

Understanding impact in social and personal context: making a case for life stories in volunteering research

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Much of the existing research on the impact of volunteering on the volunteer falls into two categories. The first is the cross-sectional quantitative survey on volunteering, or a volunteering component within a broader cross-sectional survey. Examples from the UK include Helping Out (Low, Butt, Ellis Paine and Davis Smith, 2007) and the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith, 1998). These surveys are valuable for providing a snapshot of the types of benefits and negative impacts respondents attribute to their volunteering – for example, improved health and sociability, or a loss of time for other pursuits. The second common category is the impact assessment carried out as part of a programme or project evaluation. This type of work tends to look at a particular type of impact, often coinciding with the programme's objectives – for example the relationship between volunteering and employability for job seekers or between volunteering and prisoner re-offending.

Both surveys and volunteering programme evaluations have generated a great deal of information about the wide range of benefits and potential drawbacks of volunteering. However, they can be limited by an underpinning logic of instrumentalism, or simplistic model of cause and effect. They risk being more focused on a set of narrowly-defined objectives and outcomes than on exploring the many facets of personal impact and the complexity of personal change. The challenge for researchers is to find ways to explore impact that are open-ended, participant- and process-focused, rather than being guided too heavily by programme parameters, policy trends, or pre-determined objectives and outcomes. I suggest that a life story approach has the potential to take research in this direction.

To describe what a life story approach can contribute to the field, I will draw examples from an ongoing qualitative research project called Pathways through Participation, which has been taking a life story approach in one stage of its fieldwork. Although this project is not focusing exclusively on volunteering or on the impact of participation, the team's experience of using life story-based methods to explore participation, as well as some of the initial data and emerging findings, point to the transferability and versatility of life story approaches. First, however, I will outline some of the limitations of cross-sectional surveys and common approaches to programme evaluations as methods for researching the personal impact of volunteering.

A critique of common approaches to researching personal impact

Musick and Wilson's (2008) book *Volunteering: A Social Context*, is an excellent example of work that draws a great deal on survey data to create a wide-reaching portrait of volunteers and volunteering. However, quantitative surveys are limited in

their ability to convey depth and complexity in their representation of personal impact because they must pre-determine the potential impacts from which respondents can choose. This makes surveys ineffective in capturing the dynamic and contextual nature of personal, and particularly psychological, change. They are equally ill-suited to exploring how the effect of volunteering on a person's life is shaped by the *nature* of their experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences, not just by attributes like age, ethnicity, and education levels.

Volunteering is always something people do *in addition to* or *alongside* other activities, responsibilities and commitments. The label of volunteer can make it easy for us to forget that volunteers have other identities and seldom only have responsibilities related to their volunteering. People who volunteer can be parents or grandparents, partners, carers, paid employees, students and children as well as volunteers. They are also likely to have interests outside of the area in which they volunteer. There is a body of literature around the relationship between life stages or life cycles and volunteering (Musick and Wilson, 2008), although this research tends to rely on static, cross-sectional data rather than data which captures change over time (Rotolo, 2000).

Unfortunately, like surveys, programme-specific impact assessments have a tendency to be short-term in scope and therefore quite narrow in focus. Many impact assessments take 'official' programme aims and objectives (i.e. as stated in the initial bid to funders) as their starting point and guiding framework for the process. As Kushner argues, 'to measure a program against its objectives or against an externally imposed set of indicators is a meaningless exercise in itself, for those objectives and indicators relate to the lives of the people [the program implicates] in very different ways' (2000, p.xiv). An objectives-based approach to impact assessment can ignore impacts that fall outside of the programme's own narrative, and deny volunteers the opportunity to present their own account of their experience.

Finally, impact assessments undertaken as part of a programme evaluation are often tied to efforts to maintain or secure funding, and as such are often treated as a means to an end rather than an opportunity for learning in their own right. When funding is contingent on a positive assessment, impact is more likely to be presented in a positive light. Negative impact and challenges risk being downplayed or ignored entirely. As Rochester, Ellis Paine and Howlett argue, this approach 'restricts the types of impacts which are assessed, it dictates how that assessment is done, and it shapes the analysis of the results; it also limits the value of the exercise as a whole' (2009, p175).

An introduction to life stories as a research methodology

A life story approach is characterised by a privileging of personal narratives over institutional or organisational narratives, an interest in the *wholeness* of people's lives and the relationship between various aspects of people's lives, and a commitment to responsiveness and reflexivity in the research process (Merrill and West, 2009). Life story approaches to research seek to give research participants the space to bring their own interpretations and meanings to the subject of enquiry, while recognising the role of researchers in contributing their analytic lens to the research process and data.

Programmes and policies are, to a certain extent, narrative constructs. Programme designers and policy makers may talk about them as though they are coherent and logical 'entities', but the meanings these actors assign to them are not necessarily the meanings the people involved and affected by them hold. Unless we take the time to understand how people make meaning of their volunteering experiences, and how these experiences fit within the wider context of their lives, we can only have a partial understanding of their impact.

The value of a life story approach hinges on the distinction between narrative and causal explanations of social phenomena (Elliott, 2009). The survey and objectives-based evaluation approaches to impact research I have described above seek to construct causal explanations of the relationship between volunteering and its impact on people who volunteer. Causal explanations strive to determine whether an intervention is the cause of a later outcome. This is rooted in an experimental model of social science research. Narrative explanations strive to illuminate the subject in question by presenting it in the context of a wider story – in this case, a life story. The strength of a narrative explanation, according to Baumeister and Newman, is that it 'sacrifices the generality of the paradigmatic [causal] mode in favour of comprehensiveness. Rich accounts can encompass many features, and so narratives are more flexible and can accommodate more inconsistencies than paradigmatic thinking' (as cited in Elliot, 2009, p.98).

Pathways through Participation

Pathways through Participation is a 2.5 year project led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations with project partners the Institute for Volunteering Research and Involve. It is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The project is exploring how and why people get involved and stay involved in different types of participation. What distinguishes Pathways from much previous research on participation is its focus on the possible relationships between a wide range of participatory activities, and links between different types of participation in individuals' lives, rather than on a particular type of participation in isolation (Brodie, Cowling and Nissen, 2009). Volunteering is one type of participation that cuts across the seven categories of participatory activity the project is considering: public (political) participation; campaigning and direct action; service to others and environment; mutual aid and self help; fundraising and individual giving; ethical consumerism; and leisure and recreation. The research is being carried out in three case study areas: inner-city Leeds, suburban Enfield, and rural Suffolk.

Pathways through Participation is interested in individuals' experiences of participation over their lifetimes. The centrepiece of the fieldwork is more than 100 in-depth interviews based on a life story approach, which are being carried out with residents and people who participate in the case study areas. We invite research participants to speak about their participation currently, as well as in their past. We ask how they came to get involved, stay involved and, if applicable, leave these different involvements. This often brings family members, friends, and work colleagues into the conversation. We also invite participants to speak about important life turning points, critical moments, and influential people or experiences. This means our exploration of participation often touches on things like childhood and parental influences, involvement in paid work, family, friends and social networks, and personal values. While they are speaking, we ask interviewees to

create a visual timeline that represents their history of participation in visual or symbolic form (usually chronological). This visual method serves as a prompt for storytelling. The combination of the interview and the timeline help to create a picture of what is or was happening 'around' people's experiences of participation. Were they or are they caring for others? Raising children? Moving home? Working long hours? All of these experiences have some bearing on the quality and nature of someone's voluntary involvements, and therefore on the personal impact of those involvements.

Life stories in volunteering research – learning from Pathways through Participation

A life story approach could be particularly helpful at illuminating several different areas of the personal impact of volunteering: its effect on relationships, both those formed through and outside of volunteering; negative or contradictory (both negative and positive) impacts; the relationship between the quality or nature of a volunteering experience and its impact; and its impact over time. I will briefly discuss each of these categories with examples drawn from interviews carried out in the rural case study area, where I have been working. The research team has not yet begun an in-depth, cross-sectional analysis from the interviews carried out across the three case study areas. This stage of the research will begin when the interviews are completed at the end of September, 2010. As such, the discussion below should be treated as an early-stage reflection on what a life story approach has brought to the Pathways project, in terms of illuminating elements that can often be downplayed or ignored in the more common approaches to research on the personal impact of volunteering.

Volunteering impact assessments often cite the social benefits of volunteering (Low, Butt, Ellis Paine and Davis Smith, 2007). Through volunteering, people work alongside and socialise with others and can make new friends and acquaintances. This research tends to focus on volunteers' relationships with other volunteers, but seldom explores how volunteering affects the relationships of volunteers who are family members or friends outside of their volunteering roles. Some of the Pathways research participants spoke about the voluntary activities they are involved in with friends and family. For example, Cynthia¹ talked about enjoying the volunteering opportunities in which both she and her husband, whom she married seven years ago, could get involved. She sees their joint volunteering as an opportunity for them to get to know each other better, and to see each other in different situations. She cited the example of volunteering together at a youth club:

'We tend to do loads of things separately but this kind of stuff [volunteering] we tend to do it together...At the youth club, what I found was because of the naughty children or teenagers, because Tom was a police officer he's brilliant when he's dealing with the kids and that because he had so much experience in the job. So that was quite interesting for me to see him in a different light actually and how he coped with them' (White female interviewee, 45-54 age bracket, Suffolk case study area).

However, volunteering and participation outside of the home does not have an unequivocally positive effect on people's relationships. At times, negotiating the 'demands' of a relationship with those of voluntary commitments can be

¹ All research participants' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

complicated and challenging, as the following project participant's story attests.

Jessica and her husband are both retired. Jessica has a long and varied history of participation, much of which has been connected to the church, in addition to her paid work. According to her, her husband Gene has always focused more on paid work than on voluntary work. Moreover, he has become an atheist since they met. Jessica was very open about the challenges this creates:

'[Volunteering is] something I need to do, and all this time, and then Gene was still working, I went on [working] till I was 61, so I again have built up this life for myself while he's at work, I'm doing the housework, I'm helping out with children and grandchildren and I've done all my stuff while he's been at work. Now, since he's been retired 2½ years, he's 66, he retired a bit early, we have begun to have the problems and that's why I'm going to step down from the Synod [a Church of England council], because he feels that it takes too much of my time. He says, 'It's always, church, church this, church...' and it annoys him' (White female interviewee, over-65 age bracket, Suffolk case study area).

Jessica's story reminds us that participation can have negative as well as positive impacts on participants.

A third story from a Pathways interview sheds light on the potential for volunteering to have costs as well as benefits. Monia has had depression and other illnesses for many years. She got involved as a volunteer with a local youth club to try to keep her CV current, and stay involved in some form of work. However, funding difficulties, as well as the dominance of a group of aggressive and disruptive young people at the youth club, put additional strain on her. Monia described her experience at a time when the club was at risk of closing down:

'I tried to keep it on and re-launch it with funding but at the time I was very, very sick with headaches and sickness...I found I had bouts where I could do a lot but then for three months I couldn't do anything. I tried hanging on as long as I could and then my final decision came [to stop volunteering] when I thought if I'm like this now, what happens when I'm dealing with thousands and thousands of pounds [of funding from the local authority]?' (Female Asian British interviewee, 45-54 age bracket, Suffolk case study area).

Monia's experience of having little support and a lot of personal responsibility for the youth club's funds, especially in the context of her illness, made her unwilling to continue volunteering for the club. This example also speaks to the value of a life story approach for exploring the relationship between impact and the *quality* or nature of volunteering experiences. The way a volunteering opportunity is structured and supported (or unstructured and unsupported), the people involved, and the specific tasks required of a volunteer can all inform its personal impact.

A life story approach also allows impact research to compare episodes and experiences of volunteering at different points in a volunteer's life, and to consider the cumulative impact of their volunteering over time. Steven, a white over-65 year old interviewee from the Suffolk case study area, is retired now after a rich history of involvement in political, charitable, and faith-based

pursuits. He spoke about the challenge, as a working-class person, of sitting on committees involving some of the community's most wealthy and prestigious individuals. He became a town councillor as a young man, a decision he said he took partly to become more comfortable as a public speaker. As an older man he became a magistrate, a role which had formerly been dominated by the area's upper classes. Reflecting back over his lifetime of participation in community life, Steven said that earlier experiences of representing his views in public forums, like his time on the town council, gave him the confidence to do so in later roles:

'When I was young, [my wife] will tell you, I couldn't say boo to a goose. And I thought to myself, if I try and get on the council, that will bring me out a little bit. And when you go round canvassing around people's doors, some of them tell you to clear off and others keep you talking knowing full well that they longer they keep you talking you aren't going to go canvassing elsewhere. So that brought me out a little bit...It's funny how your life unwinds, really. Because if I hadn't done those things, I'd have been a house-bound, little old boy not saying boo to a goose or anything like that. Now, [my wife] says I'm still reserved but now I can still speak to most people on the same level, as it were.'

To summarise, life stories can offer detailed and nuanced accounts of personal experience, including volunteering, and they are suited to exploring personal change – both positive and negative - in context and over time. Where cross-sectional surveys of volunteers and objectives-based programme evaluations tend to provide static accounts of experience and attempt to determine causal relationships between volunteering and outcomes, life stories problematise simplistic causal explanations and linear accounts of personal change. However, this is not to say that life story methods do not have a place in programme evaluations or alongside quantitative surveys, and vice versa. In fact, Elliot (2009) proposes that combining quantitative longitudinal research with narrative-driven qualitative research offers a powerful way to research both individual and social change over time. Each is made stronger by being complemented by the other.

To echo Kushner, who asks, 'what might program evaluation look like and involve were we to invert the conventional relationship between individual and program – that is, rather than document the program and 'read' the lives of individuals in that context; to document the lives and work of people and to use that as context within which to 'read' the significance and meaning of programs?' (2000, p.11), I will end by raising a similar question in the context of volunteering impact research. What might it look like if the lives of people who volunteer were used as the context within which to 'read' volunteering programmes, policies and their impact, rather than the other way around?

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