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## Encounters With Discomfort: How Do Young Canadians Understand (Their) Privilege And (Others') Poverty In The Context Of An International Volunteer Experience?

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## **Encounters with discomfort: How do young Canadians understand (their) privilege and (others') poverty in the context of an international volunteer experience?**

## **Rencontres avec l'inconfort: Comment de jeunes Canadiens comprennent (leur) privilège et la pauvreté (des autres) dans le contexte d'une expérience de volontariat international?**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative case study explores how a group of Canadian youth negotiated their encounters with others' poverty and their own privilege in the context of a short-term international volunteer experience in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through a thematic analysis of retrospective narrative interviews – informed by whiteness studies – this article describes participants' experiences of discomfort arising from 1) their encounters with material poverty and 2) their ability to maintain their own privilege(s) overseas. Collectively, the data illuminate the various defensive strategies and explanatory frameworks that young people might employ when confronted with destabilizing information in unfamiliar international settings.

### **Résumé**

Cette étude de cas qualitative explore la manière dont un groupe de jeunes canadiens ont négocié leurs rencontres avec la pauvreté des autres et leur propre privilège dans le contexte d'une expérience à court terme de volontariat international en Afrique Sub-Saharienne. À travers une analyse thématique des entretiens narratifs de rétrospection, informée par des études sur la blancheur, cet article décrit les expériences d'inconfort des participants résultant de 1) leurs rencontres avec la pauvreté matérielle et 2) leur capacité à maintenir leur(s) propre(s) privilège(s) à l'étranger. De façon collective, les données éclairent les diverses stratégies de défense et de cadres explicatifs que ces jeunes gens pourraient utiliser lorsqu'ils sont confrontés à des informations déstabilisantes dans des contextes internationaux non-familiers.

Keywords: international volunteering; secondary school students; Canada; Sub-Saharan Africa; whiteness; privilege; poverty; discomfort; narrative

Mots-clés: volontariat international ; élèves des écoles secondaires; Canada; Afrique Sub-Saharienne; blancheur; privilège; pauvreté; inconfort; récit (narration)

### **Introduction**

This article explores the narrative accounts of six similarly-situated youth (all identified as white, female and residents of Toronto, Canada), and in particular, how they retrospectively made meaning of their short-term international volunteer experiences in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. International volunteer experiences provide a rich study setting because they constitute a unique life episode (outside of one's ordinary course) where the narrative landscape may be quite dissimilar from volunteers' home contexts. Throughout participation in this (largely western) travel practice, socially privileged youth may be alerted to contradictions within their held interpretations of the social world. This study, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine how young people reflect on transnational inequalities and the privileges associated with occupying 'majority' or 'dominant' social locations.

Inspiration for this project was drawn broadly from the field of whiteness studies. In her monograph essay, 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,' feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (1990) lists the various ways white privilege manifests in her daily life, and collectively describes these advantages as an 'invisible knapsack': the "unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 31). Here, the author

speaks to the constancy and mobility of white privilege, but also to the silences (the ‘colossal unseen dimensions’) that surround its existence and perpetuation. Thus, whiteness scholars endeavour to bring attention to whiteness as a social construction (as opposed to ‘white skin’ as a biological characteristic) and critically interrogate the systemic factors that protect whiteness as a location of structural advantage (Dyer, 1997; Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Leonardo, 2002; Levine-Rasky, 2000). The ‘invisible knapsack’ is a particularly fitting image for discussing travel narratives – a reminder that socially privileged sojourners, in addition to physical luggage, carry with them a bevy of symbolic assets.

When young people confront harsh material inequities for the first time, these encounters may shake one’s existing knowledge, opinions or beliefs about the social world by threatening pretences of fairness and justice, and challenging the very values and routines that constitute western materialist lifestyles. In this way, international volunteer excursions could be seen as a ‘pedagogy of discomfort,’ a term Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas (2003) use to describe an educational situation that makes visible (and problematizes) one’s existing frames of reference, daily habits and “unconscious complicity with hegemony” (p. 111). Patrick Solomon, John Portelli, Beverly-Jean Daniel and Arlene Campbell (2005) offer the related concept of ‘ideological incongruence’: “the dilemma experienced by individuals when their ideological or belief sets are incompatible” (p. 153). Indeed, whiteness scholars suggest that socially privileged individuals are taught ‘not to see’ their systemic advantages, making it difficult (and perhaps painful) to recognize that the privileges of some have been accrued at the *expense* of others (Solomon et al., 2005). Thus, notions of discomfort may be a particularly relevant starting point from which to understand youth’s responses to overseas encounters that test their “capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54, italics in original).

## Literature Review

Recent empirical research has contributed to developing an understanding of young people’s responses to poverty and privilege in the context of an international volunteer experience. The following studies represent a range of national contexts and research methodologies, and shed light on the various coping mechanisms and explanatory frameworks socially privileged individuals might rely upon to make sense of their experiences in an unfamiliar setting. Émilie Crossley (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of 10 UK volunteers’ experiences in rural Kenya, drawing on participant observation and narrative interviews collected before, during and after the excursion. The author found that participants primarily gained a sense of ‘appreciation’ for their own fortunate circumstances, material wealth and ability to consume. She argues that such claims of gratitude enable volunteers to acknowledge the unfortunateness of poverty, while preserving the legitimacy of their western (consumerist) lifestyles. Crossley (2012) is concerned that the acquisition of appreciation “becomes an ethical end in itself, allowing volunteer tourists to resume their lives back in the West in the knowledge that they have undergone a personal, internal transformation” (p. 243).

In Simon Darnell’s (2011) study of 27 Canadian sport-for-development interns in Africa and the Caribbean, participants articulated a sense of ‘First World guilt’ at having recognized themselves as relatively privileged westerners who possess the unique opportunity to travel as ‘transnational citizens.’ Participants also voiced contrition at having been inadequately prepared to ‘fix’ the stark material inequalities they encountered during their service placements. Participants assuaged these feelings of guilt, in part, by drawing on the dominant development rhetoric that they ‘took away more than they had given.’ Darnell (2011) frames participants’

responses (the explicit ‘claiming’ of privilege and the benefits personally derived from the service experience) as ‘confessions’ that paradoxically work to secure volunteers’ innocence and non-implication in the systems that perpetuate poverty.

Anne Zahra and Alison McIntosh (2007) explored the lasting emotional impressions of five women’s experiences participating in Australian-organized volunteer projects in the Philippines, India, Fiji and Tonga. The authors conducted in-depth interviews several years after volunteer projects had concluded and found that participants still vividly recalled their destabilizing encounters with poverty. They draw on the notion of ‘catharsis’ to suggest that the strong emotions associated with confronting ‘human suffering’ stimulated participants’ positive personal transformations, such as rising above materialistic attitudes and amplifying a sense of responsibility to their communities. The authors conclude that participants’ experiences were “life-changing” and had “deep and far reaching” ramifications on how they later understood their identities and negotiated the social world (p. 118). This claim speaks to the potentially enduring impact of young people’s encounters with discomfort overseas.

In the above-cited studies, participants’ strategies for reconciling their encounters with privilege and poverty serve to re-centre the discussion on themselves: they are the ‘lucky’ ones, the ones who had a personally transformative experience, the ones who gained a sense of appreciation, and the ones who ultimately benefited from the service relationship. Nevertheless, the authors express concern that such exclusive focus on ‘the personal’ might reinforce one’s existing privilege and foreclose broader examinations of power, oppression and dominance.

Secondly, the authors observe that, while participants may have been discomforted by their encounters with privilege and poverty, they did not articulate a sense of urgency to resolve these inequities. Thus, even when young people experience inequalities firsthand, these situations may not inspire social justice activism or broader commitments to societal change. As a consequence, the international volunteer experience may offer some (personally) beneficial properties while leaving underlying social issues largely undisturbed.

## **Study Methods**

Participants were six white, female, secondary school students (aged 16-18) residing in the city of Toronto. The sample was purposeful and convenient: participants were approached through professional contacts in the education sector and selected because they had taken part in an international volunteer experience in the previous 18 months. Participants further met demographic criteria of interest, as my intention was to gather the accounts of the ‘typical’ international volunteer - who are predominantly white, female and middle-class (Heron, 2007). While I did not ask explicitly about participants’ socio-economic status, the volunteer excursions described in this study ranged in cost from \$5,000 to \$7,500 CAD, and these fees were the unsubsidized responsibility of each participant and their families. Throughout this article, participants are identified by an assigned pseudonym.

The individuals who chose to participate had travelled to six distinct communities across Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. Thus, when I make reference to ‘Sub-Saharan Africa,’ I use this phrasing for ease of collective description rather than to homogenize the diverse social and political histories operating within the region.

Each participant’s international volunteer experience was unique (facilitated by different organizations and supporting different infrastructural or educational initiatives), however, all could be classified as short-term (2-3 weeks), unilateral (one-way or non-reciprocal) and group-based projects (coordinated by participants’ independent secondary schools or volunteer travel operators)

(Sherraden, Stringham, Sow & McBride, 2006). This variety within the set criterion provided a basis on which to compare and contrast experiences, but also served as an opportunity to highlight the considerable overlap that surfaced between participants' reflections.

Data was collected by way of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, a strategy commonly utilized in narrative research to gather rich, personalized data in the hopes of revealing central meanings expressed through talk (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). In particular, this article focuses on the 'bounded segment' (Riessman, 2008) of participants' short-term international volunteer experiences to capture "a storied description about a person's movement through a life episode" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11). Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1990) similarly refer to this concentrated strategy as 'burrowing.' Accounts were gathered retrospectively (6-12 months after participants' return to Canada) to gain perspective on how one's narrative might evolve beyond the 'bounded segment' of the international volunteer experience itself, recognizing that "the significance and contribution of particular happenings and actions are not finally evident until the denouement of the episode" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 8). Thus, retrospective accounts provide insight on how young people's stories 'hold together' over time, as well as the extent to which one's travel experiences come to be integrated into a wider life narrative.

I employed a 'paradigmatic analysis' to identify common themes within the verbal text collected (Polkinghorne, 1995). This involved inspecting several stories, teasing out the resonances across accounts, and integrating findings with concepts derived from prior theoretical and empirical knowledge. In narrative work, the researcher then constructs a retelling (or metastory) that captures the 'essence' of participants' lived experiences based on critical moments or motifs that emerge from the data (Chase, 2011). In what follows, I present a thematic report interspersed with participant excerpts, my interpretations as the researcher, and references to existing scholarship. The findings reported are those that were articulated strongly among participants, with voiced disagreements or exceptions noted. While this data is not 'representative' or 'generalizable,' the stories participants offer may nevertheless resonate with and reverberate cultural themes and discourses beyond the particular case studies presented.

## **Findings and Analysis**

This section will describe and analyze participants' voiced discomfort arising from two aspects of their international volunteer experiences: 1) their encounters with material poverty and 2) their ability to maintain their own privilege(s) overseas. Before proceeding, I share two general findings to serve as context for the forthcoming analysis: participants' conceptions of 'privilege' and articulations of 'being white.'

### ***Participants' Conceptions of 'Privilege'***

All of the participants spoke of 'privilege' as a single overarching category inclusive of race (being white) and social class (being affluent). Even when asked about race and social class separately, participants tended to blend the categories (referring, for example, to 'rich white people') within their responses. Thus, when I use the general term 'socially privileged,' I am drawing on participants' own sense of intersection between these two majority social locations. Participants did not, however, suggest any overlap between their gender and either race or social class. It is possible that participants view their gender as standalone because this is the aspect of their identities which is not socially dominant (Collins, 2000).

Rachel, Gillian and Zoey reported that 'being white' also signalled financial affluence to members of their host communities overseas, a conflation that became particularly visible during

their visits to local markets. For example, Rachel described her interaction with the Kenyan merchants as follows: “I felt that we were spotlights and targets... White people, in general, they single you out because it’s like ‘oh, they have money. They’re white, they have money.’” Here, participants’ understanding of their race and social class as indistinct categories was also reflected in the way they believed they *were seen* by others (see also Larsen, 2014).

### ***Participants’ Articulations of ‘Being White’***

Whiteness studies illuminates the silences that surround membership in the dominant majority: “Whites, while socialized in a racially constructed world, are taught not to be aware of themselves in racial terms” (Carter, 1997, p. 199). In light of these readings, I had expected participants’ whiteness to be largely ‘invisible’ or resisted within their narratives. I was therefore surprised by the ease with which five of the six participants acknowledged themselves as ‘white’ and used this marker with apparent comfort throughout our conversations. However, in line with whiteness scholars’ critiques, none of the participants made reference to structural aspects of their white privilege or to power. Similarly, Danielle Endres and Mary Gould (2009) observed that students enrolled in their undergraduate intercultural communication class could ‘claim’ their whiteness as an individual identity marker, however, did not challenge the wider systemic inequities that sustain their racial advantages.

The exception was Erin, who paused, seemingly confused, and asked me to re-phrase the question when asked how ‘being white’ factored into her experiences overseas. Erin did not use the term ‘white’ in her own narrative accounts, and instead described herself as ‘blonde.’ This is reminiscent of David Killick’s (2012) study of 14 undergraduate women’s international sojourns to Romania, France, Spain and Australia, in which one participant (Betty) describes herself as “just English, just plain” (p. 378). Both of these rhetorical choices could be viewed as examples of ‘white talk’: the manoeuvres white individuals use to evade explicit admission of their privilege (McIntyre, 1997). Erin and Betty seem to rely on less politically-charged categories – hair colour and national citizenship – perhaps to sidestep the discomfort that may arise from naming themselves as white.

### ***Discomfort Arising from Participants’ Encounters with Material Poverty***

All six participants spoke about being immediately struck by the stark contrast between the living conditions they were accustomed to in Canada and those witnessed in the Kenyan, Ugandan and South African villages they visited. Zoey’s recounting of her bus ride from Nairobi to the Maasai Mara was typical of the observations participants made within their narratives:

I was so shocked by the living conditions, because it was literally just a line of huts...Some were even cardboard boxes that people would be living in and...there was a lot of babies and kids on their own without parents. And a lot of garbage. I’ve never seen so much garbage just laying around, and I would see kids sitting in the garbage and playing with the garbage...It was so dirty and I didn’t expect it I guess, and I saw people who were sleeping in tires...so that was really shocking and sad.

During these early encounters with scenes of material poverty, all participants expressed feeling either ‘sad,’ ‘uncomfortable,’ ‘shocked,’ ‘weird’ or ‘upset.’ Such experiences may be destabilizing because they rupture the ‘picture’ that relatively privileged young people hold about their social world, such that “we become strangers in a world where we thought we were at home” (Lynd, 1958, p. 47). To reduce the feelings of discomfort produced by these encounters with material inequity, participants appeared to rely on two defensive strategies: they construed poverty as a

cultural difference, and framed the African people they encountered as ‘poor-but-happy.’ Both of these devices are examples of individuals choosing to shift how they interpret the situation in order to render challenging information less threatening.

*Construing Poverty as a Cultural Difference.* Rachel, Gillian and Sasha used the word ‘culture’ to account for the presence of impoverished conditions in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa.

Rachel: “There were some things about the culture I couldn’t really grasp...the kids are just covered in flies and they’re just sitting there in the sun baking, and...their houses are made of poop and mud too, so it’s very different. So seeing that made me uncomfortable for them, because it can’t be that comfortable a lifestyle.”

Gillian: “...culturally you see things, and it was definitely uncomfortable to see the state that some people had to live in.”

Sasha: “I remember seeing just the difference between the cultures...how [my host family] lived in this gorgeous beautiful house...and then driving that 45 minutes distance...there were shacks and there were huts, and their houses were made out of nothing. Nothing. It was just so different.”

Here, participants’ application of the word ‘culture’ implies poverty is *characteristic* of the societies they visited. The word ‘different’ or ‘difference’ is also repeated, which suggests that participants may regard poverty as the key marker of distinction between home and host societies. Interpreting poverty as the ‘emblem of difference’ (in which comparative superiority is implied) risks strengthening perceived dichotomies between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Barth, 1969). Furthermore, this framing imagines material inequities as geographically concentrated ‘elsewhere’: with the exception of Melinda, participants did not mention poverty as an issue existing within Canadian society (see also Simpson, 2004).

*Construing Others as Poor-But-Happy.* When I asked participants to share a significant memory from their international volunteer experience, all six recollected their observation that the people they met appeared ‘so happy’ in spite of impoverished living conditions. Participants seemed surprised by this revelation, perhaps because it contradicted the expectations they held prior to departure. For example, Rachel and Melinda recalled that they had prepared themselves to face ‘sadness’ and ‘suffering’ based on the recurrent imagery contained within charitable aid appeals in Canada. Instead, participants reported meeting people who seemed ‘happy,’ ‘content,’ ‘thankful’ and ‘joyous.’

Erin: “You see how impoverished it is and how little people live by there, which was really incredible, but...everybody was so joyous...They would just be so thankful and so happy about the situation that they were in.”

Sasha: “The kids were so happy all the time. And you’d look at them and they had no shoes on, the little boys didn’t even have shirts on, and you think ‘how could you be happy like that?’ They’re just happy to be alive.”

Melinda: “Our local guide told us ‘what we lack in wealth, we make up for in character.’ And I just think that he couldn’t have put it in any better way. They are just the happiest people, and I think not even the economic contrast, but the actual contrast in character between the two [societies].”

Echoing prior research findings, the discursive construction of others as ‘poor-but-happy’ was strongly emergent in Émilie Crossley’s (2012) longitudinal study of undergraduate volunteers in Kenya, Stephen Scoffham and Jonathan Barnes’ (2009) interviews and questionnaires among pre-service teachers visiting India, and Kate Simpson’s (2004) ethnographic study of youth’s gap year placements in South America. Crossley (2012) interpreted these projections of contentment (which

were based on participants' observations of strong community spirit and the "noticeable exuberance of the local children") as a romanticization and trivialization of materially deprived conditions, but also a self-preservation strategy to lessen participants' guilt over holding positions of relative privilege (p. 249).

For some participants, locating contentment within conditions of material poverty served as a catalyst for personally reflecting on the differential 'sources' of happiness in varying contexts – in particular, the happiness *we* (as affluent Canadians) derive from materialism and the happiness *others* derive from having a strong sense of community. All six participants disclosed having realized the importance material objects carry in their lives (specifically referencing articles of clothing, shoes, purses, cell phones, computers and cars), and more generally noted the priority Canadian society places on consumerism. Here, participants not only recognized that they 'have' more than the people they visited, but perhaps more notably, that they deeply value this 'having.' However, while participants claimed that they derive (at least some) happiness from consumerist practices, I detected a sense of embarrassment and self-criticism attached to these admissions. For example, Sasha broke down 'sobbing' during her visit to a South African township, triggered by the memory of a conflict she initiated while shopping with her mother prior to departure:

I really wanted to buy this dress for the trip, and my mom was like 'you don't need that, you don't really need another dress. You have too many.' And I remember being so fed up and so upset. And then coming [to South Africa], the kids couldn't care less if they had clothes on.

Sasha's retelling is reminiscent of Helen Lynd's (1958) description of shame, which involves having an unexpected (and unpleasant) insight into one's identity; the "astonishment at seeing different parts of ourselves, conscious and unconscious, acknowledged and unacknowledged, suddenly coming together" (p. 34). In her narrative, Sasha re-examines prior life events from a new vantage point and expresses shame over the significance she once afforded to a (now seemingly superfluous) consumer item. The opportunity for young people to tease apart emotional well-being from material objects could be seen as an important step towards critically reflecting on oneself as a consumer and questioning the wider societal value placed on consumerism in the North American context.

All six participants spoke with admiration about the emphasis they believed was placed on nurturing a strong sense of community in the Kenyan, Ugandan and South African villages they visited. Sasha remarked: "just what family means to them, and friendship, and things like that. It's just so much more than it would ever mean to me." Participants seemed to envision that, in lieu of material wealth, the African people they met had found emotional prosperity – a "happiness of the soul" – rooted in the strength of their relationships and notions of collectivism (Kielburger & Kielburger, 2006, p. 183). In doing so, participants appear to have modified their prior expectations (of deficit) to consider ways in which life in Sub-Saharan Africa might compare more favourably to life in Canada. When participants reflected on the strong sense of community they encountered in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa, some seemed to re-cast themselves as materially privileged but emotionally less fulfilled, what Craig Kielburger and Marc Kielburger (2006) refer to as the 'rich-but-poor phenomenon.' For example, Zoey said:

Everyone [in Canada] has so much but we all act like we hate each other and we're always kind of rude to each other and we're always looking for a reason to be mad...it seems like I'm being taken care of so well [back home], but I'm not as happy as these people.

The use of the characterization 'poor-but-happy' could be interpreted as serving a defensive function; a 'comforting illusion' employed to neutralize one's strong emotional reactions when



confronted with poverty (Crossley, 2012). Indeed, a few participants seemed to draw upon others' (perceived) contentment to downplay the actualities of material inequity and to divest themselves of personal implication, reactions anticipated within Solomon, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell's (2005) notion of ideological incongruence. For example, while Zoey was initially 'shocked' to witness the living conditions within the Maasai villages she visited, she concluded that: "They were so happy so it seemed like everything was okay." Here, Zoey – rather than being convinced that the consequences of poverty were benign – appeared to construct a more palatable fable as a way to reassure herself or foreclose potential feelings of guilt. This type of front may enable young volunteers to reconstitute themselves as innocent and divest themselves of personal implication in systems of domination (Heron, 2007).

When Erin and Melinda spoke about community members' sense of happiness, they both asserted that the local Kenyan and South African people did not 'blame' them (or North Americans more generally) for the economic disparities that exist between their lives.

Erin: "You don't really expect them to be in contempt of you for having more than they do, and they're not at all... You don't feel like these people are looking at you in jealousy, because they have what they need."

Melinda: "Everyone [in the township] was so excited to have someone come and be interested in their community and they're not angry at the white people for how they live."

Both Erin and Melinda appear to take comfort in the perception that they have been 'approved of' (perhaps even pardoned) by members of their host communities. Darnell (2011) similarly found that Canadian sport-for-development interns in Africa and the Caribbean assuaged their sense of 'First World guilt' by reiterating how they had been accepted and welcomed by the communities they visited. Erin and Melinda seem to accentuate the positive reception they received as a defensive strategy, perhaps to feel 'redeemed' in their pursuit of western materialist lifestyles or to deny personal implication for holding dominant social locations.

### ***Discomfort Arising from Participants' Ability to Maintain Privilege(s) Overseas***

All six participants gave examples of how they retained differential access to the material comforts of home while volunteering overseas. For example, all participants were housed outside of the communities where their service projects took place. Even in the most conservative portrayals, participants described these quarters as more 'comfortable' than the living conditions they observed in the host community. Rachel used the words 'fancy' and 'elegant' to characterize her accommodations in Kenya: "I was in this resort, basically." Gillian described her home-stay in Uganda as "pretty well-to-do." These depictions reminded me of a brochure produced by Me to We (2014) – a popular Canadian volunteer travel operator – which advertises lodging in "bespoke boutique Bogani Cottages" as part of their service excursion to Kenya (p. 1). These cottages are described as "relaxing spaces to recharge and refresh" and feature hot water, power, en suite washrooms, fireplaces and fresh meals prepared by expert chefs (amenities we can expect would be limited or unavailable within the Maasai communities being served) (p. 4). Me to We CEO Roxanne Joyal further assures the potential volunteer: "We take care of all the details and creature comforts so you can focus on what's really important - making a difference in the world" (p. 4).

The discrepancy between living conditions was most glaring for Sasha and Melinda, both of whom were hosted by (white and affluent) South African families living in gated suburb communities. Sasha described her residence as 'wealthy' and 'luxurious': a "gorgeous beautiful house that looked like something from Architectural Digest." While Sasha seemed partly charmed by the plush attributes of her home-stay, she also found it somewhat disorienting to travel from

this particular base into the surrounding shanty townships on a daily basis. Similarly, Melinda recollected:

[My host family] had their own chef. I had my own maid. I had my own seamstress... So when I was there, I felt very fortunate. I was trapped in that bubble still... it was almost like a protection of everything else that was there, and I think it was kind of a wall that was separating actually seeing and understanding the history.

In Sasha and Melinda's narratives, they convey an image of being almost-quarantined from the communities where their service took place. Furthermore, they imply that this separation (a separation in physical location *and* a separation in terms of differential access to material comforts) made their volunteer experience somewhat 'inauthentic.' This lends support to Tania Mitchell, David Donahue and Courtney Young-Law's (2012) critique that young people are typically placed in service contexts that are deemed 'safe' and 'comfortable,' but are therefore stripped of their more challenging educative potential.

In general, the 'creature comforts' participants were afforded during their volunteer experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa seemed a strong source of emotional discomfort. For example, Gillian spoke about the "guilt factor" associated with having perpetual access to purified and bottled water, while knowing that "down the road it was much different for other people." Here, Gillian is not able to rely on the explanation that safe drinking water is simply not available in rural, impoverished villages in Uganda – her guilt may therefore stem from the acquired knowledge that it is *made* available for certain people, but not others. Such an observation (which speaks to the entrenched nature of power and dominance) may be quite distressing for young Canadian volunteers, perhaps because it becomes all-too-visible that they remain 'privileged' across multiple contexts. McIntosh's (1990) notion of the invisible knapsack is a particularly apt image here, as it seems that these young people carried their advantages with them even as they ventured into contexts of deprivation.

An interesting exception here was Erin, who did not voice a sense of discomfort when she recalled the (western-style) arrangements made available for her volunteer group in Kenya:

We were well taken care of, of course. We weren't exactly in tents for three weeks and stuff like that... I mean going on a corporate family trip, they did obviously keep it kid-friendly. They were trying to keep everybody comfortable and able to engage in this world without really feeling the need to draw back.

Erin's use of the term 'kid friendly' seems to be a euphemism for being 'protected' from the assumedly harsh realities of life in the Maasai Mara. Erin also punctuates her remarks with 'of course' and 'obviously' to suggest that receiving differential treatment was an expectation; as if *not* being put at physical and emotional ease would be out-of-course or even inappropriate. Further, Erin implies that if group members were pushed too far beyond their range of personal comfort this might stimulate their extraction or paralysis. This suggests that it is perhaps optimal for young people to "travel to spaces charged with enough potency, in terms of extremes of poverty, to bring about the [personal] transition," but not enough to incite their debilitation or withdrawal (Crossley, 2012, p. 244).

This segment of Erin's narrative is troubling because it proposes that while affluent westerners *elect* to volunteer in impoverished communities, their experience must be crafted in such a way that it veils them from the unsavoury truths of others' lives. Erin's focus on the well-being of the volunteers (and the prerequisite conditions for their engagement) is perhaps a by-product of what Robin DiAngelo (2011) calls 'white fragility.' Here, because socially privileged

individuals are so accustomed to having their emotional well-being prioritized, they may seek withdrawal in the face of even-minimally discomfoting information about the social world. By extension, an insulated or more commoditized volunteer experience may be sought purposefully, such that participants might gaze upon poverty but avoid feeling significant alarm or anxiety (Freire-Medeiros, 2012).

Overall, I got the impression that the participants in this study were having a *particular kind* of international volunteer experience. While these young women took part in six different volunteer excursions in six different communities, there was considerable echo between the types of (carefully managed) experiences they had been exposed to. We might therefore think of these sojourns overseas as a sort of *inoculation*: an opportunity for relatively privileged young people to briefly encounter the hardships of the ‘real’ world (offering ‘just enough discomfort’ to stimulate their personal growth) before commencing adult roles in western capitalist society. While some consideration must be given to the potential sensitivities of exposing minors to jarring social realities, it seems that the young women in this study were offered somewhat enclosed experiences with few opportunities to engage in critical reflection and dialogue about their encounters.

## **Conclusion**

This article has endeavoured to sensitize readers to the multifaceted nature of young white women’s experiences overseas, including the defensive strategies and explanatory frameworks they employ in response to encounters with distressing social realities. Specifically, this research has shown that emotional discomfort (including guilt, shame, anger, confusion and frustration) may arise in educational settings where young people are alerted to others’ material inequities, but also when they confront the entrenched (and mobile) nature of their own social privilege.

While participants reported that their journeys had a pronounced influence on them (all except Gillian referred to their excursions as ‘eye-opening’ and cited a ‘change’ in their level of ‘awareness’ or ‘perspective’) they were unable to articulate a precise impact on their attitudes, values or actions. Indeed, none of the participants offered specific examples of lifestyle changes they had made as a result of discomfoting experiences overseas, even to “small, almost mundane” self-actions such as better managing water or electricity use, or opting to purchase local or Fair Trade products (Larsen, 2014, p. 15). This seems predictable in the case of socially privileged youth, for whom behavioural change would involve forfeiting certain unearned privileges and the comforts associated with leading a western materialist lifestyle. Perhaps shifting one’s ‘cognitions’ about social inequities was more prevalent within this data set because it ultimately requires less individual sacrifice.

With the exception of Melinda, none of the young women in this study suggested that the material inequities they observed were problematic or unjust. It seemed that (their) privilege and (others’) poverty was largely normalized as ‘just the way things are.’ Further, with the exception of Melinda, none of the participants suggested at any point that poverty was a condition that required change, only that it was ‘sad’ or ‘hard’ for them to personally witness. Here, it may be that participants have an unconscious or unexpressed desire to maintain the status quo, as they have a vested interest in preserving their own power and privilege (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). It could also be that participants are simply unsure or feel unequipped to respond to the material inequities they encountered (Cermak et al., 2011; Darnell, 2011). In any case, the data show that participants’ encounters with discomfort did not arouse wider commitments to understanding systemic injustice or to advocating for societal transformation.

While the notion of discomfort arose as a strong theme in this study, this finding can be problematic from a social justice perspective. Poverty and privilege were construed by participants as ‘threatening,’ something to *defend themselves against* rather than something to challenge or change. Furthermore, the strategies participants employed to sooth feelings of discomfort are ones of self-protection, not of disruption to unequal social relations. By consequence, it is the young volunteer (who already holds considerable unearned advantages) who becomes additionally protected from the acute realities of their encounters. This challenges educators to consider the ethical implications of international volunteer excursions and *whose* needs such experiences truly serve. Indeed, if relatively privileged young people largely resume their ‘regular lives’ at the conclusion of their sojourns, what injustices have been reinforced or left intact?

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