

# Book Review: Enterprising Care? Unpaid Voluntary Action in the 21st Century by Irene Hardhill and Susan Baines

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*Many voluntary organisations now face having to take up the provision of some public services as government funding shrinks, and are also under considerable pressure to become more enterprising. Chris Gilson reviews **Enterprising Care?** which includes case study descriptions, discussions of academic debates about volunteering, work and care as well as research practice.*



**Enterprising Care? Unpaid Voluntary Action in the 21st Century. Irene Hardhill and Susan Baines. Policy Press. 216 pages. September 2011.**

## Find this book:

About one in four people in the UK volunteer in some way every month, giving up their time to support others in organisations that vary in size from the largest cancer charities with budgets in the millions to the smallest community organisations with a handful of members. With the rise of David Cameron's 'Big Society' ethic, these third sector organisations have and will continue to become far more important in the way that services are delivered in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In *Enterprising Care* authors Irene Hardhill and Susan Baines draw together strands of their own participant work with voluntary groups to develop a comprehensive account of how voluntary organisations are made up and operate. They examine and unpack the theoretical underpinnings of voluntary work and its relationship with paid work, making the link to feminist 'ethics of care', a link that is not often made according to the authors. Hardhill and Baines then go on to outline pathways into volunteering, noting recent governments' (of all colours) keenness for citizens to volunteer in order to solve social problems such as worklessness through schemes like welfare-to-work.

Using personal histories of volunteer interviewees, the authors use social theory to create a typology of volunteer motivation, the two most important being individuals with shared experiences and/or problems working together for their own mutual aid, and an altruistic philanthropy – helping others without necessarily helping oneself.

While an entire academic discipline has been built around the management of paid employees, the growing size and importance of the voluntary sector make the author's in-depth look at how volunteers are managed within voluntary organizations a very valuable one. They make the striking point that "until recently, people who worked for wages for voluntary and community sector organisations were seen as having no career aspirations". The management of volunteers in third sector organisations can be as complex and is often harder than management in the public or private sectors; likewise, the infrastructure of support organisations for volunteers such as the National Association of Voluntary Service Managers (NAVSM) is incredibly important in this context.









Many voluntary organisations are now facing a dual pressure. On the one hand, the services that government provides are retrenching, and voluntary groups are encouraged (and expected) to take up the provision of some public services. This provides its own set of problems, with different modes of funding, from small grants, to full-up commissioning of services that are often time limited. The authors point out that organisations are often forced to ‘patch together’ funding from various sources to ensure people in need do not go without the service.

On the other hand there is also now considerable pressure for voluntary organisations to become more ‘enterprising’, with the rise of different forms of organisation, such as social enterprises and community interest companies. While this move towards a more entrepreneurial style of voluntary organisation may mean that organisations become more adaptive and agile, this is often by through lack of an alternative – if they do not, then government funding may disappear.

The authors use an in-depth case study of a British community to look at how citizens become volunteers and engage with voluntary groups, often acting as service users as well as service providers. They map out the variety of community activities and organisations taking place in these areas, and how the disadvantaged can be empowered through volunteering. They then complement their place based study with a more organisational one, by looking at the history of Age UK, an example of a charity that has adapted to changing environments through a series of mergers. The authors characterise organisations such as Age UK as “spatially dispersed communities of attachment” – while no common place exists, the passion and interest of volunteers is the social glue that holds the organisation together.

Finally, the book then closes with a look forward into the Big Society agenda and the impact that fiscal austerity will likely play on the volunteering sector, seeing some opportunities (such as large Big Society Awards). They also briefly discuss the idea of the co-production of knowledge and how academics interact with non-academic research users.

In light of the government’s push for more third sector involvement in the Big Society, this book is very timely, and it offers a comprehensive view of the organisational difficulties, both internal and external, faced by voluntary organisations and volunteer managers. Its focus on communities as a target, and as the context for voluntary organisations is especially important.

A great deal of ground is covered in a relatively short space – case study descriptions, discussions of academic debates about volunteering, work and care as well as research practice. In this way, it is hard to see who this book is for. It does not work well as it could as a guide for practitioners in the sector – for example, while there is much discussion of the motivations of those who volunteer, there is little on how organisations can recruit volunteers. Is word of mouth preferable to social media, or advertising?

In some respects, there is the seed of two books here – one descriptive volume on volunteer management and the changing role of the voluntary sector in the age of Big Society, and a second one with a more theoretical take on volunteering, theories of place, notions of care, as well as the co-production of research and the role of knowledge exchange between academic and other communities. Despite these relatively minor criticisms, this book is a solid overview of the volunteering sector in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and given that the sector is worth over £20 billion annually in the UK, an important and necessary one.

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