunteer projects, there are several benefits spoken of, although with a focus on the benefits to the volunteer in varied ways. This emerges in more explicit ways, as on the main page:

“Go volunteer! Volunteer trips are trips out of the ordinary! You work as a volunteer in a local project somewhere in the world. You explore the country through excursions and discover life through the close contact that volunteer trips create to humans, animals and nature. A volunteer trip is the perfect combination of doing good and having a good time!” (Volontärresor, main page).

Here, the project is mainly termed as travel and as a genuine experience to the volunteer, a perfect combination of doing good and having a good time. On the main page is further emphasis on the travel aspect, genuineness and proximity to locals and nature as desirable features of the project: “To travel as a volunteer is a whole other dimension of traveling, where you really come into contact with different needs, cultures and environments.” (Ibid).

Another clear benefit to the volunteer is included by presenting volunteering as something that will make the volunteer more attractive on the labor market: “Certificates to every volunteer! Don’t forget to ask for your certificate after your volunteer trip! Use it in your resumé when you apply for jobs or degrees.” (Ibid).

As will be seen further on, apart from the main theme of emphasizing the enriching and memorable experience for the volunteer in varied ways, more benefits to the volunteer are traced in both implicit and explicit ways. This can be traced in a tendency to speak highly positively about the different countries or populations. All pages include travel recommendations for the host country and tips about what to do with one’s free time, and these sections are clearly formulated in the way that the volunteer is to benefit. As for the teaching...
project in Ghana, apart from general travel recommendations, Ghana is described as: “A beautiful and welcoming country, the perfect combination between modern and traditional life – the positive wordings are plentiful when Ghana is described.” (Volontärresor, project 1). As on the main page, a genuine experience is promised to the volunteer, much in terms of meeting the local population: “As a volunteer in Ghana you don’t only come into direct contact with the fantastic Ghanaians but also receive an enriching experience.” (Ibid). The two projects in Ghana, the teaching project and the campaign against sexual assault, both highlight that the projects are “meaningful”, both to the volunteer and the locals, and it is written: “Take the change and help these young people while at the same time getting an experience you’ll carry with you for life.” (Volontärresor, project 1; Volontärresor, project 4).

Similarly, the apparent gain or benefit to the volunteer in terms of experiences is clear in the Costa Rica project, as the introduction begins with: “Costa Rica is a small country with wonderful panorama, everything from volcanoes, rainforests and fantastic beaches”, and there are recommendations about what to see and experience in what is described as the “jewel of Central America”, which holds “endless opportunities for all.” (Volontärresor, project 2).

Regarding the project in the Himalayas, the country is continuously described, as well as the population, in positive terms in a way that the volunteer may benefit from it. There is a lengthy section including numerous sights and appealing descriptions of nature. The first line of the introduction is: “The air is clean, views are breathtakingly beautiful and the smiles of the people are never far away. Welcome to the Himalayas!” (Volontärresor, project 3). Travel advice for the area is included: “You can for example hike, visit temples or try paragliding.” The attraction of the country is stressed: “India is a colorful country both regarding its people, culture and food. Few of us can resist a piping hot curry and a nice Bollywood movie! Can you?” (Ibid). The volunteer is in fact termed a “traveler” instead of just a volunteer in different sections in this project, whose expectations will most likely be met:

“As a traveler to this project you can be sure of that the local partner will do their uttermost to deliver a program that meets your expectations and where you feel well taken care of.” (Volontärresor, project 3).

Further, what is stated as the purpose of the project is to have an “exchange”: “The purpose is to promote cultural exchange between India and foreign volunteers.” (Ibid). Here, the volunteer, and the local community, are presented as benefitting through a cultural exchange.

Likewise, both Namibia and Ecuador as countries, in the remaining projects analyzed in this study, are portrayed in attractive ways for the volunteer. As for the health care project in Namibia, natural sights as well as a memorable experience are emphasized: “With the
extraordinary nature of Namibia just around the corner this is a project that will surely give you a memory for life!” (Volontärresor, project 5). Namibia is described as an “exciting country” and the stated purpose is to: “offer volunteers the wonderful opportunity to experience the African wild while at the same time contributing to make life better for the people of Namibia.” (Ibid). Here is found an explicit twofold purpose, as it is a benefit for the volunteer to be in the “African wild” and the local community will benefit at the same time.

Much in line with what has been said, the project in Ecuador is described as “meaningful” to volunteers and locals. There is an unambiguous travel theme and a separate section entitled to an additional excursion to the Galapagos Islands, of which it is written: “This trip is certainly something out of the ordinary and you’ll surely remember it for the rest of your life!” (Volontärresor, project 6). Furthermore, Ecuador is described as: “a micro cosmos of South America – everything that exists on the continent also exists in this little country. Here, one is met by colors and smells, a rich animal life and proud people”, and it is stated that: “The pearl of the equator has something for everyone!” (Ibid).

While the volunteering at Volontärresor is continually presented as a benefit to the volunteer in the above manner, volunteering is also presented as a perfect fit for the individual who wishes to help and contribute. This is reflected in formulations that directly appeal to a potential wish to help among volunteers. An example can be found in the introduction to the project in Costa Rica: “In the city of San José, people who love to take initiatives can work with children.” (Volontärresor, project 2). The phrasing follows a logic that the volunteer wants to do something, and may do it thanks to this opportunity, instead of phrasing it in the way that help is needed and therefore the volunteer should apply.

Yet, in addition to these appeals are also descriptions of both explicit and implicit benefits that the volunteering brings to the receiving organization – to which I now turn.

Benefits to the receiving organization or people
Volontärresor’s slogan is: “A trip that changes!” (Volontärresor, main page). With the above analysis, one could understand this slogan in the way that volunteering changes the volunteer through a memorable experience. However, there is also a recurrent emphasis on the receiving organization or people as benefitting through the volunteering in turn. As mentioned in the above part, compound purposes are sometimes mentioned explicitly in the texts by for example claiming that the project in the Himalayas is a “cultural exchange”. However, the benefits to locals or hosts are mostly articulated in terms of underdevelopment and a need or a lack of something that the volunteer can help with, indicating that “A trip that changes!”
could be applied to the receiving organization or people, too. As mentioned, volunteering is described as “doing good”.

To exemplify, it is written about the purpose of the teaching project in Ghana:

“Even if English is an official language in Ghana, the skills of the poorer population are insufficient. The standard of many teachers is also low and classes are often very big, sometimes as many as 60 students per teacher.” (Volontärresor, project 1).

Here, a need is spoken of, or simply an underdevelopment aspect of Ghana in the form of abilities and inadequate numbers of teachers. The work of the volunteer in turn is described as a benefit to the host, as the purpose of the volunteering is obviously to raise levels of English. It is stated that there is a great need for English teachers and the volunteer is meant to work alongside and similar to local teachers: “During your time as volunteer you’ll have daily contact with your students, the children’s parents and your new colleagues.” The volunteer is told to “together with the local teachers find suitable education material.” (Ibid). The exact same sentence is found in the case of teaching in the Himalayas, and the insufficient local capacity is further emphasized: “The school now hosts around 20 students but there are only two teachers, so there is a great need for help.” (Volontärresor, project 3).

Likewise, underdevelopment aspects or needs in the local community are spoken of regarding the daycare project in Costa Rica:

“Unemployment is high in parts of San José and the opportunities for families to make extra money are scarce. Many are forced to take their children to daycare centres in order to work instead. In these areas, you can make a considerable contribution as volunteer!” (Volontärresor, project 2).

In the above citation, the volunteer is positioned as being able to make a positive impact and be of benefit to the community. It is further elaborated on in the following statement, where the volunteer is not only encouraged to help, but improve local methods:

“Every form of help is appreciated and if you can develop the methods, tasks or other things, such suggestions are usually accepted with open arms. Remember that it all depends on your imagination and creativity.” (Ibid).

In fact, that the volunteer can make positive change by his or her imagination and creativity, inventiveness perhaps, and not only by being a helping hand, is a theme found on multiple pages. It is similarly stated for the project in the Himalayas that: “Your imagination is the only limit to what you can achieve!” (Volontärresor, project 3).

Further, despite the fact that the stated purpose for the project in the Himalayas is a “cultural exchange”, it is still highlighted that volunteers can make positive change by “improving living conditions for children and youth” (Ibid). Concerning the other project in Ghana, about
sexual assault, Volontärresor writes: “Teachers have no education regarding sexual harassment so your work has a great impact.” (Volontärresor, project 4). Again, the local lack of capacity means that the volunteer can make an impact, this time implying that volunteers know more about sexual assault than local teachers.

The two final projects at Volontärresor included in this study, both related to health care, clearly point to the volunteer as making a positive impact and helping the local community, and therefore portraying the host or population as benefitting. With regards to the project at the clinic in Namibia, it is written that the volunteer will: “contribute with delivering primary health care to the local community” as well as “improve life for the people of Namibia.” (Volontärresor, project 5). What differs in this project is that a local need or lack of capability is not clearly stated as in other projects. The second health care project, in Ecuador, also states that the volunteer may improve the lives of locals: “Our partner continually tries to find projects where you can improve situations for those worst off in the Quito area.” (Volontärresor, project 6). It is not entirely clear as to how the volunteer may help to improve situations; it is written that the volunteer may: “contribute with knowledge within health related issues” whereas it is at the same time mentioned that the work is always conducted alongside a local paramedic.

As can be seen, Volontärresor consistently emphasizes the positive impacts and benefits volunteering has on the receiving communities and not merely the benefits to the volunteer. The volunteers are positioned as able to help, improve and contribute to a good cause without holding any special knowledge or skills in most cases. This is most often combined with mentioning different types of underdevelopment or incapabilities of the host country.

**CHURCH OF SWEDEN: AMBIVALENCES – WORK, STUDY, OR HELP ABROAD?**

**Benefits to the intern or the ‘home base’**

When regarding the question of who is to benefit from the projects abroad and what the internship aims at, the official goal of the financing organization, Sida, is recited on three of Church of Sweden’s pages explicitly. There is a focus on the gains to the intern and the home base as this stated purpose is to: “develop and broaden the Swedish resource base and bring back experiences from the internships to Swedish actors.” (Church of Sweden, main page; Stockholm diocese; Luleå diocese). Here, different actors may be seen as benefitting, mainly the individual who takes part in the program, who by so doing acquires new knowledge, but also perhaps Sweden as a whole or the sending organization, who will benefit from these
individuals. This can be seen as a central theme to Church of Sweden’s pages – the intern as learning and acquiring new experiences and knowledge as a central benefit to the internship.

Church of Sweden as benefitting through the program is further implied: “You will receive new knowledge that will be of benefit to Church of Sweden.” (Church of Sweden, main page). Sometimes is mentioned a similar beneficial aspect but going both ways, namely that the internship program strengthens the connections and cooperation between the sending and receiving dioceses, such as on Stockholm diocese’s page. Here, both dioceses can be seen as benefitting, albeit in a vague manner as it is not explicitly explained how, other than that the connections in themselves are strengthened. Likewise, Lund diocese mentions on their page that the internship is a newly established “cooperation” between churches.

Further, it is stated that the program is aimed at those “interested in working and living abroad” and about the work it is written:

“You will take part in the every day work at the church or organization you visit. What interns do varies. Previous interns have done everything from teaching English to leading youth groups to walking next to the preacher or lay worker in their daily work.” (Lund diocese).

Here, the internship is described as “taking part” of normal working days at the receiving diocese, and here one could again understand the volunteer as benefitting from joining in the daily activities. However, as teaching English and leading youth groups is mentioned together with joining in the daily work in church, it is rather unclear what “every day work” implies, whether it aims at interns learning new things and gaining new knowledge from locals, or if the intern is suppose to have a more active role and be of benefit to the host through teaching English, and so on. This will be further analyzed in the other section.

On a few pages, accounts by interns or interviews with interns are present, as have been mentioned in the methodology section. In these accounts further benefits to the intern are implied. Numerous interns highlight the learning perspective, similar to the official Sida goal, but also other beneficial aspects related to travelling to new places and cultures. On Stockholm diocese’s page, the main part of the page consists of three interviews with interns. Similar to the organization’s stated purpose, all three interns maintain that they look forward to and expect to learn new things. For example, one intern says:

“I want to learn more about Tanzanian culture and learn about the different projects that Sida and Church of Sweden support in Tanzania. I’ve always been interested in international questions and I see this internship as a way for me to immerse myself in how Church of Sweden and Sida work.” (Stockholm diocese).
Further, another possible personal benefit is mentioned under the question of what the interns most look forward to right now, here exemplified by one intern’s words: “What I look forward to most right now is getting a personal meeting with the people of Moshi [the receiving organization’s location in Tanzania] and take part of their life history, it’s going to be amazing to get to know them.” (Ibid). Thus, meeting local people is regarded as a benefit to the interns and is mentioned by all three on this page.

Västerås diocese’s page also consists of an account by an intern, not an interview but a lengthy text titled “Life as an intern in Tanzania”. Similar to the previous interns, one may here notice benefits to the intern in the form of valuable experiences from a new country and people as the intern writes:

“How interesting in Tanzania has brought with it many memories and impressions. After having been home for a few weeks, what I remember most strongly is the dramatically beautiful nature, how bright stars shone at night, how nice it was to fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle and how the people there often laughed.” (Västerås diocese).

The intern further describes the internship as an “adventure” and writes in a lucid manner about nature and her days. The intern also points to other benefits, namely personal change and growth as well as new acquaintances:

“The worst moments have also been valuable because they gave me more of a fighting spirit to make a change, inspiration to try to appreciate even the difficult parts of life, as well as an overall open mind. The best part of being an intern was the bonds created with people across cultures and traditions – I will always bring with me the laughter and dances that were shared with me.” (Västerås diocese).

As a contrast to the main tendencies, Växjö diocese presents the internship instead almost entirely as a study of a sustainability theme. The title of the page is “Sida interns” and the diocese writes that the internship is intended for persons showing commitment to the Church and questions of sustainability. The intern is to study a sustainability theme while away, and present it when home. It is not clearly stated who is to benefit and in what way. However, as the internship is described as a study, the intern could be seen as benefitting by acquiring new knowledge, and potentially the sending church as it explicitly requires a presentation of the study when home. However, on the same page is included a section titled “Holders of scholarship 2016” with three brief presentations of interns where one can discern clearer benefits similar to those mentioned by other interns. One intern highlights the benefits to the intern such as meeting with the locals, and travelling combined with her faith:

“I wanted to explore the world from the eyes of locals. I was raised in Church of Sweden and therefore it goes without saying that I had to apply to become a Sida intern when I realized I could combine my faith with exploring the world.” (Växjö diocese).
Another intern on the page similarly states:

“I want to do this because it is a fantastic opportunity to see how life is in a different country with another culture. I look forward to both learning a lot and sharing my own experiences and knowledge with others and receive new perspectives in questions of faith.” (Ibid).

To conclude, there are differences in how the dioceses and the main page present the internships and what the benefits to the interns are. The official purpose points to the prospect of learning and increased experience for the interns, and positions Sweden as benefitting. Interns themselves highlight other benefits, such as the opportunity to travel to a new place and meeting with locals. Although not as consistent as on Volontärresor’s pages, I will now turn to how the receiving organizations are presented as benefitting as this is also communicated in certain ways.

**Benefits to the receiving organization or people**

Although benefits to the interns and sending church are emphasized, there are ambivalences both within the same pages, as well as between the various pages regarding who the internship program is suppose to benefit and what the aim of the program is. As will be seen, it is not entirely clear according to the pages if the internships are about development work or if they simply provide opportunities for qualified interns to do internships within their fields abroad. Some mention the strengthened connections between churches as a benefit and Växjö diocese presents it as a ‘study’ of a sustainability theme. Combined with these aspects are phrasings and words used that may suggest that the receiving organization or church will also benefit in some way by the internship, even though this is not entirely clear from the churches’ own words. As will also be demonstrated below, this is clearer in the words of the interns.

What should be brought up first are the phrasings that associate the internship with the partnership idea and that both churches are supposed to benefit through this cooperation, which was already mentioned. Additionally, some pages more actively involve the receiving church in their writing, such as Lund diocese that writes: “In 2017 Lund diocese initiated a cooperation with the northeastern diocese of the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Tanzania and can offer two internship positions in the northeastern diocese during fall 2018” (Lund diocese) or Luleå diocese that writes: “Luleå diocese and Konde diocese in Tanzania may, through funds from Sida, offer internships.” (Luleå diocese).

However, continuing with clearer indications on benefits to the host, it is written on Stockholm diocese’s page that the receiving churches will receive “new perspectives” from
the interns. It is written: “You get to contribute with your knowledge and experiences so that the church or organization you visit receives new perspectives through you.” (Stockholm diocese). It is not stated just how the intern may provide the host with new perspectives, but it is there as a possibility. Used is also the word “contribute”, further signaling that the intern may benefit the host in some way.

In fact, most of Church of Sweden’s pages state that the intern will “work” when abroad, but this often comes together with this type of vague phrasing that the intern will also “contribute” in various ways. As for Västerås diocese, it is written: “Do you want to work and contribute with your competences and work as an intern in Tanzania or Mozambique for four months?” and further it is explained that the internship is for the one who is: “willing to work and contribute with your knowledge and be sent by Church of Sweden.” (Västerås diocese). Although ‘contribute’ is a rather vague word, one could argue that the receiving organizations are presented to benefit by the ‘contribution’ of the intern, especially in the last example by the “competences” and “knowledge” that the intern is to “contribute” with. However, these competences or knowledge are not specified. At Lund diocese’s page, there is likewise a focus on the intern as contributor to the local work, as it is written that the internship is intended for those “interested in interning at church and contribute with one’s competences.” (Lund diocese).

Two dioceses, Lund and Luleå, both state that priority will be given to applicants with relevant education or work experience, although a clear explanation as to why is not provided. Lund diocese also provides a list of different institutions the interns may be positioned at, most of them concerning social work such as teaching in schools, working with children or at hospitals, thus with a certain development association. Lund diocese writes that:

“In relation to the above mentioned [the list of possible positions for the intern] we seek applicants studying to become or working as or with the following; child minders, preschool teachers, special needs education, health care professions like assistant nurses, nurses, doctors, occupational therapists, social workers, keepers in psychiatry, theologians, all types of teachers, forestry, media and communication, tourism, IT. Food production” (Lund diocese).

Luleå diocese similarly states that the offer is mainly directed towards those with work experience and/or those studying towards a specific profession. The diocese further highlights the cooperation with the receiving diocese and that the tasks performed by the intern will be based on one’s knowledge and work experience and decided on in close dialogue with the receiving diocese. Luleå writes:

“Your tasks as intern will be based on your knowledge and working experiences and decided on in
close dialogue with Konde diocese. Your tasks could be within a church and include teaching in any of the church’s schools, music, children’s activities or within any of the diocese’s development work (for example water supply, agriculture, health care, carpentry).” (Luleå diocese).

Luleå diocese is the only diocese that explicitly uses the word “development work” in their official writing, as seen in the citation above, and both Lund and Luleå mention positions for the interns that may be associated to development work. The reason for the wish to accept qualified interns is however not provided, it is then not able to discern if it is because interns are suppose to receive relevant internships for their own benefit, or if interns are to be qualified so that the host can truly benefit from their presence. However, since Lund diocese emphasizes that interns are suppose to “contribute” with their competences, one could understand this as a benefit to the the receiving organization.

As previously explained, the interns are represented on a few pages with words of their own or in interviews. In some of these accounts can be found more straightforward benefits to the host or local population. The interns stress the “contributor” aspect and also take it further and elaborate on it by going into themes of positive change, helping, aiding, and straightforward development work aspects. In the case of Stockholm diocese, although the interns mention various benefits to the intern him/herself, they additionally all emphasize another aspect, which is rather vague in Church of Sweden’s and Stockholm diocese’s own words: namely the benefits to the receiving organization by the help or contribution of the intern. All three interns maintain that they wish to help and contribute. One wants to: “contribute and help so that the people there hopefully feel that they’ve received a helping hand.” (Stockholm diocese). Another states that she will: “help out and learn about the different aid projects existing in the Kilimanjaro area.” (Ibid).

The final intern further emphasizes more strongly a proposed impact in the receiving community in the form of positive change. He firstly explains that: “I had to go on this trip because I’ve wanted to make a change abroad as long as I can remember”, which in a way fits equally well as a citation in the above section about benefits to the intern, as the intern plainly explains the project as a personal aim. He further explains on the topic of positive change:

“I have a belief that our mere presence in Moshi, Tanzania could lead to some type of positive change. It probably makes all the difference if the population there can see how we, coming from developed countries, treat other people and look at things.” (Stockholm diocese).

Pointing to a clear division between ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ peoples and the inherent aiding potential of the ‘developed’, this can be regarded as the most clear-cut example of the ‘white helper’ narrative on any of Church of Sweden’s pages. The host as
benefitting in terms of improvement and change by the help and initiatives of the interns is further quite clear in this account by the same intern:

“During our stay we will take part in various projects and also teach English and IT as well as bring Petra Wadström’s invention “Solvatten” [=Sun water] that we will give education on. It is a Swedish invention in which you can pour ten litres of dirty water and then get drinkable water with the help of the heat and UV radiation from the sun. Amazing. Hopefully I’ll also get the time to start a music project for the youth since I’m very passionate about music and think it’s an important part of daily life. It would also be fun to engage others in sporting activities and I hope to bring a few footballs since they are short of real footballs.” (Stockholm diocese).

Continuing with the theme of the help provided by the intern, in this account, the ‘developed’ are linked with helping, aiding, and with inventiveness, technological advance as well as being active and coming with initiatives regarding music and sports.

Another intern that goes into the development theme and the Church of Sweden as an important actor in development can be found on Västerås diocese’s page. As mentioned, this intern is represented on the page by having written a lengthy personal account. Apart from personal gains that can be found in it, half of the text has development and aid as a theme. The intern explains a situation where she on a bus came to witness the poor in the streets, whom she terms “fellow beings”, and concludes that: “They live in a country where the society and its social system doesn’t catch those that fall” (Västerås diocese). The intern makes the point that the Church of Sweden has a clear role to play in development there. She writes that: “I hope that the social development that is happening thanks to gifts from organizations like Church of Sweden will finally also reach the people that are forgotten.” (Ibid). Here, the receiving community is presented as in need and as lacking a functioning social system, similar to the needs mentioned on Volontärresor’s pages. It is also presented as benefitting through help and aid, but it is not clear as to whether the intern intends to connect the internship itself to these developmental benefits, or if the internship is connected to this type of development work.

By way of conclusion, Church of Sweden also touches on certain ideas of helping, but with rather vague formulations that are not clear. Sometimes the internships are regarded as beneficial to both sending and receiving churches by pointing to ‘cooperation’. Interns more clearly stress a helping narrative and a development aspect.
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VOLONTÄRRESOR AND CHURCH OF SWEDEN: WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN?

In going into my second research question, I will now aim at reflecting upon the main differences and similarities between the two organizations. When embarking on this study, I was driven by an assumption that perhaps Volontärresor would show stronger ‘white helper’ narratives due to being a marketized, commercial actor, particularly given that the problems of reproducing stereotypes has been acknowledged by many non-profit organizations (such as Church of Sweden). What might be said regarding the two, according to this study, is that there are differences as anticipated, but also similarities. There are also certain ambivalences both within Volontärresor, but mainly within Church of Sweden’s texts that are intriguing.

In reflecting slightly on the marketization of aid discussion, one can see how the projects at Volontärresor, being a commercial actor, are presented as being of profit and benefit to the volunteer/consumer in more clear and diverse ways than at Church of Sweden’s pages. This might be able to connect to the fact that marketization includes that products need to appeal to consumers, so factors that might make consumers interested must naturally be stressed in order to sell. Hence, the projects at Volontärresor are not just presented as being about helping or making a change, although that is a major theme, but also as something that profits the volunteer in several ways.

Although this study has not engaged in a marketization discussion as a priority, it should be said that there are tendencies suggesting that Church of Sweden also tries to attract interns, as the church and dioceses direct the writing to potential interns often in a rather inviting manner and by the interns that highlight quite a few benefits to interns. However, it could be said that some form of attraction or appeal is natural to any such offer. What should also be added though is that Sida, the backing organization, is mentioned in a few cases together with its official goal, and in one instance interns are also termed “Sida interns” (Växjö diocese). This might give a more professional idea of the internship, and the association with Sida as an official state-backed development actor might have a certain appeal for those interested in working with development. However, Church of Sweden’s internships are not stated to be involved with Sida in any other way than being financed by the organization. The reason to stress the Sida-association could also be a way to distance oneself from the volunteer phenomenon.

Now turning to the main differences. Church of Sweden adheres more often than Volontärresor to the partnership discourse and positions the receiving organization in more instances as an equal. There is a preoccupation with choosing words such as work, study or
contribute rather than help, aid or change, such as on Volontärresor; one could argue that the language is milder but at the same time more vague, as the meaning of “contribute” is not entirely obvious, or “new perspectives”. Only in one case does a diocese mention the word development work outright, whereas the connection to Sida is mentioned by a few. Further, the churches point more often to learning as a main benefit to the intern, whereas that perspective is almost non-existent at Volontärresor that gives the volunteer a more active role, to teach rather than to learn. In connection to the partnership discourse, a detail that is of interest is that one of the dioceses, Uppsala diocese that was excluded from the study due to the page being under construction, accepts interns from the hosting organization, and so, it is more truly a partnership where interns go both ways. This may be said to be lacking in the case of the other dioceses, as it is seemingly only individuals from Sweden that leave for internships.

The other main differences between the two organizations regard themes that are almost only present on the pages by Volontärresor. Volontärresor more straightforwardly draws on ‘white helper’ narratives, and does this by clearly presenting the volunteering as helping out abroad and claiming that volunteers (although potentially unqualified or inexperienced) may make positive change in poor countries and be of benefit to the host or locals. It is shown in the way the volunteer is portrayed and encouraged to act, with inventiveness and creativity and improving local methods. It is also shown in the way the receiving organization or people are portrayed, as they are most often portrayed as poor and needy, and as wanting and needing outside help. The efforts of local personnel are scarcely mentioned, and there are narratives pointing to that volunteers have a natural and wanted place among local staff.

Added as a detail should be that the “poor but happy” reference as brought up in the theoretical overview does appear as well. The people of the Himalayas are described as “always smiling” and for the Namibia project, it is written: “Despite scarce living conditions you will meet people full of energy and joy of living!” At Volontärresor, host countries are made attractive by sights and endless opportunities, which is lacking on Church of Sweden’s pages, and what is consistently drawn upon is the natural beauty and nature as an attraction. In a few instances are cultural sights mentioned, but the dominant nature theme could potentially point to the classic dichotomy of culture/nature, where the ‘Other’ is more connected to nature (Eriksson Baaz, 2005: 43). This can be traced on the page for the project in Ecuador, when Volontärresor writes: “In many parts of the country, humans live in harmony with nature.”
The positive portrayals of local populations and the mentioning of them in a way that the volunteer may benefit, could be argued to make for a certain objectification where they become part of the attractive commodity, as McGloin and Georgeou (2016) point to. This is seen as the proximity to locals are mentioned together with other sights of the country as a positive thing, or people’s “needs” bundled together with other attractions in the section where volunteer work is described as: “a whole other dimension of traveling, where you really come into contact with different needs, cultures and environments.” (Volontärresor, main page). The authentic experience where volunteers are promised ‘memories for life’ is somehow connected to coming into contact with people in need.

Although matters of representation and the idea of subject/object have only been part of numerous other guiding principles in this study, what can be regarded as perhaps the main similarity between the two organizations is the fact that the pages are much written from the perspective of the volunteer or intern. Mainly Volontärresor, but also Church of Sweden in some cases, emphasize the wants of the volunteer/intern by presenting the projects as something that volunteers/interns may want to do and be qualified for and may benefit from, rather than to focus on the needs or wants of the host in the texts. Volontärresor does emphasize needs or lacks of the host countries, but still focuses on the wellbeing of the volunteer and on making the project attractive in the eyes of the volunteer. Both organizations can be regarded as lacking a clear and equal representation of the hosting organization or people; as for what I have seen, they are not nearly as much in focus. As will be discussed, although it is ambivalent what Church of Sweden’s internships aim at, it is perhaps striking that even Sida’s own words have such a volunteer or ‘home’-centred perspective as the internships are presented to gain Swedish volunteers and Swedish actors alone.

Another similarity is that there do exist ‘white helper’ narratives in both cases. It may be said to be part of Volontärresor’s whole philosophy, as the idea of volunteers making a positive change in poor, needy countries is clearly sold. Although these narratives are overwhelmingly found on Volontärresor’s pages, tendencies are found on Church of Sweden’s pages, usually in accounts written by or about interns. As mentioned, perhaps the strongest ‘white helper’ narrative of all could be found at Stockholm diocese’s page, where an intern clearly spoke in terms of development/underdevelopment and stressed the inventive and aiding potential of the developed from a rather top-down perspective. As brought up before, this is not to be generalized but rather seen as an ambivalence of different narratives found on Church of Sweden’s pages.
In terms of precisely ambivalences, there are ambivalences of meaning in both cases but more strongly in the case of Church of Sweden, as a similar narrative can be found on all Volontärresor’s pages. In the case of Church of Sweden, the internships are presented in rather different ways by different dioceses; it is presented as work, as studying, as taking part in the everyday work, as making a contribution, etc. Ambivalences are most clear when comparing the words written by the churches and the words of the interns, as brought up, and this creates tensions in the texts. The churches’ words are more neutral and in some cases point to more professional aspects or partnerships of cooperation. Ambivalences found in the case of Volontärresor mainly have to do with terming a few projects an “exchange” of knowledge or “cultural exchange” although at the same time still pointing to the ‘white helper’ division of helper/helped.

CONCLUSIONS

As I have examined how volunteering is presented and if there are ‘white helper’ narratives in the documents by Volontärresor and Church of Sweden, what has appeared clearly is the blurring of lines around volunteering mentioned by for example Schech (2017). There are various benefits and gains of the volunteering projects spoken of both in the case of Volontärresor and Church of Sweden, both for the volunteers/interns, the sending organizations and the receiving organizations. Volunteering is lifted from a traveler’s perspective by the interns also at Church of Sweden although it is a more traditional non-profit organization, but also from a helping perspective or as an opportunity to learn, grow as a person, and so on.

Volontärresor is more straightforward with their philosophy and with what they wish to communicate and shows stronger marketization tendencies by trying to attract volunteers than Church of Sweden. The whole experience as an attractive commodity, raised by authors, is apparent. Romantic and appealing portrayals of the host countries, people and their sights are combined with several other aspects lifted that may benefit the volunteer, such as being in close proximity to locals and a new culture, and by this authentic experience receive a memory for life. As anticipated, these aspects are connected to ‘white helper’ narratives where the volunteer is automatically positioned as able to help and make positive change – despite perhaps being unqualified – in countries that are described as lacking in local capacity and needing both a helping hand and innovative ideas. Volunteers are portrayed as active and able and usually as equal to and sometimes as above local staff, whereas local efforts are not mentioned and partner organizations never mentioned by name. The national populations
receive perhaps slightly more attention, but in rather objectifying and stereotypical descriptions of them as poor but happy, etc. In this way, Volontärresor shows ‘white helper’ narratives by going into topics of the difference between the developed/underdeveloped and by following certain logics around the dichotomies helper/helped, passive/active-innovative, and so on, as well as choosing to represent national populations in certain stereotypical ways.

There are clear differences, as anticipated, between Volontärresor and Church of Sweden with regards to how volunteering is presented and regarding traces of the ‘white helper’ narrative, but a striking find is that Church of Sweden’s pages contain significant ambivalences of meaning. Although perhaps Volontärresor shows ‘white helper’ narratives more strongly and consistently, there are traces at the Church’s pages. Apart from the ambivalences regarding the identities and roles involved, there are also significant and intriguing ambivalences regarding what the internships are presented to fundamentally accomplish and what tasks volunteers will engage with; in a simplified way, it is not clear what the internships really are. The Church has decided to use the term internship and not volunteering, which could be interpreted as a wish to distance oneself from the concept of volunteering and critique directed towards it, but the internships themselves seem to relate significantly to Volontärresor’s projects through development/volunteer related positions. It is never wholly spelled out whether the internships are supposed to support development work or not and lead to development outcomes. Some dioceses present the internships as a study or as learning opportunities, whereas others present them as work or use vague words that could imply ‘white helper’ narratives by implying that interns will “contribute” or give hosts “new perspectives”. Interns sometimes show quite clear helping narratives and touch on development questions by their words. They also highlight benefits to the intern similar to those at Volontärresor, involving travel and authentic experiences, but also mention learning new things or growing as a person as benefits. One could argue that when analyzing these two organizations, there is a blurring of lines between the travelling consumer and the aid worker, between adventure and more professional work in these cases.

Apart from the ambivalences found in Church of Sweden’s documents, a clear difference to Volontärresor is the presence of the partnership discourse and words such as cooperation, work, study, and so on, with milder language than Volontärresor that gives the volunteers more active roles. Church of Sweden makes the hosts more visible in the documents.

Finally though, what may be regarded as an interesting tendency in both cases is what could be called a volunteer-centred approach, both in benefits, writing, and representations on the pages. Although Church of Sweden shows signs of wanting to adhere to the partnership
discourse and distance oneself both from claiming the internships as development work and from the volunteer phenomenon, the official aim of Sida, recited on a few pages, still communicates a type of volunteer-centred idea: it is the intern or Swedish actors that are supposed to benefit from the internships. With no mentioning of the locals or hosts or how the internships may benefit both ways, this official aim does not communicate the partnership idea. That hosts are represented as a place where to grow in knowledge and experience could, from a postcolonial perspective, be problematic.

The fact that the ‘white helper’ narratives are seemingly more visible in the case of Volontärresor than Church of Sweden, together with portrayals of ‘Others’ as needy, as lacking skills or capacity as well as ‘poor but happy’, might indicate that Volontärresor, as a more marketized actor, uses colonial stereotypes to a larger extent than Church of Sweden as a form of package idea that needs to sell. This cannot be generalized but rather regarded as an indication and the shedding of light upon a very present phenomenon. However, this will profit from future analysis of similar cases in order to see if it is the level of marketization that leads to increased stereotypes and certain narratives. Intriguing would be to identify and analyze similar internships or volunteer opportunities to those of Church of Sweden, or other international youth experience programs that Schech (2017) argues that governments have started to fund, to see what types of narratives are usually found in these. It would also be intriguing to analyze if ambivalences such as within Church of Sweden are equally present in other cases, which also exist to some extent within Volontärresor in a few cases.

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