

# Volunteering as community

**Peter Orpin<sup>1</sup>, Christine Stirling<sup>2</sup>, Sue Kilpatrick<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>University Department of Rural Health, Tasmania, <sup>2</sup>Menzies Research Institute

## Background

There is widespread public discussion in Australia around the importance of volunteering for the maintenance of a healthy society (1, 2). A growing theme in these discussions is concern about a likely increasing demand on volunteering flowing from a decreasing ability and/or will within government to continue to provide all the services necessary to maintain social health in the face of an ageing population (2, 3). These concerns are particularly acute in rural and regional towns where the rationalisation of government services is occurring at the same time as a loss of their young (4).

These trends and concerns have led to a very lively public discourse coloured by ideological debates about possible government agendas to use volunteering to cost-shift responsibility for community service (5). This paper seeks, by means of a close case-study exploration of the scope and experience of volunteering in a small rural town, to address questions about how volunteering functions within a rural community. The paper also investigates what role volunteering plays, and might in the future play, in providing the services needed to maintain a viable and healthy community.

The study highlights a fundamental tension between the ontology and essential natures of volunteering and bureaucratic approaches to community service delivery which inevitably limits the potential for the former to substitute for the latter. The study also confirms a creeping bureaucratisation of volunteering (6) and highlights the importance of skilled, professional brokers able to build bridges and provide translations across the community volunteer-bureaucratic boundary.

## A theoretical framework

Both the terms community and bureaucracy have, over the years, become so weighed down by political and moral baggage, especially in public discourse, that it is useful to revisit some early theory.

Weber (7) saw bureaucracy as reaching its full flowering in response to the social and organisation management demands of modern democratic nation states. Weber, in his analysis of the 'ideal type' bureaucracy, identified six characteristics: professionalism, expertise, rules, impersonality, specialisation and hierarchy. Taken together, these add up to systematic measures to rationalise action by limiting the impact of the persona and the complexities of social relations in the interests of delivering comprehensiveness, efficiency, predictability and fairness. Despite major criticisms and limitations bureaucracy remains central to the organisation of life in the twenty first century.

Community, largely because of its widespread, but loose, public currency, is a much more problematic concept. Definitions of community abound in the literature, however, a linking common theme of most of these is the binding of groups of individuals largely through 'relations of affect, loyalty, common values and/or personal concerns' (8). That is, community is, first and foremost, about the interpersonal and a dynamic product of shared group values, views, history, passions and interests; all those messy things that bureaucracy is designed to minimise in order to maximise rational-calculative goals in action. Any finding that volunteering is largely an expression of 'community' in this sense, and

therefore shares its essential nature, highlights the likely essential tensions inherent in any attempt to harness volunteering as a quasi bureaucratic strategy.

## The study

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 22 volunteers and volunteer managers in a rural town with a population of approximately 5,000 conducted as part of a larger multi-site study into the sustainability of rural volunteering<sup>1</sup>. The research was approached as a case study, designed to map the overall place of volunteering within the social life of a geographically defined community. While individuals were questioned about their individual volunteer experience, motivations and rewards, the overall focus was on exploring the way that volunteering fitted into their lives and that of their community and how changes in the community and the wider, especially regulatory, environment was seen to impact on the volunteering experience.

The data were analysed using an iterative thematic approach using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

## Results and discussion

The interviews provided rich and complex data on the volunteer experience. A constant theme through the data was the manner in which all aspects of volunteering were grounded in, arising out of, and shaped by, the inter-personal relations and meanings and values of the community. Volunteering was about getting together and connecting with others first, and everything else, second. The contrast to the bureaucracy—where the personal is, at least structurally and theoretically, secondary to system and protocol—is stark.

### 'Why do you do it?'

The desire for personal connection and social engagement underlies almost all the 'why do you do it' responses:

- Being engaged and stimulated: This was often phrased in terms of 'having something to do' or 'getting out of the house' but there was always the underlying element of seeking to engage with others; being part of the group and the community:

So I mean it's in your mind, you're, it keeps your mind active volunteering and yeah and you meet a lot of people you know.

- Contributing: The desire to do their bit as part of the group, not for external reward but simply because that is what being part of a community means:

... I suppose with any emergency we whether we like it or not members of the community want to help ... people will come out of the woodwork ...

- Meeting a need: The concept of volunteering in terms of recognising a need and 'doing it because someone has to' for all its value is, in contrast to the rational scoping and planning of bureaucracy, decidedly *ad hoc* and largely related to situation, serendipity, interest and group affiliation.

---

<sup>1</sup> This study was funded under a grant from Volunteering Tasmania Inc.

- Being there for others: This is a subcategory of meeting need but with a substantial component of affect and caring:

the lady ... who does our community support, I mean she has a real heart and passion for, you know, people who are in need and in crisis ... the opportunity to be involved in people's lives ...

- Pursuing passions: Much volunteering is linked to the pursuit of individual passions and interests but always with an underlying major component of seeking a group with which to share.
- Sharing Expertise: For many, volunteering provides the opportunity to share knowledge, skills and experience with, and for the benefit of, the community:

I was working for a lady who got cancer. ... I watched her try to get some phone information and book information and things on her breast cancer and she got very frustrated and she couldn't get it. ... we didn't know much about the Cancer Council up here ... back in those days ... (cancer support group convener).

### Costs and rewards

Similarly, costs and rewards were largely conceptualised in terms of the interpersonal, not the financial. Almost all interviewees acknowledged, when directly questioned, that volunteering involved out-of-pocket expenses, however, few saw these as of any import and only a handful reported seeking only intermittent re-imburement. The matter was more crucial to emergency workers who were on call '24/7'. They were more concerned about the social costs to their family than money; financial costs figured only in terms of lost income to employers and business partners. Rewards were seen as largely flowing from the activity itself, although the importance of acknowledgement and recognition within the group and community was also highlighted:

They felt very much appreciated for their part ... I've been awarding [long service medals] to all volunteers with more than ten years service. And during those presentations I really made a point of thanking the families... . and every time you mentioned the families and you can see their heads nodding... .

### Training and qualifications

Bureaucracies rely on credentialed expertise and knowledge and regulation to ensure quality of service and manage risk. Such accountability requirements are inexorably spreading to volunteer organisations who are currently grappling with the difficulties this poses for volunteer training, credentialing and regulation (9). The interviews suggest that a key may lie in the way that training and regulation is 'sold' to volunteers by coordinators. For most of our volunteers, training and skills acquisition was welcomed in so far as, and only to the extent that, it enabled them to continue to do what they want to do; to engage, contribute and grow. While there was some resistance among older emergency workers to seeking credentialing for lifelong skills (the 'old and bold' as one manager termed them), the majority accepted regulation as, at worst, a necessary inconvenience as long care was taken to address initial suspicion and resistance and training was interesting, relevant and designed in a way that maximised social experience and minimised formal study:

For us [training is] not as heavily emphasized on formal training where you sit with a group of people that you don't know and you do a Certificate Course. We tend to run training in the broader sense of development. So it's exposure to opportunity ... on an 'as needs' basis and it tends to be more informal and it tends to be development rather than training ... through experience.

Much learning occurs through osmosis and in-house mentoring on a 'need or want to know' basis:

You learn them [computing skills] on the job. Yes that if any volunteer knows how to do it and we don't, then we can just go and watch them so then you know.

Many volunteers bringing existing skills with them into the groups which they share:

I've found that I've had some absolutely fantastic volunteers come through and I've had all sorts of life skills I just wouldn't have expected. I've had people stamping envelopes only to find out they used to be a typesetter and work on computers. Well I've said ... you don't have to stamp those envelopes ... you can work out how to print them.

### The overall shape of the volunteer community

Even though the study cannot claim to have comprehensively mapped the volunteer community (for example, the sample has significant gaps in terms of some categories such as school volunteers), the picture was sufficiently consistent across the sample to support cautious generalisation.

Volunteering, in this case, presents as relatively unmediated expression of the culture, demographic mix and history of the community from which it arises. This simple observation has significant implications within the debate around the degree to which volunteering can substitute for bureaucratic service delivery. While it would be a nonsense to argue that bureaucracies are not shaped by culture and interpersonal relations, they do work within structures and systems designed explicitly to mediate the impact of cultural and personal factors on organisational functions. Community, in the sense used here, and the volunteering that arises out of it, works to a very different logic; responding in a relatively spontaneous *ad hoc* manner to fluctuating need, interest and demographics. This dynamic is quite antithetical to the consistent, planned provision of services associated with modern government and expected by its constituency.

This is clearly evident in the range and lifespan trajectory of the volunteer organisations.

In terms of organisational spread, while the range of organisations is wide, it appears to reflect the eclectic range of interests and connections within the community rather than any comprehensive logical coverage of community need.

The same logic is seen in the patterns and methods of recruitment and in organisational life-spans. Very few of our volunteers came to their work through a formal method of recruitment. Rather the predominant stories were of serendipity, personal or family connection and/or interest; with an element of benign press-ganging and strategy of last resort.

... it seems that the reasons that people initially volunteer are quite varied it's been because they've been attracted, [through] a friend or family member, they generally want to do something to help the community ... it's caught their eye or they saw a road crash rescue demonstration and thought gee that looks exciting, I'll give that a go.

Well I only got involved ... because a friend who'd been on the committee decided she didn't want to do it anymore and thought I'd be a good recruit to, so she could do other things.

One issue with such recruitment, apart from its essentially *ad hoc* nature, is that a number of participants occupying executive positions within organisations admitted to neither the skills nor the interest for the position but undertook the task to ensure continuation of an organisation supported an activity about which they were passionate.

Many of the organisations were struggling to remain viable and/or to maintain service delivery in the face of ageing and declining membership. While not supported by national figures (10), the reality for

many in our sample is that they are failing to recruit or hold younger members—to the extent to where their very existence is threatened.

The over sixty fives basically. If you look at all the volunteering organizations in this district, they only know about this district really, they're all grey haired white haired brigade.

While in some cases this appears to simply reflect an organisation reaching the end of a natural lifespan associated with a particular cohort, it is clear that the community is facing an decline in, at least, traditional volunteer community organisations

Yes and a lot of those community groups have fallen over through the passage of time because of that lack of interest and that sort of malaise. A lot of community groups no longer exist or they just can't operate anymore. Some have been replaced, some have been amalgamated but there are certainly a lot less than three hundred now than there were back then..

Bright spots in all of this are increases in 'mutual obligation' volunteers and the role of young-old 'tree change' incomers; who see volunteering as a way 'in' to the community, although, their efforts are more likely to be focused in areas other than the more traditional service organisations.

While some participants blamed this decline on a lack 'community spirit' among the young, most, on reflection, see the impact of internal and external forces that are as inevitable as they are immutable. For our sample, the most obvious and serious of these are employment changes: increased female workforce participation, egress of younger people from the area in search of employment and increased commuting for those who stay. Others acknowledge a mismatch between the traditional profile of community organisations and the changed demographic profile of the community

So I wonder down the track in another twenty years time, where the volunteers are going to come from and I can't see it happening. I really can't because people are changing, your old fashioned people are not going to always be there and your younger generation are more monetary minded and more, more, though 'That's below me a bit, I need to be doing something more important than that'.

But whereas going back to my early married life, wives tended to stay at home and bring up the children. Now because of the, several reasons, not least which people ... need more money ... they all go out to work so there's really, you haven't got the next generation coming up to take the place of volunteers and I think there's also home entertainment, videos, computers, that type of thing.

[They are] finding it difficult, you know they're losing members and it's really interesting because on one hand we've got people coming in from the community saying we want to do something... [on the other] ... you've got these organizations saying we need people ... there's something in the equation that's not quite.

Overall, the data highlight the essential organic nature of volunteering within our study community; germinating, growing, thriving, stagnating and dying as the 'ground' which gives rise to, and sustains it, changes over time. One of the drivers in this process will be changing community need. However, while individual members of the community are clearly responding to need where and when it crosses their field of interest and attention, this is a long way from the comprehensive systematic approach provided by, and expected of, government services. The exception to this is the increasing number of organisations that straddle the difficult territory (see below) between bureaucracy and volunteerism.

### **Bridging organisations and actors**

The study spoke to volunteers and coordinators from a number of organisations that were run by paid professional staff under bureaucratic structures and strictures but utilised volunteers for much of their work. These organisations often had significant numbers of volunteers, generally either long-term

young or late middle-aged unemployed, fulfilling government 'mutual obligation' requirements. Such a situation is potentially fraught with tensions, especially where professional and volunteers perform essentially the same tasks side by side. However, in most of the cases encountered in the study, thanks largely to the skill of the coordinators, this appeared to be functioning well. The highlights the critical importance of the coordinator as bridging agent; someone who possesses a sound knowledge and understanding of the community in which they operate, is sensitive to the interests, needs and culture of volunteers yet is comfortable in a bureaucratic environment and is adept at acting as a translator and buffer between the volunteer and the organisational structure and processes. They recruit carefully and very selectively, manage a fine balance in terms of regularisation and regulation and invest heavily in providing personal growth opportunities matched to interest and capacity.

... you have to see volunteers as not what they can do for you but what you can do for them fundamentally because there is competition [for suitable volunteers] ... needing volunteers you have to put yourself in the eye of the volunteer the potential volunteer and say. What are they going to get out of it? What's the benefit to them... Also our expectation of volunteers is not long-term like staff the concept of loyalty in organizations has changed [Coordinator]

He's just brilliant he's so easy going and gives you a lot of freedom, let's you do it, like a lot of input as well like we get a say in pretty well much what goes on here and yeah he just makes it fun to come [Volunteer].

## Conclusion

The current widespread discourse on volunteering, regardless of the particular stance of protagonists, appears to have a common basis in a concern about a possible decline of an essentially nostalgic conception of 'community' and its impact on the provision the services needed to maintain the social (and physical health) of the population. This is overlaid with a vigorous side debate on the possible cost-shifting motives behind government level interest. In this discourse, volunteering takes on an instrumental caste in which it is seen as primarily a tool for strengthening and meeting the service and support needs of community. This instrumentality becomes problematic if, as this small study suggests, volunteering is a deeply embedded, ongoing, changing and changeable expression, or product, of the historical, cultural and demographic biography of a particular place and people.

Human services and supports in the 21st century are highly evolved, providing (relatively) comprehensive, structured and strategically planned (if arguably at times, inadequate) cover through a complex bureaucratic organisational structure. Despite the fears of some and purported plans of others, there is little evidence that volunteering can ever do more than supplement this system. Community volunteering operates to a very different logic and is reactive to, and a product of, a complexity of local and external social forces. Any effort to increase and organise volunteering has to take account of, and will always be limited by, these forces, many of which are well beyond the control of local actors.

However, it is clear from the study, that volunteering is a both a process for enriching, and a product of enriched interpersonal relations and social life for communities. Whether it be product or process, this inevitably leads to the question of how to increase volunteering. Two clues are contained in the case study. Firstly, interventions which focus, not on changing individual attitudes, but rather on fostering an environment which provides the widest possible range of choices, freedoms and opportunities for people to pursue their particular interests in fellowship with like-minded individuals. Secondly, nurture and value—and make the necessary financial commitment to support—those individuals who have the knowledge and skills to act as translators and buffers between the passion and interests of volunteers and the bureaucratic organisational structures necessary for planned

consistent and risk controlled service delivery. To use a botanical analogy, volunteering is more in the nature of a native forest than a timber plantation and the role of the coordinator more like forester than farmer.

That is, volunteering needs to be seen as a thing of value in and of itself—and an expression of a certain quality of interpersonal relations within a group—rather than as a potential replacement for the range of services that we have come to expect from government.

## Bibliography

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Voluntary Work, Australia Cat. no. 4441.0. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2007 July 2007.
2. Flick M, Bittman M, Doyle J. 'The community's most valuable [hidden] asset-'Volunteering in Australia. 2002.
3. de Vaus D, Gray M, Stanton D. Measuring the value of unpaid household, caring and voluntary work. Australian Research Paper 34. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies; 2003.
4. Australian Institute of Health & Welfare. Rural, regional and remote health: Indicators of health system performance. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; 2008 September 2008.
5. Mowbray M. Community capacity building or state opportunism? Community Development Journal. 2005;40(3):255.
6. Onyx J, Leonard R, Hayward-Brown H. The Experience of Volunteers in the Provision of Human Services in NSW: A Regional Perspective. Australian Journal of Volunteering. 2001;6(2):128-44.
7. Weber M. Economy and Society. Runciman W, editor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1978.
8. Brint S. *Gemeinschaft* Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept. Sociological Theory. 2001;19(1):1-23.
9. O'Shea P. A discursive study of institutionalisation in community organisations. The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy. 2007;27(11/12):483.
10. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Voluntary Work, Australia 4441.0. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2006.

## Presenter

**Peter Orpin** is Senior Research Fellow and PHCRED Program Coordinator in the University Department of Rural Health and the Rural Clinical School, Tasmania. His career has spanned both the biomedical and social sciences, fuelling an interest in multi-method research. His current research interests centre on rural ageing, community and research capacity building.