

Beyond choice: ‘Thick’ volunteering and the case of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution

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Paper accepted for publication in *Human Relations* (Authors’ post-print version for Open Access). Acceptance date 10th February 2015.

Abstract

This paper problematizes the dominant assumption in the literature on volunteer work that it is undertaken simply as a matter of individual choice. Using findings from a qualitative study of volunteers at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution it is shown that volunteering exists within a dense web of social relations, especially familial and communal relations. This, along with the danger of the work, renders volunteering highly meaningful and the concept of ‘thick volunteering’ is developed to denote this. Volunteering emerges as recursively constituted by structure and agency.

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to problematize the dominant understanding (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) of what it means to volunteer that is to be found in the literature on voluntary work. Although there are a number of exceptions (e.g. Eckstein, 2001; Kramer et al., 2013) we will argue that this understanding is largely ‘voluntarist’ – stressing volunteering as a matter of individual choice (Wilson, 2012). By contrast, we will show how volunteering can be characterised by a much more complex social dynamic. We will explore this by introducing the concept of ‘thick volunteering’ to denote the ways that voluntary work can be understood in terms of dense webs of social relations, which are not reducible to individual motivations to volunteer but which do create or enable volunteer identities.

In order to position this analysis, we begin by providing an overview of the theoretical issues at stake when considering choice to be an explanation of volunteering. The roots of this debate lie in the persistent action-structure dualism which has permeated social science leading, in the case of volunteering, to an over-emphasis on agency. As a corrective to this, we draw on structuration theory, most associated with Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), as one well-established way of framing post-dualist analysis. From this, we propose thick volunteering as a way to capture such an analysis in relation to voluntary work.

We will then explore the significance of thick volunteering via a qualitative study of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) which is the charitable body organizing sea rescue in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland (and it is in the latter that the study was conducted)¹. The RNLI is largely staffed by volunteers, and the work involved can be extremely hazardous. For this reason, we also need to consider issues relating to dangerous work and to understand this as one element within a dense web of familial, inter-generational, communal, geographic and historical relationships which taken together exemplify thick volunteering and shape volunteer identity. In a concluding discussion we explore the significance of the case for understanding the meaning of voluntary work.

Theorizing Volunteering

Choice and Beyond

Defining volunteers and volunteerism 'is an elusive task that has baffled scholars for years' (Hustinx et al., 2010: 412; cf. Van Til, 1988; Cnaan et al., 1996; Wilson, 2000). In a content analysis review of over 200 definitions of volunteering, Cnaan & Amroffell (1994) and Cnaan et al. (1996) find that all definitions centre on four axes: extent of free will; availability and nature of remuneration (from completely unpaid to expenses paid); proximity

¹ For historical reasons the RNLI covers both countries. Later we will pick up on some implications of the study having been conducted in Ireland.

to beneficiaries (for example whether unpaid caring for relatives should be classed as voluntary work); and the presence of a formal agency (whether or not the volunteer is working on behalf of a recognised organization). The United Nations stipulates that volunteering requires benefit to others, lack of financial gain and free will (UN Volunteers, 2008). Thus the issue of ‘free will’ permeates these definitions. Volunteering has embedded within it – not least in its etymological roots² – a strong bias towards being understood primarily in terms of agency: it is a matter of the exercise of will, of choice. Yet it is almost definitional to sociology that human behaviour has to be understood in terms of the paradoxical interdependence of ‘freedom and dependence’ (Bauman, 1990: 20) or ‘human activity and its social contexts’ (Layder, 1994: 5). Thus to theorize volunteering in a way that is sociologically adequate it is necessary to attend to this interdependence. We will return to that shortly but, for now, we will briefly summarise the volunteering literature with this in mind.

The volunteering literature generally falls into three categories; the motivation to volunteer (e.g. Clary et al., 1998; Einolf, 2008; Finkelstein, 2008; Omoto et al., 2010); experiences of volunteering, meaning what is it like to be a volunteer, how organizational matters influence volunteering (e.g. Mellow, 2007; Haski-Leventhal & Bar-Gal, 2008; Kreutzer & Jager, 2010); and the personal, organizational or social consequences of volunteering (e.g. Handy et al., 2010; Hong & Morrow-Howell, 2010; O’Brien et al., 2010; Morrow-Howell, 2010). In a recent review of the volunteering literature, Wilson (2012) suggests that the first of these – motivation to volunteer – has received, by far, the most research attention to date. He goes on to note that ‘few would deny that people’s behaviour is influenced by their social context, but this notion has taken a back seat to the idea that individual characteristics explain volunteer work’ (2012: 190).

² *Voluntas* being the Latin for ‘will’.

Thus not just standard definitions of volunteering but also the bulk of the literature on volunteer choice (e.g. Bekkers, 2005; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2009; Omoto et al., 2010) does indeed overwhelmingly privilege the individual motives and characteristics of volunteers. It is true that within the functional approach to motivation (Clary et al., 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1999) some consideration is given to the social aspect of volunteering. But even here, partly because of the functionalist assumptions, the issue is framed within a model of individual choice and its social consequences. Such studies do not, and cannot, fully explain the embeddedness of volunteering within a structural context and therefore do not do justice to the complexity of motivations to volunteer. They are predicated on the ‘assumption that individuals weigh up the costs and benefits of volunteering and subsequently make a rational, un-coerced choice to volunteer’ (McAllum, 2014: 86). It is also the case that a steadily growing literature examines the social stratification of volunteers, seeking to identify determinants of inclusion or exclusion in volunteer participation based on economic status, gender, race, immigration status, work status, education and income (e.g. Wilson & Musick, 1997b; Sundeen et al., 2009; Eagly, 2009; Brand, 2010; Einolf, 2010; Lee & Brudney, 2010; Taniguchi, 2012). But in general terms, these studies are based on large-scale survey data and focus on quantitative variables, rather mechanically linking volunteering to these, although there is a growing qualitative literature (see Ganesh & McAllum, 2009) which takes as its concern the meaning rather than the frequency of volunteering.

Even in studies that go beyond the individual level, there is a tendency to explain motivation to volunteer in binary terms as either individual or collective (McAllum, 2014). For example, Eckstein (2001) notably departs from individualism in her account of communal and collective volunteering, locating these within an anthropological understanding of gift relationships. Yet, admirable as that study is, she argues that it ‘shows that who volunteers, when, how, why, and with what effects, differs when volunteerism is

collectivistically rather than individualistically grounded' (Eckstein, 2001: 847). Similarly, Simon et al. (2000) explore both individual and communal identities amongst HIV/AIDS volunteers. Thus even in these studies the collective and the individual are treated as a dualism rather than a duality (Giddens, 1984: 25). We wish to move beyond this either/or distinction, where each classification is treated 'as a uni-dimensional category devoid of any complexity' (Hustinx et al., 2010: 411) to show that the motivation to volunteer is a combination of both individual and collective embeddedness, and, more specifically, that these are recursively related (Giddens, 1979).

The recursive relation of action and structure is the central concept of Anthony Giddens' (1979, 1984) structuration theory which posits: '...the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution' (Giddens, 1979: 5). In other words, human actions and choices take place within social structures which constrain and enable (but do not determine) them; social structures are a medium and an outcome of the human actions and choices without which they would not exist. Giddens (1979) uses the example of language to illustrate this. On the one hand a language has various rules, or structures, of, for example, grammar to which individual language users must adhere. On the other hand, individuals are creative users of language and, over time, it is their usage which creates the structures of language. This duality of structure, as Giddens terms it, enables social practices to be reproduced and also to change over time and space (Giddens, 1984: 17) which in turn means that when considering a social practice, such as volunteering, it is necessary to be attentive to the time and space in which they occur. That is to say, recursiveness is not a static 'encounter' between agency and structure in the abstract but a historically and geographically located process. Whilst structuration theory is not without its

critics (e.g. Mouzelis, 1989; Reed, 1997) it is sufficiently well-established to serve our present purposes well because it enables us to open up the dominant assumption of agentic choice in volunteering and the concomitant neglect of structure.

However, the way that recursiveness entails attention to the mutual constitutiveness of agency and structure also enables us better to understand how agency itself operates. This becomes particularly important for considering the issue of identity, with which we will in part be concerned when discussing volunteering. Whilst commonsensically identity might be thought of as a fixed characteristic of individuals, contemporary theorizations stress identity as an ongoing social accomplishment (Kenny et al, 2011) which is both a medium and an outcome of social relations (Watson, 2008). Indeed in Giddens' own work it is stressed that, especially in late modernity, self-identity entails a continuous narrative (Giddens, 1991: 54) in part structured by the very demand within late modernity that individuals be active choosers rather than passive recipients of their role in life. In this sense identity is to be understood as always being emergent, or in process of being made (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Harding, 2007; Kornberger & Brown, 2007) or aspired to (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). This might take the form of consumption, paid work, family life and many other things or combinations of things, since identities are typically multiple (Gergen, 1972). Clearly volunteering is another possible source of identity (Grönlund, 2011) and thus it should be understood not just as a momentary expression of identity but as part of an ongoing process of identity construction; moreover, the forms which volunteering takes are bound by what is socially available and valorised at a particular time. This makes it particularly important that the study of identity be firmly rooted in particular empirical settings, and perhaps especially so in this case volunteer work setting since, as Kuhn (2006: 1340) notes, 'this is an area in which conceptual contributions overshadow empirical investigations'.

An understanding of identity as context-specific, socially constructed and processual is important because it underscores that what is at stake is not simply an ‘encounter’ between two ‘fixed’ entities – actors and structures, individuals and context etc. – but a situation where both are in flux and mutually implicated; indeed several accounts of identity suggest that organizational and individual identity are co-produced and co-emergent (e.g. Harding, 2007). From this perspective, the choice to volunteer can be seen neither as an expression of personal preferences nor as the determined outcome of a set of social relations. Rather, it sits within and is part of the ongoing elaboration of both self and social relations: this is what we mean by a recursive understanding of volunteering.

Introducing Thick Volunteering

In order to try to explicate what this recursive theorization of volunteering might mean, we coin the term ‘thick volunteering’. This term is suggested by the much quoted expression of ‘thick description’ as characterizing qualitative, and especially ethnographic, research (Geertz, 1973; see Ponterotto, 2006 for detailed discussion of the origin and meaning of the phrase). Thick descriptions are rich, dense and evocative accounts of human experience, but they are more than this: they also operate as forms of translation in that they offer (as applied to culture) an account which non-members of that culture can find intelligible and compelling. That is to say, they have phenomenological depth as well as narrative complexity. So when we borrow and adapt from this to speak of thick volunteering, we mean to imply a form of volunteering which is rich in quality, heavily saturated with social and individual meaning, and having a depth to that meaning.

It might be objected that these are two different things: that thick description is a way of doing or presenting social research, but thick volunteering is about a quality of behaviour. But this is not necessarily so. In both cases the ‘thickness’ refers to a particular practice. For

Geertz, thick description is a form of inscription, and this is what the ethnographer does: '[t]he Ethnographer "inscribes" social discourse: *he [sic] writes it down*' (Geertz, 1973: 17, emphasis in original). So, in fact, in both cases thickness refers to the manner in which something is done, whether it be interpretation and writing, or volunteering. However, in another way they are different. Thick description, both as discussed by Geertz and as understood by social scientists, is superior to its obverse, thin description, which is superficial and misleading. That is not the case for thick volunteering, the obverse of which would be 'thin volunteering' and would be characterised by a relative absence of phenomenological meaning and depth. But such volunteering would not be deficient in the same way as a thin description: it would be a different, but no better or worse, form of volunteering. That is to say thick volunteering is not ontologically superior (it is not 'more real') nor is it ethically superior (it is not 'better') to thin volunteering. Rather, it is a way of characterizing some particular, complex and socially-saturated qualities of volunteering.

Thus it seems likely that undertaking occasional voluntary work in schools (Valcour, 2002), sports clubs (Cuskelly et al., 2006) or charity shops (Maddrell, 2006), for all that it may be important to those concerned, could be considered relatively 'thin' in terms of its psychological meaning and social significance, although it is important to note that whether this is in fact so would require empirical examination of such cases. Within volunteering, context is highly relevant when examining the type and depth of relationships (Kramer et al., 2013; McAllum, 2014). We propose thick volunteering as a form of volunteering which has sufficient substance and meaning as to make it possible for those undertaking it to gain a significant sense of identity from it. This proposal is consistent³ with the work of a small number of authors who have identified something similar, often in the pages of *Human Relations*. For example, Mangan (2009) explores volunteer subjectivity in the context of Irish

³ It might also be seen to relate to the colloquial term 'super volunteers' to denote high dedication and which seems to have emerged initially to describe the volunteers supporting Barack Obama's election campaign.

credit unions, showing disciplinary pressure on volunteers stemming from the competing discourses of enterprise and community service. What is significant in this from our point of view is how the older, community service, discourse provides a much more robust, or in our terms thicker, sense of identity for the volunteers which is experienced as being undermined by attempts to develop a more individualistic or entrepreneurial ethic. It is not that one discourse is disciplinary and the other not: both are productive of a certain subjectivity (Mangan, 2009: 96), but the former is rooted in a longer history and a sense of collective, reciprocal responsibilities. The “norms and behaviours of community service ... become ... deeply ingrained” (2009: 111). This becomes highly visible when the community service discourse is called into question, revealing the strength and depth of what volunteering had traditionally meant.

In a very different research site, Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, (2008) examine the organizational socialization of Israeli volunteers working with vulnerable young people. This too can be understood in terms of the concept of thickness, because the different stages of socialization they describe entail a range of emotional and social transitions which are highly meaningful for the volunteers: the motivations and meaning of volunteering changes over time (2008: 70). This is consistent with our argument that volunteering is not simply characterised by a moment of choice that expresses identity but is rather an ongoing process of identity construction, in which the meaning of volunteering and of being a volunteer develops. At least some of this development entails quite profound experiences, such as the new volunteers’ ‘shock and surprise’ (2008: 80) on encountering the harsh reality of the street life of the client group and the feelings of being ‘more deeply involved’ (2008: 83) as they begin to engage directly with clients. Something not dissimilar may be found in Palmer et al’s (2007) study of US families engaged in voluntary service expeditions. Here, what is uncovered is a process of what the authors’ call ‘family deepening’ in which the challenge

and sacrifice of the expeditions has long-term effects upon the identity of the participating families.

The notion that thick volunteering is bound up with ‘challenges’ comes into sharp relief in the RNLI case study we will shortly discuss, where the volunteer work is not just challenging but physically dangerous. Whilst danger is only one aspect of thick volunteering its significance is such as to warrant closer examination not least since dangerous work is also the subject of a literature within organization studies (e.g. Brewer, 1990; Collinson, 1999; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Gatino & Patriotta, 2013). The findings of this literature are quite unambiguous in making clear the capacity for danger to initiate – and perhaps to require – unusually strong senses of group loyalty, identification and care. Studies of coalmining have illustrated this particularly forcefully (Parry, 2003). Studies of police work (e.g. Van Maanen, 1980; Brewer, 1990; Tracy & Tracy, 1998; Dick & Cassell, 2004), the work of the armed forces (e.g. Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) and fire-fighters (e.g. Weick 1993; Scott & Myers, 2005; Desmond, 2007, Colquitt et al., 2011) re-enforce this. Of particular relevance for the present paper is Lois’s (1999) excellent ethnographic study of the socialization of team members into a voluntary mountain rescue organization. This provides some fascinating insights into the co-production of team norms in dangerous settings, although it is very tightly focused on socialization processes and the tensions between individuals and teams. Similarly, McNamee and Peterson’s recent analysis of ‘high-stakes’ volunteering shows that this can ‘have significant implications for the volunteers, their organizations and the people they serve’ (2014: 6).

An attention to thick volunteering, then, allows us to bring into focus a wide variety of different elements – emotional, social, physical – which enable us to configure volunteering as being more than a choice. The concept of ‘deepening’ in Palmer et al (2007), the references to ‘deeper’ involvement in Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, (2008), and to the

‘deeply’ ingrained values of community service in Mangan (2009) can all be subsumed into the concept of thick volunteering that we are seeking to develop. On the one hand, the metaphors of depth and thickness both imply a profundity of quality which seems to relate to the meaningfulness of the volunteer work. On the other hand, the deepening occurs because of the challenging nature of the volunteering activity, whether emotional or physical. If we prefer the thickness metaphor it is in part because it also captures a sense of texturing as well as depth. Bartley’s (2007) account of being a mental health volunteer in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina provides a remarkable testimony to this. Here, she describes a complex interweaving of a variety of themes around challenge, encompassing dislocation, anxiety and confusion, substantial physical hardship and danger of death. Moreover, in line with what we have said about identity, she positions this in terms of a narrative and personal journey – before, during, and after – during which she changes as a person. It is this terrain of a complex, textured and meaningful practice which we call thick volunteering that we now seek to explore in detail through the RNLI study.

The Case Study

The RNLI is a charity registered in the UK and Ireland with the mission of saving lives at sea (RNLI Purpose, vision and values, 2014) and operates a twenty-four hour per day, 365-days a year lifeboat search and rescue service in 236 strategically-located stations dotted around the coast of the UK and Ireland. The organization depends on a network of over 31,500 volunteers, of which 4,600 are lifeboat operational crew members (RNLI About Us, 2013). About 8% of operational crew members are female. A permanent paid staff of about 1,282 employees support and oversee operations (RNLI Annual Report and Accounts, 2012: 28), the majority of whom are based at headquarters in Poole, in Dorset, England, which is also the site of the Lifeboat Training College, a purpose built state-of-the art training facility

for lifeboat crew. The fleet consists of 346 lifeboats ranging from five metres to seventeen metres in length. All-weather lifeboats are the largest of the fleet and are capable of launch in the strongest hurricane force weathers, as their self-righting mechanism ensures that the boat will re-float in the event of capsizing. Overall, lifeboats were launched 8,346 times in 2012, rescuing 7,964 people and saving 328 lives (RNLI Operational Statistics Report, 2012: 8). The RNLI is different to other emergency services as it is not an organ of the state or an expression of state power, nor has it ever been so. It is internationally recognised as ‘providing one of the most effective and dependable search and rescue services in the world’ (RNLI International Development Publicity Material, 2012), and is widely accepted as the benchmark to which similar organisations in other countries aspire.

Almost all operational volunteers start off in the RNLI as a crew member. Crew members are probationers for the first six months of their membership, when they are not allowed to go to sea in the lifeboat and instead have to demonstrate their commitment by attending to menial jobs such as cleaning the boat and station. Once they have proven their commitment, crew members are trained both locally and at Poole HQ. The typical all-weather lifeboat going on a rescue service is staffed with five or six crew, one coxswain (captain) and a mechanic.

At station level, the lifeboat operations manager (LOM) is the head of the operations team, in charge of the day-to-day activities of the station and commands the lifeboat and station when the boat is not at sea. Deputy launching authorities, mechanics, coxswains, crew and shorehelpers comprise the operations team. When the lifeboat is at sea, the coxswain is in charge and is legally responsible for the lifeboat and crew. As a rule, the coxswain is a local navigational expert with many years’ experience, and must have completed specialised RNLI training. Due to the offshore nature of the work, there is very little back-up for the crew of a lifeboat if the rescue is very difficult and becomes a life-and-death situation. Occasionally,

volunteers are forced to deal with horrendous physical working conditions, such as hurricane force wind, waves and storms. In 2012, almost ten percent of launches were in winds of strong breeze up to and including violent storm (RNLI Operational Statistics Report, 2012: 8). A strong breeze produces a wave height of three to four metres and a rough sea. Forty-one percent of lifeboat services in Ireland were performed in darkness in 2012 (RNLI Operational Statistics Report, 2012: 8), adding to the already dangerous and frightening setting.

Research Methods

The main research method was a programme of forty semi-structured interviews of individuals at all levels of the organisation. Thirteen of these were waged and twenty seven unwaged. Three interviewees were female and thirty-seven were male. Depth data were sought and so interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in order to allow respondents to expand on those issues which they felt were most significant and meaningful. Interviews took a 'life history' approach (Musson, 1998; Kirton, 2006) and began by asking participants to trace back their involvement with the RNLI, how and when they had come to join the RNLI and what happened when they joined. Interviews took place at local stations (for coxswains, launch authorities, LOM's, mechanics and crew members), at RNLI headquarters (for directors and senior managers of the RNLI) and at RNLI divisional base (for divisional management and staff) and lasted from fifteen minutes to three hours in length, with an average of fifty minutes per interview. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Further data were collected through participant observation (undertaking an exercise in the simulator) and non-participant observation (sitting-in on a five day management communications and command training course aimed at station management personnel) at the Lifeboat Training College co-located with RNLI headquarters in Poole. These research visits were used as 'an opportunity to see the organization at work and to 'feel' the organization'

(Parker, 2000: 238), and observations were recorded in a research diary. Data were also derived from approximately 850 pages of organizational documents.

After all interviews were transcribed and field notes and the research diary were written up, the primary data ran to 514 single-spaced pages. The data was coded firstly without trying to fit it in to any analytic preconceptions about motivation to volunteer. The analysis became more deductive as codes were generated alongside research questions. Broadly following Braun & Clarke (2006) codes were collated into clusters, and finally overarching themes. We now turn to exploring what the study revealed about, specifically, thick volunteering.

Thick Volunteering at the RNLI

The operational volunteers had to give a strong commitment to the very time-consuming work involved. They had to reside within a defined radius of the station and wear pagers at all times. Their lives were constrained by drink-driving legislation and ensuring that adequate cover was always maintained so that calls for help could be responded to around the clock, every day of the year. Respondents spoke forcefully of being extremely proud of their stations and their teams, and the immense level of personal satisfaction, confidence in their own abilities and positive self-development they gained from being part of a local station. Volunteering was explained as something that was passionate and heartfelt and that they felt a great desire to do, and was prioritized as a key role in life, not least because of the hazards (discussed in more detail later):

The lifeboat is first really, in front of [paid] work and everything. That's the bottom line of it ... the lifeboat comes first ... Maybe because we are so close to the sea here and we see so many tragedies over the years, I remember when I was a young chap there were five friends of mine drowned. And maybe that got us all together,

when I seen what the [lifeboat] lads were doing at that time, I was only seventeen years of age at the time and I looked at it and I thought these lads are doing it for nothing and it just clicked home with me, ever since then it has just been top of my agenda really. Saturday night if I was going out with the wife or family and the pager would go, they are left. It's no big deal, we would all do it, it's not just me it's a thing that you inherit. (Ben, Station Chairman)

The significance attached to their volunteering led to individuals understanding it as identity work or a 'narrative of the self' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 627) which deeply informed their self-understandings about the kind of person they were (Watson, 1994). Volunteering was experienced as a 'powerful framing function' (Kornberger & Brown, 2007: 505) in the construction of the self that influenced self-perception and behavioural patterns. The thickness of this volunteering was indicated in the way that volunteers took ownership of their role, the lifeboat and the service their local station provided. Many participants described how their lives revolved around volunteering, a symptom of the disciplinary power of commitment to the role, so that the persistence of the RNLI and the identity of the volunteers were recursively constituted:

Oh Jesus sure I suppose it's been a big part of my life really, you know, its bred into you. It's part of what you are and what you do. You'd revolve a lot around it, even though you're not paid full-time to be here it's always on your mind if you're going anywhere or doing anything. (Christy, Coxswain)

The thick volunteering observed at the RNLI was both a consequence and a cause of the intricate recruitment and socialization policies enacted at local level. On application to become a volunteer, informal inquiries were made around the locality by core members of the

station such as coxswains, mechanics and ‘old-timers’ in order to ascertain the character of the applicant. Reputations were checked and selection was tightly controlled – not everyone was considered to be a suitable volunteer. Tightly controlling inputs by selecting volunteers for perceived value compatibility is a classic indication of reliance on community mechanisms (Adler et al., 2008; cf. Ouchi, 1978), a point which will be discussed in greater detail later. Furthermore, just giving up time for free was not enough – this, too, thickens the volunteer concept beyond simply being unpaid work. Probationer volunteers had to prove their commitment and dedication and conform to the collective norms at station level. In this way, local stations socialized and controlled their members with ‘symbolic rewards such as prestige or acceptance’ (Lois, 1999: 117). These recruitment and socialization practices are a key aspect of recursiveness, for here we can see how the agency of volunteers is central to the reproduction of the social norms of the station: they make and remake the station through their actions and these actions are themselves made and re-made by the station. The following passage succinctly expresses the expectations volunteers had of themselves and each other:

Well I think it’s the sense of purpose and the dedication that everybody has to have, I mean when we start young guys here we dish the dirt on them, they are down there cleaning the boat for six months before they go to sea, and the whole idea behind that is we don’t want people who are here just to have an RNLI badge, I mean to get the chicks, or the guys if they are ladies, we don’t want those people. Fine if they want to come in and go out, we won’t keep them too long! But, we really don’t want them. We want people who are going to be dedicated. (Charlie, Lifeboat Operations Manager)

Once someone was fully accepted as a volunteer and socialized through local training with an emphasis on the norms and values of the station, collective relations were described as a ‘brotherhood’ and a ‘family’, such was the ethos of teamwork and involvement. At local level, volunteers were actively encouraged to be deeply involved, invested in and to take ownership of their part of the RNLi by accepting even the most mundane of work tasks, taking part in regular training exercises and bringing along weaker members of the team. Coupled with the dangerous work environment in which these ‘crucial life-death functions’ (Van Maanen, 1976: 87) were performed, strong emphasis was placed on values, beliefs and norms that engendered high levels of interpersonal solidarity (cf. Lois, 1999). Solidarity did not just begin and end at local station level, but was also evident across stations, as demonstrated in this account from a coxswain of twenty-three years’ service:

It’s more than a bond of necessity, more so that they [stations] have the same understanding of each other and what each other does to such a level that it becomes more family than social. We know exactly what the lads in Clifden⁴ do or go through on a shout⁵. They know what we go through. And I remember on one occasion when we were coming back from Poole, Ricky in Fenit ... I said to him ‘we’ll get home before you’ and there was this kind of race [by lifeboat] from Poole to where we are or Poole to Fenit. So I arrived home at twelve at night and I rang Ricky and I says ‘where are you?’ he said ‘I am out on a shout’, ‘out on a shout?’ I say, ‘yes’ he says ‘three of my cousins are lost’. I said ‘I am on my way’, and I turned the car around and told my wife where I was going and I headed for Fenit [6 hours away by car] and I took him off that boat and told him to go ashore, I am taking over. He could not possibly be out there searching for his cousins. And I was

⁴ This and all place names and personal names except Poole and Dublin have been changed to protect anonymity.

⁵ A ‘shout’ was the term used by the crews to denote a call out of the lifeboat.

there for a whole week until all the bodies was got. And crews came from that station; crews came from the Aran Islands, Valentia, Courtmacsherry just because the cousins were lost. That's a bond. That's more than a job, that's more than the social. That's a bond. You do that and you don't even think about it, that's what they [we] do. (Séan, Coxswain)

For the operational volunteers of the RNLI, the lifeboat was not just 'what we do', it was emphatically 'who we are'. The nuances of this are in evident in the case of the mechanic, who was a paid worker of the institution for forty hours of the week and a volunteer at all other times:

I am here because I want to be here. It's not just a job, it's not just a job. To take on the role of mechanic or [paid] coxswain in a station at a local level requires more passion than the average day job because there is a lot more involved than in the average day job. In the average day job you do nine to five, five o'clock finish you switch off and move on to your own life. The institution's job at a local level, you don't switch off you are always a full time mechanic. Its twenty-four seven, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day and there is no holidays ... you get your annual leave, but I mean I still work Christmas day I work New Year's Day I work Stephens's Day [Boxing Day] and I won't ask anybody to come in and do my job on their holidays so no you are never switched off, you are never switched off ... I am the only paid hand here, but I consider myself paid from nine to five and after that, although I am requested to be on call twenty-four seven, I consider [myself] after five o'clock to be a volunteer. (Conor, Mechanic)

The choices that Conor makes, based on his identity of being committed to something that is more than a job, are an illustration of how the RNLI is produced as an institution by the agency of its members: that it can operate around the clock is dependent upon people like Conor. Yet the RNLI provides him and his colleagues with that sense of self that is so meaningful to him. The way in which both ‘never switch off’ is an example of the recursive constitution of agency and structure.

Danger

Danger and risk were very much a way of life for the operational volunteers of the RNLI, both in the life-and-death situations encountered on rescue missions and via the process of placing themselves physically, psychologically and emotionally in testing conditions. As one crew member put it: ‘The sea doesn’t treat you different just because you are on a lifeboat’ (Luke, Crew Member). Another explained:

What does being a team mean? Being a team, to work as a team I would feel that if you go on deck in a gale force ten and you have water washing across the decks and your safety harness hooked on, you get out there and in order to work as a team the guy in front of me has to trust me one hundred percent coming behind him, and if anything happens to him I am there for him. And likewise if anything happened to me. I have to be one hundred percent clear in my mind that that guy behind me will give his life to save mine. There has to be a huge level of trust, has to be. If you don’t have that level of trust you can’t work as a team. You have to have that level of trust. (Brendan, Crew Member)

Sea-sickness and mental pressure can combine in potentially lethal ways as coxswain and crew seek to enact a successful rescue. Here, a coxswain graphically explains how difficult

the working conditions can be for those on the lifeboat, even those with considerable years of experience:

I mean everyone on the boat gets sick, even me. And I've been working on boats for twenty-six years now. You die. You wish you were dragged off the face of the earth some days. (Daragh, Coxswain)

A second coxswain speaks of the ordeal and hardship that result from these working conditions:

If you are going out in difficult conditions in high waves and high seas and it's dark, that's the sort of things that will really test guys because you can't see what's coming at you and you are getting thrown around the place. (George, Second Coxswain)

But the hardships are not just physical. They can also have a mental and emotional aspect, as in this striking example:

A woman went over the side of the ship off one of the ferries early this year, and we actually spotted her in the water, she was dead, she was in the water three or four hours, and I went over the side, clipped on and the first thing that came to my mind was I better not let her go, I just put my arm around her and we got her in. But the main thing was just don't let her go, don't lose her... bring her home. Don't let her go. (Mick, Second Mechanic)

To bring these points about danger into sharper focus we will make use of an example which powerfully illustrates the richly textured sense of what the volunteers' lives are like. The example is so rich not just because of the danger and tragedy, but because of the deep familial and temporal sense it conveys. An interview took place in a station which had just received a brand new £2M lifeboat and the coxswain was asked how it felt to be coming home with this new craft, bigger and faster than their old lifeboat. He explained that he and his crew of eight had flown to Poole and then they had to take the boat home over the Irish Sea. Prior to him, his father had been the coxswain of the lifeboat so he had grown up around the lifeboat station, and when he finally reached the age of seventeen he was permitted to go to sea on the lifeboat. On his very first rescue, on Christmas Eve in horrendous weather conditions, the lifeboat capsized twice and a crew man was lost. The respondent described it as 'a baptism of fire'.

Thirty-three years later, now as coxswain in charge of the brand new boat, pulling out of the marina at RNLi headquarters at Poole on his crew was the son of the very man who had died that night under the leadership of the present coxswain's father. When they motored into open seas:

We had a meeting on the stern, a quiet moment for all that had gone ... you remember the people gone before you and things like that ... it is a bonding thing and everyone knows that and you know, it's all part of it as well. (Christy, Coxswain)

It is difficult to reconstruct the intensity of this man's feeling as he relayed this story, but the cuttngly deep personal trauma which he and other survivors of that tragedy had endured was

evident. The way that danger ran through the volunteers' work was encapsulated in this motto: 'we have a saying 'drown you may, but go you must'' (Pat, Mechanic). It is this danger which partly explains the thickness of the volunteer role. Experiencing, physically and emotionally, what was known as 'the sharp end' (Roderick, RNLI Director) was frequently reported by respondents as fundamentally contributing to the feelings of mutual solidarity felt by volunteers which worked to confirm their identities and commitment to each other. But it also intersected with other bonds, which we will now discuss.

Community and family

The volunteers are both drawn from and to some large extent serve their local communities, and this had a direct impact on many aspects of their work. On the one hand, those being rescued, dead or alive, would often be personally known to the crew:

And I'll give you an instance, I brought my daughter and her two friends to the pub one Saturday night and I brought them home and the third girl didn't come home. I got a phone call the next morning she was missing, and I picked her [dead body] out of the water myself. (Ben, Station Chairman)

Equally, issues of staffing took on a very particular meaning, especially given the dangerousness of the work which meant it could have life-or-death consequences:

Are you going to choose someone that has got a young family, someone who is married, single? Who are you going to put out there tonight? And that's quite a lot to take on board and make that decision, and know that you [the coxswain] are making that decision for the reason that they may not come back. (Steven, RNLI Manager)

In her study of utopian communities Kanter (1968) found that feelings of ‘we-ness’ and ‘communion’ were crucial mechanisms in solidifying members’ commitment to groups. This dynamic permeated the local stations. Team spirit and camaraderie deeply guided not only actions but also self-referential thoughts of team members: ‘You are all one team it’s all of you together [out there]’ (Peter, Second Coxswain). Deep bonding evolved over time and was intensified as a direct result of the dangers of lifeboating. The cultural identity and shared norms of the local station privileged this local bonding as a ‘condition of communion’ (Barnard, 1968: 148) to the extent of constructing and codifying local ‘rules’ which facilitated the creation of ‘nomos, order, out of chaos’ (Berger & Berger, 1973, cited in Watson 1994: 22), evidenced in practice here in Pat’s response:

Jesus the one thing we have here is that if you fall over the side, go over the side, jump over the side somebody will be right after you. No matter what condition you are in, what speed you are going at, if you go in someone will be with you immediately. If they spot you they will be over with you and that’s the rule we have.
(Pat, Mechanic)

This sense of mutual reliance was repeatedly orchestrated through a metaphor of family, as in this case:

We are a family like. When you are out there [at sea] you are relying on who is out there, who is coming behind you, who is near you. You are watching out for him and he is watching out for you. Everyone looks after each other. (Ross, Mechanic)

And again in this case:

These people that you are working with, that you are with every day, you are out on shouts with, that you are put into danger along with, go on rescues, they are like a family, that's as much as you can say. (Ciarán, Crew Member)

This then extended to a wider sense of the RNLI, and not just the lifeboat itself, as a family:

These guys are so tight ... they have a great respect for each other. They know that one day, their life might depend on their fellow crewman, and they know that these guys are highly trained, every one of them, every one of them going out on that boat is highly trained, so they know that they can rely on them. So it's trust, it's reliance, it's a belief that they will be ok with those other five guys when they go out, and they train together every week, they meet each other every week, they go out on exercises, they go away on courses even together sometimes. So they are kind of living like a ... there's a togetherness that is embodied by every crew, I think, in the RNLI ... again it comes back to that feeling of family, I think that it really is embodied here in the station, and the minute you come in the door you almost feel it, you almost tangibly feel it. (Charlie, Lifeboat Operations Manager)

But family and kinship are not just metaphors for the volunteers. On the contrary, as we saw when discussing the dangerousness of the work, there are literal familial and generational bonds in play. In fact, when asked how they first got into lifeboating, most respondents emphasized how it was a family tradition, explaining that their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had been involved, at varying levels from coxswain to shore helper, in the local lifeboat of their day: 'well it's been in my family going back, my father was a lifeboat man and his father was, it's been in the family' (Mick, Training Coordinator and Second Mechanic). Something very similar can be found in Thornborrow & Brown's (2009) study of the Parachute Regiment, where many respondents spoke of being 'born into' the

regiment and being intimately familiar from an early age with the ‘history, traditions, and the mentality’ (2009: 360), and where there was also a context of dangerous work⁶. Amongst the lifeboaters, family ties were associated with a kind of preferential recruitment based on the perception that you were known, you understood the work of the lifeboat, in a sense you already belonged and, therefore, could be trusted: ‘[my father had been on the boat] and you get took in because they know you are family’ (Daragh, Coxswain). All four of the stations studied had multiple family members involved. Upon retirement of their fathers, the sons of mechanics and coxswains frequently took up that respective position.

Kin relationships, be they through shared blood, marriage or adoption, added a peculiar texture because an extra-organizational source of meaning wove together family and work ties. This almost pre-modern aspect⁷ has always been a central feature of the RNLI’s work. A local family’s proud history and tradition of lifeboating acted not only as a recruitment resource for the RNLI, but also perhaps instilled and perpetuated a family norm and tradition that lifeboating was somewhat expected of family members, particularly young men. This is one very obvious respect in which an understanding of volunteer work as ‘pure choice’ is inadequate. There was some sense not just of expectation but of obligation and, conversely, a kudos associated with volunteering:

People in the community would say ‘it’s a great job that you do’ and they do recognise you, and the community have always turned out at any fundraising, they are always one hundred percent behind the RNLI in this community. (Tom, Crew Member)

⁶ Moreover, although the case of the soldiers was one of paid work those going into the Parachute Regiment had volunteered for that particular duty.

⁷ In the sense of dating in general to the era before the industrial revolution, where families and business existed to a great extent in conjunction with each other (Zachary, 2011)

Adler et al. (2008) posit that the basis of trust in traditional social relations is ‘loyalty, honor, duty and status deference’ (2008: 366), which suggests a norm-based tradition, possibly even obligation, of volunteering behavior. As lifeboating was ‘bred into’ volunteers (Christy, Coxswain), kinship ties enabled expert local knowledge, often tacit, to be handed down generationally from ‘very gnarled old experienced coxswains who have been at sea all their life and their father and grandfather before them’ (Eithne, RNLI Director). Clearly these inter-generational, familial bonds are inextricably linked with the geographical and historical enactment of community. The spatially-bound community of the village or town in the geographical meaning of a physical place, piece of coastline and area of sea provided a wealth of information on how volunteers approached and derived meaning from their work. They thought of and used a sense of community of place to make sense of themselves and their history, thus giving weight to Dixon & Durrheim’s assertion that ‘questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’’ (2000: 27). When asked how the traditions of the RNLI fed into the present day, one respondent linked family, history and place thus:

Well most of them are still around, their families are still around the stations, and its station history. I know you can’t live in the past but it’s what made you, the town and the station; it’s what the building blocks of the station was. (Daragh, Coxswain)

Community and place

Social psychologists have long emphasised ‘the importance of place for creating and maintaining a sense of self⁸’ (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000: 27; cf. Rowles, 1983; Simon et al., 1995). The RNLI’s geography and history both framed and were reproduced by the work of

⁸ Moreover, sociological research on space, work and identity is becoming more prevalent within the fields of organization theory and organizational behaviour, for example Baldry, 1999; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Dale, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2007.

the volunteers and their identity with the local community, past and present. This is not to say that all volunteers *must* come from and be firmly rooted in the local community, but it was clear from respondents' answers that integration with the group was easier, motivation for joining was treated with less circumspection, and expectations that the prospective volunteer would 'make it' through the probationary period were higher if the person was known to at least one current member of the local station. All identities are indeed based on inclusion and exclusion, and participating in 'the bonds of we' (Hornstein, 1976: 62) was made more difficult for those who were relatively unknown. Informal enquires were made around the locale to ensure that prospective members were suitable and desirable, with those considered less so being fobbed off in one way or another.

The emotional and subjective attachment people had to particular locales which enabled the production and consumption of meanings (Tyler, 2011) were clear in Pat's account: 'I have been all over and home is always home. And I'd always identify with the people and the people that went before me' (Pat, Mechanic). As Dale (2005) has argued, aspects of materiality are inherent in the ideational levels of discourse, culture and identity, represented in this case by one director: 'Each station is an RNLI. That is their world, that is the RNLI for them' (Eithne, RNLI Director). Equally, as Pat's response indicates, not only was there a special, unique and rooted quality about 'home', but also, meanings were grafted from the past as well as the present (Parry, 2003). Place was indeed a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2004: 7), and as an aspect of thick volunteering, rootedness in a place may be seen as a contrast with the phenomenon of 'volunteer tourism' (Simpson, 2004; Mostafanezhad, 2013) characterised by relatively short placements undertaken by outsiders to the communities in which they work. By contrast:

When you join the RNLI and you see what they do, anybody who stays for more than 6 months, they're hooked, they can't get away really unless they leave because of job or

moving house or family reasons or whatever...so we have those that come in and go out shortly after, or we have them for twenty or thirty years' (Charlie, Lifeboat operations manager)

It should not be thought that community here means something 'cosy' or that volunteering was simply about a high-minded sense of duty. It is relevant here to note that these lifeboat stations were all located in fishing villages or towns, and rescues could be for the benefit of oneself or one's family:

[If they are fishermen] well their whole livelihood is the sea then, their work is the sea, everything is the sea. The lifeboat is more important to them lads because they could be wanting it. (Christy, Coxswain)

Indeed, more generally it is important to attend to the specificity of what kinds of communities these were, and not just to treat community as an abstract term. The lifeboat stations studied were in small, rural communities with relatively stable populations. Moreover, they existed in a wider national context. Ireland has a long tradition of voluntary activity and charitable service that has been influenced by religious, political and economic developments (GHK Consultancy, 2010). Dating back to medieval times, the tradition of 'caritas', meaning doing good work for the benefit of other individuals, has been ingrained in the Irish culture.

A particular aspect of the dynamics in the RNLI case is gender. Almost all of the lifeboat crew are male, and thirty-seven of the forty individuals interviewed for the study were male. It seems clear that familial expectations and traditions of volunteering bore exclusively upon men, and more particularly younger men. In this way the situation was perhaps somewhat similar to the Parachute Regiment case discussed by Thornborrow & Brown (2009), which we already mentioned as having some parallels in terms of familial

history. However, we perceive some differences. Thornborrow & Brown (2009: 365) found that ‘talk about machismo-ism — aggressive behaviour, war, conflict situations and combat — was the most frequently occurring resource for identity work. Paratroopers said that they craved combat’.

That was rather different in the RNLI case. Harrowing stories of danger, risk, tragedy and heartbreak abounded but these were not relayed with anything akin to boastfulness, pride or self-aggrandizing heroism. Rather they were told in quietly wistful, regretful ways, sometimes very emotionally. This may in part be explained by the fact that, of course, RNLI work does not involve combat. Even so, to the extent that it involved danger and physical toughness it might have been expected that some machismo would have been in evidence. Yet, as we saw in an earlier quote from the interviews, there was even a degree of rejection of machismo: ‘we don’t want people who are here just to have an RNLI badge, I mean to get the chicks’. It may also be the case that because the interviews were conducted by a woman this aspect did not surface in the way it might otherwise have done. But in any case, masculinity is not just or necessarily about machismo (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 2003). In saying that there were particular social expectations on men to volunteer we can see a form of masculinity bound up with service to and care for others, belonging, endurance and perhaps adventure.

Concluding Discussion

The key contribution of this paper is the development of a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of volunteering so as to move it beyond being seen as an individual choice, which we have argued is the dominant assumption in the literature. We have also sought to do this by going beyond positing a dualism of individual and community or context as two relatively fixed entities interacting with each other. Instead we have showed the way that the

two are mutually intertwined so that volunteer identity and the RNLI itself are co-produced.

As Kunda (2006) puts it:

...self and society stand in a dialectical relationship: how one sees, thinks, and feels about the social world and one's own place in it is the outcome of a continuing dialogue with the representatives of the social order into which one is born, its various forms of social organization, and the ready-made roles they offer.

(2006:161)

In the RNLI structuring, through tradition and community, partly determined what was available to individuals (e.g. who would be accepted into a station as a recruit), and the very fact of availability structured the choices that individuals could make. In other words, the act of volunteering occurred not just within, but in part because of, the relations around it – it was embedded within them. Perhaps the most obvious element was that of the institution of the family and its influence on the recruitment, selection and retention of volunteers. Volunteering for the RNLI traditionally occurred within social and familial ties within the community of place, suggesting that it was somewhat expected of, particularly, men, of a certain age. This was historically informed both by the history of the lifeboat stations and by the family histories in which generations of men had volunteered. This is very much emblematic of one of the key claims of structuration theory, namely that it explains the persistence of social practices across time and space (Giddens, 1984: 17). History and place structured what was available to volunteers, whilst their volunteering reproduced that history and place in the present and for the future.

The structuring of, particularly, history, community and family, helps to explore the question of identity amongst the volunteers. If, as Giddens argues, the persistent question for self-identity in late modernity is not simply 'who am I?' but "[w]hat to do? How to act? Who

to be?” (Giddens, 1991: 70) then volunteer identity provided a ready answer. Faced with choosing an identity, the choice was relatively easy to make. Indeed, precisely because the conventional understanding of voluntary work is of it being a choice, this makes it especially attractive as a vehicle for the exercise of choice whilst, paradoxically, not requiring a particularly active choice to be made since the identity was so readily available. Of course being a volunteer was not the only identity these individuals had – many were involved in the sea in other ways and obviously had other ways of thinking about themselves besides that – but the case of the RNLI was a remarkable one in that many of volunteers’ central group memberships converged at this point in time and space. Individuals may have as many self-conceptualizations as they have group memberships (Tajfel, 1981, 1982), but it is salient that generic key memberships – family, community, locality, friendships and connection with the sea coalesced at the point of membership of the local station of the RNLI. It is this coalescence of multiple group memberships that ‘thickened’ the volunteering as these different elements were layered together and mutually re-enforcing. If it was *just* family, *just* community, *just* history and so on – for all that any of these might be highly meaningful – the volunteering would have been less thick; it is their cumulative effect that made it all the more so, rather like the ‘deepening’ and ‘interweaving’ of issues described in some of the studies of volunteers discussed earlier (e.g. Bartley, 2007, Palmer et al, 2007).

Furthermore, if structure is conceptualised as social forces which constrain what the agent is free to choose, what we can see is that the choices were limited because the social pressure to volunteer and remain volunteering was strong. However, at the same time as showing the structural constraints around choice, we have shown that the choices and actions of the volunteers recursively shaped the persistence of the structures that constitute the RNLI. The way in which the local stations recruit and shape volunteers explains the capacity of the RNLI to persist as an organization and in particular to sustain itself as a round-the-clock

service. The two are inseparable. We are not, of course, claiming that this insight is new in social science or organization studies – far from it - but it is a vital corrective to studies of volunteering which, as we argued at the outset, for the most part privilege agency.

Volunteering at the RNLI was also structured or contextualised by the dangerous working environment. The solidarities and empathy fostered led to the building of interpersonal trust, which, as Giddens recognises, is ‘a fundamental means of dealing psychologically with risks that could paralyse action or lead to dread and anxiety’ (1991: 3). Risk and danger faced together by crews was certainly different to risk and danger faced alone, and in this way issues of danger and of community were mutually constituted, as they also were by the possibility (and actuality) that rescues would be of members of that community. Very few other occupations have these characteristics. Medical professionals save lives, but in doing so they do not normally put their own lives at peril. Police work and fire-fighting are closer as is military service, which has the additional aspect of sometimes involving the taking of life. But all of these latter occupations are undertaken as paid work. It is difficult to think of many other cases where there is both danger and volunteering – voluntary mountain or cave rescue work, or some kinds of charitable work in dangerous countries might be examples (see, for example, Desilvilya & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2008; Lois, 1999).

Our substantive contribution is to suggest that when the recursive relationship of action and structure around volunteering is especially rich and complex, that volunteering can be designated as being thick. In the RNLI case, the thickness came in particular from the intertwining of family, community, place and danger. It might therefore be said that this case study is a rather specific one and, indeed, it is in the nature of case studies that this will be to some degree true. However, the concept of thick volunteering, or more precisely the underlying idea that volunteering is characterised by degrees of thinness and thickness, does

have a wider purchase. It suggests that whatever the specific details of a case may be, it can be assessed with respect to the strength or density of the meanings that surround it, rather as it is now recognized that the practice of emotional labour can involve more or less deep or profound experiences (e.g. Grandey, 2003). Relatedly, it is not that thick volunteering is only, or even specifically, associated with danger. Rather, the point is that danger offers one particular basis for the thickness of volunteering (as also in Lois, 1999 and Bartley, 2007), intensified in this case by the familial and communal issues we have identified. Thus in other cases the thickness might come from some other source of significant meaning which might, indeed, include something like the extent of emotional labour involved in the volunteering. For example, one might characterise voluntary work in mental health (Randall & Munro, 2010) or at risk street children (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008) in this way.

Thus in terms of future research on volunteer work, our proposal is that the concept of thick volunteering can be used to assess or explicate what that work means in terms of its inter-relationship with a wider set of social dynamics above, beyond and around 'choice'. This may not necessarily be immediately obvious, and methodologically requires in depth study of or involvement with volunteers' lives so as to understand the phenomenological meaning of their volunteering for them. For example, one might envisage someone returning annually to their hometown to volunteer in the Christmas soup kitchen. On the face of it this might seem a rather 'thin' form of volunteering – it is not very extensive, perhaps not very demanding or harrowing. Yet it might be extremely meaningful for the person involved as a repeated, ritualistic re-engagement with their childhood community, or a tribute to now dead parents or some other thing which is not immediately apparent or observable. Conversely, it must be at least possible that voluntary work which, from the outside, looks to be an obvious candidate for being thick volunteering might on examination turn out to be rather thin from the perspective of the volunteers themselves. In other words, thickness of volunteering is not

something that inheres in the activity itself, but in the meanings that surround it which must be established empirically rather than assumed *a priori*.

With that said, we do not mean to imply that it is only or especially in cases of thick volunteering that a recursive understanding of structure and agency is relevant. It would also be so for cases of thin volunteering. One might say that for thick volunteering the structural issues are especially complex and interwoven, and agentic choice especially weighty in that the consequences of that choice are potentially more serious. But all this means is that thick volunteering provides a good site to explore the meaning of volunteering because there is in various ways a lot 'more going on'. In cases of thin volunteering the issues of both structure, agency and their recursive relationship will be less complex and weighty, no doubt, but will still be present. Thus if we want to explain the existence, or understand the meaning, of volunteering of whatever sort it is necessary to go beyond choice.

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