

Academic Commentary: 'Toward Deeper Understandings of Volunteering Practice', Dr Koen P.R. Bartels, Business School, Bangor University

Volunteering is on the rise. Sure, it has been around for over a century. And over the past decades, overall levels of voluntary activity have remained relatively stable in the UK. But what has been changing is the attention for volunteering and its centrality to the governance of Western societies (see, for example Bryer, 2014). We are witnessing increasing ambitions and expectations about how much people should volunteer and what voluntary organisations should achieve. With policies like the Edward M. Kennedy Service America Act in the US, the Participation Society in the Netherlands, and the Big Society in the UK, governments are deliberately stimulating citizens to volunteer and making public service delivery increasingly dependent on voluntary provision.

However, that does not make volunteering practice any easier. If anything, it has become more complex and challenging to successfully manage voluntary organisations. With austerity squeezing funding opportunities, volunteer availability, living standards and public service quality, voluntary organisations have to toil to attract new volunteers, cultivate human capital, improve performance, gather resources and demonstrate impact (Ramesh, 2011; NEF, 2012). All the while, national policy standards, relationships with a variety of competitors and collaborators and rapidly evolving societal needs need to be taken into account. As such, it is all the more important to improve our understandings of the various dimensions of volunteering practice and the factors that influence its shape, performance and value.

This is what the articles by Debbie Haski-Leventhal, Lucas Meijs and Lesley Hustinx (2009), Femida Handy and Laurie Mook (2011), and Guido Cozzi, Noemi Mantovan and myself (2013) set out to do. Based on a variety of backgrounds and methods, they each shed more light on the motivations of volunteers, voluntary organizations, governments, and other actors, the assumptions dominant to the volunteering discourse, and the policies and practices that could make volunteering more thriving and effective.

In this commentary, I will first briefly summarise the three articles and appraise their value and limitations. Second, I will highlight a number of common issues and emphasise the importance of deepening our understandings of volunteering practice. I will end by arguing that academics and practitioners should labour to improve volunteering policies and management by producing thorough and critical accounts of their daily work experiences, strategies for dealing with other actors, and the impact of volunteering.

Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx (2009) observe that what they call ‘third party actors’ have become increasingly involved in volunteering next to its traditional actors (volunteers, voluntary organisations, and clients). Therefore, they develop a model of factors relevant to understanding why and how governments, corporations, and educational institutes influence volunteering. Two factors form the core of the model: volunteerability—“the willingness, capability and availability of individuals to volunteer” (p. 141)—and recruitability—“the ability of volunteer organisations to recruit volunteers and maintain them” (p. 142) through accessibility, resources, and networks and cooperation. Volunteering is not simply a matter of interested individuals and available organisations coming together; individuals might lack social incentives, skills, or time, while organisations have to facilitate a diverse volunteer force to reach them, provide adequate financial and human resources, and collaborate with other actors. The third party model provides a helpful and nuanced overview of the possible motivations, activities, and positive and negative effects of governments, corporations, and educational institutes getting involved in this.

On the one hand, third party actors can enhance volunteerability and recruitability and thereby the many positive impacts of volunteering. Governments can introduce favourable legislation, tax deductions to volunteers, and financial support to voluntary organisations as to promote better service delivery, social cohesion, and democratic participation. Under the banner of corporate social responsibility, corporations can provide a highly skilled and motivated workforce as well as organisational resources. Educational institutes, finally, can facilitate students in partaking in extra-curricular volunteering in order to generate a pool of volunteers in the present and of the future while improving students’ social behaviour, employability, and civic responsibility.

On the other hand, volunteering can also be significantly harmed by the involvement of third party actors. Governments can impose welfare reforms that place an unfair burden for public service provision on the voluntary sector. Collaborating with corporations can lead to a loss of voice for voluntary organisations, as they might be overwhelmed by corporate demands, resources, and management. Educational institutes can frustrate the investment of time and resources and as they provide youngsters with low skills and little experience who do not stay on after term time. Moreover, it is questionable whether all of this can still be called volunteering, as citizens, employees and students are driven to volunteer through regulatory incentives and obligations rather than free will and genuine motivations.

Overall, Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx help us toward further understanding the influence of third party actors on both the supply and demand side of volunteering. Although they could have done more to theoretically refine the third party model and provide practical recommendations, the article emphasises that academics and practitioners should critically explore (and develop strategies to deal with) the interests, motivations, and trade-offs of third-party actors' involvement in volunteering.

Handy and Mook (2011) also strive to provide more insight into the supply and demand side of volunteering. They signal that while the number of US voluntary organizations and their dependence on volunteers has greatly increased, the costs and benefits of volunteering are usually not measured or capitalised on. They propose a social accounting model that makes this possible, which includes benefits and costs on in terms of private and public value, individual and organisational levels, and monetary and non-monetary factors. On the individual level, volunteering can have benefits such as a 'warm glow' effect, capacity building, prestige and increase of social capital, while costs can take the form of foregone earnings and leisure time, direct expenses and social pressure to volunteer. On the organisational level, volunteering can bring benefits by increasing the quality of services, levels of fundraising and savings and relationships with the community, while costs can come down to investing in recruitment and training, providing resources, dealing with liability issues and handling fears among paid staff about being made redundant. Handy and Mook apply their benefit-cost model to a case and demonstrate that the benefits of

volunteering exceeded costs—as well as reporting a number of other studies with similar findings.

Using a benefit-cost model can help both individuals and voluntary organisations in making more informed decisions about the most optimal use of their time, efforts, and resources. It takes us beyond “the common perception of the do-good volunteer who contributes his or her labor for free” (p. 412) and broad brush policy rhetoric about the value of volunteering toward more detailed understandings of the conditions under which it pays to volunteer for particular individuals or to facilitate volunteers for organisations. Furthermore, it can be a valuable tool for producing evidence about the performance and value of voluntary organisations.

At the same time, we should be cautious in embracing Handy and Mook’s assumption that volunteers are “impure altruists” who make rational calculations about the costs and benefits of volunteering and “will only volunteer if the sum of these benefits exceeds their private costs” (p. 413). While common in the domains of economics and accounting, and useful for the aforementioned reasons, it should not distract our attention from the social, emotional, and practical nature of volunteering practice.

The article by myself, Cozzi and Mantovan (2013) attempts to integrate a macro-economic and policy practice approach to volunteering. The connecting factor between these two diverging approaches is the main assumption underlying the Big Society: government should be rolled back as high levels of state intervention and public spending reduce the likelihood that citizens will volunteer. The theoretical and empirical support for or against this crowding out assumption is rather inconclusive, especially when it comes to employed individuals. In the context of the Big Society and austerity policies this seems to be a crucial group of potential volunteers to tap into. However, their time constraints and responsibility to generate income might strongly limit employed individuals’ inclination to engage in time-consuming, unpaid work in a period of rising costs, wage freezes, unemployment, and reducing public services. Therefore, we combined analytical modelling, econometric

analyses, and a narrative analysis to see whether less public spending would make employed individuals more likely to volunteer.

We started by modelling the decision of employed individuals as depending on levels of public spending, mediated by their individual abilities and the available volunteering infrastructure. The prediction that resulted from this was that lower public spending would decrease the likelihood of volunteering. We then looked at statistical evidence from Europe and the UK over the past three decades, with all tests consistently confirming this prediction. Even with the most optimistic expectations, a 10% decrease in public spending would lead directly to a 6.3% decrease in volunteering. A narrative analysis of interviews with volunteers and public officials in Glasgow explains why this is the case: volunteering is a challenging and often frustrating practice. Volunteers and public officials alike experience many barriers and setbacks to working together and actually making a difference to the problems they devote their time to. Lower public spending decreases the availability of an adequate voluntary infrastructure as well as the likelihood that employed individuals feel that volunteering is worth their time.

Our article takes a valuable step toward raising awareness of the influence of public spending on levels of volunteering and the importance of cultivating a thriving voluntary infrastructure. Moreover, we argued that public spending alone is not enough. Volunteers and professionals, as well as voluntary organisations and governments, need to maintain collaborative relationships for effectively dealing with the inherent challenges of volunteering practice. However, it remains unclear how can that be achieved (Locke, 2013). How can a voluntary infrastructure effectively support volunteers? How much funding should be allocated where? What are the effects of funding and support on different types of voluntary activities and divergent contexts? These, and other, questions still need to be answered.

As in many countries it is now “a deliberate strategy to enhance participation in volunteering” (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx, 2009, p. 154), we need more solid evidence, clear theories and practical strategies that will help us better understand and

improve the nature, problems and value of volunteering practice. The three articles discussed here provide a number of methodological, practical, and critical handles that will help us move in that direction.

First, their diverging methodological approaches highlight the need for varied and complementary ways of looking at what has become a complex practice. We need to understand macro-economic conditions, national policies, supply and demand barriers, organisational interests, individual motivations, monetary and non-monetary benefits and costs, and everyday experiences. This can be aided by analytical modelling, econometric analyses, qualitative interviewing, social accounting, and sociological analyses. Each of these approaches has its benefits and limitations, cautioning us in drawing any comprehensive or definite conclusions about volunteering. We should therefore not only gather evidence and explanations from various approaches, but also seek to let them speak to one another and try to integrate them into a more nuanced and coherent understanding of volunteering practice.

Second, even though these are perhaps not as developed as we might want, we can take away a number of practical recommendations from each of the articles. Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx (2009) raise awareness of the trade-offs of the involvement of various 'third party' actors. Volunteer managers should adapt their strategies for collaborating with governments, corporations, educational institutes and other actors based on careful considerations of their impact on the 'volunteerability' of volunteers and the 'recruitability' of the organisation. Handy and Mook (2011) guide us toward examining and reporting the benefits and costs of volunteering. Volunteer managers can use benefit-cost analyses as a tool to provide evidence for the performance and value of their organisations as to obtain support and funding. Cozzi, Mantovan and myself (2013) emphasise the importance of public spending, the volunteering infrastructure, and collaboration. Volunteer managers have to collaborate with governments in sustaining funding adequate for a volunteering infrastructure that will make volunteers feel their efforts are worth their time.

Third, the articles lead us to critically rethink common assumptions about the value of volunteering, the motivations of various actors, and the relationships between government and the voluntary sector. We should move beyond the notion that volunteering is simply a matter of do-gooders, philanthropic organisations, and the less fortunate coming together. Getting third party actors involved might have unintended or even undesirable consequences. Analysing benefits and costs is vital for enhancing performance and support and does not necessarily reduce volunteering to numbers and money as long as nonmonetary, qualitative factors are recorded and accounted for as well. And reducing state intervention and public spending can actually drive out volunteers and inhibit effective action by weakening vital infrastructure and collaborative relationships. Thus, we should ask critical questions: What are the costs and benefits of getting involved? Who gets what out of it? Is it worth people's time and organisations' efforts? How do government policies work out in practice? How are quality of services, lives, social capital and problem solving affected?

Besides looking to researchers for producing analyses and answers, practitioners are particularly well situated to critically report their experiences with the everyday practice of volunteering. Their daily efforts, struggles, and achievements require a tremendous amount of practical know-how, informal processes and feel for the situation. Volunteering policy and management should be thoroughly grounded in, and conducive to, the ways in which practitioners perform their work in meaningful and competent ways. How, for example, do volunteering practitioners deal with third party actors? Or in which ways do they account for benefits and costs? And how do they cope with changes in government policies and reductions in public spending. Storytelling, site visits, auto-ethnographic accounts, visual records, and deliberative meetings could enable policy makers, managers, and researchers to learn from practice. Indeed, it is time to move toward deeper understandings of volunteering practice.

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