

'It's just part of what they do': Habitus, social class and youth volunteering policy

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'It's just part of what they do': Habitus, social class and youth volunteering policy

Jon Dean

Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being. (Kuhn, 1995: 98)

They're doing things that I'd count as volunteering that they don't. To them it's 'what they do'. (Joan, University Volunteering Manager, Croft).

Introduction

Encouraging young people to volunteer has emerged as a government priority over the last 15 years. Highly expensive schemes, such as the £200m invested in v, have been implemented to build on the existing volunteering infrastructure, develop community cohesion, social capital, and provide young people with the flexible skills and experiences they need to succeed in the jobs market. Drawing on research from two juxtaposed areas in England - one a deprived industrial town in the West Midlands called Eastwood, the other a prosperous borough called Croft in the South East¹ - this paper and presentation offer initial conclusions as to what extent a government can mould its citizens into behaviours of voluntarism, especially those young people from hard to reach backgrounds.

Volunteering and class: theory and praxis

Young people embody their attitudes to volunteering; both those that stem from their agency, and those that emanate from the structures which are built around them, courtesy of their family and social networks. Bourdieu provides an effective framework through which to analyse these attitudes in that he 'developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate the ways in which not only is the body in the social world, but the social world is in the body' (Reay, 2004: 432). The following responses from those intimately involved with bringing young people into the social world of the voluntary sector highlight how pre-conceived attitudes and values affect their work:

A lot of students who have volunteered since they were 15, they don't see it as volunteering, they see it as part of their life. So a lot say 'does it count as volunteering because I've been doing it for years and years?' (Sarah, University Volunteering Manager, Croft).

Chrissie (Youth Volunteering Manager, Croft): Our kids, grammar school kids, can volunteer anytime, anywhere.

Paul (Charity Director, Croft): It's just part of their life.

¹ Names of localities and interviewees have been altered in line with ethical practice.

Successive governments' calls to volunteer have centred on making volunteering a part of young people's lives. Yet the habitus, already in place before the transition to adulthood, is in itself a barrier to young people volunteering, which due to the practical considerations of policy delivery is a problem which is reinforced rather than overcome through the efforts of volunteering brokerage workers.

Habitus was Pierre Bourdieu's response to this structure-agency debate (Calhoun, 2011), a method of explaining social behaviour and the structure in which those behaviours occurred. A 'durable but generative set of dispositions – perceptions and appreciations,' (Burawoy, 2008: 4), which are 'created and reformulated through the conjecture of objective structures and personal history' (Harker et al, 1990: 11); it is a mediating construct which takes the individual's previous knowledge and experience, and their relations and interactions with social structures and activities of other individuals, the totality of which culminate in their responses to situations. As Robbins (2000: 16) has written, habitus is a concept developed to:

Explain the process by which, in a socially plural situation, all individuals internalise as a guide to their actions and attitudes, the practical structural explanations of their situations which impinge upon them partially as a consequence of those situations.

Therefore, when in social situations people use experience and social guidelines to manage their behaviour; therefore their actions are somewhat contained within a structural cycle. Identity is not shaped 'in opposition to the social world' but by the social world (Lawler, 2008: 7); it is their individual history, shaped by their social history (Bourdieu, 1990a: 91; 1990b: 46). The primacy layers make the youth stage of social life 'so critical to social reproduction' (MacDonald et al 2005: 875), as what is acquired early on in childhood can shape every action which is to come, as people develop a sense of how to play the game (Calhoun, 2011: 377-8; Burawoy, 2008). When trying to implement macro volunteering policies at the micro level, workers saw this first hand, that young people did not know how to play, or did not see that it would be beneficial for them to play, the volunteering game.

'If you go to and set up a Volunteer Centre in [a poor area of Croft], you're already not talking the language of 90% of the population... Children come from families with no concept of volunteering,' Paul, the Director of a youth volunteering charity said. Whilst the families from poorer areas are not against volunteering in the formal environments which Paul's charity offers, it is simply not part of their habitus, their 'inherited concept of society' (Robbins, 2000: 26) – just not the sort of thing they do. Beatrice (Youth Volunteering Worker, Croft) said that many young people who put themselves forward are 'the ones who do everything anyway...They're not intimidated about meeting a whole new group of people which is essentially what volunteering is'. This was a recurring theme. Young people who have experienced either volunteering, or extra-curricular activities such as after school clubs and sports teams, or joined youth organisations such as the Scouts or the Guides, are more

likely to respond to the call to volunteer when Beatrice and her colleagues arrive at an assembly offering the chance to walk dogs at a rescue shelter. These structures which concentrate voluntary activity amongst a hardcore of young volunteers are reinforced by the practices of youth volunteering workers who know they can rely on certain young people to commit fully to the charity and fulfil certain criteria such as arrive on time, so they continually get to participate in opportunities. Workers have targets to meet, and lack the resources to put extra effort in to encouraging a more diverse range of participants. The engaged young people are also the ones most likely to receive support from parents and families to take part in such activities, in giving lifts to attend activities or money bus fares, and 'mop up' good activities, using their cultural and economic capital to their advantage. These findings are reflected in the work of Mohan (2011: 9) who found that 49% of the volunteering hours undertaken in Britain are conducted by 8% of the population, a largely middle-class, middle-aged, religious band of the population.²

Class theorists have followed Bourdieu in 'contrasting the self-assurance of the middle class with the unease and discomfort of the working class' (Bottero, 2004: 993), but the middle-class self-assurance is not innate, it has been trained into their bodies and brains over time, and by the time of their transition to adulthood when they are encouraged to take part in new activities such as volunteering, it has become second nature.

The habitus – embodied habitus, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. (Bourdieu, 1992: 56).

Bourdieu is highlighting the idea that if you, for instance, ask a middle-class young volunteer how they know to ask the project leader what to do, or how to strike up conversations with other young volunteers, they may well shrug their shoulders and go 'dunno'. They would not be able to pinpoint a place in history when they were told to act with this confidence and assuredness. Instead it is built up over time ('the whole past'), 'something in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman' (Reay, 2005: 911), and not necessarily found at the level of consciousness (Webb et al, 2002).

Conclusion

Lareau (2003) writes that the entitlement of middle-class young people comes from the cultivated approach of child-rearing employed by their parents. Entitlement may be a highly problematic word to utilise here, for the loaded values and subjective responses it creates, and we should instead understand this as a heightened understanding of fairness, where middle-class youth are reared to be more reflexively understanding of the rights that they deserve as young people and as global citizens (see, for example, the United Nations

² See also, Ram Cnaan's work on the Church of the Latter Day Saints in the United States, whose research on the social inheritance of Mormons found that believers committed 9.5 hours a week on average to voluntary causes, against a national average of 4.5 hours a month.

Convention on the Rights of the Child [1989]). The growth of bureaucracy and of the welfare state can be attributed, it has been argued, to a society increasingly informed about the rights and standards to which they are afforded: the regularity of the exercise of authority of Weber's 'levelling of the governed' (Weber, 1968: 983-7; Cohen, 1991: 90-1; Evers, 1995; see, for example, the growth of consumer watchdogs, ombudsmen, and legislation such as the Human Rights Act). Therefore when New Labour want citizens and young people through volunteering to develop an awareness of both their 'rights and responsibilities', the ability to perform this awareness is a middle-class behaviour in itself. The 'natural growth' that Lareau sees employed in working-class upbringings entails that the young person is less able to respond to these calls, because a sense of constraint emerges in them, where they are more likely to passively take orders than proactively take responsibility. A middle-class young person can feel entitled to be given the chance to get involved and lead in their communities, and possess the necessary capitals to enable them to do so, having been reared to see fewer barriers to participation, and access to a greater number of opportunities to contribute.

The term governmentality sought to draw attention to a certain way of thinking and acting embodied in all those attempts to know and govern the wealth, health and happiness of populations (Miller and Rose, 1992: 174).

If social class, from a Bourdieuan standpoint, is built up through embodied behaviours, and governmentality, as Miller and Rose argue above, seeks to reform and reframe those same such embodied behaviours through policy interventions, then there will always be a clash, with governmental projects less likely to succeed, particularly if they are anything less than dramatic holistic interventions. If class is embodied 'naturally', and through performativity repetition causes behaviours to appear innate and natural over time (rather than any biological understanding of 'natural'), and a sense developed through environmental factors and lived experience, then the process of policy which aims to get working-class young people to embody certain autonomous behaviours and characteristics (Warburton and Smith, 2003) is always fighting against pre-embodied social class behaviours, and remains open to middle-class advantage, even when this outcome is in distinct opposition to the aims of policy makers.

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