
The Volunteering Experiences of Young People in Disadvantaged Areas

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Abstract

Volunteering rates are frequently reported to be lower in disadvantaged areas, inferring an additional aspect of social exclusion. But do such reports paint a misleading picture? What are the differences between young people's formal and informal volunteering practices? Are definitional variations concerning what constitutes volunteering the cause of low rates? How do localised cultures and norms influence participation? This paper presents the research focus I have developed during the first year of my PhD, centred on the volunteering experiences of young people from disadvantaged areas. Of particular interest are young people's definitions of volunteering, their routes to participation and the forms of volunteering they engage in, the benefits they enjoy and barriers they encounter. To address these issues, participants, aged 12-18, as well as adults working with young volunteers, will be recruited from three locations in Glasgow and asked to participate in focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews.

Paper

1. Introduction

‘Perhaps, after all, we should not *just* be asking “Do children volunteer?”, but also, “How might consideration of children’s experiences re-shape our view of what volunteering *is*?”’
(Sarre & Tarling, 2010: 304)

Data from the Scottish Government consistently shows formal volunteering rates to be lowest in urban and deprived areas (Hurley *et al*, 2008). Similarly, the formal volunteering of children aged 8-15 has been strongly linked to the socioeconomic status of their household (Sarre & Tarling, 2010). In certain circumstances, volunteering has been highlighted as a positive tool for easing life transitions (Newton *et al*, 2011) and enhancing employability prospects (NCVO, 2014). The consistently low representation of young people from disadvantaged areas in formal volunteering opportunities, raises concerns about their ability to benefit from volunteering in the manner those from less deprived areas do. Literacy and numeracy levels, life expectancy, health and mental health are, according to government data, worse in the most deprived areas of Scotland. As such, their underrepresentation in volunteering opportunities may be an additional aspect of their exclusion from broader society (Smith *et al*, 2004).

However, due to the broad and diverse nature of volunteering, definitional differences mean individuals do not always identify their actions as volunteering creating problems for researchers seeking information about this behaviour (Gaskin, 2004; Hurley *et al*, 2008). Similarly, surveys tend to focus on formal volunteering thus limiting the scope of what can be researched. Williams (2003) has argued the culture of informal volunteering is more prevalent in deprived areas, challenging the notion that volunteering *per se* is less common; rather, a particular *form* of volunteering is less common. Indeed, socially excluded individuals may *actively* choose to focus on their own communities, rather than mainstream organisations, for reasons of solidarity and shared identity or because they feel alienated by formal volunteering structures (Smith *et al*, 2004). Youth-orientated volunteering programs are increasingly predicated on the belief that structure is central to development, engendering inflexible roles (Strickland, 2010). Low participation levels may, therefore, be reflective of young people’s active decision not to partake in rigid programs rather than passive inactivity.

We are left with a confused image. On the one hand, young people from disadvantaged areas appear to participate less in volunteering opportunities meaning they are less likely to enjoy the benefits it can bring; benefits which could be used to ease aspects of their social and economic disadvantage. On the other, it may be the case that research into volunteering has not yet fully explored the breadth of this phenomenon due to definitional differences, the way questions are phrased and the privileging of certain activities over others.

2. Research Objectives

The mixed picture painted above is the area from which I have developed my research objectives:

1. **Understanding:** To explore what young people from disadvantaged areas understand by the term volunteering.
2. **Participation:** To understand both the routes young people from disadvantaged areas follow into volunteering as well as types of activities they engage in when volunteering.
3. **Benefits:** To understand what young people from disadvantaged areas have gained from their volunteering experiences.
4. **Barriers:** To investigate the barriers young people from disadvantaged areas encounter when volunteering or seeking volunteering opportunities.
5. **Adult understandings:** To explore the continuities and discontinuities between young people's responses to the objectives and adults who work with them.

The objectives feed in and relate to one another. The first four focus directly on young people's experiences whereas the fifth will be used to help frame the issues and explore the harmony and dissonance between adult and adolescent responses. With the remainder of this paper I will provide a more detailed outline of the areas my research will explore and indicate the methodological approach I will employ to address them.

3. Taxonomical & Definitional Issues

Volunteering can be construed and performed in countless ways and has given birth to various definitions (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2010; Rochester *et al*, 2012). The Scottish Government (2013: 121) considers volunteering as:

the giving of time and energy through a third party, which can bring measurable benefits to the volunteer, individual beneficiaries, groups and organisations, communities, environment and society at large. It is a choice undertaken of one's own free will, and is not motivated primarily for financial gain

Four main points are embedded here; volunteering must happen through a third party (i.e. an organisation), engender measurable benefits, be freely undertaken and performed without payment. The stipulation that volunteering takes place through a third party, locates the Government's definition within the field of formal volunteering. Williams (2003) argued a roughly equal amount of time is spent on formal and informal volunteering activities. Moreover, he contended that although formal and informal volunteering rates were higher in less deprived areas, in deprived areas informal volunteering was the more prevalent activity. Williams' work problematises the accuracy and utility of the Government's definition as it suggests a focus on formal actions may, at best, only capture half of the volunteering landscape and even less when focusing on deprived areas.

To focus on organisational structures is to focus on one dimension, rather than a defining characteristic, of volunteering (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2010). Opportunities promoted by staffed and formally structured organisations can be said to belong to the dominant paradigm of volunteering; conceptualising it as an altruistic act to those less fortunate than oneself, taking place through a role one has applied and received training for (Rochester *et al*, 2012). Corporatist forms of volunteer management, with hierarchical structures and layers of bureaucracy, have been criticised for producing passive forms of citizenship (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003). By forcing individuals into predefined roles that reproduce unequal power relationships, e.g. helper and helped (Smith *et al*, 2004), volunteering can be a disempowering experience. The organisational and managerial formalisation of volunteering can produce alienating structures (Smith *et al*, 2004) and uncomfortable hierarchical roles disliked by volunteers, who would prefer to see themselves as equals; as part of a 'crew' (Fyfe & Milligan, 2003: 2082).

Pessimistic perceptions of low-participation, due to individualising social forces, have stimulated organisational attempts to 're-embed' volunteering (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). This is done through functional and normative rationales aligning the supply and demand of volunteers and encouraging the willingness of individuals to participate. However, the normative rationales in re-embedding strategies place pressure and obligation on individuals to participate; eroding the "freely" chosen

aspect of volunteering. An organisational shift in volunteer management, known as flexibilisation, aims to better accommodate individuals from an increasingly individualised society by creating smaller jobs with lower levels of training to ease the commitment pressures of volunteers to volunteer involving organisations (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). Ironically, however, by producing 'programmatically and professionalised forms of volunteer management' (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011: 12) flexibilisation decreases the flexibility of roles an individual can perform by limiting their agency to act within the role.

Compulsory and employment-centric volunteering programs risk disempowering volunteers and altering the meaning of volunteering. The Coalition Government's *Help to Work* program enforces volunteering on unemployed persons in the hope their employability skills will be enhanced; failing to participate can lead to benefits being stopped. Similarly, the 'Job Shop' model of volunteering promoted by universities emphasises skills development to prepare graduates for employment (Anderson & Green, 2012). Yet there is little evidence volunteering helps people find work (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2013), enforced volunteering can put people off, engender resentment towards it (Dean, 2014) and attack volunteering's freely chosen aspect (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2010). Coercion from the state to volunteer risks changing 'the relationship between government and civil society, as well as public perceptions of civil society itself' (Strickland, 2010: 256). The narrow focus on employability risks instrumentalising volunteering, losing social and community-orientated benefits (Anderson & Green, 2012) and removing notions of social justice (Holdsworth, 2014). Organisational and societal attempts to re-embed volunteering, in an increasingly de-traditionalised and individualised era, are 'explicitly framed in normative terms' promoting volunteering as desirable behaviour (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011: 10). The alignment of institutional and individual goals, through processes such as volunteering, is reflective of the emergence of a 'control society' whereby certain activities are promoted along specific ideological lines (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2013). It is therefore pertinent to question what "desirable" behaviour is and for whom it is "desirable".

The dominant paradigm has been argued to 'make a major contribution to the widespread lack of appreciation of the full scope of volunteering' (Rochester *et al*, 2012: 240). Tellingly, one young volunteer remarked 'we're enjoying it, so it can't be volunteering' (Gaskin, 2004: 12) suggesting the normative image of volunteering does not appeal to some young people. This may, in part, be reflective of the exchange model of volunteering in which participants have clear expectations of roles and returns for participation (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). The most common volunteering activities undertaken by 16-24 year olds in the *Scottish Household Survey 2005* were generally helping out,

doing whatever was required and helping to organise or run activities or events (Hurley *et al*, 2008). In terms of informal volunteering, based in the *Time Use Survey 2000* in the UK, 8-15 year olds were found to be most likely to perform household work, personal care and visiting as well as accompanying and pastimes (Sarre & Tarling, 2010). These findings are based on quantitative data and unfortunately do not describe further what such activities entail; however, it is clear they differ from the dominant paradigm's conceptualisation of volunteering. That definitional variations as to what constitutes volunteering exist among young people (Eley, 2003) are perhaps, therefore, of little surprise. For example, the act of donating blood, which, as an activity that is of benefit to others, has no reward and is freely undertaken, ticks the three boxes of volunteering (Ellis Paine *et al*, 2010) was found in Eley's (2003) research to divide participants almost equally as to whether or not it was volunteering (52% said yes, 48% said no).

In their exploration of the spatial dimensions of social exclusion, Thompson *et al* (2014: 66-7) argue 'young people negotiate and construct everyday meanings, mediating, enacting and contesting conceived space [i.e. the dominant space constructed in policy] and embedding it within everyday routines'. The dominant construction of volunteering, although powerful in shaping perceptions of it, is one construction of which it is likely there are many. With the literature suggesting individuals do not always identify their actions as volunteering (Hurley *et al*, 2008; Smith *et al*, 2004), the 'v-word' itself being off-putting (Gaskin, 2004) and a gap existing between dominant definitions and young people's actions, it is essential to qualitatively explore the formal and informal volunteering experiences of this group to construct a more complete picture.

My research will look at the participants' definitions of volunteering, what they understand by it and the types of activities they engage in. It will explore how official discourse is understood at a micro-level as well as how young people from disadvantaged areas construct narratives around volunteering practice. The age range of participants (12-18) will enable the research to examine definitional and practice variations as young people age. For example, when a person reaches 16 and is suddenly faced with the prospect of entering further education, training or employment, will a individual and institutional shift occur in how volunteering is approached?

4. Unequal Access & Routes to (Positive) Volunteering (Experiences)

Formal volunteering rates are low in urban and deprived areas of Scotland. Additionally, the most deprived areas have lower literacy and numeracy levels, lower life expectancy, worse health and a

higher number of exclusions from school. The spatial concentration of worklessness in deprived areas is typically depicted by politicians as a 'welfare dependence story' rather than a result of deindustrialisation and structural processes (MacDonald *et al*, 2014). Solutions to unemployment are espoused in terms of benefit reductions to correct the "moral failure" of the poor. Yet, MacDonald *et al* (2014: 216) contend the 'availability of opportunities to be other than workless' is the 'most likely' approach to challenging unemployment. Volunteering, an activity potentially open to all, has been linked to enhanced employability (NCVO, 2014), eased life transitions (Newton *et al*, 2011) and pride in personal accomplishments (Eley, 2003). In some instances, such instrumental reasons may not be enough to develop the confidence to volunteer amongst young people who have experienced 'set backs in work or life' (Dean, 2014: 238). However, when organised in a holistic manner, volunteering has the potential, not to solve social issues, but to provide young people with alternative routes to address shortcomings in skills and experience and developing social awareness.

While underrepresented, individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have reported being no less willing to volunteer and have spoken of enhanced personal skills post-participation (Scottish Executive, 2004). Activities, such as post-service reflection (Eley, 2003) and encouraging participants to confront and challenge their stereotypes (Anderson & Green, 2012), have helped volunteers assess the impact of their activities and develop critical citizenship. Yet, the existence of real and perceived barriers (Rochester *et al*, 2012) before, during and after participation (Pantea, 2013) can prevent individuals accessing opportunities and subsequently engaging in reflective practices. Barriers include, but are not limited to, the costs of volunteering, a preference for paid work (Gaskin, 2004), fears of benefits being stopped (Smith *et al*, 2008), not having the time, being wary of overcommitting (Rochester *et al*, 2012; Smith *et al*, 2008), lack of information about opportunities particularly for those not attached to institutions (Gaskin, 2004), minimum age restrictions (Gaskin, 1998) as well as the negative attitudes of adults (Gaskin, 2004). Barriers, as well as enabling factors, are reflective of the availability and willingness of individuals who, in turn, are affected by changing lifecourses and living conditions (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). These influencing factors highlight the interplay between structure and agency and can be grouped into three, sometimes overlapping, categories: cultural, structural and individual.

Cultural

Cultural factors relate to the obstacles, encouragement and attitudes of family, friends and an individual's cultural environment. Younger teens, for example, often access volunteering through school, family, church and youth clubs while older teens find routes via college, university and

friends (Gaskin, 2004: 17); thus suggesting young people do not volunteer in isolation (Mills, 2014). Perceptions of what constitutes volunteering amongst young people are, Eley (2003: 42) argues, 'influenced by the interests and activities that were most relevant to them at the time'; inferring the guidance of socio-cultural factors. Furthermore, amongst young people from financially less well-off households, parental pressure may prevent participation as volunteering is considered a waste of time, working for free and not contributing to the household (Gaskin, 2004: 24).

Structural

Structural factors centre on locally and regionally available services. Minimum age restrictions, for example, constitute a structural barrier as organisations, perhaps fearful of insurance risks, avoiding recruiting persons under the age of 18. Similarly, lack of local volunteering opportunities or information about them constitute a structural barrier as it is the make-up of the area, rather than individual or cultural factors, that hinders participation.

Individual

Individual factors relate to how a person, in accordance with or in spite of their cultural and structural position, exerts agency to either volunteer or not. For example, lack of time, resources or the need to carry out a caring role for a family member constitute individual barriers; as does disbelief in personal confidence, skills or knowledge (Brodie *et al*, 2011). Similarly, an individual may see an advert or read about a volunteering opportunity online and be motivated to participate. Yet an individual may also be aware of opportunities, have the resources to participate, but actively chose not to.

Not only do barriers exist prior to volunteering opportunities, but a negative experience of volunteering can put an individual off participating in the future (Pantea, 2013). Feeling instrumentalised by organisations, having to pay for expenses and feeling like substitutes for paid staff can be potential barriers (Pantea, 2013). However, the case has yet to be made for poor volunteer management leading to individuals dropping out (Rochester *et al*, 2012). More commonly, volunteers stop due to personal factors such as no longer having the time, the acquisition of employment or moving house (Hurley *et al*, 2008). Reasons for stopping volunteering happen at various levels, from the individual and their local environment to societal factors, and participation ebbs and flows throughout an individual's life (Brodie *et al*, 2011). Yet while negative experiences may not always lead to attrition, the perception of devalued engagement and contribution, particularly if participation is compulsory, is likely to harm future volunteering (Dean, 2014).

My research will explore the participants' experience of barriers to volunteering both in the sense of material obstacles, such as lack of resources, and immaterial obstructions, such as information deficits. Moreover, cultures of volunteering will be examined; what are the key drivers to varying forms of participation and what is the extent of individual "choice" to engage in volunteering? Similarly, in the presence of structural obstacles, do participants exert agency and develop their own informal networks of volunteering? What are the conditions conducive to "positive" volunteering experiences, and how is the notion of a "positive" experience constructed; "positive" for who?

5. Methodology

'In using photographs, the potential exists, however elusive the achievement,
to find ways of thinking about social life that escapes the traps set by language'
(Walker, 1993 cited in Germain, 2004: 170)

Issues of power are widely contended to be the biggest challenges facing researchers working with young people (Greene & Hill, 2005; O'Kane, 2008; Veale, 2005). The unfolding of power happens at all stages of the research process from design and implementation to analysis and representation (Best, 2007). The methods selected to research young people's experiences must therefore be sensitive to such concerns; yet rather than necessitating new or special methods, the methods chosen ought to reflect the participants' levels of understanding, interests and social locations (Greene & Hill, 2005). This project acknowledges experience as an embodied phenomenon (Crossley, 2001) and a result of social pressures through which an individual learns to relate to themselves and others (Greene & Hill, 2005); it therefore necessitates an open and responsive method. A qualitative approach focused on the participants', not researcher's, point of view (Bryman, 2012: 408) will be used. Qualitative methods allow 'the full richness of experience' to be captured in a manner quantitative approaches do not (Greene & Hill, 2005: 13). Focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews will be used (see below) as well as the participants being asked to undertake a photographic activity in which they document their volunteering experiences through photography. Providing them with an active role¹ in the research, through photography, gives them greater control

¹ I am hesitant to overstress this 'active role' as the participants will not have set the parameters of the research and the analysis will be performed by me. However, I would nonetheless contend it gives the participants a level of input and ownership that would not be present if this stage of the methodology was excluded.

over the content of the research, makes the process more responsive and opens the possibility of developing 'new and more relevant areas of questioning' (O'Kane, 2008: 145).

Following an informative workshop on visual methods organised by the *Scottish Graduate School of Social Science* where the practicalities, benefits and difficulties of using photography were explored, in addition to a methods orientated literature review, I have chosen to employ a photographic method. A benefit of using images, rather than words, rests on the anchoring effect they have by virtue of focusing on an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties (Harper, 2002). Where photographs are utilised in one-to-one interviews they can act as memory prompts leading to the unearthing of information that may otherwise remain hidden (Germain, 2004). Moreover, they can be used, in part, to address the power dynamics in research; by placing the participant in charge of the camera they can choose how to represent themselves (Germain, 2004).

Participants will be recruited from three disadvantaged areas in Glasgow; as demarcated by the *Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation* and the *Urban Rural Classification*. The sites selected will contain pre-existing groups providing localised collections of adults and young people who know each other. At each site, three groups will be selected: one composed of adults working with young people; the other two consisting of 12-16 and 16-18 year olds. This division of groups will allow an exploration of the continuities and discontinuities between young people's experiences and the attitudes of adults who work with them. It will also enable an exploration of attitudinal changes to volunteering in the older and younger adolescent groups.

The adults will be qualitatively interviewed during the early stages of the research to frame the issues and to provide data to compare and contrast with young people's experiences. The young participants will be asked to take part in a photographic method during which they will take photographs that will be discussed in one-to-one interviews at a later date. Prior to the photographic activity, focus groups will be conducted with each of the six groups to explore the areas and themes they deem relevant to the research objectives; each session will be recorded and transcribed. Following an initial analysis of the transcripts, a brief will be composed and delivered to participants at a second meeting during which they will be given a timeframe in which to take photographs of their volunteering experiences. Once complete, the photographs will be collected and a further meeting arranged where each participant will individually have the opportunity to go through their photographs, explaining the significance in relation to their experiences. This final interview stage is considered crucial by researchers using visual methods as, rather than viewing the

image as data in and of itself, it is the layers of meaning that emerge as respondents create new narratives and (re)make the images meaningful which provides analysable data (Pink, 2007).

Photographic methods have been argued to enable researchers to access spaces that would otherwise be difficult for them to enter (Pink, 2007). This approach will afford the research the capacity to gain insight into the 'multi-scalar processes involved across a whole spectrum of [volunteer] involvement' (Smith *et al*, 2010: 268), rather than the more researched formal activities. By giving participants an active role in the process it is hoped they will engage positively; feeling their thoughts and accounts are truly valued. However, it is anticipated not all participants will take to the use of photography. In these instances, other tools, such as journals, will be available as an alternative way of engaging with the project. The focus on concrete events is said to enhance the generation of data with young people as they 'reflect [...] their construction of reality' (O'Kane, 2008: 131). The starting point for one-to-one interviews will therefore rest on a specific event the participant has experienced and has ownership of, rather than being imposed by the researcher.

6. Conclusion

Important gaps in our knowledge of young people's volunteering experiences emerge from the literature above. On the one hand, coming from a disadvantaged background appears to reduce an individual's chances of volunteering and benefiting from this practice. Yet on the other, it may be that we have been looking in the wrong places and informal volunteering is prevalent amongst the sample. We know barriers to participation exist, as well as enabling factors, but how do these manifest themselves for participants? How do structural and agential pressures permit or inhibit volunteering in disadvantaged areas? Definitional differences constitute a further area of inquiry; how is volunteering conceived: "volunteering", "helping-out" or simply "what I do"? Moreover, what is the impact of a policy-led instrumentalisation of volunteering? Do participants view it as an enforced necessity, something alien to their circumstances, a positive endeavour or a waste of time? It is these questions and issues my research will explore.

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