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Neocolonial Discourse in the Peace Corps: Problematic Implications for Intercultural Relationship-Building

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Abstract

For those familiar with the field of international development, the Peace Corps has become a well-recognized source of American aid, service, and intercultural relationships. While many would call Peace Corps service honorable, it is important to recognize the agency's roots in neocolonialism. As I demonstrate in this article, the Peace Corps was established so that the United States could interfere in the self-determination of foreign countries, influence their development, and ensure the creation of Western democratic and capitalistic structures worldwide—all under the guise of altruistic aid. My challenge for the Peace Corps is the following: in order for the agency to continue promoting the peace, sustainable change, and intercultural relationships it prides itself on, the Peace Corps has to reckon with its intentionally deceitful past, neocolonial structure, and current position as a federal entity exerting power in developing countries around the world.

First, I provide some background information about the Peace Corps, their goals, and their model of service. Then, in Section 2, I discuss the historical context of the Peace Corps' establishment and reveal how colonial rhetoric was used to justify a need for the agency. I do this by exploring the "East vs. West" divide in development discourse through an application of Edward Said's "Orientalism" theory. Next, I uncover how notions of Western superiority furthered neocolonialism by drawing upon the concept of "positional superiority," which Michael Latham discusses in his book *Modernization as Ideology*. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how racist and ethnocentric ideologies have shaped the Peace Corps narrative.

In Section 5, I examine current Peace Corps values by reviewing agency training materials and the work of their Intercultural Competency, Diversity and Inclusion (ICD&I) Team. Here, I highlight how the Peace Corps is promoting equitable relationships through improved intercultural training and from an application of "postcolonial self-reflexivity"—a theory covered by Jenna Hanchey, a returned Peace Corps volunteer. Finally, I provide an overall analysis of the agency, detailing three negative aspects of its structure I believe pose the biggest challenges, as the issues pertain directly to neocolonial development work, equitable partnerships and intercultural relationships.

Ultimately, I argue no amount of intercultural awareness, sensitivity training, or integration measures can override the "positional superiority" that the Peace Corps benefits from as a U.S. government entity. Only when one considers the agency's neocolonial roots, their unwillingness to

change problematic aspects of their structure, and the Eurocentric notion that is "development", can the problem be fully realized. I argue true equity between the Peace Corps and the countries it serves cannot be attained until the agency separates itself from the U.S. government, hires only technically-skilled applicants, and begins incorporating more host country national leadership into their grassroots work.

Brief Peace Corps Overview

Founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps (PC) serves to work alongside developing countries and provide them with trained volunteers in sectors of agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health, and youth development. Peace Corps volunteers live abroad for a total of 27 months as they work on community-level projects designed to "modernize" and "elevate" developing host nations—projects that, for example, improve literacy rates, lower child mortality rates, and increase sustainable farming practices.[1]

Prior to service, volunteers undergo 10-12 weeks of pre-service training that equips them to work in their sector, teaches them the language(s) spoken at site, and provides cultural context to prepare them for life in their host country [1]\. During service, volunteers are paired with local civilian counterparts who help volunteers address their communities' needs (GAO 1990, 48). The three goals of the Peace Corps are to provide countries with trained assistance, for volunteers to represent the United States and American culture, and for volunteers to learn about their host countries.[2] This mutual exchange of practices, norms and values is an integral part of Peace Corps service and the knowledge volunteers bring back to the U.S. after their service is said to benefit the whole U.S. population by promoting a better understanding of cultures around the world.[2]

Historical Context

In order to understand why the Peace Corps was created in 1961, one must recognize the historical context of the Cold War and the United States' perspective going into it. Following World War II, communism in the Soviet Union posed the next great danger to American society. This intangible threat of communist ideology, and the goal of ultimately containing it, became the United States' main concern leading into the Cold War.

No president better exemplified anti-communist rhetoric and liberal "Western" ideals than the young John F. Kennedy. Upon being elected to office in 1961, Kennedy put forth a comprehensive containment plan to focus on periphery regions around the Soviet Union, rather than interfering directly with the superpower[3]. The Kennedy Administration saw young, emerging countries in "the East" as opportunities for the United States to suppress the spread of communism and ensure the establishment of Western political and economic structures in the U.S.' own image. Kennedy's foreign policy advisors believed that developing countries "lacked the type of integrative values that theorists identified with […] stable, Western democracies," making them "extremely vulnerable to communism and its seductive

claims of social reform, political order, and economic growth".[4]

This language is nearly identical to that used by British colonist Arthur James Balfour, in his 1910 address to the British House of Commons, famously critiqued in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[5] "Orientalism," as Said describes, "is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. [It is] a political version of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')". [5] An early proponent of the "Orientalism" theory, Balfour defends British colonization and occupation in "Oriental" countries by stating "the facts of the case" [5]:

> Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self[-]government having merits of their own… You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. […] never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government. [5]

Balfour does a number of things in his assertion. First, he divides the world in half by distinguishing a strong binary between the "East" and "West". Second, he associates "the West" with moral prowess and leadership, while labeling the less-developed "East" as incapable. Lastly, Balfour reduces the historical, cultural, and political achievements of Egypt to nothing more than a country deserving of foreign domination. This condescending attitude fueled imperialistic practices, as it empowered Western nations to colonize and exploit developing countries and rebuild according to their own ideals. Sadly, these processes persist today, although no longer demonstrated through physical military imposition as it was in earlier centuries. Instead, many Western countries continue to exercise influence over parts of the world through economic, political, and social pressures—practices known as neocolonialism.

This type of neocolonialist discourse was present in the Kennedy Administration during the early 1960s. Walt Whitman Rostow, one of Kennedy's top economic advisors, argued the new challenge for U.S. foreign policy "was to disguise development in a way that was desirable for those who had previously been under colonial rule".[6] Rostow recognized that America needed to create a model of development that stressed "national liberation" and economic independence in order to entice newly-independent countries away from communist ideals. [6]

By reiterating Balfour's belief that developing countries were incapable of self-governance, the Kennedy Administration

wished to extend American "assistance" overseas to subtly exercise control over periphery states in the East. This sense of American authority comes from the belief that the American experience (its colonial history yet subsequent rise to power) is exceptional—a belief that "establish[ed] a polarity between the United States and the rest of the world".[7] This exceptionalism was reinforced after World War II, when the U.S. began exercising a more dominant presence around the world and in "the Orient"—a feat historically reserved for European powers (Said 2003, 11-12). In doing so, the United States solidified its position as a fully-developed, Western country and began to apply this sense of entitlement to its relations with the Eastern world.

This East/West dichotomy equated terms like "development" and "progress" with American notions of democracy, capitalism, and equality, while "undeveloped" and "traditional" societies elsewhere became synonymous with the opposite—thus implying they were prime targets for communist infestation. Here, it is clear how notions of development were (and continue to be) based on European societal values and disadvantages other ways of measuring life, health, economy, and happiness. This divide in development theory still exists today, though terms like "First vs. Third World" and "Global North vs. South" more commonly refer to the divide. [7] By equipping this rhetoric and framing intervention as rescuing "backward societies" from communist ruin, America could defend its own international meddling through neocolonial tactics. [6] With this in mind, Kennedy established the two most recognizable U.S. development agencies within the first few months of his presidency—the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development—both with the intention of preventing the spread of communism. In doing so, the Peace Corps provided a "friendlier, more casual alternative" to diplomacy, thus making it an ideal neocolonial cover for the United States' political, economic, social, and ideological overhaul in developing nations. [6]

Neocolonial Rhetoric in Early Peace Corps History

Neocolonial discourse was heard by the American public in 1961, when President Kennedy proudly declared at his inauguration, "To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required" ("Inaugural Address"). This reinforced the East/West divide and labelled people in developing countries as "helpless" by asserting that they lack the necessary tools to "help themselves". It also implied that "unless something American is brought in [or] unless Americans use their exceptionality to empower, […] the [other] culture will remain static". [8] In this course of action, the Peace Corps was established to "save" people in the East from their "huts and villages" and to provide them with the same opportunities, resources, and freedoms Americans enjoyed in the West.

Though portrayed as purely altruistic, Peace Corps methods of "helping

others" operated within and perpetuated power differentials—a structure in which the United States had "positional superiority". [9] This "positional superiority" situated the U.S. on top, followed closely by European hegemons, with the rest of the "developing world" trailing below. This hierarchy of power fit right into Kennedy's early development theories. Walt Whitman Rostow once famously said that "the development of nations is a little like the development of human beings," suggesting "a mature, advanced society could take the hands of wayward, childlike ones and guide them into the adulthood of modernity". [9] By comparing newly independent countries to helpless children in need of care from older, more established democratic nations, Rostow asserted that development could not occur without Western guidance and influence.

This echoes Edward Said's analysis of the Oriental-European relationship. To quote Said, the key "feature of [these] relations was that Europe was always in a position of strength [...] True, the relationship of strong to weak could be disguised or mitigated […] but the essential relationship [would always be] between a strong and weak partner".[10] By attempting to "disguise" and "mitigate" American influence through development, the United States was able to justify self-asserting itself into the affairs of developing countries in an effort to modernize them.

In truth, this process of modernization was simply "a means for the continued assertion of the privileges and rights of [the] dominant power" onto a colonized people.[9] By placing Peace Corps volunteers in countries with colonial histories, it was easy for the U.S. to use neocolonial tactics to encourage their dependency. This is where the process is intentionally deceitful. "In order to make [neocolonialism] attractive to those upon whom it is practised it must be shown as capable of raising their living standards," however, the ultimate "economic objective of neo-colonialism is to keep those standards depressed in the interest of the developed countries. It is only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable 'aid' programmes [...] can be explained" (Nkrumah 1966, xv). In this way, the United States was able to demonstrate a public "commit[ment] to self-determination for all", while using the Peace Corps to reinforce relationships of dependency around the world. [11]

Ethnocentric Arrogance Within the Peace Corps

It was President Kennedy's "help them help themselves" declaration in 1961 that best exemplified the problem in international development. While it appeared noble on the surface, his statement perpetuated the East/West divide and equipped patronizing phrasing that has propelled the field of development for years. With his statement, Kennedy placed the duty of assistance on American citizens—essentially creating a 20th century equivalent to the "White Man's Burden". Named after the poem by Rudyard Kipling, the "White Man's Burden" concept "assumes the American as the standard of perfection" and states that those with this privilege must help the "Other to develop both

economically and culturally" in order to share their liberties and freedoms.[12] For the Peace Corps, this "Burden" is "coupled with the idea of American exceptionalism" and applied within the Eurocentric framework of development, making it additionally problematic. [12] As a result, Kennedy's promise of mobilizing Americans to "break the bonds of mass misery" sent the message that Americans had the inherent ability and responsibility to reduce the world's inequities, reinforcing the belief that those in developing countries needed a savior. [13]

Though the term "White Savior Complex" wasn't officially coined by Teju Cole until 2012, early PC rhetoric had been fully embodying this term since 1961. [14] Just like the "White Man's Burden," the "White Savior Complex" is demonstrated when white people (often those in Western countries) and set out to "save" others (predominantly people of color in less-developed countries) that they have deemed less fortunate. Here, race is an important factor because it acknowledges that self-righteous assumptions in development (for instance, the assumption others need your help and that the "world exists simply to satisfy the needs […] of white people") are all deeply rooted in white supremacist ideologies. [15]

These racist and Eurocentric sentiments remain on full display in current Peace Corps materials. As former volunteer Michael Buckler points out, "a prime example" of the Peace Corps' "hallmarks of saviorism" is the agency's official motto: "Make the Most of Your World". [16] "The message is clear: The world is yours, go forth and fix it". [16] This phrasing literally tells American volunteers they are entitled to the world and when one considers how PC recruits are predominantly white, while host countries consist primarily of people of color, it reinforces notions of white supremacy. [17] This motto affirms the belief that any American, regardless of qualifications, can provide assistance to and "save" those in developing countries, simply because of their American privilege.

These racial dynamics are entrenched within development work. Just as the East/West binary instilled a hierarchy between developed and developing countries, so too has an imbalance of power been established between white and non-white people. As a result of years of conquest and colonization by white Europeans, "the West" has become synonymous with "white", while places in "the East" are "Othered" and labeled "non-white." "This brings us back to the fundamental bias [that] Europeans conquered the world because their nature was predisposed to it, while non-Europeans were colonized because their nature condemned them to it".[18] "Racism appears, then, not as an incidental detail," Albert Memmi writes, "but as a consubstantial part of colonialism". [18] Because white supremacy plays a significant role in development theory, the "positional superiority" the U.S. benefits from is now dually compounded by race, as a majority-white nation.

This intersection of power, nationalism, and race is consistent with the findings made by Jenna Hanchey, a returned Peace Corps volunteer who researched the impact of race and colonization on stories of service from former volunteers [19]. In her

graduate dissertation, Hanchey reveals "the intricate connection that postcolonial theoretical issues have to issues of race and ethnicity. Though colonialism should never be reduced to racism," she writes, "the act is intricately tied to race". [19] These racial ideologies were not abandoned when physical, militaristic colonization was traded for more discreet neocolonial tactics. Instead, racism continues to be perpetuated within neocolonial development structures.

Eurocentrism is another ideology upheld in the field of development. Similar to ethnocentrism, which judges one's own cultural norms and values as the only "correct" or "moral" way to behave, Eurocentrism believes any behavior outside of European or Western norms "is wrong and misguided[,] that other cultures are decidedly inferior". [20] This belief echoes all previous assertions made by Balfour and Rostow. Additionally, the interchangeability of "democratic values" and "capitalistic economies" with the developed "West" and opposite qualities with the undeveloped "East" allows one to conclude that the notion of "development" is inherently measured in Eurocentric ways.

Despite its inextricable ties to development, Eurocentric behavior does clash with current PC goals of integration. By demonstrating these attitudes in service, volunteers risk offending their host communities, damaging local relationships, and being interpreted as elitist and narrow-minded. Instead, it is crucial for volunteers to practice cultural relativity as they learn to integrate into their host communities and build positive intercultural relationships—two markers of successful Peace Corps service. [20]

The first critique that identified this type of problematic behavior in Peace Corps service came in 1968, when Harvard University's student-run newspaper published a scathing op-ed written by former volunteers. [21] The article read, "We now see that the Peace Corps is arrogant and colonialist in the same way as the government of which it is a part. […] It is a blindness produced by the arrogance of a nation that thinks itself capable of solving all the world's problems with its own techniques". [21] Here, former volunteers condemned the agency for perpetuating American superiority and admitted, that instead of "the antithesis [of] American colonialism" that Kennedy had promised, the Peace Corps truly was "imposing the United States' political and cultural values" on developing countries through neocolonial means. [21]

Today, the Peace Corps has put more resources towards cultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, and integration, as they recognize effective service cannot occur without these skills. In the following section, I discuss how the agency has begun to address issues of American superiority, ethnocentrism, and racial ideologies through mandatory staff trainings that improve intercultural competency and address topics of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Present Discourse: Intercultural Competency, Diversity, and Inclusion

I turn now to the current discourse within the agency to show how they are

tackling ethnocentrism through improved intercultural training. To do so, I draw from their official cross-cultural workbook, *Culture Matters*, and assess two popular training models: the Self-Other Bridge and Intercultural Code-Shifting. Here, I specifically highlight the Intercultural Competency, Diversity & Inclusion (ICD&I) Team for their work to identify workplace inequities, resolve conflict, and provide support to the international Peace Corps community.

The ICD&I Team is part of the agency's Office of Overseas Programming and Training Support (OPATS), which supervises the development, implementation, and evaluation of all Peace Corps training materials. In addition to addressing themes of diversity, the Intercultural Competency, Diversity & Inclusion Team also addresses common cross-cultural interactions that occur during service. These can include adjustment issues faced by volunteers, a lack of support for minority and/or marginalized Peace Corps staff, and communication setbacks between Americans and host country nationals. [22]

For three months prior to service, soon-to-be volunteers receive language, technical, and cross-cultural training in order to prepare them for service. During this period, each prospective volunteer receives a copy of the official PC cross-cultural workbook, *Culture Matters*, and begins to gain the skills necessary to navigate their new surroundings and the cultural differences that arise "between the volunteer and the people they're working with". [22] To aid the adjustment process and encourage best practices among volunteers, ICD&I specialists use two popular models within the field of intercultural communication: the Self-Other Bridge and Intercultural Code-Shifting. [22] In a 2019 training webinar, ICD&I Specialists Emily Clawson and D'Lynn Jacobs explain these two models and apply them to common Peace Corps settings. [22]

First, the Self-Other Bridge Model requires the self-analysis of "one's own reactions and worldview," in addition to the consideration of others' perspectives in a given scenario. [22] By asking oneself if adjustments could be made to achieve similar behaviors to others in the interaction, these strategies can help to "bridge" the "self-other" divide and create a more inclusive and equitable space (2019). While intercultural communication goes beyond simple verbal exchanges, language-learning is a common bridge method. This is an important bridging tool, as Albert Memmi points out, because "two tongues are in conflict" in places with colonial histories: "those of the colonizer and the colonized". [23] By using language to bridge the colonial power divide and communicate with others in their native tongue, volunteers often report better interactions and improved feelings of cultural adjustment. [22]

Jacobs, who also serves as the Director of Programming and Training in Vanuatu, finds that speaking the local language of Bislama is a "great way to develop effective and healthy relationships with [her] team," earn their trust, and allow her coworkers to feel "valued" and "seen". [24] Clawson, a Supervisory ICD&I Specialist, agrees and says she always tries to "learn the basics of greeting people in their own

language because that can allow me to […] create a space where it's not just one group of people who always has to speak a language that's not their first" (2019).

The second intercultural model PC uses is the Code-Shifting technique. [24] Code-shifting refers to "intentionally modifying one's own behavior to be appropriate and effective in a particular context" and often happens when one person recognizes a difference in engaging with another and alters their own approach in order to peacefully or more effectively interact with the other. [24]

It is important here to reiterate the role that power plays in international interactions. As stated throughout this paper, the Peace Corps wields a great deal of power in host countries as a U.S. government agency. Even with attempts to balance out this power, American volunteers and staff still benefit from this "positional superiority"—whether they are conscious of this dynamic or not. The problem that occurs, Clawson admits, is that HCN staff then constantly code-shift to fit American norms and make their American coworkers feel more comfortable (2019). Over time, it is not only exhausting for them to keep conforming to norms that are not their own, but it reinforces power inequities that stem from histories of colonization, imperialism, and racist ideologies like white supremacy. To best balance these power inequities, the Peace Corps has highlighted the "need for [volunteers] to code-shift culturally in relation to their own communities" and adapt to host culture norms, rather than the other way around. [24]

Both the Self-Other Bridge and Code-Shifting techniques require constant deliberate effort to be sensitive to cultural differences and to be aware of existing power dynamics. This is crucial, Clawson explains, because "when you're aware of what's going on, you can be intentional about the choices that you make" (2019). Jacobs echoes this, recognizing that by asking her staff to speak English during meetings instead of the local language of Bislama, "[I] would be leveraging my power as a U.S. American staff member, in this U.S. American organization, in their country". [24] Instead, Jacobs finds that speaking the local language is "more appropriate for me to do my work and be equitable […] because this is the country in which we serve". [24]

As demonstrated by these ICD&I Specialists, PC intercultural training requires a great deal of self-reflection, or as Hanchey calls it, "self-reflexivity". "Self-reflexivity," the former Peace Corps volunteer writes, "requires an acknowledgement and challenging of our own structures and structural ideologies". [25]Furthermore, Hanchey argues that a postcolonial approach is necessary when working in international development as it analyzes "the underlying Eurocentric assumptions of both one's field and one's own research, in order to root out 'latent ideological structures that inform our scholarship and practices'". [26]The damage, Hanchey claims, occurs when volunteers "perform the role of 'development' without bringing into question the global power differentials upon which development work is based". [26]

Here, ICD&I Specialist Clawson demonstrates postcolonial self-reflexivity as she analyzes her own identity "as an English-speaking white woman" and position "in the facilitator space of privilege" when conducting ICD&I workshops in host countries (Clawson 2019). "When I'm going to countries that have a history of being colonized by English-speaking white people (or other white people), I think it's really key to […] do that Self-Other Bridge process and ask myself, 'what cultural norms am I privileging?' [Do] I make everyone code shift to me or do I intentionally look for ways to honor a diversity of ways of being?" [27]

By exemplifying the standards set in ICD&I practice, Clawson demonstrates how important it is to name the power structures present, recognize how one's identity exists within those structures, and consider the perspectives of others in the interaction. This work from the Intercultural Competency, Diversity and Inclusion (ICD&I) Team demonstrates how the Peace Corps has been prioritizing better cross-cultural training, intercultural communication, and awareness around power dynamics to create equitable and inclusive relationships. These ICD&I practices are incredibly impactful as they promote self-reflexivity and awareness on an individual level, while also ensuring the broader PC community shares a common vocabulary that reflects intercultural competency standards. [27] That said, I argue intercultural training is not enough to neutralize the systemic damage caused by the agency, or enough to alleviate the "positional superiority" the Peace Corps benefits from as an extension of the U.S. government working to develop the international community.

Overall Agency Analysis: Three Structural Issues to Address

In this section, I reiterate how the Peace Corps is perpetuating harm by analyzing three structural issues within its framework that must be addressed. First, I examine the lack of accountability offered by the agency as a result of its position within the U.S. government. Second, I explore the organization's affinity for hiring unqualified applicants, which perpetuates issues of Western superiority, American exceptionalism, and white saviorism. Third, I question the agency's failure to provide proper support or compensation to host country staff, as well as notice the lack of local involvement in Peace Corps countries. In each of these three sections, I propose possible solutions to combat these structural deficiencies and draw from outside scholarship and critiques for support.

Structural Issue #1: PC's Position as a U.S. Government Entity

The biggest problem facing the Peace Corps and its future, I argue, is the agency's own position as a part of the United States government. The Peace Corps' close ties to the U.S. government has helped solidify its "positional superiority" in the field of international development and the power that accompanies this privilege—no matter how "nonlegitimate" the privilege is—has affected every aspect of the agency, including each intercultural interaction made

by those in service. [28] This power has also prevented the organization from taking true accountability for the harm it has caused, whether through deceptive neocolonial tactics, the imposition of Eurocentric measures of development, or through the extension of U.S. foreign policy interests. As a result, I argue that while the Peace Corps remains connected to and funded by the U.S. federal government, it cannot begin to take responsibility for damage it has caused, nor can it boast of the "equitable intercultural relationships" it helps to form, when its structure remains one of neocolonialism.

The presence of the federal government within PC structure allows the agency a sort of "untouchable privilege." The Peace Corps would never acknowledge its role in foreign interference because, by doing so, it would implicate the United States government. This allows the agency to be entirely complicit. This "privilege" and resulting lack of accountability is exactly why Kwame Nkrumah, the former Prime Minister and President of Ghana, despised neocolonialism. "For those who practice it," he writes in his book*, Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, "[neocolonialism] means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress".[29]

The former volunteers of Harvard Crimson's article made this crucial observation in 1968 when they found "the bureaucratic loyalty of these administrators is to Washington" only, and not to the volunteers, staff, or communities the agency is supposed to serve.[30] Sadly, nothing has changed in the decades since that article was published.

For these reasons, we cannot expect the Peace Corps to suddenly take full accountability for the harm it has caused, acknowledge the role it has played (and continues to play) in the neocolonial oppression of developing countries, attempt to remedy its structural inequities, or trust the agency to conduct a deep, meaningful, and lasting reform. Instead, many argue the ideologies that helped establish the Peace Corps are too integral within PC structure to be removed. Of these in dissent, the group "Decolonizing Peace Corps" (a collection of former PC volunteers who criticize the "unethical" system they participated in) is vocally advocating for the agency's abolition. [31]

In a slightly different approach, the former volunteers in the Harvard Crimson piece advocated for a separation of the organization from the U.S. government and suggested the Peace Corps be turned "into an internationally administered agency," "where administrative power is shared by representatives of various societies [and] where the interplay of their differing interests produces truly flexible programs that can be transferred from culture to culture, rather than imposed by one culture on another". [32]

Merely privatizing the agency will not solve its problems but the suggestion of internationalizing it makes a great deal of sense. By having better oversight and external assessments, it would allow for more accountability, greater local input, and fewer Americans in positions of power in foreign countries. However, for as long as

the Peace Corps remains a mechanism of the U.S. government and benefits from the "positional superiority" it receives as such, the agency cannot effectively demonstrate equitable intercultural partnerships on a large-scale international level.

Structural Issue #2: Inexperienced and Unqualified Hires

One of the most consistent gripes against the Peace Corps has been for their fondness in hiring inexperienced volunteers who lack the specialized skills that developing countries often request, like "doctors, education specialists, and crop extensionists,".[33] While all volunteers undergo training prior to service, this instruction is sometimes the first technical experience some receive in their sector and it is insufficient for many: the agency's own 2009 Annual Volunteer Survey revealed 1 in 4 volunteers reported their job-related training as ineffective or poor and that "technical training [ranked] the lowest of the five training areas".[34] This technical training should not be the first experience volunteers have in their sector; however, this is often the case, as PC recruits "B.A. generalists," or young college graduates with liberal arts degrees, who still lack "the specific training or professional employment sought by the host nations". [35]

Despite other agency-wide reforms, the Peace Corps' recruitment of inexperienced volunteers remains consistent and, if anything, has gotten worse. In 1965, 70% of recruited volunteers were generalists that lacked specialized skills[36], whereas this number had increased to 85% in 2019. [37] This hiring trend reflects a deeply-held belief that unskilled and inexperienced Americans are still qualified enough to provide new insights and assistance to developing countries. This is a dangerous and arrogant assumption that connects directly to Western superiority, American exceptionalism, the white savior complex, and colonizer behavior.

I argue this hiring trend will not significantly change for two reasons. First and foremost, the trend and its accompanying belief in Western superiority is inseparable from PC values and early goals: it was President Kennedy's original belief that "all volunteers were capable of giving the 'underdeveloped' nations 'a hand in building a society'", regardless of their actual qualifications. [36] Secondly, recommendations to hire more qualified applicants and focus resources on the "improvement of technical training" and "additional training days for volunteers" have been previously made by the agency's own internal assessments, but to no avail.[38] In order to show their values are no longer in line with arrogant notions of Western superiority, the Peace Corps needs to rebrand their recruitment materials, come up with a more equitable and culturally-sensitive motto (as opposed to the current "Make the Most of Your World" which is thick with American entitlement), and hire only technically-qualified applicants with relevant field experience in the future.

Structural Issue #3: Failure to Prioritize Local Leadership

As mentioned earlier, there are two elements of the existing Peace Corps model that incorporate host country national input:

the assignment of a local civilian counterpart to each volunteer during service and the host country national hires that staff Peace Corps country offices. The goals of these two elements were to prioritize the "partnership" between Americans and host country nationals; to reduce ethnocentric assumptions of development by informing volunteers of pre-existing community needs; and to provide the agency with local representation to ensure a cooperative and equal environment.[39] While these goals are great in theory, they have not worked well in practice. Below, I discuss three problems that exist in the PC model, as they relate to local host country national staff.

The first issue here is that the Peace Corps does not pay civilian counterparts in the way that host country staff receives reimbursements or salaries.[40] This fundamentally devalues their input, dismisses their efforts to assist volunteers in establishing community projects, and reinforces the idea that HCNs are less important than the volunteers they serve alongside. In order to repair this, "Decolonizing Peace Corps" has outlined demands for financial compensation and increased counterpart involvement, urging that "counterparts [be] paid on the basis of 2-5 year fellowships" and "be responsible for completing community assessments, identifying projects, [and] applying for and managing grants" so they have more control over the projects and finances in their local communities. [40]

The second issue that arises is the dual responsibility of host country nationals. Host country staff are hired to both provide support to volunteers and provide HCN representation. This is problematic because, when locals play a secondary "supportive" role to volunteers, it centers Americans when volunteers should be the ones supporting local community leaders. Additionally, mere host country representation does not automatically create beneficial multicultural spaces, just as the recruitment of diverse identities does not solve racism. Instead, the Peace Corps must prioritize ICD&I measures to ensure its workplaces are safe for non-Americans and that HCN suggestions, concerns and efforts will be heard and appreciated.

The third issue that exists is the lack of employment opportunities for host country nationals to serve the Peace Corps. Only Americans are eligible to become Volunteers or Country Directors, yet even HCN staff positions are often limited in what they can offer the agency. [40] This deficiency in the organization's structure fails to encourage more local input, guidance, and feedback (something PC would highly benefit from) and reinforces the idea that the Peace Corps exists primarily for Americans. Following their suggestion to "internationalize the Peace Corps," the former volunteers of the Harvard Crimson piece envisioned a model where locals could "plan and direct programs in [their own countries]" and Americans, if they still wanted to serve, could "put themselves in subordinate positions, [and] allow themselves to be really used by the people who live [there]".[41] While this is far from the current PC structure, I argue the benefits of an internationalized plan like this one would allow for more HCN staff positions and

leadership roles—thus allowing locals to play a substantial role in their own development.

Conclusion

The most pressing steps the Peace Corps can take towards accountability include separating itself from the United States government and federal funding; acknowledging its intentionally deceitful past and role as a neocolonial actor; and working to address several structural issues within its model—like answering to the countries and communities it "serves", hiring only qualified applicants as volunteers, and incorporating more host country leadership and input into its organizational structure.

That said, I acknowledge how even if the agency were to take these steps and rebrand itself entirely, its fundamental nature as an international development organization operates within a field based on Eurocentric values and relies on "global power differentials".[42] Here, I reiterate the problem that is the Peace Corps in and of itself—a United States government agency that was established with clear neocolonial intent and uses federal funds to exploit developing countries in the name of American foreign policy interests. It is their "positional superiority" as a U.S. government entity within the field of international development that prevents the agency from being held truly accountable for the harm they have caused.

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