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# **A Market to Sell Experience: How Neo-liberal Volunteering Policies Trade on the Pressures of being Young**

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## **Abstract**

Whether volunteers should be motivated to give their time for altruistic or instrumental reasons is a continuing issue. This article presents evidence from a qualitative study exploring how the behaviours of youth volunteering recruiters are affected as a result of young people's motivations. It is shown that these brokerage workers feel that educational institutions, central government, and other social structures pressure young people to be increasingly instrumental in their volunteering. Recruiters do not challenge these instrumental motivations; instead, employability and easing the transition to work form a large part of 'selling' volunteering, as young people trade time for experience. It is concluded that these findings fit into a wider theoretical narrative about the individualisation of society, and that the marketised nature of giving one's time will increasingly create problems for voluntary organisations and communities.

## **Keywords**

individualisation; instrumental motivations; work experience; youth volunteering

## **Introduction**

The academic literature on volunteering is dominated by motivations. The question of what motivates someone to give their time for free is a continually fascinating one for

researchers across disciplines because 'the most obvious way to explain why people volunteer is to ask them their reasons for doing so' (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 54). For this reason, these findings are of upmost interest to the voluntary sector and charity practitioners; if it is possible to understand what best encourages people to volunteer, understanding those causes can be vital to increasing recruitment and in turn running a successful charity, social enterprise, or voluntary organisation. This article does not seek to replicate the substantial academic work already completed on volunteer motivations (see, for example, Clary et al, 1996; Anderson and Moore, 1978; Nichols, 2012; Gage III and Thapa, 2012; Sherer, 2004; Boz and Palaz, 2007; Musick and Wilson, 2008: 54-80, and many others). Instead, by focusing on how writers have conceptualised the changing nature of youth volunteering, and demonstrating through empirical, qualitative evidence how these developments have necessitated certain dynamics in the behaviour of youth volunteering brokerage workers and policy-makers, this article seeks to highlight the dangers of the increasingly instrumental nature of motivations within youth volunteering.

To fulfil these aims, firstly this article discusses how social theorists such as Bauman (2001; 2007), Sennett (1998; 2012), and Kropotkin (1914) have conceptualised the individualisation of society (and its consequences), and then examines how these themes have been applied within the study of volunteering. It then moves on to highlight how young people in particular are motivated to volunteer in order to develop their careers and learn new skills. This is supplemented by a discussion of the efficacy of 'work experience' programmes for young people, of which, this article argues, volunteering is increasingly one. After setting out the methodological approach undertaken by the researcher, the data generated from interviews and the fieldwork is presented. This explores the social factors and policy practices which interviewees believe are necessitating increasingly instrumental motivations for young volunteers, focusing both on the social pressures they face and that brokerage workers feel the need to commodify volunteering as a product to be sold. The article concludes by returning to the theoretical literature and offering a critique of the direction and delivery of volunteering policy and cautions against models of volunteering which may encourage instrumental motivations as these may damage community infrastructures.

### **Individualisation and the changing nature of volunteering**

The sociological literature on individualism has often seen the growth and extension of capitalism into more aspects of everyday life as part of the never-sated appetite of the market (Bauman, 2001). In *The Corrosion of Character* (1998: 145), Sennett sees strength in the IBM workers he interviews, because 'they took responsibility for their failures and insufficiencies together', understanding that responsibility was a communal and inter-dependent effort, not merely a personal and isolated game of reward and blame. Sennett sees this as the problem of character in modern capitalism: '[t]here is history, but no shared narrative of difficulty, and no shared fate' (p.147). The growth of individualism, as coined by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1862), which strengthened the bonds of trust in

kinship at the expense of bridging with strangers, has led to fractured communities, of isolated persons and families, *Gemeinschaft* replaced by *Gesellschaft*.

This dependence on others for survival was witnessed by Kropotkin (1914) among the volunteers of the miners' associations of the Rhonda Valley which rescued those trapped underground. Kropotkin asked why these men of impoverished rural communities, are more likely to volunteer to come to the aid of others than those who witness crime and distress in big cities. The answer he sees is in inherited instincts and education of these communities (Kropotkin, 1914: 275-8), akin to that developed by the animal communities he observed in the wild. While they do volunteer in a formalised and organised society, they do it because of the generations of human psychology and emotional involvement they have to those who they are saving, evidenced by the accounts given by the volunteers as to why they choose to risk their lives for others, rather than because they have been recruited to volunteer or to gain a skill or to boost their CV.

Sennett (1998: 148) sees this individualism, the flexible capitalism which emerged as part of the neo-liberal agenda, as a prime foundation for societies 'which provide human beings no deep reasons to care about one another', eliminating their legitimacy. As the 'we' of community has turned from a source of mutual respect, responsibility and pro-active behaviour, into a darker, defensive and protectionist reaction (Sennett, 1998: 137-8; see also Lawler, 2008: 122-5; Lawler, 2002), volunteering and altruism have increasingly followed the market's lead. Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) write that the marketisation of charitable acts, philanthropy and the drive for social betterment have come to be defined as elements which operate in the service of consumption, which in turn breeds more consumption. The volunteering industry, and the volunteering policies they enact, as governments seek to 'hyper-actively' (Kendall, 2005) utilise volunteering for state purposes (Sheard, 1995), are trapped and forced to operate within these boundaries; young people are encouraged to *consume* volunteering as without it, they cannot move up or move on.

A natural consequence of this however it that volunteers are often accused of having highly individualistic orientations, from giving their time as an act of hedonism (Lähteenmaa, 1999) to wanting to develop their CV (Brooks, 2007). It is also cautioned that many lack the degree of commitment that voluntary organisations need (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011: 5; Wollebæk and Selle, 2003; Hustinx, 2005):

Both in the practical field of voluntary work, as well as in the volunteerism literature, concerns have every now and then been expressed about volunteer motivation and commitment shifting towards personal interests, gain, and lack of commitment. (Yeung, 2004: 42)

Hustinx (2001) writes of a spectrum of volunteering; from the *classical*, identified by traditional values of culture and community, the unconditional commitment of volunteers who are motivated by altruistic instincts, juxtaposed with the *new*, identified by its individualisation, irregular and conditional commitment, and the reciprocal benefits felt by

both the volunteer and the recipients of assistance. While these two categorisations present a dichotomy, it should be argued that the majority of present-day volunteering should more accurately be portrayed as a blend of classical and new characteristics, dependant on the individual and certain context specificities.

However it is generally acknowledged that there has been a shift from the 'classical' to the 'new' style of volunteering. Hustinx and Lammertyn (2000) write that the traditional discourse about volunteering as a purely altruistic and self-sacrificial activity has become an 'unrealistic and old-fashioned ideal'. It may be that we must conceive purely classical volunteering as unattainable, where even the archetypal altruistic volunteer, such as an older woman working in a charity shop, is giving her time in order to make friends or keep active in her retirement (see Sanchez Flores, 2009). Of significant importance for this article, it is now understood that this set of motivations remains dominant among the voluntary activities of young people (Hustinx, 2001).

It has been suggested that in order to adapt to the 'new' volunteerism, the answer may lie in adapting the functional practices of organisations which recruit and use volunteers, to 'better accommodate not only volunteers' individualised conditions and constraints...but also their changing preferences and needs' (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011: 10). The authors continue:

The goal is no longer to keep volunteers tied to the organisation, but rather to realise an optimal adjustment between, on the one hand, volunteers' individual possibilities and desires and, on the other hand, clearly delineated projects and tasks. Organisations and volunteers increasingly use an exchange model: exact inputs and returns are discussed and negotiated in great detail. Volunteers know what they are expected to do, what they can expect from the organisation and what they will get back in return for their efforts. (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011: 10-1)

The issue with a wider proliferation of such transactional volunteering is that the general public's views on 'what counts as volunteering' remains relatively strict. While the academic literature defines volunteering as an activity which is undertaken of one's own free-will, receives no financial reward, is of benefit to others, and requires some organisation and structure (Rochester et al, 2010), Cnaan et al (1996) found that the public are more likely to consider an activity as volunteering the more cost there is to the participant (for example, the more someone has to go out of their way to contribute, or the more difficult the project is).

Hustinx and Meijs (2011) calculate that this may shift as more 'new' volunteers give their time in opportunities which are, for example, either implicitly or explicitly obligatory. As society adapts to this more marketised form of altruism (Nickel and Eikenberry, 2009), we may reason that in future volunteering 'will be rewarded more (although not necessarily financially) and to some extent will become obligatory' (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011: 17). This

argument over obligatory or compulsory volunteering is a continuing and heated one. In Britain, while the governing Conservative Party argue that compulsory volunteering 'is a contradiction in terms and an abuse of government power' (Conservatives, 2008: 31), programmes within the coalition government's big society agenda have recognised the need for reward. Yet as shown below, while not formally compulsory, volunteering increasingly can be understood as a non-negotiable necessity in young people's biographies.

### **Young people, volunteering, and employability**

Since the 1990s, volunteering in Britain has entered the political mainstream. Under Prime Ministers Major, Blair, Brown, and now Cameron, volunteering emerged as a significant area of government policy (Etherington, 1996; Kendall, 2005). Some authors have argued that this occurred so that governments could develop another tool with which to tackle social problems, such as over-extended welfare and dependency (Warburton and Smith, 2003). More commonly though, policies encouraging young people to volunteer often see the part it can play in transitions to work and adulthood, because there are a number of opportunities to encourage people to volunteer during life transitions (Hill and Russell, 2009). This is because volunteering is seen as highly flexible, in terms of its level of commitment, and relatively easy to access, and leave once undertaken. It is a highly prevalent assertion that volunteering is a way of developing skills and, as an effect of this, increasing employability (Hardill et al, 2007). Employers prefer volunteers to non-volunteers (Hannah, 2010; NYA, 2007), not only because of the practical and soft skills they have developed, but because 'volunteering involves a cost to the volunteer it constitutes a credible sign that says, "You can believe I'm a good person because I volunteer"' (Bekkers and Bowman, 2009: 894), reasserting the message of Cnaan et al (1996). The belief among young people that volunteering will assist them in gaining employment is high. In one Canadian study, 55 percent of young people said improving their job opportunities is a reason why they volunteer, compared to only 16 percent of older people (Schugurensky et al, 2005: 3). Young people clearly see, or have been persuaded to see, volunteering as a vital step into employment.

Demonstrating this, the *Helping Out* survey of volunteering in England (Low et al, 2007) provided data focusing on young people's motivations to give their time. Responses to questions enquiring about an individual's motivation to volunteer fell into 19 categories, including personal importance, time to spare, and religious belief. For most of the responses there was no significant discrepancy based on the variable of age of the respondent. However, there were two responses for which one age category produced a dramatically statistically different response: those who were motivated to volunteer in order 'to learn new skills', or 'to help me get on in my career'.

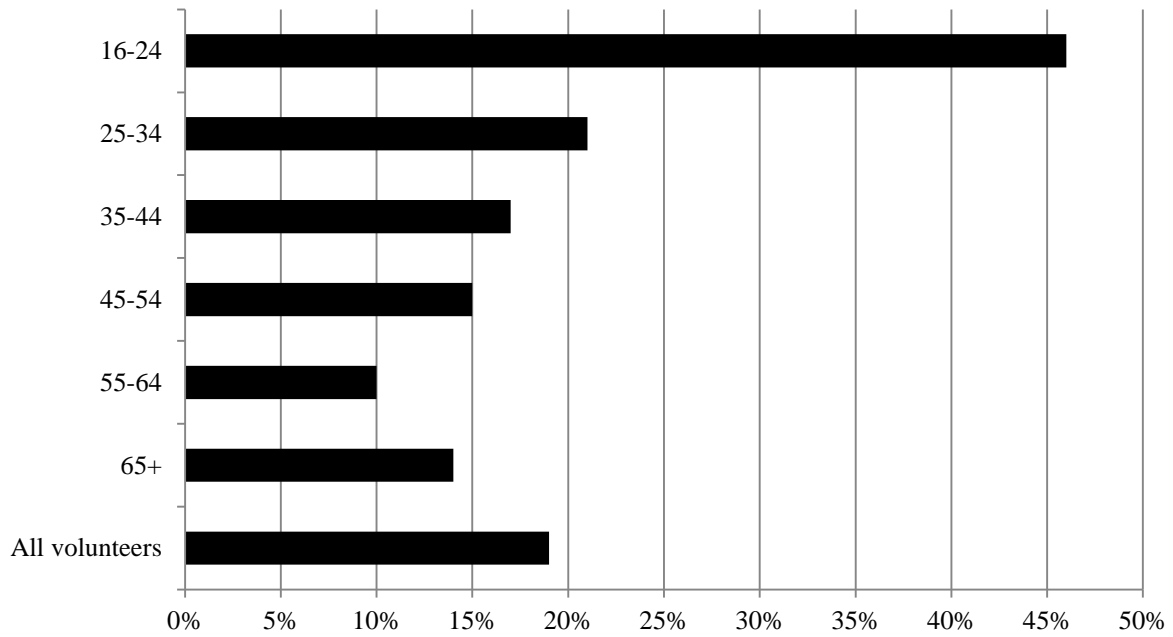


Figure 1: Motivated to volunteer to learn new skills, by age-range. Adapted from Low et al (2007: 35).

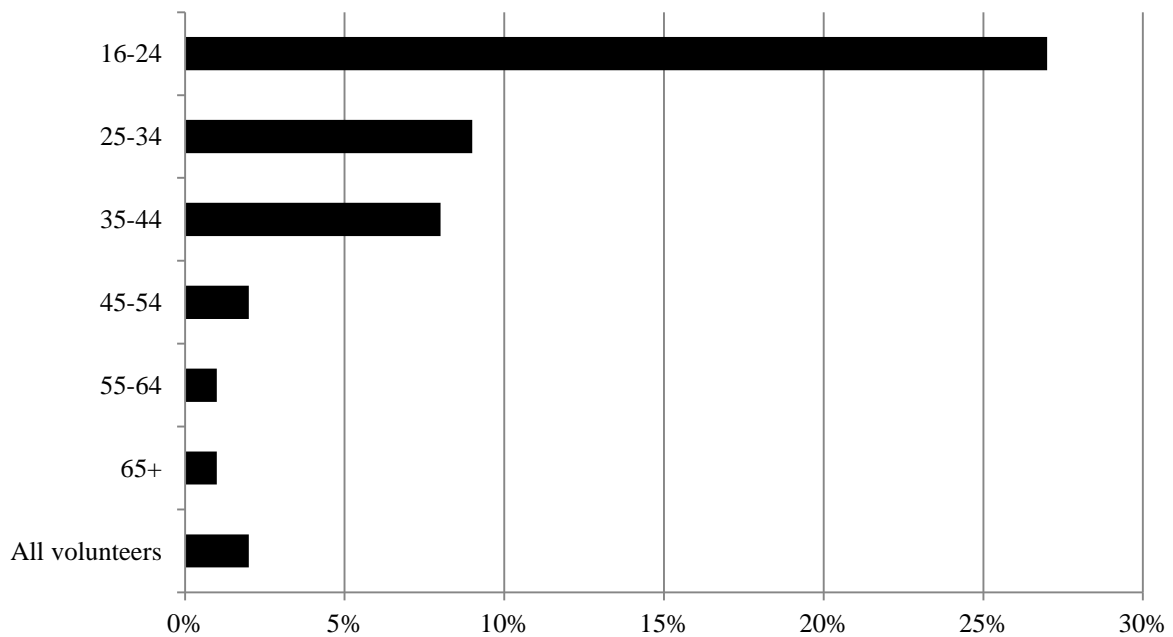


Figure 2: Motivated to volunteer to help me get on in my career. Adapted from Low et al (2007: 35).

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that young people aged 16-24 are significantly more likely to be motivated to volunteer for instrumental reasons than individuals in other age ranges. This is not to say that younger people are not motivated by altruistic reasons as well, but that

issues of employability are uppermost in their minds; much higher than, predictably, the considerations and motivations of older people.

A further exploration of this issue is found in Handy et al (2010), who used survey data from 12 countries to examine the relationship between motivations to volunteer and its impact on young people's participation in volunteering. The authors focused on three broad but separate and constructive motivations – altruism (wanting to give), *résumé* (wanting to get), and social (wanting to meet). 'Across all countries, students express the strongest support for altruistic and value-driven reasons for volunteering' (Handy et al, 2010: 509). Instrumental reasons were the second most prominent, with social motivations third. But while these trends were common among the 12 countries, the strength of these motivations differed significantly, with students in the USA, Canada and England giving most overall prevalence to *résumé* building, with least importance attached to *résumé*-building in South Korea.

Most interestingly, and perhaps most worryingly, the authors found that young people with the desire to volunteer principally in order to build a *résumé* did not have a higher rate of participation in volunteering; in fact these students volunteer less, with a lower intensity and regularity. Therefore it can be argued that if the volunteering industry, and government policy, is designed to actively encourage young people to move into volunteering as a way of gaining skills and experience, then while for many young people this will prove a fruitful addition to their transitions, overall across society, it is not hard to hypothesise a decline in youth volunteering and voluntary commitments. It seems young people 'are more likely to see volunteer work as a substitute for paid work, something they can do to occupy their time usefully and gain skills *until they get a job*' (Musick and Wilson, 2008: 61 [emphasis added]). Qualitative data is presented below which provides evidence that such trends are occurring in youth volunteering, as young people are managed into a culture of 'mass credentialism' (Reay, 2006).

However, while volunteering generates enormous support in employability discourses, some studies have shown that the effects of volunteering and work experience programmes may not always be positive. Ryan (2001) argued that while European countries such as the United Kingdom and France invest a large amount of legislative time and policy concern with solving the acute problems of the youth labour market, their societies, particularly their civil societies, lacked the grander drive to actually solve the problems they were facing. This he compared to countries such as Japan, where government involvement in the school-to-work transition (Coles, 1995: 29-56) was less explicit, but providing young people with a smooth and solid transition into work was seen as a *social* problem rather than a political one.

Ryan also ventured the notion of policy damage – interventions which fail the simplest test of first do no harm. He writes:

Some programs make participants worse off during participation, while doing nothing for their labour market prospects... [P]rograms –



particularly those based upon work experience and training at the workplace – displace regular youth employment. (Ryan, 2001: 83)

Some practitioners working in this field agree. As Tanya de Grunwald, the founder of Graduate Fog, a UK student careers advisory service, stated '[u]npaid labour is not the solution to youth unemployment, it is a big part of the problem' (in Townsend and Malik, 2011). Ryan (2001: 83) continues:

[Youth training policies] may contribute to high youth inactivity in the United Kingdom and Sweden. The extension of workfare-type requirements to participate in poorly rewarded pseudo-employment in order to qualify for public income support breeds cynicism.

This cynicism was obvious in the 'enforced' volunteering studied by Warburton and Smith (2003), where, in order to continue receiving state benefits and educational credits, participants indicated they were less likely to engage and participate after such policies forced them to volunteer. One young person summed up this position, saying:

Why would I want to volunteer for anything else when I've been forced to do something...Like a lead balloon really. (Warburton and Smith, 2003: 781)

Enforced participation can hinder and prevent the development of significant facets of citizenship such as trust and cooperation (Brown et al, 2000). Yet whereas Warburton and Smith were focusing on the explicitly enforced volunteering, this study is instead concerned with the implicit normalisation of volunteering as an expected part of a wider credentialism. The evidence presented below aims to demonstrate that while volunteering may once have been a choice, now it is a requirement. Whereas once money was traded for labour, through volunteering institutions young people increasingly trade their labour for a new currency: experience.

## **Methods**

Youth volunteering in England is delivered through many different streams. Alongside direct recruitment for volunteers by charities, and volunteers approaching charities directly in order to participate, one such way is through volunteer brokerage. Brokerage agencies such as Volunteer Centres work as the middle-man in the volunteering relationship, recruiting both organisations and individuals, and working with both in order to match individuals up with suitable opportunities. Volunteer Centres have existed in many towns and communities for since the mid-twentieth century, with 344 currently in operation in England.

In order to explore how the increasingly instrumental motivations for volunteering were being shaped by and shaping youth volunteering brokerage agencies, 33 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in England between April 2010 and March 2011. Interviewees worked in volunteer brokerage organisations, such as Volunteer Centres, and in youth charities aimed at engaging young people with pro-social work. The sample also

included policy-makers and statutory sector officials, working for Local Authorities and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, who worked with brokerage agencies to develop local volunteering projects. The sample was selected through a snowballing technique, which identified key figures working in local volunteer brokerage institutions, and then enquiring who, given the nature of the questions asked during interview, the researcher should speak to next. The sample was considered adequate when interviewees suggested the names of previous interviewees, and the data became saturated. Interviews lasted between 40 to 180 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Ethnographic work was also conducted in both areas. This involved attending local volunteering events where young people gave their time, such as gardening at care homes, creating art installations, and recruiting other volunteers. Participant-observation at these events served not only to speak to young volunteers directly, but to legitimise and triangulate findings from interviews through examining the relationship between brokerage workers and volunteers close-up.

The names of all interviewees, organisations, and locations have all been anonymised.

## **Findings**

The findings from this study fall into two broad headings, presented below. Firstly, we can see how interviewees spoke of how structural issues in volunteering programme design and delivery were not working effectively, reinforcing the problems of instrumentally motivated volunteering, which contributed to fears about the adequacy of volunteering provision. Secondly, we hear how brokerage workers feel the young people they were working with were increasingly pressured into volunteering by schools, universities, and society in general.

### ***Structural issues: Job Centres, and organisation sustainability***

As interviews took place against the backdrop of a recession and high levels of unemployment, interviewees commented that the economic climate provided a 'hook' that they could use to encourage young people to participate locally. This was encouraged by central government, in the *Real Help for Communities* package (Cabinet Office, 2009), a £12m investment in the early stage of the recession to encourage the unemployed to use volunteering as a tool to develop skills and move back into work. The package of measures made little or no comment on the potential altruistic benefits of volunteering, instead concentrating solely on employment:

If we are to respond to the challenges of the current economic climate, it is vital that Government creates opportunities for people to get new skills. Volunteering plays an important role in enabling people to develop new skills and improve their employment prospects. (Cabinet Office, 2009: 16-7)

Interviewees were sure that there would be even more short-termism in participating in volunteering as a result. For instance, Anjay, an environmental charity worker who recruited young people to help in community gardening and landscape redesign projects, saw these

developments as a massive negative, a further move away from the more traditional altruistic notions of volunteering, and emblematic of the way in which volunteering was seen by government as a 'panacea' for society's problems (Sheard, 1995: 115). It was also noted that even a potential benefit or instrumental reason to volunteer, such as doing it to gain a skill to create a new route into employment, may not be enough to encourage young people who have had many setbacks in work or in life, to have the confidence to embrace volunteering. 'People who are unemployed are unlikely to do something for nothing,' said Lynette (Volunteer Centre Worker), who spent a great deal of her time locating volunteering placements for people referred by Job Centre Plus (JCP) staff. She said the attitude of potential volunteers was very negative and inward looking, asking 'what's the point in that, I'm not going to do something for someone else', even though the offer to them was a means to an ends, a specific training opportunity, that happened to be voluntary, an improvement on the offer from the Job Centre.

In her interview, Lynette was quietly angry about the inability of JCPs to get a grip on the potential impact of volunteering, and the rules governing volunteering whilst receiving benefits. A mythical '16-hour rule', had played havoc with getting the unemployed volunteering for years. Legislation used to exist in the UK which stated that individuals receiving Incapacity Benefit could only volunteer for 16 hours a week. The rule never applied to Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), but the myth holds that it does, confusing senior politicians and voluntary sector officials (see Bowgett, 2009). The current guidelines state that those on JSA only need to inform their JCP worker as to their volunteering, so it does not interfere with the time they spend searching for a job. However, the myth has continued, causing many in the voluntary sector to despair of JCPs, and JCP staff to side-line the possibilities of offering volunteering to unemployed young people.

With JCP staff still informing job seekers of the '16-hour rule', any government programme, as in *Real Help for Communities* where brokerage workers were meant to work directly with Job Centres, even volunteering for instrumental reason became a struggle. Anjay spoke of 'banging his head against a wall' trying to get through to JCP staff, aghast at the nonchalance of the system, continuing:

When we get Job Centres in they're like [dismissively] 'Oh, put on some volunteering'. And they don't think about what the wider benefits would be if the volunteering was properly planned. It shows how seriously it's taken. It's that example of how volunteering is used by different people.

The notion that volunteering is 'used by different people' through different means and to different ends echoes Brooks' (2007) argument that motivations to volunteer were rarely clear cut, and in fact could be complex, multi-directional and contradictory. The same is true of any moral argument one tries to make about what is ultimately a personal decision to participate. Interviewees were keen to stress that as long as the work was getting done, and people were being helped, it was not really their business, as Johnson and Erin here demonstrate:

Johnson (Council Officer): If people are going into volunteering activity to get something out of it, I don't think that's any less valuable than going into voluntary work because they want to give something back to society. I wouldn't make a value judgement about it.

Erin (Youth Volunteering Worker): They've had it drilled into them that they need a good CV, that they need a university place and that's absolutely fine because motivations to volunteer come in all different forms.

However, while people may not wish to make a value judgement, interviewees often saw an economic or human resource imperative for volunteering to be motivated by both philanthropic and instrumental reasons. Lynette (Volunteer Centre Worker) told how she had volunteered for a bereavement counselling charity, both because it was a passion of hers due to personal experience, and because she wanted her counselling qualification. Alongside her, many other people volunteered as trainee counsellors, but of her fellow volunteers she noticed that 'as soon as they got their qualification they disappeared'. She stated categorically to me that she chose to make no moral judgement about this, reasoning that they may well have used their new skills to help people in other ways. However, the charity was left unable to cope with the workload, and had to invest in training up a new set of volunteer counsellors at great expense.

Lynette's experience echoes the work of Abrahams (1996: 773-4) who found that many female volunteers in a rape crisis centre were volunteering because they were considering a career in counselling, who needed to keep a 'foot in the door' of an organisation which may eventually provide employment. Yet from a point of view which focuses on volunteer retention and management of a voluntary group, Lynette identified huge problems with sustainability. In her view volunteers were not better citizens or expressing higher values if their primary motivation for giving their time was instrumental or philanthropic in nature, but she did feel that by staying with the charity, and continuing to give her time after her qualification, she and others like her had shown a deeper responsibility to the charity: 'I felt I owed them for their contribution to my training'. Anjay (Environmental Charity worker) also started his career in environmental volunteering by giving time to the charity for which he now works: 'it was selfish thing. Yes, I wanted to help people, but I wasn't coming in to give my free time to help'.

### ***Selling volunteering: the pressure on young people to give their time***

When asked if instrumentality dominated the reasons for young people volunteering, Helen (Volunteering Policy Officer) expressed the view that in volunteering there is always a balance between helping others and developing personal skills, especially so amongst young people: 'I don't want to decry them. There will be lots of young people who have a strong faith or ethos or family values':

[Jon]: But if you need to volunteer to understand other people and to create social capital, does that mean something has been missed out along the way?

Helen: Well, we live when we live, and we live in a time where young people can spend a lot of time at school with their peers, and a lot of time at a screen, and a lot of this is life experience and not everything can be taught through school. So I think in this world where we are both global and isolated – we're connected all over the place though the internet – yet somehow immune from the ordinariness of living life on your street, one of the privileges of youth is that you can live in a bubble. But maybe volunteering helps, I think volunteering helps and has a huge place whether it's...[tails off] It's really hard being young, I think it must be terrible...

[Jon]: And volunteering can't really solve those problems?

Helen: No, not those deeper problems of big social change. We know everyone and we know no-one. Because there's so much pressure on young people to earn, if my son said 'I'm gonna' do some voluntary work' I would be so impressed I'd probably subsidize him.

Helen is here reinforcing the problem that young people increasingly have to cope with being pulled from several directions where they 'attempt to direct the content and complexity of their lives: at the same time, they are forced to adapt to the constantly changing demands of their environment (especially the labour market)' (du Bois Reymond, 1998: 63).

Schools have a large part to play in the work of volunteer brokerage agencies. While schools often do not provide adequate transition experiences for work (Mannion, 2005), volunteering has come to fill the role of a tool of adaptation. Although some might feel uncomfortable citing work-related motivations for volunteering, it has been argued that it is quite common for schools, colleges, and volunteer agencies to tout this as a specific reason for doing volunteer work (Musick and Wilson, 2008). This was in evidence during research, as the below quotes from interviewees indicate:

Chrissie (Volunteer Project Manager): Schools want their young people to have volunteering or community action on their CVs. We have a lot of kids from one of the grammar schools volunteer on one of our disability play schemes because they have kids who want to be doctors, and they know on their CV working with disabled children will look good...For us it doesn't matter why they do it in the first place, as long as they enjoy it and it becomes part of what they do.

Beatrice (Youth Volunteering Worker): In schools you could always go in and get a good bunch for numbers but you often found the students did it more for themselves, to get into Uni or

whatever...And so we sold it to them along different lines to get our targets met.

Jill (Youth Volunteering Worker): Because you have to pitch it, I say 'so, you want to go to university and this will look great on your personal statement'.

Schools were demanding, through participation in volunteering, that young people look out for their futures. Interviewees spoke of how there are many demands on young people's time – both things that they have to do, and things that they can choose to do. Where does volunteering sit on this line? Going to the cinema with friends may at first glance be an activity of choice, but given the social pressures and stigmatisation that can occur, it becomes something young people have to participate in, otherwise they risk becoming ostracised or isolated (Cotterell, 1996). Volunteering finds itself in a similarly awkward categorisation. While the very word *volunteering* has choice at its core, it is no longer seen as a choice, it is enforced, though economically and socially rather than legally. Choosing not to participate is akin to choosing not to develop or progress or invest in oneself.

It increasingly became obvious that volunteering was understood by interviewees as a product to be sold to individuals, which they pay for with their time. No interviewee complained at the use of the word 'sell' – all understood its relevance to their work, as Alan (Volunteer Centre Manager) reveals in his retail technique:

Alan: If people come looking for volunteering, we offer them the carrot of improving their CV or UCAS application.

[Jon]: And is there a stick involved?

Alan: Whilst the whole nature of volunteering is about free will, I suppose the stick is if you don't do it and someone else is going for the same job as you in the future, the chances are the person with more volunteering experience will get it. So there's implied, not threat, but loss in the future.

So the beneficent carrot of volunteering is replaced by the bullying stick of non-compliance. As Anjay (Environmental Charity Worker) asked, 'if they're not in school, it's volunteering, but do they have much of a say?' Students who were in school but did not 'have much of a say' were those taking the International Baccalaureate (IB). And nowhere did the voluntary sector workers display more antagonism towards the increasingly instrumentalised nature of youth volunteering than when discussing the IB system.

The IB is a programme of education for 16 to 19-year-old students, recognised around the world, and currently studied at over 200 British schools, aiming to provide a more rounded further education, as opposed to specialising in four A-level subjects. There is a community element to the system, a requirement to complete 50 hours of volunteering over the two year period, and many brokerage workers helped schools in finding

placements for young people so they could fulfil this part of the course. However, many saw the detrimental impact this was having:

Erin (Youth Volunteering Worker): IB students are encouraged to do 50 hours of volunteering during the year which is great, but there's a debate about is it volunteering if they have to do it? But then there's IB students who are fantastic, throw themselves into it but who get to their 50 hours and you never hear from them again!

And even works against the development of a volunteer ethic:

Beatrice (Youth Volunteering Worker): Not a fan of the IB students who just get the 50 hours then they go because volunteering is something they have to do, they're not choosing to do it. Even the ones who would usually choose to do it, they've got it into their heads 'just get the 50 hours and go'.

Rita (Youth Volunteering Worker): It turns young people into mercenaries!

The IB was also presented as self-defeating if its aim was to give students individual experiences:

Jill (Youth Volunteering Worker): If you're made to do it, then how does volunteering make you stand out? You have to put even more hours in to show that you actually want to volunteer.

The International Baccalaureate provoked a mass of contradictions for the volunteering services. Young people would leave charities with whom they had been placed after 50 hours of volunteering, meaning the charity would have to recruit and train another volunteer. Often Rita, Beatrice and their colleagues would be blamed for the students' lack of commitment, damaging relationships with charities, and making it less likely that they would look to involve young volunteers again. Staff found themselves seriously questioning whether they should continue to find IB students placements if in the long run the lack of sustainability they provide proves a problem for local charities. However students taking the IB provided a constant stream of work for the brokerage workers, providing students who would definitely sign up for 50 hours work. Brokerage workers were fighting to meet their own targets, and therefore were forced to choose volunteers who were unmotivated and did not want to be involved, but were required to as a part of their education. Workers had a moral and practical argument against involving IB students, seeing them as symptomatic of a volunteering culture which favoured the short term shock, rather than the long term commitment (Hustinx, 2001), but as their funding required them to meet rigid recruitment goals, they ended up reinforcing practices which they saw as damaging.

Further, interviewees found that the language they used to talk about volunteering was changing as a result of young people's desperate need for experience. Kay (Youth

Volunteering Worker) told me of one meeting she attended, where the local Council were developing a youth work experience programme. She, as the most high-profile youth volunteering worker in the borough, was invited along:

I went to a meeting about developing apprenticeships and work experiences and placement across Eastwood, and it was more about that than talking about volunteering. Not to say that volunteering was off the agenda, it wasn't, but in their minds it was more about placements.

She felt that the two subjects, volunteering and work experience, had become blurred in the eyes of policy-makers, as if they were interchangeable ways of thinking about and dealing with the school to work transition. Kay's view was confirmed to me by Isaac (Council Youth Worker):

Perhaps instead of calling it work experience you should call it volunteering week and send the kids out and work with some of the sector agencies, instead of just going to look for work in an office somewhere...Perhaps instead of calling it work experience you should call it volunteering week and send the kids out...

The term volunteering was increasingly seen for what it was - work experience, not an altruistic donation of time. Continually, interviewees reported this as a rather depressing development, a state of affairs storing up long-term problems for the communities in which they operated.

Anjay (Environmental Charity Worker) stated that he found the language which he used to recruit young people changing: he now reserved the title *volunteer* purely for those community members who gave their time at one of the occasional weekend gardening events he organised; those who were doing it for the fun, as serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004). Young people came to those events, often brought along by parents who were attracted by a different day's entertainment; an ethic of 'being outdoors and doing something'. Anjay saw that the distinction had become 'blurred' because young people who volunteered in his graduate programme, for instance, entered the schemes saying 'I want to go into this' or 'I want to be a climate change officer', and were looking for work experience in related areas. That this work experience was sold by his charity, and had secured funding from central and local government as volunteering, was immaterial. Young people came forward to plant trees and clear canals, not because they wanted to plant trees and clear canals, but because they wanted to say they had planted trees and cleared canals. The *work* was supplanted by the *experience*. This had begun to emanate from the language used in policy pronouncements, particularly during the high unemployment levels among young people during the recession.

## **Conclusion**

Employers believe that a range of experiences in the workplace contributes to the job-readiness of young people (Harvey et al, 1998). Conversely, Steinberg (1982) finds that the



benefits of work experience, such as education, socialisation and gaining future employment have been greatly overestimated, and instead the quality of schooling is far more prominent in determining the future occupational successes of young people, and that participants can see a decline in school achievement due to the detriment which work experience can have on their academic focus. Blackwell et al (2001) report that when viewed retrospectively, students who undertook work experience are more positive about the long-term benefits, as opposed to students who are currently participating in such a scheme as part of their curriculum. Volunteering has become part of that curriculum. Young people increasingly, in the views of interviewees, access their volunteering as a part of work experience or training, for a future, as yet (usually) unidentified, role. However, if volunteering is subsumed by instrumental motivations rather than altruistic motivations or a commitment to mutual aid, many authors have cautioned long-term problems, for the sustainability of voluntary organisations, and the health of communities:

These alleged changes not only pose a threat to the resilience of the voluntary sector, but also create a direct problem for volunteer organisations, which experience increasing disruptions in the supply as well as the retention of volunteers. (Hustinx and Meijs, 2011: 5)

Bauman (2007: 4-5; see also, 2001), writing on the topic of the increasing ubiquity of fractured pathways faced by (young) people, states that the increased necessity for flexibility in the labour market will mean individuals are more likely to 'abandon commitments and loyalties without regret – to pursue opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preferences'. Abandoning commitments and loyalties without regret, echoes Tocqueville's fear of growing individualism: the individual who 'may mix among [other people], but...sees them not; he touches them, but feels them not' (Tocqueville, as quoted in Sennett, 2012: 190). If the UK government continues to sell volunteering to young people, as the volunteer brokerage agencies practices have emphasised, building a big society on increased levels of volunteering and charitable giving, will, it is theorised, become ever more difficult.

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