"In the County but not of the County": Volunteering and Popular Perceptions of University-Community Relationships

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Abstract

There is a view that human sociality is underpinned by co-operation and inter-dependence as well as competition; we exist in a system of expectations and obligations. From this perspective, volunteering is related to concepts of power and gift exchange. My research takes a critical, ethnographic approach to explore volunteering at one particular university in the North East of England and its relationships with communities and voluntary organisations in the region. I combine gift exchange with grounded theory to gain fresh perspectives about the complex nature of UK Higher Education volunteering, and to identify gaps that exist between narratives of volunteering 'on the ground' and the top-down rhetoric of institutions and policy makers. In this paper, I focus on some of the different voices and perceptions of university managers, volunteers, and community organisations, asking why this institution has been described as "in the County but not of the County"?

Paper

Research and Context[1]

Epistemological and methodological challenges to more traditional anthropological perspectives have increased in recent years, particularly with regard to social relationships and power. Critical and subjective perspectives question many aspects of what was previously taken for granted about the nature and purpose of social phenomena, and what it means to be human in a particular time, place and society. In parallel with these developments in anthropology, there have been concerns in recent years about a decline in social cohesion (Putnam 2000: 18) and many governments have supported volunteering and volunteer research as one way of encouraging civic behaviour among young people (Hustinx et al. 2010: 350; Smith et al. 2010: 65). Related to these concerns is a long-standing debate about the public role of Higher Education (Boyer 1990; Collini 2012), its changing relationships with government and industry (Goddard 2009), and the increasing emphasis placed on volunteering as a route to employability and skills (Furco 2010; Hartley et al. 2010).

It is within this context that I take up the lens of gift exchange to explore aspects of volunteering in contemporary UK Higher Education, using anthropological theories of the reciprocal gift (e.g. Mauss 1990; Godbout 2000; Osteen 2002; Komter 2005) to re-visit some of the value-laden and often paradoxical ways of understanding volunteering as optional and obligatory; involving autonomy as well as dependence and unequal power relations; and recognising both altruistic and self-interested motivations. In so doing, I have asked how experiences and expectations of volunteering are related to the effects of social norms or structural constraints on agency. All these questions are related to the view that human sociality is underpinned neither by competition on the one hand, nor by "disinterested kindness" (Carrithers 1992: 48) on the other, but by co-operation and inter-dependence; we exist in a system of expectations and obligations. From this perspective, volunteering as a force for social cohesion is related to concepts of both power and reciprocal gift exchange (Layton 1997: 98).

In my doctoral research I use a critical and ethnographic approach to explore different and often conflicting ideas about volunteers and volunteering within UK Higher Education, focusing on Durham University and its relationships with voluntary organizations in the region. I have spent time with university management, staff and students who volunteer independently or through university-

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organised volunteering programmes, and various external organisations. Using a combination of the gift and grounded theory (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 1990, 2006), with data collected through participant observation and semi-structured or biographical interviews, I wanted to capture people's experiences as far as possible in their own words, allowing them to focus on their current volunteer relationships, priorities and interests, and also to identify gaps that might exist between narratives of volunteering 'on the ground' and the top-down rhetoric of institutions and policy makers. I consider not only the individual but also the social realities and narratives of volunteering, and how multiple, contested and situated meanings of volunteering reflect different political, economic and social values. My research has encountered diverse and changing beliefs about what 'volunteering' is and is not, disputes about uses and motives, and the extent to which different types of volunteering are actually voluntary, for both students and staff. As one student told me recently:

> Everyone wants volunteering to mean the same thing, but it just doesn't *[Student volunteer organiser]*

My findings suggest that Durham University seeks to represent staff and student volunteering as the 'natural' thing to do, a route to employability and personal development. Whilst most people I spoke with emphasised the importance of giving time and helping others for no financial reward, it is increasingly accepted that volunteering benefits both giver and receiver, and that self-interest is compatible with 'doing the right thing'. However, there are concerns that focusing on volunteering to get a job, as part of the curriculum, to meet targets, or to improve the University's image, has a potentially negative impact on activities and organisations that do not fit dominant discourses or the needs of volunteers. University volunteering is described in terms of bridge building, or addressing perceptions of elitism and exclusivity, but the University is also described as distant, privileged and separate from the region in which its staff and students live and work.

It is this last point that I address in the remainder of this paper, which is based on one particular chapter of my thesis, although due to constraints of time and space only material on student volunteering is included here. At first glance, the focus of that chapter – and this paper – is less about gift exchange and more about the unequal and sometimes difficult relationships between a wealthy institution and organisations in a relatively deprived area. However, Bourdieu (1977: 180) points out that the rich and influential acquire much of their power from the community in which they live, and on whom they rely for support. In return, they are obligated to show generosity, support the poor and disadvantaged, and take the lead in community organisation. In this vein, I touch upon: how volunteering fits into different popular and academic ideas about the public role of Higher Education; the sometimes problematic relationship between the University and the region in

which it is situated; and finally, how volunteering fits in to some of the expectations and stereotypes associated, fairly or not, with Durham University.

The Public Role of Higher Education

Universities have traditionally been associated with moral and civic goals but perhaps with a more abstract focus on relationships between academic work and a wider social good, rather than practical engagement with public needs and interests (Goddard 2009: 6; Furco 2010: 375-376). Increasingly, however, greater pressure is being placed on universities in relation to civic participation and public benefit. Not all UK universities emphasise citizenship and service in their core activities, choosing instead to focus on research, education and employability, but recent years have seen an increase in the support and funding of volunteering programmes (Annette 2010: 453).

UK initiatives have sought to bridge the gap between universities and the regions where they are located, fostering mutual respect and genuine partnership whilst embracing a social responsibility to help disadvantaged groups, often through outreach and volunteering (NCCPE 2010; Universities UK 2010). However, it has also been suggested that some universities continue to privilege instrumental motives and outcomes, regarding partnerships as an opportunity to further their own interests (Annette 2010: 459). Furthermore, the combination of teaching, research and service has been described in terms of "the myth and the reality of academic life" (Boyer 1990: 15), in which service runs a poor third in the competition for value and support, and where there is little integration of these three streams in the wider academic experience.

"In the County but not of the County"

In spite of the increasingly popular belief that "universities should aim 'to be of and not just in the community'" (Humphrey 2013: 103), some university managers I spoke with are acutely aware that their support of volunteering and community engagement comes as a surprise to many people because historically, Durham University has been seen very much as:

In the County but not of the County *[University manager; volunteer organiser]*

In the early days of university involvement with organised volunteering, as opposed to student-led initiatives, people often questioned its commitment and they still do:

There's a castle on the hill in Durham, isn't that where you should be? And seriously, that's what we had to live down *[University manager]*

A degree of tension is common whenever large numbers of students need to co-exist with the residents of a town or city. In spite of this, advocates of volunteering from the University and the local area agree that although there are still problems, the University is trying to improve relationships with its neighbours. This optimism is echoed by those who believe that volunteering creates a positive relationship, helping to offset the negative experiences that some local residents may have with loud or disruptive students. As one undergraduate volunteer said, it shows people that "we're not all hooligans" and makes the University visible in a different way, demonstrating the value of students and showing that they are not just a nuisance.

"An Ivory Tower Institution"

"It may sometimes be hard to imagine, but somehow students from affluent backgrounds and with limited experience engage successfully with people far less privileged than themselves" (Robinson and Hudson 2013: 190). This statement reflects popular stereotypes of both the University and the surrounding region, but also appears to overlook a number of points: that so-called elite universities do have local students; that not all students are wealthy; that not all volunteers are from privileged backgrounds; and finally that not all volunteer activities are necessarily for the benefit of disadvantaged individuals or groups. Durham is certainly reputed to have a very high proportion of students from a public school or wealthy background, but in a twist to the usual stereotype, a student volunteer from the University's Stockton Campus told me:

> I find it really difficult because I'm originally from Middlesbrough…my strong northern accent will be blaring out [but] as soon as I go, but I'm from Durham, even though I might be the most northern person you'll ever meet, they immediately think, you've got a lot of money, you're from a really privileged background, and I'm like, I'm from down the road from you [Undergraduate volunteer]

Influential institutions that are involved in social, educational or economic organisation are often considered to be distant and separate, and people may be unaware or sceptical of their wider contributions to everyday life; hence the common view of Durham University as:

An ivory tower institution [Local police officer]

That sense of distance stems at least partly from the tendency for university life to be very insular, and Durham's collegiate system offers a place of safety that some students may not always need or want to venture far away from. Popularly known as the 'Durham Bubble', this isolation is not just about location; it is also about perceptions of student privilege, and volunteering is often regarded as a useful way to pop that bubble. This opinion is shared by several local volunteer organisers that I spoke with, one of whom observed of student volunteers:

It does them no harm to actually see a bit of the real world *[Local volunteer coordinator]*

However, it is not just students to whom this stereotype can be applied. Another volunteer organiser who runs a day centre in Durham observed that:

> We were just laughing because we have a new student with us and she's from Dover, and people have been amazed...they've responded to Dover like it's the most exotic kind of place, ...'cos sometimes people here have lived in the little Durham bubble *[Volunteer manager, local organisation]*

Mutual Partnership or Noblesse Oblige?

Student volunteering can be regarded as a form of bridge building that fosters local relationships and addresses perceptions of elitism and exclusivity (Darwen and Rannard 2011: 183). And yet, the idea that "universities predominantly reflect and reinforce class and power" (Robinson and Hudson 2013: 189) offers a stark contrast to more egalitarian narratives of partnership and mutuality. Powerful institutions often emphasise the importance of being a good neighbour. However, arguments that Durham University has a responsibility to engage with the local area tend to be rooted in the obligations emerging from wealth as well as a desire to engage in a mutual relationship between equal partners, suggesting that there is a fine line between universities having a social responsibility, and acting out of more traditional, class-based ideas of patronage and power.

Higher Education institutions have been accused of supporting volunteering initiatives as nothing more than public relations exercises or noblesse oblige, suggesting that claims of participation mask a perpetuation of academic expertise and superiority (Hartley et al. 2010: 398). This argument may well underestimate the genuine intentions of many institutions and individuals, but a university's "elite status" is often reinforced by the very activities that are meant to build bridges with other parts of society, through a display of wealth, facilities and resources (Williams and Cochrane 2013: 75). Whilst not denying the potential impact of such activities, this is nevertheless an illustration that the relationships universities such as Durham have with other groups and organisations are not necessarily those of mutual or equal partners.

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