'A rose by any other name …'

Revisiting the question: 'what exactly is volunteering?'

Working paper series:
Paper one

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Institute for
Volunteering
Research

About the Institute for Volunteering Research

The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) is a specialist research and consultancy agency focusing on volunteering. It was set up in 1997 in response to the increased demand for research on volunteering. Since then IVR has carried out a wide variety of research, consultancy and evaluation projects on many different aspects of volunteering, including four national surveys of volunteering.

IVR aims to:

- Carry out and commission research on different aspects of volunteering at a variety of levels

- Disseminate findings so as to maximise the policy and practice impact

- Act as a focal point for research on volunteering

- Develop links with bodies involved in volunteering research in England, the UK and other countries, with a view to sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas

- Stimulate and contribute to education and training on volunteering.

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IVR is an initiative of Volunteering England in research partnership with Birkbeck, University of London

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1. Introduction and rationale

Do we really need another paper examining the different ways in which volunteering has been defined? Does it really matter? Is it possible to come up with a settled and practical definition? We think that we do, that it does, and that (broadly) it is. A number of different factors have led us to these conclusions and have helped to define the aims of this paper.

> "…so many preconceptions and stereotypes have become attached to volunteering that they make it difficult to conceptualise and define."
>
> **(Graham, 2004:16)**

Our own agenda

Since 1997 the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) has conducted a wide-ranging research programme on different aspects of volunteering, primarily in the UK but also internationally. Each year we publish numerous reports and articles on volunteering. Looking back at these, however, it is surprising how few explicitly address the very basic question of what exactly we are including in our field of study. Beyond reiterating standard definitions of volunteering, and with a few notable exceptions, it seems this is something we have largely taken for granted.

It is certainly something that IVR staff members have discussed amongst ourselves but not something that we have often been explicit about in our writing. Not being clear about what we define as volunteering, and therefore what we include within our field of study, has a number of implications. It makes comparative studies difficult – how do we or anyone else know if we are studying similar phenomena? It makes explaining why we chose or chose not to study certain activities more difficult – how do we prioritise different research agendas focusing on different forms of volunteering if we don't know what the boundaries of volunteering are? We could go on. Reflecting on these challenges and shortcomings led us to a belief in the need for this paper. Its primary aim, therefore, is to be clearer and more explicit, for ourselves and for those who read our work, about how we define and describe volunteering and therefore our own field of interest. In doing so, we hope this will shape and inform our future work.

Our decision to write this paper, however, was based on broader considerations than a concern about our own agenda. We also believe that there have been a number of developments within the policy and practice of volunteering that have called into question the definition of volunteering and have given rise to a need to readdress this very basic question.

Developments in policy and practice

In the first place, there is an ongoing circular debate within the volunteering movement about the utility of the term 'volunteering'. At frequent intervals a search is conducted for a word which is not exclusive or exclusionary (see for example Lukka and Ellis Paine, 2001; IVR, 2004) and one which is not accompanied by enduring stereotypes. This quest has so far led to the conclusion that other terms are equally problematic and that it makes more sense to continue to use 'volunteering' and to concentrate on challenging the stereotypes and broadening people's understanding of what it encompasses (see for example Ellis, 2004).

Perhaps more fundamentally, volunteering is changing, as is the context in which it takes place (Rochester et al, 2010). This means that it is important that we revisit earlier definitions of volunteering to check that they have stood the test of time. In particular a number of developments in the policy and practice of volunteering have, we believe, challenged perceptions of what is inside and what is outside the boundaries of the field. These include volunteering schemes that have allowed explicit payments; that have been linked closely to citizenship rights; and that have been built into educational programmes. We will discuss these in more detail later in this paper, but, for the moment, will note that they are interesting developments that have stimulated a great deal of debate and discussion about whether they are or are not volunteering. This discussion is important if we are to be clear about what is happening on the levels of policy and practice. It also means that we need to take the challenges to existing definitions into account and assess the extent to which they continue to stand up to scrutiny.

As well as helping us be clearer about our own field of study, then, we also believe that the search for greater clarity and a more comprehensive overview of the different ways in which volunteering has been defined and conceptualised will be of wider benefit. We believe that if policymakers and practitioners simply 'get on with it' without exploring some of the fundamental conceptual issues it can lead to negative outcomes for volunteering (and volunteers) and threatens realisation of the full potential of volunteering.

The need for clarity

We think that this search can be useful in the following ways:

For research and theory building

The lack of clarity about the boundaries of the field and the absence of generally recognised typologies of the kinds of activities that take place within it has meant that there are at least two major obstacles in the way of developing adequate theoretical explanations of volunteering. The first of these is the relatively limited base on which the sector's understanding of volunteering is built. We know a great deal more about certain kinds of voluntary activity than others; our evidence base is heavily biased towards volunteering which contributes to the work of comparatively large and formally organised agencies in the broad field of social welfare. There has been much less research on volunteering in small scale and informal organisational settings and that which is involved in areas such as advocacy and campaigning, culture, recreation and sport. 'Unorganised' acts of volunteering are rarely acknowledged (despite the valiant championing of their cause by Williams, 2003a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b; 2008).

The second difficulty in developing models, concepts and tools is the tendency of researchers to treat volunteering as a single entity and to attempt to explain volunteering in general without due concern for the significant differences in the nature of the experience and the kind of setting within which it takes place. We hope that our working paper will make a contribution to overcoming those obstacles and thus not only reshape the agenda for research but also lay the ground for a more nuanced understanding of volunteering.

To inform policy

Volunteering's place on the policy agenda has rarely been more prominent and 'the weight of expectation about the contribution it can make to individual development, social cohesion and addressing social need has never been greater' (Rochester et al, 2010: p1). We believe, however, that there is a considerable gap between the conceptual understanding of volunteering by some policy-makers and the reality – particularly central and local government policy-makers. Efforts have been made at local, national and international levels to promote volunteering and increase the numbers of those involved in it, but many of these initiatives have been based on views of volunteering which are only part of a much bigger picture and the means that have been selected to increase volunteering – such as media campaigns and the appointment of 'champions' – have, as a consequence, been aimed at too narrow a target.

At the same time, more specific initiatives which aim to use the act of volunteering as a means of addressing a variety of needs – such as anti-social behaviour by young people, the health and well-being of older people, developing skills and behaviours to enable the unemployed or students to become more employable and overcoming social exclusion – may be based on a misunderstanding of what volunteering is and a failure to appreciate the multiplicity of activities it encompasses. We hope that the working paper will contribute to the development of policy which is better informed and thus more likely to achieve its ends.

To guide practice

During the 12 year life span of IVR, there has been a striking expansion in the amount and range of activities aimed at promoting 'good practice' in volunteer-involving organisations. These have included the publication of manuals and toolkits, the development of training provision, the drafting of National Occupational Standards and the formation of a professional body for volunteer managers (Howlett, 2010). There are two elements underlying this expansion – the codification of 'home grown' practice based on the experience of volunteer managers on the one hand and, on the other, the adoption of the battery of tools used by human resources managers in dealing with paid staff (Zimmeck, 2001).

While much of this material is useful, there is growing concern that a heavily prescriptive and quite narrow view of what constitutes 'good practice' has been developed which ignores some of the key differences between volunteers and paid staff and assumes a 'one-size fits all' approach to the nature of the organisational setting in which volunteering takes place (Ellis Paine et al, 2010; Howlett, 2010). A better understanding of the variety of activities which constitute volunteering and a clearer delineation of the differences between them would make possible the development of a bigger portfolio of guidance geared to the very different circumstances under which volunteering takes place. It may also lead to a more inclusive definition of volunteering 'good practice' which recognises the diversity of volunteering activities and programmes which deliver a tangible benefit to communities.

Three questions

In pursuit of this aim we will try to address three questions:

- How do we delineate a boundary around the field of volunteering which distinguishes what is unique about it and how it is different to other fields of activity?

- How do we then make sense of all that is included within our field (and potentially could be in the future)? How do we break it down into smaller categories and understand the different ways in which the main characteristics encompassed within volunteering have, to date, been grouped together?

- How have various researchers, policy-makers and practitioners accessed the field of volunteering and come to study and understand it? What are the implications of this for how volunteering is defined and conceptualised as well as for how policy and practice are developed in response?

Addressing the first question will provide a means of deciding what we are/are not interested in. Addressing the second will help us to understand the wide variety within volunteering. And the third will provide a framework for understanding how others have come to view volunteering and how this has influenced which aspects of it they have embraced, overlooked or re-interpreted.

2. Delineating the field of volunteering

Introduction

In this section of the working paper we will review existing definitions of volunteering and look at the extent to which bottom-up, lay or popular views match those top down views developed by the professionals – policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. The section then explores what has previously been identified as the three core defining principles of volunteering – that it is unpaid, undertaken as an act of free will and of benefit to others. We will argue that these should not be seen as binary concepts – paid vs unpaid; free will vs not free will; beneficial vs. not beneficial – but that each of them is better understood as a spectrum. The section will end with an attempt to use these three dimensions of volunteering to construct a conceptual map of the field.

Definitions

While there is no one lay definition of volunteering, several studies have sought to understand whether there are common core principles which underlie the general public's understanding of volunteering both within and across countries. One of the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR)'s own studies (which explored the link between volunteering and social exclusion) found that volunteering was most commonly understood as a form of work without pay. The second most common notion was that it consisted of offering time and help to others and embedded in this view was the perception that it involved a cost to the volunteer which was greater than any benefit they might receive from the activity. But this view that volunteering was essentially altruistic, a gift relationship, was not universal. Others – and especially those who were already volunteers – saw volunteering as a mutually beneficial exchange relationship and 'something that provides benefits to

the individual, be it enjoyment, skills, or the sense of having given something back' (IVR, 2004; p25).

The work on public perceptions of volunteering carried out by Cnaan and his various colleagues (Cnaan and Amrofell, 1994; Cnaan et al, 1996; Handy et al, 2000) offers an important perspective from which to consider these different views of the volunteering transaction as a gift or an exchange. This is the idea of the net cost of the volunteering situation arrived at by subtracting the total benefits accrued by the volunteer from the total costs incurred by them. Their conclusion that the public idea of what constitutes volunteering is something that has a net cost for participants (i.e. the greater the cost to the individual the more likely they are to be considered a volunteer) (Handy et al, 2000) has been supported by a cross-cultural analysis of eight countries (Meijs et al, 2003). Participants in this study were asked to look at examples of behaviour and rank them on a five-point scale from 'not a volunteer' to 'definitely a volunteer'. While there were some variations in the mean scores from country to country which could be explained by socio-cultural differences, overall the study found that 'across all eight regions, a broad consensus exists regarding who is definitely a volunteer' (Meijs et al, 2003; p32). The authors conclude that 'this application of net-cost to understanding volunteering is helpful in defining who is a volunteer and who is perceived as more of a volunteer' (p33).

Meijs and his colleagues also describe the net cost concept as the 'common denominator' of all four dimensions of volunteering previously identified by Cnaan et al (1996). Based on a comprehensive review of the literature these are: free will; lack of material reward; benefit to others; and formal organisation. More recent attempts to define volunteering cover similar ground.

In England, the most authoritative top-down statement is found in the introduction to the 'refreshed' Compact on relations between Government and the Third Sector in England. This defines volunteering as:

> "… an activity that involves spending unpaid time doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups (other than or, in addition to close relatives)."
>
> **(The Compact, 2009; p7)**

It is a slightly revised version of the definition developed by IVR for the series of National Surveys of Volunteering, the latest of which was conducted in 2007. Here volunteering is defined as:

> "any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives, or to benefit the environment."
>
> **(Davis Smith, 1998)**

The introduction to the Compact goes on to claim that 'there are four principles that are fundamental to volunteering'. These are:

- *Choice* – volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual

- *Diversity* – volunteering should be open to all

- *Mutual benefit* – both the volunteer and the organisation that the volunteer works with should benefit from the relationship

- *Recognition* – the contribution of volunteers should be recognised.

Another policy-led definition was that developed for the United Nations International Year of the Volunteer which identified three key characteristics.

> "First, the activity should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, although the reimbursement of expenses and some token payment may be allowed.
>
> Second, the activity should be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual's own free-will, although there are grey areas here too, such as school community service schemes which encourage, and sometimes require, students to get involved in voluntary work and Food for Work programmes, where there is an explicit exchange between community involvement and food assistance.
>
> Third, the activity should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to society at large, although it is recognized that volunteering brings significant benefit to the volunteer as well."
>
> **(As quoted in the Russell Commission report, 2005)**

There is, therefore, a great deal of common ground between the public perception of volunteering and the top-down or policy-led definitions. Three of the four dimensions identified by Cnaan and his colleagues (1996) – absence of remuneration, free will and benefit to others – are common to all the approaches. The fourth – the idea that volunteering is formally organised – appears only in the Compact principle that 'both the volunteer and the organisation that the volunteer works with should benefit from the relationship' (our emphasis). The other striking feature is that the UN definition explicitly recognises circumstances in which the 'ideal type' formulation of the essential characteristics of volunteering may be

adjusted to the real world. Absence of remuneration may not preclude token payment or food assistance in return for community involvement while school schemes which require students to get involved in voluntary work, although clearly not an example of free will, represent another 'grey area'.

This brief review of existing approaches to defining volunteering provides us with a starting point for our attempt at setting boundaries for our field of study. In the first place they provide us with three core characteristics or defining principles of volunteering. It is an activity which is:

- Unpaid

- Undertaken through an act of free will

- Of benefit to others.

We have decided not to add the fourth principle found in the definitions reviewed by Cnaan and his colleagues – that of organisation. We believe instead that the degree to which volunteering activities are organised should be seen as a dimension of volunteering – a way of categorising and understanding it – rather than a defining principle. Occasionally there are other restrictions which are placed upon the term 'volunteering' such as that it shouldn't be carried out in a for-profit setting or that it should be undertaken within the letter of the law. Again, we see these criteria as interesting issues for consideration about the nature of different types of volunteering, not defining principles in themselves. As long as the activity meets the three defining principles outlined above it is considered volunteering – irrespective of the setting. As such, we leave any further discussion of these concerns to the next section of the paper.

In discussing each of the three core characteristics of volunteering we are aware of the problematic nature of each as a means of drawing a boundary between volunteering and other kinds of activity. Following the work of Handy et al (2000) and Meijs and his colleagues (2003) we will approach each characteristic not as a binary concept but as a spectrum of activity. We will try to identify points on each spectrum where activities would definitely be considered volunteering by most people; where activities would definitely not be considered volunteering; and an ambiguous zone in the middle where opinion is divided.

We need to add at this stage that our spectra do not carry any connotation of value or comparative worth of the activities between which we try to draw distinctions. Pure forms of volunteering are not 'higher' forms of activity than those we classify as more ambiguous while those we exclude from our field are not, as a result of this exclusion, deemed to be any less valuable in the greater scheme of things. Our purpose is to identify the kinds of phenomena of which we need to take account if we are to develop a better understanding of volunteering and in the process to exclude activities which are different enough from voluntary action to require separate treatment.

Absence of payment

At first glance the issue of payment seems straightforward; the definitions in common usage and the current legal framework make it clear that volunteering is unpaid. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of examples of people regarded as volunteers who receive some kind of payment above and beyond, or different from, the reimbursement of expenses incurred by the volunteer. These may include formal incentives for involvement such

as a concert ticket; a living allowance for full-time youth volunteers; the employer-supported volunteer who gets time off with pay; and the volunteers at museums who receive a discount on their membership cards.

We can group these – and many other examples – into four types of payment:

- *Incurred expenses* – ensuring that volunteers are not out of pocket as a result of their involvement

- *Enhanced expenses* (often considered to be enablers) – providing flat rate expenses and living allowances

- *Incentives and rewards* – aimed at encouraging people to get involved in volunteering or at expressing gratitude for their contribution

- *Payments* – an explicit exchange of hours volunteered in return for the payment of money or gifts.

This typology is a useful means of delineating one of the boundaries of volunteering. At one end of the spectrum, we would have no difficulty in accepting that payment of **incurred expenses** such as fares and subsistence do not breach the non-remuneration boundary. Indeed, these payments are widely regarded not only as permissible but also as good practice. At the other end of the spectrum, **payments** would clearly shift the activity over the boundary between volunteering and another kind of activity.

People receiving **enhanced expenses** may well be considered volunteers provided that the allowance can be seen as limited to ensuring they are not out of pocket. Once the enhanced expenses exceed that level, they can be seen as payments and we would no longer regard the recipient as a volunteer. The line here is not easy to draw: it will depend on a judgement about what constitutes an acceptable standard of living and an appropriate level of

allowance to sustain it. Should it, in the case of full-time volunteers, for example, include a modest budget (perhaps no higher than typical state benefits payments) for social life, or should it be confined to the bare essentials? (And who decides what the bare essentials are?)

Incentives and rewards constitute a much greyer area. We have little difficulty including activities with modest incentives or rewards in what we consider to be volunteering. Incentives which act as an initial sweetener to encourage people to get involved – after which the individual continues with the activity regardless of incentives – would certainly be included within our boundary. And so would a reward for volunteering which was unexpected by the volunteer or so small as to be limited in their effect upon the individual's decision of whether to volunteer or not.
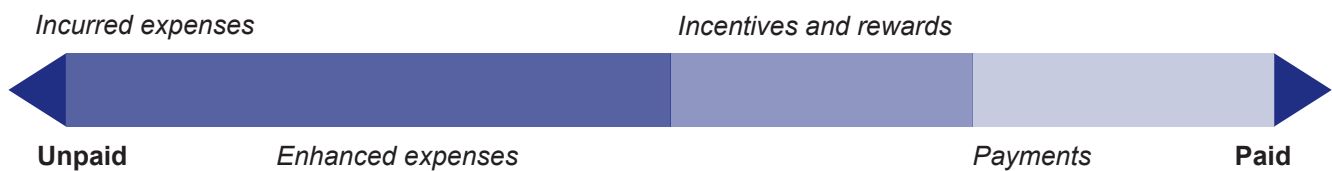
When incentives and rewards become more formalised or play a larger role in the decision-making process of the individual – or both – they belong in the fourth group we have identified and become **payments**. Two features distinguish the payment group from the other three. In the first place they involve a direct exchange of a service for a set payment. For example, arrangements often involve an implicit (or sometimes explicit) contract between the individual and the broker that they will receive a particular level of payment in exchange for a certain amount of engagement. The second key characteristic is the role that the payment plays in the decision-making process. If the payment plays a large part in motivating the ongoing involvement of the volunteer (i.e. above and beyond an incentive for initial involvement) then the activity falls outside our definition. On the other hand, a formal exchange (e.g. receiving a small discount on membership after completing a specific number of hours of service) could be included due to its insignificance in determining the individual's actions.

The typology which is presented in Figure 1 provides a framework for deciding who definitely is and is not a volunteer and a means of assessing the many examples which fall in between. Its application, however, requires some sensitivity to the specific nature of the individual activity. What is a small payment for some, for example, may be seen as quite large for people on low incomes. There are also some potential difficulties where people combine different kinds of roles within the same community; an individual engaged in a small community organisation, for example, might be paid for secretarial work but campaign for the organisation as a volunteer.

Figure 1: The payment spectrum

Incurred expenses   *Incentives and rewards*

Unpaid   *Enhanced expenses*   *Payments*   **Paid**

Free will

The second characteristic of volunteering is that it is an activity which is undertaken as the result of an exercise of free will. We are conscious of the seductive charm of entering a philosophical discussion of the meaning of free will. However, for the purposes of this working paper we will limit ourselves to focusing on some of the ways in which choosing whether to volunteer and choosing which kind of volunteering to do can be constrained and use examples of these to illustrate some of the points on a spectrum which ranges from free will to coercion.

There are a number of external influences, pressures, constraints and coercive factors that impinge upon the individual's freedom of action. We have distinguished between five types of coercion (we have used 'coercion' as a shorthand expression for the range of pressures listed below.)

- *Physical coercion* – involves a direct threat to an individual's physical well-being if they fail to follow a particular course of action; this is the 'gun to your head' scenario

- *Legal coercion* – involves a legal requirement to follow a particular course of action such as undertaking community service as a sentence

- *Institutional coercion* – involves pressure (sometimes formalised) from institutional structures to follow a certain course of action. One example is pressure from management to take part in a company's employer-supported volunteering scheme

- *Social coercion* – involves informal pressure from an individual's family or community (or society more generally) to follow a certain course of action. This might involve pressure on parents to help with school-based leisure activities in which their children are involved or indeed children who are involved in activities related to their parents' interests

- *Individual coercion* – involves informal pressure from one individual (or a small group) to follow a certain course of action. An example might be helping an organisation that your partner feels passionately about.

It is difficult to point to examples of **physical coercion** as a means of involving people in beneficial activities especially in the UK but one imagines that involvement in the paramilitary organisations on both sides of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland might have been motivated in part by the fear of violence. On the other hand, quasi-volunteering activities such as community service as a non-custodial sentence are clearly driven by legal constraints while ideas for compulsory non-military national service for young people are also founded on the idea of legal compulsion. In any case, these are found on the 'coerced' end of our spectrum and are clearly outside our boundary.
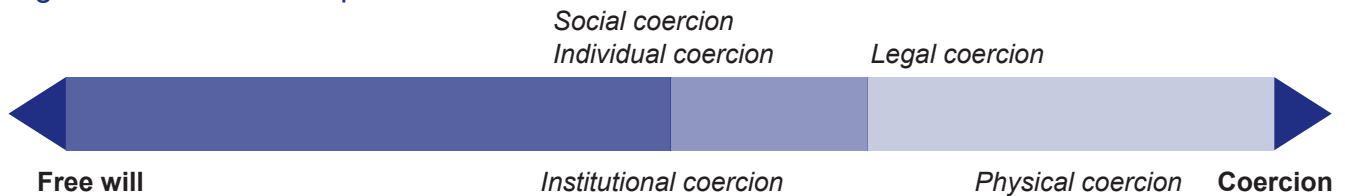
The concepts of **institutional, social and individual coercion** are more complicated and contested. Their position on our spectrum depends on two factors – the strength of the pressure placed on the individual and the extent to which there are clear and direct consequences of a refusal to comply. In its softer forms, the attempts to influence people's behaviour take the form of advocacy and persuasion while the sanctions for non-compliance are weak or non-existent. A government campaign to increase the number of volunteers involved in their local communities; a managing director's attempt to encourage employees to volunteer; or a suggestion to a friend that they might like to join the committee of a local organisation; these might all fall well short of coercion and those who respond can still be seen as making a choice to become engaged. Indeed, these efforts may be seen as positively contributing to a culture of volunteering in the school, workplace or society at large. They are included in our definition of volunteers.

The position becomes more ambiguous as the pressure becomes stronger and more direct. On one level, it may become more formalised. We enter a grey area when employer-supported volunteering becomes part of the discussion in a member of staff's supervision meeting with his or her manager, and move across the coercion boundary if a link is made between participation in such a scheme and prospects for promotion. And pressure can be intensified in other ways. Family members may be very critical of those among themselves who do not get involved in an activity, while an individual might bring emotional pressure to bear on a friend to help organise an event: these kinds of attempts to influence behaviour take us into the ambiguous zone between untrammelled free will and coercion. And, beyond that, members of a peer group or community who face ostracism for not getting involved can not, in our view, be considered to be volunteering. Clearly, the task of actually identifying and assessing a volunteer's internal decision-making process for getting involved would raise extreme difficulties in practice. However, we feel that there is clarity around the underlying principle.

Figure 2 provides a graphic view of these different kinds of coercion and arranges them on a spectrum from untrammelled free will to unambiguous coercion.

Figure 2: The free will spectrum

Social coercion
Individual coercion *Legal coercion*

Free will *Institutional coercion* *Physical coercion* **Coercion**

Benefit to others

The third defining principle of volunteering – that it should be of benefit to others – poses two sets of questions. In the first place we need to examine what we mean by 'benefit' and, secondly, we have to look more closely at the idea of 'others'.

Benefit

The first of these is far from straightforward. There are two main issues. Do we need to demonstrate that an actual benefit has resulted from the activity or is it sufficient to decide that the action was motivated by the desire to have benefit? And what exactly constitutes benefit and where do we draw boundaries around it?

The tension between 'actual benefit' and 'intended to benefit' can be illustrated by some examples: a fundraising event which loses rather than generates money for a good cause; or a volunteer guide in a museum who accidentally damages an exhibit. The activities are well meaning but the outcomes are not beneficial. If we focus on the motivations of those involved, we risk opening up a wide debate about the psychological foundations of volunteering. If, on the other hand, we exclude activities which cannot be shown to have delivered a net benefit we are in danger of excluding a great deal which might be considered volunteering – even if we were in a position to make an assessment of their impacts. We acknowledge that neither of the concepts of

actual benefit or intended to benefit is necessary or sufficient to provide us with a boundary per se. Instead we need to look at two aspects of the activity, which provide a conceptually less clear-cut and more difficult to apply but ultimately more accurate hybrid.

Firstly, we look at the purpose of the activity. This purpose is not the same as the intention of the volunteer. Rather we look at the activity itself and if part of the purpose of the activity is to benefit others (whether this purpose is derived from the volunteer, the organisation or even the beneficiary) then it can be considered volunteering. Secondly we need to look at the actual benefits that can be expected from the activity. This does not mean carrying out an audit of every instance of volunteering; rather, we assess whether if the activity were carried out with a reasonable amount of competence (and, perhaps, good fortune) it is likely to deliver some kind of benefit.

This still leaves us with the puzzle of what is – and is not – a benefit to society. The problem here is that different and conflicting views of what is beneficial can co-exist. Jurgen Grotz (2009) has highlighted this dilemma by contrasting the views of social benefit involved in supporting the work of a charity which enables blind people to take up angling with those of a group which is campaigning against angling on the grounds that it is a cruel sport which inflicts pain on fish. Both are arguably pursuing a socially beneficial

outcome. Both, it seems to us, need to be included within our definition of volunteering. On the other hand, there are activities which some would consider beneficial but which we would exclude from the most widely drawn view of volunteering.

Take the example of activity that involves violence. Whatever one's view of the justice or otherwise of their cause, violent terrorist groups would not be viewed as volunteers. David Horton Smith's typology of voluntary action is useful here (Smith, 2000). He splits the field between non-violent voluntary action (this would be unambiguously within our definition), illegal or violent voluntary action (ambiguous) and clearly anti-social behaviour (unambiguously not part of our definition). This framework provides a good starting point but to make the judgement violent action must be viewed within its own context. In some situations it would be excluded as it could not be seen as proffering benefit to others (e.g. racist attacks) whereas in others it may be seen as fitting within the definition (e.g. resistance to apartheid in South Africa). How the framework is sketched onto reality is an empirical, context-dependent question.

Others

The second set of questions – about who benefits – is less challenging. The principle is clear: activities which benefit only the protagonist and his/her immediate family (and his or her very close friends) do not constitute volunteering. Although the principle is clear, the application of this can be more difficult than it appears on the surface. While caring for one's own children, parents or partner is clearly not volunteering, and providing for the needs of strangers equally clearly is, exactly where the boundary should be drawn through the ambiguous zone between these poles is not altogether obvious.

There are important cultural differences to be taken into account: in some communities, for example, the extended family involves much closer relationships than in others. There are also differences in the relationships involved when volunteering takes place within a defined group – such as a refugee or migrant community or a congregation – rather than when it is undertaken for the public at large. And it is important to note that most definitions do not exclude benefits to the volunteer personally (or to his or her family or friends) provided that other people also benefit – e.g. self-help activities.

Finally, some definitions include activities of benefit to the environment. On one level it is difficult to disentangle these kinds of benefit from their social impacts and we may think of environmental benefits as purely pertaining to the benefits they have for other people (whether that be biodiversity, clean water in developing countries or preserving fossil fuels for future generations). However, others place an intrinsic value in nature and would see activity that benefits the environment as self-evidently beneficial without the need for a human recipient. Again we adopt a broad definition of volunteering, which would include activity benefiting others or the environment. Whether the beneficiary is other people directly or the environment may be an important question within volunteering but not one that can be used to define volunteering.
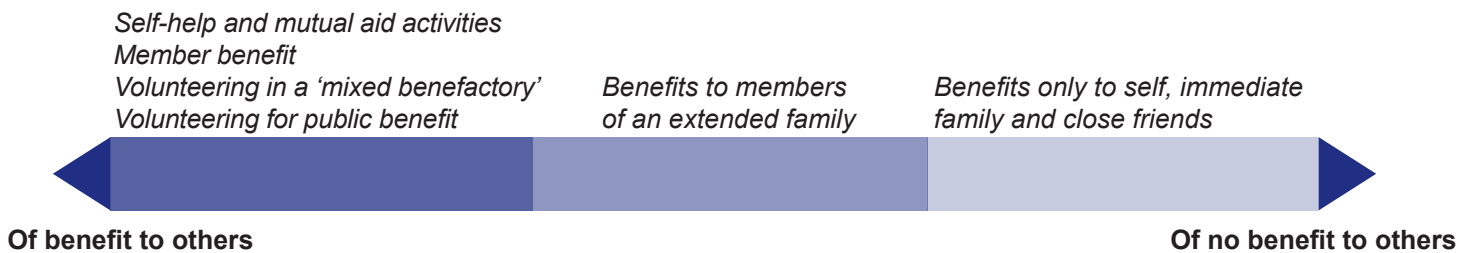
Bearing these points in mind we have developed a tentative typology which uses the dimension of benefit to others as a means of defining the boundary between volunteering and other forms of activity.

- *Benefits only to self, immediate family and close friends* – not volunteering

- *Benefits to members of an extended family* – ambiguous

- *Self-help and mutual aid activities which benefit members of a small group or tight-knit community as well as the volunteer* – a form of volunteering

- *Member benefit* – where the benefits are largely or exclusively to members of a club, society or association – a form of volunteering

- *Volunteering in a 'mixed benefactory'* – where there are benefits not only for the members of a club, society or association but also for a wider public, for example where the members of an Arthritis Care local group help to meet the needs of all local people with arthritis and not only their members – a form of volunteering

- *Volunteering for public benefit* – a form of volunteering

Figure 3 locates these different kinds of volunteering along a spectrum which ranges from absence of benefit to others to benefit for the public as a whole.

Figure 3: The benefit spectrum

Self-help and mutual aid activities
Member benefit
Volunteering in a 'mixed benefactory'
Volunteering for public benefit

Benefits to members of an extended family

Benefits only to self, immediate family and close friends

Of benefit to others
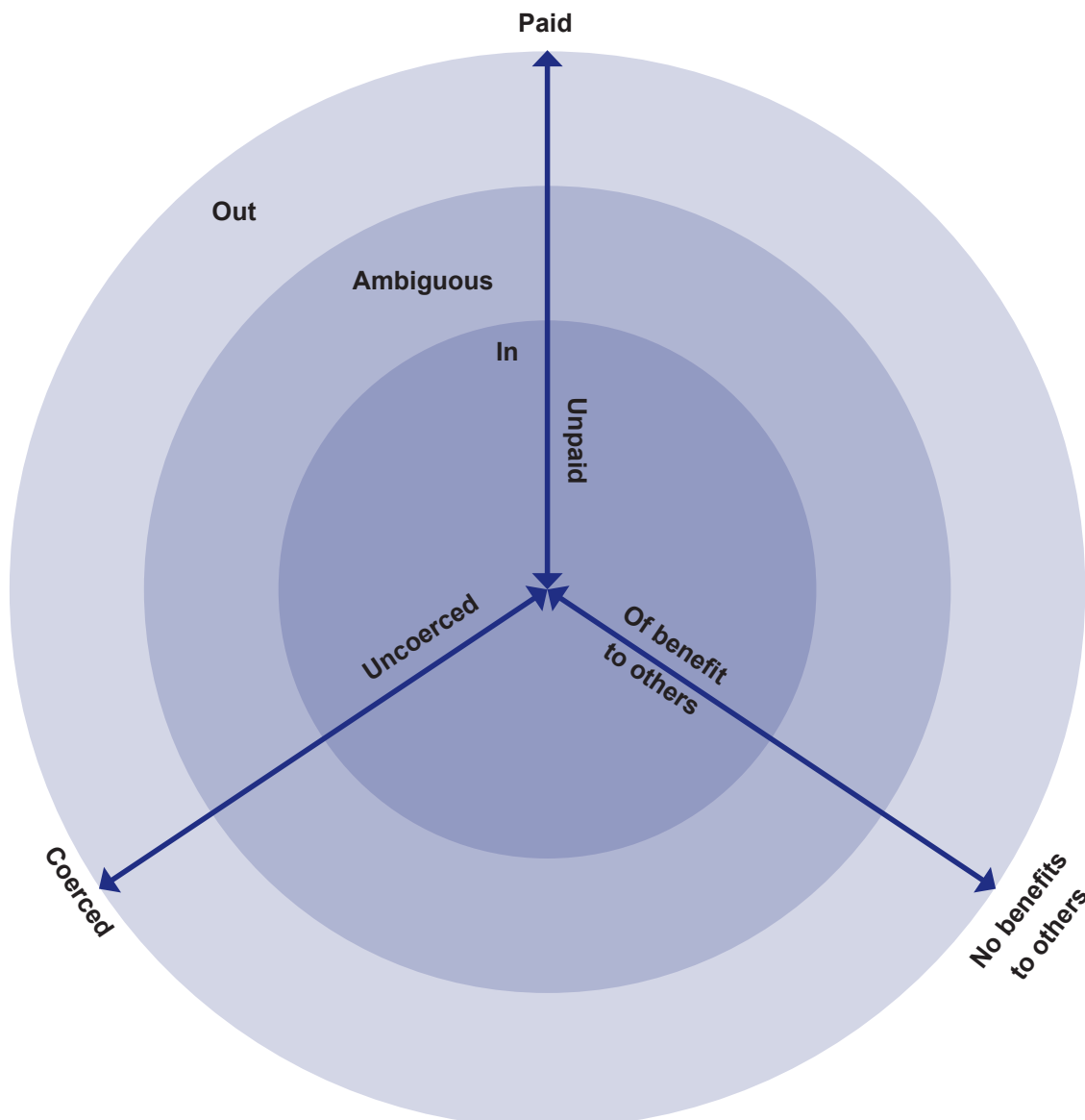
Of no benefit to others

A conceptual map

Having explored in turn each of the three principal dimensions of our definition of volunteering, we can now bring them together to provide a conceptual map of the boundaries of volunteering. As our discussion has stressed, there are considerable difficulties in definitively pinning down some of the concepts involved, however, we hope that Figure 4 will provide a useful framework for testing the boundaries of volunteering using real life examples. On our map, the inner circle represents activities which can clearly be seen to be volunteering; the circle surrounding it includes activities which are to a greater or lesser degree ambiguous in their status; and the activities outside these two circles are clearly not included within our definition of volunteering.

Figure 4: The multi-dimensional spectrum

3. Dimensions of volunteering

Introduction

Having delineated the field of volunteering, we now turn our attention to making sense of the range of activities found within its boundaries. We will review a variety of dimensions of volunteering and the ways in which they have been used to categorise and classify it. The key dimensions of the volunteering experience which we will discuss are: degrees of organisation; some established general perspectives; the nature of volunteering activities; and the degree of intensity of the volunteer's involvement.

Organisation

We noted above that Cnaan et al's (1996) review of the literature included 'organised' or 'carried out through an organisation' as a generally accepted element in definitions of volunteering. More recent attempts at definition have omitted this feature and we ourselves have chosen to treat it as a dimension of volunteering rather than one of its defining features. One important reason for adopting this approach is the growing recognition that volunteering also takes place outside organisational structures. While much of the literature focuses on formal volunteering – carried out under the auspices of an organisation – increasing attention is being given to informal activities undertaken between individuals (Rochester et al, 2010). The major source of data about volunteering in England and Wales – the Citizenship Surveys (e.g. Kitchen, 2009) – attempts to measure it in both its informal and its formal manifestations while some researchers (Williams, 2008; Woolvin, 2010) have focused on informal volunteering in the hope of rescuing it from comparative neglect. Research has also suggested that the simple distinction between formal and informal volunteering is too simplistic and is an inadequate way of approaching what is a far more complex set of phenomena. And there are other issues.

The concept of informal volunteering has been criticised as being so broad as to encompass forms of interaction between neighbours or friends which stretch the idea of volunteering to breaking point (Saxton and Baker, 2009). At the same time, the concept of formal volunteering raises questions about the definition of 'a group' or 'organisation' and thus where the boundary between formal and informal volunteering needs to be drawn.

Our response is to put forward a new three-fold classification with which to replace the simple distinction between formal and informal. It categorises volunteering as organised, collective, or individual.

Organised volunteering

This is an unambiguous zone in which volunteering is carried out in or through a formally constituted entity with a long-term or permanent existence. It will have a written document which sets out, as a minimum: its aims and purposes; the identity of its members; and the ways in which it will conduct its business, appoint its leaders and hold them to account. There are three principal types of organisation (Billis, 1993) through which people are involved in volunteering:

- *Associations* – membership organisations which elect their officers and a committee to manage their affairs and depend on the unpaid work of their members to carry out their functions

- *Bureaucracies* – these are the normal organisational forms found in the for-profit and statutory sectors as well as very large household name charities. The key feature of them is their hierarchical operational system in which authority flows downwards from salaried managers to paid staff whose functions and authority and autonomy are clearly defined and prescribed. Volunteers (excluding trustees) play an essentially ancillary role

Hybrid voluntary agencies – combines some of the features of the bureaucracy and the association. Its members elect its officers and governing body but it employs one or more managers and other staff to perform its operational activities.

Collective volunteering

Collective volunteering takes place in groups that are not formally organised, those entities which Billis has called 'unorganised groups' (1993) and 'the primordial organisation soup' (Billis, 2010) and which Milofsky (2008) has termed 'transorganizations'. These groups can be seen as hybrids with some of the characteristics of associations but also some of the personal or informal world of family and friends. They lack a constitution or legal entity (as such they are a group of individuals rather than an organisation) and they lack clarity about who is and is not a member – people may turn up and join in on a very ad hoc basis. Unlike organisations, they have a tendency to fade away when the original purpose has been achieved (or failure admitted). Unorganised groups of this kind may play a major role in social welfare (Billis, 1993) but are perhaps more often associated with campaigning and self-help activities yet they clearly play an important role in volunteering.

Individual volunteering

The third category of volunteering is that carried out as an individual with no host organisation or collective endeavour. Our understanding of individual volunteering is closely aligned to the Citizenship Survey's definition of informal volunteering. The survey asks about respondents' participation in a list of activities which the researchers then define as informal volunteering including (in order of the most commonly reported): giving advice; looking after a property or a pet; transporting or escorting someone; providing childcare; doing someone's shopping; and providing personal care. Broadly, the definition used in the survey gives a good representation of our individual volunteering.

However, we would offer some qualifications and additions to the definition. We add to our definition some of the activities which the Citizenship Survey calls civic engagement rather than informal volunteering – such as contacting a local councillor or council officer – and some which are seen as leisure time activities – such as individual coaching or individual mentoring of people engaged in sport or the arts.

Further, the definition should only include activity that is not purely spontaneous but is to some extent considered or planned; also the activity should represent more than a fleeting encounter. That volunteering should involve some element of prior consideration and be of some substance is not a defining principle of the order of the three principles discussed in section 2 (it does not distinguish volunteering activity from other types of activity). Rather it distinguishes between insubstantial reflex behaviour and more substantial and considered activity. This type of distinction would have to be made if we were trying to define terms such as 'political participation' or even 'playing sport' but it does not help to distinguish between them. Exactly where the cut off is made remains somewhat of a loose end, but we feel that there must come a point where something is so fleeting and spontaneous that it wouldn't be included in our definition. Table 1 is an attempt to distinguish individual volunteering from other pro-social behaviour.

Table 1: Individual volunteering compared to other pro-social behaviour

Activity	Individual volunteering	Other pro-social behaviour
Giving advice	Assisting a neighbour to complete a legal document	Giving directions to a passing motorist
Transporting	Taking someone to hospital to keep an appointment or visit relative(s)	Offering a lift to neighbours when passing them in the street
Childcare	Arranging to look after a child so its parents can go out to the theatre/cinema	Minding a child for a couple of hours while its parents deal with a short-term and unexpected need
Contacting a councillor or local government officer	Helping a neighbour get a service; taking up a problem affecting the whole street/estate	Responding to questionnaires (depending upon the aims of the survey)
Coaching or mentoring (on an individual basis)	Offering a structured conversation or series of conversations about performance	Suggesting a change in technique or approach on the way home from a match or performance

Some general perspectives

Another way of trying to make sense of the diversity of volunteering is provided by three broad perspectives or paradigms. Lyons and his colleagues (1998) have provided us with an understanding of two of these, the non-profit and the civil society paradigms. Their non-profit paradigm can be seen as the dominant view of volunteering in the UK and other Western developed societies while the civil society paradigm reflects the way in which volunteering is seen in the developing countries of the South. The third broad perspective – volunteering as serious leisure – has been developed by Stebbins and his colleagues (see for example Stebbins, 1996). Table 2 is an attempt to summarise the key features of each of these perspectives.
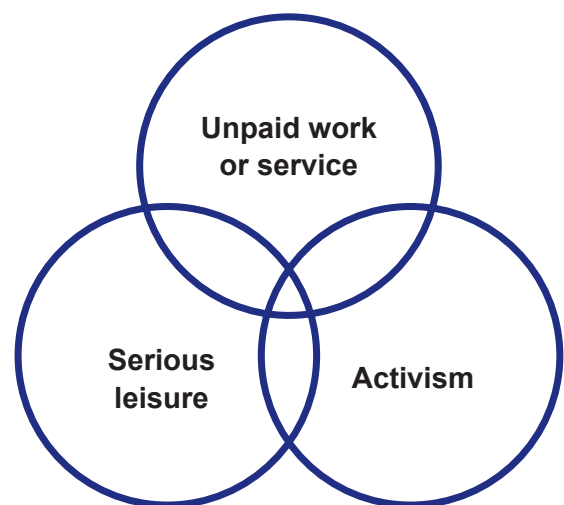
Table 2: General perspectives

	Non-profit paradigm	Civil society paradigm	Volunteering as serious leisure
Motivation	Altruism: helping people who are 'less fortunate'	Mutual aid: working together to meet shared needs and common problems	Intrinsic: commitment to acquiring expertise to practise a specific activity
Activities	In the broad field of social welfare	Self-help and campaigning in social welfare but also other areas of public policy	Arts and culture and sports and recreation
Organisational context	Typically in large, professionally staffed and formally organised charities but also statutory agencies like hospitals and schools	Associations and self-help groups entirely or largely based on voluntary efforts	Local clubs and associations but also larger federated structures at regional and national level
Volunteer roles	Additional resources/ ancillary roles Pre-determined functions and selected for specific tasks	Provide leadership and perform all of the operational tasks Volunteers develop roles over time	Performers, practitioners and participants but also full range of leadership and support roles

These three perspectives have been combined into a conceptual map (Figure 5). As well as the unambiguous forms that coincide with each of the three broad perspectives discussed above, the map includes four hybrid forms where either the nature of the organisation through which volunteering takes place or the combination of roles undertaken by the volunteer means that more than one perspective is needed if we are to understand the nature of the specific volunteer engagement.

Figure 5: A three-perspective model of volunteering

Volunteering activities

Our third set of classifications is based on the kind of activity undertaken by the volunteer. The best known broad brush activity typology is that developed for the UN International Year of the Volunteer (UNIYV) (Davis Smith, 1999) which identifies four types of volunteer activity:

- *Self-help or mutual aid* – probably the oldest form of voluntary action in which people with shared problems, challenges and conditions work together to address or ameliorate them. This is sometimes described as voluntary action 'by us, for us'

- *Philanthropy and service to others* – this is what most people in Britain would identify as volunteering; typically involving an organisation which recruits volunteers to provide some kind of service to one or more third parties

- *Participation* – the involvement on a voluntary basis in the political or decision-making process at any level, from participation in a users' forum to holding honorary office in a voluntary and community sector organisation

- *Advocacy or campaigning* – collective action aimed at securing or preventing change which includes campaigning against developments seen as damaging to the environment and campaigning for better services, for example for people with HIV/AIDS.

This categorisation seems fairly comprehensive to us. We would, however, make two changes. First we would change the title of the existing participation category to governance (for us participation is a much broader ranging activity than that indicated here). Secondly, and more fundamentally, we would add a fifth category of expressive behaviours:

- *Expressive behaviours* – involvement in an activity as a fulfilment of a personal interest often associated with volunteering in the arts, culture and sports sectors. Here the volunteer is expressing their interest and passion in a particular field through their volunteering.

Other classifications have provided a more detailed, nuanced breakdown of the activities within the field of volunteering. The fullest attempt at a comprehensive checklist of volunteer activities was developed under the UNIYV as part of a toolkit to assist people around the world to conduct comprehensive surveys of the extent and of nature of volunteering (Dingle, 2001). Unfortunately the list is too lengthy to include here, however, it has been summarised by Rochester et al (2010; pp.27-29).

Intensity of involvement

A fourth way of categorising volunteering is to segment it according to the amount of time the volunteer is involved in the activity. Various typologies have been developed to categorise short-term volunteering (Macduff, 2005, and Handy et al, 2006), a synthesis of which is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Discussion of different intensities of volunteering involvement

Micro-volunteering		The volunteer offers many discrete contributions such as forwarding fundraising emails on to friends for a cause that they support. Each individual involvement is minute but when combined it can be a significant contribution.
Episodic	The temporary (Macduff) or genuine (Handy et al) episodic volunteer	Volunteers on one or, at most, two occasions a year when the involvement will consist of a few hours (or, at most, a day) of his or her time on a one-off basis. The volunteer may give out water bottles at a marathon, make sandwiches at a party for homeless children, or arrive at a beach to clean refuse. This is a form of volunteering often found in the team challenges of employer-supported volunteering.
Serial episodic	The occasional (Macduff) or habitual (Handy et al) episodic volunteer	Provides 'service at regular intervals for short periods of time' which may range from a month to a few hours 'but the manager of volunteers can count on this person returning year after year' (Macduff, 2005; p51); or 'circuit volunteers', who volunteer for multiple episodic opportunities (three or more) throughout the year.
Short-term	The interim volunteer (Macduff)	Involved on a regular basis but for a limited period of time – less than six months. Examples might include a student on a full-time summer placement (intense short-term) or a member of an organising committee for a large event.
Episodic as well as long-term	Long-term committed volunteers (Handy et al)	People who, in addition to the episodic volunteering they do, are also engaged in long-term, regular, committed volunteering within the same or other organisations.
Sporadic long-term volunteering		Volunteering in the same role irregularly and episodically over a long period of time e.g. a patron of a charity who is sporadically called upon to attend events, be interviewed, and raise funds.

Building on the existing typologies, we propose three temporal dimensions to categorising volunteering in terms of the intensity of involvement – frequency (how often?), amount (how much?) and length (for how long?). When categorising a particular type of volunteering by the intensity of involvement we can simply ask ourselves three questions; see Figure 6.

Figure 6: A three-perspective model of volunteering

How much?

Hour   Day   Week   Month

How often?

Daily   Weekly   Monthly   Yearly

How long for?

Day   Week   month   year   decade

However, analysis of these three dimensions is complicated by the fact that volunteers can undertake a range of different types of opportunities at any given time (Handy et al 2006; Stuart, 2009) or indeed may volunteer consistently over a long period of time but change the organisation with which they volunteer.

We can, if we wish add this as a fourth dimension of consistency (how many volunteering opportunities?). It would take up too much of this paper's space to give a discussion of every possible combination but Table 4 explores some examples of volunteering activities with different types of intensity.

Table 4: Examples of different intensities of volunteering involvement

	How much?	How often?	How long?	How many?
Temporary	Six hours	Daily	Week	One
Occasional	Week	Yearly	Decade	Two
Interim volunteer	Four hours	Weekly	Six months	One
Committed	Three hours	Weekly	Two years	Three
Long-term	Eight hours	Monthly	Decade	Two

4. Entering the field of volunteering

We have marked out the boundary of the field of volunteering and explored its various dimensions. We now expand the discussion to consider how volunteering has been conceptualised more broadly. Historically volunteering has rarely been conceptualised as a field in isolation; more often a light has been shone upon volunteering from the perspective of a broader social phenomenon such as work, leisure or participation. These lenses through which volunteering has been viewed have important implications for our understanding of the field and therefore complement and build upon sections 2 and 3. These lenses tend to locate volunteering on a variety of different spectrums of social phenomena, with volunteering then being located in, and studied as, part of that broader activity. These forms of analysis can help us to develop our understanding of different aspects of volunteering and its interconnectedness with other related activities, but also run the risk of taking too narrow a view of volunteering itself – both overemphasising some types of volunteering and ignoring others.

This section of the paper will explore a number of different lenses through which volunteering has been viewed. We will discuss some of the conceptual implications of viewing volunteering through a particular lens and attempt to draw out some of the invaluable insights the perspective provides and also some of its limitations.

Volunteering as work

Many view volunteering through the lens of work (Chambre and Einolf, 2008; Stebbins, 2004; Rochester et al, 2010), including researchers from the areas of economics, management and feminist theory.

Tilly and Tilly (1994) usefully divide work into four regions: labour markets, the informal sector, household labour and volunteer work. Volunteering is seen to fit alongside other work roles that an individual undertakes. It is distinguished from labour markets and the informal sector because it is uncommodified; and it is distinguished from household labour in that it is freely undertaken. As Tilly and Tilly (1994; p291) put it, volunteering is 'unpaid work provided to partners to whom the worker owes no contractual, familial or friendship obligation'. Through the lens of work, volunteering is seen as a job people do, for free, for the benefit of the community (Henderson, 1981, 1984 in Stebbins and Graham, 2004) and it 'adds value to goods and services' (Tilly and Tilly, 1994: p291; see also Taylor, 2004). Conceptually, volunteering can substitute for, compensate for or complement paid work.

Viewing volunteering as work has several implications. Firstly, motivations are viewed as extrinsically orientated. As Musick and Wilson argue,

> "...by thinking of volunteering not only as a gift but as unpaid labour we shift the emphasis from the motivation behind the act to its productive aspects."
>
> **(Musick and Wilson, 2008; p111)**

As such, the role and nature of motivations for involvement are viewed as an empirical question to be explored rather than a defining principle of volunteering itself.

This lens also offers insight into how volunteering intersects with other forms of work and how the individual balances competing demands upon their time. Volunteering is one of a range of productive behaviours, which an individual may or may not decide to pursue depending upon a particular context. We know from UK national surveys of volunteering that

there is a relationship between rates of volunteering and employment status and type (Low et al, 2007; Kitchen, 2009) and exploring volunteering as one of many forms of work can help us to understand these dynamics.

Viewing volunteering as an essentially productive activity focuses attention both on the value of that productivity (which is welcomed) and on strategies to increase it. The focus on improving productivity has also in part led to an increased focus on the importance of volunteer management (which again is no bad thing). However, the danger of seeing volunteering as work is that it can reduce the nature of this value to productive outputs only and the wider, more holistic benefits of volunteering can be lost (although this doesn't necessarily have to be the case).

This conceptualisation has lead to an increased focus upon volunteer management, which to some extent has been welcomed in the sector. However, some also argue that this input-output conceptualisation has led to the commodification, professionalisation and formalisation of volunteering and volunteer management (see for example Howlett, 2010). In a 2008 paper, Stuart and Ellis Paine concluded by suggesting that 'a pre-occupation with formal systems, processes and procedures within the volunteering sector may have diverted attention away from the central ingredients of volunteer engagement: participation and voice' (Stuart and Ellis Paine, 2008).

Another conceptual implication is the persistent focus by some on the link between volunteering and paid employment with the two being viewed on a linear hierarchical framework where volunteering is demoted to a mere stepping stone to employment (Rochester, 2009; Hill, 2009). This demotion is by no means inevitable; however, it is a conceptual danger of viewing volunteering through the work lens.

Volunteering as philanthropy

A second lens through which volunteering has been viewed is philanthropy. Research through this lens tends to be concentrated within the fields of economics, law and management studies (Lyons et al, 1998). Here volunteering is seen as one part of a spectrum, which also includes charitable donations. Those who view volunteering in this way often inhabit the non-profit (Lyons et al, 1998) or dominant (Rochester et al, 2010) paradigm outlined in section 3, which mainly explores volunteering as a form of service provision.

As with work, this conceptualisation sees volunteer time as a resource that can be utilised by organisations and therefore also runs the risk of commodifying volunteers' involvement. However, rather than work, this resource is seen as a gift by the volunteer to the beneficiaries of the service they are providing. This sense of an asymmetrical and unidirectional gift relationship between the volunteer 'giver' and beneficiary 'receiver' is a key feature of the philanthropy lens and evokes caricatures of volunteers as wealthy, privileged benefactors. The focus here is also almost exclusively on formal activities in certain organisational contexts, most often carried out within social welfare organisations that provide public services and more specifically on large, well-organised and well-resourced third sector organisations.

A final important conceptual implication of viewing volunteering through this lens is that it to a large extent de-politicises volunteering. Here volunteering is an act of charity rather than anything more activist. It works within existing structures to deliver social welfare rather than something which can aim to challenge the very structures which foster asymmetrical relationships in the first place. As such, volunteering is largely conceptualised as something that sits alongside the state either directly, in partnership, or indirectly to deliver social welfare provision. Those who stress the activist aspects of volunteering argue that this conceptualisation ignores volunteering which operates tangentially or even in opposition to the state.

Volunteering as activism

Moving away from management studies and away from formal, third sector organisations, a third lens through which volunteering can be viewed is that of activism – which incorporates aspects of self-help, mutual aid, advocacy and campaigning. Viewing volunteering through this lens is common in continental Europe and especially the global South where volunteering is more often conceptualised as being located in the volunteer's local community. Those viewing volunteering like this are generally from fields such as sociology and politics and are more likely to be interested in smaller, less formal organisations and associations, or in civil society more broadly (Lyons et al, 1998), with a focus upon the wider community sector and grass roots associations (Rochester, 1997).

Rather than being seen as a resource to be managed by an organisation in order to deliver a cost-effective service to the public, volunteers here are the organisation, working together to meet shared needs and address common problems (Rochester et al, 2010). The fields in which they engage are seen to go beyond social welfare, into fields such as the environment. Motivations are rooted in self-help and mutual aid and notions of management or even recruitment are something of an anathema, with an emphasis instead on volunteer roles emerging, developing and diversifying over time.

The explicit focus upon informal forms of volunteering is a key insight of this perspective as these forms are often overlooked by other academic disciplines. In addition, this focus makes the relationship between the volunteer and beneficiary more symmetrical, acknowledging the reciprocal benefits of volunteering, and explores both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Here, multiple and mixed motivations of solidarity, vested interest, common causes, altruism, mutual dependence, self-help, mutual aid, and working 'together to meet shared needs and address common problems' (Lyons et al, 1998; p52) are all part of the make-up of volunteering.

The focus on small, less formalised organisations when viewing volunteering as activism perhaps excludes understanding of the larger more formalised advocacy organisations, which would likely place themselves within the activist sphere. Multi-national organisations such as Greenpeace involve a large number of volunteers in a wide range of roles, not all of whom are directly carrying out activism.

Volunteering as leisure

A fourth and increasingly popular way to think about volunteering is to view it through the lens of leisure. Historically volunteering has been given little attention within leisure studies although there are some exceptions (Henderson, 1981, 1984; Parker 1987; Chambre 1987; Fischer and Schaffer 1993; Graham 2001). This type of analysis was greatly popularised by Stebbins and Graham's 2004 book *Volunteering as Leisure/Leisure as Volunteering: an international assessment* which argues that volunteering is self-evidently a form of leisure because it is unpaid and uncoerced. Here, all of those things that are unpaid and uncoerced are leisure and the part of the spectrum which is occupied by volunteering is simply those activities which also have benefit to others (although this may not necessarily be the motivation of the actor).

Those who have come to consider volunteering from this perspective particularly focus on the enjoyment and satisfaction that volunteers gain from their involvement and on the notion that volunteers get involved without coercion. Stebbins (2004), for example, suggests that while there might be an element of obligation in volunteering, it is flexible obligation and this is what distinguishes it from either work or personal obligation. Volunteers are getting involved primarily out of self-interest – for enjoyment, self-actualisation and self-expression – so their motivations are intrinsically orientated rather than based on more altruistic notions of helping others (Henderson, 1981, 1984).

For those who view volunteering as leisure, one key agenda item has been to protect it from being viewed and reduced to a productive output, 'making this clear distinction [between volunteering and paid work] will guard against volunteers compromising their leisure experience by being viewed, assessed and valued in the same way as paid staff' (Stebbins, 2004; p242).

Those who reject this conception feel that it has the implication of trivialising volunteering: viewing it as leisure ignores the sacrifices that many people make in order to carry out such activity. Viewing volunteering through this spectrum also looks at it purely from the perspective of the individual volunteer and neglects the needs and impacts upon beneficiaries and society more widely.

Volunteering as care

The field of volunteering has also been viewed through the lens of care. Care includes paid care, care for family members and care for strangers (volunteering). Much of the academic attention given to volunteering as care has emerged from feminist scholars, particularly around the exploration and development of an ethics of care. For some feminist theorists, this care is something to be celebrated as a human strength which is currently predominantly exhibited by women but which can equally be displayed by men. However, concerns remain over the lack of value and recognition attached to it and the gender divisions that exist when it comes to who performs such types of activity. Zukewich (2003) argues that only when adequate tools are created to measure and value unpaid informal care-giving will we have a better understanding of the social and economic costs of care and how this relates to an individual's capacity to engage in the labour force.

However, those from other academic fields have sought to distinguish care from volunteering. In particular the level of obligation (for example, intense gender-based pressure) which is associated with caring is seen as a key principle distinguishing it from volunteering (Wilson, 2000). Musick and Wilson (2008) also suggest that care is not an appropriate conception for volunteering in some settings. They argue that the individual may have originally become involved in the activity because they cared about a particular person or group of people; however, their role is not as a carer. Rather they are required (due to the institutional structure) to carry out a specific role or function and they are, in fact, often encouraged to detach themselves from the intimacy of a caring role (Musick and Wilson, 2008; pp.420-1). They argue that this type of volunteering is better conceptualised as (care) work. Furthermore, one limitation of much of the literature on care is that it fails to distinguish between care for family and friends and care for strangers. This distinction is crucial when trying to delineate, categorise and understand volunteering.

Volunteering as participation

Another lens through which volunteering is viewed is participation. Here volunteering is located in the set of different types of participation, as described by Brodie et al (2010): public participation, which is 'engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy' e.g. voting, being a councillor; social participation (where volunteering is located), which refers to 'collective activities that individuals may be involved in as part of their everyday lives' including membership and volunteering; and individual participation, which refers to 'choices and actions that individuals make as part of their everyday life and that are statements of the kind of society they want to live in' e.g. fair trade consumption and using green energy supplies. Within the social participation category, volunteering is distinguished from other forms of collective activities which do not deliver tangible benefit to others but are better seen as simply taking part (such as playing for a football team).

In many ways the conception of volunteering as positive participation has underpinned one of the key government policy areas focusing on volunteering, seeing it as an overtly pro-social activity. This civil renewal agenda has been launched to counteract a perceived democratic deficit evidenced by low voter turn out, apathy, atomisation and fears over the breaking down of society. The agenda sees volunteering as a mechanism for getting people more involved in their communities and allowing people to participate in projects which address the problems they are facing (Blunkett, 2003). Academically, the focus of this lens comes from theories of participation, social capital and political engagement.

Certainly, there is a great deal of evidence that volunteering can lead to an increased sense of belonging (Hill, 2009), offer increased access to some of those excluded from other social spheres and can be a form of positive social engagement. However, there is also a great deal of evidence that the world of volunteering can replicate many of the exclusionary features of other social spheres such as work and politics (Davis Smith et al, 2004) and as such there is a danger in conceptualising volunteering as something necessarily pro-social.

Volunteering as learning

Finally, volunteering has been explored as an aspect of learning, training and development. Here volunteering is seen as contributing to an individual's learning in addition to the more formal experiences provided by educational institutions and work-based settings. Volunteering is seen as offering unique opportunities and settings for this learning to take place. There is currently some research which addresses the links between volunteering and lifelong learning (e.g. Ockenden et al, 2009) and considerable policy interest in the skills that can be developed through involvement, both from the point of view of volunteering as general lifelong learning and more specifically through the association of volunteering with training and retraining for the workplace (Russell, 2005). In the US volunteering as learning has received more attention under the designation of 'service learning'.

Eyler and Giles define service learning as: 'a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves' (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

There is no doubt that volunteering can aid the development of a whole range of different skills (Hill, 2009; Low et al, 2007; Kitchen, 2009; Ockenden, 2007). However, there is very little theoretical literature on the implications of conceptualising volunteering as a form of learning activity. One implication of viewing volunteering through this lens is that it can reduce it to a means rather than a valued end in itself. The focus is also on the volunteer themselves and not explicitly on the beneficiaries of volunteering or the broader social impacts of volunteering. Any benefits to society as a whole are reaped through aggregating the impact of volunteering upon individual volunteers.

Some commentators would also be keen to make a distinction between learning and volunteering, especially in the US where this concept of service learning is the best established. Volunteering here is seen as something valuable but quite separate to formal academic learning and it is not seen as directly relating to a student's academic goals (Owen, undated).

A multi-lens approach

This section of the paper has explored some of the key lenses through which volunteering has been viewed and the key spectra upon which it has been placed. It has become clear that each of the conceptualisations provides insights both into the field of volunteering, and how this activity interconnects with other related social phenomena. However, we have also discussed some of the implications of adopting each of these forms of analysis and we have seen how some of these conceptual underpinnings can lead to a restriction and distortion of volunteering in all its diversity. Instead of coming down on the side of any one of these conceptualisations we advocate a broader multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary and multi-lens approach to viewing our field. In section 2, we outlined the boundaries of the field of volunteering. For us, these are the only assumptions that can be made when studying volunteering. That is not to say that the additional conceptual implications of the particular lenses do not provide invaluable insights to our understanding of the field but rather, it seems clear that it is only through taking the very broadest conceptualisation of volunteering and ultimately studying it in its own right that we can hope to begin to fully understand the whole phenomenon.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Summary and introduction

In this working paper we have revisited the key question of 'what exactly do we mean by volunteering' by exploring three ways of addressing the issues it raises.

In the first place, we have discussed three generally accepted core elements in the ways in which volunteering is defined by developing three spectra along which to assess the degree to which an activity can be seen as:

- Unpaid or paid

- Uncoerced or coerced

- Of benefit to others or not.

Secondly, we have looked at four dimensions which enable us to make distinctions between different manifestations of volunteering. These enable us to suggest categories of volunteering based on:

- The final outcome or final purpose of the activity

- The kinds of activity involved

- The nature of the organisational context within which volunteering takes place

- The amount and intensity of time committed by the volunteer.

Finally, we have discussed seven perspectives – lenses through which volunteering has been seen by those whose primary focus is not volunteering. These view volunteering as a form of:

- Work

- Recreation

- Philanthropy

- Caring

- Activism

- Participation

- Learning.

In this section of the paper we will consider how and to what extent this framework will meet the needs we identified at the beginning of the paper. On the one hand, we were looking for greater clarity about the boundaries of our field of study and the spectrum of activities it encompasses in order to assess the work of the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) to date and help to guide its future agenda for research. And, on the other, we felt that it was important that policy and practice should be informed by a better understanding of the scope and range of volunteering. But, before addressing the lessons for IVR (and other researchers) and the implications for policy and practice, we will provide a brief account of the current volunteering research agenda as we understand it.

The research agenda

Over the past three or four decades a substantial amount of work has been carried out with the aim of developing a better understanding of volunteering and volunteer behaviour. To date, much of the research activity has focused on two questions which can be summarised as 'who volunteers?' and 'why do they get involved?' Major resources have been allocated to large scale surveys of volunteer participation and a great deal of attention has been given to the motivational psychology of volunteering. Two further questions have received less attention; these are about retention – 'why do volunteers stay? – and management - 'how can their work be best organised?'.

More recently, a rather different agenda has emerged with four principal strands:

- *Why and how do people become involved in volunteering?* This goes beyond psychological explanations for individual choices to include an assessment of the social, political, religious and cultural circumstances which may or may or not create a predisposition to volunteer and an analysis of the opportunities or triggers that convert predisposition into active involvement

- *What kinds of pathway or career do volunteers follow?* Instead of a narrow focus on why volunteers stay (or not) in a particular role, the concern is increasingly on how people drop in and drop out of volunteering and how the focus of the volunteering and the activities with which they get involved may change over time

- *How is their involvement facilitated, supported and sustained?* Rather than focus on volunteer management, this line of enquiry encompasses a wider range of factors that can make volunteering rewarding and a broad spectrum of organisational arrangements within which volunteering takes place

- *What impact does volunteering have?* IVR has pioneered systematic approaches to measuring the impact of volunteering on service users and the community as well as the volunteers themselves and the organisation in which they are involved.

Lessons for IVR

We suggest that the framework presented in this paper provides some key lessons for IVR as it seeks to understand and explain volunteering and volunteer behaviour and to address the kinds of questions set out above. If we are to develop a theory of volunteering, we need to determine what is included in our field of study and what is not and this involves drawing boundaries and ensuring we are aware of all that belongs within them. We also need a means of making sense of the variety of activity within the boundaries by making useful distinctions that create clear categories.

In the first place, the framework enables IVR to make a distinction between the kinds of behaviour that should or should not be its focus of study. We suggest that the unambiguous form of volunteering – as measured on our three spectra – provide its central area of study and that it should not concern itself with those which clearly fall outside the field of volunteering; these are significantly different kinds of activity. The phenomena found in the ambiguous areas of each spectrum involve activities which can be seen as having some of the characteristics of volunteering but also involve elements of non-volunteering. To the extent that

they are partly about volunteering they may offer useful sources of understanding the phenomenon. Including them within any particular line of research will, however, require an explicit decision based on a judgement of their relevance and value.

Secondly, the framework provides a means for IVR to ensure that it can see the full picture and will not develop general theories based on the study of only part of the field. Both the seven perspectives and the four dimensions are ways of developing a rounded vision of volunteering.

Thirdly, it enables IVR to make meaningful distinctions between different kinds of activity and ensure that it builds theories on sound foundations. The dimensions are particularly relevant here but the other elements in the framework are also useful in this respect.

Together, the framework provides a means of mapping where existing knowledge is stronger or weaker and thus to identify priorities for future research.

Wider implications

As well as helping IVR to take stock and to plan its future work, our framework has, we suggest, wider implications for research, policy and practice.

Research
We hope that the framework may be of use to other researchers and to the field in general. In the short term it could (a) help researchers locate their work in a wider framework of enquiry; (b) enable them to identify what may or may not be helpful empirical data and conceptual thinking by others; and (c) suggest fruitful lines of enquiry and identify under-researched areas. Longer term, we hope that the ideas developed here will provide a starting point for a debate and discussion that will revise and refine the framework to the point at which it could be widely accepted and used.

Policy
There are two broad ways in which our work might have implications for the development and implementation of policy. In general terms, the horizontal policy agenda through which government seeks to promote volunteering as a whole would benefit from a better understanding of the breadth of the range of activity involved; too often it is based on a very narrow view of volunteering as unpaid work carried out through large voluntary agencies and driven by altruistic motives. More specifically, the vertical agendas of individual departments and agencies need critical attention: volunteering is ill-served by policy initiatives described as volunteering which involve payment (above mere enablement) or coercion. Community service is a perfectly respectable activity but it is quite different from volunteering. The ongoing tension between centrally organised government initiatives on the one hand and local bottom-up developments would also be better understood through a more comprehensive way of describing volunteering. And, finally, the recognition that people approach volunteering from different perspectives might help us avoid the misunderstandings and misapprehensions which can easily result.

Practice
The two main areas in which volunteer-involving organisations and those that support their work have looked for help from researchers are recruitment and management. The proliferation of how-to manuals has tended to use a one size fits all model in both areas. While these may be well suited to some kinds of volunteering activity, they may equally well be inappropriate for other activities and other settings and our framework offers a means of identifying suitable horses for the variety of courses involved.

Concluding remarks

We conclude by stressing the tentative nature of our framework. It is the best we can do in the present state of our knowledge and it is largely untested: we have tried to use it a means of classifying the work IVR has undertaken over the past twelve years and it seems to work reasonably well. But it should be seen as a tool or set of tools which we and other people can use in the future. Whether it works or how it can best be used are questions to be answered by attempting to apply it. We look forward to revisiting this most basic of questions in the light of our and other researchers' experience on a regular basis.

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