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The Social Experience of Volunteering for Young Adult Volunteers

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Volunteering is known to benefit not only recipients of services but also the volunteers themselves. Such benefits are especially important in volunteering young adults, who are undergoing a period of rapid transition and psychosocial development. Whilst the impact of volunteering is reasonably well studied in student groups, there is relatively little research on young adult volunteers outside the 'student as volunteer' context, despite the fact that this group may present different motivations towards, and benefits from, volunteering. We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experience of young volunteers. Using the experiential qualitative approach of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, prominent themes relating to the social experience of volunteering were explored. These were selected as the topic of this article and are explored under three subthemes: *Social belonging*; *Social motivation to volunteer*; *Social effects of volunteering on wellbeing and development*. Interpretations of the participant's verbatim are offered and discussed in relation to Identity Fusion Theory and Positive Youth Development.

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Introduction

Volunteers provide a vital service to their communities which is of great societal value. It is estimated that the global economic value of volunteering is approximately US\$1.348 trillion (Salamon, Sokolowski and Haddock, 2011). However, the benefits of volunteering extend beyond the recipients, impacting on the lived experience of the volunteers themselves. The UK Cabinet Office recently estimated that the 'wellbeing value', the equivalent amount of money necessary to provide the increase in wellbeing associated with a particular service, attributed to frequent formal volunteering as a monetary figure to be in the region of £70 billion per year (Fujiwara, Oroyemi and McKinnon, 2013). These benefits also cross the domains of academic achievement (Moore and Allen, 1996) career enhancement (Smith, 2010).

Of particular importance are benefits of volunteering for young volunteers in their transition into adulthood, which can be conceptualised from developmental and personal perspectives (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009; MacNeela & Gannon, 2014). For example, Positive Youth Development Theory (PYD; Bowers, Li, Kiely, Brittian & Lerner, 2010; Lerner, 2004) emphasises the capabilities and confidence associated with volunteering, whilst Identity Fusion Theory (IFT), based on the larger framework of Social Identity Theory (Brown, 2000), may also be used to help explain the behaviours and experiences of volunteers who feel a very high sense of belonging within their volunteer groups (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012).

Previous research indicates that volunteering has numerous psychosocial benefits to the volunteer, including the promotion of resilience (Oliver, Collin, Burns and Nicholas,

2006) and increasing subjective well-being (Littman-Ovadia and Steger, 2010; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001). However, much of the existing literature has used restrictive quantitative methods. Whilst questionnaires are useful in measuring hypothesized relationships between correlates, for example, volunteering and levels of self-esteem; Brown, Hoyer and Nicholson, 2012, their deductive stance limits opportunities for in-depth exploration of subjective experience (Willig, 2008). In such areas, qualitative methods may be used to develop initial research and identify themes which may be useful for future study (Bradley, Curry and Devers, 2007; Sofaer, 1999). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) is an excellent method for exploring our research questions, as it is designed 'to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world' (Smith and Osborne, 2015, p.25). The method makes use of the participant's expertise of their own experience and allows for an inductive approach to analysis. Themes are interpreted from the transcribed data, simplified, and then related to the previous literature (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005).

Previous research exploring the phenomenology of volunteering (Young, 2004) has sought to understand volunteer motivation in terms of individual meaning and how this process affects engagement (Maehr & Meyer, 1997). The Octagon model of volunteer motivation (Yeung, 2004) captures the inter-related dimensions of "getting-giving", "continuity-newness", "distance-proximity", "thought-action" and suggests a complex relationship between different motivations. The dimension of proximity may be particularly relevant to the sense of social connectedness reported in volunteers (Brown, 2012), and contrasts with volunteering being perceived as less collective and more individualistic (Hustinx & Lemmertyn, 2003). A phenomenological study of the

experiences of student volunteers reported positive benefits of volunteering on personal identity and developmental transitions (MacNella & Gannon, 2014). However, non-student young adult volunteers may present different motivations towards and benefits from volunteering than student participants (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Hooghe, Stolle, Mahéo and Vissers, 2010).

The aim of this study is to explore the psychosocial context of volunteering and, in documenting this, explore what volunteering means to the individual and what role and function it plays in their personal and social lives. Such research is of special importance in adolescent and young adult populations where the situation of youth is met with rapid developmental and social transitions which can place individuals at heightened risk of experiencing uncertainty both in terms of work and study and also in the relationships they form (Furlong, 2012). In particular, young adults from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may lack effective social networks and resources (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002) as well as facing barriers to educational success and career advancement (Furlong, 2012). Thus, it is particularly important to study young people who face additional challenges to help understand and challenge this social reproduction.

Our study's sample was drawn from a locally based youth-work charity. This charity complements local relational work and youth clubs with seasonal outdoor-adventure residential trips, using a largely voluntary team to achieve this provision. Participants belonged to, or were recent graduates of, the 'Young Team' – a developmental programme of the charity which seeks to engage selected young adults in voluntary youth-work and training. The charity invites young adults to participate in their volunteering program based on a number of reasons; most commonly that they have

experienced considerable challenges, such as family poverty or mental health issues, throughout their own youth and also that they show potential as social leaders within their communities.

A series of semi-structured interviews were most appropriate for gathering our data, since they allowed the in-depth procurement of personal interpretations of experiences. As is consistent with IPA, a relatively small, homogenous sample was used (Smith, 2011).

Research Questions

(1) What is the purpose and role of volunteering for young adults who have faced personal challenges in their own lives. (2) How does volunteering contribute to these young adults' sense of current and future identity? (3) What is the psychosocial impact of volunteering activities for these young adults?

Method

Participants

Three females and three males, aged 18-22, consented to take part in one-to-one interviews. These participants had been active volunteers within the youth work charity for at least two years and have considerable experience of regular voluntary youth-work delivery in both local and residential settings. At time of interview, one participant was at school, one was in full-time work, two were on apprenticeships, one was at university and one was at college. Pseudonyms were used and secondary identifiers, such as names of people, places, wider organisations, were omitted from the transcripts to safeguard confidentiality.

Data collection

The charity's project manager granted permission to collect data and supported the planned program of research. The study had ethical approval from the University of Glasgow ethics committee. Each of the participants were informed about the study before giving consent, and had the right to withdraw/omit their responses at any time prior to wider dissemination of the findings. The interview schedule was piloted with another active volunteer within the charity. As a result, the original schedule was adapted as to impose less structure on participants and allow greater flexibility of discussion.

Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were carried out over the course of three weeks, resulting in three hours and 22 minutes of recorded data. The interviews took place in a quiet room within the charity offices and were recorded onto a secure electronic recording device. The research questions provided an initial basis for discussion. However, tangents and examples were encouraged to provide a rich and detailed account of participants' experience of volunteering (Eatough and Smith, 2006). The interviews were transcribed verbatim using Express Scribe Transcription Software.

Analytical approach

The practical process of coding in IPA is well described by Smith and Osborne (2015). The case-by-case analysis enabled the researcher to build a list of emerging themes; individual or collective patterns across the data set, which aided interpretation of the phenomena of volunteering. With the aid of NVivo, these emerging themes were re-

worked, re-grouped and or refined as each interview was analysed. The full analysis across the interviews yielded a larger list of final themes than are presented in this particular paper. Within the reflexive process of re-working and re-grouping the thematic structure, it was decided to give prominence to the themes which connected most closely with social experience of volunteering. In essence, the analysis was influenced by a degree of 'abductive reasoning' (Shaw, 2016), whereby there was a dialogue created between inductive themes generated and the desire to expand the theoretical dimensions related to the social processes underpinning the experience of volunteering. The researcher used his reflective diary to note this process and shared the analysis with his supervisors to enable credibility checks to take place.

Reflexivity

I have volunteered for more than five years within the charity from which participants were drawn. While this meant I was ideally placed for providing rich interpretations of the participants' interviews and offering additional insight, it also opened a potential bias towards representing them positively. Throughout the project, I kept a reflective diary which aided in the organisation of the research, interpretation of the data and in exploring my own subjective outlook as it related to the interview and emerging themes.

Findings

The analysis is communicated as a narrative where evidence is drawn from direct verbatim quotes. The 'social elements of volunteering' for young volunteers are presented as three sub-themes: *social belonging*; *social motivation*; and *social effects on well-being and development*.

Social elements of volunteering

Social belonging

A shared observation across the participants' accounts is that volunteering within a team can foster a sense of belonging and bring about positive social connections. The different interpretations of these social connections vary from the 'role models' described by Casey through to the 'friends' Jack frequently mentions or even the sense of 'family' as experienced by Robert:

it's like a family. Like the staff are all like a big family. They're all there for each other. - Robert

A powerful term, 'family' helps indicate the sense of belonging and trust that Robert feels within his volunteering team and expresses the sense of wellbeing that he gains from establishing and maintaining these social connections. The interpretation of 'family' is loose and is based on the positivity of group cohesion and connectedness which this type of volunteering fosters. Like Robert, Jack also expresses a sense of social belonging:

That comradery that [the charity] has... you do just think, well, yeah "don't know why I wouldn't do this". You know, because you do get a good feeling out of it. - Jack

Jack helps further describe the positive experience of belonging and interacting with the other volunteers. He frequently uses the word 'comradery' to convey the trust felt

between volunteers, even saying: *'I do quite like the word but it does describe us quite well'*.

A number of explanations are offered by the participants as to how this sense of belonging and trust arises. Casey describes how belonging is fostered through the acceptance the volunteers have been shown by the charity, explaining *'[The charity] just accept you for who you are and the positive that you bring'*.

On the other hand, Mani describes the structure of the charity (staff roles) and how: *'they almost make the charity... sometimes [it] feels about the volunteers'*. Mani raises an interesting point, stating that the benefit to volunteers in terms of opportunity, training and wider social opportunities is matched or even outweighs the benefit for the recipients of the volunteering. Another explanation is offered by Jack. He appreciates the consistency of the volunteer team and describes the security it brings him, explaining: *'that benefits us as volunteers because we know that, you know, that we're not just going to get replaced in two or three months'*. There is an implied insecurity or fragility contained with Jack's account. It may be that his own personal circumstances lack the security and continuity that is being offered through the contact with the volunteering group. It could also be indicative of this stage of development to young adulthood which is often characterised by change and transition.

Volunteers offer differing explanations of how their sense of belonging within the charity grew through their volunteering. However, these explanations share certain features. Both Casey and Mani describe aspects of acceptance, care and positive attention being offered towards the volunteers. Similarly, Jack explains how the consistency in this

supportive environment has promoted his sense of social security and belonging. It appears that the trust and the positive social nature of volunteering originates from the structure and even the culture of the charity itself and it is passed on to the volunteers, over time, through existing volunteers and staff.

Social motivation to volunteer

In the above exert, Jack captures how comradery is a powerful motivator to volunteering when he says: *'[I] don't know why I wouldn't do this'*. This sense of belonging and friendships within the organisation seem to be at least partially responsible for his continued volunteering, a sentiment which is shared by many of the participants:

So I get to do loads of youth-work, which is brilliant and all the 'residential' and I get to have, well, work with all my friends which is the best bit probably. - Mani

[Describing fellow volunteers] *Friends, I think friends rather than just acquaintances, you know. I wouldn't say like, like "friend-friends" who I spend every day with and stuff but definitely friends, yeah. - Mila*

Mani reflects Jack's sentiment around the importance of friendships to enjoying the work. Mila is slightly more reserved, describing how the friends made through volunteering are not her closest friends who she might 'spend every day with'. This indicates that the quality of social interactions varies between individuals and not all will find or require the sense of total belonging and 'family' as described by Robert. However, Mila also reflects that the relationships formed are more personal than simply working alongside people. Jenny also sees personal relationships as important to her experience of volunteering:

Yeah, [friends within the team] are important cause it makes volunteering a bit easier. Cause like volunteering, for some people who aren't as outgoing as others, is quite hard, so if you have friends and you manage to build... like relationships that is - it's really good because it makes you want to keep coming back again. - Jenny

Jenny expresses two important points. Firstly, like Jack, she finds the friendships built through volunteering to be a vital factor in motivating her continued volunteering. She also alludes to a new point, that friendships make the volunteering easier. She acknowledges that relational youth-work volunteering may be quite challenging for some individuals, especially those who are more introverted and lacking in confidence. However, Jenny feels that through friendships and social support within the team, these barriers may be overcome, and can increase the efficacy of the work. This raises an important point for voluntary organisations; not only are good social relations seen to be a motivator for volunteering commitment, they are also viewed to make the work easier and perhaps even more effective.

Social effects of volunteering on wellbeing and development

The social environment of volunteering is of clear importance to the participants, both in their enjoyment and in their commitment to the work. However, it is described by some participants as having an importance beyond this level. For Mila, feeling a sense of belonging and social support is viewed not just as enjoyable but also critical to her own wellbeing and development:

I started volunteering when I was in fourth year?...Half-way through 4th year maybe. Ended up me in 5th year going into hospital for four months cause of my anxiety and mental stuff. And then when I came out I was really, really shaky and just [the charity] has made me much more confident and given me much more confidence and self-esteem and made me feel... made me feel so much better and like, knowing they were there and stuff like that and... I feel like I am stronger. I don't think I'm, like, there yet, I'm not recovered and I don't think I will for a while, like properly recovered... But I'm definitely stronger than what I was before... - Mila

Mila provides a powerful narrative as to how volunteering has helped to sustain and enhance her own mental health. She describes how even after leaving the mental health unit she still felt unsteady and unsure of herself. Mila feels it was at this point the support she received from her voluntary organisation was critical. She feels her volunteering experience and network of support has massively bolstered her self-esteem and that she was able to get 'stronger' from simply 'knowing they were there'. Issues of psychological strength and wellbeing seem to run closely with accounts of personal resilience during hard times for Mila. The account demonstrates that volunteer work can be adapted to suit the needs of the volunteer as they themselves recover from personal life events such as mental health problems. It was extremely beneficial for Mila to know that she could contribute and re-establish the positive role of volunteer even though she is not quite back to full-health.

Similarly, Kev acknowledges that his involvement with volunteering has led to a type of transformative change. In this extract, he reflects on what his life may have been like had he not taken up the volunteering role.

My personal development and that I feel that if [the volunteer charity] didnae step into my life when they did I woulda went back to being a little rogue that got into trouble and didnae listen and... I think that I wouldnt've have been doing absolutely anything with ma life right now, never mind getting into uni... - Kev

Kev also attributes his success in winning at place at university not only down to the work experience gained through volunteering, but also due to the changes he has noted in himself which makes him more ready to move on in life. These include a greater maturity and enhanced sense of purpose. The metaphor of volunteering as a personal and professional 'stepping stone' is useful here where the young adult volunteers are keen to leave a positive imprint on the charity and those who stand to benefit from their volunteering. However, there is also a transient quality to the accounts, where volunteering is taking place during a time of change and transition where the young adults are learning to find their place and purpose in the wider context of their lives and their future

Discussion

Our findings convey volunteering as a complex social experience where social belonging, social motivations and social benefits all have a role in explaining the lives and identity of young volunteers.

The theme of social belonging fostered through volunteering has some coverage in previous literature (Brown, 2012; Yeung, 2010). MacNella & Gannon (2014) found a prominent phenomenon of social grouping to arise in student volunteers. However, volunteering in the student group did not raise the same level of belonging as conveyed by the 'family' Robert described in his interview. While the student sample described a strong liking of their fellow volunteers, due to shared values, many of them described career or personal development as the major motive for their volunteering rather than spending time with individuals they enjoyed the company of. These student accounts may reflect the instrumental and value based motivations for student volunteering reported in the literature (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2003; Hustinx & Lemmertyn, 2003), and the variety and regularity of volunteering opportunities and in university students (Cnaan, Smith, Holmes, Haski-Leventhal, Handy, & Brudney, 2010). In contrast, our analysis describes the consistency of the volunteering group as being key to the young volunteers' sense of trust and belonging.

Identity Fusion Theory

The theme of social motivations suggested that social factors were one of the main motivations for continued volunteering within the charity. It appears volunteering can satisfy the deep human 'need to belong', a term brought into popular usage by Baumeister and Leary (1995). This strong sense of belonging in the young volunteers and the social motivation to volunteer may be viewed in the framework of Identity Fusion Theory (IFT; Swann et al., 2012). IFT is used in the study of behaviours and of individuals who feel a very strong sense of belonging to a particular group, characterised by highly permeable borders between the personal and social self. One of

our participant group's main explanations for the strong sense of belonging experienced was the high degree of acceptance and positive attention from the charity. This may allow volunteers to present a truer version of themselves within the social group, free from fear of judgement. The process of identity fusion, where the individual internalises the values of the group and takes on a desire to help the group, may also explain the social motivation to volunteer (Swann et al., 2012). The potential for volunteers to internalise values from groups is of especial importance in adolescents where value formation is developing at a rapid pace, as emphasised in PYD (Geldhof et al., 2014).

The final theme of social effects of wellbeing and development supports the proposal that positive social connections are integral to positive mental wellbeing and development in adolescents (Bowers et al., 2010). The Five Cs model of PYD has been evidenced to be a robust measure of development in adolescents (Bowers et al., 2010). Within the Five Cs model, 'Connection' is one of the key components, where 'connection' is defined as 'positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges...' (Geldhof et al., 2014 p.934). It is clear from the participant's accounts that they have positive relations within the charity and that they are valued members of the team, thus fulfilling this core component of the Five Cs model. More widely, social belonging is known to have strong links to wellbeing (Steger and Kashdan, 2009), and these accounts also reflect the importance of social connectedness as a mediating factor in the relationship between volunteering and wellbeing (Brown, Hoye, & Nicolson, 2012).

Implications

This study has contributed a new dimension to research on volunteering, exploring the social experience of volunteering in young people outside the student context. The importance of social belonging and motivations in this sample furthers current knowledge on meaningful youth participation. Specifically, the role of belonging in fostering resilience to adapt to change and negative events (Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicolas, 2006), and the importance of community connections in facilitating civic engagement in young adulthood (Duke et al., 2009). Social belonging is also a key factor in the transition into higher education and in retention (Brooman, & Darwen, 2014; Thomas, 2012); thus we can see that social belonging fostered through volunteering may also provide a solid foundation for future work and study.

However, certain limitations to the scope and methodology of this study invite further research. The present study used a small, homogenous sample at one stage in young adulthood. Future research could use a longitudinal approach to better observe the development of personal and social identity, and monitor the influence of volunteering in real time (Haslen, Jetten & Weghorn, 2009). A further limitation to this study was the breadth of topics covered within the interviews. Future research could focus explicitly on the social elements in greater depth (Bronk, 2011). For example, in a sample that experiences very high social exposure, such as residential volunteers.

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