

Telling tales of volunteering: Individual insights

A research findings briefing paper

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Highlights

We undertook secondary analysis of 78 interviews with volunteers and third sector workers in order to explore the changing dynamics of volunteering. Here we focus contextualising volunteering within individuals' life histories.

People get involved in volunteering due to a combination of motivations, triggers, resources and opportunities. Staying involved also involves a mix of individual and organisational factors.

Volunteering can only be understood when situated within an individual's wider roles and responsibilities. These relational aspects can create tensions and conflicts as people attempt to negotiate the space available for volunteering available in their lives.

Volunteering can be a form of caring, and is affected by an individual's wider care roles and responsibilities: changes in the level of care an individual provides for family members, for example, can facilitate or hinder volunteering.

The relationship between paid work and volunteering is complex. Volunteering can occur as part of paid work, through it, alongside it, despite it, instead of it or regardless of it. Paid work can facilitate volunteering, but can also hinder it, and vice versa.

Volunteering can be a source of enjoyment and a leisure pursuit. It can also be embedded within an individual's wider leisure activities.

There is a strong connection between religion and volunteering, affecting motivations, opportunities and triggers for engagement.

Volunteering can represent more than just another activity that people do; for some it is a fundamental part of who they are.

We have highlighted three particular implications of these findings:

- There is a need to move beyond explanations of why people volunteer that focus on asking their motivations, and of how people volunteer that focus on isolated volunteering activities or episodes.
- Paying greater attention to the relational aspects of volunteering, such as how it must be balanced against other roles and responsibilities, may help organisations seeking to grow and retain their volunteers.
- Recognising the role of volunteering as source of identity and meaning for some people, and the levels of ownership they can feel towards the organisations they support may be useful in the development of approaches to volunteer support.

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Introduction

Expectations are high for the potential of volunteers to deliver services, create resilient communities and contribute to a thriving civil society. The Big Society and Localism agendas in particular put great store in the potential power of volunteering. Repeated drives to increase participation seem based on the assumption that there is an army of volunteers willing and able to get involved alongside a set of structures and organisations waiting expectantly to welcome them. And this is taking place in the context of severe funding cuts. It is also set against evidence of long-term static levels of volunteering (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011), a decline in the average amount of time spent volunteering (Clark, 2014), and that a few people make a disproportionately large contribution to formal civic engagement (Mohan and Bullock, 2012). Questions have been raised as to the ability of volunteering to live up to the great expectations placed upon it. What do we really know about how volunteering works and how the contexts within which it is situated affect its potential?

All too often studies of volunteering decontextualize it. They freeze volunteering in time and space by focusing on individuals' engagement in one particular voluntary activity or at one point in time. Volunteering is not, however, static or isolated. It is dynamic. It is a 'situated practice' (Cornwall, 2002). A process which is positioned within and shaped by the multi-layered contexts within which it occurs: individuals' life histories, their families, organisations, and communities (Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

This set of briefing papers provides insights into the changing processes of volunteering from the stories of individuals, families, organisations and communities. They have been produced as part of the Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector project (see changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk). They are based on secondary analysis of 78 qualitative longitudinal interviews selected from the Real Times (see Macmillan, 2011) and Pathways through Participation (see Brodie et al, 2011) projects. Real Times was primarily concerned with organisational change; Pathways with changes in individual's participatory histories. Both were set up to explore specific but contrasting questions, united by a focus on changes over time. Although not the specific focus of either, together they provide insights into the dynamic ways in which volunteering unfolds over space, place and time, throughout individuals' lives, family, organisational and community histories.

This paper is part of a series of four, each of which focus on one of these evolving participatory contexts. Each paper starts by sharing individual stories from the studies, before drawing out cross-cutting themes and identifying key implications. The focus of this paper is on contextualising volunteering within individuals' lives and life histories.

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Situating volunteering in individuals' lives

There is a tendency to view volunteering in isolation from other activities that individuals engage in and to view it as a static activity without recognition of the different ways it may change over time. The Pathways through Participation project (Brodie et al, 2011) provided new understandings of the myriad ways in which people participate over their lifetimes, and suggested that individual's participatory trajectories are hard to predict. Here we reinforce and add to these findings, by exploring how individual's volunteering practices are shaped by everyday life experiences, alongside specific events and critical moments – relationships, children, jobs, retirement, moving home, caring responsibilities, for example. We begin with three short stories, before drawing out themes that cut across these and the many other individual stories that were analysed as part of this research. The emphasis is not on why people volunteer or even what they do as volunteers, but on how we can gain new understandings of volunteering by contextualising it within individual's lives, situating it within and alongside other roles and responsibilities.

Iris is in her 80s. She was born in London, where she lived – apart from a spell as an evacuee in the countryside - until five years after qualifying as a radiographer. After London she moved to a city in the north east, and while she was living there she met her husband to be. Once married, Iris and her husband moved to a nearby village where they lived and raised their children for 18 years. It was important for Iris that the village had good access – she commuted to work and was extensively involved in activities in a nearby town. These activities included being a District Councillor, a position which was facilitated by flexible paid employment. Iris describes herself as a hands-on councillor, getting actively involved in the areas that she took responsibility for. In addition, Iris set up a charity for young people in the early 1980s; established a club for older people; ran a bingo session; and was an active member of the WI. Iris recognises the importance of her husband's support for all this volunteering, and of the influence of her mother in shaping her love of organising things.

A move out of the long term family home in the 1980s into a new village location, necessitated by a need to provide a suitable home within which to care for her father, was the start of a series of changes in Iris' life. Not long after, at the age of 64, Iris retired from full time paid work. When her husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's she also gave up her role as a District Councillor in order to provide full time care. He died 12 years later. Alongside the grief, Iris described feeling free to be able to enjoy retirement.

Although Iris loved the village that she lived in, she had not been particularly active in it until that point: her previous volunteering had been based elsewhere. Keen to get involved more locally and particularly to re-engage in the familiar territory of a local council, Iris hosted a fundraising dinner with the intention of making relevant local connections. At the dinner she got chatting to the chair of the village Parish Plan Action Group and before long she was an active member, taking on responsibility for the local footpaths. From there she became the Action Group representative on the Village Hall committee, while also establishing a regular village bingo night. Iris regularly organises trips to the theatre and other cultural events and can be relied upon to help out at other village events.

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She continues to volunteer one day a week at a charity shop in the nearby town, raising funds for the young people's charity she founded. Reflecting on her activities, Iris suggests she gets at least as much as she gives: "So, again, I can't say that I organise the things, perhaps, for the village's benefit, it's more for mine. Because I get the buzz, because this is what I like doing." Getting involved, organising and running things, is part of who she is and what keeps her mind active: "And it gives me something to think about, really, because I don't know what people do who don't organise things, what they think about? I still read a bit, but I suppose I don't read as much as I could do if I wasn't doing things. I think I like people."

Basil has always been passionate about collecting things. While farming, he built up a private collection of old farm tools and machinery, as well as other items of memorabilia. When a local charity started work to develop a heritage centre they asked Basil if he would be willing to donate some items. The opening of the centre coincided with Basil's retirement and his involvement grew. Since the start, Basil has volunteered alongside the Centre's curator to develop the collections, research local history, develop leaflets, lead historical walks around the local area, and deliver talks. He was instrumental in the transfer of ownership of the Centre to the village community association, the establishment of its own management committee, and its move into new premises within the village.

Basil's volunteering did not, however, start with the heritage centre. Indeed, it was his engagement in other community activities that made him and his collection known to those in charge of setting up the heritage centre. When he was a teenager Basil had got interested in politics, but was advised against getting involved with any particular party by his step-father. He had instead got involved in the farmers union and had helped to run farmers' discussion societies in the local area. Later he volunteered as a magistrate in the local town, a role which helped him escape from what he described as a relatively insular world of farming.

Alongside these roles, Basil volunteers as a school governor. Basil had noticed that the local school children were rather straying off track when out doing cross country running. Rather than getting angry with the children running across his land, he decided to take a map of the local footpaths into the school to show the teachers where the paths actually were. This meeting led to the head teacher asking Basil to become a governor, a role he accepted and has maintained for many years. Later, after supporting the development of a rural enterprise unit within the local secondary school he also became governor there.

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Violet is in her forties. She is a Christian who has spent much of her life living in two cities in the south west, with a spell living in London and another overseas. When Violet was growing up her mum used to organise various fundraising activities which she would help out with: “I don’t think I had any choice at home!” This proved to be the start of a lifelong involvement with volunteering. During school she visited an elderly local resident. When she moved to university Violet said she didn’t do much volunteering. ‘Not doing much’, however, involved leading a youth group at her church, serving teas and coffees at a drop in centre one evening a week, and helping out at a prison visitors centre!

After finishing her studies, Violet was unsure what direction to take and struggled to find a job. Thinking that she wanted to work with people, potentially with offenders, Violet started to volunteer at the local probation centre. She also got involved with a Methodist centre for excluded young people. She hoped both would provide her with skills and experiences that could lead to paid work. Both came to an end when Violet moved to London where she felt she had greater prospects of finding paid work.

Violet lived in London for nearly a decade during which she developed a career in market research and management consultancy. Although involvement with the church continued, long working hours, an increasingly active social life and longer travel times left little time for volunteering: ‘I think I was just too busy going out and having a good time’. After a few years, however, Violet began to question her future, and a series of connections led her to spend a few years living overseas, some of which was spent working, and a small amount of volunteering teaching English.

On returning to the UK, Violet spent six months living back with her parents during which time she contemplated a new career direction, which led her to visit the local Volunteer Centre and subsequently to a voluntary role with an adult education centre that she hoped would equip her with skills for potential paid work in the field of basic skills training. After six months at home, Violet moved back to her university town where she has lived ever since. She now works in information for a large accountancy firm, which she finds ‘dull’ but well paid and flexible enough to allow her to volunteer one day a week and in the evenings – a factor which has helped to keep her with the firm. When she first returned to her university town she found she had to work to build her social life back up: achieved in part through volunteering with the Samaritans. Violet has maintained the role with Samaritans for eight years, although after a period of feeling over-worked and drained she now tries to keep the role more contained. More recently, a connection at her church led her into advice work with a local charity and subsequently to become a trustee with the same organisation, roles which she feels enable her to draw on the skills she has gained through paid work in a more engaging and challenging setting. Christian connections, and a strong attachment to place, have also led to Violet’s involvement in a campaign against local housing developments.

After relatively recently coming out as gay, Violet has a new partner and is currently finding that she has less time for volunteering. Also, now that she has company, she says she is happier to spend time at home without a constant need to be busy. She acknowledges that throughout her life volunteering has, in part, been about ‘being a bit needy and wanting to feel good about myself’. She says ‘...it reflects the kind of person that I am in that my need to be there for people has led me to do quite a few of these things, my need to be liked has led me to do lots of things, and my need not to be bored.’

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The significance of individual context

As these short vignettes suggest, everyone has a different story. Contextualising volunteering within an individual's life history illustrates the depth and diversity of involvement, the complexity of motivations and routes in the volunteering, and the dynamic nature of participation. There are, however, common elements which shape an individual's volunteering experiences over time such as family relationships, paid work, social connections, and leisure interests. Changes in any of these can affect volunteering practices in some fundamental ways – some can encourage and facilitate involvement, others can stifle it, others shape the experience and its outcomes in more subtle ways. Here we distil some of the crosscutting issues affecting volunteering when we situate it within the diverse and evolving, everyday lives of individuals.

Voluntary action: Volunteering takes on many different guises. People may get involved in different forms of volunteering at any one time and/or over time. For some there is a clear and common theme which unites the different activities – the environment, young people, equality, sport, for example – for others it is much harder to identify any connections. Some people consistently do a lot: they dedicate a considerable portion of their time, energy and passion to their voluntary activities. Others consistently do a little. For many the intensity of involvement varies considerably over time. *Volunteering is not a static activity, but is something which changes over time in terms of role and intensity.*

Getting involved: Qualitative longitudinal analysis suggests that explanations for why people volunteer are far more complex than can be understood by asking about their motivations alone. As the Pathways project found and secondary analysis confirms, volunteering occurs through a combination of motivations, triggers, opportunities and resources. Access to volunteering is structured by different dimensions such as gender, class, age and ethnicity: such dimensions influences the resources that people can draw upon - at individual, family, organisation and community level - in order to volunteer. They also influence the likelihood of being asked, and, as has been found elsewhere, being asked is a significant trigger for volunteering: *"Most people who in theory [...] are happy to do the work, need to be asked and some of them, some of the most successful recruits, have been the ones who have been telephoned 'will you help'".* Agency is, however, also important – individuals make important choices about what they will and won't do, about whether or not they will respond to a request to get involved, about how to utilise their time. *People get involved in volunteering due to a combination of motivations, triggers, resources and opportunities. The reasons they give for volunteering are unlikely to provide a full explanation of why volunteering happens.*

Staying involved: Once involved, one thing often leads to another: *"...I knew they needed a volunteer in a book shop for half a day so I said I wouldn't mind doing that. And then I got my arm slightly twisted to join one of the committees. And then I got my arm twisted to edit its newsletter. I must admit I have a fairly flexible arm!"* In order to stick at it, getting something back in return is often important: a sense of achievement, satisfaction, enjoyment, friendship: *"I think you only give when you get back, because I think that's where the strength comes to do it".* Being taken for granted, or not feeling that your actions are making a difference can lead to frustrations which can make people question their involvement: *"...we're sick of doing things for folk who don't appreciate it".* Knowing when to stop or to say no can be difficult. *Staying involved in volunteering depends on*

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a mix of individual and organisational factors, including the balance between volunteering and other individual roles and responsibilities.

Caring lives: Volunteering may be both a form of caring and may also be shaped by other caring roles (see our families briefing paper for wider discussion). Caring for dependent children, for example, may on the one hand reduce the amount of time that someone has to volunteer, but may also create new motivations, opportunities and triggers for involvement. Caring for elderly parents was cited as a reason for stepping back from volunteering, but had also inadvertently led to others getting involved as they had, for example, left paid work to provide care and this had left them with time to volunteer. Illness or distress amongst loved ones can trigger involvement as people get involved in supporting an associated cause. Equally, supporting or indeed sharing an interest or a passion of a family member – a child in particular – can lead someone into volunteering. *Volunteering can be a form of caring, and is affected by an individual's wider care roles and responsibilities: changes in the level of care an individual provides for family members, for example, can facilitate or hinder volunteering.*

Working connections: The relationship between paid work and voluntary work is consistent and complex. Volunteering can occur as part of paid work, through it, alongside it, despite it, instead of it, or indeed regardless of it. Some people engage in voluntary activities which are closely related to their paid work – they get involved in order to develop skills which can help them in their paid work or as a way of utilise skills gained in paid work. Others chose activities which are clearly distinct and different to their paid work.

Changes in people's working lives appear particularly influential for their volunteering. The search for work can be a starting point for volunteering as people use it to build connections, experience and their CV. Getting a new job can put a stop to volunteering if, for example, it involves a change of location, more hours or stress, less flexibility or support for such activities. The reverse, however, can also be true. Retirement can free up time and energy to expand or take up voluntary activities; it can also, however, coincide with a time of worsening health, reduced energy and additional caring responsibilities. Similarly, volunteering can also facilitate or hinder paid work. Some people felt that volunteering had helped them get on in their careers; at least one, however, suggested that their voluntary role had affected their ability to maintain their paid job. A sense of having to juggle paid and voluntary work was a common theme. And it is not just the individual's work which makes a difference, but also the work of other family members (see families briefing paper).

Sometimes the distinction between paid work and voluntary work is blurred. For some people volunteering can be a direct extension of their paid jobs through activities such as supporting the development of professional associations. Others move fluidly between different roles within the same organisation, one of which may be paid another of which may be voluntary. Others told us that they do the same role within the same organisation getting paid for it when there's funding and doing it for free when not. Even when roles were similar, however, some people drew a distinction between their voluntary and paid work, not in terms of roles but the value base, the nature of the relationship with the organisation, and sense of power and agency they are afforded: *"We're volunteering for this job, so it's up to us"*.

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Changes in an individual's working lives, and those of their family members, can affect their volunteering. Paid work can facilitate volunteering, but can also hinder it. The reverse is also true. Balancing paid work and voluntary work can be something of a juggling act.

Leisure time: Volunteering can be a form of and/or closely connected to leisure activities. It can grow out of leisure-time activities: fulfilling functions necessary for the activity to take place, such as chairing the committee at the sailing club or organising venues for band practice; or enabling others to participate in the activity, through coaching, teaching or marshalling. Changes in an individual's participation in leisure activities – and those of their friends and family - can influence their volunteering trajectories: triggering, stalling, enabling, hindering involvement. It can also in itself be a form of leisure: a source of enjoyment and fun, and an important way to socialise. *Volunteering can be a source of enjoyment and a leisure pursuit; it can also be embedded within an individual's wider leisure activities.*

Religion: The relationship between volunteering and religious activity is well established, albeit complex (Hustinx et al, 2015). Religion can provide both a reason to volunteer and a vehicle to facilitate it. It can create a common connection between otherwise disparate voluntary activities. Some people, for example, spoke about taking on volunteering roles associated with the running of their church, directly organised through their church, or encouraged by a fellow church member. Being a member of a church may facilitate continuity in volunteering activities that may otherwise be halted by a change in location, and in turn volunteering may provide a way of integrating into a new church and wider community. *There is a strong connection between volunteering and religion. Religion can provide a motivation for volunteering; its institutions can also provide opportunities and triggers for engagement.*

Tension and conflict: Emerging through all these different aspects is a sense of tension and conflict as people constantly juggle different aspects of their lives. Volunteering is not something which happens in isolation but must find space alongside these other activities, roles and responsibilities, and can only be understood when considered in relationship to them. Balancing voluntary work with paid work, care roles and leisure activities can be a source of pressure and tension. Being appropriately supported within a voluntary role can be vital in ensuring that the frustrations and pressures caused by this juggling act do not cause burnout and withdrawal. As one person said: *"...I've got my own life to live, you know, and I'm not ... feeling that I am going to be able to get enough support for these things – do I just stick 'cancel' through the middle of it?"*. These tensions and conflicts do not occur solely on the individual level – one person's volunteering is also influenced by changes in the lives of their family members, colleagues and community members. *Volunteering can only be understood when situated within an individual's wider roles and responsibilities and those of their families, the organisations they participate in and the wider community. These relational aspects of volunteering contribute to ongoing tensions, conflicts and power struggles as people attempt to negotiate the space available for volunteering within their lives.*

Identity: Volunteering can become a fundamental part of an individual's identity, a part of who they are: *"Guiding is kind of my life, it really is"*. Talking about herself and her husband, one person said: *"we stay involved because ... we love being on it. He'd be like a fish out of water if he didn't get involved in ... something"*. Reflecting on the development of their volunteering activities over time, one person felt that the different activities they had been involved in reflected *"an evolution of my awareness"*, the different experiences they had, changed the way they viewed the world, and that

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then affected what they were doing: *“this is my particular flow or expression of the things I’ve experienced in growing”*. Volunteering can represent more than just another activity that people do, for some it is a fundamental part of who they are.

Key implications

Situating volunteering within the wider roles and responsibilities that individuals engage in is essential to our understandings of volunteering. Volunteering must fit alongside, and can also be a form or expression of, work, leisure, care, and faith. Changes in any of these can influence the resources available for volunteering, and the experience of being involved. We think there are three particular significant implications of these findings:

- Volunteering is not a static or isolated activity. Movements into volunteering are influenced by a mix of motivations, resources, opportunities and triggers. Staying in volunteering is influenced by a mix of individual and organisational factors. While some people may stay consistently involved in one activity over time, others move in and out of different volunteering activities and intensities over time, with more or less connection between them. Moving beyond an explanation of why people volunteer that is focused on asking their motivations and on how people volunteers which is focused on isolated volunteering activities is important for volunteering researchers, practitioners and policy makers in their attempts to understand and broaden engagement.
- Volunteering is a relational activity. It is a situated practice. The space and resources available for volunteering in any individual’s life is affected by other roles and responsibilities, including paid work, leisure and care. The potential for role conflict means that balancing the demands for time and energy from each of these can be a constant juggling act. Appropriate support and recognition can help to counteract some of these tensions, and can keep people volunteering despite counter pressures. Paying greater attention to the relational aspects of volunteering – to how it must be balanced against other roles and responsibilities – may help organisations seeking to grow, support and retain their volunteers.
- Volunteering can be an important source of meaning and identity for some people. This can contribute to high levels of commitment and strong feelings of ownership towards the groups and organisations in which volunteering takes place. Recognising not just the contribution that volunteers make to an organisation, but also the significance that it can have in their lives and the levels of ownership they can feel towards it, is important for organisations, particularly in times of change.

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Changing Landscapes

Understanding the micro-dynamics of third sector organisations is vitally important in times of rapid social change. This briefing paper has been produced as part of a study called *Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector*, designed to enhance our understanding of the voluntary sector by bringing together evidence from a network of projects that 'walk alongside' third sector organisations as they navigate a shifting policy landscape. For more information, go to: <http://changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk>

Changing Landscapes was undertaken in partnership by:

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