Ethical Questions about Poverty Tourism

By **Rachel Robison-Greene** - Jun 25, 2018

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If you choose to visit one of the world's big cities, a sightseeing option that may be available to you is what is frequently referred to as "poverty tourism." If you look hard enough, you'll be able to find tour buses that will drive you through the poorest parts of the city—places that you wouldn't see if you hitched a ride on the standard hop-on-hop-off tourist bus. Poverty tourism is common in places that have been hit hard by natural disaster. Tourists tend to be curious about the extent of the devastation.

Many object to the practice because it seems straightforwardly exploitative. The people living in these conditions are not landmarks at which tourists should gawk. When foreigners arrive on buses to gaze, in awe, at their living conditions, it adds insult to injury. Those living in poverty must deal not only with the difficulty of their situation, but with embarrassment about it as well. Some of the most noteworthy objectors are the people who live in the neighborhoods on the tour route. Many of them resent rich people driving through their neighborhood, snapping pictures that they'll later, without a second thought, sanctimoniously share on social media. These considerations speak strongly against the practice of poverty tourism.

On the other hand, poverty tourism might be able to assist with some of the shortcomings that are frequently present in our moral reasoning. Here in the United States, one frequently encounters arguments for the position that proximity makes a difference when it comes to determining the nature of our moral obligations. Those who hold such a view argue that our obligations are first to the people with whom our lives are the most closely intertwined. These arguments proceed along several different lines.

First, some argue that moral obligations arise out of the relationships into which we choose to enter. At least to a certain degree, we choose the communities in which we live, the careers that we take on, and the friends we allow into our circles. Because these choices are voluntary, they give rise to a plausible set of moral obligations. Similarly, if we choose to raise children, we have obligations to those children in light of the weighty responsibility we knew that we were taking on when we made that choice. The number of obligations that arise from non-voluntary relationships

are limited—for example, we may have moral obligations to our parents or more distant relations even though we didn't choose those parents or relations. Every human being is only capable of satisfying a limited number of obligations, and those generated by relationships seem to comprise a sensible list.

Some argue, further, that we owe loyalty to the identities that are carved out by borders. We can directly participate in our state and local governments, so it seems reasonable to some that our moral obligations exist only within our immediate spheres of influence. Similarly, we share something important in common with other citizens of our country in virtue of having, at least to some degree, a shared culture and history. We vote in this country and pay taxes in this country, and, as a result, some argue that we should focus our moral attention on citizens of this country.

Moreover, some argue that, as a matter of psychological fact, people are just more likely to care about harm that is happening to others if that harm is taking place nearby. If any of us were walking down the sidewalk and encountered a person experiencing a medical emergency, it's fairly likely that we would do something about it. Harm happening far away doesn't tend to strike us with the same sense of urgency.

In addition to the claim that proximity makes a moral difference, we also suffer from what social psychologists call "bystander effect." When human beings are aware that other people are around when a problem is taking place, they are less likely to do something to stop or prevent the problem. This may be because they assume that someone else will take on the responsibility. The most famous case of this type was the case of Kitty Genovese, a young woman who was stabbed to death just outside of her apartment building in Queens while many of her neighbors looked on, confident that surely someone else was doing something to help. Similarly, people who might otherwise be kind, charitable people might think that surely there are others who are helping people living in extreme poverty in remote locations.

In this respect, there may be much to be said for the practice of poverty tourism. Seeing the suffering first hand may cause people to realize that moral decisions seemingly justified by proximity considerations are actually arbitrary. Proximity shouldn't play such a crucial role in our ethical calculations. When we see the extent of the suffering taking place—lack of access to food, clean drinking water, reliable shelter, and basic medical care, our sense of ranked loyalty to socially constructed borders may melt away. We may start to rank our moral obligations by the *severity* of suffering we could prevent rather than by *where* the suffering is taking place. Poverty tourism may provide a jump-start to our sense of empathy for those living in poor conditions in distant locations.

Moreover, poverty tourism may help us avoid bystander effect. When we see a raging fire first hand and up close, it is easy for us to see that there are no fire fighters fighting it, it is up to *us* to call the fire department. Similarly, when we see the suffering caused by poverty up close, we might, in certain cases, see that no one is doing anything to stop it and recognize that it really is *our* moral obligation to do something. We can bring the stories back home and hopefully motivate others to do something as well.

As we've seen, there are arguments both for and against the practice of poverty tourism. At the end of the day, the motivations of the tourists may make some moral difference. Is the intention merely to marvel at how much worse others have it? If so, the practice may be morally repellent. Is the motivation to increase one's level of education about unfamiliar areas of the world toward a goal of making things better for people who are suffering? That may be something altogether different. Others may argue that intentions may count for very little, morally speaking, unless they result in real, meaningful action. To that end, here's a place to start: https://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/

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