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Volunteering and social class : a narrative approach

DEAN, Jonathan

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Social Class and Habitus: a qualitative study of the barriers to youth volunteering

Jon Dean

Centre for Philanthropy, Humanitarianism and Social Justice, University of Kent

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This paper draws on data from a qualitative study of youth volunteering to juxtapose the lived experiences of young people in working-class and middle-class areas, and the efforts of those working in the voluntary sector in encouraging them to participate. 18 semi-structured interviews took place in Croft, a large prosperous county in the South East of England, in spring 2011 to explore the differing approaches to volunteering amongst the pupils of selective (grammar) and non-selective (comprehensive) schools. Utilising Bourdieu's theory of habitus, we can understand how pre-conceived notions of volunteering impair or encourage the uptake of volunteering programmes. I argue that in implementing recent policies developed to foster a volunteer spirit amongst young people, policymakers and voluntary sector workers have neglected the issue and consequences of social class. This has rendered a supposedly universal service a largely middle-class resource, reinforcing rather than reducing unequal levels of social and cultural capital.

Social Class and Habitus

Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being. (Kuhn, 1995: 98)

They're doing things that I'd count as volunteering that they don't. To them it's 'what they do'. (Joan, University Volunteering Manager, Croft).

Habitus was Pierre Bourdieu's response to the structure-agency debate, a method of explaining social behaviour and the structure in which those behaviours occurred. A 'durable but generative set of dispositions – perceptions and appreciations,' (Burawoy, 2008: 4),

which are 'created and reformulated through the conjecture of objective structures and personal history' (Mahar et al, 1990: 11); it is a mediating construct which takes the individual's previous knowledge and experience, and their relations and interactions with social structures and activities of other individuals, the totality of which culminate in their responses to situations. As Robbins (2000: 16) has written, habitus is a concept developed to:

explain the process by which, in a socially plural situation, all individuals internalise as a guide to their actions and attitudes, the practical structural explanations of their situations which impinge upon them partially as a consequence of those situations.

Therefore, when in social situations people use experience and social guidelines to manage their behaviour; therefore their actions are somewhat contained within a structural cycle.¹ Identity is not shaped 'in opposition to the social world' but by the social world (Lawler, 2008: 7); it is their 'individual history' (Bourdieu, 1990: 86), which in turn has been shaped by their social history.

Burawoy goes on to list the factors that go to make up habitus: practical sense, a learned capacity to innovate and demonstrate reflexivity, done through a person accumulating dispositions which are internalised through previous social structures and experiences encountered in life. So the development of the habitus is a continual process, where layer upon layer of experience develops and determines how an individual reacts to situations. Therefore, the 'primacy' layers, acquired early on in life in childhood are the most vital because they shape every action which is to come (Garnham and Williams, 1996: 61; Burawoy, 2008), meaning that the youth stage of social life is particularly important to study - 'the youth phase is so critical to social reproduction' as MacDonald et al (2005: 875) have written.

Bourdieu produced the following rudimentary equation in *Distinction* (2010: 95), which, whilst he felt overly simplified the concept in that a mathematical value cannot be attached to the concepts we are addressing, proves a useful tool for explain and examine the processes of habitus-informed agency:

$$(\text{Habitus} \times \text{Capital}) + \text{Field} = \text{Practice}$$

To break it down into four easier to understand categories, we can see this as:

¹ Bourdieu felt that 'culture' would have been an adequate term to describe this process, but was a word pre-loaded with too many subjective meanings and understandings, and a history of its own, so therefore would have been misapplied (Robbins, 2000).

(Who we are x What we've got) + Where we are = What we do

And to apply the above theoretical formula to the process of volunteering, we are able to see something like this:

(Previous attitude to volunteering x skills and abilities) + Activity = Response to Opportunity)

Young people embody their attitudes to volunteering, both those that stem from their agency, and that of the structures of their family and social networks around them. 'Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate the ways in which not only is the body in the social world, but the social world is in the body' (Reay, 2004: 432). The following responses from interviewees highlight how this affected the work of brokerage workers:

A lot of students who have volunteered since they were 15, they don't see it as volunteering, they see it as part of their life. So a lot say 'does it count as volunteering because I've been doing it for years and years?' (Sarah, University Volunteering Manager, Croft).

Chrissie (Youth Volunteering Manager, Croft): Our kids, grammar school kids, can volunteer anytime, anywhere.

Paul (Charity Director, Croft): It's just part of their life.

Successive governments' calls to volunteer have centred on making volunteering a part of young people's lives. Yet the habitus, already in place before the transition to adulthood formally starts at age 16, is *in itself* a barrier to young people volunteering, yet remains largely uncontested by my interviewees in their roles of encouraging more young people to volunteer.

'If you go to and set up a Volunteer Centre in [a poor area of Croft], you're *already not talking the language* of 90% of the population... Children come from families with no concept of volunteering,' Paul continued. Whilst the families from poorer areas are not against volunteering in the formal environments which Paul's charity offers, it is simply not part of their habitus, their 'inherited concept of society' (Robbins, 2000: 26) – just not the sort of thing they do. Beatrice (Youth Volunteering Worker, Croft) said that many young people who put themselves forward are 'the ones who do everything anyway...They're not intimidated about meeting a whole new group of people which is essentially what volunteering is'. This was a recurring theme within the interviews. Young people who have experienced either volunteering, or extra-curricular activities such as after school clubs and sports teams, or joined youth organisations such as the Scouts or the Guides, are more likely to respond to the call to volunteer when Beatrice and her colleagues arrive at an assembly offering the chance to walk dogs at a rescue shelter. These structures which concentrate voluntary

activity amongst a hardcore of young volunteers are reinforced by the practices of youth volunteering workers who know they can rely on certain young people to commit fully to the charity and fulfil certain criteria such as arrive on time, so they continually get to participate in opportunities. They are also the ones most likely to receive support from parents and families to take part in such activities, in giving lifts to attend activities or money bus fares, and 'mop up' good activities.

Class theorists have followed Bourdieu in 'contrasting the self-assurance of the middle class with the unease and discomfort of the working class' (Bottero, 2004: 993), but the middle-class self-assurance is not innate, it has been trained into their bodies and brains over time, and by the time of their transition to adulthood when they are encouraged to take part in new activities such as volunteering, it has become second nature.

The habitus – embodied habitus, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. (Bourdieu, 1992: 56).

Bourdieu is highlighting the idea that if you, for instance, ask a middle-class young volunteer how they know to ask the project leader what to do, or how to strike up conversations with other young volunteers, they may well shrug their shoulders and go 'dunno'. They wouldn't be able to pinpoint a place in history when they were told to act with this confidence and assuredness. Instead it is built up over time ('the whole past'), 'something in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman' (Reay, 2005: 911), and not necessarily found at the level of consciousness (Webb et al, 2002).

The grammar school/comprehensive school divide

Croft is one of the few localities left in England that still operates under the grammar school system. Schools are selective at age 11, using an examination paper to ensure they take on the most academically talented pupils. As AJ, a senior Youth Manager with Croft Council, told me with a note of sarcasm:

We have the grammar system here in Croft. My wife being a teacher would say the grammars do a good job of taking the best students, and aren't afraid to do so, knowing there's a catch-all underneath.

He diplomatically, as many interviewees from the statutory sector were wont to be, tried to express this as creating a 'diverse mix' of schools, but went onto express that the concentration of smart pupils at the top meant that some schools were failing as a result. Kathryn, who worked in a poorer area of Croft, expressed that the grammar schools in her area were specialists (in information technology or sport for instance) who were better at

encouraging 'mixing' than the more rigidly academically-focused grammar schools in the leafier suburbs of Croft. But grammar schools were presented by my interviewees as more ambitious on behalf their students, encouraging them to go out and participate in their communities. Why?

The way youth volunteering brokerage had been set up, and the way that grammar schools were desperate for their students to build up their CVs was a match made in heaven. These young people did not need personal development; they just needed the appearance of activity, to fill their personal statements for UCAS applications to university. 'So often they were told [by teachers] that "to do your personal statement, you're going to need some volunteering experience on there,"' (Rita, Youth Volunteering Worker, Croft). Kathryn said:

I think they've got different priorities [comprehensives and grammars]. The grammar schools very much assume that you're going to university and you have to tick these boxes – and I'm one of those boxes.

It is important here to understand how this affected the work of those tasked with recruiting young volunteers, as it was a policy which in actuality, against the purpose of the investment, benefitted grammar school pupils, who needed the externalities that volunteering could offer, more than it benefitted the comprehensive school pupils, who would have benefitted from volunteering in, for instance, making up any gaps on their CV.

Jon: Did you just skim the surface [of working with young people]?

Chrissie: Yes, and that's why it worked well with the grammar schools.

Paul: It was a numbers game, set up by a committee who did not understand what volunteering was about. Particularly youth volunteering, as opposed to middle-aged people, who need little or no supervision.

Paul was angry that youth volunteering policy had become a 'numbers game', rather than a process of development both for the young person and their community. He told me how when he had complained at the start of the program in 2007, that the recruitment was driven by quantity of young people through the system, rather than the quality of their experience. He was told by a very senior official 'to like it or lump it'. Deciding to take 'their' £750,000 (said derogatorily, as if he couldn't believe 'they', the charity he now worked for, would give him such a large amount of money to run a program he saw as having little worth), Paul

used the money carefully, meeting the targets set by the centre, but investing the extra investment to work with volunteers in other projects at a deeper level.²

Youth Volunteering Workers in Croft would recruit through running assemblies at schools. They would make appointments to come and talk to students with appropriate teachers, and spend their time in front of the pupils outlining several volunteering opportunities students could get involved in over the next few weeks, and ask pupils what they were interested in participating in.

We'd do an assembly and have a good range of opportunities or go in and do a single event quickly if you had a big event coming up – depending on your relationship with the school. But usually, at the start of the academic year, you'd go in and do an assembly and tour the sixth forms with all your opportunities and go back in the New Year and remind them that you're there. (Beatrice, Youth Volunteering Worker, Croft).

This meant that workers could build up a rapport with students and encourage them to try new things. As previously explained, the workers were not running the opportunities, their task was to recruit for other third sector organisations who needed volunteers, either in continuing placements, or for one-off events. To understand the difference in effectiveness of these assemblies, Kathryn gave me some estimates. She expected when presenting to a comprehensive school, out of 70 students in an assembly, around 15 would express an interest in volunteering, either at one of upcoming events or at some point in the future. When she walked into a grammar school, she was confident that the 'vast majority', probably over 50 out of 70, would sign up. Paul went on:

Schools are the gateway - and the gateway is more open the higher the quality of the school. That's no reflection on Headmaster's, as each have their own problems. If a sink school is failing then they become much more insular because you're concerned about your children's behaviour outside the gates. Whereas the private and selective schools have always welcomed volunteering with open arms and been much more freer with their time and resources.

Chrissie expanded on this, explaining that for comprehensives it remains a case a case of prioritising the vital above the important:

² Paul explained how his volunteering charity had changed how they worked with young people within Croft over the 20 years he had worked there: 'We used to work with 95 per cent selective schools. Now it's about 75-85 per cent. But it has been very, very difficult [to achieve]. And the attrition rate for young people from non-selective schools is off the scale compared to grammar schools.' (By attrition, Paul meant that *retaining* young volunteers from working-class backgrounds was much tougher than middle-class volunteers).

I think when a school is struggling, with much more difficult young people, it's harder to allow another agency in, when you can't depend on your kids to behave. Why get someone to come in and talk about volunteering – you're still trying to get them to come to school every day?

As Paul expressed, grammar schools do not possess this fear about outside interference, nor do they fear any detriment to their school's reputation. They see, and have long experienced, the benefits, rather than being risk averse, echoing the reluctance and risk-aversion shown by their students in not signing up to volunteering activities. Grammars see volunteering as a natural part of 'what they do', which Kathryn experienced on the ground:

Some schools are more receptive and eager for me to come in. There are a lot of grammar schools, and they very much demanded my presence whereas often the high schools just aren't interested.

This demand came from teachers and heads of sixth forms and headmasters, who saw the value in their students taking part in extra-curricular activities, confident of not disrupting their school work, taking the long-term view of bulking up their student's image and identity. I asked Erin if the comprehensives fail to work with outside bodies because they want to keep their students focused on examinations. She replied, 'the comprehensive's targets on A-C's are much harder because obviously the grammar schools have creamed off the top achievers', the ones who are destined to gain the requisite GCSE grades, largely unrelated to the effort they make at school.

I asked Lorna and Joni, two young volunteers who went to a grammar and a comprehensive respectively, whether their schools pushed volunteering. The results were representative of what my interviews had said:

Lorna: The school were really good at promoting volunteering. v used to come in once every three weeks and tell us about new volunteering opportunities and I'd be like 'yeah, I'll come', and sometimes my friends would come and other times I'd just be alone.

Jon Dean: What about your school Joni? Did they push volunteering?

Joni: No, I wouldn't have done it if Lorna hadn't introduced me to it.

My school's rubbish!

Jon Dean: Are they too focused on exams?

Joni: Yeah, A-levels – they told me to stop volunteering.

Jon Dean: Really? Why?

Joni: I don't know, they were like 'you've got A-levels to do, stop volunteering'.

Youth volunteering workers in Croft found they needed to put more work into getting young people from working-class and comprehensive school backgrounds, for less reward, in terms of achieving the monthly targets for recruitment which they were funded to meet. The young people at comprehensive schools needed a more organised and structured environment to participate in their extra-curricular activities whereas at grammar schools flexibility was built into the structures for brokerage workers to spontaneously offer one-off opportunities to volunteers. A system based on numerical targets, rather than targeted need will always run into these problems, as these original theoretical programs are run by people, and people are fallible and feel pressured to get jobs done, not necessarily viewing the wider picture.

Comments are welcome on this interim piece of research. Please contact me at jd323@kent.ac.uk.