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Between privilege and poverty: the affordances of mobility among aid worker children

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Accepted Version

Abstract

Contemporary research on children affected by migration in Southeast Asia has examined the impact of mobility on their life chances, choices, and overall welfare. Extending this concern, this paper seeks to address these questions in the context of privileged migration. Specifically, it asks how the mobility of children whose parents work for aid agencies in low-income countries shapes the way they understand and negotiate experiences of privilege, as well as their everyday encounters with poverty. Based on ethnographic research with young people and their families in Cambodia, the paper suggests that parents and children may envisage their international mobility as a chance for personal growth, specifically as manifest in the form of ‘open-mindedness’. Such positive discourses are complicated, however, by a simultaneously engendered sense of superiority towards those who are less mobile. They are also intertwined with practices of ‘bracketing’ possible frictions arising from their interactions with children of local elite members. While the young people’s proximity to poverty provides opportunities for locally-based service-learning activities, connections with their parents’ work can remain abstract. The paper therefore suggests that this form of international mobility may not in itself enable a critical engagement with poverty, or with their own and others’ privilege.

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Among the migratory flows and movements of people within and across the Asia Pacific region, a long-established, if less visible group are professionals who work for international aid agencies. These professionals are often part of mobile families where one or both parents are employed in the development sector, and whose work involves sustained periods of time spent living outside of their country of origin. In contrast to humanitarian emergency and relief staff, whose duty stations are often considered incompatible with accompanying family members and children, these development workers' contracts may enable them to remain in one place for between 3-5 years and occasionally longer, and which are therefore suitable for families with school-age children. Considering them as privileged labour migrants or mobile professionals insofar as they move for work-related reasonsⁱ, I suggest that the study of children and young people who are part of these families can provide innovative and critical perspectives on experiences and practices related to privilege and difference in the context of transnational mobility.

I suggest that the situation of aid worker children provides an apt case to explore in what ways their mobility may produce particular attitudes towards privilege, poverty, and negotiating their position in relation to both. The key questions driving this paper are, in the first instance, how their exposure to a range of countries is indeed fostering an 'open-mindedness', and to consider this in the context of their interactions with local populations in Cambodia, as well as their home countries. Secondly, the paper asks how this manifests itself in their handling of 'difference' among their school peers. The suggestion is that rather than cultural or national difference, socio-economic difference and possibly associated value disparities are more significant than hitherto recognised, and may lead to practices of 'blocking out' instead of open engagement. Finally, the question is raised in what way, if at all, being a highly mobile aid worker child makes any difference to how they relate to instances of poverty- or why, indeed, it should. I suggest that while they constitute a marginal demographic, the insights offered by their positionality resonate beyond their immediate group, and speak to wider concerns regarding the chances and challenges posed by transnational mobility in an increasingly interconnected and unequal world.

The mobility brought about by their parents' careers is in many ways considered a unique opportunity for personal growth. As Fedorak sums up, 'living abroad is a rewarding experience, tapping into an individual's resourcefulness, adaptability, and sense of self' (2013: 118). Even though some of its possible negative consequences are acknowledged, such as a lack of 'roots' in a particular territory (Stevenson-Moessner 2014, Sichel 2011), the existing literature on internationally mobile young people also emphasizes the potential benefits to be reaped from such an upbringing (Lam and Selmer 2004). This positive discourse holds also for aid worker children. Elisa Pepall, in one of the few studies focusing on aid worker families, finds that 'in terms of potential rewards from living abroad, almost all informants identified the "fantastic opportunity to be exposed" to alternate cultures and worldviews', which was especially true for children (Pepall 2014:185; Pepall 2012). Yet at the same time - and this holds even more so for aid worker children, given that their parents are often based in low-income countries - this mobility also brings them in daily contact with manifestations of inequality and poverty. This situation offers the opportunity to ask how they experience the tensions arising from this constellation, and more generally to examine in what ways - if at all - the assumed potential for personal growth is being realized in the ways espoused in the academic literature as well as by parents, schools, and young people themselves.

The material which this paper draws on was gathered during several periods of fieldwork in Cambodia between 2010 and 2015, in the context of a broader research project on international aid workers in Cambodiaⁱⁱ. Cambodia was chosen as a fieldsite because it ranks among the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, and has been receiving substantial amounts of foreign aid. It therefore features a high concentration of aid agencies, including international NGOs, multilateral and philanthropic organisations, with corresponding high numbers of foreign staff. Partly in this context, the number of international schools in Cambodia has also risen steadily. I interacted with students, staff members and parents of several of these schools; however, in order to preserve anonymity, I do not provide more specific information on their profiles. While they are run by a mixture of non-profit bodies and commercial providers, they all charge substantial amounts of fees, which are often only affordable to aid worker children if paid for, or subsidised

by their employer. Phnom Penh now boasts a number of developments such as Western-style accommodation, medical facilities, malls, restaurants and bars, and thus provides what is considered an ‘adequate’ infrastructure for internationally posted families. The kind of aid workers whom I interviewed for this study were typically employed on mid-to high-level positions with international agencies, working on issues such as decentralisation, good governance, health, private sector development and land rights. While these positions often necessitate regional travel, they were typically office- rather than field-based.

My contact with aid worker children was initially facilitated by interviewing their parents about their work. Through networking and small-scale snowballing, I had formal and informal conversations, as well as one group discussion with 11 current, and several ex-students of international schools in Cambodia. Their ages ranged from 14 to 17 years, while the majority (eight) of those interviewed were in grade 10 or 11. They comprised six female and five male students. They were approached on the basis of having had more than two years’ experience of international schools in Cambodia; all of them had moved at least once, usually more often. The age range was chosen as these students were actively reflecting on their life circumstances and future plans, as well as being old enough to have participated in the volunteering programmes offered by their schools. Their nationalities included North American, Australian, European and Asian countries. In addition to the students, I had in-depth conversations with some of their parents; with four staff members of different NGOs who work with international schools; and two teachers who facilitate community activities at their respective schools. While I draw on their views below, the main focus was on the experiences of the students themselves. Names, details and school profiles have been either withheld or anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Privileged Mobility and ‘Open-Mindedness’

Arguably the most prominent and efficacious paradigm within academia, schools, and families describing the outcomes of a privileged mobile upbringing is the notion of the ‘third culture kid’ (TCK). Coined in the late 1970s by the sociologist Ruth Useem, the term was originally devised

to describe the particular characteristics of children with mobile lifestyles as a consequence of their parents' careers. In the first instance, this specifically referred to Americans working abroad in the military, diplomatic and corporate sectors (Pollock and van Reken 2001), and has gained much wider currency since. While the merits and shortcomings of this paradigm have been widely discussed (eg Tanu 2014, and introduction to this volume), the aspect I want to draw out here relates to the unique possibilities offered to these young people as a result of their mobility with regard to their personal growth, and the 'open-mindedness' which is often assumed to arise from their mobility. It is worth stating that the term used in business and management studies, as well as education research is 'international mindedness' (Ellwood and Davis 2009). This concept is underpinned, as Langford states, by the idea that 'life abroad has enhanced the ability of Global Nomads to understand differences in values and issues between people of diverse backgrounds' (1998:35). Among my informants however, the most commonly used term was 'open-mindedness', attributed to themselves and their peers. In the following, I therefore use this emic term as an object to be interrogated, rather than an analytical category itself. It is worth noting that 'international-mindedness' features prominently not just in the popular literature as one of the hallmarks of the 'third culture kid', but is represented as one key outcome of an international school education, and as such is espoused on school websites, mission statements and curricula (see Tamateaa, Hardya & Ninnesa 2008 for a critical analysis). Further - and arguably partly as a result of such promotional discourses - the trope of 'open-mindedness' also is widely utilized among educators, parents, and children themselves.

In my conversations with students whose parents worked in the aid sector, the characteristics of being 'open-minded' as a result of a mobile upbringing was a recurrent feature. I spoke about this with Tim and Sophia, both in grade 11, whose parents were Australian and American nationals respectively. Asked about the possible advantages of such high mobility, Sophia thought that *'it makes you a better person... you have more respect for people. You've got less stereotypes- you're so open-minded'*, while Tim added with a laugh, *'the lifestyle flows really well. I just can't imagine being in one place for ten years.'* Neither of them considered a sedentary life desirable, and both were keen to enable this mobility for their own future children,

partly because this would bestow them with precisely this openness. As Sophia put it, *'When I have a family, I want them to live abroad. So they get the same open-mindedness that we've got'*.

Asked about any possible negative aspects, Sophia was quick to emphasise that, *'the downsides are weighed up though... you grow into a better person. I feel like I can connect to TCKs a lot more than to FCKs¹'*. A closer look at Sophia's comments, however, reveals a more ambiguous reality underlying the discourse of openness. While existing literature demonstrates the strong affinity that self-identified TCKs experience with other TCKs, rather than with those whom they call 'First Culture Kids' (Langford 1998), I suggest that the open-mindedness afforded by this kind of mobility can be laced with a sense of superiority. This becomes evident in Tim's account:

'I think being an international child makes you more... superior. People raised in specific cultures - they have so many stereotypes. I feel superior to these people... or more like, privileged. Because I know so much more about the world'

Similarly, Sophia felt that being open-minded enabled a more forgiving attitude towards other people's shortcomings in this respect: *'people who live in small towns- I feel so sorry for them! I respect them for not being bored... they are blind, basically. And if they behaved in a nasty way, that would be because of their narrowmindedness'*. By way of illustration, she recounted the following situation:

'we [at the international school] had this link with a small town in the US- they made a video where they asked us questions. They were just so ignorant. Like they asked us if Cambodia was where the Great Wall of China was. Did we have phones, did we live in mudhuts... They were so ignorant, it was hilarious. I mean such closed-mindedness! They just don't have the same perspectives that we do'.

¹ FCK is an acronym for 'First Culture Kid'.

This sense of superiority due to their knowledge of the world was not only felt in comparison to those with sedentary lives in the US, but also to young people who had come to Cambodia for a gap year, and whom they occasionally encountered in the city's nightlife and leisure spaces. While Tim recognized that some 'gap year people were genuinely interested in Cambodia, he also thought that,

'some are superficial. All they talk about is partying. They don't really care about the place and the culture, like what is right to do here and not. They see it as a little paradise, and they're really disrespectful to people'.

He contrasted this with his own knowledge of Cambodia, specifically of 'how to live here'. This lifestyle knowledge also included visiting members of his family, and what he considered their naïve touristic sensibilities: *'I had these cousins over from Canada, and they begged to go to the Russian market [a popular tourist destination] to get food- I don't even do that. Because it's unhygienic, and I don't like Khmei [Khmer] food'.*

Alongside the observation that their self-proclaimed open-mindedness can be understood as a basis for, and indicator of their distinctiveness, this sense was bookended by experiences of feeling alien, and sometimes discriminated against on trips to their home country, but also as part of everyday life in Cambodia. The sense of not fitting in during visits, or on return to a home country is widely documented in the literature (Storti 2002), such as through experiencing 'constructive marginality' (Fail, Thompson, and Walker 2004), and as a recognised problem by employers (see eg <http://www.state.gov/m/fsi/tc/c56075.htm>). It may be particularly pronounced in countries with a sense of national ethnic homogeneity, as in the cases of Japan and Germany (Goodman 1990; Knoerr 2005, 2010). Several of the young people residing in Cambodia reported such experiences. This was especially felt by those who had spent longer periods in their parents' home countries. Mia, for example, had lived in the Netherlands for six months in order to experience 'normal life', as her mother put it, and to gain independence which her parents thought was harder to come by in the comparatively sheltered world of the international school. Her friend Tim also spent a year at a boarding school in the UK, with a similar rationale of getting a sense of what 'home' was like. Both reported experiencing a 'culture shock', not

feeling understood, and a sense of being alienated from their peers. They found it difficult to convey a sense of their lives in Cambodia to their classmates. Mia was taken aback when *'they asked so many strange questions... they thought Cambodia was in Africa. They asked if people here looked Chinese or African-!'* She attributed the difficulty of forming relationships with them partly to her own greater 'open-mindedness', which became an obstacle for mutually rewarding relationships:

'it was hard to make good friends in the Netherlands ... they couldn't keep up with me, all they talked about was boys, diet, and gossip. And I was like, I'm a bit more interested in general news, like if there is something happening in Siberia, I might want to talk about it. But they had no idea about the world around us. We're more interested in the world around us... not just the Netherlands. It's hard to have a deeper conversation with them'.

On a separate occasion, her mother, Susan, expressed a similar sentiment, including the lack of capacity of the others to appreciate people like her daughter, coupled with a lack of interest in their previous lives, and a general unwillingness to engage with this kind of difference:

'they [children from international schools] have had so many different experiences, their horizon is so much broader. When Mia was in the Netherlands, she was quite shaken. Having lived in China [on a previous posting], the other kids didn't understand that. And nobody asked her directly, what was that like? It was not very open. Nobody approached her. Here, it's very different, very inclusive. When there is a new arrival, they are being integrated straightaway. The whole attitude is different'.

Furthermore, Natalie for example, who identifies as Asian American, recounted an experience of racist discrimination at home in the US, which was not the result of her time abroad. Rather, this would be shared by other US residents, but Natalie found she was less exposed to while at international school. As she remembers, *'I had lots of racial abuse when I went to the US, like in El Paso, Texas, they do like this [pulls her eyes into a slant] behind my back and stuff like that.'*

By all accounts, their experiences are not unique. Academic and popular writing on ‘TCKs’ abounds with reports of reverse culture shocks, repatriation difficulties, of being misunderstood and insufficiently recognised on their temporary or permanent return. I suggest, though, that the analytical emphasis on the return difficulties obscures how they relate to their place of residence while abroad. While their sense of belonging to an imagined community of ‘TCKs’ is well-documented, research on their relations and affiliations with local communities is only just emerging. I suggest that while the sense of being different may make relationships with peers in their home countries difficult, this can be paralleled by feelings of disconnect from their local surroundings, both in terms of places and people. It can be especially pronounced as a consequence of racial, ethnic or linguistic differences, and of living in relatively sheltered neighbourhoods. While some of my informants stated that Cambodia feels like ‘home’ to them- especially if they had spent formative high school years there - this was also interwoven with experiences of disconnect. As Sophia explained about the residential area her family lives in,

‘What is different here, there are no neighbours, there are only barriers. Like at home [in the US] you would have a hello, welcome to the neighbourhood kind of thing, but not here. Here, your neighbours are just people who play loud Khmer music. There are all these barriers of ethnicity and language’.

It may therefore be that the space -geographically and socially- where they are comfortable is delineated between places in their ‘home country’ that can feel alien to them, and a local environment that is at times experienced as unwelcoming or even hostile. As Tim describes his time living in Ethiopia when he was younger, *‘you are distant from people in a way... because it is too dangerous. It’s not safe. Like in Ethiopia, I couldn’t go to the end of the road, because of kidnappings... and there were lots of stray dogs’.* The experience of outdoor mobility being dangerous is not unique to this group of young people, but has also been identified, for example, with regard to ‘minority children’ in South Africa (Benwell 2009).

The sense of being in an environment that is encroaching on them, or receiving unwelcome attention was also illustrated by Mia’s experiences of evenings out, and encounters with begging children. On these occasions in particular, she finds that *‘you have no personal space... especially the kids at night, they put their fruit tray right in front of you, they sit on your lap...*

they sit and stare at you...I don't like it'. This discomfort can also be triggered by sexist or racist remarks. Mia recounts how she, as a young white woman, experienced such situations:

'compared to the Netherlands, here [in Cambodia] I miss the freedom you have as a woman... at nighttime, you don't walk around here in the evening. You get disgusting looks. You're exotic. When I was 14, I walked past these motodop [motorcycle taxi] guys, with my Khmer friend, and they made comments, and she was terrified. She told me afterwards what they had said, like what dirty things they would do to me...it was horrible'.

While these experiences are shared with tourists and other foreign residents, I draw on them here to explore the particular positionality that many of these young people find themselves in. I argue that their experiences are significant because they complicate the narrative of their 'open-mindedness'. In the first instance, this narrative becomes a justification for a sense of superiority, and as such arguably may be defeating its object. It also emerges as predicated on a lack of belonging in their home countries and alienation from their peers there. At the same time, this is compounded by a sense of disconnect from some of their local surroundings, such as not feeling part of their local neighbourhood, being identified by some Cambodians as different, or becoming targets of hostility or ridicule. One might therefore argue that an individual sense of being open-minded arises in spite of, or paradoxically, in conjunction with a lifestyle characterized by selective and carefully modified ways of engagement with both the local Cambodian as well as 'home' country environments. The open-mindedness presumed to arise from mobility can thus appear as an attitude suffused with superiority; but their sense of being special can also be paired with a sense of being discriminated against and being uncomfortably singled out.

Negotiating Difference

Among the possible affordances of privileged mobility is the exposure to a range of different lifeworlds. The case of international aid worker children offers a pertinent scenario in this

respect, because they are placed at the intersection of a range of global dynamics. Partly as a result of the managerialisation and professionalization of aid work, large aid agencies as employers may pay for, or subsidise international school fees. At the same time, the low- and middle-income countries where aid workers are often posted, are likely to feature an emerging middle class, as well as an existing band of local elites, whose children are part of the international school student body. These broader contexts mean that a juxtaposition and intermingling of differently positioned students can be a regular feature of these schools.

The resulting interactions between children of local elites and those of international aid workers provide a relevant context to explore how their self-ascribed attitude of ‘open-mindedness’ plays out when encountering the differences that arise from these social contexts. Existing literature has often foregrounded challenges that may arise from national, ethnic or cultural differences among students at international schools (eg Tanu 2015), while studies of ‘elite’ private schools in the UK or US, for example, which host an international student body, are also concerned with how privilege is reproduced within the school in relation to mainstream society (Khan 2012, Maxwell and Aggleton 2015, Waters and Brooks 2002). A much less considered aspect is, however, how differences of socio-economic status and specifically wealth – and possible moral ambiguities associated with it – are perceived and negotiated among students themselves.

The case of aid worker children is particularly distinct in this regard. Through everyday life at school, mingling with children or relatives of government or military officials and powerful local businesspeople may be a reminder that some of their parents’ ways of governing, doing business or wielding power could be in stark contrast to what their own parents - as professionals working in development - are mandated to work for, such as reducing corruption, alleviating poverty or upholding the rule of law. Among the chances - or challenges - of an international upbringing, then, is engaging with children whose families may represent values considered unpalatable in their home countries, and which they would witness less directly there. It is likely that the “*fantastic opportunity to be exposed*” to alternate cultures and worldviews (Pepall 2014:185) invoked by some aid workers would not include businesspeople engaged in dubious or illegal practices. This may, however, be exactly the kind of challenge which a fee-paying international

school in a developing country can pose. One may therefore ask if these kinds of differences matter to aid worker children, and how they respond to them. In addition, the question arises in what way, if at all, their parents' occupations and the values that may be associated with them, feature in this scenario.

The situation in Cambodia may be resonant with other countries where international aid workers are posted, insofar as it is known for its high levels of corruption. Discourses on local corruption are something that students at international schools are familiar with. Tobias for example, partly relaying the view of his mother, a senior government advisor, thought that,

'the top ranks are corrupt and then all the way down. The main problem is corruption, from the low class to the high class. Some people are buying a Lexus for a grandchild that has just been born-! We see this, the high end part, from our Cambodian friends.'

When I asked Tobias if this is discussed between them, he responded that *'well, they are our friends...so it's hard to bring that up'*. When I asked Tobias and two of his friends, Steen and Marcus, if they thought that there was any tension between their parents' work with an emphasis on social justice and good governance, and the fact that some of their school friends' parents may derive their wealth on the basis of a disregard of these, they answered in near-unison, *'yes that's where we don't get involved. We bracket that out'*.

Tobias and his friends also confirmed that such strategies, termed 'bracketing' or 'blocking out' were employed with regard to political events in order to maintain trouble-free relationships between their peers at school. Tobias was careful to point out that, *'about the protests [during the national elections in 2013], I never talked to my high-end friends about that. With some, maybe you say, I hate CPP [Cambodian People's Party] but you have to be careful. So we take a neutral position'*. When asked how the school deals with possible tensions, several students stated that especially the events around the street protests would not have been mentioned in class, with the rationale given by the school that *'people might get offended'*. It is worth stating that most of my

informants had Cambodian friends; however, they almost exclusively consisted of class- or schoolmates. In fact, the tensions described above only arise because they socialise together.

On a separate occasion, I had a conversation with Linda, also in year 11, whose father worked for a multilateral agency. She described a fellow Cambodian student in her class, Bernie, who *'is swimming in money- he's always got the latest phone, he's throwing the money around, he always comes with his bodyguard'*. However, Linda also found that on the occasions when she asked students like Bernie what their parents did, their response remained vague - *'business, lots of business ... we're like, cropping things'*? Linda therefore reckoned that the parents' wealth was neither the children's choice nor responsibility: *'they don't care what their parents do. They just care that they get their allowance. They don't see them that much anyway'*, referring to the fact that many of these young people were looked after and driven around by staff, as their parents were away or busy. Linda also added, though, that her own knowledge of her father's job had for a long time remained similarly unclear to her, not unlike those of her Cambodian peers. A careful policy of backgrounding parents' occupations was also pursued by the international school that Isabelle's two children were attending. Over the course of several years, she found that their school consciously avoided drawing any attention to possible relations between wealthy elites, corruption, and poverty in Cambodian society. In particular, she explained that:

'the school does not want it, it's not the kids' fault, what their parents are up to. You'd have to address the parents, like if they got their money from illegal logging or the diamond trade or whatever. They [the school] don't want to make it into an issue so that the aid worker kids don't start saying, we're the goodies here, and your parents are corrupt, you are the baddies'.

In sum, based on the material presented here, it would seem that while high mobility may bring aid worker children into close proximity with children of local elites, such proximity in itself does not generate space or desire for reflection on the contradictions that may become evident. On the contrary, such proximity rather triggers conscious or unconscious efforts to contain and 'bracket' possible frictions, enacted by the school itself, endorsed by parents and by students

themselves. Based on the young people's comments, they feel that in order to have sustainable social relations with their peers, overtly probing questions on issues such as corruption or social exclusion are best avoided. This is coupled with a sense that some of their wealthy friends are exonerated from criticism or wrongdoing insofar as they remain detached and ignorant of their parents' source of wealth, despite benefitting from its results.

Engaging with Poverty

If their school environment, at least hypothetically, offers aid worker children the chance to reflect on tensions related to wealth and social justice, then acknowledging the wider context of Cambodian society provides an opportunity to engage with poverty, and the lack of privilege. Even though formally, poverty levels in Cambodia have dropped recently below 50% (World Bank 2013), a significant proportion of the population still lives in impoverished conditions with regard to housing, education and health, including in parts of the capital, Phnom Penh, where most of the international schools are located. Another affordance of mobility, therefore, is the exposure to such poverty, and the question arises how aid worker children in particular understand and engage with its visible consequences.

When I discussed the theme of poverty with parents and their children, one of the most common responses was that they had become accustomed to it. Sybil for example, whose family had been living in developing countries for the last ten years due to her husband's work for a governmental aid agency, explained that: *'we take a lot of this for granted. We haven't really thought about it. It's just an interesting experience, growing up in a developing country'*. This view sat alongside Sybil's and her husband Michael's general left-leaning political views. Sybil in particular was a keen supporter of feminism and sympathetic to political activism, while her husband was strongly committed to human rights, evident also in conjunction with his work, which was focused on good governance. Even so, when I asked Sybil if, or how the issue of poverty in Cambodia was discussed in their family, she explained that:

'Poverty does not come up as a specific issue. It comes up when we drive through the provinces, and we see all these huts, then the kids ask, why is it that way. But generally, they grow into it, that's their lifeworld. That's the political situation.'

While for many of the young people, 'growing into it', or being used to the presence of poverty around them, for some- especially those who have limited exposure to urban poverty because they are, for the most time, being driven around by car- this resulted in a lack of awareness, or even denial of the existence of urban slums. While explicit recognition of poverty varied, during my encounters with young people there was often lively debate on its manifestations, such as how to respond to begging street children. There was often unanimity that they were being exploited by adult 'handlers', though this did not preclude engaging in spontaneous acts of charity. Isla, a student in year 10, recounted how once, together with her mum, she had emptied her bedroom of most of her soft toys in order to donate them to a group of street children, with the rationale that these would not be confiscated by their 'handler', but left for the kids to enjoy. Similarly, her friend Charlotte explained that during her time living in Malawi, whenever they bought pizza from a fast-food outlet, they ordered an extra one to hand to street kids waiting outside. In addition and alongside such spontaneous acts of charity, however, the most significant mode of these young people's engagement with poverty took place in the framework of 'Creativity, Action, Service' (CAS). These programmes are run by international schools which are offering the International Baccalaureate as a mandatory part of their curriculum. While they are not assessed, a set number of hours on this programme needs to be completed in order for students to graduate. Especially the 'service' part of the programme is often explicitly linked to the schools' stated objective to educate their students for 'global citizenship' (see Tamateaa, Hardy & Ninnesa 2008).

Engagement in this kind of 'service learning' was commonplace among my informants, and they often professed to enjoy it. In Mia's case, this took the form of weekly visits to a children's home in the outskirts of the city, where she ran regular crafts workshops. Even though she sometimes resented going there on a Sunday, as she would have preferred to enjoy her leisure time, she usually came back happy, in her words, *'because the kids are so grateful and it's fun'*. Other

activities at her school included a ‘buddy scheme’, which involves children who use NGO services to come to the international school after teaching hours for activities such as swimming lessons, arts activities or sports. Alternatively, students from some international schools are able to choose a local NGO to work with, and contribute to activities such as English teaching, hygiene and health education, or motivational instruction. As Hilary, a coordinator of such programmes, explained, *‘our students talk to them about dreams and goals and what you can achieve in life and the professions you can have, because all the kids can see is [jobs] like, car washing’*.

In my discussions with Hilary, she described in more detail how the school envisages the objectives of this service learning: *‘it’s about helping our students to make them more aware of what is around them. There is more empathy - they see more needs.’* In order to achieve such sensitization, the school used to bring older students to a large waste disposal site in the outskirts of the city, where whole families were working as rubbish sorters. In the aftermath of such visits, she talks how *‘some of them came back sobbing... they were so moved by they had seen. For some, the transformation is phenomenal. It is a great opportunity for personal growth.’* In this sense, living close to poverty affords children of aid workers the chances to ‘grow’ as a person through engagement with poor populations in the context of service learning activities.

Even though their situation may be particular insofar as these sites of poverty - rubbish dumps, children’s homes, or village schools- are in driving distance from their own homes, the phenomenon of ‘service learning’ by young, privileged people travelling to low income countries has been well documented, and widely criticized (Vrasti 2012). Many of the features for which such voluntourism or ‘gap year’ activities are derided could also be levelled at these locally-organised service learning activities. A noteworthy aspect in the present context, however, is that such activities are purposely kept free of wider political implications. For instance, when children of privileged Cambodian families participate in such service learning, this may mean that, as Hilary explained for the case of a boy in year 10 who was working with a village school,

'the driver brings him to the village and follows him around, because he's also his guard. Some of the Cambodian families we have got, they know all about NGOs and do a lot. Others don't. But we don't discuss the politics of it.'

This bracketing of politics also extends to non-Cambodian students who query the role of NGOs more generally, and on those grounds refuse to engage with them. As Hilary recounted about a student Nino, originally from Sweden,

'he wouldn't take part in service learning, because he thought that NGOs were letting the government off the hook, and what they were doing caused more harm. We don't get such kind of political views very often. We're not here to have a political debate. We talked to him, and eventually he saw the value of NGOs'.

The fact that institutionally organized service learning activities are kept non-political is well-documented in other contexts. A specific question here is what insights might be gained from considering the involvement of aid worker children in this scenario. I focused on the situation of these young people because, as a result of their families' mobility, they are brought in daily contact with consequences of global inequality. This becomes manifest in attending expensive international schools which may be surrounded by run-down settlements. Does the fact that their parents' jobs are fundamentally concerned with addressing these disparities feature in their understandings, and do they affect their practices? Could they be expected to be particularly engaged, given the rationale for their family's stay in Cambodia-?

When I queried some of my informants on this issue, it emerged that because their parents' aid work tended to happen on managerial or governmental levels, it only gradually become clear to them what exactly their parents were doing. As Tobias, whose father works for the World Bank said, *'for a long time, I actually thought my dad worked in a real bank. Now, there are things I understand and others, I understand the words but not really what they mean'*. His friend Mia agreed with him, insofar as she had found her mother's job hard to grasp: *'I only recently understood what my mum really does, it's so much about legislation, its more abstract'*.

However, the effect of their parents' high-level involvement was ambivalent: on the one hand, Tobias and Mia were agreed that they saw a lot less of their parents than they would if they had 'normal jobs', as they suggested parents would then be at home more, would be travelling less and working shorter hours. At the same time, several credited their parents' professions such as

working on land rights, good governance, and HIV/Aids prevention with raising their own political awareness. Mia stated that *'we're more exposed here to corruption and poverty, deforestation, abuse, because you read about it in the paper, but also because most of our parents do something about it'*. This held even though some felt that their parents would not describe things in detail to protect them, for example with regard to human trafficking or sexual violence.

Conclusion

How, then, does being an aid worker child matter for mobile young people who are in many ways privileged, while being confronted with manifestations of extreme wealth as well as poverty? What are the affordances of high mobility in this particular constellation, and how are they-or are not-being realized? Based on the material presented here, I argue that a key affordance is the self-ascribed open-mindedness of those attending international schools. This capacity, however, is complicated by being translated into a form of superiority, especially towards those who are less travelled, less worldly, and as result, are considered disadvantaged and possibly more 'narrow-minded'. My informants' sense of their own open-mindedness is also limited by their sense of disconnect from peers in their home countries, as well as not feeling part of the local fabric such as their neighbourhood, in their home countries as well as in Cambodia. The discourse of open-mindedness therefore appears precariously balanced between discordant experiences in their 'home' countries, and in their places of residence abroad. One might speculate that this precariousness could indeed fuel their insistence of such discourse, in the face of more compromised social realities.

Secondly, the question was in what ways mobility might shape these young people's engagement with difference, in particular with their own and their Cambodian peers' comparative affluence. I suggest that rather than a climate of openness, their interactions with children of wealthy Cambodians are characterized by careful 'bracketing' of contentious issues such as corruption and human rights. Parents as well as schools take care to avoid frictions which might be detrimental to relationships between the students. While high mobility engenders such

juxtapositions, it does not necessarily enable critical reflections on the global conditions which render both aid worker children and wealthy Cambodian ones in these positions of privilege.

Finally, the paper sought to identify if, and in what ways, being an aid worker child made any difference to their understandings of and attitudes towards poverty. Spontaneous acts of giving notwithstanding, their encounters with poverty were significantly shaped by service learning activities organized by their schools. While they were understood as pathways to personal growth as well as supporting others, these practices are best understood in the critical framework applied to voluntourism and service learning more generally. In this sense, there was little that was specific to aid worker children's responses to poverty. They did, however, consider themselves more aware of issues such as corruption, and less naïve than their peers at home, crediting this to their parents' professions.

In sum, being highly mobile, and having parents whose jobs' mandate was directed at global justice, does not necessarily furnish young people with the reflective capacity or motivation that would allow different engagement with their position between privilege and poverty. Exploring the situation of aid worker children thus contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it critically examines how a discourse of 'open-mindedness' is realized in practice, and how young people deal with frictions that arise. Secondly, the paper argues that in addition to ethnic or cultural differences, socio-economic ones, and associated moral ambiguities deserve serious attention as a structuring influence on international student interactions. Practices of 'bracketing' appear central to sociality, but limit room for critical debate. Finally, the paper highlights that CAS activities are best understood through the analytical framework of voluntourism as a neoliberal practice. The possibility that children of aid workers are involved in this in much the same way as gap year students are may not be surprising; but it is noteworthy when assessing the possible affordances- or their lack-of young people's international mobility.

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ⁱ While many self-identified corporate expatriates would undoubtedly balk at being described as 'migrants', one assumption underpinning this paper is that they can arguably be considered as mobile professionals, or

indeed as labour migrants, albeit privileged ones, whose relocations are motivated by their professional trajectory.

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