

# **Dynamic Pathways Into, Through and Out of Environmental Volunteering: beyond a zero-sum approach**

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# Introduction

The launch of Big Society, as part of the Conservative Party manifesto in March 2010, set in motion a number of initiatives, ideas and forecasts for the future of sustainable governance in the UK (e.g. neighbourhood grants to encourage the development of local groups and encourage social enterprise) (Blond, 2010). These convictions have been reiterated on a number of occasions, for example, from the launch of the Big Society Bank to support entrepreneurship through creating local economic partnerships, to attempts to simplify the registering of charities, and the introduction of mechanisms for transparency and accountability in government (Mohan, 2012). This shift in government policy is part of a wider political agenda to produce new modalities of active citizenship by offering publics more choice in local decision-making (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008; John et al, 2009; Pykett et al, 2011).

Environmental volunteering is a substantive, as well as symbolically important, dimension of the policy aspirations for the current Conservative-Liberal Alliance Governments promotion of the Big Society. From its formative placement in social policy, where concern to propagate nature's benefits centred primarily on reversing and restricting losses to habitat and wildlife, and securing valued iconic landscapes (Sheail, 1998) environmental volunteering today belongs within a more complex, and ambitious, narrative of 'sustainable development'

and 'wellbeing'. A number of theoretical frameworks have been developed seeking to make sense of what might be at stake here, with ideas of post-productivism and multifunctionality representing key points of empirical debate and departure (Ward, 1993; Marsden 1998; Wilson, 2007). In this vein a large body of work has emerged seeking to grasp whether and how the methods and mind-sets of a post-war UK land economy is being fundamentally and decisively transformed to one more centred on leisure and therapeutic spaces (see especially; Wilson 2001; Evans et al. 2002; Walford, 2003; Mather et al. 2006).

Interesting and significant this work is, one of the implications of this type of empirical focus and reasoning is that it inevitably shapes the idea that environmental volunteering's role within sustainable development is primarily bound up with patterns of behaviour embedded in paid occupations across the land based industry and how these intersect with actions of the market and the state. In effect, environmental volunteering interfaces with sustainable development as an issue first and foremost bound up with economic viability and productivity, and indeed, this is precisely how the so-called 'rural development paradigm' (Ploeg, 2000) has been interpreted, with its attendant concern on drawing out synergistic relationships between environmental and economic concerns in the name of rural 'multifunctionality' (e.g. Marsden and Sonnio 2008). As such, there is little in this

## Introduction

theoretical and empirical position that tells us of the way environmental volunteering may function in the context of wider community development agendas (Big Society), despite their highly visible place within discourses of sustainability.

Structured through the work of public and third sector actors, often working in partnership with each other, community agendas provide an important stage upon which modalities of livelihood and well being are now being choreographed, and as we shall see, are significant in the way they interface with environmental goals through unpaid, non professionalized, commitments of time and labour; activities that often go by the name of 'volunteering'. Volunteers and volunteering are central to the current governments policies for developing environmental and social standards. As political influence disengages from development processes amidst changing socio-economic states the ability of society to 'do it for themselves' has rarely been greater. This expectation and faith in a voluntary sector under critical strain from shifting flows of finance indicate that complacency toward ineffective practices requires challenging. The potentiality of volunteering to transform social systems and experiences is written within policy, as a decentralised state, but localised practice, underpins political strategy. Here then is a tension, as organisations historically placed to facilitate a revolution of public empowerment are themselves disempowered. This is

indicative of the potentiality of grass-roots volunteering to appease the contradiction between opportunity and capability. Activating latent capability at grass-roots and voluntary sector scale requires improvement of volunteer management practices, to actualise the potential from each volunteer. Multiple scales of action, at the structural and operational level, are required to robustly enable community led change in the new decentralized state system.

At present, voluntary capabilities are liable to fall short of future demands placed on society and the environment. In order to meet social needs it is predicted the volunteer population must double to 60% by 2021 (Wilson et al, 2011). Optimism regarding its achievement using current practices is brought into stark aspect by the 4% decrease in participation between 2005-10 (Defra, 2010). This warns of future issues regarding voluntary support and provision (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2011). Environmental volunteering promises particular gains as the interconnections between voluntary environmental enhancement and personal and community development are well documented. Despite this, its capacity for social change remains largely misunderstood. As society demonstrates an appetite for the short-term opportunities prevalent within the environmental sector (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2011) the gap between demand and

action is indicative of opportunities for change. Robust conclusions on trends within environmental volunteering are encumbered by deficiencies in knowledge. There is, however, an optimistic suggestion of a slight increase in participation within this activity (Russell, 2009). As the foundations of reduced state function are firmly laid, a cycle of learning and self-improvement is now required from the voluntary sector to realise volunteering's potential.

Notions of personal futurities are powerful motivations of action. Sense of self-efficacy, expectation and aspiration interact to determine behaviour choices, suggesting causal predictors of voluntary behaviour. Knowledge on the role of personal futurities in behaviour shaping is, however, obscure within the literature. This lacunae of understanding, in which volunteers are conceived of in terms of zero-sum beings that can be reliably categorized in terms of discrete classifications, has cogent implications for the volunteers conceptualization and their management. Predictably, resultant theories demonstrate a reticence to draw contextually relevant conclusions regarding the interplay of personally relevant priorities, values and interests in the cognitive process of decision-making. This blind-spot in comprehension is born from a reductionist language and cognitive behaviourist approaches that give weight to generalizations. This has resulted in the construction of a false idea:

volunteers are valuable in terms of their availability and delivery of outputs. In its preoccupation with volunteering as a tool for end users, the value of volunteering is underestimated. Volunteering provides rich opportunity for personal development and the profound enhancement of wellbeing (Pretty et al, 2005; White 2010). Simultaneously acting as attraction and impact, voluntary action is capable of radically transforming personal worlds, with implications for community, family and self (Penner, 2004; Berkman et al, 2000; Kilpatrick, 2009). In policy and practice, volunteers are framed as units of action, materialising at the point of need to satisfy a given output (Nassar-McMillan et al, 2003; Bruyere, 2007). In this the full transformative effect of volunteering is lost, as it negates its latent capacity to transform social, local and personal worlds. Resisting the myth that volunteers are useful, this paper draws on notions of futurity to enhance understanding of volunteers as intrinsically valuable individuals in a continual state of psychological transition and priority formation.

Transferring the focus onto individuals' intensely personal and contextually relevant lived experiences can give rise to largely concealed explanations of human behaviour. In this I seek to extend existing understanding on the factors that determine entrance into, through and out of volunteering opportunities. Notions of futurity fluctuate with perception and priorities, and sensed options shift

## Introduction

with lived experience. This is unpicked, as volunteer accounts suggest blurred boundaries between volunteers and 'non-volunteers'. The interconnected transition of structural and psychological states are considered in relation to subjective behaviour choices, in an analysis that indicates longitudinal predictions of voluntary behaviour are inherently flawed due to these flows.

The purpose of this paper is to provide theoretical and empirical insight into nature of these activities with particular reference to a key moral and political framing of environmental volunteering: the creation of spaces that can speak to the needs of communities. In this paper we trace volunteers' pathways into, through and out of environmental volunteering, in the context of interactions with land cultivation. We suggest that participation in voluntary action is a process, as factors coagulate to determine action and inaction. Accepting that volunteers are experts in their own experience, we question the antecedents to these actions. Indicative of the diversity of volunteer backgrounds, complexity and personal priority lie at the heart of decision making. Volunteer accounts bring this to the fore and, in doing so, black-holes in understanding are addressed. This paper adds to knowledge on the affect of environmental volunteering on wellbeing, calling into question complacency regarding the significance of the voluntary act for personal progression towards an independently formed goal,

regardless of project output.

### *The Politics of Volunteering*

Volunteering is a personal choice that is intimately connected to a personal politics that is performed in the public and private sphere. The previous Labour administration (1997-2010) pursued policy directives that encouraged individuals to be responsible citizens and volunteer within their communities (May et al, 2005). This call to public service was reiterated through the current Coalition Government's neo-liberal agenda. As Wilson explains, the 'big society' hinges upon 'big responsibility' (2011). Although this remains contentious, as public questions regarding political responsibility continue to be debated, dire accounts of global mental health and environmental degradation demand a change in the provision of social policy (World Health Organisation, 2012; Raleigh et al, 2007). Addressing mental ill-health, which accounts for 13% of the world's diseases (World Health Organisation, 2012), and dire predictions for global climate change (which effects will hit the vulnerable hardest as they are unable to adapt) (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2004; Natural Environment White Paper, 2011) are now pressing political issues. As Haines et al (2009) have argued actions that address the dual burden of public ill health and environmental degradation represent

significant gains to economy and society. However, voluntary action is falling short of the Coalitions Government target of doubling the volunteer population by 2021 (Wilson et al, 2011). Hence it is timely to question how volunteering will contribute to future changes to society and the extent to which desired futures may be achieved.

Amidst austerity measures with concomitant reduced resource support and patchy policy design, communities are being encouraged by government to find a way to shape the spaces, places, services and cultures that form their valued worlds, or risk losing that which they depend on for physiological, psychological and social needs. Local participation is critical to achieving these desired futures. However, this onus of responsibility is placed on communities and individuals who may neither be equipped, able or willing to engage in this process. The Coalition Governments policy therefore of 'empowering individuals' to deliver local services therefore runs the risk of becoming nothing more than empty rhetoric. As Williams explains, both formal and informal community involvement is higher in affluent and educated wards than deprived regions (2003). Thus a policy emphasis on replacing social provision through volunteering provision may potentially exacerbate extant inequality. Methods of mobilising and training volunteers therefore requires renewed appraisal.

Volunteering in the UK builds on a

strong history of charitable action. The Big Society agenda lays the foundation for the implementation of community participation, as localities are 'empowered' to determine their own future. Oppenheim et al. (2010: 2) explain, "it is an agenda born from a profound belief of mutualism, co-operatives and the social economy". The philosophical onus for a Big Society centres upon social responsibility, increased democracy, improvements in welfare, and a stronger, more cohesive, empowered community (Blond, 2010). The assumption, on the part of government, is that if the state steps back, communities will engage in localised decision-making and community-based deliberation will come to dominate the structure of local governance. The central ideas of the Big Society, of self-efficacy, volunteerism and moral responsibility, aim to encourage a 'neighbourhood army' of professional community organisers to assume the coordination and activity of governing. In doing so, government seeks to stimulate an 'organised' and cohesive society with the capacity to overcome local issues with local solutions, and find ways to improve citizen happiness and wellbeing (Rogerson et al, 2011). It is the notion of 'empowerment' that government uses to legitimise intervention into civic life through neoliberal rationalities of "unravelling ... public institutions, practices and sensibilities" (Newman in Pykett et al, 2011:8; see also Blakeley, 2010). Through the process of unravelling these institutions and practices, central government is

## Introduction

presented with an opportunity to construct new thought and behaviour through the reconciliation of “personal freedom of choice, supporting the establishment of a more caring and supportive system of government” (ibid: 1). The outcomes of this ideological shift will be determined not by Government, but by the combined determination and decisions of the public, private and third sectors, as well as communities. Traditional advocates of voluntary action focus on community groups and NGOs (Bell et al, 2011).

However, the landscape of these charitable agencies is changing due to financial constraints and with it incrementally developed resources conducive to effective action are being redistributed and dispersed. As established charities and groups are unable to survive in a period of financial downturn, their dissolution results in more than just a skills deficit when key actors disperse. Knowledge of local priorities, networks, resources and culture and the trust that enables their effective use underpin effective, locally appropriate projects disappears too. These resources are the foundation of the place-based strategies required for resolution of complex local challenges.

Opportunities for action are simultaneously emerging and dissolving as the development of a neo-liberalist system realigns both resources and opportunity. Contradiction characterizes these shifting geographies, as inequality of participation overlays inequality of opportunity and relative poverty (Williams, 2003). Realigning

inequality of participation requires, therefore, grasp of contextually embedded factors that determine participation in collective action. The challenges of mobilizing group based voluntary action are manifold. The act of cultivating participation in community-based action requires resilient communities, a sense of belonging and trust (Williams, 2005; Kilpatrick, 2009; Berkman, 2000). This we suggest is indicative of the feedback loops of experience and action that are latent within the act of volunteering.

### *Motivations, Mobilisation and Futurities*

Producing a resilient voluntary sector, able to respond and adapt to political priority shifts, is fundamental to creating sustained future change. Contemporary literature on volunteer motivations and barriers is extensive, with particular attention paid to socio-demographic triggers to participation (Sundeen et al, 2000; Measham et al, 2007; Bruyere et al, 2007; Ryan et al, 2001; Dolnicar et al, 2007). Yet few studies suggest strategies for understanding the emergence, practice and dissolution of action in relation to temporally relevant experiences. This is an important as Yanay et al (2008) explain, the attrition of volunteers is one of the greatest challenges to functioning charities. Extending our knowledges from initial volunteer motivations, through



commitment, practice to withdrawal could contribute to ameliorating drop-out rates. We propose that shifting commitments of volunteers are inadequately explained, hindering volunteer management and mobilisation. Furthermore, that the reduction of perceptions, attitudes, values and aspirations into discrete, temporally bound states perpetuates the myth that volunteers are a constantly available tool for social change and that the context of volunteering is inherently embedded in maintenance - not necessarily uptake - or opportunity.

Current research demonstrates that volunteering occurs as individual needs and opportunities align. These needs may arise from altruistic (Ryan et al, 2001; Wearing et al, 2001) or egotistic tendencies (Hibbert et al, 2003). What is clear is that these factors are not mutually exclusive and that they interact dynamically (Rehberg, 2005). This is a significant point, given the trend in research on volunteering to define discrete classifications of behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Clary et al, 1999; Measham et al, 2007) that inadequately account for the fluidity of motivations. Despite this evidence there is a plethora of research that fails to explain these complexities. We argue that individuals everyday desires and dissatisfactions interact to determine behaviour choices, as they aspire to transform themselves through supplementary experiences. This understanding exposes the flaws in the zero-sum distinctions between volunteer

and non-volunteer, as potentiality lies in all and experience shapes states of future being. In this we assert with Teske (1997) that active participation is embedded in volunteers' desire to change who they are and who they may become.

The 'natural environment' (broadly conceived) offers a unique site where the benefit to an individual can be accrued from volunteering and being in nature. Current research on human interactions with the natural environment on mental functioning is burgeoning (White et al, 2010; Dolan et al, 2008; Diener et al, 2012). Exposure to nature can bring about mental restoration and calm, as reflexivity is evoked by 'nature's' beauty, otherness and space away from everyday places of being (Kaplan et al, 2008). However, there is extensive debate on the capacity of volunteering to transform psychological states. The accrual of self-enhancing experience, including human capital (Penner, 2004), friendship (O'Brian et al, 2010; Okvat et al, 2011), technical skills (King 2008) and confidence (Yerrel, 2008; Theodossiou, 1998) are widely documented. As Davis-Smith (2011) suggests environmental volunteering is a versatile tool for social change, yet developing knowledge on the determinants of volunteer pathways is limited, indeed there is a significant lacunae in our understanding of the multiple scales of action. There is a dearth of literature that explains voluntary behaviour within the context of environmental action. Motivations to voluntary environmental

## Introduction

participation are extensively theorised, to saturation point, including but not limited to, place attachment motivating care for the environment (Gooch, 2003; Manzo et al, 2006), learning (Ryan et al, 2001), expression of environmental values (Ryan et al 2001; O'Brian, 2008) and care for the general environment (Measham et al, 2008) are commonly cited motivators to action. Supporting Yanay et al (2008), we argue failure to respond to mid and end motivational states exacerbates discrepancies between expectations of volunteer participation and reality.

### *Methods for Researching Environmental Volunteering*

This research captures the factors that lever, maintain and terminate voluntary action within a bound context of environmental volunteering. Sensing the subjectively complex determinants of action, we draw on qualitative methods to capture interpretations of behaviour to their fullest. Responding to the diversity of volunteer capabilities and proclivities, a suite of methods designed for inclusivity and ease of participation were offered to participants for use in data acquisition. Through the elective use of semi-structured interviews and photo-diaries that probe alike factors in the decision making process, participation despite volunteers differentiated capacities for communication is supported. These techniques are complemented by

participant observation, which embeds volunteer pathways in context.

To dissolve the researcher-researched divides that inhibit the attainment of full and accurate information (Ozanne et al, 2008) the researcher immersed herself in the voluntary organisation's cultures. This longitudinal process elicited a rich understanding of the group's processes and people, necessitated for a repositioning of the individual at the heart of participatory theory. Undertaken over a period of 6 months, a relationship was developed with volunteers at group sites, with interviews conducted incrementally as trust was developed. In order to capture the vivid, vitally diverse narratives of participant pathways interviews were conducted in situ of their everyday volunteerism. The surrounding context of group volunteering and environmental stimuli prompted memories and emotions that are at the centre of everyday behaviour choices.

This research was conducted in Cornwall, UK. The area is characterized by social inequality, both of resources and opportunity, indeed this was recognised by the European Unions classification of Cornwall as a less well favoured area. Organised voluntary action offers particular gains for this region, as a strong culture of collectivism and independence supports voluntary action. Four sites of voluntarism, all sharing an interest in agricultural production for sustainable, affordable, and locally consumed food were chosen as field

sites.

The subtle differentiation between the sites of research subsequently described is indicative of how seemingly small details such as supervision technique and location can determine trends in pathways. The Growing Group (TGG) operated out of a rural village, actively promoting participation through community newsletters. Pivotal to this group's inclusive and energetic culture is the volunteer manager, influenced by her personal interest in growing and caring for people at risk of social exclusion. These personal values and practices exerted a strong influence over participants, contributing to a culture of acceptance and independence. A product of these values, volunteers were encouraged to participate in site-based decisions such as crop planning and daily activities. Here, people from diverse backgrounds volunteer together, including retired people, those who are unemployed and in work, ex-offenders and people experiencing mental health problems. The Mabyn Organic Food Company (MOFC) is an example of a highly organised, successful growing project with high productivity. Managed by a group of expert growers and professionals this project attracted a high proportion of affluent retired people from the local community. Daily tasks are pre-decided, with volunteers opting for their preferred activities. As a consequence of the scale of organisational activities there are variable opportunities for group-based activities, with regular

end of session visits to a local café the hub of social interactions. The Growing With Us (GWU) project was located in an isolated rural community in Cornwall, bringing together a small group of people many of whom were ex-offenders and people with mental health problems. The volunteer manager fosters a supportive culture, constructing an open and fun environment in which volunteers can determine the plan for gardening, method of approach and personal tasks. In Bude the groups activities were located at the heart of the town, in a garden characterised by a sense of separateness from the everyday. Here people with mental health problems and from the wider community, came together to garden and grow food.

Operating at grass-roots scales of action, the pathways of 22 volunteers are documented, inclusive of those with learning difficulties, mental health issues, ex-offenders, the retired and younger people. These sub-sets suggest that regardless of scales of mental suffering or life stages there are characteristic and conventional attractions to environmental volunteering.

# Volunteer Pathways

In this section we discuss the pathways that individuals undergo into, through and out of volunteering. We explore a range of factors that influence people's participatory behaviour choices, including community networks, values, personal relationships and aspirations. As the findings demonstrate, the benefits of participation often merge with its appeal.

## *Relationship Matters*

Accounts from volunteers across the sites of growing assessed indicate that reasons for participation and non-participation are weaved into intensely personal narratives, based on notions of identity, responsibility and the production of futurities. Connections to those who actively volunteer, either through familial or friendship bonds recurs as a critical factor in determining action. Acting as gate-keepers to opportunities, tailored explanations of voluntary opportunities and their qualities stimulates interest and energy for action in the listener. This is born from affective bonds towards family and friends and an ambition to support their endeavours (Rotolo et al, 2006). In this then, we see that the purpose of volunteering does not necessarily factor in initial decisions to environmental volunteering. Rather, satisfaction of emotional needs and sensed responsibilities are crucial to provoking action where no other connections or motivations to participate exist. This

tendency extends across generations and relationship types, as demonstrated by a mother in her 80's who volunteered to support her daughter's project, a number of retired persons volunteering to support their partners and one under 16 year old volunteering to support his mother.

**"It's not that I'm interested in gardening, but my husband is and since he's got a bad back it didn't seem fair not to come and help him out." (Sandra, MOFC)**

**"Well it's my daughter who started all this you see. Naturally I wanted to help, so when I'm down here I pop along and help." (Jennifer, MOFC)**

Here our research suggests that the home, in its broadest sense, is a fertile ground for instigating non-subject specific voluntary action. The influence of affective bonds broaches generations, as sons, mothers, daughters, wives and friends participate in voluntary action in order to provide emotional and structural support. In this, we believe networks of opportunity are important, as contact with other volunteers enhances likelihood of personal participation.

Gate-keepers to environmental volunteering operate at multiple scales of action, from the dissemination of

appropriate information to providing placements, can determine participation. Targeted information on project benefits stimulates action, where recipients interests match with opportunity qualities. This influence to action is established as trust combines with enthusiasm to induce confidence in altruistic motivations for participation (Geoghagen, forthcoming). Where enthusiasm is supported by enchantment this process becomes more persuasive, developing heightened energy for action and interest in engagement (Woodyer and Geoghagen, forthcoming).

**“Mum told me about this place.  
She’s been coming for ages.  
I’ve thought about working  
outside, I’m not sure doing what  
though. I like being outdoors. So  
when she told me about what  
they do here I thought it’d be  
good experience.” (Ed, MOFC)**

In this example, the impact of information pivots around accurate communication of subjectively relevant benefits and access methods. Collective familial knowledge, experience, perception and proclivity to communicate can determine the recognition and uptake of voluntary opportunities by individuals in their networks. Knowledge of aspirations and lived experience is, therefore, central to the provision of targeted advice. In this then, we can see how inequality of opportunity can be reproduced through personal

network capabilities. The efficacy of these interactions, transforming latent into active volunteers, hinges upon information flows embedded in what individuals determine is personally relevant. The interplay of social capital and goodwill in the determination of participation in a given opportunity or area can account for inequalities of opportunity and geographical disparities of participation. As the following section demonstrates, relational influence does not necessarily act in isolation to determine uptake and longevity of participation. Rather structural and coincidental factors merge to determine action. This indicates that the experiences of trusted actors, including friends, families and acquaintances, form a flexible boundary around personal opportunity.

### *Structural Determinants*

Transforming individuals will to volunteer is in part determined by structural factors that influence behaviour choices. Predictably, engagement in voluntary action is dependent upon personal capacities to attend (Barr et al, 2006). The significance of the availability of personal time and the timing of opportunities emerge as critical factors that influence volunteering experience now and in the future. Control of voluntary participation is important here, as inclinations to action are tempered by proclivities to maintain autonomous behaviour and contribute only when it

## Volunteer Pathways

satisfies personal needs and aspirations. What differentiates volunteering from alternative options for subject specific action is its enabling of self-styled participation (Gagne, 2003). In this study, two of the host organizations supported flexible participation, meaning that volunteers fed into the decision making process and managed their own time – this is unusual in environmental volunteering (cf. Leyshon and Fish, 2010). This style of volunteer management is particularly attractive to those with chaotic lifestyles or anxiety. Here, local opportunities that allow intermittent participation enable individuals to remain comfortably with their choices and self-manage experiences. The result is an invisible geographical boundary around opportunities deemed ‘appropriate’, as organizations/opportunities outside the walking distance of home are excluded from considered options. Hence, proximity and ease of access are factored into broader selection processes, as subjectively justified proclivities for local engagement guide opportunity choice as expressed in the following quote:

**“This was the most local one (voluntary opportunity) and the only one that got back”. (Claire, TGG)**

This significance is variable, for example, where access to transport is restricted, it predictably dominates decision making for volunteering. This is largely explained

in terms of fuel costs and restricted incomes, as individuals seek voluntary opportunities without or low financial expenditure. In rural communities where opportunities for volunteering are often restricted, access to public or private transport is a significant factor, and can result in time lags between desire to participate and uptake of opportunities. In our study, individuals filter opportunities according to walking distance from place of residence. This clustering of volunteers is particularly apparent in rural areas, where unemployment, low incomes and poor transport networks are prevalent (Commission for Rural Communities, 2009).

In our study, the clustering of individuals results in self-forming support networks. Mutual empathy, support and friendship are provided within these networks and form an emergent motivation for commitment. This is demonstrated in the following:

**“It’s been nice to meet people with similar problems and I met this lady and she’s been through the wars and I’ve had some conversations with her and it’s nice to know you’re not the only one... I feel I could perhaps call her up or she could call me up and that helps.”(Howard, TGG)**

These ‘place-specific’ supportive networks

provide further forms of sustenance for volunteering, as their focus emerges from need. Through these means, individuals justify their continued participation, as processes arising through group volunteering satisfy psychological and developmental needs. Sense of place attachment also guides opportunity selection, as viable opportunities are bound by subjectively determined geographies.

**“I wouldn’t want to travel outside the village because that’s just me, I like to be contained, I don’t like to travel too far.” (Karan, TGG)**

These differentiated explanations of opportunity selection demonstrate the interaction of the structural with the emotional and psychological to determine voluntary participation. In this the weaknesses of research predicated on longitudinal predictions of volunteerism is made apparent.

### *Experience*

Our research demonstrates how experience of gardening and other outdoor activities imbues latent volunteers with a heightened confidence and aspiration to participate. As Karan explains:

**“I really like gardening and that really appeals to me, I like to get hands on and stuck into things.” (Karan, TGG)**

Individuals’ experience of being in the outdoors equips them with contextually relevant information that they use to assess volunteering opportunities. More than this though, prior experience of growing or gardening fosters aspiration, for example, as Sam said:

**“I’ve always been interested in gardening and grounds tidying, cutting the grass. So Thelma and the house manager said about this and Lorraine came out and had a look at our grounds and I said ok sign me up.” (Sam, GWU)**

The aspiration of individuals is frequently exhibited in their desire to participate as a means to disseminate expert knowledge, for example on growing or agricultural processes. This is often expressed through individuals taking on a pedagogic role through volunteering to provide advice, skills and resources on interest specific issues (Narushima, 2005). Volunteers’ attachment to specific activities can enhance this process, and therefore we argue that incrementally developed activity attachment can support on-going participation when original motivators for action have been satisfied.

## Volunteer Pathways

### *Psychological needs*

According to Dillon (1994), Boronovi (2008) and O'Brian et al (2008) volunteering enhances mental wellbeing. Voluntary action may be sought where this function is found and maintained and where need and provision persists. The volunteer accounts indicate that inadequate satisfaction of psychological needs compels individuals' to seek provision from diverse sources. As individuals' appraise options that satisfy their personal emotional needs, they also evaluate volunteering alongside these options. As illustrated in the following from Tony at the Bude Project:

**"I'm stuck in the hospital...  
being outside's much different  
from being inside the hospital  
because I'm locked up inside.  
This is a lot nicer than sitting  
looking at four walls and pulling  
my hair out." (Tony, Bude)**

As the benefits of volunteering for mental wellness are experienced, such as a decreased sense of social isolation, this acts as a significant motivator for individuals that compels them to maintain those actions. In this then, volunteering is valued in terms of a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This is pertinent given that much policy hinges upon the notion that volunteering should be engaged in as it is the right thing to do.

The sense of self worth that flows from the recognition of peers can have profound effects on wellbeing. This has implications for volunteer pathways as participants seek to maintain enhanced wellbeing through continued voluntary action. Interestingly, where voluntary engagement is most successful at appeasing these needs drop-out can closely follow. The psychological benefits of immersion in and interaction with nature are extensively documented. These benefits, which include the inducement of calmness and reflexivity, not only reduce mental ill-health but enhance mental wellbeing. For example as Jane and Carol reflected upon:

**"I guess it's necessary for  
human nature to feel they're  
contributing and learning and  
producing something. That's  
a necessary." (Jane, Bude)**

**"It's good for me, not having  
to think for a while. I've always  
done gardening, so I can  
really focus. It gives you a  
break really." (Carol, Bude)**

Environmental volunteering can also enhance mental wellbeing, through providing a space for social interaction as well as a framework for return opportunities, as the following descriptions demonstrate.



**"I basically wanted to get out the house all day, because I'm sat at home all day... waiting for my husband to come home." (Claire, TGG)**

**"I like the people here. You're all so friendly, always smiling. I like to come here because I get to see all the people here." (Tony, Bude)**

The voluntary projects in this study actively foster a culture of inclusivity that encourages social interaction and supportive relationships. This can produce profound satisfaction as volunteers' experience acceptance, for example, Karan says

**"It's nice to feel valued and just accepted for who I am." (Karan, TGG)**

Further project staff energetically manage this experience by setting informal ground rules for acceptable behaviour that actively constructs sites of volunteering as safe places, and through these means have critical influence upon volunteer commitment.

Volunteering can also play an active role in enabling uptake of non-voluntary opportunities, including training and employment that ease mental suffering and enable personal enrichment. This is

largely through the enabling capacity of volunteering, which brings volunteers closer to personal goals by developing a sense of efficacy (Ohmer, 2007) and enhancing aspirations. This is indicative that attrition and non-participation is not inherently detrimental to social development and local goals.

Although not representative, the development of physical health is a rarely cited determinant of participation in environmental projects (Yeung, 2004). Where physical health problems are diagnosed within an individual the current expectation from some clinicians (Friedli et al, 2004) is that volunteering will assist with the recovery or long-term prevention of minor depression. Within our research, although not a dominant reason for participation in active opportunities, interviewees often explained that alternative personal development needs including respite, enhancement of mental wellbeing and skill development, were key triggers for participation in physically active opportunities. This interaction of motivating factors explains continued participation where physical health does not improve following engagement.

In this study, we have identified that ennui is a powerful motivator to voluntary action, as individuals seek activities to alleviate suffering generated by the experience of volunteering per se. Individuals indicate that periods of inactivity foster ennui, inciting the motivation to

## Volunteer Pathways

seek distractions. Induced by a range of factors, including unemployment, mental ill health and gaps in occupation, individuals assess volunteering in terms of its ability to provide for personal need beyond alternative options. The aspects of volunteering that are valued and act as catalysts to action reflect the unique aspirations and priorities of the individual, as demonstrated by the volunteers participating to reduce sense of isolation (Howard, TGG), gain work experience (Claire, TGG) and improve personal confidence (Carol, Bude). Where dissolution of ennui is the predominant force motivating participation, commitment can be variable to projects as alternative diversions more satisfactorily fulfil needs. Within this study, the result is intermittent participation, where dissolution of ennui remains the predominant motivating force. Here Karan and Steve explain:

**“My daughter’s on holiday from university. I just know she’s going to be bored and she hasn’t got a job yet, so I’m getting her to come here with me instead.” (Karan, TGG)**

**“At home you sit around and do nothing, you get easily stressed and going out and doing something keeps me busy.” (Steve, Bude)**

Demonstrative of the shifting nature of aspirations, participation to alleviate ennui can, however, transform into more enduring motivations. This can be in response to experiences internal and external to the opportunity as self-efficacy and aspiration develop. Again highlighting the transience of priority and need, the findings demonstrate that key motivators to action transform in relation to experience. In response, on-going assessments of volunteer need and aspiration are required to enable tailored opportunity design and avoid preventable volunteer attrition.

### *Socialisation*

Friendship is an intrinsic aspect of human sociality (Hruschka, 2010). Developing relationships often remains, however, an aspiration as insufficient networks, opportunities, confidence and social skills inhibit their development. Across the different sites in our study, volunteers suggest that the ability to socialise with “open”, “friendly” people enriches the volunteering experience as it constructs the site as a space of enjoyment and need fulfilment. These enriching relationships are created through the proximal relations of participants and their relationship to their actions. Group tasks, tea and chat breaks and the provision of mutual assistance add a layer of experience to voluntary participation, valued for the socialising that they enable. Management of volunteers

and project structure is intimately connected to this soft outcome, as the development of relationships pivots around the production of spaces of socialization and discourse.

### *Respite*

The mental and physical distinctions between volunteering and “every-day” life constructs volunteering as a place of respite (Wilson 2001). In this study, experiences compelling the need for respite were highly diverse, indicative that a single volunteering opportunity can appeal to individuals with heterogeneous backgrounds and needs. Respite was sought for diverse reasons, illustrating that individuals construct a ‘spectrum of suffering’ that they sought to avoid through volunteering. These factors include domestic abuse, unsatisfactory work and distressing home lives. Indicative of this Chris explained that volunteering was instrumental having time away from home, where he was responsible for caring for his physically abusive father.

For many, environmental volunteering was selected for convenience rather than being actively chosen to reflect political beliefs, as available opportunities were assessed for ease of access. This is demonstrative of how interest does not necessarily guide opportunity selection, as alternative priorities influence behaviour choices. Within the study, however, one

volunteer explained that they sought an environmental volunteering opportunity because seclusion from the natural world within the workplace created suffering, as Karen explained

**“With my job I’m cooped up in a box for over 13 hours. No windows, no contact with the outside world for such a long time. Then I come here and get out in the open air meeting people. It’s really nice.” (Karan, TGG)**

Indicative of broad trends, despite forming the initial reason for engagement, participation for respite interacted in each case with broader motivations and priorities to determine commitment and on-going attendance. Commitment to specific volunteering remained whilst priorities dissociated with volunteering did not prevail. Here volunteering emerges as one of a suite of options considered for satisfaction of aspirations, differentiated only by its availability. In one volunteer’s case, following a drop-off in engagement due to personal problems, attendance surged in importance, as its calming, restorative affects were sought to assist coping mechanisms in times of stress:

## Volunteer Pathways

**“When I came here I was really nervous, it was dreadful, but now I’m a lot better. I was nervous in general. But when you walk through that gate it’s just like a little haven.” (Carol, Bude)**

Here the drop-off from participation emerges as an essential aspect of personal management, rather than detrimental to social wellbeing. This supportive, nurturing aspect of environmental volunteering is experienced by wide demographics of volunteers, ranging from people with acute mental health problems to those undergoing stress in their home life, as time spent during participation is utilized to “get perspective” through the quiet moments and interactions with others. Here the tangible distinction made between the everyday, defined by the differences of space-based qualities, signifies an important determinant of participation, as wider life experiences are enriched.

### *Satisfaction of values*

As Ryan et al (2001) and O’Brian (2008) have discussed, personal values are underpinned by behaviour choices. The values that construct participation in voluntary action as personal priority are manifold. Volunteers’ within the study cite family values, religion, altruism and ecological citizenship as determinants of voluntary

participation, as they seek opportunities to live authentically, according to their values. This is not to suggest that values necessarily act in isolation to determine priority and behaviour. Rather, relative worth is subjectively attributed to ‘entities’ and supportive behaviours, and it is the weighting ascribed to these entities that forms impulsion for action.

**“We’re church folk and we came very much to feel that the Christian response to the environment was really important... and then when this came up it seemed along the same lines in environmental responsibility and doing what you can in your own community.” (Sandra, MOFC)**

Familial values and healthy living were also cited as strong values that determine participation in environmental volunteering, as individuals sought methods of providing healthy food for families.

Indicative of the interaction of values and structural factors in the determination of participation, was how individuals postponed the opportunity to volunteer. In one case Jenny from MOFC resisted volunteering until she could ensure she’d be able to regularly participate, as commitments to her family and hobbies

meant she had changing personal free time. This example illustrated how individuals assess personal needs/capabilities at the point of entry into volunteering, as personal priorities interact and shift to produce changing perceptions of valuable behaviour choices. In this the limitations of snap-shot assessments of behavioural causes is made salient, as personal circumstances and opportunities to participate shift in relation to subjectively prioritised experiences in the world.

The ability to act according to one's own values is authenticated through an individual's identity. Where individuals sense that their actions do not conform to their values, guilt arises and this is a strong motivator to action and commitment within the volunteer group. This process is located within various notions of citizenship, as the desire to "do one's bit" towards enhancing society, environment, the disempowered or a specific cause, prompts search for and engagement with volunteering (Brown et al, 2011). Through this process perceived gaps between ideal and actual action are addressed. The significance of this driver in decision cognition extends to explain reasons for disengagement with voluntary participation. As values transform and shift throughout life stages so too then may desire to volunteer ebb and flow.

### *Satisfaction of interest*

Interest activates voluntary action as opportunities are sought to expand knowledge and experience (Edwards, 2005; O'Brian et al, 2008). Predictably, interest in environmental conservation, 'nature' and growing, engender individuals to seek and occupy opportunities for voluntary action in the environment. In expectation of exposure to activities of interest, individuals voluntarily participate for self-motivated reasons. This is rationalised and nurtured through abstract understanding or prior experience. This process involves individuals assessing available opportunities in relation to potential satisfaction of need. Here, voluntary action is not inherently preferred. Rather it is assessed in terms of its ability to satisfy interest needs, as part of a suite of total available opportunities.

Demonstrative of the interaction of structural determinants with aspirations, interest is a particularly conspicuous driver where methods of satisfying needs are restricted. As interviewees explained:

**"I saw an article in the local paper (about the project) and I thought 'that'll teach me how to turn a carrot into a meal because I'm not overly good at gardening.'" (Jane, Bude)**

## Volunteer Pathways

**"You know I used to keep someone's garden for them and grow all sorts, I even used to sell it because we had too much, but that was in Italy... I've got a window ledge at home but that's it. I just want to grow but it's a bit different here (in England)." (Hannah, TGG)**

**"I really like propagation and taking cuttings and sowing seeds. I just thought it'd be nice to grow different things here." (Carol, Bude)**

The diversity of actions and opportunities that volunteering in and for the environment affords can extend its appeal beyond environmental enthusiasts. Peripheral organizational activities can motivate action in non-specific project subjects, as it is the actions enabled through participation, such as skill development and enhancement of CVs that are core drivers for action not the environmental action per se. This can explain the process of drop-out from volunteering; as interests shift and needs are sated by experience so do aspirations and priorities of action also shift. Failure to evolve volunteer experiences in line with changing volunteer needs, will ultimately lead to individuals leaving projects as they will view their behaviour without utility (Yanay et al, 2008).

## Opportunity Recognition

Organisations in contact with vulnerable people are uniquely positioned to guide individuals into voluntary action. Through contact and discourse at critical life junctures health care professionals, the job centre and social services are able to provide advice on personal development opportunities. Efficacy of this process is, however, variable as professional and individual qualities interact to determine participation or non-participation. As Tony and Claire explained:

**"I had some mental health problems so my community care chap said this would benefit me. I did the environment thing just by chance." (Tony, Bude)**

**"The job centre was running a volunteer week so I signed up." (Claire, TGG)**

The impact of institutional actors is, however, rarely reported as unproblematic. As a number of volunteers explained, volunteering had been recommended to them by case and social workers. However, workers often "hadn't helped at all" (Howard, TGG) in locating appropriate opportunities. This resulted in time lags between awareness of volunteering as an appropriate personal opportunity and participation, as motivation to transform

will to action was insufficient.

In cases where institutional recommendations act as key conduits for opportunity awareness, existing proclivities towards voluntary participation or exposure to trusted discourse on the idiosyncratic benefits of voluntary action can influence the uptake of voluntary opportunities. It is here then, that the interaction of personal and structural factors determine action and inequalities of opportunity emerge, as Chris explained:

**“The job centre told me about volunteering. My mate I’ve known for ages comes. He gave me the heads up on it all and it sounded alright.” (Chris, GWU)**

The assessment of behaviour options according to satisfaction of need is demonstrative of the active production of futurities. To a lesser extent, affiliation with networks of knowledge, including the church and special interest groups, act as a comparable conduit for the identification of voluntary opportunities. Volunteers explained that local churches and climate awareness groups highlighted opportunities for voluntary participation, thereby providing an integral role to awareness development. In accordance with Giddens (1986), social capital again emerges as a determinant of access to opportunity.

Media publications serve a similar function to religious networks, as contextually significant information is disseminated to targeted publics. As information interacts with extant interests, recognition of accessible opportunities can be the catalyst for transforming volunteering from interest into action. The significance of trust in recognition of opportunity is lessened here, as personal relevance is embedded in context of the message rather than subjectively significant interpretations (Fish, 2004). Locality is of particular importance in this, as notions of place attachment and convenience interact in the choice-making process. It is for this reason that parish magazines may serve a vital function in realigning uneven geographies of participation in rural communities. Transformation of will to action is not, however, necessarily zero-sum, as certain volunteers conceived of, and constituted opportunities for, voluntary action in response to unfulfilled need. This process is marked from others, in that it hinges upon competently high knowledge, capabilities and enthusiasm to produce effective outcomes. It is here, then, that the fuzzy definitions of volunteering emerges, as the personal meets with organizational to autonomously produce opportunities of action.

### *Conclusion*

Understanding pathways into, through and out of environmental volunteering offers great gains, as this enhanced understanding has the capacity to grapple with the dual challenges of an increase in mental health disorders and the effects of climate change. At present conceptualisations of volunteers are as zero-sum entities. This fails to respond to the fluid state of motivation and participation that this research has exposed. The weakness of excluding the complexity of volunteers and dynamic interaction in models of voluntary behaviour requires challenging, as our findings indicate reasons for participation shift with human experience and opportunity.

Environmental volunteering, by its very definition, elicits ideas of action within the environment. This study has demonstrated that environmental volunteering means much more to volunteers, as they value association and proximity to such activities, whilst they may be working on periphery activities such as IT. This is profound, as it is indicative that appeals to action on the sole basis of direct engagement with the land may limit latent volunteer audiences. What is clear from volunteer accounts is that the appeal of environmental volunteering stems from benefits accrued through participation. These benefits are subjectively defined and account for both altruistic and egotistic proclivities.

Regardless, it is indicative of the fact that participation terminates where needs are no longer met. There is a tendency within volunteer management to 'forget' the volunteer once they are engaged. This is indicative of an acute weakness of many engagement strategies, as the evidence suggests on-going assessment and responsiveness to volunteers' changing aspirations, motivations and needs is required to support sustained voluntary action.

Pathways into volunteering are as diverse as the individuals who engage, as they each demonstrate nuanced entrances into, through and out of participation. In this study we have assessed the interaction of structural and psychological factors that determine behaviour choice and participation. Rationalistic assessment of needs versus opportunities emerge at the core of opportunity selection processes. Subjectively defined priorities interact with structural determinants of opportunity and access to determine idiosyncratic behaviour choices. The inherently heterogenic quality of weighting priorities and capabilities makes salient the handicap of assessment of volunteer priorities exclusively at the point of opportunity entry. Nonetheless, the research demonstrates that the extent of our networks' experience, knowledge and skills of communication forms certain boundaries to our own opportunities. This is indicative of the inequality of opportunity to participate without removal of barriers, be they structural or psychological. Here



then, the weakness of a government policy that depends upon voluntary participation to deliver social goals is highlighted, as opportunity produces opportunity so too may inequality exacerbate inequality. Suffering, in its many forms, also recurs throughout accounts as key motivator to action and sustained action, as individuals seek to remove causes of psychological stress. Demonstrating the multidimensional attributes of environmental volunteering, the broader value of volunteering for social development is suggested.

The multidimensional benefits that volunteers accrue through participation, including psychological and functional enhancement, are profound. Through the process of active engagement individuals predictably change in response to experiences. Throughout this study volunteers have explained how confidence and friendships have been developed, that their mental health is improved and that they have developed their capabilities. So too then have their needs and aspirations changed. The resultant effect is that volunteers are changed through their experience of engagement and that this experience can nullify a sense of requirement for on-going participation, as needs have been met. As voluntary activity is terminated where needs are satisfied the urgency of a reconceptualization of volunteer attrition as inherently detrimental to society is indicated. Moreover, the evidence signals the weakness of current measures of opportunity success that

fail to account for 'soft' outcomes, as the findings indicate that soft-outcomes such as friendship and self-efficacy development can be more significant levers to action and commitment than planned outputs such as food production. Through these findings this research seeks to provoke a renewed debate on the value of volunteering and the volunteer. As without a more volunteer-centred approach the potentiality of environmental volunteering to create positive social change will not be fully actualised.

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This research captures the factors that lever, maintain and terminate voluntary action within the context of environmental volunteering.



Knowledge  
Transfer  
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