
A Case Study Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Volunteers and Paid Workers at an Empower Scotland Charity Shop

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Abstract

This ethnographic project applied my nine month volunteering experience as an 'Empower Scotland' charity shop volunteer in Eastern Scotland, to address a twofold gap in the sociology literature: the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers, and particularly those exclusively of volunteers.

The completion of semi-structured interviews and subsequent thematic analysis revealed many positive responses linking to motivation and rewards, with recommendations for improvement also being offered. The findings locate expansive potential in how Empower Scotland competes with other voluntary organisations. Furthermore, participants questioned target and rule suitability in the charity sector and the efficiency of volunteer management.

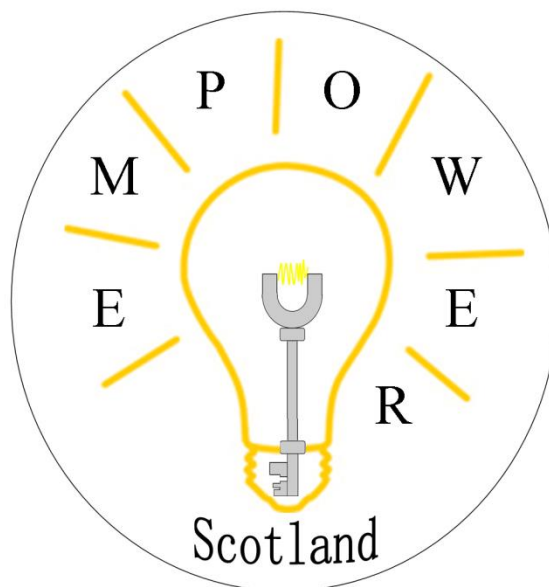
These findings imply that 'horizontal' policies should further emphasise the significance of giving time and money and that 'vertical' policies should consider the potential for professionalisation reaching a state of equilibrium. We must value and empower volunteers, placing the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers at the centre of policy decisions.



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Research Title

A Case Study Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Volunteers and Paid Workers at an Empower Scotland Charity Shop



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Front Cover Diagram:

‘Empower Scotland’ represents the anonymised charity name, with the logo symbolising volunteering as empowering through the generation of innovative ideas and providing a key to unlocking new opportunities.

Abstract

This ethnographic project applied my nine month volunteering experience as an ‘Empower Scotland’ charity shop volunteer in Eastern Scotland, to address a twofold gap in the sociology literature: the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers, and particularly those exclusively of volunteers. The completion of semi-structured interviews and subsequent thematic analysis revealed many positive responses linking to motivation and rewards, with recommendations for improvement also being offered. The findings locate expansive potential in how Empower Scotland competes with other voluntary organisations. Furthermore, participants questioned target and rule suitability in the charity sector and the efficiency of volunteer management. These findings imply that ‘horizontal’ policies should further emphasise the significance of giving time and money and that ‘vertical’ policies should consider the potential for professionalisation reaching a state of equilibrium. We must value and empower volunteers, placing the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers at the centre of policy decisions.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Aim

In adopting a reflexive approach through my personal lived experience of volunteering in an ‘Empower Scotland’ charity shop located in Eastern Scotland over summer 2012 and summer 2013, the aim of the completed research is to give a ‘voice’ to a small sample of volunteers and paid workers at the grassroots level. This project sought to address the twofold gap in the sociology literature concerning, on the one hand, the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers, by emphasising that the daily operation of charity shops depends on both parties; and on the other, the lived realities of volunteers in particular, by instigating a ‘trickle-down effect’ that extends beyond solely paid workers by also reaching volunteers. In contributing towards overcoming the marginalisation of the perspectives of volunteers and paid workers, the completed research strives to communicate that the interpretations of these two groups matter and should be widely recognised as significant.

1.2 Research Questions

The completed research sought to refine and extend existing knowledge in the pursuit of new knowledge by answering the following research questions:

1. What does it mean to be a volunteer or paid worker at the selected branch of Empower Scotland?
2. How does working at Empower Scotland impact upon sense of individual identity?
3. What is the importance of community integration and involvement through representing Empower Scotland?
4. Do volunteers and paid workers at Empower Scotland feel that they should be given more recognition from stakeholders?

5. What are the ways in which the professionalisation of the British charity retail sector has directly influenced the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers at the chosen branch of Empower Scotland?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Charity Shop Managers

In evaluating existing knowledge, it is clear from Parsons' (2004) research that charity shop managers recognise the need to act charitably to customers and volunteers, and the charity shop pricing tensions that exist between managers who want to sell stock at the fully stated prices, and volunteers and customers who often try to reduce prices. While acting charitably to customers and volunteers can be traced to the managers in the completed study, no pricing tensions were reported; which may be due to Empower Scotland typically offering items at lower prices compared to the larger, more mainstream charities. Parsons and Broadbridge (2004) exposed charity shop managers' predominantly pessimistic reactions to the effects of professionalisation, e.g. pricing and stock presentation alterations, the introduction of targets and the shift towards standardisation. Contrastingly, my research found high managerial support for professionalisation and the guidance that it has brought.

On the other hand, Parsons and Broadbridge (2005) provide largely positive evidence from charity shop managers to support the introduction of careers in the charity retail sector in terms of achieving self-fulfilment and job satisfaction; findings that can be mapped on to the managers in the completed project. The pessimistic and optimistic attitudes of charity shop managers are further evident in Parsons and Broadbridge's (2006) study, which identified that negative job characteristics lead to low satisfaction levels, e.g. working conditions, pay and occupational status; whereas, the analysis of communication revealed that charity shop managers optimistically view their relationships with volunteers, the assistance they provide to the parent charity, and the dynamic, challenging nature of their job. While these communication findings are all applicable to the managers in the completed

research, negative job characteristics are only evident in relation to working conditions insofar as the Manager expresses concern over the standard of the shop.

2.2 Charity Shop Volunteers

Parsons' (2006) qualitative study is a significant start in addressing the poverty of academic research into the lived experiences of charity shop volunteers. The narrative accounts from the charity shop volunteers in her study uniquely uncover the dedicating and empowering nature of volunteering; which noticeably extends to the volunteers in the completed project. Parsons (2006) believes that charity shops currently symbolise both domestic spaces and traditional workplaces, but warns against the over-dominance of Government policy and management activities, fearing that these will destroy the tenderness of charity shops as domestic arenas; something of which is clearly articulated by one volunteer (Emily) in my completed study. Parsons (2006) found that volunteers interpreted their charitable roles as assisting fellow volunteers and customers, rather than the recipients of the charity; whereas the completed research located the reverse finding. This discrepancy may exist due to the volunteers in my research having a stronger association between how their charitable roles directly help service users, than the volunteers in Parsons' (2006) study.

3. Research Design

3.1 Participation Inclusion Criteria

Participants must: -

- Be age eighteen or over
- Currently be a volunteer or paid worker at the selected branch of Empower Scotland
- Have been a volunteer or paid worker for at least eight months at this branch of Empower Scotland

3.2 Recruiting Participants

As an existing volunteer at an Empower Scotland charity shop in Eastern Scotland, I recruited participants from this same branch. Volunteers and paid workers, who satisfied the research criteria and agreed to participate, were issued with an information sheet, had the opportunity to ask questions and were issued with an informed consent form. A total of six participants were recruited: two paid workers and four volunteers.

3.3 Foundations of Social Research

Ontology & Epistemology:

The application of a relativist ontological standpoint captured the multiple, overlapping conceptions of the reality of participants because each individual understands the social world in their own distinctive way (Crotty 1998; McNeill 2006). Moreover, a constructionist epistemology provided a valuable opportunity upon which to detail how participants meaningfully construct their daily lived experiences (Crotty 1998) working in this branch of Empower Scotland.

Theory:

The completed research stems from Husserl's theory of phenomenology (Ricoeur 1996), which centres on the examination of lived experience and consciousness. Malinowski's (1922) translation of ethnography was central to the research process because it focuses on describing human behaviour through the immersion within a particular culture. The mapping of Bourdieu's (1977) break from objectivism to this project uniquely emphasises the importance of being an Empower Scotland insider to enmesh the happenings within daily charity shop life; which problematises the notion of an outside observer. The hermeneutical circle seeks to discover unfamiliar knowledge (Plunkett et al. 2012) through the inter-predicative sharing of 'being in' the chosen branch of Empower Scotland from the shared positions between the researcher and participants within the same horizon of meaning (Heidegger 1996).

Methodology:

The ethnographic observations were recorded in short-hand as relevant interactions and events unfolded, and transcribed on the same day. This strategy aimed to capture the complex and elusive behaviour of participants (Malinowski 1922), in addition to bringing a greater degree of veracity to this research.

Methods:

Reflexivity was an important tool for utilisation in the completed research because I have existing, well-established relationships of rapport and trust with the volunteers and paid workers at this branch of Empower Scotland. Subsequently, reflexivity provided a fundamental platform upon which to validate and strengthen (Bourdieu 2004) my research upon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in an informal setting while the volunteers and paid workers were engaging in their everyday activities, to maintain a sense of familiarity during interaction. Semi-structured interview data was noted in rapid short-hand and also transcribed on the same day.

3.4 Data Analysis

A theoretical thematic analysis was applied because the completed research was influenced by my theoretical and analytical interests, and the data was coded for relatively specific research questions. Themes were identified at a latent/interpretative level because it transcends the semantic/surface level of data, in addition to closely aligning with the constructionist paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.5 Ethics

Ethical Procedures:

Before this research was conducted, ethical approval was obtained from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained as far as possible throughout this project, with participants being issued with pseudonyms to protect their identity. When interviewing a service user (Paul), his support worker was present and provided guidance where necessary. The participants were given the opportunity to request a word-processed copy of their individual interview transcript to either confirm that the paraphrased quotes were reliable or to raise any concerns, so that subsequent transcript modifications could be completed; however, no requests were initiated, which is likely to reflect the reciprocity and trust that exists between the researcher and each participant.

Ethical Limitations:

The utilisation of paraphrased quotation is an ethical issue insofar as these narratives are not verbatim. Nevertheless, this was the most appropriate method of data collection because of the continual mediation of the volunteers and paid workers between the front and back shops, no private office within the back shop in which to complete formal, recorded semi-structured interviews, and the spontaneous nature of when the interviews could be conducted due to limited spare time windows. The viewpoints expressed in the completed research are only reflective of the sample of participants involved, and are therefore not necessarily representative of all the paid workers and volunteers at Empower Scotland. Nonetheless, the narrative accounts that were obtained satisfy the purpose of this project as a small-scale qualitative case study.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Contextual Participant Information Table

<u>Pseudonym of Participant</u>	<u>Job Title</u>	<u>Approximate Age</u>	<u>Approximate Length of Service</u>
Stephen	Manager	Mid forties	One year
Maria	Deputy Manager	Mid sixties	Six and a half years
Emily	Volunteer	Late sixties	Eight to nine years
Audrey	Volunteer	Mid seventies	Fourteen years
Po	Volunteer	Early forties	Ten months
Paul	Volunteer	Early thirties	Seven years

4.2 Internal Issues

Leadership & Accountability:

In discussing whether Maria feels valued for her job role at Empower Scotland, she reported feeling recognised as being someone who will offer guidance to others:

“I always get asked for advice. It’s nice to know people respect what you say and your views”.

An unexpected finding was Audrey’s argument against volunteers being given more recognition from stakeholders, by emphasising that this is not needed if good organisation is in place within the shop:

“If the shop is well run, it’s not necessary. We don’t need the chain of command from Head Office”.

This suggests that any issues surrounding the recognition of volunteers can be resolved within the shop, rather than receiving assistance from Head Office; thus reducing the need for leadership from and accountability to Head Office.

Financial Management & Strategic Planning:

In exploring participants' views concerning the importance of integration and involvement in the community through representing Empower Scotland, all responses were positive. Surprisingly, Maria's response was positioned around the specific organisational example of shop hour changes, rather than focusing on community integration and involvement at an individual level:

“We are now open on Sundays...from March until September... Although we are open for more restricted hours on Sundays...we sometimes raise more money on Sundays than on weekdays”.

This visibly justifies the decision of the charity to extend the opening hours of the Coveburgh branch because the additional funds that are raised on Sundays are extremely useful; particularly when the money that is raised exceeds daily takings between Monday and Saturday. Furthermore, the sub-theme of the ‘pre-professionalisation and post-professionalisation distinction’ locates an illustrative argument from Audrey that challenges the high expenditure of paid workers in the charity sector since professionalisation:

“Our Chief Executive...earns £80,000 a year. Think how many tops we would have to sell at £2.95 to raise that money”.

This implies that such salaries are disproportionate in the voluntary sector and counteract the traditional notion of a charitable organisation by reducing the funds that are raised for service users.

As a sub-theme, ‘targets and rules’ uncovers concerns surrounding the suitability of these phenomena in the charity sector. In particular, Audrey stressed that the unpredictable nature of the stock means that targets are needless and problematic in the charity shop context:

“How can we have targets?... We have no control over what is in the shop... We might have a target to sell ten jumpers, but we might have ten pairs of trousers available for selling instead”.

Similarly, Emily commented that targets place too much expectation on paid workers and volunteers:

“I think targets are off-putting. Pressures are too high for volunteers and paid workers”.

The completed research extends Parsons and Broadbridge’s (2004) study because it is the volunteers, rather than the charity shop managers, who challenge the introduction of targets.

Performance Improvement:

The theme of ‘professionalisation’ contains Audrey’s positive outlook on this concept, alongside her recommendation that professionalisation needs to become more rigorous through the increased supervision of staff:

“Professionalisation is not a problem. Instead it depends on the quality of the staff... Higher management should monitor more to know what is going on”.

As a sub-theme, ‘shop efficiency’ found that all participants agreed on the completion of shop improvements to enhance their working conditions. The small size of the shop premises was raised as a key issue by half of the participant sample, with Emily identifying and suggesting that:

“The kitchen facilities are extremely cramped. We should have bigger premises and more storage. Laminate flooring is also needed”.

Emily is emphasising the importance of practicality and functionality within the shop, with larger premises indicating more efficient shop operation and stock to sell. However, the potential decision to re-locate to larger premises would have to be offset against increased shop running costs.

Evaluation & Impact Assessment:

As the Manager, Stephen critically evaluates the multiple factors that can affect the amount of funds that are raised in the shop on a weekly basis:

“It depends on what you get from donations, how stock is presented, bad weather, students leaving, and many more contributing factors”.

Additionally, the theme of ‘professionalisation’ reveals that all participants support this concept, except Emily who provides a useful critical evaluation and impact assessment of this internal issue:

“I think it’ll either make or break it... It’ll be awful if the charity got so bogged down in bureaucracy that they lose sight of the human aspect of volunteering... However, professionalisation could make ‘Empower Scotland’ with more people keen to choose future careers in the charity sector... There needs to be a degree of flexibility with professionalisation”.

Emily’s justification for how professionalisation could ‘break’ Empower Scotland reinforces Parsons’ (2006) prediction that professionalisation is likely to further challenge charity shops as providing domestic arenas. On the other hand, Emily’s positive appraisal of the long-term effects of professionalisation on Empower Scotland extends the managerial support for the introduction of careers in the charity retail sector in Parsons and Broadbridge’s (2005) study, by providing parallel insights from the perspective of a volunteer.

4.3 Interaction with the Environment

Co-operation, Collaboration & Competition with other Voluntary Organisations:

‘Recognition’ as another theme locates expansive potential in how Empower Scotland interacts with the environment by co-operating, collaborating and competing with other voluntary organisations. Stephen and Po, respectively, support an increasingly professional approach through brand reinforcement at Empower Scotland that will reflect those that are evident in the larger and more widely known charities:

“It can only get better and increase to mirror-image the mainstream charities... The new logo and slogan is telling exactly what we are about”.

“‘Cancer Research’ has its brand name and logo on pens and badges, and ‘Save The Children’ has its own name and logo on wrist wraps. I think ‘Empower Scotland’ should have its brand name and logo on pens, cards, diaries, rubbers, magnets and badges... These small items further promote awareness and advertise the charity”.

When asking participants whether they think that the number of volunteers has increased, remained steady or decreased since they started working at Empower Scotland, there was clear contradiction across data items: half the sample responded that they thought the number had declined; two participants focused on its stable nature; and one volunteer reported a recent increase. This contradiction in perception across participants may be partially explained by sample variation in the length of service at Empower Scotland. Maria justified her view on the decline of volunteers:

“This is probably due to more charity shops opening in Coveburgh, so people like to have a change and choose where they volunteer”.

This indicates that an increase in charity shops in Coveburgh places competing pressures upon individuals regarding which charity shop they decide to volunteer at; a view that was also shared by Emily. The broader implication of this narrative is that charity shops will feel a greater strain in the completion of tasks because volunteers act as a valuable resource to the daily operation of these shops.

4.4 Issues of Volunteering & Volunteer Involvement

Motivation & Rewards:

The three themes of ‘personal affiliation with Empower Scotland’, ‘personal benefits of working at Empower Scotland’ and ‘individual identity’ elicit many positive responses that link to motivation and rewards. As a service user, such responses were particularly evident in Paul’s narratives:

“It’s nice that I can contribute something to the charity and it helps me. I find it a friendly place and something to occupy my life with... Volunteering is something I can tell people about... I certainly recommend it to people”.

Early on in Audrey's interview, she listed her personal benefits as being:

“A feeling of belonging to the community, doing something for the community, doing something for myself...voluntary work expresses me as a person. I enjoy it. It's a service to me as well as the charity”.

This plainly demonstrates that Audrey has a strong connection between her voluntary contribution at Empower Scotland and how this has impacted upon her lived experience of being a volunteer at community, individual and organisational levels. Similarly, Emily reflected upon the self-actualising nature of being an Empower Scotland volunteer:

“It's helped to fulfil me as a person and to appreciate people and the work that is being done for [service users]. It's given the opportunity to challenge my inner strengths and abilities and to do things I wouldn't have had the chance to do”.

The dissemination of such positive and inspiring first-hand narratives may be beneficial towards increasing uptake in volunteering, to enable a larger cross-section of people to directly experience how volunteering can change their lives and those of service users.

Motivation & Rewards Recommendations:

Some participants offered recommendations for improvement regarding motivation and rewards. In alignment with the aim of this research of giving a 'voice' to volunteers in particular, Maria argued:

“They should do more for volunteers... They should have open days to fundraise and include volunteers in everything to make them feel that the job that they are doing is as important as those of paid workers”.

This recommendation is especially important because valuing and empowering volunteers by treating them equally to paid staff will motivate and reward volunteers for their fundraising efforts. The completed project further extends Parsons and Broadbridge's (2004) study into the lived experiences of charity shop managers because it alternatively found that the volunteers expressed pessimistic reactions to the shift towards standardisation, with Emily proposing that:

“A questionnaire should be issued to new volunteers when they begin, so that the skills that they have can be identified from day one by their fellow colleagues, and effectively utilised thereafter”.

This suggestion recognises the significance of embracing the uniqueness of volunteers, so that they benefit from feeling valued for the skills they have to offer, and the charity benefits from effective skill identification and application. Emily also recommended:

“I think targets should be realistic. If you fall short of meeting an unrealistically high target, you feel like you have failed; but if you go above a realistically set target, you feel success”.

This is a useful recommendation because it highlights that if targets continue to be utilised in the charity sector, they should be set at levels that are achievable - yet challenging - to ensure that volunteers and paid workers remain satisfied and motivated in their working roles.

Volunteer Management:

When discussing the level of importance that Stephen places upon the mediation and communication between volunteers and paid workers in contributing towards daily shop operation, he responded:

“Without the volunteers and paid staff, there would be no shop”.

Stephen is demonstrating that the collaborative process between paid staff and volunteers is vital by underlining that the daily operation of the charity shop depends on both parties, which reinforces the aim of the completed project. In this regard, managing volunteers efficiently is essential in maintaining positive manager-volunteer relationships. The sub-theme of ‘targets and rules’, coupled with the theme of ‘recognition’, identify room for improvement in volunteer management as an issue of volunteering and volunteer involvement, to overcome the devaluation experienced by volunteers. Audrey disclosed:

“Since the new manager has started, he has only rung me once to ask to help out in the shop... Also, there was one situation when the new manager told me: “there’s nothing else you can do” and that I could go home. But there is *always* something to do... I couldn’t help but think: ‘why did I bother?’ I felt rejected”.

Moreover, Emily claimed:

“I don’t think the ‘Staff Handbook’, ‘Staff Training’ and ‘Daily Duty Guidelines’ have positively impacted upon my lived experience of being a volunteer because at my age you can use your common sense and initiative”.

These narratives are compelling and reinforce the necessity for charity shop managers to tailor and be sensitive to volunteers’ needs and preferences, as far as possible.

5. Research Conclusions & Implications

Clearly, what it means to be a volunteer or paid worker at the selected branch of Empower Scotland is positioned within a hierarchy of interpretation that critically reflects multiple motivations and rewards, alongside recommendations for improvement and concerns surrounding financial management and strategic planning, performance improvement and volunteer management. Working at Empower Scotland impacts upon sense of individual identity by providing new opportunities and a contextual space through which to advance one's personal development. All participants placed high importance on community integration and involvement through representing Empower Scotland and linked their narratives to personal benefits; and in some cases, extended their responses to community and organisational levels. Participants argued both for and against volunteers and/or paid workers at Empower Scotland receiving more recognition from stakeholders; therefore determining whether there is an over-riding consensus across different charities in Britain in favour of or against more volunteer and paid staff recognition from stakeholders, would achieve greater clarity on this issue. Lastly, the professionalisation of the British charity retail sector has directly influenced the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers at the chosen branch of Empower Scotland, by enabling them either to embrace this concept in practice for the guidance that it provides, or critically evaluate both positive and negative outcomes of professionalisation.

The implications of these findings are for 'horizontal' policies to further emphasise the significance of giving time and money and for 'vertical' policies to consider the potential for professionalisation reaching a state of equilibrium. It would be beneficial for future research to generate more awareness of the demanding roles that volunteers and paid workers complete on a daily basis, in conjunction with ascertaining the reasons why people do not volunteer, to try and encourage the connection of more people to volunteering opportunities. Identifying and addressing the abilities of individual paid workers and volunteers, to enhance their lived experiences and enable voluntary organisations to obtain maximum benefit from the identification of these skills, would also be fruitful to advance current understandings.

Further to this, future research should review how targets and salaries are set and distributed within the charity sector, in addition to research being conducted within and between charities across Britain to allow internal and inter-charity comparisons to be made, in the pursuit of more conclusive and generalisable data on the lived realities of paid workers and volunteers. The findings crucially underscore the importance of valuing and empowering volunteers to free them from the possible experience of voicing comments of devaluation, for example “I felt rejected” [as narrated by Audrey]. On that note, we must place the lived experiences of volunteers and paid workers at the centre of policy decisions for generations to come [see Figure 1 below] because “public policy plays a critical role in helping create the conditions for volunteering to flourish” (Volunteer Scotland 2014, p. 1).

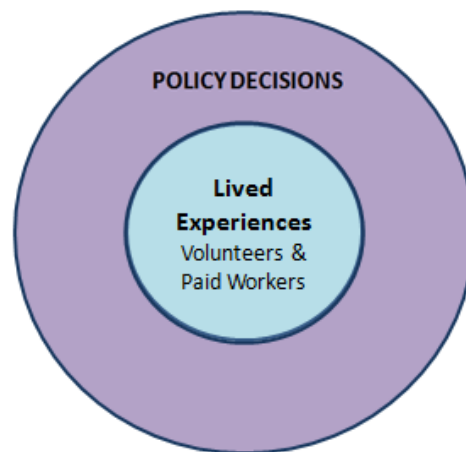


Figure 1: Placing the Lived Experiences of Volunteers and Paid Workers at the Centre of Policy Decisions

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