

Telling tales of volunteering: Family insights

A research findings briefing paper

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Highlights

We undertook secondary analysis of 78 interviews with volunteers and third sector workers in order to explore the changing dynamics of volunteering. Here we focus on the importance of family contexts in shaping volunteering.

Families provide an importance mechanism for socialising new members into a norm of participation. They can provide motivations, triggers and routes into involvement. This is often a positive, inspirational force, but it can create a more coercive sense of obligation which is hard to resist and can lead to conflict with other roles and responsibilities.

Volunteering is not a purely individual activity. Roles may be negotiated, divided, shared and passed on amongst different family members. For some families, doing something together is an integral part of the volunteering experience.

Situating an individual's volunteering within their family context makes visible the ways in which volunteering is part and parcel of a wider division of labour and resources within families, structured by gender, age and other dynamics.

Volunteering can be a positive force in shaping family identities and strengthening family ties. It can also, however, be a drain on family resources and relationships.

We have highlighted four particular implications of these findings:

- Recognising the existence of 'volunteering families' is important for those looking to build and sustain community engagement and empowerment.
- Attempts to nurture volunteering should consider the ways in which the resources required for volunteering are distributed amongst family members, with implications for access to volunteering and its benefits.
- Volunteering has consequences not just for individual participants, but also for their families.
- Volunteer-involving organisations should consider ways to engage whole families, while also safeguarding against taking this to the extent that they become dominated by certain groups.

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Introduction

Expectations are high for the potential of volunteers to deliver services, create resilient communities and contribute to a thriving civil society. The Big Society and Localism agendas in particular put great store in the potential power of volunteering. Repeated drives to increase participation seem based on the assumption that there is an army of volunteers willing and able to get involved alongside a set of structures and organisations waiting expectantly to welcome them. And this is taking place in the context of severe funding cuts. It is also set against evidence of long-term static levels of volunteering (Staetsky and Mohan, 2011), a decline in the average amount of time spent volunteering (Clark, 2014), and that a few people make a disproportionately large contribution to formal civic engagement (Mohan and Bullock, 2012). Questions have been raised as to the ability of volunteering to live up to the great expectations placed upon it. What do we really know about how volunteering works and how the contexts within which it is situated affect its potential?

All too often studies of volunteering decontextualize it. They freeze volunteering in time and space by focusing on individuals' engagement in one particular voluntary activity or at one point in time. Volunteering is not, however, static or isolated. It is dynamic. It is a 'situated practice' (Cornwall, 2002). A process which is positioned within and shaped by the multi-layered contexts within which it occurs: individuals' life histories, their families, organisations, and communities (Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

This set of briefing papers provides insights into the changing processes of volunteering from the stories of individuals, families, organisations and communities. They have been produced as part of the Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector project (see changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk). They are based on secondary analysis of 78 qualitative longitudinal interviews selected from the Real Times (see Macmillan, 2011) and Pathways through Participation (see Brodie et al, 2011) projects. Real Times was primarily concerned with organisational change; Pathways with changes in individual's participatory histories. Both were set up to explore specific but contrasting questions, united by a focus on changes over time. Although not the specific focus of either, together they provide insights into the dynamic ways in which volunteering unfolds over space, place and time, throughout individuals' lives, family, organisational and community histories.

This paper is part of a series of four, each of which focus on one of these evolving participatory contexts. Each paper starts by sharing individual stories from the studies, before drawing out cross-cutting themes and identifying key implications. The focus of this paper is on contextualising volunteering within families.

Situating volunteering in families

There is a tendency to view volunteering as an individual activity – to focus on the individual volunteer, their reasons for getting involved and their volunteering experiences. Evidence indicates that household structure and parental volunteering histories can influence the likelihood of individuals volunteering, but we know relatively little else about how family dynamics shape participation. This briefing paper provides insights into the ways in which volunteering processes are embedded within family relationships and the significance of family contexts in shaping motivations for and experiences of volunteering. We explore the ways in which volunteering is passed on, negotiated, shared and fought over on a collective, family basis, shaping each stage of the volunteering process.

Jonathan and Barbara have been married for over 30 years. They have two children and a grandchild. They live in a deprived ex-mining community in the Midlands, England, having moved into a village that has strong family connections on Jonathan's side in the early 1980s. Not long after moving in they brought the village shop, which they ran for a few years before selling it on. Once they sold the shop Jonathan returned to his previous career in engineering; a job which involved working long hours outside of the village. Barbara, meanwhile, took on part time youth work in the village. Both are now retired.

Quite soon after moving into the village, Barbara got involved in various community activities and groups, including the school that her daughter attended. Jonathan's work left him little time for voluntary activities, but over time and with a little encouragement from Barbara he started to get involved:

"Well obviously it all comes through [Barbara] really. She'd nag me and nag me to come to these meetings and I'd always resisted because by the time I got home at night, at 7 o'clock, to go out for a meeting at 7:15 or 7:30... I didn't really want it to be honest, but I had an interest in what [Barbara] was doing, so I did go down to one of the meetings and sat, listened and said nothing, and then went to another, and then obviously a subject comes up that you get interested in so you start involving yourself."

Since moving into the village, Barbara's level of voluntary involvement has been consistently high. Jonathan says the amount he volunteered was limited while working; it was high by many people's standards, and has grown since retirement. Together they are key players within the community association, part of which involves them running a community shop and previously involved Jonathan as chair of a community company. Jonathan is also responsible for organising a community transport scheme and has recently become a director of a newly formed local social enterprise. Both are beginning to question the sustainability of their involvement, particularly in the light of ill health and a growing sense of lack of appreciation from other community members.

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Charlotte and Thomas are both in the 70s, married, with a son and daughter. They live in the family home which they brought when they first moved into a fairly affluent village in central England about 40 years ago. Although they weren't born in the village, Charlotte and Thomas both grew up nearby so they feel local. Thomas has now retired from his career, but helps out with Charlotte's paid, part time cleaning role, a responsibility he picked up when she was injured and needed some assistance to get the work done.

The whole family is active in the local community, and share common participatory interests. Both Charlotte and Thomas are on the local Parish Council and both undertake various voluntary roles associated with the church, which for Charlotte has also led to a seat on the village hall committee and to involvement in Christian Aid week. Charlotte is also an active member of the Women's Institute.

The children have provided a route into new forms of participation for both Charlotte and Thomas. While Charlotte became a governor in the local school, Thomas got involved in bell ringing after taking their daughter to join school mates in a local group. While all the children eventually drifted off, Thomas stayed involved and has since become tower master in two churches. More recently Thomas has got involved in the local skittles team, after his son became team captain. Meanwhile, Thomas has been church warden for 35 years. His son has followed in his footsteps, becoming a church warden in a neighbouring church.

Reflecting on her voluntary activities, Charlotte acknowledges that her mum was very much the same – always involved in village life – and that has influenced her. At one stage they ran the village youth club together. Volunteering has been part of the family's social activities and, indeed, its identity over generations.

Inspired by her grandmother, who was 'like a saint' because 'before the welfare state she helped people, she'd go into their houses if they were sick, she would prepare dead bodies for the funeral', Carol has been a volunteer since she was 15 or 16 years old. Her volunteering started with providing respite care for parents of a disabled child in her local community. This was also about the time when she met her husband, John, and when she first got John involved in helping out.

Shortly after getting married Carol and John moved into a new home in a new area. Having attended church since she was a child, Carol soon joined the one in her new village and took up a role on the church council. She didn't, however, feel particularly welcome and this meant she wasn't particularly inspired to do more. After their first child was born Carol got a lot more involved in the community, including helping out with mother and baby groups. It was not, however, until they moved home again that things really 'kicked off' for Carol – she was soon involved in the church council, took on the role of Sunday school superintendent, chair of the young wives group and secretary of the pre-school group. Another change of location and her children growing up, however, saw roles change again, albeit within the familiar environment of a church.

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Carol's paid work has also been shaped by family commitments, and has subsequently impacted upon her volunteering. While the children were young Carol undertook part-time secretarial work to fit around their school hours. Following the death of her mother and grandfather in the same year, and the diagnosis of her father with terminal cancer Carol gave up her paid job to provide care for her father. Miraculously her father recovered but Carol did not return to work. This gave her greater flexibility to take on other voluntary roles, including two days a week volunteering at a centre for people with learning disabilities.

Over time John has also been involved, albeit to a lesser extent than Carol, fitting in his voluntary activities around his paid job. They were both on the PTA for a while, and were both involved in the church. Carol thinks John is something of a reluctant volunteer – he wouldn't particularly chose to volunteer, but she ropes him in. More recently, John has retired and has also become an atheist, both of which have shaped his views on participation. Carol sees that her voluntary activities were an integral part of her building up a life for herself while John was at work; they have become part of her identity. Now John is retired and spending more time at home, he's pressing Carol to reduce her commitments, especially to the church, in order to have more time to spend together on other shared interests. This has at times created some tensions within the family.

The effects of family contexts on volunteering

These, and many other stories shared through the research hint at the different ways in which family structures, relationships and dynamics shape participation and how this evolves over time. The family context shapes all stages of the volunteering process, and in turn volunteering can shape family relations and identities. Here we summarise findings from across these and other stories which provide insights into some of the most significant ways in which this happens.

Socialisation and motivation: For some people volunteering is something of a 'habit' borne out of family tradition. Participation becomes 'natural' as it is a dominant part of family life: volunteering becomes a culmination of socialisation into a norm of participation through childhood and family activities and culture. This can happen, however, in different ways. Parents and grandparents can provide an inspiration for getting involved in voluntary action. They may act as role models through their own participatory activities, creating a family culture of involvement, leading to younger generations wanting to get involved. In some families, parents talked about taking on voluntary roles with the direct intension of acting as role models for their children – as a way of supporting their children emotionally and spiritually by helping to instil in them values of care and mutuality. While parents, and wider family structures and circumstances, often provide a source of inspiration, they can also act as a source of obligation and pressure to participate. For some, voluntary activities are driven more from a sense of duty, rather than from free choice: not to get involved would be to '*neglect our duties to our fellow man*' and would be frowned upon within the family. *Families provide an important mechanism for socialising new members into a norm of participation. This can be both a positive way to inspire a future generation of participants; it can also create a more coercive sense of obligation and duty which can be hard to resist even when getting involved may be in conflict with other pressures to work or spend time with the family.*

Triggers and routes in: Family members and structures also provide important triggers and routes into volunteering. Parents often get involved in voluntary roles through groups their children are involved in – supporting parent and baby groups that they attended with their child, helping out

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at their child's school or sports club. Parents and children also took on roles to support the wider interests of other family members. A serious illness within a family, for example, may trigger the involvement of other family members in fundraising activities in support of a charity connected to that illness. Family structures can provide mechanisms for persuasion: wives may convince their husbands to get come along and help out; parents persuade their children to get involved in activities they are responsible for. This can trigger the start of an extensive volunteering journey, even when initial involvement is more by default than by design. *Families can provide motivations for volunteering and also specific triggers and routes into involvement.*

Passing on and sharing roles: Some volunteering roles are passed on within or between generations, either directly or indirectly. A mother or a sister being involved in the Guiding movement can, for example, lead to a daughter or sibling volunteering in their local Guide group. When a father is ready to give up his seat on the village hall committee, it may be handed over to the son: *"their parents were on the committees or were councillors and it just went down the line"*. Families may also take on voluntary roles within the same group or organisation, at the same time: *"...families tend to have somebody else, 'oh so and so will come and do that', so you tend to get a bit of a family flavour with things"*. In other cases volunteering roles may be shared. Couples may volunteer together for the same organisations, share seats on a committee or jointly run activities and organise events. In one community it was reported that the parish council was currently made up of four couples; only two councillors were not related to at least one other. *Volunteering roles may be passed on or shared amongst family members. For some families, doing something together is an integral part of the volunteering experience.*

Spreading and dividing interests: Rather than getting involved in the same activities, some families had divided different areas of interest amongst themselves: *"I sort of concentrate more on the school and the kids. [My husband] does the rest of the village"*. With different family members spread out across different voluntary activities, for particularly active families in small communities this could mean a consistent family presence in the main institutions: *"we didn't want it to seem as though we were taking over the village, we are very conscious of that"*. This division of responsibility extended also to the giving of time and the giving of money: a number of male respondents, active in volunteering roles, mentioned 'leaving' making regular charitable donations to their wives, who were deemed to be 'better' at giving, and to act as their 'conscience'. It may be that gendered patterns of volunteering are influenced by broader gendered patterns of employment and family involvement. *Volunteering is not a purely individual activity. Roles may be negotiated and deciding upon at a family level, shared out and divided amongst different family members.*

Capacity: As well as having a reason to get involved and a route in to participation, volunteering also requires resource – time, money, skills and confidence. For some, this too is negotiated on a family, rather than individual, basis. In general it means a balancing of resources across the family and across responsibilities, including sharing responsibility for paid work, children and voluntary action. In some families, one person shouldering the responsibility for bringing in the money needed by the household means that another has the time and the financial backing to be able to volunteer. The limits to which such resources can be drawn upon to volunteer are negotiated, renegotiated and kept in balance, in an attempt to ensure the relationship remain fair and are not seen to become exploitative. Some family members reign in their volunteering activities, sensing that to take on more would be unfair on their partner who was compensating for their lack of income. Having children may provide a motivation and a route into volunteering, but may also limit

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resources – time, money, emotion - available to do so. Meeting a new partner may reduce the time, and emotional resources, available for volunteering, leading people to step back from their commitments; it can also have the opposite effect. *Contextualising an individual's volunteering within their family structures makes visible the ways in which volunteering is part and parcel of a wider division of labour and resources within families, structured by gender, age and other dynamics.*

Organisational outcomes: Families can shape the outcomes of volunteering for organisations and communities. Family structures can be an effective way of building engagement in an organisation, they provide a route in to an organisation for volunteers and for service users. They can also act to close down opportunities for engagement – groups or organisations that are dominated by individual families or groups of families can appear exclusionary, both for other potential volunteers and for service users. This can be particularly problematic in tight knit, stable communities, where generations of the same family live together and where the decision of residents as to whether or not to use a service might depend on their connections to the family providing it. *Family ties can act as positive influence of volunteering, particularly through shaping the antecedents of volunteering and opening up routes in. They can also, however, serve to close down opportunities to 'outsiders' to engage with organisations either as volunteers or as users.*

Consequences for families: Taking part in voluntary action can strengthen families, helping to create a common sense of endeavour and identity: *'we are a volunteering family'*. Participation can, however, come at a cost to families. Time taken up volunteering can mean less time for other family members. Some people felt that had neglected their families because their voluntary activities had taken up so much of their time and energy. Tensions can develop when undertaking voluntary activities is seen to be an unfair use of family resources. *Volunteering can be a positive force in shaping family identities. It can also be a significant drain on family resources.*

Key implications for volunteer-involving organisations

Situating an individual's volunteering practices within the context of their family settings, current, past and future provides a fuller understanding of the dynamics of participation. Volunteering patterns and experiences can be shaped by family structures and relations, which inevitably change over time, linked to the family-life cycle. In turn, families can be shaped by volunteering, in both positive and negative ways. There are a number of specific implications, all of which need further investigation:

- Research into the civic core (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012) has indicated that a relatively small proportion of people are responsible for a majority of civic engagement. Our findings suggests that this civic core might be further concentrated into a smaller number of families. Additionally, it is worth considering the broader 'in kind' contributions that volunteering families make at an organisational and civic level that entails more than their 'time'. One specific consequence of this is that, where key family members are lost to volunteering through demotivation or burn out, this might lead to an intergenerational loss of volunteers to volunteer organisations. More generally it reinforces suggestions that access to volunteering is unequal – both the burden and the benefits of volunteering may be concentrated amongst not just a small group of individuals, but an even smaller group of families. Recognising the existence of 'volunteering families' is important for those looking to build and sustain community engagement and empowerment.

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- Changing family and household structures may affect volunteering. Voluntary action requires resources; these resources can be generated collectively within families and the 'costs' of volunteering distributed amongst family members. In single person households there is no possibility of sharing resources or costs. This may affect access to volunteering. It may also affect the volunteer support requirements. Attempts to grow or support volunteering should consider the ways in which the resources required for and costs associated with volunteering are distributed amongst families, and the implications of this for access to volunteering and its benefits.
- Undertaking voluntary action has implications not just for individual volunteers but also for their families. It can strengthen families, through providing a sense of shared identity and interest. It can also act as a drain on family resources: distracting individual members from other family commitments and contributing to family tensions and conflict. It may prove important for those responsible for supporting volunteers to be aware of the consequences of participation not just for the individual volunteers but also for their families.
- Viewing volunteering as collective action, as well as an individual action, suggests that considering ways to recruit and involve whole families might be fruitful for organisations. Conversely, some organisations may need to consider the appropriateness of allowing volunteer roles to be passed around amongst families and the issues this may create. Volunteer-involving organisations looking to expand involvement should consider ways to engage whole families, while safeguarding against taking this to the extent that they become overly exclusive or exclusionary.

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Changing Landscapes

Understanding the micro-dynamics of third sector organisations is vitally important in times of rapid social change. This briefing paper has been produced as part of a study called *Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector*, designed to enhance our understanding of the voluntary sector by bringing together evidence from a network of projects that 'walk alongside' third sector organisations as they navigate a shifting policy landscape. For more information, go to: <http://changinglandscapes.leeds.ac.uk>

Changing Landscapes was undertaken in partnership by:

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