

Viewpoint

Doing one's duty? Voluntary work and the 'new economy'

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The journal *Local Economy* was launched in 1986 and since then volunteering and the third sector have featured in articles, features and new initiatives. Volunteering along with unpaid social reproduction and reciprocal exchange represents a hidden dimension of economic restructuring (Jarvis, 1999). The act of volunteering can affect a person's perceptions of well being, of self worth and of making a contribution to society. Unpaid work (formal and informal) which is undertaken by volunteers makes a vital contribution to family and community. The voluntary sector, which is a vehicle for formal volunteering, is praised for its pioneering work in community development and its key role in building social capital. The idea of social capital (which includes, although it is not limited to, voluntary work) has become enormously

influential in policy terms. More and more is expected of volunteers themselves as they take on increased responsibility for service provision. In this Viewpoint we wish to open a debate on the interconnections between volunteering and paid work.

The 'traditional' image of a volunteer is that of a middle-aged middle class woman (Lukka and Ellis, 2001). Indeed, the identity of women with the local and the community has a long history. The nineteenth century philanthropist Josephine Butler argued that state controlled welfare systems were 'masculine' while parochial service, which recreated domestic life, was essentially feminine (Prochaska 1988). Some feminists suspect that present day calls for more reliance on unpaid work through voluntary organisations and groups within communities means a return to traditional gender roles and relations (Frazer 1999). Jo Little (1997) has uncovered ways in which voluntary activity supports a gendered form and image of one kind of community, the rural English village. In her analysis rural women's participation in voluntary work can be seen as a reflection of their powerlessness and of the hegemonic power of paid work over unpaid (ibid.).

As policy interest in volunteering has grown so has the attention of researchers, but there has been relatively little reflection on voluntary activity as 'work' and its relationships with paid work. In order to begin to fill that gap we consider the following:

- Debates about work, caring and valuing unpaid activity as 'real' work.
- Women's traditional role as volunteers linked to their domestic role and lack of participation in the labour market.
- Reconnecting the excluded to paid work.
- The changing nature of volunteering - becoming more 'work like'.

The demands of paid work for those with jobs make it harder, not easier, for many working women and men to participate in voluntary work. Working hours and work intensity are increasing, but perhaps the most significant component has been women's emancipation. Since the 1960s, women have been increasingly involved in paid labour, maintaining a deeper commitment to the labour market throughout their working lives. Thus while the number of men in formal employment has declined, the workforce has become increasingly feminised. Since 1971, female economic activity rates have increased for women of all ages, except those aged 60 years and above, and the decline in economic activity rates which used to occur at the childbearing years had almost disappeared by 1997 (Hardill et al, 2001). Grandparents - mainly but not exclusively grandmothers – have played a key rôle in enabling women juggle work and home, as they are seen as the next best source of childcare when mothers cannot look after children due to work commitments (Wheelock and Jones, 2002).

Work - meaning paid employment - is of central importance to social policy. Social inclusion is achieved through paid work and all adults of working age have a 'duty' to engage in it. Citizenship and civic participation are now part of the national curriculum for school children. There have also been a number of Government-sponsored schemes such as recruiting young people in Millennium Volunteers (DfEE) and older volunteers (40-65 years) in Experience Corps (Home Office). Against this background boundaries between employment, education, and volunteering are changing. For example students who wish to pursue a career in education are encouraged to do voluntary work in schools prior to undertaking a teaching qualification. Young people are offered voluntary work as a route into full-time training or employment and the term 'volunteer' is according to some increasingly associated with unemployment and unemployed people (Wardell, 2000). Voluntary

work in the community may be a second best alternative for those outside the world of 'real' work (Bruegel, 2000). Does all this amount to an inherent contradiction between the mainstreaming of the voluntary sector and what Ruth Lister (2002) has called the 'paid work fetishism' of New Labour?

The need for a healthy, active voluntary and community sector for rural areas was highlighted in the 2000 White Paper *Our Countryside the Future* (DETR, 2000a). Urban women are also said to be the backbone of local community life as volunteers as well as mothers, residents and workers in the *Urban White Paper* (DETR, 2000b), 37). At the regional level the pivotal role of the third sector in fostering economic inclusion has been recognised, for example the role of the third sector is recognised in regional economic strategies (such as in the East Midlands, EMDA Business Plan, 2002, 24). However the capacity of the third sector – in terms of local demands placed upon it for delivering and serving the needs of the local community, and in the supply of local volunteers - varies spatially and affects the capacity of 'communities', who are being urged to find grass roots solutions to social and economic problems.

While on the one hand citizen participation in public spaces, churches, trade unions and political parties has declined, a 1997 survey showed that half the population volunteered in some form (National Survey of Volunteering, 1997); the ESRC's recent citizen audit of 24,000 revealed high figures for such things as giving blood, and serving on a jury (Hoodless, 2002; see also Pahl and Scales, 1999, 59). Returning to the National Survey of Volunteers (1997), which provides base line information on the characteristics of volunteers, how much time they spend, what activities they undertake and for whom, and their reasons for volunteering. It is interesting to note that whilst the NSV shows men and women as equally likely to volunteer, it also shows that those from the highest socio-economic group are almost twice as likely to

volunteer as those from the lowest. Volunteering has consistently tended to peak in middle age and fall off after the age of retirement. However, although retired people remain under represented among volunteers, the 1990s also saw a trend towards more volunteering on their part while participation began to fall away among younger people (ibid).

Voluntary work overlaps with informal care and with paid work in ways that are complex and subject to change. Informal neighbouring and care within kin groups have traditionally been key to the wellbeing of communities (Young and Wilmott, 1957). Notwithstanding dramatic changes over half a century in people's attachment to places, community relationships are still particularly significant in the lives of some groups; older women, for example, act as 'neighbourhood keepers' according to a recent study that revisited the communities researched by Young and Willmott in the 1950s (Phillipson et al., 1999, 741). Such activity is usually distinguished from volunteering because it is not integrated into an organisational structure. (Graham, 1991). However, connections between voluntary work carried out in a neighbourhood and more informal activities can be close; indeed the boundaries are perceived differently by different groups. For example, the contribution of some minority ethnic groups may be undervalued because its lack of formality does not conform to narrow definitions of volunteering (Lukka and Ellis, 2001).

Returning to paid work, it has been argued that the world of work of the new economy is changing so that waged work is increasingly just one form of activity among others (family work, parental work, political activity and voluntary work) (Beck, 2000). On the contrary Sennett (1998) contends on the contrary that participation in community and other public activities is being weakened by the new insecurity of labour market attachments. Feminist commentators have noted that the 'traditional' job was

structured on the assumption that the worker was a man in a full-time job supported by a female homemaker; it is far from clear if women make gains and men losses from the weakening of the 'traditional' job (McDowell, 2001). Some now classic texts (Oakley, 1974; Waring, 1989) argued for understanding domestic tasks and caring as 'work'. Indeed, this issue has been seen as symbolic of society's undervaluation of women and their contribution to social wellbeing (Beneria, 1999).

Moreover some recent initiatives have sought to 're-brand' volunteering by shedding the old fashioned image of the middle-aged female volunteer (Lukka and Ellis, 2001). A concern of current policy is the possible role that voluntary activity can play in connecting and re-connecting excluded individuals to the labour market. *Millennium Volunteers*, for example aims help young people acquire skills and experience directly relevant to the labour market and so enhance their employability. Voluntary work can provide social contact, foster social networks and create a platform for gaining new skills and experience that may prove valuable in finding paid employment and achieving economic inclusion (Green and Hardill, 1991). However, the correlation between volunteering and reconnection to the labour market is blurred because volunteering takes place through complex layers of patterns experienced by different groups of people (Hirst, 2002), and peoples motives for volunteering are complex and vary according to stage in the life course, and household situation. Overall, those in paid work are much more likely to volunteer than those outside the labour market (National Survey of Volunteering, 1997). Voluntary work can, nevertheless, be a partial alternative to paid employment at least in terms of providing the individual with an opportunity to do something meaningful with their time and a chance to gain both self esteem and a sense of value within the community (Pahl and Scales, 1999, 59).

Finally, it should be remembered that the third sector is an employer of waged labour as well as being dependent on volunteer labour (Gosling, 2000). The volunteer role in some organisations is becoming more employment-like with increasingly trends towards training, appraisals and opportunities for advancement (Davis Smith, 1996). As a result sometime heated debates have arisen about the extent to which management cultures imported from the paid workforce are compatible with the informality and flexibility of volunteering (ibid.).

Concluding comments

In the Viewpoint we have examined voluntary work, a form of unpaid work, against the background of the shifting boundaries between paid work, volunteering and education. Since 1997, work - meaning paid employment – has assumed central importance to social policy, the (paid) work ‘ethic’ is stronger than ever, with the Government firmly holding the view that social inclusion and reconnecting people to ‘mainstream’ opportunities is achieved through paid work and all adults of working age have a ‘duty’ to engage in it. Moreover a key role has been identified for voluntary organisations in the delivery of care, involving more formal reliance upon the work of volunteers (Billis and Harris, 1996; Wardell et al., 2000). Formerly unpaid carers may be entitled to some form of payment through Disability Living or Invalid Care Allowances. This, and the moves to commoditise childcare under the National Childcare Strategy, may undermine the motivation of volunteers who work without monetary reward. Even in cases where monetary reward is not involved there has been increased promotion of volunteering from the volunteer’s perspective in terms of what he or she can gain from the experience. For example, unemployed young people (16 to 25 year olds) are expected to acquire skills relevant to the labour

market through voluntary activity (Wardell et al., 2000). A recent discussion paper from the *Performance and Innovation Unit* notes new proposals in the United States that would enable older volunteers to earn scholarships transferable to grandchildren or others (PIU 2002). At the same time the demands of paid work (long hours culture, insecurity and women's emancipation) for those in the new economy make it harder, not easier, for many working women and men to participate in voluntary work.

We wish to end this Viewpoint by posing a series of questions, which we hope will stimulate debate in subsequent issues of *Local Economy* on the changing boundaries between volunteering and employment. What does all this mean for interconnections between the public sector and the third sector? In what ways should we encourage all citizens to be active volunteers? Is the link between unemployment and volunteering harmful? Are we right to push New Dealers into third sector activities in the name of enhancing employability? Who is there to do the unpaid work? What are their rewards? What support do they need? Does paid work fetishism lead to undervaluing unpaid work and the people who do it?

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