

Telling tales of volunteering: Community 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 on the importance of (geographical) community contexts in shaping volunteering.

Communities are more than just part of the context within which volunteering takes place: they are sources of identity and meaning for residents, shaping and being shaped by all stages of the volunteering process.

Community boundaries have implications for voluntary action, indicating insiders and outsiders, affecting people's participatory possibilities.

Networks of group and organisational structures provide the fundamental building blocks for volunteering within communities, but these are dynamic structures. As new groups are set up they offer the potential for new members to get involved, but may also unsettle existing patterns of engagement.

Volunteering is not a level playing field but varies across communities in terms of the degrees and forms of participation, personal costs and benefits. Communities may rely on a very active core group of volunteers. There is a persistent worry about who will take over as existing volunteers 'retire', but little evidence of systematic succession planning.

We have highlighted four particular implications of these findings:

- Attempts to grow or support volunteering need to recognise and work through the tensions and divides that exist within communities rather than plaster over them.
- Providing the right kind of support for those community members who volunteer in roles which demand considerable investments of time and energy and which come with high levels of responsibility is vital in order to ameliorate burn out.
- It is important to recognise the value of different forms of volunteering, and ensure opportunities are structured to enable people to participate in different ways and at different levels.
- Findings new ways of asking new people to get involved in volunteering can be hard work and can represent a real challenge for community groups, but it is an investment which is likely to pay off.

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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 communities.

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Situating volunteering in communities

There has been an ongoing policy interest in communities, particularly geographical communities, as sites for participation, mutuality, development and service delivery. The current government has made specific commitments to enhancing the role of local people in developing and running their communities. The persistence of such rhetoric suggests that it is both important and interesting to contextualise volunteering within the communities within which it occurs and to build our understanding of how communities shape volunteering, and vice versa. Our focus here is primarily on geographical communities. Indications are that communities of interest, race and religion are equally as important for shaping volunteering, but we are guided by our data to focus here on communities of place. We begin with three short stories, before summarising some of the cross-cutting findings.

Buttercup is a relatively affluent village in south east England. It has a population of approximately 1,200, and is more socially mixed than is typical of the area. The village has distinct areas within it, where geographical divides come to represent social divides. It has a school, shop, post office, pub and community hall, and a range of volunteer-run community groups, including a friends of the school, an allotments association, WI, a football club, a village newsletter, an over 60s club, guides and scouts, church groups, and skittles team.

The fortunes of these groups and organisations have varied over time. The village hall is recognised as an important institution within the village. For the last few years, however, its fate has hung in the balance. After the existing committee left about five years ago with talk of the need to sell the hall, it has been given a new lease of life by a new committee made up of representatives from other community groups and driven by a particularly charismatic chairman who is committed to opening it up to the community. The committee have been vigorously fund raising to pay for renovations and upkeep. While some felt the hall and its committee had opened up, others felt there was more to be done, suggesting for example that ticket prices for fund raising events were set too high, making it inaccessible for some.

Some groups have struggled recently to maintain involvement, attract new members or to encourage people to help out with their activities. The football club, for example, has folded in the last couple of years. Others have been successful in attempts to widen the number and range of people involved. With encouragement from the local Rural Community Council (RCC), a group of residents came together in 2008 to form a Community Plan steering group. The RCC was specific in its guidance that the Community Plan team should not be made up of existing Parish Councillors. A core group of eight volunteers emerged to lead the planning process, some of whom had not been particularly active in the community previously. After a period of research and consultation, the parish plan was endorsed by the Parish Council in 2009. An action group was subsequently set up with high hopes of taking things forward, including delivering a few 'quick wins' to keep the community on board. Not everyone was convinced that the issues that were being addressed were the right ones.

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The Parish Council is another important institution, shaping participation in the community. In 2010, nine of the 11 places on the Parish Council were filled. One councillor had held the position for about 40 years. It was suggested that few people in the community would know who their councillors were. In 2011 Parish Council elections were held for the first time in 25 years. Twelve people had stood for 11 places, and three new councillors were elected. The renewed interest in the Parish Council may have been in response to a planning application for 60 houses on the edge of the village, causing considerable upset and mobilising the community in protest.

Despite these recent developments, there remained a core group of particularly active residents, albeit slightly wider than before, who seemed to do a lot of volunteering. A wider group helped on an occasional basis, particularly when personally asked to do so. A list of people had been put together from residents who had said they were willing to help out during the parish planning process, but this was yet to be acted upon.

Bluebell is an ethnically, socially and economically mixed community, spanning a number of neighbourhoods within a large city in the north of England, with pockets of high deprivation. It has a range of housing, including back-to-back mixed tenure terraces and high rise flats. It has a sizeable, transient student population living alongside a more stable 'local' population.

A considerable number of groups and organisations operate in the area. Various initiatives have been running to encourage collaboration and partnership between such groups, at different levels. In amongst the mix, there are a few particularly significant community institutions. In an area where communal areas were lacking, for example, a multi-purpose community centre acted as an important anchor within the community, providing a space which brought different groups together.

About ten years ago a Development Trust was set up in the area, originally in response to plans to close and redevelop one of the local schools into housing. The Trust has since headed up an initiative which brought local groups together to produce a neighbourhood design statement. It also now runs a community shop, a farmers market and a community orchard.

Housing issues have had other effects on local participation. Tenants and residents associations have a long history of activity in the area. A Community Action Group was set up to protest against a private finance initiative, which included plans to sell off three blocks of council flats in the area. The group was protesting against the plans and the ways in which they were consulted. Some residents felt that their voices got lost in amongst the louder voices of the middle classes who lived in other parts of the community. When they spoke out, it was not always well received, not least (they felt) because it was 'unexpected' from working class residents. While perceived threats to the community were bringing certain parts of the community together, they were also creating tensions and divisions.

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The mosque and an associated Muslim organisation were both important sites for participation and peer support, in the area and beyond. The organisation was established in 2001, became a charity in 2004, and by 2012 it involved over 300 people.

The divides within the community, based on the physical geography and along social, ethnic and cultural lines are well recognised. An initiative, set up by residents in response to unrest in the area, with the aim of bringing different parts of the community together for a day of activity, was recognised as a way of enhancing integration through voluntary action.

Delphinium is a rural community in the Midlands, England, made up of a number of villages. It is an area of high deprivation and high unemployment, devastated by the closure of the local coal mines. In the 1990s it was designated a Regeneration Area. The geographical divides created by the physical structure of the villages have come to reflect social and economic divides. Labour Party membership is high, so too is (or at least was) union membership and this has shaped participation.

The community has a school, a couple of shops and cafes, a number of halls, a few pubs, a sport and social club and a heritage centre. These resources are not evenly distributed across the villages. A number of voluntary and community groups provide a rich mix of activities and services, including a community-run shop and cafe, a magazine, a minibus service, a youth club, a pensioners group, various bingo nights, mother and baby groups, football club, fishing club, cricket club, brownies and guides and residents association. There is considerable cross-over in terms of participation in some of the groups, with a tendency for certain groups of people to cluster around certain activities. The fortunes of these different groups have waxed and waned over the years, as have the levels of engagement. For many years, two key institutions have, however, been consistently dominant.

The Parish Council holds considerable sway in the community. It employs a number of people, and is responsible, among other things, for the maintenance of various halls, buildings and green spaces. Its boundaries are not coterminous with Delphinium's. Although Delphinium represents the largest community, the parish council also covers a number of other villages. Debates have raged over the years as to how fairly Parish Council resources are distributed across the different communities and how well its members represent all their constituents. Questions have also been raised as to how open, accountable or transparent the council and its decision making processes are. Tensions peaked in 2007 when the chair was ousted following accusations of bullying. Following a short period of relative stability, in 2011 a number of Delphinium's existing Councillors stood down in protest to a number of issues, including concerns about the forthcoming election process. Since then Delphinium has not had a representative on the Council. Plans have now been passed to create a new Delphinium Parish Council, which will come into place in 2015, the boundaries of which will fit better with the community boundaries. Residents were realistic about the likelihood of this resolving the ongoing issues of participation and representation.

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With the encouragement of a regeneration officer, a community association was set up in Delphinium in the late 1980s as an Industrial and Provident Society. The aim was to draw in support for the association from across existing community groups, within the guidelines that it could not be run by the same people as the parish council. This guidance contributed to a tension between the two groups which has been hard to shift, exacerbated by overlapping areas of responsibility. The association is responsible for a number of initiatives, including a shop, café, heritage centre, and mini-bus service. Each initiative has its own committee, although often the same people find themselves on each one. They are also the same people who are on other village committees, leading to concerns over conflicts of interest. After a few years of success for the community shop and café, during which enough income was raised to subsidise other services, in the last year a delicatessen was opened up next door, which immediately took away trade and the future of the shop now hangs in balance. This might prove to be the final straw for some of the core members of the association who, after years of community service, are questioning why they bother, when faced with an uphill struggle to get people involved in using the services, let alone volunteering to support them.

The effects of community on volunteering

These short stories barely touch the surface of the complex realities of the processes and practices of volunteering and participation in the communities from which they are drawn. They do, however, hint at some of the different ways in which community contexts shape volunteering and, in return, how participation shapes communities. Here we summarise some of the most significant.

Feelings of community: A desire to be part of a 'community' and equally the sense of already belonging to a 'community', and the rights and responsibilities that this implies, can lead to people taking on voluntary roles, either through choice or sense of obligation. Perceived threats to a community can be a particularly powerful motivation or trigger for voluntary action. For many people, participation is an integral part of the very idea of community, and becomes part of their own self-identities and indeed their social status. *Communities are more than just part of the context within which volunteering takes place: they are sources of identity and meaning for residents. They shape all stages of the volunteering process, and are shaped by it.*

Boundaries and divides: Communities are social constructs, with fuzzy and contested boundaries, yet in the implementation of policy they are often delineated by administrative boundaries which may not conform to those which community members would themselves recognise. Further, within each geographical community, individuals many hold multiple allegiances to other 'communities' which crisscross that one space. Communities are also divided, with geographical divisions over time often coming to represent and to reinforce wider social divisions. *Community boundaries have implications for voluntary action. They indicate the existence of insiders and outsiders, and 'them' and 'us', affecting people's participatory possibilities.*

Institutional structures: Participation within communities is structured according to the different institutions within it: the networks of community groups and organisations are particularly influential in providing the foundations for volunteering. Different social groups within a community tend to form different networks around specific building, groups and organisations. While there is often considerable overlap in the membership of certain community groups, this does not always enhance relationships between them. Further these structures are not the same across different

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communities. Our findings suggest, for example, that the institutional structures found within urban areas may be more diverse than those within rural areas and this has implications for participation. Neither are they static. The visibility, capacity, and power of the community groups and organisations changes over time and are perceived differently by different parts of the community, all with implications for participation. *Networks of institutional structures provide the fundamental building blocks for volunteering within communities; but these are dynamic structures. As new groups are set up, new spaces for participation are opened up for volunteers, but new entrants can be seen as a threat to the existing regime and may result in a refusal to participate which may jeopardise the success of the new group, despite potential benefits to their community.*

Levels of involvement: Community participation is often dominated by a small number of very active volunteers: *'there's certain lynchpins within the community and their paw prints are everywhere'*. The considerable resources – financial, social, personal - required to volunteer at this level means access is unequal. Such community leaders often volunteer in multiple groups/organisations, and shoulder much of the burden of community action, sometimes at considerable personal cost. Burnout is a real risk, particularly when other community members fail to recognise their contribution. Arguably they also have the potential to reap the greatest returns. They are not, however, the whole picture. Leaders are supported by a group of followers, who may not initiate action but do make it happen: they turn up for committee meetings and follow up on the actions required. In turn there is a wider network of active participants, willing to help out when asked on specific occasions or for specific events. A group of more passive participants will turn out to support community events and activities. Some do not appear to participate in their communities at all. Not everyone's voluntary activities, however, are equally as visible: some volunteer outside of their geographical communities; some participate in ways which are obscured by the dominant construct of volunteering. Those who do most may bemoan the lack of engagement of others; those who are perceived to do less may be inadvertently excluded by those who are perceived to do more. *Volunteering is not a level playing field in terms of degrees and forms of participation, personal cost or benefit.*

Recruitment and succession: People get involved in volunteering activities within their communities through many different routes. The role of personal networks, is however clear. Many people find themselves involved after having been asked to attend a meeting, help out at an event, or sit on a committee by a family member, friend or neighbour. Local newsletters were frequently used to ask community members to get involved, but their effectiveness was questioned, with the personal touch was more likely to be seen to yield a positive response. This has implications for the diversity of people that are likely to get involved: recruitment is concentrated within more homogenous groups. One particular concern was whether and how far the volunteer base within communities was ageing: *"we started with brown hair, but there's none of us got it now and there doesn't seem to be anybody coming up behind us"*. Getting people to sit on committees was another particular challenge. *There is a constant worry about who will take over from current volunteers, but little evidence of systematic succession planning.*

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Key implications for the volunteering movement

Communities are often characterised as being harmonious and homogenous, within which common characteristics lead to a sense of solidarity and mutual support, with little acknowledgement of the power differentials that often exist between or within them. There is a tendency to assume a universal culture of participation whereby all members are willing and able to participate equally, share common goals, and subsequently benefit equally; to obscure differences and inequalities and changes over time.

When the fractures and divides that exist within communities are laid bare, we begin to see some of the implications for volunteering and for its potential to meet various policy ambitions. While volunteering can help to unite different parts of a community, it can also serve to exacerbate divides. Taking part in voluntary action requires various resources which are not equally distributed across communities; it also generates resources which again are not equally distributed. In order to understand the processes and practices of volunteering as situated within communities, we must acknowledge the power relationships which structure it and can be reinforced by it, and the ways in which these plays out over time and space. We have distilled a few specific implications:

- Rather than being homogeneous and harmonious, communities can be full of divides, tensions, conflicts and power struggle. Such divides and tensions can affect the practice and potential of volunteering; the reverse can also be true. Attempts to grow or to support volunteering need to recognise and work through these realities – the tensions and divides - rather than attempt to plaster over them.
- It seems common for a relatively small group of particularly committed individuals to be responsible for a majority of the most visible forms of volunteering within communities across the country: they make a significant contribution to the life of our communities. These individuals invest a considerable amount of time and energy in their communities, and volunteering can come at considerable personal costs. Providing the right kind of support for those who volunteer in roles which demand considerable investments of time and energy and which come with high levels of responsibility is vital in order to ameliorate burn out.
- Alongside the important contribution of the relatively small number of particularly committed individuals, communities rely on a much wider group of people to undertake a much wider range of voluntary activities, not all of which is equally visible or valued. Recognising the value of different forms of volunteering, and ensuring opportunities are structured to enable people to participate in different ways and at different levels is important.
- As well as providing different opportunities to participate, it is important to find different ways of asking people to get involved in supporting their communities. Different people will respond to different methods, but in general the most likely to be successful is the personal ask. In order to involve new and more diverse people the 'ask' needs to be extended beyond current volunteers within existing networks. Finding new ways of asking new people to get involved in volunteering can be hard work and can represent a real challenge for organisations, but it is an investment that is likely to pay off.

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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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