

## **Youth volunteering policy : the rise of governmentality**

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### **Youth Volunteering Policy: The Rise of Governmentality**

Young people are increasingly encouraged to volunteer, perhaps as a panacea to combat personal and social problems (Sheard, 1995). This paper will explore why volunteering policy has developed this instrumental tendency in recent history. It will analyse Michel Foucault's theories of governmentality, and use these as a frame to consider the advances made in youth policy over the last half century, but with particular regard to volunteering policy in the last 15 years. Using governmentality as a tool of analysis, it will argue that volunteering policy has become a device to responsabilize younger generations; a method to improve the authority of the young over their own lives and their local areas, whilst moulding behaviour which brings about individual and collective wellbeing. It is also argued that this follows a natural progression of youth policies to tackle the 'problem of youth'.

#### **The process of governmentality**

Recent approaches in government, such as communitarianism or associationalism, are intended ways of governing not through the centralised, bureaucratized state, but through "instrumentalizing the self-governing properties of the subjects of government themselves in a whole variety of locales and localities – enterprises, associations, neighbourhoods, interest groups, and, of course, communities," (Rose, 1996: 352), where rights and responsibilities can be handed back to the citizen in return for increased participation. Through Foucauldian theories we can understand this progression as a recently unlocked method that governments have found to solve the problems of society and a way to touch the lives of its individual members (Gordon, 1991).

Michael Foucault argued that a certain mentality – governmentality – had become "the common ground of all modern forms of political thought and action," (Miller and Rose, 2009: 27). This is not government with an '-ality' suffixed, but mentality with a 'govern-' prefixed. A mentality which is to be governed. A desire or acceptance, perhaps subconsciously, to have one's behaviour guided or conducted. This is why the concept is often labelled 'the conduct of conduct'. This should not be viewed as passivity, but a certain amount of constraint and management, and facilitating models of possible actions; encouraging citizens to govern themselves. For example, New Labour wished not for its citizens to be passive recipients of benefits and services, but active self-sustaining individuals (Clarke, 2005); with volunteers as 'thorns in the side' (Miliband, 2006).

#### **Understanding youth provision**

There is a long historical prelude to the creation of national youth volunteering policy in the 1990s, which under the constraints of this paper it would be a disservice to attempt to and

fully examine. Briefly though, to understand the idea of the conduct of young people's conduct in this manner, we should be aware of two historical trends. One is the 'problem of youth' (Bettelheim, 1962), and the other is the rise of adolescence (Hall, 1921) as a distinct period of transition. The problems faced and caused by young people are not new issues. From Plato, to Peter the Hermit, to the twenty-first century press, society has labelled young people as a disrespectful group to be feared and watched. When understood through this discourse, governmental projects which target youth exist to exert some control over their lives and behaviours. For example, the British Education Act 1944 created both a Minister for Education and formalised the Youth Service. This universal service has been portrayed as a collectivised technique to manage the risk posed by young people (Stenson and Factor, 1995). Under governmental terms, this is not just the risk to society – of crime, disorder, and breakdown – but a risk that young people would not develop fully into the necessary citizens capable of continuing the work of the state.

The Youth Service was further developed by the Albemarle Report, which criticised the existing provision as woefully inadequate (Albemarle, 1960). This led to the foundation and extension of many youth clubs and training opportunities. It was a positive and proactive policy which tried to engage with young people, yet some governmentality scholars have questioned whether the state wanted a universal provision of youth services, or merely a way of controlling and containing the young working class (Jefferies and Smith, 1999). Whilst well-intentioned, it provided regulatory and coercive features (Nava, 1984: 8), and whilst cloaked in the language of 'care' and 'guidance', it resulted in creating a mechanism of social control (Osgerby, 1998: 141), in accordance with Foucault's theories of '*surveiller*'.<sup>1</sup> Volunteering bodies such as v can be seen as the outward-looking face of youth service provision in the twenty-first century. However, Smith and Doyle (2002) deem the shift from the principles of voluntary participation evocated by Albemarle, to today's youth work which centres on coercion and surveillance, as an answer to public and media concerns about 'the youth problem', even if such concerns aren't new.

Under the terms of governmentality, a population is required to be flexible to whatever the state needs it to achieve. By creating a youth volunteering infrastructure, successive British governments have created an additional social education element to the education system, encouraging young people to get involved with voluntary projects, charities, or social enterprise. One Rowntree Report on Income and Wealth (1995) stated that inequality grew rapidly between 1977 and 1995, at a rate higher than any other country than New Zealand. The report highlighted the importance of skills training for young people, and that participation in voluntary activities should be encouraged and not stymied by benefits rules. Under neo-liberalism, young people had become a deep economic problem, often lacking in skills and abilities to fit into the fluid, market based society (Stenson and Factor, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> Surveillance was a key theme of Foucault's theories of governmentality. Space does not allow for a fuller explanation, but through using modern techniques of government, states could effectively monitor citizens to aid their control. For more, see Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.

Young people have been encouraged to be more rounded citizens, for both economic and social cohesion factors, so we can therefore suggest that using a governmentality framework presents not a strictly ordered philosophy or ideology, but a reactive and reflexive approach, gently steering citizens towards uncontroversial behaviours.

### **Youth volunteering and the 'capacity to act'**

Volunteering is one such uncontroversial behaviour. Until the 1990s, it had little place in national policy discourse, until the Youth Volunteering Development Grants were initiated by Virginia Bottomley, Minister for Heritage, and under Michael Howard's Make a Difference program. Since then, a large amount of public funding and political will has been pumped into volunteering infrastructure, with the clear message for young people that volunteering could solve some of their problems. On the theory of power, Nikolas Rose wrote that "to govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and utilize it for one's own objectives", (Rose, 1999: 4). The growth of volunteering policy acknowledges the great potential of young people to get involved in their communities, and attempt to allay some social problems, as 'active citizens' who volunteer have become the basis for community regeneration (Clarke, 2005).

Michael Howard's Make a Difference, which pledged £20 million over three years to create a 'more neighbourly society' (White, 1995), aimed to use volunteering as a way to tackle community breakdown. This included the Government's Youth Challenge; a drive to create a volunteering opportunity for every young person aged 15-25 by 1997. Government was providing the apparatus for young citizens to act within a certain set of responsible possibilities (Wilkinson, 2010), a key technique and procedure of the deployment of governmental power. Fifteen years later and the number one aim of the Conservatives proposed National Citizen Service is community cohesion, alongside a more responsible society, where "young people reflect on the responsibilities that come with being an adult citizen of this country," (Conservatives, 2010: 8). David Cameron's foreword highlights how this volunteering scheme could tackle social problems for young people, much more prominently than increased altruism. This eight week programme aims to assist in solving the pressures that the state finds itself facing. The instrumentalism of encouraging volunteering (Lewis, 1999), can be perceived as using young people's personal development as a tool to mend society's issues. It is a scheme which intrinsically uses the voluntary spirit of youth for wider purposes. The research presented below begins to examine whether this process occurs at a local level, and if it is effective.

### **Current Research**

For this paper and a continuing study, the researcher interviewed 15 professionals working in the volunteering industry, from both the statutory and voluntary sectors, from one economically deprived borough in the West Midlands.

Many interviewees spoke about the growth of community development, and how voluntary groups and local communities had been given a more central role in strategic decisions, specifically through the creation of Local Strategic Partnerships. Where this has a key impact on young people is through the responsabilization agenda. Several interviewees believed that through a large push by the local authority on environmental volunteering, the population was taking responsibility for care of local areas. One local environmental charity worker identified that one main aim as encouraging locals to take ownership of green spaces. The benefits were identified as “healthy living, mental health and wellbeing, and employment prospects... And physical improvements, such as creating natural play areas, improving canal systems, which in turn creates routes for people into physical fitness”. Another spoke of how the Council was promoting mass environmental volunteering schemes so residents would feel accountable for litter in their area. But how successful is this responsabilization in reality? There was recognition that it generally takes a statutory partner to start these schemes of devolved responsibility, and to be a continuing presence. This message should be coupled with other interviewees, who felt that there was a lack of long-term thinking about utilising the goodwill generated by these large scale volunteering events. Young volunteers’ interest rarely followed up on, and in the past there had been a lack of cohesive support.

Raising the level of youth volunteering in the borough was seen as vital to extend the capacity and sustainability of both statutory and voluntary sector programs. One statutory sector interviewee, with a 30 year involvement of working with voluntary sector organisations described the short-sightedness of not getting enough young volunteers involved: “We need to involve more young people in short bursts of volunteering rather than ongoing volunteering and harnessing all the energy and stuff around any event that we run”. Yet, this was countered by another view that there was not enough of a long-term vision of altruism created for young people, merely a one-off, gain the benefits and move on approach, therefore perhaps preventing the rewards of a governmentality strategy. Time-Banking had been piloted in the area, with the express hope of encouraging positive behaviour toward a neighbour, then gradually progressing to assisting the wider community. However, interviewees recognised that with the many social pressures faced by young people, the likelihood of increased volunteering is minimal; youth is too closely associated with being “acquisitive”, and peer-pressured into social activities. “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 amazed I’d probably subsidize him,” said a Volunteering Policy Officer.

However, there was some evidence that whilst programmes to encourage volunteering were being targeted at young people in the borough, the effect they had was certainly not always as positive as hoped. One public health official, who has been encouraging volunteering as a path to wellbeing, spoke of how in the last 15 years investment has moved into volunteer peer education programmes amongst the young to tackle issues such as sex education, drugs, and racism, using volunteering and community work. He felt that “bureaucrats” had

failed to tackle these issues, and instead it was left to young people to educate themselves in these issues. This echoes the message of Baroness Neuberger, the government's volunteering champion, who has encouraged volunteering as a way to create 'people-centred' and 'understanding' public services (Neuberger, 2008; Rochester, Ellis-Paine, Howlett, 2010). Nevertheless, the interviewee felt involvement has not been sustained and he had witnessed many young people 'retire' from their positions as peer mentors when they reach 21.

## **Conclusion**

Governmentality is a use of power which attempts to "unleash the productive skills and capacities which enable young people to adapt to a modern society," (Stenson and Factor, 1995: 176). Successive governments in Britain have realised that youth volunteering is a relatively cheap and effective way of delivering results that benefit not only the young person, but society and the power, financial or otherwise, of the state. A young population constructed to take responsibility for their communities will provide this long-term through social control regulated at the individual level. This is perhaps why encouraging volunteering has become one of the first reactions to a recession (Cabinet Office, 2009). The Russell Commission aimed to provide young people "with a new route to skills and qualifications" (Russell, 2005: 3), which under a neo-liberal governmental agenda was key. Policies to tackle the economic and social 'problems of youth', have determined that volunteering can be an instrument of which the state is the major primary active sponsor and director, rather than a passive beneficiary of the fruits of young people's voluntary labour. With a responsabilized youth, the power of the state is increased, as the possibility of a threat to authority from young people within is reduced, and the work of the state is taken up by conscientious empowered volunteers.

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