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A Reflection on Looking, Seeing, and Being Seen
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As I walked through the village and people invited me into their humble homes, I felt like I was walking through a museum about poverty in rural Romania. I wasn't. Instead, I was looking at the real homes of real people whose lives we could never fully understand. Surely our tour was meant to help us understand rural poverty, but for me and many of the other team members, our experience on this Global Outreach project had the opposite effect: we felt detached from the people who opened their lives to us.

Before I went on my project, I was aware of the potential pitfalls of short-term service immersion, including paternalism and the white savior complex. In fact, a family member who heard I was going on the project sent me videos and articles about the projects' potential for harm in the communities they seek to support. When training for my project, my team leader was clear about our role in the community. We were there to learn, not to help or teach. We would allow our community partners to tell us how we could be useful and relieve certain burdens. It would not be our role to tell people how to fix their problems. This training is why we were hesitant to speak up about our tour through the village, which felt more like a visit to a museum than a connection with a community. Our community partner wanted us to help her distribute food and she wanted us to see rural poverty. We were not in charge of our activities, but we were in charge with how respectfully we treated our hosts.

This unsettling experience that I had in Romania in 2016 continued to bother me as I delved deeper into my studies of critical cultural theory in communications. In fact, the experience bothered me enough that I chose to conduct original research on the topic of visual culture on short-term service immersion projects. In the fall of 2017, I conducted interviews with 16 current and former student participants in Fordham's Global Outreach program as well as 3 of the program's administrators. I was interested in learning more about how students feel during

moments of intense cultural exchange, which are often marked by looking and captured through photography.

I noticed that photographic output after Global Outreach teams return from their projects is significant and widespread. Nearly every team takes hundreds, if not thousands of photos and posts an album on social media for their peers and family members to see. For me, this raised important questions. Who are these photos for? Whom do they represent? Do they represent communities accurately? I think that, in most cases, the photos are for the Fordham students who participate in direct service and cultural immersion on Global Outreach projects. Many of my interview subjects agreed that the photos serve as a reminder of the time they spent on their projects and help the team members feel connected to one another. Some subjects, however, offered a more sinister conjecture about the purpose of project photography. Some students appear to use these photos to boost their moral reputations and make themselves seem beneficent to their peers and family members. Of course, this type of self-aggrandizing posting often includes a photo in which a privileged student is posing with a child from a marginalized community. Has this child consented to the dissemination of his or her photo? Is it ethical to use a child to make oneself seem more altruistic? Does this use of a child cheapen the relationship that the student has undoubtedly formed with the child? I argue that the use of the child or, more broadly, the experience of direct service, for self-aggrandizement violates the foundational principles of such an endeavor. Specifically, Global Outreach claims social justice, spirituality, simple living, and community as its four founding pillars.

Intentions and attitude matter when entering into direct service experiences. Participants ought not to consider the impact of their participation on their reputation. Rather, the experience is one that requires great humility. Students must pay for their trips by fundraising and assuming

personal financial responsibility for the cost of their participation. Surely asking peers and family members for financial support requires great humility. Intentions are also critical to the cohesiveness of a team. When team members enter into the experience with different intentions, the community they form among themselves suffers. Self-aggrandizing intentions directly contradict the pillar of simple living, which invites participants to be in solidarity with the communities with whom they engage. Taking photos in order to boost one's image reinforces a power structure based on inequality. Already, the student groups who go into communities come from a place of great privilege. When photos with underprivileged children are used as props to boost students' egos and reputations, this difference in power and privilege is made more evident.

The exploitation of marginalized people for a gain in social capital is an issue fraught with contradictions that place it in an ethical gray area. Often, students do not mean to exploit children or boost their own egos when they take and share photos with children. Instead, the photos serve as a reminder of a meaningful time full of personal growth. The photo could be a way of preserving a personal connection between a student and a member of a community.

Besides the possibility of an experience in which team members are not honest about their intentions, photography on short-term service immersion projects has great potential to misrepresent the experience. I know that the photos I took and shared during my Global Outreach experience do not represent the full breadth of my experience. The failure of photos to tell the whole story of my experience means that I can never fully understand another student's intentions in taking and sharing a photo with an underprivileged child. Although a picture might be worth a thousand words, it could never tell me that the student asked for the child's consent to

take the photo, or that the child asked the student to take a photo so that the student would remember the child.

Despite my discomfort with situations on short-term service immersion projects that may exacerbate power differentials, I know that photos do not tell a complete story. The ethics of consent and representation that are deeply intertwined with short-term service immersion are up to students to understand and abide by.