

Challenging narratives : the importance of informal volunteering

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Themed Panel Session:**Challenging Narratives: towards an understanding of the history of volunteering****Chair: Nicholas Deakin, University of Birmingham**

The history of volunteering is a subject of increasing academic focus with organisations such as the Voluntary Action History Society flourishing in recent years. But do we artificially limit the debate to narrow conceptualisations of what is volunteering, when it has taken place, and what its role in society has been? We must constantly strive to challenge the orthodoxies which surround voluntary action in order to expand the creativity of volunteering practice in the future.

This panel session will consist of three short work-in-progress papers by new career researchers.

1. Georgina Brewis of the Institute for Volunteering Research and the Institute of Education, university of London
2. Anjelica Finnegan of the University of Southampton
3. Jon Dean of the University of Kent

These will be followed by a discussion with the panel members, chair and attendees to focus on how the history of volunteering and the voluntary sector can be better understood. By offering historical perspectives on theoretical and empirical issues we hope to stimulate a debate that encourages us to look beyond volunteering in relation to recent UK governmental agendas, and instead as a phenomenon situated in relation to economic, social, and cultural change. By disseminating academic work on the history of voluntary action to social policy researchers and practitioners we can hope to encourage new avenues of exploration,

Jon Dean, University of Kent**The Importance of Informal Volunteering**

***Informal volunteering:** Giving unpaid help as an individual, for example to friends, relatives or neighbours. Not counted as volunteering for the purposes of this study.*

From Appendix C: Glossary, *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, 2007.

This working paper seeks to highlight two issues. Firstly, that the research community often ignores the importance of informal volunteering, and secondly that to do so causes most harm to working-class communities.

The everyday behaviours of informal volunteering, which exist outside of the formal and organised activities of charities, have long played a role in the history and development of community life. But they are often sidelined in studies of voluntary action. This may be because informal volunteering

cannot produce a cohesive *narrative* as formalised volunteering can, of campaigning and demonstrations, of innovation, and of institutional organisation.

There is little narrative to be gleaned from researching the history of mowing a neighbour's garden, or helping a stranger carry goods, except perhaps anecdotally through the sociology of work and divisions of labour.¹ Conceptualised in this way, to write the history of volunteering would be akin to writing the history of giving, or smiling, or holding, or any other basic human behaviour that most of us do most days. However, these behaviours play a role in more people's lives than formal volunteering does. From the surveys that do study informal volunteering, a higher proportion of the population partake in it than formal voluntary activity, 35% per month against 26% per month in 2008/09. Why then do people partake in informal volunteering, and to whom is it important? And by sidelining informal volunteering, are we sidelining those who take part in it?

Classed Impacts

During my PhD research, I have conducted substantial qualitative interviews with workers in the voluntary and statutory sectors in a deprived industrial area in the West Midlands called Eastwood. I asked many interviewees a simple hypothetical question – is mowing your elderly neighbour's lawn 'volunteering'? Some interviewees insisted this was volunteering and was the exact type of behaviour they were trying to encourage, others were quick to stress that they did not think this was volunteering, and whilst a good endeavour, it was not the job of volunteer brokerage agencies to encourage it.

Several interviewees with first-hand knowledge of volunteering statistics, felt that they prevent Eastwood from understanding the true picture of the levels of volunteering in the area, due to the overly formalised nature of the question, and the types of voluntary activity that occur in a poorer area. NI6 is measured by asking the question, 'Do you participate in regular formal volunteering?' To unpack this statement, 'regular' means volunteering once a month and 'formal' means volunteering with an established charity or organisation. In the interviews, respondents indicated this acts against a borough such as Eastwood where neighbourliness and helping a friend are much more common than volunteering as a trustee, or organising larger community events, due to low levels of social capital.

I think it acts against areas like us. It's a middle class idea, formal volunteering, and it's one for people like me – 'would you like to volunteer for a management committee, or be a mentor, or a school governor?' It's coming from a place of authority, and a lot of people in Eastwood don't have those networks and actually if they did they wouldn't choose to volunteer in those ways. They'd much rather do volunteering for their neighbour... If the question was 'do you, once a month, do something to help someone in your community?' that would be more meaningful to us, and I think lots of people do that. (Graeme, Council Strategist)

The practical implications of this were further developed in a statement from Helen, who was tasked by the local Council to improve volunteering in the area and deliver on NI6.

¹ See Pahl, Bellah

If I was filling out a form in Eastwood, I wouldn't be bothered to go through the mental loops of whether it was regular enough and whether it was formal enough, so I'd just tick 'No I don't', because it's about how you see yourself. If I said, 'do you volunteer?', and gave some for instances, I think you'd get a much truer reflection of volunteering in all its diversity, than if you ask the formal regulated question in NI6. (Helen, Volunteering Policy Officer)

It was felt local people would respond much better to the term neighbourliness than volunteering, so this became the approach to 'selling' volunteering in the area, particularly to older residents, and framing volunteering as 'work experience' for younger people, both out of necessity and the image of volunteering in younger people's minds.

Conclusion

As a response to Darwinian thinking, Petr Kropotkin challenged the idea of survival of the fittest. He witnessed little struggle for existence amongst animals *of the same species*, which he felt had been over played by evolutionists. Kropotkin labelled this sociability the vitally important 'progressive element' of evolution, where human beings developed pleasure, and it was pleasurable to help people, as the 'social instinct in animals for the well-being of the species' had been previously under-rated.²

Informal volunteering is a natural and biological phenomenon, and often the voluntary activity which matters more to people in working-class communities. These informal social bonds often provide more support than a middle-class ideal of bridging social capital (Putnam), which often does not exist in such communities.³ Forrest and Kearns (2001) claim that 'close family, mutual aid and voluntarism are often strong features of poor areas' and help people 'cope with poverty, unemployment and wider processes of social exclusion'.⁴ For researchers interested in volunteering, its informality offers a vibrant and egalitarian field of study.

² Kropotkin, 1914, i-ii

³ MacDonald 2005

⁴ Forrest and Kearns, 2001, p2141