

BSG Annual Conference 2023
Hosted by University of East Anglia (UEA): Norwich

Symposium: The Role of Volunteering in Older Adult Volunteers' Lives

12:00 - 13:00 Wednesday, 5th July, 2023

Julian Study Centre 1.03



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John Carlin



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Abstract

This symposium will assess the current situation for older volunteers and the role volunteering plays in their lives. The role of volunteering in older peoples' lives is highly relevant as the positive effects of volunteering on older adults' wellbeing as well as physical and mental health with the corollary of risk of cessation have been well documented.

Since the early 1990s the number of older adults, over 65s, volunteering has increased proportionally and in 2019 they overtook those of younger age groups. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everybody's lives, the picture emerging about older adults' volunteering, as we come out of the pandemic, appears unclear. While some reports show how volunteering for older volunteers, especially those shielding declined, other reports suggest that compared with younger age groups, more over 70s continued volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic

The format of this symposium is deliberately co-productive, involving academics, practitioners and people with lived experience, exploring knowledges and experiences from different perspectives. Looking ahead the symposium will discuss public policy with regards to volunteering and the attitudes of volunteer involving organisations

Provocation

Within this symposium we want to consider some of the key research concerns concerning older volunteers and the role volunteering plays in their lives. We will propose three provocations in order to generate discussion and contribute to the development of a critical research agenda around volunteering. These provocations operate at three levels; firstly there is the organisational level, secondly there is the political level and thirdly there is the individual level. They all address the very pressing need to rethink the 'dominant paradigm' which sees volunteering exclusively as service (Rochester, 2013), and to address 'inequalities in volunteering' (Hustinx et al., 2022).

Our first provocation is that volunteering is not necessarily a social good for all those who do it, and that there are particular elements of being an older volunteer that we must take account of if we are to ensure that the potential positive elements of volunteering are accentuated and the potential negative elements are mitigated. After Rochester (2013) and Hustinx et al. (2022) we take the view that dominant theories of volunteering contain a strong normative tendency towards regarding volunteering "*by definition a desirable, positive activity, due to the multiple benefits that it generates for volunteers, beneficiaries, and society at large,*".

Our argument is that the field is more complex than this and that we need to try and bring more pluralistic ways of thinking to how we conceptualise or theorise these fields. For example, Grotz and Leonard, (2023) differentiate between a transactional model of volunteer involvement and a participatory model of volunteer involvement. Within the transactional model, volunteers tend to be seen as unpaid labour, where the aims and benefits of involvement are determined by the organisers, where volunteers are directed and there is little opportunity for volunteers to determine the shape and direction of the activity. The participatory model, on the other hand, regards volunteers as collaborators, who have a role and a say in determining the aims and benefits of the activity. In the social context where we already know that older people can be marginalised and excluded, (and that this tends to get more severe the older the person is), then we need to commit to ensuring that opportunities and activities intended to reduce marginalisation, do not, (directly or indirectly), actually compound existing structures and inequalities. We need to

ensure that volunteer involvement opportunities do not operate in such a way that marginalises older volunteers, for example treating them simply as unpaid labour, as this will directly create more feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. In turn, this means that all volunteer involvement activities need to ensure that there are opportunities for involvement for all volunteer activities, but more so that special attention must be given to the existing sources of inequalities, disadvantage and marginalisation across all volunteers, old or young, men or women, global majority or global minority status, social class etc, in order to ensure a parity of participation opportunities for all.

This leads to the second provocation, that the opportunities for volunteer involvement are not the same for all. Here we are talking about the relationship between policy and volunteer involvement. There is a long and well established conservative political tradition which champions volunteering and voluntarism as an important component of civil society, whereby voluntarism provides the opportunity for 'less government' as more is done by the so-called Third or VCSE Sector. In the context of the contemporary United Kingdom, this has very clear policy ramifications, when considered in light of the devolved nations. National policies around volunteering are significantly different in the four nations, with policy in England predicated upon an idea that volunteering is something separate from government. For example, there is currently no clear policy for volunteering in England, compared to the current Scottish Government's 'Volunteering for all' national framework. Similarly, Wales and Northern Ireland have umbrella organisations for wider voluntary and community engagement which facilitate collaboration and involvement between devolved government and volunteer involvement. This suggests that there are very clear differences in the perceived social value of volunteering within these different jurisdictions, where England is clearly the outlier. In England, the idea of 'social value' vis a vie volunteer involvement (Dowling and Harvie, 2014), is broadly defined as the positive non-financial impacts and outcomes of programmes, organisations and interventions. In this context, social value is used to "*quantify the extent that particular initiatives contribute to a better functioning, socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable society,*" (p.880, *ibid.*). The difference between the model of social value contained

within English policy making around volunteering, compared to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, goes back to the first provocation we made. The English model of social value, if we can call it that, tends to be solely transactional, whereas Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland include a more participatory model. Of course this brings with it all of the previously raised concerns about compounding inequality, but more than that, it also sets the terms of the debate, such that the tone and tenor of opportunities for involvement and participation are structured differently within the respective policy fields they originate in, with the latest call for volunteering in social care in England being a pertinent example. So even if we know, and insist, that participatory volunteering is the best way forward, if the policy context to enact participatory models of volunteering is not developed and robustly supported, then we again, run the risk of compounding inequalities and disadvantage through the very activities intended to reduce that. As such, there is a need for an organisational commitment to participatory volunteer involvement, but there is also a clear need for a political commitment to volunteer involvement, at the level of regional and national policy making.

The third provocation relates to the volunteer themselves. Again, the common themes of exclusion and marginalisation are important in this regard, but this time they refer to issues around the economic, social and cultural resources required to participate in volunteering. Indeed there is a pressing need to address massive changes in the resources required to participate in foot of the post-COVID-19 consolidation of the shift towards digital technologies.

So on the one hand, we argue it is imperative to ensure individuals are able to participate but also, we need to develop new ways of conceiving of individual, and social benefit. The growth of the digital brings with it a requirement for the necessary technology to facilitate participation. As with provocation one and two above, any policy or practice which limits or constrains the opportunity for participatory volunteer involvement needs to be challenged and critiqued. As such, this third provocation is a call for the individual needs and agency of volunteers to be a primary determinant of volunteer involvement. We argue that volunteer involvement should consistently ensure that individual volunteers are not excluded because of a lack of access to necessary technology, but we would even extend this, and say that there is a very

clear need to ensure that no individual is excluded from participating in practices of volunteer involvement because they lack the social, material or cultural capital to be involved.

It is within this context of individual, organisational and political participation that we see the need to develop an active, participatory co-produced research agenda for older people in the context of volunteer involvement across the four UK jurisdictions and beyond. There is a need to shift from a resource model, as per English notions of transactional social value, to a model of understanding underpinned by a focus on inequality, this will enable us to develop a range of methodologies, and deepen our understandings, across the range of people who volunteer, both those who are marginalised and those who are not.

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Bios

Ewen Speed

Ewen Speed is Professor of Medical Sociology in the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. He is interested in the political sociology of health and healthcare and has researched participation and involvement across a number of contexts. His research seeks to explore and develop new and novel ways of participating in health care and social care. His publications include:

Speed, E. and Reeves, A., (2023). [Why is Lived Experience Absent from Social Security Policymaking?](#). *Journal of Social Policy*, 1-16.

Speed, E., Crawford, L. and Rutherford, A., (2022). Voluntary Action and the Pandemic across the UK, pp. 19-39. In I. Hardill, J. Grotz and L. Crawford (eds.): *Mobilising Voluntary Action in the UK Learning from the Pandemic*. Policy Press.

Speed, E. and Taggart, D., (2019). [Stigma and Mental Health: Exploring Potential Models to Enhance Opportunities for a Parity of Participation](#). *Journal of Ethics in Mental Health*. 10 (VI).

Madden, M. and Speed, E., (2017). [Beware Zombies and Unicorns: Toward Critical Patient and Public Involvement in Health Research in a Neoliberal Context](#). *Frontiers in Sociology*. 2.

Heather Edwards

Heather founded and leads Come Singing, a small voluntary organisation offering music and peer support sessions for people living with dementia. Currently with a core of fellow volunteers she runs 19 therapeutic groups monthly in Norwich for the NHS, Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Mental Health Trust, Norfolk Library Service, Barchester, NorseCare and other organisations.

Experience during this work led to the development of Music Mirrors, a simple practical way to archive and access audiobiographical cues to wellbeing. The concept was recently the subject of a four-year scientific research study by Zurich University and is in extensive use as an intervention in care homes and hospitals. Previously Heather taught renaissance music history at UEA and Madingley Hall, Cambridge and was a professional accompanist. She is addicted to volunteering.

Her publications include

Oppikofer, S. & Edwards, H. (2021). Der Musikspiegel in der Palliative Care. *Pflegen:palliativ*, 52, 32-34.

Oppikofer, S., Hofstetter, G., Hess, A., Engström, S. & H. Edwards (2021). Den audiobiografischen Klängen auf der Spur. *Gerontologiech*, 2 (21), 9-10.

Edwards, H. (2020), "Making things personal: a project promoting the wellbeing of older residents and staff in sheltered housing and care homes", *Journal of Public Mental Health*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 251-257. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMH-04-2020-0029>.

John Carlin

John is currently the Volunteering Good Practice Advisor at the Alzheimer's Society. Previously at the Society he worked as the Regional Volunteering Development Lead for London and the Southeast. He has worked for the Alzheimer's Society for five years. Previous roles include; Quality Programme Manager at National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) leading their Quality Standards Unit with overall responsibility for managing and developing NCVO's suite of quality standards (APS, liV, liVE, PQASSO & VCQA), Infrastructure Development Manager at Volunteering England and before that the Development Manager at West London Network working with local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations across the six London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon and Hounslow. John has one current volunteer role which he has been doing for over 20 years.

Jurgen Grotz

Jurgen Grotz PhD is the Director of the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) at the University of East Anglia. He is an author, academic and practitioner with 30 years' experience of applied research, working with a strong focus on participative and inclusive approaches. His mainly interdisciplinary research covers volunteer involvement in the public, private and voluntary sectors, focusing on the role of agency for everyone being involved as volunteer or involving volunteers and the

difference this makes to individuals, organisations, communities and societies. His publications include:

Grotz, J., Ledgard, M., & Poland, F. (2020) *Patient and public involvement in health and social care: An introduction to theory and practice*. Imprint Springer Nature and Palgrave Macmillan.

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