Ethical Considerations for Japanese Students Doing Short-Term Charity Work Abroad

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Abstract:

Students in the Department of Regional Development Studies at Toyo University regularly participate in short-term volunteer trips, traveling to developing countries and assisting with projects aimed at improving conditions for local people in one way or another. However, these students are rarely prepared beforehand for the ethical challenges that relate to the unique circumstances of limited duration charity work. A lack of consideration of these challenges can lead to negative results both for the students and for the local residents they will be working for and alongside with. Three aspects are of particular importance here: the us/them dichotomy, the helper/helped hierarchy, and the *uchi/soto* element of Japanese culture. Although these issues are considered from a Japanese perspective, the conclusions drawn and practical suggestions made may be more generally applicable. Finally, it is argued that we in the developed world have a moral obligation to support global poverty reduction, and that the most effective way to do so is through regular and ongoing charitable donations.

Keywords: charity; Japan; moral obligation; poverty; short-term volunteer work; Southeast Asia

I. Preparing to leave: A missing element

Every year a number of students in our department participate in one or more short-term volunteer programs, typically going to Southeast Asia in order to assist local residents with practical concerns of either a social or structural nature. Students may undertake these trips for a variety of reasons, but foremost amongst such will likely be a desire to help those less materially well-off than themselves, recognizing the difficulties that could come from a lower standard of living or the absence of the kinds of creature comforts that we take for granted. When preparing to go it will be the practical concerns that quite naturally get focused on by students and facilitating administrators: issues related to transport, lodging, food and drink, safety, health, and so on. What may get overlooked, or not given enough attention, will be the attitudes that students should take with them concerning those whom they

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will help. This is an important issue, with potentially far-reaching consequences that could remain in effect long after students have returned to Japan. However grateful the recipients of the volunteers' time and efforts may be, a failure to break through the us/them barrier or perceptions of condescension could leave a lasting negative impression and could in turn affect how students view their own time abroad. Although students will almost certainly not overtly maintain that separation or demonstrate such an attitude, an affective basis to such could influence students' behavior and subconsciously inform how they relate to and speak with the local residents that they meet, also truncating the breadth of their own experiences. This highlights the necessity of preparing students mentally for where they will go and what they will do long before they leave Japan, and this preparation should include an ethics of the other. In the following I would ask us to consider how some of these issues could take shape through an examination of the us/them divide, the hierarchy of the helper/helped relationship, and the *uchi/soto* feature of Japanese culture. Throughout the next section and summarized at its end some suggestions will be offered regarding what a practically oriented ethical preparatory program could include to help overcome these hidden stumbling blocks. Finally, we will look at the moral obligation we have to the people of Southeast Asia and other developing regions that stretches beyond the time frame of a short-term trip, and towards meeting this obligation it will be argued that there are compelling reasons for ongoing personal support of charities.

II. Going there

One of the main causes for the rigidity of the us/them barrier remaining in place during a volunteer trip overseas is the limited duration of time spent with local residents. Whereas with longer-term programs (stretching for months or even years) the natural process of acclimation sets in and volunteers began to at least partially take on the outlook of their host culture — recasting the others around them in a new light and reducing the perceived differences of the local people from themselves — short-term programs preclude this from taking place due to their brevity. As such, students are likely to remain in a bubble-like frame of mind, seeing their situation in terms of 'us' helping 'them' and never breaking beyond that barrier to humanize and fully appreciate the people for whom they have come to volunteer in the first place. The danger in this, and it should be stressed that this outlook is a very natural and unconscious response to the situation that students find themselves in, is that local people will be viewed and treated not so much as people with their own goals and desires but as the objects of the help that the volunteers have come to give. This runs the risk of mentally reducing those residents to the level of accessories, considering them the objective of one's actions rather than as equals working towards a common goal. This viewpoint is a default one that most of us would have in a similar setting, based on the clear differences between ourselves and those of the host country as well as on the fact that our purpose for being there is to offer assistance and to do for 'them' what they presumably cannot do for themselves, a point we will return to shortly. That this unexamined mental position is a natural one does not make it beneficial, however; rather it is potentially quite detrimental for both the

volunteers themselves and the locals who are meant to benefit from the volunteers' activities because it blocks both groups from relating to one another in a meaningful manner. While the students remain walled off behind their enclosure of an 'us' that is wholly separate from the local 'them' they will be unable to forge relationships with their host country's people beyond the superficialities of a greeting here and a smile there. They will not be capable of relating as one person to another person, as one full human life with another equally full human life, and this will in turn prevent them from experiencing the complete richness of an alien culture and the personal growth that such can bring. We are doing a disservice to our students by not preparing them to overcome this, and the first step towards that is to actively instruct them in these issues and to teach them to be aware of the warning signs within themselves that they are constructing an us/them barrier and then how that divide can be broken down.

A related factor to the severing of sameness that typically accompanies how those participating in short-term charity trips perceive their hosts is the unintentional creation of a hierarchical relationship between the volunteer giving the help and the local person receiving the help. This too occurs naturally and needs to be mitigated by the people giving the help as it is they who will be in the position of power in the relation that develops. Just as the differences between the student volunteers' and their host country's cultures reinforce the us/them divide in students' outlooks during the duration of their time abroad, the mere fact of the students being the ones offering the help and the local people being the ones accepting that help acts to establish an unequal relationship in the minds of both parties. While one group is the powerful and generous caregiver offering assistance and guidance, the other is in the humbling position of having to ask for help, of not being able to do for themselves what it is that they would like to. That a lack of ability on the part of those receiving the aid exists is not always, or even often, accurate is quite clear; in many instances local residents are very capable of doing the work that the student volunteers have come to do, and when they can't it is more often than not a question of resources rather than skills or know-how. The complicating factor of wanting to have volunteers from a wealthier country visit one's less well off country in order to obtain economic benefits plays a part in this scenario as well, but nevertheless the hierarchy that is subconsciously established by the varying roles of each group holds in the minds of those involved. This is not something for which students should be faulted, but it is something of which they must be made aware. During the 18th and 19th centuries European colonial powers would often argue that their rule of others was justified because of the benefits they brought: improved infrastructure, a lingua franca, schools, hospitals, government buildings and bureaucratic procedures, work and economic development. Cultural superiority was claimed and patronizing attitudes and policies were emplaced. Although obvious to us today, counterarguments for indigenous self-rule and self-determination were at the time blithely ignored and the ill-treatment continued well into the 20th century, so much so that Frantz Fanon, in his famous *The Wretched of the Earth,* maintained that violent means were needed to overthrow the colonial power in order to cleanse the psyches of the local people, that only through the brutal re-establishment of power over their own lives via the visible physical defeat of the colonizers who had mistreated them could the

colonized overcome their oppression.[1)] Students who travel to Southeast Asia on short-term volunteer trips are not of course going to colonize and generally take with them very good intentions based on an honest desire to help, but the country they represent — Japan — only very recently either colonized or militarily occupied many of the places they are going, and the historical scars that remain from that experience can take many generations to heal, as ongoing conflicts between Japan and its Asian neighbors indicate. Due to this historical backdrop, Japanese students who are involved in charity work may find themselves facing an underlying resentment from their hosts, and if students are not cognizant of that possibility they could inadvertently cause offense if seen to be demonstrating an attitude of supremacy, of giving out of their largess to a people whose country has not reached the lofty position of their own. Japan's cultural traits have certainly been a large part of what has made, and continues to make, Japan successful, but if students are not warned against exhibiting an excessive pride in their home country and taught that the people of Cambodia or the Philippines or Laos or wherever have an entirely different view of recent history and events than they do the potential for damaging words and actions remains, to the detriment of all involved.

The dichotomies of us/them and helper/helped both have their roots in common human psychological responses, and their expression likewise stems from unconscious and intuitive responses to the situations in which people find themselves. The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has developed a model based on much empirical research that helps us understand such behavior through recognizing the important role that intuition plays in our actions, and supplementary to his work we may add the rich research into the emotional influences and affective stances that we bring to the world we encounter around us in our everyday lives.[2)] What the research in this area reveals is that nearly all of our behaviors and the attitudes that we take towards others come from the intuitive and emotional parts of our brains, that our judgments are almost entirely quick, unconscious, and based in automatic responses, and that only later do we apply our reasoning by giving post hoc justifications to ourselves or others as a way of explaining what we did or thought. In essence, we act without rationally deciding what to do the vast majority of the time, and afterwards if we or another asks us why we did X then we start to think about it and provide Y as the reason. It is possible for us to change our automatic reactions and the behavior that follows from them through personal reflection and efforts made at establishing habits that we deem to be positive, and our intuitions may also be altered via the social influences others exert on us, but on the whole we are creatures that feel first, act on that feeling, and then only later may or may not think about the action that we took. That we operate in this manner has important implications for behavior generally and all the more so in situations where people from different cultures are interacting with one another. Students who wish to volunteer abroad will need to reflect on these points and examine their own behavior in light of this research if they wish to positively interact with, and better understand the perspectives of, the local residents whom they will be meeting. In this regard there is one element of Japanese culture that has equipped students with a mindset, and intuitive reactions, that is likely to exacerbate the problems outlined above, that of the

uchi/soto (in/out) division.[3] Knowing where one stands in relation to others is extremely important within Japanese society and the understanding of this that students develop during their childhood acculturation period is a necessary survival skill for them as long as they remain in Japan. However, since by this system of categorization all non-Japanese people (defined ethnically) are automatically placed in the *soto* out-group students will have a very hard time considering the people for whose benefit they have traveled and with whom they are engaged in an ongoing enterprise to be one of 'us' *(uchi)*, resulting in the worsening of the problems caused by the us/them barrier discussed above. While one's *uchi* group typically consists of family, close friends, immediate co-workers, etc., it can be extended to include larger or different sub-groupings of people depending on the circumstances, but it can never (practically speaking) be stretched so far as to include a non-Japanese person. Although being in the *soto* group does entitle one to polite and deferential treatment, it also means being kept at arm's length to some degree; both of these elements can cause friction between students and the local people of the area they are visiting. Depending on the culture, receiving overly polite behavior can be seen as something of an affront, particularly if those involved have been working on a project together for a number of days. Moreover, feeling that the Japanese student or students with whom one has been interacting will not make her or his true feelings and thoughts known is likely to be off-putting and could easily be ascribed to the students' consideration of themselves as superior, related to the helper/helped issues of the preceding paragraph. Although these judgments may appear to be unfair because the students in question surely do not mean to offend, it must be remembered that all parties involved are acting out of their unconscious, reflexive, and emotionally-based intuitive reactions, and the first steps to overcoming these reactions are to recognize and fully comprehend them and their affects on oneself.

Due to the difficulties presented by the us/them barrier and the helper/helped hierarchy, problems which are unfortunately worsened by Japan's traditional *uchi/soto* distinction, students would benefit more from their time volunteering abroad — and the people for whom they are going would as well — if they were to first receive some practical ethical training concerning these issues. Such training would ideally include the psychological research into behavioral patterns and decision-making briefly outlined above, along with opportunities for students to reflect on their own intuitive and automatic responses and the manner in which they would like to change them. Another aspect that would be advantageous to include would be a historical sketch of the area to which students will be going (or to where students do frequently go), focusing on that area's relations with Japan and current perceptions of Japan and the Japanese people held by local residents. As our department's students are primarily involved in volunteer groups that go to Southeast Asia that region could be covered in a general manner, a detailed historical analysis of each specific country would not necessarily be needed in order for students to understand the basics of the local perspectives although highlighting the similarities and differences between each country and culture would be helpful. Training regarding their own outlook towards others would also be of enormous benefit to students, and not just during their time spent on a

volunteer activity. In *I and Thou* Martin Buber argues that human relationships fall into either the I-It category or the I-You category, with the I-It relationship not being limited to a person's interactions with an object but also covering areas where a person treats another person as an object. Buber takes this beyond the Kantian maxim of never treating another human being as a means to an end only, and challenges us to see others in the fullness of their humanity at all times, not as something to be worked on, associated with, taken from, or even given to, but as a creature whose expansive existence has intersected with our own for just this moment in time. To treat someone in the I-It manner is to pass by them without experiencing the depths of whom that person is and without having one's own life touched in the course of the meeting; in an I-You interaction, on the other hand, one turns fully towards the other and loses oneself temporarily in the process, both parties forgetting their mutual independence while they embrace the relational aspect of their being together,[4] becoming absorbed in that moment of togetherness, as it were. Students could again be challenged by this argument and in applying it to their own lives and interactions with others without covering all of the aspects that Buber does in his work. Finally, students should be reminded that although they will go and assist others in improving their lives, they will be returning to Japan while those they aid will remain, and often remain in conditions of heartbreaking poverty. It can be an exciting and life-changing event to visit a foreign country in one's youth, and it is all too easy for students to see their volunteer trip simply as a trip — something fun to do during break. In order to help avoid this insufficient point of view programs like Salamat[5] include time spent solely on labor and time reserved for activities that are purely for enjoyment, leisurely breaks during the course of the real work that needs to be done. As Robert Hughes has pointed out, community-based projects like this are sustainable ways to combine tourism with positive personal growth for the students and needed development for the local residents.[6] If students are made to understand before they leave that they will have opportunities for recreation but that the main purpose of their time overseas is to assist others while interacting with and learning from them, they may be able to better approach the work before them with the seriousness required of their endeavors. In sum, a pre-trip ethical training course should preferably include elements of psychology, history, philosophy, and community-focus.

III. Being here

Having examined how students could be made better prepared for their short-term charity work prior to leaving and while staying abroad, the question of what happens after they return remains to be discussed. I would like to argue that we here in Japan, and in the developed world generally, do have an obligation to engage in long-term support of the developing world, and that this obligation is by no means limited to students but includes all of us of working age. The types of time limited, mostly manual labor, volunteer trips that many young people choose to engage in can be highly beneficial in promoting broader worldviews and a greater concern for the world outside of one's home country, and can naturally also make a difference in the lived experiences of those receiving the labor, but

on the whole they are one-off undertakings that do not extend throughout a person's lifetime. Young people go to a poverty stricken country, see what life is like there and are emotionally touched, help out with a local project, perhaps also do a bit of touring, and then head back to where they came from and find themselves once more enmeshed in the necessities of their day-to-day concerns. This is a natural pattern and one that most of us have found ourselves in; people in this category are not and should not be faulted for it. Yet this pattern also does very little in real terms to combat world poverty and, as laudable as short-term volunteer work is, is far less effective than a sustained commitment to economically supporting a charitable organization would be. There are at present a vast number of groups engaged in full-time work to alleviate poverty and to improve the daily lives of those in the developing world, so much so that one can easily find a match between one's personal concerns and a charity organization devoted to meeting that need. For those who are overwhelmed by the number of groups to choose from websites like *GiveWell* rank charities based on a thorough scrutiny of available evidence to determine which best serve the global poor, have a current need for more funding, and most effectively use the money that is donated to them.[7] There are a number of reasons that could be offered for why it is important to financially contribute to fighting poverty but perhaps the most obvious is that the needs are so great and ongoing. Some 80% of the world lives on less than US$10 per day, half of the world's population suffers from water problems, 22,000 children die daily due to poverty related causes[8] — the immensity of the disparity between the lives of those in the developed world and the developing world cannot be overstated. Moreover, it is that vast difference in life quality that not only points to the need for us in the rich minority of the world to give of our considerable disposable incomes but also to our moral obligation to do so. We cannot claim to be caring and decent people while ignoring the plight of nearly everyone else on the planet simply because we are not confronted with their troubles on a daily basis. Joshua Greene has recently asserted that although spending money on creature comforts or non-necessities may make us slightly happier, our increase in quality of life is nothing compared to what the same amount of money could do for the life of someone elsewhere;[9] someone struggling, for example, to get by on less than US$2.50 per day, as over three billion people are now doing.[10] That an amount like ¥1,000 does so little in Tokyo but goes so far in a developing economy in terms of purchasing power is a well-known fact that only strengthens the point Greene is making. Due to concerns of this nature, Peter Singer has argued that we may be morally compelled to give as much as all of our disposable incomes to assisting those in need, a position which he recognizes as having the limitations of likely asking too much of people and of being potentially disheartening (if one can't meet that level then why bother giving at all?), amongst others.[11] Perhaps more realistically, in his fuller treatment of the topic, *The Life You Can Save,* Singer suggests that our standard for donating to charities should be at least 1% of our income, increasing progressively from that starting point.[12] (The book's associated website has a tool that generates one's personal proposed level both as a percentage and as a numerical figure.[13]) There will be many factors that affect how much a person decides to give, and in the case of couples sharing an income or each contributing to common household finances further issues will come into play, but Singer's target

is at least a fiscally reasonable one, even if other circumstances prevent it from being fully met. On a purely practical level, perhaps what is more important than a numeric goal is an ongoing commitment to giving something, and to making one's donations regularly and consistently. Organizations such as UNICEF make this very simple to do by signing up to be a monthly supporter; their website lists denominations of ¥1,000-20,000 as options and gives examples of what ¥2,000, ¥3,000, ¥4,000, and ¥5,000 gifts are able to do, but those wishing to give can enter in any amount they would like to when signing up and once enrolled on the program receive regular reports of how their money is being used and the progress being made towards improving the lives of those in need.[14] By regularly giving to a charity one is providing it with a stable and reliable source of income and therefore increasing its effectiveness as well as establishing within oneself a virtuous habit that in turn equips one with a new outlook and set of intuitive responses. It is very important for us to go and see the reality of life for people in developing countries — not only while we are students but throughout our lives — yet if we are serious about doing something to ease their troubles then we will need to make supporting charities a regular part of how we allocate where our income is spent. It may seem unfair that we who just happened to have been born in a country that is part of the developed world are burdened with an obligation to improve the conditions of all of those who weren't, but when we consider the vast benefits we have reaped through that happy accident of birth we should quickly come to see that what has been suggested here and by others is the least we can do. Those who are motivated and able to work full-time for charity organizations will be capable of making a tremendous difference in the lives of others, and although most of us may choose other career paths for ourselves we too can still be effective in improving conditions in the developing world through our regular and long-term monetary support of aid groups and our irregular short-term charitable work.

Students who choose to participate in a short-term volunteer trip are demonstrating a generosity of spirit and concern for others that should be applauded and encouraged. Such ventures come with their own specific ethical concerns, however, and at present the associated needs are not being met. After considering the potential problems generated by the us/them dichotomy, the helper/helped hierarchy, and the role that Japan's *uchi/soto* viewpoint plays in aggravating those issues, some suggestions were made for the form an ethical training program could take in order to better prepare our students before they embark on their trips. Nevertheless, our obligation to those who are less well off than we are does not end when our volunteer work does; why that is and what we ought to do about it have also been discussed in the above. Each of us has the rare opportunity to genuinely make a positive difference in the lives of not only the people that we regularly see but also those who are thousands of kilometers away and whom we may never meet. Whether or not we take advantage of this chance that has been given to us is entirely ours to decide; it is my hope that we will and that we will also furnish our students with the outlook to do the same, both before they go and while they are back here.

[Notes]

1) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001).

2) On Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model see Jonathan Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review,* 108:4 (2001), 814-834 and *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012); on the dominance of emotional and automatic responses in our thinking, which often subsequently directly affects our behavior, see Michael Gazzaniga, *Who's In Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (New York: Ecco Press, 2011); António Damásio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); and Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

3) For a very brief description of this aspect of Japanese culture, particularly its linguistic effects, see 'Uchi-soto', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uchi-soto>. There are also a number of book length treatments on this concept that interested readers may wish to consult for a deeper analysis.

4) Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* translation and preface by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribners, 1970).

5) For more information on Salamat and what student volunteers have contributed to the greater Cebu City area of the Philippines see 'Salamat: Assisting children living in poverty', *Toyo University.* <http://www.toyo.ac.jp/site/rds-global/42589.html>; and the group's page on *Facebook.* <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Salamat 国際ボランティアサークル /292072487477643>.

6) Robert Hughes, 'Voluntourism: A Powerful Trend', *Journal of Regional Development Studies,* 16 (2013), 38-43.

7) *GiveWell.* <http://www.givewell.org/>; its criteria page can be found here: <http://www.givewell.org/criteria>.

8) For a compilation of world poverty statistics see Anup Shah, 'Poverty Facts and Stats', *Global Issues: Social, Political, Economic and Environmental Issues That Affect Us All.* Last updated 07 January 2013. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.

9) Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).

10) Shah, *op. cit.*

11) Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics,* 3rd edn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

12) Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009).

13) 'How Much to Give', *The Life You Can Save.* <http://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/TakethePledge/HowMuch.aspx>.

14) For the Japanese site see *UNICEF: Monthly Support Program.* <http://www.unicef.or.jp/cooperate/coop_monthly.html>; the English version can be found at *UNICEF: Donate monthly.* <http://www.supportunicef.org/site/c.dvKUI9OWInJ6H/b.7651793/k.4403/Support_UNICEF__Donate_monthly.htm>.

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UNICEF: Monthly Support Program. <http://www.unicef.or.jp/cooperate/coop_monthly.html>. Accessed 03 June 2014