**VOLUNTEERS
WHAT WE NEED TO FIND OUT
(AND WHY WE NEED TO DO IT)**

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Public interest in volunteering in Australia has markedly escalated over the past five years, reflected in a number of publications in the popular, professional and academic press. This interest is welcome, and in many ways, is long overdue. Volunteers, or employing a term we find more useful, voluntarism is important for a number of reasons, not least of which is its structural role in the social institutions we have developed to support people, manage dependencies and facilitate a range of developmental activities across the life span. Voluntarism is an extremely complex social phenomenon. Conceptually, it transcends the sum of its parts, in that it is more than a simple aggregation of instances of individual behaviours. Our core argument here is that this complexity is such that equally intricate and multi-faceted perspectives and models need to be employed to further our understanding. In academic speak, this means that we need to develop analytical frameworks that draw on the breadth and depth of the social sciences[1].

Here, we will illustrate the types of perspectives already employed to further our understanding of and knowledge about voluntarism. In doing so, we will examine the extent to which these extant discussions employ social scientific frameworks in their endeavours, illustrating the relative infancy of many Australian endeavours to date. Following this, we will provide a brief example of how social theory can be employed, in this case providing a theoretical explanation for the constitutive role of volunteering suggested by much of the recent literature. In conclusion, we will mount a tentative argument for why we should take voluntarism seriously, an argument that applies equally to nonprofit studies more generally.

Themes in the Australian literature

Up until recently, voluntarism has been a neglected area of research in favour of the state and the market, and little research attention has been paid to the activity of volunteering itself. Indeed, the Australian Bureau of Statistics published the first national survey of volunteering as recently as 1995. This compares to extensive published material on the paid labour market.

The general dearth of literature up until the 1990s perhaps reflected the social and political invisibility of volunteering as a behaviour and voluntarism as a social phenomenon, despite its integral importance to the social and economic fabric of Australian society. It is the strategic importance of voluntarism to the socio-political context that is more recently being acknowledged, and, in particular, the relationship

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[1] Within the field of social science, we include the disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics, political science and anthropology.

between volunteers and the non-profit sector within changing notions of the state and the development of civil society. The rhetoric of the Howard government has embraced the notion of a social coalition or partnership between governments, business, the not-for-profit sector and individuals, positioning voluntarism as one of the cornerstones of the new approach to social policy.

During the past decade, profound change has occurred as a result of the new political agenda, and as a result the peak volunteer body, Volunteering Australia, has produced a national journal. This could be seen as an acknowledgment of volunteering as "a subject worthy of study" (May, 1996; Noble, 2000). Taking the Australian Journal of Volunteering as a key medium for discussions about volunteering, we can see that several core themes of modal types of analyses emerge in the refereed articles.   These are reproduced in the table below.

Themes in the Australian Journal on Volunteering 1996-2000

The importance of voluntarism, and the benefits of participation	May, 1996 Murphy, 1996 Wooldrige, 1996 Kerr and Savelsberg, 1997 a&b Cox, 1997 Sidoti, 1998 Edgar, 1999 Baum et al, 1999
Demographic analyses of volunteering: who, when, where, what, how many.	Jamrozik, 1996 Bell, 1996 Ironmonger, 1998 Lyons and Fabiansson, 1998 Baldock, 1996
Role of voluntarism in public policy	Cordingley, 1997 Baker, 1997 Creyton, 1999
Motivation	Metzer, 1996 Warburton, 1997 Lucas and Williams, 2000 Battaglia and Metzer, 2000
Management of volunteers.	DuBoulay, 1996 Tyzack, 1996 Rogers, 1997 Metzer et al, 1997 Paull, 1998 Reynolds, 1999 Cuskelly, 1998 Elton, 1996

These themes are reflected in the broader Australian literature on volunteering, which has also tended to focus on the importance of voluntarism and its relationship to civil society (eg Lyons, 1997; Onyx & Bullen, 2000); demographic analyses of volunteering (eg Lyons & Hocking, 2000; Noble, 1991); and the role of voluntarism in public policy (eg Baldock, 1992; Nyland 1993). The approach has been essentially multi-disciplinary, with new research emerging across a range of areas such as economics (Ironmonger, 1998; 2000); law (Reynolds, 1999); history (Oppenheimer, 2000); management (Dollard et al, 1999); leisure studies (Cuskelly, 1998) and sociology (Pusey, 2000).

Despite the range of effort, much of the Australian work such as that cited above, tends to position voluntarism somewhat in a taken-for-granted manner, as an activity and a social phenomenon that is both collectively understood and relatively uncontested. That is, local accounts less frequently pose questions, particularly theoretically informed questions that engage in the analytical process of dissecting and analysing voluntarism as a complex social phenomenon. In other words, voluntarism largely belongs in the category of phenomena which are 'normalised', treated as natural and un-problematic, and part of the given order of the world. Another illustrative example of social phenomena similarly positioned for long periods of time, for example, is gender relations, in which contested issues such as the division of labour and associated social roles were similarly normalised. Certainly, much of the current public policy debate conceptualises voluntarism in this manner, positioning it in an uncontested somewhat idealised manner, able to serve 'useful' purposes in terms of policy goals.

We are not suggesting here that Australian authors are unthinkingly discussing voluntarism in this manner, in what can be considered as an idealised and overly naive manner. What we are suggesting however, is that relatively a-theoretical approaches have a similar effect in that they tend to obscure as much as illuminate the phenomenon in question by normalising particular sets of practices and behaviours within equally naturalised sets of relationships. In this manner, much of what is actually going on is rendered invisible.

Fortunately, some Australian work does not fall into this general category. Feminist approaches, for example, explicitly adopt feminist social theory and associated constructs and apply these to voluntarism. In doing so, they are able to explore how it is that voluntarism as both a social institution and sets of social practices is implicated in the construction of the broader regime of gender relations (note here the work of Cora Baldock, and, in particular, Baldock, 1983; 1998; Baldock & Ungerson, 1991; see also Limerick & Heywood, 1992). On another level, by applying mid-range theory drawn, for example, from psychology, some Australian scholars have been able to explore volunteer

motivation (Warburton, 2000; Metzer, 1996). In doing so, they have been able to shift our understanding of volunteer motivation outside of the less than useful binary divide of altruistic volunteer versus self-interested paid employee. By doing this, such authors encourage us to have a considerably more rewarding debate about the complexities of volunteer motivation, and to think more usefully and pro-actively about the impact of external factors on those motivations and propensities.

Resting explicitly on social theory, some recent work we have undertaken similarly exposes the social processes and practices that constitute voluntarism, and the social institutions which voluntarism itself constitutes (McDonald and Mutch, in press). Here, we use theory to explore the constitutive dynamics that other authors invoke when they nominate a relationship between social capital, civil society and voluntarism (Hogan and Owen, 2000; Baum, et al, 1999). While not claiming that there is no relationship between social capital and voluntarism, we argue that much current thinking does not explore or explain *how* it is that voluntarism creates social capital. To do this, we need to refer to other bodies of theory that provide the conceptual capacity to explain constitutive processes in the social world.

In our case, we use fairly recent developments in a body of organisational theory that positions volunteers as what we term key institutional agents engaging in social practices which of themselves create the institutional field of voluntarism, voluntary organisations and the non-profit sector. In other words, we derive from this body of theory a conceptual model of how volunteers, in their everyday practices, create and recreate the 'something' over and above their instrumental value as free labour. This 'something' is, we suspect, what people repeatedly invoke when they talk about social capital, civil society and community capacity. It is, if you like, the outcome (that is, social capital and civil society as social institution) of the output (that is 'habits of the heart'[2]), created by, through and within the throughput (volunteering), using the social practices of individual human agents (the volunteers). What this work does is draw out in quite specific and precise ways a theoretical model demonstrating the 'what' and the 'how' of volunteers and voluntarism in the discursive construction of the institutional field, a model which can be subjected to empirical investigation in the field.

Our point here is not to privilege any one theoretical perspective over any other, but rather to demonstrate what we believe is both an appropriate and probably fruitful way forward for our thinking about voluntarism. We suggest that for a variety of reasons, robust scholarship and research is highly desirable, particularly at this juncture as voluntarism is drawn firmly into developments in public policy. Our work in progress demonstrates how

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[2] Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton, 1885

such research can inform the debates. First, the work employing neoinstitutional theory develops a model for assessing the impact of institutional change on volunteers as constitutive agents. This work will eventually allow us to understand from the volunteers' perspective what institutional change will mean, and will also help us begin to understand the impact of shifts in volunteers' interactions with organisations on nonprofit organisations and the nonprofit sector as an institutional space. A second body of work will examine volunteer motivation within the current context of welfare reform. Applying psychological concepts and theory to volunteer motivation allows for both the development of a theory-based approach, as well as the capacity to inform contentious social policy developments in the form of mutual obligation and enforced volunteering. This project will provide much-needed empirical research evidence relating to future propensities to volunteer.

Why is it important?

Finally, it is essential to consider the question of why such research matters (or any research on the nonprofit sector) over and above our own personal and peculiar interests. We note with appreciation the recently published work by Brown, Kenny, Turner and Price (2000) which presents cogent arguments about why such research is important, particularly at this juncture in Australia. We employ a similar argument, particularly invoking the work of Nancy Fraser (1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1997). Employing the notion of the 'public sphere', Fraser argues that there is a site or context in which social meanings are generated, circulated, contested and reconstructed. The public sphere of liberal democracy (ie the institutions of the state and the polity) is not and was not open and accessible to all. Instead, that institutional space systematically marginalises and silences women, subordinated racial groups, the disabled and the poor. The liberal democratic public sphere also privileges and normalises one conception of the public sphere by de-legitimising alternate spheres as irrelevant at best, and anti-democratic at worst. In this way, the discursive space created by the liberal democratic public sphere is narrowed, constrained, rigid and exclusive.

An alternative arrangement would be to provide spaces or public spheres away from the supervision of dominant groups where members of subordinated groups can deliberate about their issues. Such alternate or counter public spheres also challenge another underlying assumption of the liberal democratic conception of the public sphere, that is, what is public and what is private. Fraser points out that there are not natural boundaries between what is public and what is private, but that the 'boundary' is discursively constructed and contested. In the modern liberal democratic state, the delineation of the public is restricted to a notion of the common good, and in which what is constructed as

private is excluded. Voluntarism, for example, sits uneasily on the boundaries of the public and private, being drawn in or pushed out through the dictates of 'legitimised' public policy developed in the narrowly constructed and exclusive public sphere. Accordingly, its legitimacy and role is automatically constructed by the space it occupies (or multiple contradictory spaces) at any given time, and it stands at all times in danger of being relegated back into the sphere of irrelevance.

The liberal democratic public sphere also carries a particular model of citizenship, which creates a binary divide or opposition between contract and charity, or between welfare given as a right and that welfare given as charity. In Australian terms, the 'welfare as right' refers to the (still existing if reconstructed) wages earners' welfare state, the entitlements generated through (gendered) labour market participation (the public sphere). Welfare as charity in this country would cover much of the community services provided in the nonprofit sector (the private sphere), and most certainly refers to voluntarism. The differentiation ultimately rests on the privileging of waged labour and the depreciation of (gendered) care work, particularly unpaid care work.

From this perspective, the way forward is to collapse the binary divides between public and private and between contract and charity. The task is to create the conceptual space for 'non-contractual reciprocity' (Fraser and Gordon, 1994a), thereby creating the moral basis for social citizenship. This conceptual space, if created, allows for the recognition of and legitimation of a whole range of social practices (including voluntarism, informal mutual aid and so forth) underpinned by and creative of solidarity, non-contractual reciprocity and interdependence. That is, the enactment of an inclusive rather than exclusive social citizenship of multiple and diverse groups in nonprofit organisational locations lifted out of the binary divide of public/private, which allows for the expression of diverse cultural citizenships. In this way voluntarism and the nonprofit sector can be positioned as a key discursive context where this new moral space is created, and becomes central to a renewed and invigorated project of citizenship. It is these possibilities that illustrate why research and scholarship on voluntarism in particular, and nonprofit organisations and the nonprofit sector more generally, is important.

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