“Why would anyone volunteer with a convicted sex offender?” Volunteering with the ‘undeserving’ in the Big Society.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand volunteerism in the context of society. It explores what leads people to volunteer with ‘undeserving’ groups and how this may relate to society; more specifically, the Big Society. The Big Society agenda seeks to increase giving by ‘...creating the choice architecture and entrenching norms for giving’ (Cabinet Office, 2010: 15). One of the things the government wants people to give is their time; to volunteer. But why volunteer with an ‘undeserving’ group? Sociological approaches to volunteering have explored ‘who volunteers’ (Smith, 1975) and the growth of the voluntary sector (Brenton, 1985). Whilst psychologists have focused on individual motivations explained through the construct of altruism.

The methods of investigation are qualitative, consisting of semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant observation with people who volunteer with ‘undeserving’ groups. The volunteers have been recruited through gatekeepers at organisations who work with ‘undeserving’ groups. These include a night shelter for people who would otherwise be homeless, volunteers from Circles East who work with people with a history of sexual offences and Special Constables who volunteer to carry out the same functions as police officers.

Emerging themes will be presented and discussed in relation to the proposed theoretical framework, which is based on structure-agency theory. Predominantly there will be an exploration into the role of agency within structures through the application of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) ‘chordal triad’ scheme, which divides agency into three components: the iterative - the repetition of past patterns of action, the projective – the envisioning of an alternative course of action, and the practical-evaluative – where a new line of action is executed in response to a current problem. These three components broadly relate to the past, future and present and Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that the way in which people understand their relationships to them makes a difference to their actions. This paper considers the application of this approach, considering that the way in which volunteers view their past, future and present may have an affect on their path into volunteering with ‘undeserving’ groups.

Keywords: (Volunteering, Big Society, structure-agency)

Context

Whilst in a global economic downturn and in a time of national debt, the UK held a general election, which resulted in a Coalition Government made up of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties (Evans, 2011). The Big Society was a key element of David Cameron’s election campaign and after the elections and the formation of the coalition government; the Big Society agenda was launched in May
2010 by David Cameron and Nick Clegg. David Cameron describes the Big Society as “a guiding philosophy - a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control” (Cameron, 2010). There is a clear message that people will be responsible for doing more things for themselves and will be less reliant on central government for finding solutions to local problems. Voluntary action is seen as the means for ‘fixing Britain’s broken society’ (Alcock, 2010). Volunteering is to be encouraged; the Giving Green Paper demonstrates how the government is seeking to create structures in order to make volunteering a social norm for citizens:

“The government can play a role in creating the choice architecture and entrenching norms for giving, and we invite views on whether we should be looking to establish social norms around the giving of time and money, and what those norms should be.”

Cabinet Office, 2010: 15

The Big Society seeks to make it easier for people to volunteer, create volunteering opportunities, and ensure there is support for people to volunteer within organisations (Rochester et al., 2012). In the Giving Green Paper (Cabinet Office, 2010) and the Giving White Paper (Cabinet Office, 2011), the government expresses its aims for achieving social action. The desire is for people to give more and one of the things people are being asked to give is their time; to volunteer. The means to achieve this come in the form of the GIVES principles:

- **Great opportunities**: we need more exciting, enticing, flexible, and convenient opportunities for giving that go with the grain of people’s lives.
- **Information**: we need better information so that people can easily find opportunities to give that are right for them.
- **Visibility**: we need giving to be more visible – the more people see that their peers are giving, and how much they give, the more likely they are to give or give more themselves.
- **Exchange and Reciprocity**: we can encourage people to give in new ways by making the benefits of giving more tangible and immediate – giving is not a one-way street but a mutually rewarding experience.
- **Support**: we need to support communities, charities, and social enterprises to scale up good projects and take on new responsibilities; and to inspire and encourage businesses to be ambitious in their support for the Big Society.

Cabinet Office, 2010: 07

These principles will be revisited later in the paper in order to explore how individuals’ paths to volunteering fit within the Big Society agenda for increasing levels of volunteering.

On the one hand people are being encouraged to give, on the other there have been reductions and proposed reductions in welfare provision. This has reignited a debate that goes back further than the Elizabethan Poor Law; who is deserving of help? This question has been debated in the media (Radio 4, 2010; Furnham, 2012; Seabrook, 2012). Academics have also discussed the Big Society in terms of the inequalities it may lead to (Rochester et al., 2012; Taylor, 2011). Leat (2012: 137) argues that “philanthropy does what it wants to do, in uneven and limited quantities”. As individuals in society become more responsible for delivering areas of provision than the state, it is unknown what will happen to those constructed as undeserving. This paper seeks to explore what led people who already volunteer their time to help
There has been a growing emergence of literature on the Big Society in the social sciences. Early literature was openly speculative (Alcock, 2010; Taylor, 2011; Rochester et al., 2012) and further literature has sought to place the Big Society within history and political ideology (Evans, 2011; Heywood 2011; Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012). There has also been an emergence of literature which has considered the role of the volunteer within in the Big Society (Charlesworth, 2012; Ockenden et al., 2012; Rochester et al., 2012).

The literature around why people volunteer covers a far more diverse range of theories than government initiatives alone. One of the main bodies of literature on why people volunteer concerns motivations. In the field of psychology the most prominent theorists consider motivation as a functional activity which meets a pre-existing need (Clary et al., 1998). This research focuses on volunteering from the individual perspective however, within the various strands of sociological thought there is criticism of this approach. Sociologists argue that action is based on a broader cultural understanding of the social situation (Musick and Wilson, 2008). From a symbolic perspective action is led by the values and beliefs held within broad cultural understandings (Dekker and Halman, 2003). Hunstinx et al. (2010) provide a comprehensive review of the literature on theoretical perspectives on volunteering, and in doing so highlight the lack of literature on volunteering which considers how the wider macro system - socio-cultural context - influences individuals volunteering. Political ideologies around welfare and the responsibility of providing services influence the levels of volunteering (May et al., 2005) as do economics and cultural characteristics of nations (Hodgkinson, 2003). There are two main streams of literature on volunteering: that which considers the individual and that which considers the wider macro context.

This paper seeks an explanation of volunteering that goes beyond the individuals’ motivations and instead seeks to place the actions of volunteers within the wider macro context. In drawing on the emerging findings from my PhD project I seek to add to the discussion on the Big Society. The emerging findings come from qualitative fieldwork carried out with volunteers working with groups constructed as undeserving and will be presented within the framework of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theory of agency. These will then be linked to the principles on increasing volunteering as set out by the Big Society. The aim from my PhD project which will be explored in this paper is:

To unpack what leads individuals to volunteer for groups routinely constructed as ‘undeserving’ and explore their resonance with the principles on volunteering as defined by the Big Society.

**Structure-agency theory: the part of agency**

Structure-agency theory provides a means of looking at phenomena through the agency of social actors and within the structural conditions in which actions occur. In the field of structure-agency Giddens (1984) is the most widely cited theorist, known for his theory of “structuration”. Giddens (1989: 23) argues that structure and agency should be understood through a “dialectical interplay” in which each presupposes the other because social order and individual action happen within situational contexts. Whilst Archer (1988) agreed that structure and agency are empirically linked, she argued that they should be conceptualised as analytically distinct; that there should
be an examination of the influence they have on each other. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) agree that structure and agency are empirically entwined, but seek to demonstrate the different components within agency through their chordal triad.

Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) chordal triad is useful in exploring what leads people to volunteer because it brings together the elements involved in agency. It demonstrates that people’s actions cannot be explained through individual motivation alone, nor can they be explained solely through structural conditions. I will be using the chordal triad to explore how the individual’s narrative of volunteering began, and how this has resonance with their broader cultural understandings and the structural conditions in which their actions take place. These themes are represented by the three elements of which the chordal triad is comprised: iterational, projective and practical-evaluative. These chords demonstrate the actor’s orientation towards the past, future and present in using their agency.

The Chordal Triad

[Diagram showing the Chordal Triad of Agency]

Iterational

The iteralional chord of agency represents a stronger inclining toward the past. Although individuals’ experience takes place in the present, the present is affected by the past and therefore past experiences condition actions that take place in the present. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that in this triad, through habit and repetition, the past creates a stable influence in which action is shaped. When making a decision actors are able to draw upon past experiences and make that decision based on schemas. Schemas can be physical things in the world as well as cognitive patterns which exist in “mental categories, embodied practices, and social organization” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 975) and are recursive in social life (Giddens, 1984). Iteration represents the part of the triad which is based in the habitual patterns of the past; of the routines and traditions. Due to the nature of this triad, it is more akin to theories of structure rather than of agency. However Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that this is due to the focus upon the recurring patterns of actions rather than the way in which social actors engage with them. Whilst this chord is the least reflexive due to its reproduction of social structure, it still requires agency because it “entails attention, intention and effort (Berger, 2008). For a volunteer, it could be that they followed a habitual path into volunteering through an institution, such as the church or their family. However they will not have taken this path as an automaton, they will have still been agentive in volunteering and maintaining this social structure. In this element, the individuals’ reasons for volunteering are likely to be predominantly based within the values and beliefs which they use to justify their actions, which are placed within a broader cultural understanding.

Both the projective and practical-evaluative dimensions are grounded in these habitual past patterns of action.

Projective

One of the limitations of theories of agency has been the failure to move beyond the iteralional dimension. Whilst Giddens (1984) does see change as possible, through ‘discursive consciousness’ (being able to put things into words) Emirbayer and Mische (1998) go further, arguing that Giddens focused on low level reflexivity and failed to show how schemas can be challenged, reviewed and altered. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that human actors do not simply repeat past routines, but invent new ones. By not focusing on the past, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that actors can demonstrate their agency toward the future, imagining new possibilities. In this way, actors are able to distance themselves, at least in some part, from the schemas and habits which constrain social identities and institutions. It entails “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 971). This tends to take place when something disrupts the taken for granted and presents a challenge, to which the solution cannot be met through habitual modes of action. Berger (2008) likens this to Denzin’s (1989: 70) “epiphanies”; moments of experience which make a lasting impression on people’s lives. They have the potential to be turning points in people’s lives and can be powerful enough to “alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person’s life” (Denzin 1989: 70). Turner (1986) argues that this pushes the actor into a state of limbo between the past and the future; here the actor is on the verge of something new, but has not actualised that yet. In the case of volunteering this could be presented as an epiphany where an event has caused the volunteer start volunteering or to change
their volunteering activity.

Practical-evaluative

The third element of the chordal triad is practical-evaluative: “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolved situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 971). This is where agency is used to respond to the demands of the present. Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 994) argue that “even relatively unreflective routine dispositions must be adjusted to the exigencies of changing situations; and newly imagined projects must be brought down to earth within real-world circumstances”. Therefore, whilst a volunteer may have continued volunteering in a habitual manner, they may still have had to alter their volunteering activity in light of external changes. On the other hand, those volunteers who had epiphanies may find their volunteering desires face restrictions. In this chord, the contextualisation of the social experience is important (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), something which has been largely under explored in volunteering research (Wilson, 2000; Musick and Wilson 2008; Hunstinx et al, 2010). Furthermore, Frank (1993) states that action of this kind may also draw upon publically available ‘rhetoric’s of self-change’. These could present themselves in the volunteer’s narrative if they contextualise their volunteering actions within frameworks such as government ideology or policies, or religious practices. These rhetorics of self-change may supply a model by which the actor can frame their pathway or trajectories through the problem they seek to solve (Berger, 2008).

Method

The approach taken to investigating what leads people to volunteer was qualitative. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate because an in-depth understanding of why people volunteer was sought in order to build theory. The research was broadly ethnographic, drawing on narrative approaches, phenomenology and structure-agency theory and using a mix of qualitative methods.

This paper draws on conversations with volunteers who work with groups constructed as less deserving. The conversations occurred during interviews and ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, 1982) during participant observation and non-participant observation. Different data collection methods were used in each setting. Methods were chosen based on appropriateness and the access allowed to me as a researcher in each setting.

Research was carried out with groups of volunteers who have direct contact with groups constructed as undeserving. Volunteers were recruited through gatekeepers in the organisation they volunteer at. The data drawn on in this study comes from:

- a night shelter for people who would otherwise be homeless
- Circles East, a regional branch of Circles UK. This is an organisation which provides circles of support and accountability to people who have committed sexual offences; and
- Special Constables who have the same powers as regular Police Officers and consequently deal with offenders whilst on duty.
Emerging Findings: “What led you to volunteer?”

Unsurprisingly this question provoked a different response from each participant. As their narratives flowed, the volunteers dipped into the past, future and the present. However, their narratives tended to lean more toward one element of agency than the others. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argued that one element of agency can be more dominant in any developing situation. In order to explore the emerging findings, I will draw upon four volunteers from the research as case studies. At this stage in the research, these volunteers’ best demonstrate the links between the chordal triad of agency and what led them to volunteering.

Habits and norms: a lifetime of volunteering

For one participant in particular, it was the norm for her to volunteer. Kay had first volunteered as a teenager whilst a Girl Guide and was now past the age of retirement, having been involved in many voluntary activities in her life time. Research suggests that children who volunteer through their teenage school years are more likely to volunteer during their adult life because they learn pro-social behaviours (Astin 1993; Damico et al 1998; Wilson 2000). Kay's volunteer narrative began in her childhood, suggesting she is more orientated towards the past, toward habits and repeated patterns of action. Kay told me:

“You can perhaps tell, I've done volunteering all my life, so I'm not going to be able to recall it all”.

Kay told me about what she described as the “main” volunteering activities she had done. She had volunteered at her children's playgroup “as you do as a mum”, she was passive about this and didn’t offer further details. Her statement suggests she felt it was normal for mothers to volunteer at their children’s playgroup. Research demonstrates that parents are more likely to volunteer if their child is involved in an organisation (Nichols and King, 1998) and that their volunteering is likely to end once their child is no longer involved with the organisation (Wymer, 1998). This appeared to be the end of this phase of child based volunteering for Kay as she moved on in her narrative to tell me about a new phase of volunteering.

Kay was also a member of the church and had found most of her volunteering opportunities through this connection. She explained this as:

“I've for a long time been a member of the church, so I've done volunteering things with the church, associated with the church”.

This narrative suggests that Kay saw inevitability in her volunteering due to her church membership. Religion has been seen as a significant determinant to volunteering (Low et al, 2007; Paik and Navarre-Jackson, 2011), particularly so for white people and black people (Kitchen et al, 2006). Religion is part of a wider cultural practice that goes beyond the individual (Hustinx et al, 2010) and demonstrates that Kay’s values and beliefs toward volunteering are likely to be embedded in this cultural understanding, which she may draw upon as new situations emerge for her to deal with. This is something that a motivational theory within the field of psychology neglects. Action goes beyond the individual, it is not simply a productive activity, but is founded in symbolic meaning (Hustinx et al, 2010). Although Kay did not create these values and beliefs, by volunteering as part of a member of the church Kay recreated and repeated them through her actions.
Kay began to describe how she became involved with offenders, and how this led to her volunteering with sex offenders. She recalled reading an article in a newspaper that changed her understanding of issues within the criminal justice system. She told me; “it really opened my eyes” and she felt she wanted to investigate this more. This for Kay was the projective occurrence, where she imagined herself doing something to help offenders. Through the Christian Fellowship she began volunteering in prisons, delivering a restorative justice course on victim awareness. Kay had the desire to help a great deal, but she also had to be realistic:

“Hearing offenders stories (...) for many people [it] seemed like an inevitable path and I wanted to help them not make the same mistakes again, so I wanted to help them when they were out. I also wanted to help them never get there in the first place, but you can’t do everything!”

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) had argued, projected plans are often brought down to earth with the reality of the context in which the actor is situated. Kay had to come to the realisation that she was unable achieve her wish to help in three different ways; supporting offenders in prison, when they left prison and to prevent people from entering prison at all.

Through the Christian Fellowship Kay also heard about a befriending project for ex-offenders once they had left prison, and subsequently became both a volunteer trainer and a befriender for this programme. This was about the same time Kay had heard about Circles, she had read an article about it years before and had thought it provided a valuable service. Her husband was a Quaker and so she had read about Circles (a project initially established by Quaker’s) through Quaker magazines. In their social network analysis on volunteering Paik and Navarre-Jackson (2011) demonstrate that those with an wider social circles, such as those who practice religion are more likely to volunteer because they are presented with more opportunities to do so. Kay had tried to contact a probation officer who was trying to set up a Circle in her area, however they did not get the funding and as a consequence the project never got off the ground. This demonstrates the external real world influences that affect actors’ future trajectories coming to reality. Kay’s want to help offenders and prevent the problems she had read about, were affected by current policies and economics which affected funding. Eventually Kay did join a Circle. She kept her “eyes open” and read in a Quaker publication that Circles were being extended over the whole country. Kay rang the Circles headquarters and was a given a number to ring for a project which, she realised to her delight, was located near to where she lived. Kay met with the Circles East coordinator and became a member of the first Circle in Circles East.

Kay’s actions tended to fit predominantly with the iterational element of agency. Volunteering appeared to be normal for her, having done voluntary activity all of her life. However Kay’s volunteering career wasn’t without agency. Whilst she had been given different volunteering opportunities through social aspects of her life such as motherhood and the church, once she had projected a future in which she was a member of a Circle Kay was determined in her approach. This opportunity didn’t fall upon Kay. She tracked it down, went out of her way to contact people and in doing so determined her own volunteering path.

The moments that lead to volunteering

When asked what brought her to the night shelter during a participant observation session, Helen immediately recalled seeing a newspaper article about people who
were homeless and remembered thinking “I'm lucky to have a roof over my head”. Whilst the first memory narrated may not be the first memory remembered (Lieblich et al, 1998) it is significant because it is likely to be the first one which has bearing to the situation (Adler, 1931). Helen’s narrative began with this ‘epiphany’ moment (as described by Denzin, 1989), demonstrating its importance to her in her story of how she came to volunteer in this setting. Her response to this epiphany was to seek a way to help people who would otherwise be homeless. Her ability to do this was shaped by the structures in society which create homeless people (Murphy, 2000, Shelter, 2012), the historical creation of the means to help people who become homeless, as well as the inclusion of volunteers within the delivery of service provision (Cloke et al, 2007), which is reflected in the changing political ideologies within the different governments’ approaches to volunteering within welfare services (May et al, 2005). Helen hadn’t volunteered before and volunteering hadn’t been a part of her family life growing up, so when Helen started volunteering at a night shelter it was a break from her previous patterns of action. The first shelter Helen volunteered in changed location within the city before changing again into the current night shelter where she was volunteering when the research took place. Although Helen described volunteering at the shelter as becoming “a habit after a while”, she still demonstrated agency in meeting the new requirements placed on her as the changes occurred.

Different trajectories: choosing the path to volunteering

Throughout their narratives volunteers also demonstrated the different futures they had projected for themselves and how this led to their volunteering. The narrative of one Special Constable collected during non-participant observation on an active shift, demonstrated the projective element of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) chordal triad.

Earlier in Fraser’s life, he’d had two projections for the course his life would take in terms of his career; he said it was “50/50” as to whether he would join the army or join the Police. He had been a Special Constable for a year whilst at college, but had joined the army over the Police Force. Looking back, Fraser felt he had done it “the right way around”, he said he couldn’t have been a Special Constable if he’d been a Police Officer first as not many Police Officers come back as Special Constables once they retire. Fraser said that this way he had been able to do both the army and the police. Fraser now had an office job, and when I asked him why he hadn’t become a Police Officer instead of his current job, he said he “couldn’t have afforded to be a regular” and he also believed he would have been pushing the age limit to join. Here Fraser demonstrated how choosing one career projection over another meant that he was able to volunteer at a later stage, when he again could have become a regular Police Officer, the policies in place that dictate pay and age limits within the police had prevented him from fully meeting one of his trajectories. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) had stated, newly imagined trajectories can be challenged by real world circumstances. However, the long standing role of Special Constables within the Police Force and from the previous knowledge and experience he had of being a Special Constable in the past, allowed Fraser to project and achieve a future in which he became a Special Constable.

The practical nature of volunteering

Viv, a volunteer at Circles East’ produced a narrative during an interview which suggests she leans more towards the practical-evaluative aspect of agency. Viv had a new situation emerging; she was in the process of studying for a degree and was
thinking about future employment. Viv was using her agency to respond to the
demands of the present.

“…I’m doing a Psychology degree, and, erm, I obviously want to look at the
end of my Psychology degree and what was going to help me with that. So
obviously I started deciding what I want to do and so, went onto different
volunteering websites and came across Circles…"

This was the first part of her volunteering narrative that Viv gave, demonstrating that
it was the problem of seeking employment in the future which was most significant to
her narrative. Viv was also seeking to challenge herself when she projected her
future working with offenders:

“I thought that, actually, I’m a very non-judgemental person and I thought that
would challenge, am I really non-judgemental?”

There was also an element of wanting to solve problems beyond her individual
outlook and in wider society with what Viv chose to volunteer for, and eventually have
a career in, but it was a particular area she wanted to solve these problems in, and
this meant a break from her past experiences. Viv explained that:

“…my background has always been working with mentally ill, and working
with children (…) I wanted to steer away from that. Erm, originally I wanted to
work with children who had been abused, and so this appealed to me,
because of the fact that actually, rather than work with children who have
been abused, work with offenders so that we can stop the abuse before it
happens. And that’s why, it was like this… rather than work with the victims,
who are sort of, you know (pause) are victims, let’s stop them being victims
basically. So that’s why it really appealed to me.”

Volunteering at Circles meant that for Viv, she had succeeded in projecting a future
trajectory which broke from her past experiences and began to solve the problem she
faced. She had gained the experience she needed for a career with offenders. This
experience had also confirmed for her that it was the carer she wanted.

“after doing Circles it is something that I so, so enjoy, that I’m absolutely
confident it’s the area I want to go into”.

The context of this narrative was Viv’s seeking to gain work experience in her chosen
field. This issue is placed in the wider context or the economic downturn and the
shrinking of the labour market. Wilding (2010: 99) reported that the recession has
caused an increase in volunteering, arguing that this is down to “unemployment,
underemployment or perhaps simply the fear of worklessness”. In order to seek
employment in her chosen field, Viv was aware that she needed to show practical
work experience. In times of recession where levels of employment are low, one of
the ways in which experience can be gained is through volunteering.

Discussion: Volunteering, agency and the Big Society

Having attempted to unpack what leads individuals to volunteer for groups
constructed as ‘undeserving’ in the above section, I will now consider this in light of
the principles on volunteering as defined by the Big Society. As stated in the context
section of this paper, the Big Society seeks to make volunteering a social norm. If the
Big Society succeeds in creating the ‘choice architecture’ to make volunteering a
taken-for-granted part of everyday life, then perhaps more explanations for volunteering will be framed predominantly within the iterative chord of agency. Kay's narrative demonstrated how values and beliefs can shape volunteering behaviour when they are embedded within social structures. I will now reflect on the GIVES principles for increasing volunteering in light of the narratives discussed in the previous section.

Great Opportunities

The idea behind this principle is that by providing great opportunities, people will be more likely to choose to give their time to volunteering than to something else (Cabinet Office, 2010). This principle proved important to Kay's narrative. Once Kay was aware of the opportunity to become part of a Circle, she was determined to see it happen. The only hindrance to Kay's success in achieving her goal was the funding issues in the Probation Service. For Fraser too, the opportunity to become a Special Constable was important to his narrative. It was an activity he was able to succeed in as a result of the establishment of volunteers within the Police (Gaston and Alexander, 2001). For Viv who wanted to volunteer specifically with offenders, again, this opportunity was only available through the established role of volunteers in delivering services within the Criminal Justice System (Rochester et al, 2012). These volunteers used these opportunities to achieve their goals. Despite using their agency, they also needed these opportunities to be created, funded and supported. This happened in the wider macro context which is affected by political ideology, economics and cultural characteristics, going far beyond the individual's motive to volunteer.

Information

Individuals can only volunteer for something if they know the opportunity to do so exists. The Giving Green Paper (Cabinet Office, 2010:11) states that:

"We want to see an information revolution for giving so that people and organisations can easily identify opportunities that interest and motivate them to participate".

The internet is one of the ways the Giving Green Paper suggests information can be provided. This is how Viv found her opportunity to volunteer; she used the information from volunteering websites to make her decision on where to volunteer. Those with wider social circles tend to be more likely to volunteer because they have more information available to them via their social networks (Paik and Navarre-Jackson, 2011). An increase in information about volunteering opportunities may provide a way for those with smaller social networks to learn about voluntary activities available to them, although this does not necessarily mean they will take up the opportunities.

Visibility

Increasing the visibility of volunteering is the governments' way of promoting regular volunteering through "peer effects" (Cabinet Office, 2010: 12). The intention is for people to see others volunteering and be socially compelled to do so themselves. The embedding of voluntary activity within social norms already exists in some institutions. Kay's narrative suggested that it was inevitable for her to volunteer due
to her church connections and research also demonstrates that being active within a religion increases the likelihood of volunteering (Low et al, 2007; Paik and Navarre-Jackson, 2011). However, for Kay and for Helen, it was the visibility of a need which inspired them to volunteer in their current setting rather than the visibility of volunteering. Both Kay and Helen had read articles which made them want to act to solve the problems they saw. In discussing the opportunities to volunteer, the Giving Green Paper (Cabinet Office, 2010: 09) argued that “certain situations prime the mind for making decisions about giving – creating ‘trigger moments’ – and there are some interesting ideas about taking advantage of these opportunities”. In this paper I have discussed these moments as ‘epiphanies’ in volunteers narratives, highlighting the event which led them to project a future in which they volunteered. Perhaps greater visibility of social issues, combined with the opportunity to do something about them will lead to an increase in volunteering.

Exchange and Reciprocity

The government acknowledges that those who give are likely to want to get something out of it for themselves. This principle of increasing volunteering proved to be very important for Viv, she needed to get work experience from her volunteering activity in order to seek employment in her chosen area. This idea of exchange and reciprocity may prove important during the recession. More people have come forward to volunteer in the recession. Wilding (2010: 99) argues that “macroeconomic policy may well have succeeded where other government initiatives have struggled in increasing volunteering levels.” However there is no evidence to show where people have opted to volunteer and which groups have been the benefactors of increased volunteering. It might be that the recession means that people are more likely to volunteer in an area that is of advantage to them in terms of experience and job opportunities, rather than areas of social need. A focus on exchange and reciprocity has the potential to cause inequality.

Support

Support within the Giving Green Paper (Cabinet Office, 2010: 16) looks toward government supporting “communities, community groups, charities, and social enterprises [who] are essential to catalysing and sustaining social action”. Support from government for volunteering was not overt in the volunteers narratives, despite each of the settings the volunteers worked in requiring financial support from the government. Without the financial support to provide shelter for people who would otherwise be homeless, to train, kit out and provide expenses for Special Constables within the Police Force or to fund the training, support and expenses to volunteers within the probation service, it is unlikely that these volunteers would have been able to volunteer in their current roles. This demonstrates that what leads people to volunteer is not based solely on the individual, their experiences and motivations, but also on the structural conditions over which they have little control.

Concluding thoughts

This paper brings together two approaches; that which focuses on the individual and that which looks to wider macro explanations for volunteering. I have taken Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) chordal triad and applied it to the narratives of volunteers working with people who are constructed as undeserving. I explored volunteers’ narratives through the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative
processes of agency and found that individuals’ actions are connected to wider structural influences such as government policy, values and beliefs set within cultural understanding and real world circumstances. Early indications suggest that, much like structure and agency, these two approaches (the individual and the macro) are entwined; one cannot be considered without the other.

I also explored how the paths individuals took to volunteering resonated with the GIVES principles set out by the Big Society. I demonstrated how great opportunities were important for volunteers to succeed in achieving their goals and how information had helped one volunteer to decide where to volunteer. I also showed that although visibility was important in the path to volunteering, for two volunteers in particular it had been the visibility of the need rather than of the opportunity which had led them to volunteer. Furthermore I showed that exchange and reciprocity had been the dominant theme in one volunteer’s narrative. Viv had needed to volunteer in order to gain work experience in her chosen area, a need which was driven by the wider macro context of the recession. Lastly I found that although support was not overt in the volunteers’ narratives, financial support from government was crucial to the volunteering opportunities available.

The next stage of my research will delve further into the structure-agency approach to develop the explanations of what leads people to volunteer, and provide a clearer understanding of how the current context of the Big Society may impact upon volunteering. However, it remains to be seen how much of an impact the Big Society principles on volunteering can have when “philanthropy does what it wants to do” (Leat, 2012: 137).
References


Seabrook, J., 2012. Cameron's attack on the 'feckless poor' has a very long history: The government's planned welfare cuts are the latest attempt by authorities to root out the idle and inactive and set them to work. *The Guardian,* 26 June.


