

Progress in Environmental Volunteering: pathways, places and significance for people

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Introduction

The heightened socio-political interest into volunteerism has refocused participation as a multifaceted tool for social change. This comes amidst social debate on responsibility for health care and social provision (Marmot, 2010) that draws a question of ethics into strategies for the mobilization of volunteers. Ethical modes of mobilization and the role of volunteering in contemporary society must be questioned, as volunteering is positioned to deliver for increasingly challenging social needs (NAVCA, 2011). This position paper reviews the current situation in volunteering literature and investigations, in particular environmental volunteering, in relation to these questions. To initiate this we consider how current trends and accepted notions of mobilizing voluntary action are confounding the development of effective volunteer management, and volunteerings capacity to induce life-changing effects. The authors challenge the dearth of research explaining the fluidity of volunteer pathways and the role of context in determination of participation. Participation in voluntary action can mean much more than the delivery of planned outputs, as the benefits of volunteering can be the appeal of engagement (O'Brian et al, 2008). In this paper we seek to draw out discourse on the value of volunteering for society and self (Bushway et al, 2011; Pillemer et al, 2010; Grese et al, 2000; Penner, 2004; Kilpatrick, 2009), informing a collection of papers published by the authors on environmental volunteering and its affects on participant wellbeing (Harrison et al, 2012), and volunteer pathways into, though and out of volunteering (Harrison et al, 2012).

Volunteerism in Changing Times

A cornerstone of social life in the UK, the voluntary sectors responsibility for social and environmental services has expanded over the past 20 years (Powell, 2003) as a neo-liberalist agenda has retracted the welfare state (Peck, 2001). Evidence that neo-liberalism has failed to adequately raise wellbeing (Diener et al, 2002), demonstrated in an economy in crisis, has repositioned wellbeing on the political agenda. This renegotiation of the voluntary sector arises alongside a wider questioning of societal values (Sen, 2009) that primes the psychological conditions for behavior shifts (Abrahamse et al, 2007). Urgent scrutiny of the intimate connection between volunteering and raised wellbeing is now necessitated to enable effective planning for the development of volunteering's role in society today. A reading of health care and social data indicates that environmental volunteerism is a particularly potent means of mitigating the dual challenge of a nations wellness in decline and environmental degradation (O'Brian et al, 2010; Borgonovi, 2008; Yerrell, 2004). Strengthening community and personal resilience through complex processes simultaneous to delivering vital environmental action, the wellbeing of humans is united with the wellbeing of the earth (Okvat et al, 2011).

The Big Society agenda has renewed questions of responsibility (LG Improvement and Development, 2010) and blame that frame societal responses to these socio-environmental challenges. Proposals for the devolution of power to communities have produced a framework for locally responsive strategies to human and nature threats (Keating et al, 2009). Simultaneously, differential capacities to engage have produced uneven geographies of engagement (Bruyere, 2007) mapped to inequalities in health and wellness (Etherington, 2011). Evidence that participatory action in the environment links to improved health is indicative of volunteering's capacity to exacerbate extant inequalities. Poor physical and mental health results, Marmot (2010) explains, in premature death rates in disadvantaged social groups. Spatial disparities between rates of volunteering conceal deep inequalities, as participation is elevated where integration and cohesiveness is greater (Etherington, 2011) and volunteers experience better physical and

mental health (Moore et al, 2007; Luoh et al, 2002; Musick et al, 2003). Injustices arise as socio-economic divides shape geographies of engagement. Collins explains that affluent people are more likely to participate in the formal volunteering most closely associated with wellbeing affects, in tension to more deprived places where one-to-one informal voluntary action dominates participatory action (Etherington, 2011). 'Closing the gap' between affluent and deprived participatory behaviors is therefore an issue of social justice. More than this, it is a matter of economy, as £31-33bn is lost annually to health inequalities through lost productivity alone, as poorer people die younger and have more years of ill health (Marmot, 2010). This draws into focus the importance of contextually congruent participatory knowledge and opportunities for engagement, as actions in the environment holds particular gains for health (Barton et al, 2010; Herzog et al, 2002). Despite this, there is a shortage of investigations exploring environmental volunteering and health care effects that demands redress.

Volunteer Pathways

Geographical debates about volunteerism have produced a rich understanding of the versatile and extensive field of voluntary action. Much of this work has been concerned with motivations and barriers to participation (Yeung, 2004; Schondel et al, 2000; Rochester, 2006; Warburton et al, 2007), belying the dynamic processes that determine commitment and outcomes for people and places and confounding the development of effective volunteering programmes. This conceals the inadequacies of extant knowledge and approaches to mobilization. An understanding of the fluid states that motivate and inhibit participation is central to adaptive, effective strategies for volunteerism (Measham et al, 2008). Geographers have extensively sought to investigate the complex dynamic of factors that determine participation (Cloke et al, 2007; Fyfe et al, 2003). This has largely produced static notions of differentiated participation on the basis of person centered qualities and geographies of opportunity (Clary et al, 1996; Bruyere, 2008; Carlo et al,

2005) that confound effective volunteering management and retention. We address this in our paper on pathways into volunteering, as the extensive field of motivations and barriers literature belies the transitory aspects of being and experience that produces shifting scopes of the possible. This is a salient issue for practitioners in volunteerism, as voluntary organisations 'life expectancy' is intimately tied to attrition (Yaney et al, 2008). Repositioning the volunteer in practitioner discourse as an individual inherently changing in relation to external and internal stimuli is needed to bring a new value to volunteers throughout their trajectory in participation, that can inform appropriate management of their needs and aspirations.

Building on extant knowledge through repositioning the individual at the heart of explanatory accounts of behavior is perhaps the strongest approach to renegotiating the value of volunteers. The interaction of psychological and structural factors determining behavior choice can be complex, chaotic and chance based (Dolnicar et al, 2007). Comprehension of these interacting factors can inform better volunteer recruitment and retention. Sometimes the planned purpose of participation is central to the uptake of opportunity, but not always. Attachment to place through affective bonds can compel action in particular environments, as there is an interest in caring for valued spaces (Gooch, 2003; Manzo et al, 2006). There is potential here to expand our understanding of the appeal of local volunteerism, as participatory behavior choices may be as much to do with emotive connections to objects than it is to do with generalised ideals (Manzo et al, 2006). Others reinforce the significance of sites of action and purpose in the determination of participation. The natural environment provokes multiple affective and psychological responses that catalyse action (Gosling et al, 2010). Voluntary participation can be used as a means to act upon values where convenience or alternative options for environmental action are constrained. Gilmour et al (1995) and O'Brian et al (2008) explain that a desire to care for the environment motivates engagement as people seek ways to act upon values. Ryan et al (2001) add to this, as aspirations and priorities interact to

determine action, as people participate in environmental action to learn, make friends, help the environment and participate in a competently structured project establish commitment to environmental volunteering. In these motivating aspects we observe compelling forces to action. It is now urgent we identify how these needs are met in participatory action and the implications for shifting needs.

Analyses of participation in environmental action expand to suggest that geographies of volunteerism are shaped by further instances of experience that transcends sites of action and interest. Programmes of participation must be responsive to these culturally embedded gatekeepers to participation, and we examine this in our pathways paper. Penner draws attention to underlying factors that catalyse action, explaining that social circumstances, disposition and peer encouragement to participate interact to determine participatory behavior (2004). Bringing this into the everyday, Barr et al explain that time and convenience are salient issues in transforming will to voluntary action (2007). This draws useful attention to patterns of behavior across contexts of action, as people who work part time (Markham et al, 1996) or are retired (2000) have greater flexibility in their hours of volunteering. Absent from prevalent discourse on volunteerism, cultural norms can however compound disparities in participatory behaviors. As Measham et al (2007) et al highlight, gendered child-care commitments can determine patterns of free time and volunteering. Penner draws wider attention to this, documenting how the treatment of volunteers interacts with expectations to influence commitment (2004). With immediate implications for the sustainability of organisations and outcomes for participants, the significance of volunteer management methods is however largely absent from discourse on participatory behavior. A renewed focus on how sites of volunteerism construct experiences is necessitated to explain shifting patterns of behavior and planned outcomes through participation.

Patterns of social exclusion conceal deeper community inequalities that compound unequal access to opportunity and achievement, forming an issue of immediate social justice. Penner explores this self-perpetuating cycle, explaining that education is correlated to higher rates of participation, which in turn develops human capital resources (2004) and more extensive social networks (Wilson et al, 1997). The extensive documentation of demographic qualities (Sundeen et al, 2007), hides what little is known of why people participate, commit and drop out of voluntary engagement. This is a marked oversight, as Yaney et al explain the failure to discriminate between motivations for initial engagement, ongoing commitment and dropout has implications for the efficacy of programme design and quality of project outcomes (2008).

Extended issues of inequality arise as banks of personal social capital are traced to scopes of participation (Wilson et al, 2000). There is a tension here for policy makers and practitioners alike as social engagement can contract and expand disparities in social capital. Timbrell's 2006 and 2007 studies outline how social interactions at sites of volunteerism can enable the mitigation and avoidance of social exclusion through disconnection. Yet O'Brian et al explain this is not an 'automatic outcome' (2008). Indeed, social exclusion can be exacerbated by the self-perpetuating cycle of connectedness and participation. Thus compounded, social exclusion is both a driver and barrier to cross-sector participatory behaviors. This has implications for urban and rural resilience. In areas spatially disconnected from services and sites of opportunity social exclusion has particular implications for quality of the lived experience and local cohesion. Thus our papers examine how participatory experiences function to change sensed inclusion in local engagement.

There is a failure in maps of participatory behavior to recognize the dynamic processes that catalyse movements into, through and out of participation. Participation is a cyclical process, as will is transformed into action,

commitment in maintained and dropout forms the final stage (Yaney et al, 2008). Active volunteering arises when needs opportunities align (Clary et al, 1999). Yet practitioners and theory inadequately move beyond the primary point of engagement. The consequence is poor retention and de-motivated volunteers. Ockenden's paper on volunteering in the North-East of England considers this, drawing motivations, commitment and dropout into an early theory of participatory pathways (2007). In this, contextual factors including styles of management, training provision and positive appraisal of volunteer outputs can play as much a part in shifting participatory behavior as transformations of perspective. Drawing on these insights, Yaney et al argue that tendencies to participate initiates with sensed desire and are terminated when these needs are gratified or are un-fulfillable through the position (2008). Thus the paper moves beyond catalyzing states to stimuli provoking dropout. Bell et al expand on this newly emerging strand of theory, as distinctions are drawn between causal determinants of initial engagement and lasting engagement, with each stage associated with different motivating forces. A reflexive approach to these differential stages in the volunteer lifecycle and the factors that bring about their existence can equip practitioners with the knowledge necessitated for targeted volunteer provision.

Yaney et al suggest the significance of reflexivity in volunteer management, explaining "what fosters commitment does not necessarily lead to commitment" (2008: 67). Bell et al extend this, describing how gratification from observation of project outcomes, relational bonds and accordance between expectation and experience are core drivers of commitment (2011). Together these papers move us towards a different way of explaining and managing participatory behavior, directing us to the continuums and distinctions in the phases of volunteer pathways.

"It is not enough just to understand why a person decides to volunteer; one must also consider the characteristics of the organization in which the volunteering

takes place, the exchanges between the individual volunteers and the organization, and the changes in these relationships over time” (Penner, 2004: 646)

The prevalent notion of motivations as static states points to areas of operational weakness, as volunteer provision necessitates responsiveness to changing needs and aspirations (Hagar et al, 2004). This is a dilemma in programme delivery. Construction of coherent narratives on movements to, through and out of volunteering promises a number of improvements to mobilization and retention. Yet the reductionist language influencing discourse on volunteering (George et al, 2010; Gage et al 2011) mislays the contradiction and fluidity of participatory causes. As determinants of volunteering are reduced to essential states the vitally alive, real and immersive experience of volunteering is lost. Whilst these papers have produced extensive documentation of participatory behavior and differential states they hide the essentially human stories and states that define action and experience. This is problem for volunteering in practice, as the value of volunteering is enclosed within intensely personal narratives. This reduction of the individual is countered by an emerging approach that repositions the individual at the center of research (Gooch et al, 2009; Warburton et al, 2007). These papers begin from the basis that volunteers are experts in their own experience. As these compelling aspects shift and morph, ongoing evaluation of provision for personal needs is necessitated at sites of volunteering (Hibbert, Piacentini, & Dajani, 2003).

If we can think of segregate catastrophic determinants of behavior as dynamic, subjectively prioritised forces we can draw together an approach to volunteering that greater reflects the heterogeneity of human action and experience. Viewed from this perspective Solomon (1997) explains that the expectation of benefits from participation transform in response to experiences in the organization and changing interpretations of the world. Adding to Bruyere et al's (2007) categorization of motivation types, Ryan et al (2001) suggest the interplay between the psychologically transformative effect

of environmental volunteerism and factors that catalyse action. The opportunity to reflect, they explain, is a stimulus to action (Ryan et al, 2001). Indicative of the unique appeal and participant outcomes of environmental action environmental volunteerism functions to provide spaces of respite, as psychological spaces of reflection induce a mental restoration associated with improved wellness (Kaplan et al, 1995). We explore this in our paper of volunteer pathways, examining how the psychological benefits of volunteering compel action and shape patterns of participatory behavior. With the dual burden of a nation's wellbeing under stress and the retreat of state services the compelling aspects of volunteering take on new values and significance.

Volunteering for People

Despite moves to improve the nation's wellbeing, as documented in the Healthy Lives, Healthy People White Paper (2010) practitioner understanding of how this intensely important state can be enhanced remains incomplete. As the NHS shifts towards preventive health care, this lacunae of knowledge interferes with the accurate prescription of volunteering for particular psychological and developmental needs. The notion of wellbeing's dual aspects – affective states and functional abilities – (Huppert et al, Deiner, 2006; Ryff, 1998) provides a useful starting point for understanding how spaces of volunteering can be created and used to foster wellbeing affects. In an early account, O'Brian et al finds that the social interactions volunteering affords are conducive to the development of social connections and relationships (2010). In the elicitation of hedonic gratification and increased life satisfaction from these relationships, the interconnected benefits of participatory behavior for wellbeing become salient. These relationships have wide implications for people and places, as it is through these means meaningful networks are formed (Antoni, 2009). Huppert et al (2009) discuss this in terms of connectedness, with sensed belonging at the root of wider feelings of social inclusion (Diamant et al, 2010). Despite this, the ability to

foster and create these spaces is confounded by the deficit of knowledge on the exact qualities that give rise to these interactions and participant outcomes.

The intimate connection between mental health and morbidity transcends wellbeing from an ideal personal state to a matter of social justice, compounding the importance of actions that improve wellness. Borgonovi explains; people who enjoy good mental health experience lower rates of morbidity (2008). This functions through diverse processes. Stress, for example, is a major predictor of mortality and chronic illnesses including asthma, heart disease and strokes (Pretty, 2004). Questions remain though on the particular aspects of participatory experiences that induce these wellbeing affects. Glover (2003) initiates debate on the aspects of engagement eliciting specific responses, proposing that community gardens bring together residents in 'denser networks' that usually allowed by urban lifestyles. There are however several complications with developing current sites of volunteerism for network formation. There has been a failure to grasp the compelling aspects of volunteering that catalyses the participation of people living in shared localities. As participation can rely on sensed community, national inequalities of access and engagement gains may be caught in a deadlock (Wilson et al, 1997) rarely questioned. Thus knowledge of the spaces, interactions and actions that induce a transformation of participant wellbeing can inform better mobilization strategies.

Felicity Huppert's authoritative paper on wellbeing builds a formative theory on the reach of personal wellness on community (2009), suggesting the significance of developing individual wellbeing for social resilience. Social connections operate as conduits to expanded social participation (Kilpatrick, 2009). Manzo et al's review highlights this process of place attachment and connection engendering an upward flow of participation (2006). This is explained by the compelling aspects of place attachment that accelerate the identification of common interests (Tuan, 1977) and a will to protect valued

aspects. As an upward spiral of self worth and social engagement functions to improve personal worlds, volunteering emerges as an important tool for fostering social inclusion. Building on these insights Dalglish suggests how volunteering can be utilized for its rehabilitative capacity:

“Volunteering can help those experiencing difficulties in their lives, such as addiction, homelessness and mental health problems, to get back on their feet and become fully integrated into communities” (2006: 10)

Studies on the benefits of nature interactions and exposure reveal how contexts of voluntary action can determine these outcomes for participants. These findings signal the heterogeneity of the voluntary sector and its efficacy for raised participant wellness. With an extensive field of psychological and medical evidence pointing to nature’s restorative effects environmental volunteering can make a tangible difference to participants lives through complex and diverse processes. Suggesting the gains of volunteering for health care provision, absorption with nature provides rest from mental suffering (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1995) with implications for mental health (Barton et al, 2010), healing times (Ulrich, 1999) and communities as aggression is lessened (Kuo et al, 2001). These restorative effects are further documented by Pretty et al, who assess environmental volunteering effects in their study of Green Gym’s (2005). In these spaces of nature-volunteering, participants find accelerated recovery from attention fatigue, rest from mental focus and a reflexivity that enables the brain to process complex problems and experience sensed wellness and calm (Kaplan et al, 1995; O’Brian, 2010). These are important findings, indicative of environmental volunteerings worth.

It is easy to appreciate how volunteering fosters the second aspect of wellbeing - functional capacity - as individuals engage in tasks and projects that produce immediate evidence of efficacy. Indeed, autonomy in action and decision-making is the foundation for self-esteem (Niemic et al, 2010). Policy

has sought to marry this function of volunteering with social programmes for employment, as evidence suggests that people who volunteer learn social and practical skills for personal growth (Akintola, 2010). Yet the onus on outcomes of engagement rather than causes of wellbeing effects hinders inter-project learning. However, the accounts of variable wellbeing affects through nature-interactions are indicative that positive psychological responses may not be an automatic outcome of environmental engagement. Referring to a plethora of scales, actions and cultures that interact to determine experience, all forms of voluntary participation are not equal in their development of wellbeing. Nor should they be. The differentiation within volunteering is fundamental to its resilience and adaptability (McCabe, 2010).

Is through unlocking the aspects of volunteering that induce particular states of wellness that individuals can better determine the participatory actions that best meet their needs. Belying volunteering's role for personal and social change, a contraction of resources (NAVCA, 2011) confounds scopes of impact. The full identification of volunteerings impact on wellbeing can play an important role in realigning this disparity of value. Geographer's connection to a 'broader lens', capable of capturing the complex "processes that promote, remedy or regenerate health" (Flueret et al, 2007) well positions the field to answer important questions on the construction of wellbeing and spillover effects for society. Flueret et al explain the identification of spaces conducive to the development of wellbeing (2007) can improve the delivery of increased social wellness, as this knowledge can well equip design for planned aims. This is raised as an important contemporary issue as commissioning moves towards preventative health care (Griffin et al, 2009), as there is an admittance that the ideal form and duration of participation for different health care needs remains unclear (Barton et al, 2010).

Conclusion

The role of volunteering in society is changing. The retraction of services in health and social care and environmental provision expands the responsibility of this sector under strain. Developing understanding on how volunteering can function to meet some of our greatest challenges is of immediate import, to realign the sectors value with its impacts on places and people. The advantages of volunteering can be the appeal, and developing our understanding of the compelling aspects of participation can aid effective management in volunteering. Much is known about volunteers' motivations. However this extensive field hides the weaknesses of this knowledge, namely the insufficient grasp of how motivations change throughout the course of engagement and the implications for commitment and attrition. More must be understood about how participatory experiences influence these compelling states, to allow for better programme design. It is through repositioning the individual as an expert in their own experience that we are best able to do this, as we find out how their unique needs and priorities interact with objective states of volunteering to determine ongoing engagement.

This arises at a time when mental wellbeing is posited as an important measure of social success that is inextricably tied to physical health and social inequalities. Knowledge on volunteerings participant benefits has a dual purpose. In addition to allowing planned action for personal improvement it can inform strategies for the recruitment and retention of volunteers. There is a newly emerging field of research examining the aspects of wellbeing that participation effects. From this we know that voluntary engagement improves multiple aspects of wellbeing, from life satisfaction and sensed autonomy to community connectedness. Indicative of the latent capacity of volunteering to improve lives, there is however a dearth of evidence explaining the particular aspects of volunteering that induce these changes. As evidence points towards the unique gains of participation in the environment, due to the restorative effects of nature contact environmental volunteering, geography is capable of capturing the multiple outcomes for people and places. No two volunteering experiences are alike. In this position paper we have shown that there is an inadequate understanding of how environmental volunteering differentiates in its ability to induce wellbeing

affects. A deeper understanding of these distinctions is now required to enable effective program design for people, places and the environment.

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