A Critical Review of Overseas Gap Years

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Abstract
This article provides an introduction to overseas gap years, an increasingly popular way of taking time out between school and university. These experiences are often defined as a means of individual self-development and an opportunity for young people to ‘broaden their horizons’. The article highlights three potential ways gap years are said to be learning experiences: encouraging cultural understanding; skills and career development; and enabling identity work. I conclude that thinking critically about overseas gap years helps us to remember that any benefits should not be taken for granted and that they have arisen in a particular social context.

Introduction
It has become increasingly popular in the UK to take a ‘gap year’. Jones (2004) defines a gap year as:

… any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual ‘takes out’ of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory (Jones 2004: 8).

Gap years may be taken at various stages in a person’s life, for example after university or as a career break. Gap years may also involve activities in one’s home country, for example volunteering or working to fund further study. Taking time out overseas is particularly popular, however. Heath (2009) draws upon the UK’s Youth Cohort Study to highlight this preference:

47 per cent of those respondents who intended to take a pre-university gap year in 2001-02 planned to work or travel overseas, although in practice only 37 per cent of those who actually took a pre-university gap year achieved their goal (Heath 2009: 37).

Even though not everyone is able to take their gap year overseas, it is clearly an aspiration for many. These experiences can encompass travelling (usually independently organised), working, volunteering, or a combination of the three, and are defined as a means of self-development. Young people may also spend varying
amounts of time overseas during their gap year, from long-term volunteering placements to short periods of travel interspersed with working in the UK.

This article focuses on gap years after school and before entry into higher education that are taken overseas. It examines their status as educational experiences, beginning with a brief discussion of the popularity of overseas gap years and why they are seen to be appropriate for young people at transitional moments. The article then reviews the field of gap year research, supplemented by findings from my own study (Snee 2009). It concludes with some reflections on the implications for those interested in gap years as learning experiences. I suggest that rather than focusing on gap years as an individual rite of passage, we need to consider the gap year in its historical, cultural and social context and as a collective experience. Furthermore, I argue that the benefits of gap years should not be taken for granted.

The Rise of the Gap Year

Unfortunately, it is difficult to give the definitive number of young people from the UK engaged in gap years, as there is no single source of data that would be able to provide these figures (Jones 2004). Drawing upon a range of quantitative and qualitative data, a report for the former Department of Education and Skills (Jones 2004) suggests an annual participation rate of around 250,000. However, this includes young people in the age range of 16 to 25 and also a wide variety of gap year categories, including post-university, employment breaks, and those taken in the UK (Jones 2004: 46). One way of capturing the numbers is to examine data from UCAS, the body that manages applications to higher education in the UK. In 2009, 34,049 students who had accepted places at university deferred the start of their degrees for one year. This was 7.1% of the total number of accepted applications (UCAS 2010: n.p.). Again, this figure includes those who do not go overseas and it also does not capture those who apply to university during or after their gap year (Mintel 2005: 14). Industry estimates for pre-university gap years seem to agree that the figure is in the region of 50,000 per year (Mintel 2005: 14).

Gap years can be placed in the context of the growth in popularity of long-term independent travel, and ‘gappers’ may also be backpackers, valuing extended periods of budget travel without a fixed itinerary (O’Reilly 2006: 999). However, a
specialised gap year industry has also emerged so that overseas experiences can be undertaken through ‘structured’ placements. These are organised by charities or (increasingly) commercial companies, who co-ordinate overseas accommodation, activities, employment, and / or volunteering. Furthermore, a gap year guidance industry has emerged, consisting of publishers (such as Lonely Planet), advisory websites (such as gapyear.com) and industry organisations like the Year Out Group (www.yearoutgroup.org). Gap years have become an enshrined practice in the UK, encouraged by the education sector, government bodies and career guidance literature.

As noted by Simpson (2005a), the profile of gap years rose when the heir to the British throne Prince William undertook a volunteering placement in Chile (Simpson 2005a: 9). Every year, British national newspapers run special features on gap years when examination results are released, offering advice and guidance on how young people can spend their time out. It can also be likened to other examples of youth travel as self-development, such as the ‘big OE’ (overseas experience) in Australia and New Zealand (Inkson and Myers 2003).

Gap years are a thus a popular activity and are well-supported as a means of assisting with transitional periods. Sociologists suggest that youth transitions to adulthood are less certain than before. Rather than common prescribed paths, transitions are becoming increasingly individualised, flexible and complex, which means that today’s young people have the task of successfully navigating their way with fewer frames of reference than previous generations. This is reflected in social policy, which has emphasised the need for young people to take individual responsibility for successful transitions and to construct their own personal project of self-development (Brooks 2009: 10). For example, Walther and Plug (2006) suggest that European policy initiatives aimed at the transition from education to work emphasise:

- employability (individuals need to ensure that they meet employer demands);
- lifelong learning (education and employment are no longer directly linked but an ongoing process); and
- activation (individuals need to be motivated) (cited in Brooks 2009: 5).

Gap years have emerged in this context, so that they are aimed at increasing young people’s employability through developing beneficial skills; are defined as an informal learning experience; and provide evidence of young people being active in
their development. Johan (2009) argues that ‘GYT [gap year travel] meets the needs of young people for time, place and space to negotiate their sense of belongingness and their emerging sense of identity in approaching adulthood’ (Johan 2009: 143).

The following review of the field of gap year research aims to consider the gap year in this context. My intention is to provide an insight into the academic work on the phenomenon but also raise questions about the basis for gap years to be automatically assumed to be a ‘good thing’. It is not my intention to devalue the experience, but to argue that we need to think carefully about the reasons why overseas gap years are encouraged.

**Gap year research**

Academic research into the gap year has emerged from a variety of disciplines including tourism studies, geography and the sociology of youth and education. A general overview of the gap year sector can be found in a report on behalf of the former Department of Education and Skills on gap years for 16-25 year olds, which attempts to define the practice; provide information on access and participation; assess the benefits; review the sector; and consider issues of quality and accreditation in the provision of gap year products (Jones 2004).

The follow review of gap year literature focuses on three key areas:

- Volunteer tourism in less developed countries and the potential for overseas gap years to increase cultural understanding.
- The skills and benefits that are perceived to be gained through undertaking a gap year.
- How gap years have been positioned as enabling individual identity work.

I also draw upon my own research (Snee 2009) which utilised blogs written by young people to document their gap years and communicate their experiences to their friends and family back home, alongside interviews with a sub-set of the bloggers. This included young people who undertook structured placements only; who undertook independent travel only; and who undertook a mixture of the two. Rather than concentrating on structured placements or backpacking, I was interested in the stories
of young people who took time out between school and university that were self-described as overseas gap years. One objective of the research was to examine how the gappers described the places they visited in order to understand why being away during a gap year is preferable to staying at home.

Volunteer tourism and cultural understanding

A central motivation for the popularity of gap years is the importance of ‘seeing the world’. In the case of volunteering, this intersects with altruism and becoming a global citizen. However, independent travel also has its own connotations of adventure, exploration and engaging with different cultures. Building upon the literature on youth travel, Johan (2009) suggests that overseas gap years can help young people to deal with different cultural contexts (an important resource in contemporary globalising conditions) and also encourage learning through new experiences and interactions with ‘the other’ (Johan 2009: 142; 144). One of the purposes of the overseas gap year is to broaden the mind and gain a greater understanding of cultural difference.

However, we might question the extent to which cultural understanding can be fostered through gap years. Does visiting a place necessarily mean that you understand it? The gap year literature that has reflected on these arguments has looked at volunteering in less developed countries. Volunteer tourism is a growing sector that is popular with gappers. Individuals are motivated to combine travel with voluntary work to seek:

… a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and / or economic environments in which they participate (Wearing 2001: 1).

Such experiences are often put forward as enabling volunteers to understand local cultures and the issues facing communities through cross-cultural interaction (Raymond and Hall 2008: 531). Guttentag (2009) argues, however, that the research on volunteer tourism which focuses on profiling volunteers and their motivations often does not engage with its negative impacts. This results in a presumption that volunteer tourism is beneficial for host communities without reflecting upon the
claims that are made. Critical work on volunteer tourism has developed to question some of these claims, including those which focus on gap year placements.

Simpson (2004; 2005a; 2005b), for example, offers a critical account of the gap year industry that provides volunteering placements in the ‘third world’, finding the lack of engagement with issues surrounding development problematic and not sufficiently addressed by these organisations. Her work suggests that the historical legacy of colonial expansion has impacted on how gap year programmes are organised, such as putting forward models of development based on individual effort rather than encouraging an understanding of the systems and structures of global inequalities (Simpson 2004: 685). Simpson argues that young people focus on the differences encountered on volunteering programmes, and that taking part tends to confirm what participants already know about these places (Simpson 2005a: 208; 213). For example, her study of young gappers volunteering in Peru found that they reproduced the idea that local people were ‘poor but happy’, a discourse which does little to actually challenge poverty (Simpson 2005a: 212).

Thus, whilst the gap years are marketed on the benefits for young people who participate in such programmes, there may not necessarily be benefits for the host communities. Underlying these concerns is that the western volunteer, who may has little or no qualifications, is positioned as an ‘expert’ or ‘teacher’ and thus racially or culturally superior (Raymond and Hall 2008: 534). In addition, they may actually have a negative impact upon host communities, for example through performing unsatisfactory work, affecting local labour markets or even causing problematic changes in local cultures (Guttentag 2009). These ideas have moved into public debate in the UK, in part prompted by the media coverage of Simpson’s research. In 2007, the director of VSO UK (an international development organisation) voiced her concerns about: ‘the number of badly planned and supported schemes that are spurious – ultimately benefiting no one apart from the travel companies that organise them’ (Ward 2007: n.p.).

This research is not suggesting that volunteering itself is problematic, but that it is not automatically a ‘good thing’. Furthermore, there are implications of this for the pedagogical benefits for young people who undertake these placements. Simpson
(2005b) argues that there is little strategy across the gap year industry to actually deliver its promised goals of cross-cultural learning and understanding (Simpson 2005a: 467). Whilst he agrees with many of Simpson’s (2004) concerns, Jones (2005) suggests that cross-cultural experiences can engender a more sophisticated understanding of cultural difference and issues of development, but this is dependent upon the quality of the project (Jones 2005: 14-15). Moreover, young people can gain a ‘global perspective’ through volunteering, including an understanding of global links, a sense of empowerment to make a difference, and a disposition to future volunteering work (Jones 2005: 15-17).

Not all young people who take overseas gap years volunteer. The literature on backpacking documents the desires of young travellers to go beyond tourism and have authentic experiences of the places they visit (see O’Reilly 2006; Richards and Wilson 2004). There is status in being cosmopolitan and a ‘good traveller’ (rather than a tourist) and to encounter difference successfully. This travelling status also helps to explain some of the perceived benefits of gap year travel, as these are based upon the cultural value of travel itself:

Travel has a long association with enhanced social status… Part of the gap year product is access to the social status of being ‘experienced’ and being travelled… The idea that travel makes you a more ‘interesting’ person exemplifies the cultural capital embedded in travel and gap year experiences (Simpson 2004: 152).

Building upon this idea of travel as an enriching experience, gap years are also aimed at developing skills that are advantageous in the employment market.

**Skills and career development**

Simpson (2004) suggests that the practice of taking a gap year is an indicator of the ‘professionalisation’ of youth travel, which has shifted from being an alternative activity to ‘a training ground for future professionals’ (Simpson 2004: 143). Young people do not undertake their gap years spontaneously, but are encouraged to do so, and in the ‘right’ way, by a number of sources that stress their benefits in terms of skills development. The UK government has shown an interest in gap years, including the aforementioned DfES report and a debate in Parliament on gap years and volunteering (Hansard 2000, cited in Heath 2009: 34-35). Alongside encouraging
young people’s citizenship, this support has stressed how gap years are educational experiences. Information on the UK Government’s ‘Directgov’ website, for example states that gap years ‘can do wonders for your skills, confidence and CV’ (Directgov 2009: n.p.).

The official account of the gap year as conducive to career development is reinforced through media coverage of the phenomenon. According to one commentator, gap years ‘will give you something impressive to add to your CV. Employers and university admissions officers love gap year students and the skills they acquire’ (Ford 2005: n.p.). Given the increase in access to higher education in the UK, it may be argued that standing out is increasingly important. Heath (2007) places the growth of gap years in this context, arguing that ‘new ways of gaining distinction’ are required (Heath 2007: 92). Furthermore, the recent economic downturn and record competition for higher education places in 2010 have led to suggestions that being distinctive is more vital than ever, and young people are urged to be strategic in making sure that their actions are orientated towards career development. A recent article in the *Guardian* newspaper reports that young people who miss out on a university place are being advised to be ‘selfish’ and to take a gap year to maximise their chances on being successful in the future (Shepherd 2010: n.p.). I will return to this idea of the ‘selfish’ gapper shortly.

How would a gap year help a student stand out? Jones (2004) summarises the perceived benefits of gap years (including those based at home) as follows:

- improved educational performance;
- formation and development of educational and career choices;
- reduced likelihood of future ‘drop out’ from education, training or employment;
- improved ‘employability’ and career opportunities;
- non-academic skills and qualifications;
- social capital;
- life skills;
- developing social values.

(Jones 2004: 58).
Many of these benefits, as noted by Heath (2007) and King (2009), overlap with the personal qualities and soft skills that have been identified as increasingly required in graduate employment (Brown et al 2003; Brown and Hesketh 2004). Brown and Hesketh (2004) suggest that a degree is no longer enough to be employable, and candidates need to demonstrate activities that shown their ‘drive, determination and creative thinking’ (cited in King 2009: 205). Heath (2007) therefore suggests that gap years can add to an individual’s ‘personality package’ (Brown et al 2003) that show they are employable.

There is, however, little concrete evidence to support the view that young people who undertake gap years do better at university or are more successful in employment, although it seems somewhat accepted that this is the case. This does not necessarily mean that young people do not gain these skills or benefit from undertaking gap years. We might question, however, the taken for granted nature of this self-development. Moreover, we might want to think carefully about the social groups who are associated with these attributes, and inequalities of access to the sorts of experiences that are seen to develop them. Until recently, gap years were also seen as a practice associated with privileged youth (Heath 2007). Certain official accounts suggest that gap years are now open to all:

Once the preserve of the rich and well-connected… gap years are now a must for any self-respecting student (Bennett 2008: n.p.)

However, Jones (2004) identifies the common characteristics of young people who are more likely to undertake gap years: white; female; relatively affluent; an over-representation of grammar school and private school backgrounds; and an under-representation of people with disabilities. In other words, similar inequalities that are associated with unequal participation in higher education.

Although gap years are considered to be valuable experiences, much of this is based upon taking the ‘right kind’ of gap year and making the most of your time out. Thus some types of gap years are of more value than others. It has been suggested that there are inequalities of access to the more ‘valuable’ forms of gap year (Heath 2007). According to Heath, overseas gap years are more desirable than those based in the UK, despite the Government’s efforts to promote UK-based volunteering (Heath 2007: 97). Moreover, the experiences of young people who have to work during their gap year to
save for university are not likely to be valued as highly (Heath 2007: 95). In addition, the expense of overseas gap years can be prohibitive for many. Although many placements are funded through sponsorship, the social networks of young people from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to be able to contribute (Heath 2007: 99). We can thus see a hierarchy of gap year experiences, with overseas more valued than home, and structured placements more valued than 'just backpacking’, that corresponds to the relative exclusiveness of these activities. This was identified by a marketing report on the gap year industry, which notes that the ‘Year Out Group’ aim their marketing fairs mainly at students from independent schools:

Although young people from state school are thought to make up the majority of the pre-university gap year market, the marketing policy of the Year Out Group reflects the predominance of young people from wealthier, middle-class backgrounds participating in the relatively expensive structured placement gap year activities (Mintel 2005: 13).

What we may perceive to be the personal qualities of an individual, like ‘confidence’ or ‘creativity’, often reflect their social background. Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital – cultural competences and knowledge – was designed to explain class differences in scholastic achievement. He argued that it was the culture of the dominant classes that is legitimised and rewarded by the education system, working against a commonsense view that natural aptitudes could explain these differences (Bourdieu 1986). If the most beneficial types of gap years - those which contribute most to developing soft skills and personal qualities – are those in which young people from privileged backgrounds are over-represented, then gap years could contribute to reproducing social inequality (Heath 2007). It is important to remember that cultural capital as a concept is not just about beneficial cultural competences, it is also about how these are unequally distributed and how they are ‘misrecognised’ as natural rather than tied to social status. The more expensive types of gap year, which involve overseas travel, can exclude those young people who may have the most need of additional development, as they may have less financial, parental and school support (Blackburn et al. 2005: 40).

As noted above, the career development potential of gap years centres on the development of advantageous personal qualities. However, the motivations for taking
a gap year for the people involved are often not about adopting a strategic approach to career development. Instead, young people may go overseas with a wider perspective on self-development. For example, the young people in Inkson and Myers’ (2003) study of overseas experiences reported their motivations as mainly cultural and social, with career development as serendipitous (but significant). They viewed the increased self-confidence and broader life-skills they had developed as useful in a work environment but were also ‘whole-life’ factors (Inkson and Myer 2003: 179). In the next section I discuss this broader ‘identity work’ that the gap year is seen to enable. However, we might be sceptical about the overlap between what is beneficial for ‘life’ and what is beneficial for ‘work’ – the social and cultural support for gap years can be seen, in part, as a result of the value it holds for increasing life chances (i.e. through high status employment).

**Identity work and transformative learning**

The idea that there is a ‘true self’ that can be uncovered through the practice of travel (and independent travel in particular) is a well-established cultural trope: ‘one of the classic notions about backpacking is that people travel to find themselves’ (Richards and Wilson 2004: 262). As noted above, the gap year has been presented as a period of time out in which young people have the space to engage in identity work: to actively create and manage an identity through providing experiences that can be incorporated into a coherent biographical story or ‘narrative’ (Giddens 1991). Empirical studies of backpackers and independent travellers have highlighted the self-development that is enabled through travel. Desforges (2000), for example, suggests that travel provides meaning through investing in new experiences which are mobilised for the narration of self, and taps into the idea of travel as a rite of passage. This body of literature is referenced within studies of the gap year phenomenon, for example the implications for identity work through gap year volunteering as considered by Ansell (2008). Given that transitional moments in young people’s lives are considered to be increasingly complex and individualised, Ansell (2008) suggests that gap years enable young people to construct a successful identity in a contemporary, unpredictable context. The gap year, she argues, enables young people to use the ‘risky’ spaces of the ‘third world’ through the relatively safety of structured volunteering placements for this identity work. Similarly, Bagnoli (2009) argues that travel enables young people to narrate their identity at key moments in their lives.
Johan (2009) suggests that there is potential in the gap year for ‘transformational learning’ – to move beyond constructing an identity and negotiating transitions to a more profound and deeper learning experience:

Whilst travel provides external stimulus, gappers make sense of this in their own terms through their perceptions and interpretations. Transformations may manifest itself in significant changes of beliefs, attitudes and values in the evolution of a more mature identity. Transformational learning is not necessarily a single event, but a chain of continuous events, which then become a lifelong learning process (Johan 2009: 148).

Johan (2009) is suggesting that the overseas gap year can be a prompt for lasting personal change, where young people can gain new perspectives in new contexts. A key discourse that helps to frame the gap year as a concept is that this is individual identity work:

The very term gap year is a misnomer; it implies a space to be filled, something passively waiting rather than a period when a young adult will be actively constructing an identity and taking responsibility for their own lives in a way unlikely to be matched by friends going straight to university or college (Price 2008: n.p.).

The emphasis here is on taking active responsibility to ensure that young people make the most of their time. This is where I would argue that the discourses surrounding the gap year become somewhat problematic.

The pursuit of self-development on an individual level through undertaking a gap year is compatible with the dominant economic and social values of neoliberalism, according to Simpson (2005a: 157). This is also addressed by Cremin (2007), who argues that how gap years are discussed places the responsibility for advancement and self-development upon individuals, rather than acknowledging how choices are limited by economic and social conditions. For Cremin (2007), the problem with this notion of choice is that it lays the blame for not advancing on individuals, rather than inequalities. For example, the ‘self-respecting student’ (Bennett 2008: n.p.) referred to above suggests that students who do not undertake a gap year do not respect themselves! Or if students are being advised to be ‘selfish’ and take a gap year, are discussions of altruism or cultural understanding just the means to encourage young
people to develop themselves in a particular way? We might therefore want to think more critically about talking about gap year identity work, and whether it is beneficial for the young people involved or just helping them fit in with predominant economic and political values.

**Telling gap year stories**

My own research (Snee 2009) into overseas gap years looked at how gappers represented their experiences. One of the areas I addressed was whether their representations of ‘the other’ confirmed established ideas, drawing upon the literature on volunteer tourism. Not everyone in my sample undertook volunteering placements or visited ‘third world’ countries, but throughout the accounts, the gappers tended to stress how the places they visited were different, ‘exotic’ and somehow more authentic than ‘home’. The outcome of interacting with different cultures could result in reflections upon global issues (not just for those on structured placements) but also frustration, for example criticisms of disorder and harassment.

A sense of being out of place did lead some gappers to reflect upon the world and their position in it:

> I could not help but feel out of place. I was still heavily culture shocked and I think the root of it was a great uncertainty of how the people around me would react. I knew that the Ugandan people I was surrounded by had a life very different to mine, what could I say to them? How would they react to my prescence[sic]? What if I do something to offend them? (Paul [Conservation Project / Independent Travel]).

This seemed to be encouraged by spending an extended amount of time in one place, something that was more likely on structured placements. At the same time, it was difficult for the gappers, even those on long-term programmes, to get away from preconceived ideas about an exotic other that lives a more authentic life:

> If you live by subsistence farming you will have a very stress free life (providing you can grow enough!) Compare this to England; how many people pay to go to yoga classes or therapists, or just permanently feel tiered [tired]? (Christina [Teaching Placement]).

Talking about life in Uganda, Christina thought beyond the idea of ‘poor people who need the help of the west’, However, her interpretation of local life was that it is
simpler, more traditional, and hence ‘stress free’, a rather romanticised view that does not really engage with structural inequalities. She also stressed difference rather than connections. The evidence from my study suggested a tendency to reproduce ideas about ‘them and us’ (Simpson 2004: 688) and established ways of thinking about the other. So, whilst there were genuine desires to learn about their host countries and communities, they were somewhat limited in the ways they framed and understood their interactions with local cultures.

The skills and knowledge that the gappers in my study discussed gaining from their experience included language skills, work experience and more ephemeral ideas regarding knowledge about the world. They also reported personal qualities such as independence, confidence and self-sufficiency. These were perceived to be achieved through being overseas and undertaking authentic experiences (either through independent travel or an extended placement) that provided challenges. However, there was a sense that these benefits were somewhat taken for granted:

*This trip is going to offer me so much, such as a good step up the career ladder, becoming more independent, and realizing how lucky I am to have things in life I do* (Tim [Work Placement]).

Tim’s thoughts neatly encapsulate the perceived benefits of gap years, combining gains in respect of future employment, life skills and understanding global issues. In this blog extract, Tim was looking ahead to his gap year, highlighting established ideas about their purpose. He *already knew* what a gap year would do.

Furthermore, the gappers made additional ‘them and us’ distinctions, this time between those who did and did not undertake the right kind of experiences. They were not only concerned with the specific skills that they accumulated, but also were keen to demonstrate that they were doing something worthwhile in contrast to others who were not:

*The realisation that there are so many amazing things you can do has really hit me today. There is absolutely no need at all to be a sightseer. Whether it is teaching, working at a rescue centre or building furniture for Tsunami victims (as [Friend], one of the other GAPpers is), working in a place gives you so much more than just passing through and seeing the sights. Getting to know a*
place, networking with the Thais - learning the lingo and having fun, is infinitely more rewarding (Ewan [Teaching Placement / Independent Travel]).

The gappers made moral distinctions and assigned the benefits of the right kind of gap year to some more than others. A motivating factor for taking a gap year for the young people in my study was the desire to have a break from formal study, but there were indications that this break had to be used wisely. The gap year was seen as a once-in-a-lifetime experience to reap the benefits of being away. For those who undertook voluntary work there was the additional dimension of altruism, driven by a genuine concern to do something for host communities (although, as suggested above, we might question the extent to which certain programmes are helpful). Yet the young people also made sure that they distanced themselves from others who had poor taste, or from their peers who did not do something worthwhile. My study suggests that we might want to question the extent to which this really is individual identity work if there are collective boundaries being drawn between ‘them and us’.

Whilst some interviewees placed more emphasis on the importance of volunteering as a worthwhile activity, not all make the distinction between ‘just backpacking’ and more structured placements, suggesting that hierarchies of experience depend on a number of factors; it is ‘what you get out of it’ that is important. This last point is reinforced by a discussion I had with Owen, a blogger I interviewed who did not undertake a structured placement. Owen was particularly explicit about making the most of his time out. For him, becoming an accomplished traveller and gaining the accompanying personal benefits was a key goal. He made distinctions between his own activities, and the gap years of friends and acquaintances that were less worthwhile:

The idea had always been there but I was concerned about wasting my time. I’d seen a lot of friends, er, take a year off, even just a couple of guys from halls, took a year off and just worked in Edinburgh the whole holiday and went out drinking and buying clothes and stuff. I was quite concerned I would get stuck in that rut (Owen [Independent Travel]).

The issue here is not whether taking a gap year does or does not increase a young person’s confidence or make them more independent. I argue that this is a taken for granted assumption; if you approach an experience with the idea that doing it in the
right way is an exercise in self-development, and that how you talk about it centres on this idea, then we do not question whether this actually happens. Rather than assuming that the overseas gap year prompts individual self-reflection and identity work, we can actually see collective representations and understandings of worth and value. These involve defining what is not worthwhile, devaluing the experiences of others.

I would suggest that it was the way in which a gap year story was told as being worthwhile that was important, rather than the experience alone. This might not necessarily be problematic in and of itself. However, these ideas of worthwhile activity are bound up with the responsibility placed on young people to make the correct individual choices. As noted by Furlong and Cartmel (1997) in their work on youth transitions, this idea of choice obscures the effects of economic, social and cultural circumstances on young people’s life chances. We need to think about the young people who are not able to undertake gap years, because by privileging certain types of activity we demerit others.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has not been my intention to state that gap years are a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing. Rather, they are a ‘thing’, something that has emerged in a particular economic, social and cultural context and which is embedded in that context. Keeping this in mind ensures that assumptions are not made about their value. Thinking about context also helps us think more critically about gap years. Assuming that taking a gap year overseas will engender cross-cultural understanding loses sight of the historical legacies that are tied up with overseas travel, particularly in less developed countries, and the continuing ways in which we view others. Promoting the right kind of gap year to develop advantageous skills in individuals in terms of personal / soft skills neglects the social inequalities that can lie behind such ‘natural’ traits, and privileges certain kinds of experience over others – usually those of the more fortunate in society. This tends to be hidden behind ideas about the individual identity work that can be facilitated by an overseas gap year. Justifications for the gap year that emphasise personal choice and responsibility obscure the inherently social nature of the activity. Accepting that anyone is free to choose to do a gap year loses sight of inequalities and places the blame for not developing the self on those with fewer resources.
**Implications and suggestions**

Recommendations from volunteer tourism scholars stress the need for such programmes to have genuine value for local communities; to not assume automatic cultural learning but encourage reflection; and that opportunities for genuine interaction should be facilitated (Raymond and Hall 2008: 541). The planning and management of projects can mitigate negative impacts, but projects need to be aware of this and need to consider needs of each community (Guttenberg 2009: 549).

Anyone advising students on undertaking volunteering projects as part of their gap year may wish to reflect upon which placements take such issues into consideration. Furthermore, Simpson (2005a) argues that the gap year industry should consider ‘influences from adventure and experiential education, service learning and other travel-based programmes such as the Peace Brigade and VSO’ (Simpson 2005a: 231) to develop a more meaningful pedagogic agenda. This suggests a valuable role for education researchers and practitioners to intervene in the gap year field.

To meet the needs of students, Blackburn et al. (2005) advise university departments to:

- encourage students to record their gap years;
- think about the differences in ability that might result from taking a gap year when planning modules;
- not stereotype gap year students due to the variety that such experiences take.

(Blackburn et al. 2005: 39)

They also stress that, if gap years result in differences in first year abilities, an accessible and inclusive curriculum is even more important (Blackburn et al. 2005: 40). However, we need to extend gap year research to consider the relative success of returned gappers in gaining the projected benefits of these experiences. This would be able to comment more conclusively on whether the benefits of the gap year can be transferred into advantages in education and employment, and perhaps provide insights into how inequalities of access can be challenged.
Finally, Johan (2009) suggests that gappers should be trained in the skills of reflection to enable transformational learning (Johan 2009: 148). To this, I would add that we should always challenge the idea that gap years are intrinsically a good thing, critically consider the practice in context, and encourage young people to do the same.

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