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## **Volunteering in Higher Education: Gifts, Virtues or Obligations?**

**Joanna Puckering**

There is a re-appraisal taking place in many Higher Education institutions in relation to their engagement with national and global rhetoric and policy. This Ph.D takes a critical and ethnographic approach to elicit a deeper understanding of volunteering at one particular institution within UK Higher Education, focusing on its relationships with other communities and voluntary organisations in the region. Anthropological theories of reciprocal gift exchange are used to re-visit some of the value-laden and often dichotomous ways of understanding volunteering as either altruistic or self-interested and in so doing, explore how some of the changing uses and expectations of volunteering are related to the exercise of power and the effect of social norms or structural constraints on agency. Grounded theory, gift theory and critical discourse analysis are combined in order to gain fresh perspectives about the complex and contradictory nature of UK Higher Education volunteering in the contemporary socio-economic climate.

Results suggest that at a management level, Durham University represents staff and student volunteering as the 'natural' thing to do, as a route to employability and personal development. It is increasingly accepted that volunteering benefits both giver and receiver, and that self-interest is not incompatible with 'doing the right thing'. However, there are also concerns that focusing on volunteering as a vehicle for finding a job, as part of the curriculum, to meet targets, or to improve the University's image, has a negative impact on activities and also on organisations that do not fit dominant discourses or the needs of volunteers. Whilst university volunteering is described in terms of bridge building, or addressing perceptions of elitism and exclusivity, Durham University is also described as distant, privileged and separate from the community in which many of its staff and students live and work, suggesting that university-community relationships are not necessarily those of mutual or equal partners. There is a need for further research into the socio-cultural, moral and academic influences that inform the decision whether or not to become a volunteer, since Higher Education institutions may be pursuing volunteer policies based on flawed assumptions. This is especially relevant in the context of widespread public spending cuts and international competition for both academic and volunteer funding.

**VOLUNTEERING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
GIFTS, VIRTUES OR OBLIGATIONS?**

Joanna Puckering

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

Durham University

2015

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASR	Annual Staff Review
CATSS	Children Achieving Through Student Support
CEEC	Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
DSU	Durham Students' Union
DU	Durham University
DUCK	Durham University Charities C(K)ommittee
ESV	Employer Supported Volunteering
GCR	Graduate Common Room
HEACF	Higher Education Active Community Fund
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
JCR	Junior Common Room
NUS	National Union of Students
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
RAG	Raising and Giving
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SCA	Student Community Action
SUNEE	Sports Universities North East England
SVO	Staff Volunteering and Outreach
UGC	University Grants Committee
UUK	Universities UK
WRVS	Women's Royal Voluntary Service

## STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the goals of this PhD thesis has been to make a useful contribution to the literature of the gift and to the wider body of academic knowledge. This would not have been possible without the generous contributions of many people – in the form of advice, shared experiences, practical assistance and emotional support – to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude.

Firstly, I offer heartfelt thanks to the staff and student volunteers, organisers and managers from Durham University, as well as community organisers in and around County Durham, who shared their experiences of volunteering, made me feel very welcome, and offered their already very limited time to help me with my research. In particular, I would like to thank the staff and students who make Experience Durham, SVO and SCA possible, and who want to make a difference. I have not named individual organisations beyond the University, but my gratitude goes to everyone who accepted me into their groups and communities as researcher, volunteer and friend, offering many opportunities for me to develop my own skills as well as contributing to this thesis.

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Many things can happen in the time it takes to complete a PhD and life has a habit of getting in the way. I am grateful to all the staff at Ustinov College, especially Carol and Leanne for making the coffee shop such a friendly place to work. It was at Ustinov that I also found the friends who have shared this journey and its experiences, good and bad, and in so doing have become so much more than friends: Cynthia, Peter, Mehrin, Lee, Yeuxian, and Christopher. Finally, there are Dori and Becci – partners in crime from our first days together in the Anthropology Department – and Luisa, who kept me on the academic straight and narrow from the very start.

Last and most important, I thank my parents for being so calmly accepting and supportive of my mid-career decision to return to full-time education, and to stay there for so long.

“Here. It is a freely given gift. I offer it without obligation, let or lien.”

Patrick Rothfuss, *The Wise Man's Fear*

# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

## Research Context

### *Volunteering in the Good Society*

Contemporary national and global concerns about socio-political, economic and demographic change, and the perceived decline of social cohesion (Putnam 2000:18) have led many governments to support and fund volunteering and volunteer research as one way of encouraging civic participation among young people (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2008:3; Hustinx et al. 2010:350; Smith et al. 2010:65). Closely related to these concerns is the long-standing debate about the public role of Higher Education institutions (Boyer 1990; Collini 2012), their changing relationships with government and industry (Goddard 2009), and the increasing emphasis placed on volunteering as a route to employability, skills acquisition, and personal development that extends beyond an offer of service for its own sake (Boyer 1990; Goddard 2009; Furco 2010; Hartley et al. 2010). Volunteering is increasingly regarded as an integral part of the “good society” (Kendall 2003:2), supporting social, economic and political wellbeing by encouraging community participation and generating social capital (Putnam 2000). This has been reflected in a resurgence of academic interest in volunteerism (Kendall 2003:2), particularly surrounding the diverse and often conflicting meanings, motives and uses for volunteering in different contexts.

The anthropological perspective that human sociality is underpinned by co-operation and inter-dependence rather than altruism (Carrithers 1992:48) suggests an interesting approach with which to explore the tensions between altruism and self-interest that also complement aspects of reciprocal gift exchange; in particular, the complicated and unequal relationships between status, power, social cohesion, obligation and gratitude (e.g. Godbout 2000; Osteen 2002; Komter 2005). It is also highly relevant to debates

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this thesis are revisions of work already published in Puckering, J. 2014. ‘The Gift of Volunteering and the Virtues of Self-Love: An Anthropological Perspective’, *Traditiones*, 43(3): 33-50

about the varying effects of social norms and hierarchies of power in decisions about whether or not to volunteer, and how different individual and institutional volunteer relationships subsequently develop. My PhD research therefore uses a critical, ethnographic approach underpinned by a theoretical framework of gift exchange, in order to explore some of the different and contested ways of understanding volunteering in one particular British university. Contemporary researchers increasingly study volunteering within the context of public engagement, which is a growth area for public policy and practice; it also characterises the current, increasingly centralised approach taken by Durham University (DU 2010a), hence the decision to focus my research on the narratives and experiences of staff and student volunteers at that institution.

### ***The Importance of Regional Context***

The distinctiveness of each university and region, in different circumstances and contexts, contributes to the shaping of university-community relationships over time, “thus, regions influence what is possible within their universities and vice versa” (Williams and Cochrane 2013:70). Brighton University’s Community-University Partnerships Programme (CUPP), for example, emphasises the importance of identifying areas of “common interest” between universities and surrounding regions on which to build a lasting and personal relationship, arguing that the key is focusing on people rather than abstract concepts, ideas and opportunities (Hart and Aumann 2013:47). Moving further north, Goddard’s (2009:5) comment about Newcastle University could apply equally to Durham University: “While it operates on a global scale, it realises that its location helps form its identity and provides opportunities for it to grow and help others”.

Referring to a recent report on the way in which universities should help disadvantaged communities (Robinson et al. 2012), a staff volunteer commented about Durham University:

We’re not the University of Brighton so, if you thought about this in terms of, a sort of pie chart, there’s a slice of that pie chart that we can operate in and there’s a big bit of that pie chart we wouldn’t, because of the sort of university we are [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

This is perhaps better explained by a Pro Vice-Chancellor from Durham, who told me that the way in which an institution perceives its own position, in relation to other universities and the regions in which they are situated, is likely to inform its understanding of volunteering as an obligation, an opportunity for partnership, or as a tool for developing student skills and enhancing their university experience. The North East has five separate universities with very different histories, status and aspirations: Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland, Teesside and Northumbria. They form “a genuine sub-national higher education system” (Goddard 2009:19) in which all the universities have their own priorities, not just in relation to academic success and financial security but also to how they perceive and address community need. The North East is one of the most deprived areas not only in Britain but in Northern Europe (Worthy and Gouldson 2010:37; Eurostat 2014; Inequality Briefing 2014). Durham University, by contrast, was described to me by one of its Pro Vice-Chancellors as “a point of stability”, a key institution with substantial resources in a region that has seen a huge degree of social and economic upheaval in the last two centuries.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I heard a speech of welcome given to a group of visiting students from an American institution. I reproduce it here as closely as possible since it provides not only a brief background to Durham University but also some clues to the complexity of the regional context in which the University’s engagement and volunteering programmes are situated:

Durham was an important centre of learning long before the University was founded in 1832 through its close association with the Church. As industry came to the region, a paradoxical situation arose in which “a centre of high culture and learning” in the town centre with the Cathedral, the Castle and the University, was surrounded by mining villages and collieries. This situation has been complicated more recently by the additional tensions of industrial collapse and mass unemployment. The physical geography of Durham makes this divide more visible, with the Cathedral, Castle and parts of the University located in an elevated, dominating position over the town.

The original focus of Durham University was in the arts and theology; there was also a part of the University in Newcastle, Kings College, which focused on medicine and engineering. Then in 1963, Kings College became the University of Newcastle, a separate entity. Durham

University was given the new challenge of building up its own science base, emphasising theoretical and pure sciences because applied sciences were stronger in Newcastle. The limitations to the expansion of Durham University included the attitude and distance of the University from the surrounding countryside and city, and vice versa. This began to change in the 1980s, although possibly not as extensively and successfully as University rhetoric suggests. Support since the 1980s for the development of the Queen's Campus in Stockton was closely linked to the industry of the area around Middlesbrough, in ways that the Durham Campus was not. The decline of the coal industry, culminating in the industrial action and mass pit closures in the 1980s, encouraged the University to consider how best to become more involved in the development of the region, and transition to new industries and technologies. More recently, the plan has been to develop relationships between the University and the wider community, encompassing local, regional and international communities, and extending beyond the spheres of business and industry.

*[Extract from fieldnotes, July 2013: paraphrasing a senior university manager]*

Founded in 1832 by Act of Parliament, Durham University is a collegiate institution with over 17,000 students, including approximately 4,500 postgraduates, and representing over 150 countries (DU 2014b). It currently has sixteen residential colleges, two of which are located on the Queen's Campus in Stockton, which was developed in 1992 and focuses on science, health and social wellbeing (DU 2014c). The University employs over 3000 people in academic, support and administrative roles, and states that over 30% of academic staff members are of non-UK origin (DU 2014b). However, in spite of attempts to represent the University as an international, diverse and inclusive institution, statistics about ethnicity and educational background (DU 2014d; DU 2014e) suggest otherwise and support the comment from one senior manager that:

There are exceptions, of course, but on the whole this is a very white university...it tends to be individuals from very high socio-economic groups from a particular type of school *[Michael: Senior university manager]*

It is likely that the desire to combat perceptions of privilege arising from this type of demographic information, combined with the paradoxical situation of being a wealthy institution situated in the middle of a disadvantaged area, inform the various reasons why Durham University might want to emphasise its community engagement and volunteering initiatives. As Michael went on to tell me, there are instrumental and

reflective reasons for both supporting and becoming involved in volunteering that not only have the potential to benefit all parties involved but might also reduce some of the tensions between the University and its neighbours. It improves individual employability and consequently, he argues, the competitive status of an institution; it offers an opportunity to reflect on academic, professional and extra-curricular activities; and it enables people to be of service.

What these examples begin to illustrate is that universities develop within a social, cultural and temporal context, and variations over time and between regions result in different curricula, policies and ethos (Seabury 1975:ix), which shape individual and institutional attitudes towards volunteering and community engagement. As one senior manager from Durham University put it, “different universities do different things”.

### **Research Goals and Questions**

The aim of this PhD is to contribute to the wider body of knowledge that explores socio-cultural, moral and academic influences affecting the decision whether or not to volunteer or support volunteering in a Higher Education environment, and how subsequent volunteer relationships develop, since institutions may be basing staff and student volunteer policies and practices on flawed assumptions about motivation, management and impact (Holdsworth 2010:435; Darwen and Rannard 2011:185). As subsequent chapters indicate, I suggest that a theoretical framework of gift exchange offers alternatives to economic or utilitarian perspectives, transcends dichotomies of altruism and self-interest, and also challenges narratives of mutuality and partnership that increasingly characterise the rhetoric not only of university volunteering but of wider university-community relationships. A better theoretical and empirical understanding of staff and student volunteer experiences and values, in relation to Higher Education strategies and drivers, has the potential to enable more effective management and evaluation of volunteer activities. By filtering those experiences through the lens of anthropological gift exchange, and by taking a critical and discursive approach to data gathering and interpretation, I seek also to identify potential areas of conflict and inequality in different volunteer relationships that may be overlooked by

perspectives situating volunteering within a more democratic and egalitarian framework. This is especially relevant in the context of widespread public spending cuts, debates about the value of and access to university education, and intense competition for academic and volunteer funding.

Using the language, tensions and paradoxes of reciprocal gift exchange to explore staff and student volunteering at Durham University, I ask a series of questions that fall into two main categories that the following chapters address in different ways. Firstly, how are the experiences, relationships and decisions of volunteers, volunteer organisers, university managers and community partners informed by the effects of social norms and different discourses about morality, altruism and self-interest? Secondly, at a more institutional level, how does the apparent gap between the rhetoric and the realities of volunteering experiences and policies highlight contrasting narratives of power and beneficence on the one hand, and mutual engagement, partnership and equality on the other?

The three key questions that shaped my research, and which are addressed throughout my thesis in a number of different ways, were:

- How are experiences and expectations of volunteering related to the exercise of power and the effects of social norms or structural constraints on agency?
- How is the term ‘volunteering’ understood and used in narratives of public engagement and the social role of universities?
- To what extent does the language of volunteering and of the gift mediate power and social relationships between volunteers, Higher Education institutions and voluntary organisations?

## **Overview of Chapters**

This thesis is divided into three parts, each one addressing different elements of my research but drawn together by a common thread that weaves narratives of volunteering into different aspects of gift exchange. Part I comprises three chapters in which I explore literature about the gift and volunteering, discuss methodology and the research process, and introduce Durham University as both institution and field site.

Chapter 1 opens with examples of existing literature about reciprocal gift exchange, different cultural and historical perspectives about social norms and values, and changing ways of understanding what it means to be human. I consider different and sometimes contested ways of understanding and using ideas of the gift, community and volunteering, and suggest that all three concepts are related to power, bonds of obligation, and social cohesion. I close this chapter with an overview of volunteering in relation to Higher Education that is developed in later chapters through one specific ethnographic study.

Chapter 2 focuses on methodology and methods, and the idea that differences in research design and perspective are reflected in the framing of research questions and subsequent data gathering techniques. I introduce the central theoretical framework of anthropological gift exchange, and the way in which this is combined with a grounded approach that privileges the voices and lived experiences of volunteers, as well as with critical discourse analysis of power relationships, volunteer identities and institutional policies. At a more practical level, I describe decisions about the field site, samples and timescales that defined and constrained the scope of my research. Finally, I discuss the ethical and reflexive considerations that are intended not only to inform how my research was conducted but to make an explicit acknowledgement of my own situation, and how this may have shaped the way in which data were collected or interpreted.



Chapter 3 offers an overview of Durham University's regional context, its strategy, and its formally stated goals in relation to volunteering and community engagement.

Volunteering at the University has developed in different ways for students and staff, and I touch briefly upon the various volunteering organisations, activities, access and barriers that are developed in later chapters. This chapter is about setting the scene, and introducing the main characters that participate in stories throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Part II focuses on some of the tensions and paradoxes of gift exchange, how they are inter-related and how they can be used to explore volunteering. Chapter 4 develops the idea that volunteering, like the gift, is both optional and obligatory. Culturally, socially and politically specific ideas about what 'voluntary' actually means are associated with what are often described as the privileges and responsibilities of Higher Education. I look at some of the different ways people have of expressing and responding to internal and external pressures and expectations to volunteer, and how they balance the demands of volunteering with study, work and other parts of their life.

There is a shift of tone in Chapter 5, from individual to institutional questions of power, autonomy and dependency. I address these questions in relation to the resentment and conflict that can emerge between different groups within and beyond the University, and also in the ways that infrastructure and support may be regarded as both enabling and constraining.

Chapter 6 looks at how gift exchange can be used to challenge dichotomies of self-interest and altruism. I use the stories and statements of volunteers, university managers and community volunteer organisers to question descriptions of volunteering as either selfless, or as an exercise in gain and self-development. The relationships between volunteers, the University and other community groups also offer a useful way to illustrate the difficult dividing line that can exist between gratitude and resentment.

The chapters in Part III offer different accounts of the transactional relationships existing between language and sociality, through which selfhood and activities are negotiated and performed. I associate the reciprocal gift's social processes with the link between relationships, discourses and volunteer identities.

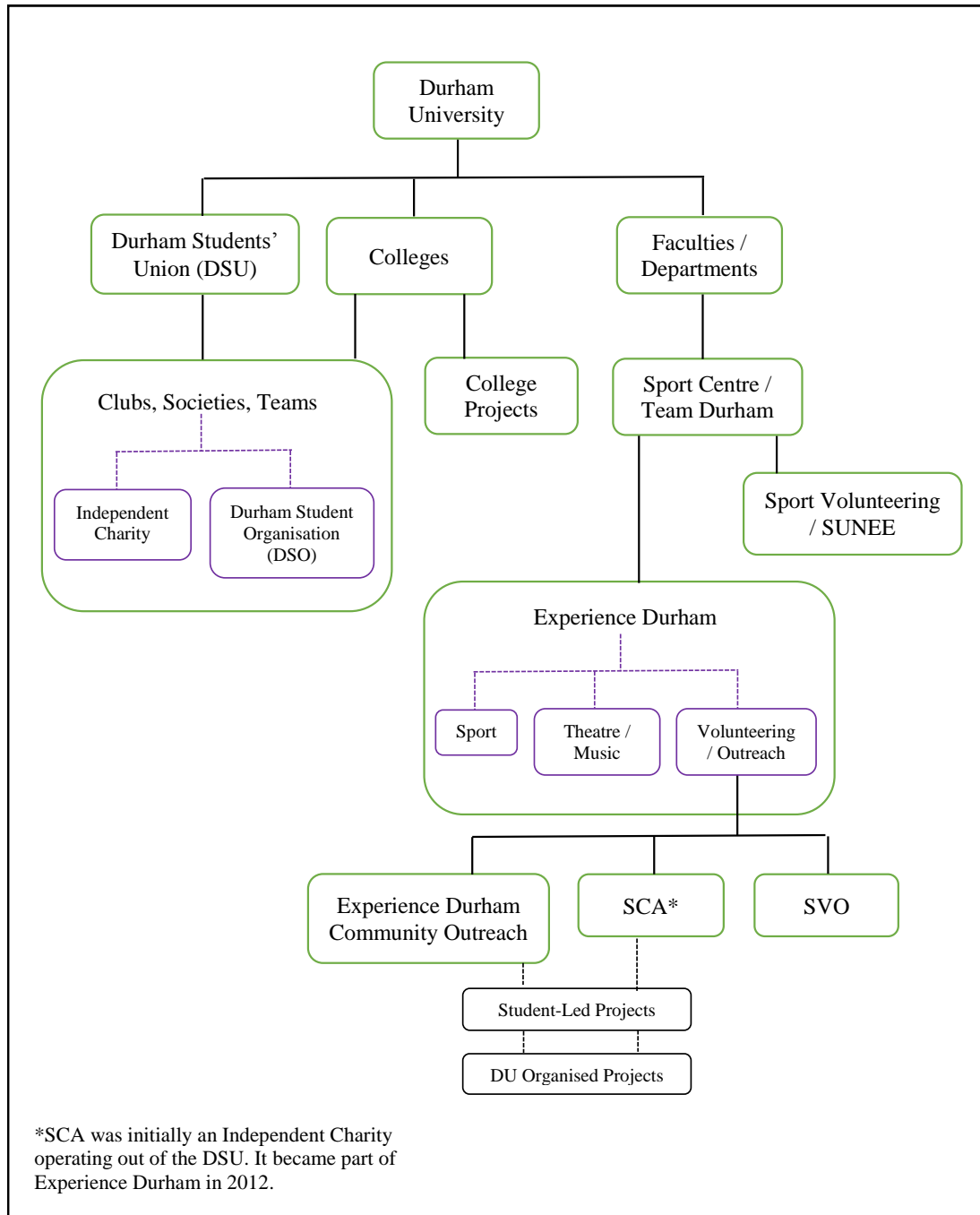
Chapter 7 emphasises the importance of social relationships in developing effective volunteer networks, but I also observe that there is a difference between membership of a group or organisation, and active participation. I look at some of the volunteering activities that staff and students get involved with, in relation to changing attitudes about levels of commitment, long-term relationships and trust.

In Chapter 8, I explore some of the hidden effects of ideology and discourse, both the conscious and unconscious effects of social norms and constraints, and how different volunteering identities are consequently accepted or resisted. Literature and fieldwork observations suggest there has been a shift in the language of volunteering, and I ask how this is expressed in relation to volunteering values, agendas and the interests of different dominant groups. Finally, Chapter 8 illustrates the contingent nature of contemporary volunteering at Durham University through the existence of multiple and often conflicting discourses and identities.

In the last chapter, I take a step back and consider how volunteering at Durham University fits into more general debates about the public role of Higher Education. I ask how volunteers, university managers and community organisers perceive and respond to the University's reputation for wealth and privilege, in relation to its statements about social responsibility and a commitment to engage with the community. I contrast narratives of democracy and mutual partnerships with more traditional discourses of responsibility, power and inequality, and consider the extent to which the latter are associated with both reciprocal gift theory and some volunteer relationships.

## A Social Landscape of Volunteering at Durham University

The following diagram represents some of the different ways that staff and students at Durham University are able to take part in formal volunteering activities beyond the academic curriculum. It illustrates the complex and inter-related nature of the ‘social landscape’ of volunteering, in which dedicated volunteering organisations co-exist with other university and college organisations.



**Figure 1** – Institutional Map of Staff and Student Volunteering

The extent to which these activities and organisations are recognised in relation to ‘university volunteering’ is informed not only by the type of activity, but the social, moral and economic values underpinning volunteering policies and discourses, and the extent to which activities are seen to benefit individuals or groups beyond the University. I address each of these points in different ways in the main chapters of this thesis.

## **PART I**

“Universities are the cathedrals of the modern age. They shouldn’t have to justify their existence by utilitarian criteria”

David Lodge, *Small World*

## CHAPTER 1 – VIRTUES, GIFTS AND VOLUNTEERING

### Introduction

Although there is a widespread belief that “there can be no community, nor a stable society, without a shared moral culture” (Etzioni 2000:9), MacIntyre (1981:6) makes the uncomfortable observation that since individuals and societies have been influenced by a myriad of competing or mutually incompatible norms and values over different periods, “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture”. Concepts of contemporary ‘moral order’ are associated with expectations of social and individual behaviour that generally entail being a law-abiding, active and productive member of society. However, the historical and cultural diversity of what constitutes morally acceptable behaviour makes it very difficult to evaluate the idea within and between societies and communities (Somerville 2011:204). This is illustrated by multiple beliefs about individualism, collectivism and social obligations that oscillate between an altruistic desire to do something for others and the goal of maximising one’s own gains, as well as culturally specific manifestations of morality, including attitudes towards giving and volunteering.

In this first chapter, I introduce just some of the culturally and historically specific ways of understanding what it means to be human, and how this is associated with epistemological stances that place different emphasis on the importance of altruism and self-interest in the development of socio-economic relationships. This leads on firstly to a discussion of gift exchange, which is characterised by similar debates about the mechanisms underpinning bonds of obligation and sociality, and secondly to ways in which volunteering – generally and in Higher Education – may be explored and, perhaps, exploited in relation to similar questions about obligation and community cohesion.

## **Constructions of Virtue and Morality**

The Enlightenment association of morality with altruism offers just one view of humanity, in which the paradoxical belief that altruism combats a so-called ‘natural’ human egoism and rational self-interest has the result of opposing morality to human nature (MacIntyre 1981:212). However, Western understandings of morality and virtue have also been deeply influenced by Aristotle (2004:176), who transcends this divide with the statement that “the good person should be a self-lover, since he [sic] will help himself as well as benefit others”. That is to say, one cannot pursue individual good without also pursuing common wellbeing, and by failing to help others in our society, we thereby fail to help ourselves (MacIntyre 1981:213). In effect, this argues that “being moral is in most individuals’ self-interest” (Badhwar 1993:91), although Badhwar adds that a moral outcome to a self-interested act does not address the question of whether self-interested motivation can, in itself, be moral. This continues to present a challenge for philosophical arguments rooted in a dichotomy of altruism and self-interest that also view humans as essentially rational, calculating and competitive.

There is a close relationship between Christianity – especially Protestantism – and Enlightenment ideas about human nature, individualism and the capitalist economy, as opposed to more community-oriented and collective mechanisms of gift exchange. Whilst Osteen (2012:12) acknowledges that this presents a somewhat exaggerated religious stereotype, “it nevertheless exposes certain key problems of the gift: the relationship between gift giving and individual choice and autonomy; the difficulty of removing calculation from charitable actions or religious ceremonies.” A similar set of dilemmas is apparent in Tripp’s (2006:1-3) exploration of intellectual, economic and moral Islamic responses to industrial capitalism, both as a mode of production and a socio-political institution. He examines contemporary debates about reconciling ethical Islam with the ‘modern’ world, and the way in which principles of “fair exchange” and “the solidarities and trust of transactions” – generally considered, writes Tripp, to be limited or absent from a capitalist economy – are underpinned by a combination of religious, moral and cultural values, norms and expectations (Tripp 2006:4).

A more culturally specific example of the complicated relationship between self-interest and the pressures of communal traditions and norms is offered by the situation faced by Gurkhas in Eastern Nepal when returning home after a period of military service (Sagant 1996). Popularly perceived as returning with considerable wealth, they face both subtle and more obvious forms of pressure about how and where to use their money for the benefit of the wider village community. Resistance to such pressure is a potential source of discord, especially in cases where they “acknowledge no obligations, no respect due to their elders, no gifts in token of old ties” (Sagant 1996:287). This is not regarded as a serious problem provided neither the harmony nor the hierarchy of the community is threatened, and returning Gurkhas who spend all their money without gaining anything in return are regarded as foolish rather than altruistic or generous. A greater threat is perceived from those who seek to use their wealth more constructively, to become influential members of the community and therefore potential rivals to those further up the social and political hierarchy (Sagant 1996:288). It is paradoxical that the cash-driven processes involved in achieving this position – through marriage price, land acquisition and the discharging of debts – are about gaining independence and escaping existing bonds, partnerships and the obligations of dependency. Whilst attempts to relieve the soldiers of their money take place in the guise of communal solidarity, Sagant (1996:292) suggests that this belies a cynical awareness of the cash economy and an understanding of Western forms of self-interest.

It is interesting to contrast Sagant’s (1996) description of social expectations and economic transactions in Eastern Nepal, with the ideals of Islamic economy (Tripp 2006). In each case there are very real concerns about individual self-interest in relation to communal bonds, redistribution, and the circulation of money, but from within different ethical and cultural frameworks. These brief examples illustrate just some of the diversity that characterises religious and cultural interpretations of morality, and the different ways of understanding exchange relationships in relation to social, religious and economic norms. Such widespread yet differing views that a trade-off between self-interest and the collective good is central to the maintenance of social harmony acknowledge the constraining and normative effects of communal obligation as an inherent part of social life: “choice is overborne by duty” (Turner 1974:35). Although



the very existence of such a trade-off also indicates the presence of varying degrees of agency, if self-interest and the collective good are understood in terms of the more fundamental conditions of freedom and security, then a balance must be found since we cannot do entirely without either (Bauman 2001:4).

Another anthropological approach to exploring the tension between autonomy and duty, and transcending the dichotomy between self-interest and altruism, lies in the argument that human sociality is underpinned neither by competition on the one hand, nor by “disinterested kindness” (Carrithers 1992:48) on the other, but by co-operation and inter-dependence; we exist in a system of expectations and obligations. The following sections illustrate that from this perspective, volunteering as a force for social cohesion is closely related to both concepts of power and reciprocal gift exchange (Layton 1997:98). An anthropological study of volunteerism using a theoretical framework of gift exchange not only challenges common and dichotomous definitions of volunteering as either altruistic or self-interested, but also enables the exploration of “possible darker sides of philanthropy” (Powell and Steinberg 2006:4).

### **Paradoxes and Ideologies of the Gift**

In his influential *Essay on the Gift*, Mauss (1990:4) situates the traditional gift at the heart of the wider social system; it forms a “total system of giving” (Douglas 1990:xi) that incorporates every exchange, institution and member of the community, over long periods of time. It is for this reason that gift exchange is understood as a social process in which relationships extend beyond the immediate participants into a larger social chain of giving and receiving (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:71). Much of the essay considers the underlying mechanics and reasons for the apparent illusion that whilst the gift seems to be “free and disinterested”, it is “nevertheless constrained and self-interested”, and underpinned by “a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit” (Mauss 1990:4). Of the three integral aspects of giving, receiving and reciprocating, Mauss (1990:53) assigns the greatest importance to reciprocity, with its inherent association with power and obligation. It is not just giving, receiving and reciprocation as a single exchange or “cycle” that underpins social cohesion and relationships, but the continuing and often

competitive nature of the system, in which the first donor is drawn into a transactional relationship (Mauss 1990:13). There may be a degree of balance based on the giver also being the receiver through this “cycle” of reciprocity; however, given the asymmetrical nature of the elements within the gift and the continuing presence of an obligation to reciprocate, Godbout (2000:132-133) prefers the term “spiral”. He argues that the third step, reciprocation, is at most risk of misinterpretation and should not be confused with the market view of settling or ending a debt and any associated bonds, which misses the point of escalation: of returning more than is given and perpetuating both the obligation and the relationship. It is also a matter of esteem, continues Godbout, because a continuing and transactional relationship enables all parties at some point to be the donor, which in a Western perspective of the gift equates to greater status and power.

The reciprocal element of the Maussian gift has come under extensive attack (Godbout 2000:122), particularly its reliance on an indigenous Maori interpretation of the *hau*, or “spirit of the thing given” (Mauss 1990:13), in which the obligation to reciprocate stems from a gift becoming imbued with an element of the giver. To Lévi-Strauss, this presents a gap in the logical underpinning of the gift (Schrift 1997:8; Godelier 1999:6) because instead of recognising the logic in the initial statement that the gift comprises three integral elements of giving, receiving and reciprocating, Mauss continues to seek an indigenous, spiritual yet redundant explanation (the *hau*). Further criticism is made on the basis of Mauss’s acceptance of what Lévi-Strauss regards as just an “indigenous” theory that cannot be generalised beyond the Maori (Godelier 1999:7). Parry (1986:456), however, challenges critics of Mauss’s indigenous explanation for the obligations of reciprocity, arguing that the *hau* is widely relevant and can be found in various forms in many cultures over different periods. Yet another view, put forward by Malinowski (1996), with its functionalist emphasis on structural influences and categories of rules, asserts that different aspects of social life are indicative of the norms and practices which maintain social cohesion, through systems of obligations and relationships. The different degree and nature of those relationships is associated with different levels of obligations and types of transactions: economic, ritual exchange, or gift. However, these structures and functions should not be considered in complete isolation since “most if not all economic acts are found to belong to some chain of

reciprocal gifts and counter-gifts, which in the long run balance, benefiting both sides equally” (Malinowski 1996:15). This perspective has been criticised for forcing the gift system into an overly economic framework, and for its tendency to see balance rather than the asymmetrical nature of long-term indebtedness within a gift relationship.

Mauss (1990:27) paid particular attention to the Kula of the Trobriand Islands and the potlatch ceremonies of the Kwakiutl in the American North West in order to exemplify the totality of the gift in traditional societies, incorporating all tribes and social institutions in a continuing cycle of exchange, obligation and reciprocity. Each illustrates the varying degrees of competition within the gift relationship, and the great importance of ritual and social rules for exchange, although Mauss (1990:54) did admit that both were extreme cases of the gift exchange system. He also sought to apply his theory more widely across time and region (Douglas 1990:xi), arguing that vestiges of traditional, older systems of gift exchange are alive and well in the ‘modern’ world (Mauss 1990:61). The combination of debt, obligation, risk and reciprocity, with varying degrees of formality and ritual, can be traced through developments in legal and economic institutions in many societies throughout history, from ancient Greece and Rome, to Germany and Scandinavia, and a description from ancient Hindu law still resonates with contemporary paradoxes: “The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take”, and for this reason, not something to be undertaken lightly (Mauss 1990:76).

From these points, it appears clear that whilst gift exchange may exist in all societies there is a wide spectrum across which forms of exchange are characterised by different degrees of obligation and competition. Consequently, rules and strategies for gift exchange have been developed that apply in different cultural, social and temporal contexts (Balkin and Richebé 2007:56). For example, whilst Balkin and Richebé (2007:55) agree with Mauss (1990) in their recognition of the role of gift exchange in building and maintaining social relationships through norms of obligation and reciprocity, there is also a suggestion that they associate reciprocity with equivalence and balance rather than competition or power, although this may well be a reflection of the economic framework within which gift exchange is being explained in this instance.

Komter (2005:1-2) also associates the gift with relational bonds and solidarity, likening Maussian gift exchange to a form of social glue, mediated by “the triple obligation to give, receive and give back” (Caillé 2000:ix): it is something we adhere to without necessarily being aware of the underlying reasons, or at least by participating in a mutual deception that the gift is both free and voluntary (Bourdieu 1977:171). However, she goes on to argue that in spite of Bourdieu’s observation that the idea of gifts without reciprocity may be a lie that we all tell ourselves, in most cases people believe that they genuinely act autonomously and altruistically (Komter 2005:39). Unlike researchers who overlook power relations in gift exchange or focus instead on reciprocity as a form of equivalence, Maussian interpretations regard the gift as crucial to social solidarity and cohesion, but also as inherently unequal due to the often unspoken pressure always to reciprocate (Godbout 2000:132) which is driven by power and status, as well as gratitude (Mauss 1990:6-9, 50-53; Levi-Strauss 1996:18).

Research into gift exchange is informed by the intellectual, cultural and personal reflexivity of researchers (Godbout 2000:118; Osteen 2002:2). A common criticism from Godbout (2000:128), for example, is that economists are inclined to force the gift into an economic framework or a liberal capitalist ideological perspective; in either case, the result can be a distorted or incomplete understanding placing too much emphasis on individualist or utilitarian motivations. At the initial time of writing in 1924, Mauss’s *Essay on the Gift* formed part of a more general attack by French political philosophy on British utilitarianism and the liberal economy, which was considered to be “based on an impoverished concept of the person seen as an independent individual instead of as a social being” (Douglas 1990:x); as neglecting the relationship between changes in social relations and modes of production; and as failing to properly value French views of liberty and civic participation. For these reasons, argues Douglas, both Mauss and Durkheim saw liberalism as under-estimating the influence of shared social norms and structures on behaviour and beliefs, thus perpetuating the view of humans as individual agents with the negative results of isolation and disengagement from civic life. However, she also notes that in addition to this ideological position, Durkheim did also criticise the failure of the French socialist

perspective to adequately allow for individual as well as social needs (Douglas 1990:xiv).

Laidlaw (2000:617) attributes the tendency for anthropologists to pay less attention to the idea of a 'pure' gift to Mauss's influence on gift theory, arguing that this has resulted in a research focus on "enduring social relations" and regards the gift as critical to social cohesion: both entail a measure of obligation and reciprocity and therefore exclude the idea of a disinterested gift that has no social ties. Although it is Parry's (1986:466) belief that every society is likely to find room for both a normative expectation of reciprocity and the idea of the 'pure' gift, Douglas (1990:ix) asserts that both Mauss (1990) and Bourdieu (1977:177) appear to challenge the notion of the 'pure' gift, made voluntarily and with no thought or expectation of return, on the basis that this misunderstands the nature of both giving and reciprocating. Titmuss's (1970:80) work on anonymous blood donation, which he describes as giving "to the unknown few or the unknown many", is often cited in defence of the existence of a 'pure' or altruistic gift, but even he recognises that motivations to give – or sell – are rarely straight forward, as well as being informed by changing social and historical contexts (Titmuss 1970:82). Yet even without tangible reward or direct gratitude, it is difficult to escape the awareness of impact, that this act will probably help someone in the present or future, and the knowledge that blood donation usually relies on bonds of generosity and obligation (Titmuss 1970:101). This is much closer to a Maussian understanding of the gift. Furthermore, Titmuss's (1970:82) understanding of "acts of giving" as forming both part of a social process and part of selfhood appears to express a position that fits within the framework of reciprocal gift exchange; each are informed and regulated by social norms and mechanisms that govern the order, form and style of giving, receiving and reciprocating.

Debates continue about the relative importance of altruism and self-interest, and motivations for both giving and receiving gifts. Where altruism is discounted, the alternative motivation is often assumed to be negative, selfish or part of human nature as understood by those privileging an economic world view (Komter 1996:3). Viewed in a positive light, however, reciprocity potentially brings a wider and more general

benefit to all, through improved relationships, trust and care: bonds which are neither purely altruistic nor purely self-interested (Putnam 2000:135). Nevertheless, a gift that is unequal and subject to the exercise of power may “create lasting relations of dependence” which are not necessarily conducive to a positive social relationship (Schrift 1997:15), and some people manage to show gratitude better and more gracefully than others (Komter 2005:7). It is for this reason that although the combination of sincerity, empathy, obligation and mutual benefit has led to the reciprocal gift being described as “an invitation to partnership” (Sherry 1983:158), there is also a danger that gratitude may develop into a sense of resentment, reflecting Mauss’s (1990:83) observation that not everyone welcomes the bonds of obligation. Bourdieu (1977:195) illustrates the connection between giving, responsibility, power and gratitude using a Kabyle saying: “The rich man is ‘rich so as to be able to give to the poor’”; the unspoken corollary being that such generosity also gives the rich man power, through which the recipient may be influenced or controlled until such time as the gift is reciprocated. His work with the Kabyle also indicates the traditional views of social conformity in opposition to individual autonomy that reflect the Maussian gift, and exemplify some of the problems that may be experienced in reconciling the gift with modern societies that place greater value on individualism and autonomy: “Doing one’s duty as a man means conforming to the social order, and this is fundamentally a question of respecting rhythms, keeping pace, and not falling out of line” (Bourdieu 1977:159).

Godbout (2000:96-97, 181) uses the idea of spontaneity to move away from the almost unavoidable issue of self-interest in reciprocity, whereas Bourdieu (1977:5) uses the concept of time. He argues that delaying a return gift avoids the appearance that the same gift is simply being returned or rejected. Such a delay is intended to foster the illusion of altruism, autonomy and spontaneity, and “allows the collective lie to be forgotten” (Osteen 2002:24). Like Bourdieu, Titmuss (1970:82-83) is also aware of “the obligation or compulsion to give” and the accompanying social sanctions where one fails to comply, regardless of the time elapsed. Arguments used by Bourdieu (1977:5, 171), particularly that the idea of spontaneous and voluntary giving is illusory, or evidence of a mass complicity in unwritten social rules, appear to find a parallel in the

traditions, norms and processes associated with the collection of alms: not appearing to seek donations; wishing to donate yet not giving too much; the denial of self-interest; active avoidance of personal links and obligation; apparent spontaneity yet with carefully prepared food (Laidlaw 2000:619). There is a suggestion that the 'free' gift is consciously crafted as such, enabling people to adopt particular roles and act out ritual behaviours that reinforce traditional social values. Although Mauss (1990:22) does not entirely separate the reciprocal gift from the notion of charitable alms-giving, Laidlaw (2000:617-618) uses Parry's (1986) work on the culturally specific Indian gift (*dan*), in the form of alms collection, to illustrate his argument that the importance of the free gift is its absence of social obligations. However, it could also be argued that the very fact of using such a culturally and socially situated example weakens his position.

Yan (1996:211) also cites examples of Parry's (1986) work on Maori versus Hindu gift exchange processes, mechanisms and norms of gift exchange, observing that the role of Christianity, with its focus on separating objects and people, has underpinned the traditional Western focus on altruism as a key characteristic of the gift. In contrast, Parry's (1986:465-466) work concludes that whilst Maoris expect or demand reciprocation and Hindus appear to reject the idea of reciprocity entirely, both recognise a closely intertwined relationship between the person and the object. Yan (1996:15) highlights other cultural variations in gift exchange. In China, for example, a gift is generally offered by someone of lower social status to someone of higher social status, which contrasts to a traditionally Western hierarchy and direction of gift exchange. He also points out that social relationships are crucial to Chinese gift exchange, even in the absence of reciprocity, and uses this to argue that culturally diverse positions on the concept of reciprocation are not central to the understanding of gift exchange (Yan 1996:214). These examples can be used to suggest that it is perhaps better to situate both the 'pure' and the reciprocal gift in their social, political and historical context, as opposed to making claims of universality for either kind of gift.

As a final observation on the culturally specific nature of the gift, “the unique character of the Chinese style of gift giving sets it apart from other systems described in the anthropological literature” (Yan 1996:4). This is not to oppose Chinese with all other systems, but to locate the Chinese system as one among many, each with different historically and culturally informed approaches to giving, receiving and reciprocating. Taking this point further, when considering contemporary research that associates the gift with volunteering, care should be taken not to fall into the trap of simply exploring one in terms of the other, since both are subject to multiple historical, cultural and academic perspectives and influences.

Gift exchange has traditionally offered another way of building and maintaining social systems as an alternative to the market economy (Douglas 1990:xviii), but the extent to which gifts should be understood as within or outside the market economy is a common area for debate (Komter 1996:5; Godbout 2000:128-129). Themes and paradoxes of the traditional gift have continued into more contemporary or developed societies, particularly the “elements of generosity and self-interest, spontaneity and compulsion” (Titmuss 1970:84). However, it is necessary to take into account the effect of different and more complex systems – social, political, legal, moral or economic – that mediate the contemporary gift as well as more market-based forms of exchange, and the diverse, culturally specific values that result in different interpretations and manifestations of social norms and bonds. One possible answer to the question of why there is an increasing divergence in the meanings and understandings of gift and exchange involves a return to Mauss (1990:37), whose explanation of traditional gift exchange as a “total social phenomenon” is enmeshed in all social structures and institutions. By contrast, so-called ‘modern’ societies appear to separate the economic sphere from other spheres so that contemporary versions of exchange become less enmeshed and less interdependent with social norms and relationships. This may explain the tendency to see contrasting ideologies of the ‘pure’ gift and of exchange in societies where economic and social spheres are most separated, even if both fail to fully represent the lived experience of social institutions and practices, and miss the complex subtlety and ambiguity of a more integrated system (Parry 1986:466).



## **Volunteering and the Gift**

The situation alluded to by Parry (1986) is reflected in the increasingly complicated relationship between the voluntary sector, the state, and the market (Godbout 2000:145-146). Researchers often create artificial divisions between these spheres, resulting in a tendency to ring-fence voluntary activities and under-estimate the influence of particular phenomena (Prochaska 1988:xiii). For example, focusing on economic explanations tends to overlook what may be regarded as ‘non-economic’ phenomena or force them into economic frameworks which may distort findings or miss valuable insights (Bloch and Parry 1989:30; Godbout 2000:144-145). Stirrat and Henkel (1997:78) agree, suggesting that there is an ideological and intellectual tendency to enforce such a divide, which has the effect of creating a false dichotomy of altruism and self-interest that separates the gift process from wider social life. In a similar manner, Bourdieu (1986:241-242) argues that it is “impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms”, and that a failure to do so leads to an association of economic exchange with profit and self-interest, and a related but spurious assumption that non-economic forms of exchange must be disinterested.

Whilst economists tend to separate private, public, economic and voluntary spheres, the idea put forward by Titmuss (1970:224) that a change in one sphere, such as a decline in altruistic spirit, will spread to and be reflected in all, fits more recent suggestions that the boundaries between the business, state and voluntary sectors are becoming increasingly blurred (Steinberg and Powell 2006:1). This increasing porosity is apparent in the description of the voluntary sector as “occupying the space between the market and the state” (Kendall 2003:1), representing self-interest and enterprise on the one hand and bureaucratic legislation on the other, and also in the way that changes in political and social hierarchies emerge from the waxing and waning influences of all three sectors (Godelier 1999:5). The contrast between ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ life has often been characterised by the separation of different aspects of social life, each requiring multiple and often contradictory identities and norms of behaviour (MacIntyre 1981:190). As a result, rather than understanding selfhood as both individual and social, integrated to form a multi-faceted yet unified whole (Collins 2002:147), what tends to

happen in ‘modern’ society is a fragmentation of the self into roles and responsibilities within separate spheres and contexts. Just as over-emphasising the separateness of different spheres can lead to a distorted understanding of wider society, this may lead to a lack of coherence and difficulty predicting or understanding behaviour and motives across the wider life narrative (MacIntyre 1981:191).

The complexities of ‘modern’ life in many societies, the increasingly blurred boundaries between private, public and financial spheres, and a greater emphasis on individuality, all mediate the social effects of gift exchange. However, an interpretation of the reciprocal gift being both freely chosen and obligatory, both conscious and unconscious, with underlying mechanics of mutuality, responsibility and social norms (Sherry 1983:158), can still be used to address more modern debates that often emerge in discussions of philanthropy and volunteering. This is because ideologies of altruism and of self-interest, whilst on the face of it antithetical to each other, are both integral to the understanding of gift exchange, reciprocity and power relations (Parry 1986:453). Using language not dissimilar to Titmuss’s (1970:101) description of blood donation as a gift “to unnamed strangers”, Godbout (2000:64) situates volunteering in the area of “the gift to strangers”, a modern manifestation of reciprocal gift exchange that recognises the impact of outside forces and the market economy, and which extends relational ties beyond the traditional grouping of tribe, friends and family. Such a gift seeks to overcome the gap between social bonds of obligation and the perceived fragmentation of modern relationships, by combining anonymity with empathy.

Attitudes towards volunteering vary between societies and over time; they are informed by culturally specific ways of understanding the responsibilities and rights of individuals, groups and institutions that highlight the uneasy alliance of volunteerism, charity and democracy (Deakin 2001:48). By extolling the “virtues of democratic pluralism inherent in voluntary action”, Prochaska (1988:2) illustrates a popular, contemporary perspective associating volunteerism with the concepts of equality, freedom and civic participation, and lending a greater voice to otherwise marginalised groups. This offers an interesting contrast to the complex relationship between volunteerism and reciprocal gift exchange, in which ideas of community and social

cohesion are underpinned by hierarchies of obligation, reciprocity and power. Such differences in ideological perspective have epistemological and practical implications for describing and researching volunteerism, as do the varying degrees of importance afforded to volunteering by successive governments, depending on prevailing dominant political values, moral norms and economic circumstances.

There is a temptation when researching volunteerism within the framework of gift exchange to focus on beneficial aspects that may heal the breaches in an increasingly individualistic and fragmented society. However, the potentially negative aspects of the gift should not be overlooked (Komter 1996:5-6; Osteen 2002:13). Although processes of gift exchange and reciprocity may be central to social integration, they signal not only a sense of membership and belonging, but also different degrees of social distance (Sherry 1983:158). There are different ways of looking at this distance. Prochaska (1988:xiv) makes a distinction between the philanthropy of the wealthy or middle classes, and the “charity of the poor to the poor” that he associates with a more democratic form of self-help. This contrasts with Godbout’s (2000:140) view that the inequality within the gift system lies not in whether the gift originates with a wealthier party, but in the asymmetrical nature of obligation between giver and receiver. Yet another view is that levels of giving and volunteering are linked to class, occupation and education, and can therefore be “negative and excluding” (Komter 2005:9) through the creation or reflection of socio-economic divisions and inequalities: those who give, volunteer or participate in collective activities tend to have the most, and be the greatest recipients (Putnam 2000:358), whereas those who contribute least also receive the least, yet are often the very people in most need (Bourdieu 1977:181; Komter 1996:7) or who might benefit from the possibilities opened up to them through volunteering. It should be noted, however, that although levels of volunteering and social resources are associated more with affluence, status and extroversion, this does not mean that people who are perceived to be poorer or of lower status do not volunteer, although this is a common stereotype (Wilson 2000:223).

These types of division also serve to reinforce the importance of social networks in providing opportunities for helping others through contacts, access to resources, and through relationships that develop bonds of reciprocity and a sense of mutual responsibility for others. In his exploration of the various reasons why social capital is associated with giving and volunteering, Putnam (2000:121) suggests that some people may share common traits of generosity and gregariousness, and belonging to social networks makes it more likely that people will be asked to give or get involved; once someone becomes known as a joiner or helper, they are more likely to be asked. However, active social networks do not equate to active participation in organised activities, and the values and norms of volunteering receive little support in communities or groups – however sociable – which do not share these norms (Wilson 2000:219).

## **Many and Contested Meanings**

### ***Gifts***

As the previous sections illustrate, gifts and gift exchange are subject to multiple and contested definitions and research perspectives, informed by different ideological and intellectual worldviews about individual and collective motivations for behaviour (Komter 1996:3; Osteen 2002:2). Whilst the phenomenon of the gift may be universal, different interpretations of both ‘pure’ and reciprocal gift exchange are historically and culturally situated (Parry 1986:453). The concept of the reciprocal gift, which forms one of the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, is described as rhetorical, a key element of human communication, and “a vehicle of social obligation and political manoeuvre” (Sherry 1983:157). Reciprocal gifts are not only concrete objects; they can also be symbolic, offered in the form of services, or used to reflect and perpetuate existing relationships, social norms, values and expectations (Sherry 1983:159), through giving and receiving, but also through the sanctions that may result from not doing so.

As with the gift, volunteering and community are subject to different, often conflicting interpretations, and tend to be understood in relation to popular and academic

assumptions, stereotypes and expectations. It is becoming increasingly unusual to encounter examples of contemporary volunteering and volunteer research that do not also refer to the concept of community. In both cases, diverse attempts at definitions are indicative of what is valued, required, included or excluded from a concept or phenomena, and may be used, explicitly or implicitly, to pursue or constrain particular agendas (Freie 1998:22; Joseph 2002:xxiv).

### *Community*

The term ‘community’ is difficult – if not impossible – to define (Freie 1998:ix), and ways of understanding the meaning and value of community are diverse and contested (Delanty 2003:2-3; DeFilippis et al. 2010:12). Whilst there is a widespread although not universal view that community cohesion and development is a ‘good thing’, how this is visualised or defined depends very much on political, social and historical context, and is also connected to more general debates about how society should be governed (Somerville 2011:34). In relation to beliefs about selfhood, sociality, and what it means to be human at different periods and in different cultures, there is a tendency to oppose individualism and community, and often to value the latter morally but the former economically (Freie 1998:24), which is not dissimilar to the dualisms within the gift and volunteering. Whether rooted in shared interests, values or physical location, anthropologists increasingly seek to understand how the term ‘community’ is used rather than how it is defined, and recognise that meanings vary according to individual and group perceptions (Cohen 1985:8).

Meanings of community tend to be both descriptive and normative, with debates focusing as much on the perceived loss of community as on how to define it (Jewkes and Murcott 1996:556; Bauman 2001:3; Delanty 2003:10). Cohen (2002:169) goes further, suggesting that “‘community’ now seems to have become a normative rather than a descriptive term” by offering a way to express both differences and similarities in ideas, beliefs and values. There is also an emotional dimension to understanding the general concept, as opposed to particular examples, of ‘community’: “it feels good” and is often linked to positive, supportive and idealistic meanings that focus on safety and

support (Bauman 2001:1). Help is offered unconditionally in such a community, and with no thought of cost or payback: “they won’t be asking us how and when will we repay, but what our needs are. And they will hardly ever say that helping us is not their duty and refuse to help us because there is no contract between us obliging them to do so” (Bauman 2001:2). Rather than these accepting and nurturing communities of our imagination, Bauman (2001:4) explains that existing communities tend to exclude and reject outsiders and differences; they involve an exchange or trade-off between freedom and security; and are constraining, insular and oppressive. Joseph (2002:x-xi) also challenges the widespread tendency to regard the presence of community as either obvious or beneficial, and proposes that this sort of idealised community conjures an unrealistic image which hides underlying tensions, power relations and inequalities.

Social norms and standards in a shared culture may support collective wellbeing and interests, and facilitate voluntary action by fostering cohesion and social networks (Deakin 2001:58). However, they may equally stifle freedom of action, creativity and expression (Delanty 2003:24), and cohesion – if it privileges one group – can be at the expense of relationships with others (Putnam 2000:22). In relation to popular views that community cohesion is “about equality of opportunity, about shared norms and values, about trust, about respect for diversity, about belonging, about interdependence and about working together” (Kearney 2003:45), the role of volunteering is often framed as contributing to the building of a resilient, democratic and cohesive society. However, the common association of community or volunteering with consensus, trust and common values runs a risk that diversity and dissent will be overlooked or ignored, with some norms and values being privileged over others, especially where decisions are made by socially or politically dominant groups (Cohen 1985:12; Jewkes and Murcott 1996:562). This reflects the idea that it is in the interest of ideology and dominant discourses to appeal to the broadest possible base and maximise consensus, which is more likely to happen when few or no alternative viewpoints are made apparent (Bourdieu 1977:164; Rabinow 1986:238).

Most so-called communities actually appear to consist of a number of heterogeneous groups, characterised by competition as well as co-operation, rivalry as well as common

interest, and all with different needs and voices (Rapport 1993:190; Jewkes and Murcott 1996:561-562). It can therefore be problematic when one particular individual or group is singled out to act as a representative for others. In the case of the voluntary sector, Joseph (2002:70) describes this as an “imaginary of community”, where there is a tendency to identify non-profit activities and organisations with ideas of community, often portraying such organisations as representatives of the communities which they appear to serve. One critical and active response to invocations of community, especially in the context of volunteering, may therefore be to consider who is asking, and for what purpose (Joseph 2002:xxiv)?

### ***Volunteering***

Meanings, explanations and uses for volunteering are constantly changing, reflecting socio-economic and political circumstances as well as stakeholder agendas linked to rhetoric, ideology and power. One widely, although not entirely, accepted contemporary definition of volunteering is: “unpaid work performed within an organised setting to the benefit of other individuals, organisations, or the society at large” (Komter 2005:126). Smith et al. (2010:71) defines volunteering as “giving freely of your time to help others through organisations”, which supports the emphasis that Higher Education institutions place on formal, university-organised activities. A third definition of volunteering which places greater emphasis on autonomy, altruism and, without being explicit, seems to privilege value-based actions, is attributed to the Association for Research on Voluntary Action and Nonprofit Organisations: “All kinds of non-coerced human behaviour, collective or individual, that is engaged in because of a commitment to values other than direct, immediate remuneration” (Steinberg and Powell 2006:4). However, the first two examples appear to overlook the role of informal or independent volunteering activities and none of these definitions reflects the growing acceptance of instrumental and self-interested motivations that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary volunteer literature. Furthermore, the reference to time being given freely and un-coerced fails to recognise that there are many forms of coercion or pressure on multiple levels that are neither obvious nor articulated. Other attempts to define volunteering prove similarly problematic.

### *Volunteering in Higher Education*

Although there is no single definition of staff or student volunteering in UK Higher Education it is usual to find references to commitment, free time, unpaid activity and benefiting others (Wilson 2000:216; Squirrell 2009:14; Darwen and Rannard 2011:177). However, Wilson (2000) does acknowledge the continuing debate about whether the idea of volunteering is compatible with any financial payment as a reward, or where people consciously undertake a poorly paid but socially useful role “because they wish to do good” (Wilson 2000:216). Also associated with this debate is the question of whether the intention or the social and beneficial effects of volunteering are more important, where the latter may not necessarily reflect original intentions or motives. More recently, it is increasingly common to find references to volunteering activities organised through an institution (Komter 2005:126; Smith et al. 2010:66) as opposed to individual or informal activities. There is also a tendency for wider meanings of volunteering to become conflated with more policy-driven concepts such as public or community engagement. Meanings become even less clear-cut when volunteering becomes attached to staff development, student academic outcomes, employability or mandatory service.

Different definitions of volunteering inform the nature, scope and outcome of volunteer research (Smith et al. 2010:65), and in UK Higher Education are frequently characterised as much by what is excluded as included (Squirrell 2009:14). For example, it is not uncommon to exclude internal voluntary roles involving university societies and clubs, or extra staff involvement in departmental and college activities, in spite of the opportunities they provide for personal development and employability that most universities claim they are keen to promote. Ironically, it may be these informal or internal activities that limit the time available for more formal volunteering. Another dividing line exists between the formal requirement to volunteer and the normative pressure to do so. The former raises questions about the ontological nature of volunteering; the latter may not be contractually enforceable, but failure to comply may still carry sanctions and social or economic penalties (Titmuss 1970:83; Booth et al. 2009:234) for an individual, or for a group (Eckstein 2001:829).



These different meanings and exclusions are associated with the current importance attached by many Higher Education institutions to agendas of community engagement (Edwards et al. 2001:446). The wide-ranging and demanding expectations now being placed on contemporary universities in relation to civic participation and public benefit contrast with earlier abstract ideals and aspirations, and university-community engagement is increasingly regarded as a practical way of addressing social, economic and political agendas at regional, national and global levels (Williams and Cochrane 2013:67). In this context, staff and student volunteering is regarded as a valuable form of community engagement, and a way of demonstrating outward-facing, socially relevant activities (Williams and Cochrane 2013:74). However, this approach and the way in which programmes often juxtapose the terms ‘university’ and ‘community’, may also have the perhaps unintended side-effects of reinforcing perceptions of some universities as being separate from the regions in which they are located.

What I am arguing is that gift exchange and volunteering are two separate but related concepts, which can be explored using similar social mechanisms and paradoxes. Both are universally recognised, but with diverse and sometimes contradictory cultural interpretations and values. Both are also subject to debates about power and obligation, motive and outcome, and the relative importance of altruism and self-interest. In his work on gift exchange, Godbout (2000:27) alludes to different but related meanings of ‘voluntary’, as a contrast both to monetary compensation and something that is obligatory. Finally, just as the gift has been described as “social glue” (Komter 2005:1) or “the cement of social relationships” (Komter and Vollerbergh 1997:747), volunteering is described “as the social glue that helps communities to cohere” (Kearney 2003:45).

### **Student Volunteering in Higher Education**

In addition to the problematic matter of definitions, to understand volunteering in a Higher Education setting it is necessary to consider the broader framework in which it is situated. The early roots of volunteering in UK Higher Education lie in the social and religious reform movements of the nineteenth century (Brewis 2011:3), emerging from

the Industrial Revolution and ideals of Victorian liberal philanthropy (Annette 2010:454). The development of British universities, more generally, has been informed by different values and ideals commonly associated with different types of institutions (Collini 2012:26), which may well have influenced political, social and economic attitudes towards philanthropy and volunteering. Consequently, from the middle of the nineteenth century, debates about the purpose and role of Higher Education have increasingly focused on the relative merits of liberal or vocational curricula and qualifications, with the former emphasising classical education and the development of character and the latter training individuals in areas of expert, specialist knowledge (Soffer 1994:5). This has resulted in a gradually increasing move towards a more egalitarian form of mass Higher Education, linked to principles of democratic civic participation as opposed to the more traditional “elite university” which tended to perpetuate a narrower set of social and political values (Seabury 1975:75).

Although many of these differences in emphasis and ideology remain, a growing recognition that “the privileges of Higher Education carried social obligations” (Brewis 2010:440) has accompanied the emergence and steady expansion of student volunteering since the twentieth century. The nature of volunteering – generally and in Higher Education – changed with the advent of the welfare system in England from 1948, followed in the 1960s by an increase in student activism and political consciousness that took volunteer activities beyond charity and community service. The 1960s also saw increasing levels of overseas volunteering which had the effect of radicalising returning volunteers, who sought to change the nature and structure of student volunteering in the UK by combining practical work addressing perceived needs in the community with better communication between universities at a national level to co-ordinate activities (Brewis 2010:442; Brewis 2011:5).

Thus the late 1960s witnessed an increasing rejection of the “social service” model of volunteering and a shift from service to action (Brewis 2011:5-7). Greater social and political awareness of community issues and a desire to get involved and make a difference then led to the development of Student Community Action (SCA) groups in the 1970s. These groups continued to develop through the 1980s with increasing

support from the National Union of Students (NUS) and the government. The 1990s, however, were characterised more by a growing focus on skills and employability, and the importance of volunteering in extending and improving university-community engagement. A key development in the formal support of volunteering in Higher Education came in 2002 with the establishment of the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF). As well as enhancing the role of universities in their local communities, the HEACF formed part of a wider government initiative to involve more staff and students in volunteering and community engagement (Bussell and Forbes 2008:366). Funding ended for this scheme in 2006, which was problematic because whilst the establishment of the HEACF led to volunteer expansion, the loss of that funding stream left the organisations it had supported or which had become dependent on it very vulnerable (Brewis 2011:7). It is therefore unsurprising that concerns about financial and organisational autonomy form a central element in so many contemporary volunteer narratives.

Current approaches to organised student volunteering have been greatly influenced by the Russell Commission Report (Russell 2005) and the Commission on the Future of Volunteering (2008), both of which focus on the voluntary activities of young people in relation to civic development (Squirrell 2009:11-12), although it should be noted that not all young people are students and not all students are young (Smith et al. 2010:68). These inquiries build on the Dearing Report (Dearing 1997), commissioned by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which acknowledges the importance of the social and economic relationship between Higher Education institutions and their local communities. The Dearing Report also states that universities need to “provide an academic framework that is based on the acquisition of critical knowledge...and which provides students with the opportunity to develop essential key skills and capabilities” (Annette 2010:455). This emphasises the economic role of Higher Education as a route to employment and a way of boosting the national economy, in contrast to the more traditional roles of critical academic thought and civic duty (Annette 2010:454).

Recent government support for Higher Education volunteering has resulted in expanded activities, higher profile, recognition of volunteer contribution, and a positive effect on volunteers' career prospects (Holdsworth 2010:421). Student volunteering is increasingly regarded as "normalised and therefore acceptable to students" (Squirrell 2009:18), and it is also becoming increasingly centralised, organised and professional. Whilst some research refers to falling rates of student volunteering compared to other groups (Bussell and Forbes 2008; Francis 2011), other studies comment on a relatively high level of contemporary student volunteering (Holdsworth 2010). And yet, student volunteering may be at a "critical point" (Darwen and Rannard 2011:177) due largely to issues of funding vulnerability and policy changes that reflect the national and global socio-economic downturn. Despite positive intentions and an overt rejection of perceived middle-class "do-gooding" (Brewis 2010:444), student volunteers still face criticism that they remain relatively privileged in comparison to those communities they seek to help, with an implication that they are therefore unqualified to understand or address issues that they do not usually experience. Although governments emphasise the central role of volunteering in the battle against economic decline and perceived social fragmentation, the development and subjective experiences of volunteering in UK Higher Education remain under-researched (Edwards et al. 2001:446; Bussell and Forbes 2005; Francis 2011:4), and existing literature is light on theory (Booth et al. 2009:228). Within an already under-researched group, it is even more unusual to focus on university student volunteers, in spite of this group being described as "today's helpers or tomorrow's leaders" (Francis 2011:2).

The need to provide "academic legitimacy" (Furco 2010:384) to both volunteering and community engagement, especially where they form part of an academic programme, has led to a corresponding rise in related volunteer research. However, until recently, research into student volunteering has been dominated by business and educational approaches, with few contributions from anthropological perspectives. Furthermore, although volunteering is increasingly regarded as a central aspect of civil society, it is rarely researched from a critical perspective that might view ways of understanding volunteering that focus on the autonomous use of free time to help others as over-simplistic, and under-estimating the role of power dynamics and social relationships

(Fahey 2005:203). Discussions centre on motivations and barriers to volunteering; stakeholder needs and benefits; and the requirements for obtaining or retaining funding. There has been a tendency to privilege individualistic and instrumental motives, with the result that recruitment strategies often focus on functional benefits of volunteering (Francis 2011:9). However, this trend is beginning to change, with an increasing number of qualitative studies. Particularly useful are Francis's (2011:3) emphasis on the role of "primary or socially proximal reference groups", that is to say the social influence of family and close friends on decisions to volunteer, and Eckstein's (2001:847) ethnographic exploration of distinctions between individualistic and collectivist reasons for giving and volunteering. Literature and methods frequently focus on individualistic volunteering as the unit of analysis even when studying groups, using surveys or collecting quantitative data about hours volunteered and activities completed. In contrast, Eckstein's (2001) in-depth, qualitative research challenges popular and academic stereotypes of giving and volunteering, suggesting alternative mechanisms which may not have become apparent without an ethnographic approach.

Contemporary studies focusing on the meanings and wider experiences of volunteering in diverse UK universities, and the ways that students make sense of dominant discourses about volunteering and civic engagement (Brewis et al. 2010; Holdsworth 2010:423), have extended survey-based research with the use of qualitative and biographical interviews, although they tend to miss the additional depth that would perhaps have been offered by ethnographic fieldwork and long-term participant-observation (Bryman 2008:465). Findings support other articles challenging the 'me first' and 'CV' motivations for volunteering (Darwen and Rannard 2011; Francis 2011); they also suggest volunteering is not all about altruism either (Holdsworth 2010:421). The complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory meanings emerging from in-depth, qualitative data reveal increasing reflection on motivations to volunteer, and the way in which altruism and self-interest co-exist to varying degrees across a wide spectrum of motives. However, the very diversity of meanings and experiences which Darwen and Rannard (2011:178) describe as "a rich tapestry of volunteering opportunities for students in Higher Education" can be problematic for research, with the need to explore ever-increasing understandings, experiences and attitudes to different types of

volunteering. There are also different levels and degrees of institutional policy, control, support and funding, all of which make volunteer activities vulnerable to the winds of social, political and economic change, and add a further level of complexity to research in this area (Hartley et al. 2010:396). It is for this reason that Darwen and Rannard (2011:178) also refer to the current situation in student volunteering as a “fragmented landscape”. The diverse meanings and importance attached to volunteering are mediated by the curricula, priorities and strategies of individual institutions, as well as their histories of student and staff volunteering. However, as with volunteer research, this variety contributes to difficulties in measuring and evaluating the effects of volunteering (Squirrell 2009:7).

It is perhaps ironic, given the criticisms of perceived student privilege, that students have also exemplified a group traditionally released from expectations of reciprocity, generally because of an assumption – not always justified – of youth and relative poverty (Sherry 1983:160). This temporary suspension of obligations is also part of the hedonistic liminality (Van Gennep 1960), described as “those ‘between’ moments...in which normality is suspended” (Delanty 2003:44), that is often associated with the university experience prior to embarking on working life. Seen through the critical lens of gift exchange (Sykes 2005:12), however, discourses of volunteering in Higher Education generate a sense of social obligation extending beyond instrumental motivation, and students have the chance to once again become part of the cycle of giving, receiving and reciprocating. Komter (1996:3) refers to a frequent caveat in gift theory: false dichotomies of altruism and self-interest risk missing insights into motivations to give, and the role of gift exchange in wider socio-cultural settings. The same could be said for motivations to volunteer. Concepts of student volunteering cover a broad range of activities, from extra-curricular service to projects linked to the outcome of academic programmes, sometimes as an alternative to internships, and increasingly to gain work experience: each entails different motives, outcomes and impact, falling into different and sometimes contested categories of volunteering which reflect the tensions between altruism and self-interest (Darwen and Rannard 2011:177) and also the increasing recognition that volunteering can play a central role in Higher Education core activities (Brewis 2010:439).

## **Staff Volunteering in Higher Education**

The rise in support for and participation in Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) is associated with a more general trend in private and public sectors towards social responsibility, environmental sustainability and accountability (Bussell and Forbes 2005:5). The development of ESV in UK universities has been supported by the HEACF and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). These bodies have encouraged Higher Education institutions, including staff, students and alumni, to become more actively involved in their regional and local communities (Bussell and Forbes 2005:6). Going beyond ideas of corporate social responsibility and public engagement, additional drivers range from socio-economic expedience and ideological values, to competition and branding. It is for this reason that Bussell and Forbes (2008:364) advise caution about accepting messages of social responsibility at face value, especially if the message emphasises philanthropy. Firstly, they acknowledge the give and take nature of most volunteer relationships, which is far more pragmatic than claims of altruism, and secondly, they suggest that motives at policy-making levels may not reflect the motives of those who manage or participate in volunteer programmes.

ESV is one of the fastest growing areas of voluntary activity, especially in the UK, United States and Western Europe (Bussell and Forbes 2005:2), but it is a relatively new research area in volunteering literature and there is a particular lack of research into staff volunteering in UK Higher Education (Bussell and Forbes 2008:364, 366). Booth et al. (2009) claims to have undertaken one of the first theoretically based ESV studies. They use gift exchange theory to explore the multi-directional relationships between employers, employees and volunteer organisations, collecting information on the lived experiences of both volunteering and not volunteering, including sense of obligation, duty and wider social impact. In linking ESV to gift exchange, Booth et al. (2009:230) emphasises the importance of the giver understanding the needs and desires of the recipient, whether it be the acquisition of new skills through volunteering which also benefit the employer, the need of volunteer organisations for a resource pool, or an employee's need for time off or resources to support volunteering activities. Their understanding of gift exchange and corporate volunteering programmes focuses on

reciprocal social relationships, but within a business rather than an anthropological framework. The use of a management perspective may account for what appears to be a relatively simplistic view, attributed to Balkin and Richebé (2007:55-56), that gift exchange is simply a type of social exchange “governed by a set of rules that apply to how to exchange the gifts”. This bears little resemblance to Mauss’s (1990:37) far broader understanding of gift exchange as an example of a “total social phenomenon”.

Rather than studying ESV within a framework of gift exchange, Balkin and Richebé (2007:52) explore the changing presentation and perceptions of corporate training provision, intended to create a long-term relationship between employer and employee through mechanisms of reciprocity and obligation, resulting in mutual benefits and reducing the risk that employers will lose their return on training investment. Benefits and outcomes closely resemble those of corporate staff volunteer programmes (e.g. Booth et al. 2009), including claims of enhanced loyalty, staff motivation, and an increase in so-called “organisational citizenship behaviours” (Balkin and Richebé 2007:53). Similarly, Pelozo and Hassay (2006:374) form a link between “organizational citizenship behaviours” and volunteer participation in ESV schemes, suggesting that volunteer recruiting strategies may be more effective if employers or institutions emphasise that participation will be beneficial to the organisation, as well as to individuals and the wider community. They propose that corporate philanthropy can be boosted through employee volunteerism but only where volunteer activities reflect and support core strategies and competencies, rather than ad hoc or independent volunteers supporting unrelated causes outside the organisation’s control. This level of control is achieved through internal corporate management of employee volunteers, and marketing strategies that match broader corporate strategies as well as the perceived values of current or prospective employees (Pelozo et al. 2009:371).

Approximately one third of Higher Education institutions involved in recent research completed by Robinson et al. (2012) have a scheme that enables staff to volunteer in work time. In principle at least, “nearly all these schemes are open to all types of university staff” (Robinson et al. 2012:39). As with student volunteering, ESV potentially offers a wide range of activities, during working hours or free time,



underpinned by different levels of formality, policies and organisational involvement (Peterson 2004; Bussell and Forbes 2008:364, 370; Booth et al. 2009:229).

Differentiating between institutions from before and after the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), Bussell and Forbes (2008:368) found that whilst there is no significant difference between staff volunteers at 'old' and 'new' universities (previously polytechnics), 'old' universities are more likely to have a formal volunteering policy. It was also noted that institutions singled out as having best practices are all 'old' and all belong to the Russell Group. There are also varying degrees of formality and detail between institutions, in the application and approval processes for staff volunteering, as well as the control and monitoring of activities. In many cases, ESV appears to resemble formal staff development more than volunteering (Bussell and Forbes 2008:370).

The concept of ESV raises a number of questions in relation to more traditional definitions and uses of the term 'volunteering'. One way to encourage staff volunteering is for employers to offer support through resources or paid time off to volunteer (Bussell and Forbes 2008:363). This illustrates a question that is being asked with increasing frequency: if undertaken during working time, is this type of activity really volunteering? Depending on the policies of companies or institutions, there may also be a tension between employer encouragement, pressure or requirements to volunteer, perhaps as part of the annual review process, and the extent to which staff are free to choose whether or not to participate (Brewis 2004:21). Whilst theories of reciprocal gift exchange address the paradoxical combination of freedom and obligation, the fear of sanctions and the role of power (e.g. Sherry 1983; Mauss 1990; Godbout 2000), the issue of payment is less easily addressed. One definition of staff volunteering that sidesteps the issues of both payment and coercion is "any formal organised company support for employees and their families who wish to volunteer their time and skills in service to the community" (Peterson 2004:616). Nevertheless, questions about payment and freedom of choice continue to inform debates about staff volunteering programmes.

Evidence for the benefits of ESV has been described disparagingly as anecdotal and lacking in rigour (Peterson 2004:615-616; Benjamin 2007:67; Booth et al. 2009:228). This is partly an epistemological issue; studies undertaken within an economic or business framework tend to value a quantitative, positivist stance that has little patience with qualitative, subjective data emerging from a more ethnographic or critical perspective (Booth et al. 2009). Brewis (2004:13-14) agrees that there is insufficient “rigorous research” to support the wide range of documents claiming the success and value of this area of volunteering. Furthermore, surveys have often elicited information from administrators or directors of companies with voluntary programmes who may have a vested interest in presenting a positive report (Peterson 2004:616-617). There is a concern that such research as there is often focuses on employers’ perceptions about benefits and impact, and overlooks other stakeholders and the staff, whether or not they actually volunteer (Brewis 2004:14). This failure to include all stakeholders in ESV surveys – or other research methods – may lead to a limited or distorted view of both motivation and benefits (Benjamin 2007:68; Bussell and Forbes 2008:374-375; Booth et al. 2009:228).

### **Service, Volunteering and Inequality**

Popular and academic perspectives of volunteering in schools and universities often focus on the relationship between service, education, development and citizenship (Mohan 1994a:329). Annette (2010:451) explores the role that UK Higher Education should play in developing citizenship; echoing Prochaska’s (1988:2) views on volunteering, equality and democracy, mentioned earlier in this chapter, he focuses on student community-based or service-learning and the way it is increasingly used to support the values of democracy in Higher Education through an association with volunteering and civic duty.

Emerging initially in the United States but becoming increasingly widespread, service-learning “brings together volunteering and learning by doing” (NCCPE 2009:30). It links regular and organised ‘voluntary’ service to academic content and outcome, through the supervised application of theoretical learning in a practical environment that

in theory at least is of benefit to the wider community. Service-learning also reflects an ideological vision of Higher Education, situated within wider debates about the public role of Higher Education, that seeks to increase access to education, and reduce the power of political and economic elitism (Annette 2010:451; Zeitlin 2001:424). Even though service-learning is beyond the scope of this project, it helps to illustrate some of the concerns that are being increasingly raised about staff and student volunteering in UK Higher Education. Marullo and Edwards (2000), for example, explore some of the ways in which different types of volunteering inform the uneven power relations between universities and the communities with which they seek to engage and in which students volunteer.

The incorporation of volunteering into academic programmes, via service-learning and formal recognition of activities, raises questions about motivation, commitment, and the vulnerability of certain causes compared to others depending on their popularity, academic relevance and how well they fit into agendas of employability (Darwen and Rannard 2011:183). This concern is not unrelated to the views of other critics, warning that mass university education with an overt democratic purpose linked to political visions of social relevance threatens academic standards and the idea of free, critical thought (Boyer 1990:6), especially if service-learning is poorly planned or executed. Supporters of service-learning, however, accept the need for activities to be well organised and appropriate, and where this is the case, argue that students benefit academically and professionally as well as developing a greater awareness of social issues and diversity (Furco 2010:385). Marullo and Edwards (2000:895-896) suggest that service-learning can potentially change the way in which students approach and perceive their volunteering, becoming more critically aware of the social and political conditions that underpin many of the problems they seek to alleviate. They cite Boyer's (1990) work on the need to extend Higher Education beyond the confines of abstract research, towards a 'scholarship of engagement' that seeks to integrate the work of the university more fully with the needs and interests of wider society, but without damaging academic rigour.

“Universities’ responses to troubled times” (Marullo and Edwards 2000:895) increasingly include a greater focus on volunteering and community engagement activities. However, the idea that “volunteering helps to promote a fairer and more cohesive society [and] also helps to build bridges” (HEFCE 2005) overlooks the different, shifting and unequal power relations existing between the interested parties: this is something that a critical perspective seeks to acknowledge and challenge. Far from building bridges and increasing cohesion, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012:388) argue that such approaches illustrate an unequal “binary distinction” between university and community, where students contribute towards others’ wellbeing, rather than the university forming a part of a larger, mutually supportive community. These different viewpoints illustrate a complicated situation whereby student volunteering – to a much greater extent than staff volunteering – is frequently represented as both example of, and solution to, the privileged position of Higher Education in relation to much of wider society, by reinforcing perceived and actual socio-economic divisions but also by challenging social inequalities. The latter stance reflects a more critical perspective which recognises that volunteering is not neutral, and also considers the ethical position of student volunteering motives and outcomes: care and responsibility versus a more reflexive and instrumental stance (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012:387).

Volunteering in and for the community leads to further “social distance” between students and the communities in which they volunteer (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012:389). Even so-called participatory programmes often disguise very real inequalities, by offering people the opportunity to get involved in volunteering activities but failing to address the roots of social and economic concerns or to challenge the inequalities and imbalances of power within volunteering (Marullo and Edwards 2000:895; Eliasoph 2013:159, 160-161). One of the problems, argues Mohan (1994a:343), is the extent to which community service empowers those that students seek to serve. He suggests that community action is preferable to service since it is more likely to involve student-community collaboration, whereas service highlights the privilege and wealth of students and institutions, especially in relation to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups or communities. Similarly, writing about the relationship between social inequality and civic participation, Eliasoph (2013:129-130) expresses the concern

that those with existing wealth, resources and power tend to have a louder voice and stronger influence, leading to a perpetuation and even reinforcement of “pre-existing inequalities”, partly because the less advantaged may feel that they do not have the position or education to make their views worth listening to.

Inequality exists within as well as beyond Higher Education institutions. Variations in status, power and resources within the student body are often manifested in different motives and attitudes towards both volunteering and the local community, and in the opportunities to participate in and gain from volunteering activities (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012:388-389). As previous sections have indicated, it is common to encourage volunteering for personal development, university entry and future employability; schools and colleges may also regard themselves as “caring stewards” (Eliasoph 2013:131). This is not a problem, continues Eliasoph, as long as they also encourage students to appreciate that the opportunities and benefits afforded to them are often closely linked to existing wealth and connections, and that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds may not be able to take advantage of these same unpaid opportunities.

A further example of inequality within the student body is the degree to which individuals are able to resist constraint and coercion. Although the full-time term of national service researched and described by Mohan (1994a, 1994b) is different to part-time volunteering or service-learning, it raises similar questions about economic vulnerability, power and autonomy. In particular, concerns are raised about the effect of national service on the underlying principles of traditional volunteerism and the extent to which legislating national service – or indeed any sort of volunteering in school or Higher Education – is coercive. One example used by Mohan (1994a:334-335, 1994b:263) is the way in which financial aid for further education or training can be contingent on first completing a term of service, which illustrates not only a form of economic coercion but also the way in which such constraints do not affect all students equally. He goes on to suggest that it is the wealthier students, who are able to avoid this type of conditional national service, “who are most in need, educationally speaking, of exposure to the social problems that service would give them” (Mohan 1994b:263).

Discourses of volunteering have often focused on the widespread benefits that are assumed to apply to all stakeholders, and which thus fail to appreciate the different social, economic and political contexts in which Higher Education volunteering is situated (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012:386-387). More recently, however, people have increasingly started to question and criticise the motives, practices and outcomes of volunteering, particularly where it appears to support an institution's image, policies or interests (Eliasoph 2013:1), or to over-state its beneficial effects. This more critical or deconstructive approach to student volunteering and volunteer research often conflicts with the dominant discourses and volunteer policies emerging from Higher Education core strategies (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012:392-394). It not only highlights inequalities of structure, opportunity and outcome, but makes it harder for students to volunteer without reflecting on these inequalities or questioning their own involvement and motives in relation to gains and social justice. Holdsworth and Quinn (2012:387) also contend that student volunteering "embodies critical tensions about community, class privilege and the role of Higher Education", and whilst there are differences in the motives, experiences and outcomes of student and staff volunteering, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this statement can be applied to university volunteering more generally.

### **Critical Perspectives**

"Anthropology becomes a project of social criticism in the anthropologist's home society when it casts doubt about people's certainty that some truths are self-evident" (Sykes 2005:11). Extending beyond descriptive anthropology, and questioning the practices, thoughts and beliefs that are often accepted unquestioningly as part of being in society, critical perspectives turn a spotlight on some of these self-evident truths, exploring ideologies, hidden agendas and unequal power relations (O'Reilly 2009:51), and how they are perpetuated in both volunteering and volunteering research. Critical perspectives also challenge the notion of stable or 'normal' values and social structures (Charmaz 1990:1162), seeking instead to highlight mechanisms of control that tend to go unnoticed and that limit people's choices and behaviours in different ways.

“One aspect of power is the capacity to impose and maintain a particular structuring of some domain or other”, which favours the position and status of dominant group and values (Fairclough 1989:13). Critical approaches highlight this power of socio-political groups on structures, institutions and society, and also the power of mainstream perspectives on the academic study and development of social phenomena. In relation to this project, a critical perspective is used to illustrate ways that volunteering does not exist in a neutral space but in a series of changing, inconsistent and culturally specific contexts, in which personal agency and values operate within a framework of shifting discourses, power relationships and social norms.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored various ways in which volunteering can be understood in relation to reciprocal gift exchange, combined with an ethnographic and discursive approach that includes the experiences and relationships of both student and staff volunteers in UK Higher Education. This thesis now seeks to address some of the limitations and gaps in volunteer research. The next two chapters in Part I address the research design and theoretical frameworks that form the basis of my research, and provide a brief introduction to Durham University, with its complex and often contradictory approaches to volunteering and community engagement.

## CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### Research Design and Aims

Social research designs and perspectives are not neutral; they both shape and reflect frequently contradictory ‘visions’ of social and empirical reality, as well as how such realities should be studied (Bryman 2008:4). Epistemological and methodological challenges to more traditional anthropological perspectives have increased in recent years, particularly with regard to social relationships and power. Critical and subjective perspectives question many aspects of what was previously taken for granted about the nature and purpose of social phenomena, and what it means to be human in a particular time, place and society. Whilst anthropologists re-examine their engagement with and understanding of human societies, institutions and daily lived experience, there is a re-appraisal taking place in many Higher Education institutions, in relation to their engagement with government rhetoric and social policy, in a regional and global context of increasing social, political and financial uncertainty.

It is within this context that I take up the lens of gift exchange to explore aspects of volunteering in contemporary UK Higher Education. I re-visit some of the value-laden and often dichotomous ways of understanding volunteering, using anthropological theories of reciprocal gift exchange (e.g. Mauss 1990; Godbout 2000; Osteen 2002; Komter 2005) to suggest that volunteering can be seen as optional and obligatory; involve autonomy as well as dependence and unequal power relations; and recognise both altruistic and self-interested motivations. In so doing, I ask how experiences and expectations of volunteering are related to the exercise of power and the effects of social norms or structural constraints on agency. I consider not only the individual but also the social realities and narratives of volunteering in UK Higher Education, and how multiple, contested and situated meanings of volunteering reflect different political, economic and social values. In an increasingly challenging socio-economic climate with fierce competition for both jobs and public funding, I also ask how the term ‘volunteering’ is understood and used in narratives of public engagement and the social role of universities. Finally, how does the language of volunteering and of the gift



mediate power and social relationships between volunteers, Higher Education institutions and voluntary organisations?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Just as theoretical perspectives and epistemological positions shape the research and understanding of social phenomena (Komter 1996:5), institutional and personal commitment to volunteering in Higher Education is shaped by different academic traditions, strategic drivers and levels of socio-cultural diversity. This PhD takes a critical and ethnographic approach to elicit a deeper understanding of volunteering at one particular institution within UK Higher Education. I focus on Durham University because it hosts both staff and student volunteer organisations supported from within a high-level Public Engagement initiative, as well as many other voluntary and unpaid activities.

Contemporary interpretations of the gift are combined with grounded theory (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 1990, 2006) and critical discourse analysis (e.g. Foucault 1980; Wetherell 1998; Kendall and Wickham 2004) in order to draw fresh conclusions about the complex nature of volunteering in UK Higher Education. A combination of theories or approaches enables analysis to be undertaken from different perspectives, finding new ways of interrogating the effects of social relationships, normative expectations and power (Fairclough 2000:163; Komter 2005:6) within different volunteering contexts. It also illustrates how differences in perspective and interpretation are informed by, and also inform, understandings of wider social, economic and ideological concepts (Komter 1996:3). A synthesis of grounded theory and critical discourse analysis explores the different experiences, explanations and agendas of volunteers, funding bodies and policy makers, seeking to identify gaps between narratives of volunteering ‘on the ground’ as well as the top-down rhetoric of institutions and policy makers. Further detail emerges from an ethnographic approach that recognises the personal, situated and contextual nature of volunteering. Using both bottom-up and top-down research approaches offers a way of questioning different

discourses of volunteering, and exploring the contradictions that exist both within and between groups, as well as being reflected in individual narratives.

### ***Reciprocal Gift Exchange***

As the following chapters show, a study of volunteering within a framework of the reciprocal gift offers a way to transcend dichotomies of altruism and self-interest, exploring instead concepts of power, obligation, gratitude, and ‘Othering’. It reveals the distinction between conscious discourses and ideology, and the importance of social relationships and networks to volunteering experiences, organisation and management. Reciprocal gift exchange, with its emphasis on social norms and expectations, inequality, and status, also offers a useful way of questioning narratives of autonomy, equality and partnership, which frequently characterise the ways that people understand volunteering, and contemporary ways of researching (in) communities.

### ***Ethnography***

Anthropology and ethnography are not synonymous, just as ethnography is related to but not all about participant-observation, yet all three terms are often used as if they were interchangeable (Ingold 2008:21; Forsey 2010:566). This can be problematic when establishing which methods are appropriate for a particular piece of anthropological research.

Ethnographic fieldwork, as opposed to a more general qualitative approach, usually includes accessing a group or community of interest, establishing a role within that group and conducting research over time and at varying levels of closeness, using a wide range of methods to engage with participants. As part of this engagement, a balance must be maintained between an ethnographic reflexivity that recognises the role of the researcher, the socially constructed nature of phenomena being researched, and the need to remain aware of a “real world” in which people live, believe and act (O’Reilly 2009:2-3). Described as a method, a product, and a way of looking at the world, ethnography is about forming relationships and building trust with different

individuals and groups. It places an emphasis on lived experience and everyday occurrences, writing about real people rather than abstract themes and concepts. There is a strong element of subjectivity, and ethnographic research “has always meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self – as much of it as possible – as the instrument of knowing” (Ortner 2006:42).

Ethnographic research is also often associated with social policy and practice, and the idea of using ethnography to “change the world” through the exposure of unequal power relations and hidden agendas (O’Reilly 2009:52). Hammersley (1992:127-129) warns that care should be taken not to exaggerate the influence that ethnography has on social policy, arguing that whilst it may inform, ethnographic research does not in itself make policy. Nevertheless, he makes a further point that this should not be considered a reason not to take an ethnographic approach.

### ***Ethnographic Knowledge and Generalisation***

The context of research and the expectations of different audiences influence how a method is selected, developed and adapted to capture and analyse data about particular activities and circumstances (Parker and Harper 2006:1; Paillet 2013:135). Similarly, social expectations inform institutional and academic policy and practice, and just as the role of Higher Education is much debated and subject to social, economic and political discourse, so is the role of ethnographic research. Ethnography is both “one of the principal research methods in the social sciences” and also hotly debated and critiqued by both quantitative and qualitative researchers from different perspectives, methods and schools of thought, in relation to social reality, reliability, and the value of data (Brewer 2000:6). Debates about ethnographic reliability and relevance are rooted in the scientific, positivist tradition, which has often viewed ethnography as “methodologically unsophisticated, intuitive, journalistic, and unfocused” (Sanjek 1990:393).

Rather than taking such a polarised view of quantitative versus qualitative research, Hammersley (1992:6-7) suggests that the aims and audiences of research be considered: what sort of data needs to be collected and why? In relation to researching the way in which policies are differently interpreted and experienced over time, for example, ethnography offers a high degree of flexibility and recognises both diversity and dissent. It is useful for highlighting differences between formal policies and actual beliefs or experiences in different circumstances, from within a closer relationship than is typical of a quantitative approach (Hammersley 1992:125). However, he adds that this does not equate to ethnography having a “general superiority over other methods”, and that it is important to acknowledge weaknesses in the approach, particularly issues of generalisation.

Knowledge – including anthropological theories and concepts – is fluid, contingent, political and situated. Different perspectives use rhetoric and ideology to claim authority for a particular world view; it is difficult to challenge or resist those bodies of knowledge when embraced and used by a dominant group (Clifford 1986:11). The idea of ethnography as partial and situated reflects one of the wider debates between positivist and interpretive perspectives: to what extent can ethnographic knowledge be generalised? Put another way, how ethnography is valued tends to be informed by changing epistemological positions and political views, such as the extent to which knowledge is expected to have relevance. A perceived failure to do so is often cited as a source of criticism (Hammersley 1992:1-2).

Generalisation typically involves attempting to establish wider relevance from a sample or specific case study to a larger population, or developing a theory that can be extended beyond the immediate research scope, setting or sample (O’Reilly 2009:82). This is often regarded as a problem for research that takes place in a “single, small-scale setting” (Hammersley 1992:5). Warning against a tendency to over-generalise the results of ethnographic research, Hammersley (1992:92) is critical of claims which place what he regards as too great a faith in the idea that human behaviour conforms to predictable patterns or laws, and that allow insufficiently for the “messy nature of the social world” (O’Reilly 2009:82). This messiness can be regarded as problematic when

seeking to generalise beyond the immediate area of study, although O' Reilly goes on to argue that this is no reason not to try; it is potentially useful provided care is taken to define and limit what is being generalised. Thus, a more modest generalisation involves remaining open to changes in research scope and content, and being aware of the flexibility and diversity that may exist within apparently similar groups, settings or situations (O'Reilly 2009:85).

These points are relevant when considering the extent to which findings from this project can be generalised in different contexts beyond this case study. Results have the potential to contribute to the understanding, organisation, and management of volunteering and engagement not only within Durham University but also organisations beyond the immediate field site, and at other similar institutions which have some form of staff and/or student volunteering programmes. The specific policies, organisational structures and experiences associated with volunteering in and through Durham University may not be the same as other Higher Education institutions, but it is valid to ask similar theoretical questions and to make empirical observations of broadly similar groups in different institutions, or of different groups within the same institution. In this way, the project approach used for this particular case study and sample provides a useful template on which to base future research. Furthermore, looked at from a different angle where a relatively small sample in a single case study has elicited broad variations in experiences and narratives of both giving and volunteering, this can be used to challenge theoretical perspectives and dominant discourses that overlook or dismiss diversity of behaviour, beliefs or experiences, privilege a particular set of values over others, or take an over-generalised view of volunteering motives, experiences and outcomes.

### ***Grounded Theory***

Anthropologists and the people with whom they interact interpret the meanings of everyday social life, but due to different experiences, perspectives and interests, we all have different ways of doing this and play different roles in constructing the lived experiences that are being interpreted. This inevitably leads to an element of subjective

bias in ethnographic research, as meaning is filtered through the lenses of the author's own lifeworld (Rabinow 1986:257). One of the challenges faced by ethnographic and qualitative research, therefore, is to respect the 'voice' of the research participant, whilst at the same time finding an appropriate level of structure and formality to make an adequate response to the criticism that interpretations of qualitative data say more about the researcher than the researched (Schweizer 2000).

A balance is found in grounded theory's systematic approach to gathering and analysing qualitative data, focusing on subjective experience and bottom-up explanations of social phenomena (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory is a commonly used technique for analysing ethnographic data, including interviews and field notes, where the 'grounding' of emergent themes in the raw data provided by individuals or groups adds credibility to the interpretation process (Glaser and Strauss 1967:224-225; Bernard 2002:463). Critics have argued that combining qualitative methods, raw data and researcher interpretation limits the ability to generate 'grounded' data (Davies 1999:4-5; Thomas and James 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998:5-8) attempt to justify the term by stating that grounded theory works directly with data rather than abstract ideas, but the criticism remains valid to a certain extent since the researcher's own experiences and background are likely to inform the interpretation of that data.

Charmaz (1990:1161) promotes a more flexible and social constructionist approach to grounded theory. Her interpretive and critical perspective takes into consideration the social context, personal history and lived experiences of different research participants, as well as the ways in which emergent theories are also a result of active researcher participation and decision making about data collection, analysis and management. That is to say, grounded theory is rooted in the social constructions of both research participants and researchers, emerging from a combination of knowledge and beliefs, experiences, events and the social context in which they occur. Whatever approach to grounded theory is followed, it should be remembered that a theoretical model is no more than a partial representation of social 'reality' in a particular time and place, based on the researcher's inter-subjective selection and interpretation of data taken from a limited sample (Geertz 1973:4-5, 15; Davies 1999:42). Consequently, in spite of

grounding data in experiences of, and reported attitudes towards, volunteering and volunteer management, it should be remembered that the extent to which this project's empirical and theoretical findings can be generalised to other Higher Education institutions, or to volunteering in other contexts, is informed by the subjective nature of the data, and the organisational, cultural and ideological differences between institutions.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

“Ethnography cultivates an engaged clarity” (Clifford 1986:2), enabling researchers to challenge taken for granted ways of being in society, or to identify hidden forms of power that constrain and enable different individuals and groups according to their position and status within socio-political networks and hierarchies. Another way to interrogate dominant discourses and the status quo, by focusing on daily interactions, relationships and ideology, is through critical discourse analysis. Discourse is social, political, situated and contextual (Foucault 1971:8; Scheuer 2003:143); it actively constructs and perpetuates particular meanings through the use of language and rhetoric (Clifford 1986:10).

Critical discourse analysis offers one more way of analysing textual data, including interview transcripts, speeches, and other documents, as part of a wider ethnographic perspective. There is a close relationship between language use, social theory, social practice and power relations (Fairclough 1989:1; Fairclough 2000:164). As social agents, people are regarded as both active and passive: creating meaning as well as accepting, resisting or negotiating various identities and subject positions, but also constrained through the different social structures within which actors operate (Wetherell 1998:393; Fahey 2005:203-204). A study of volunteering experiences, attitudes and policies involves the analysis of relationships and power dynamics; it highlights the different ways that institutional or social structures enable, constrain and construct identity and opportunity, through interactions at different levels of social, political and academic hierarchies (Fairclough 2000:167).

### *Discourse, Narrative and Habitus*

An analysis of ideology must include both the effect of dominant – and conscious – discourses, and the effect of “institutional mechanisms” which frequently operate without conscious awareness of their effects and are therefore not discursive (Bourdieu 1977:188). This PhD looks at both grounded ethnographic and discursive evidence, in order to study, compare and contrast the lived experiences of volunteering, as well as the conscious discourses and ideologies surrounding volunteer policies and practices – and possibly illustrating the differences between ideological, social and empirical ‘realities’. Our identities are multiple, situated, and rooted in diverse selves that develop through life events and social interactions (Collins 2002:147). An element of unity emerges through the stories that people tell about themselves and others, and through the social structures and constraints in which actors are situated. These different ways of making sense of ‘social reality’ can be illustrated by two concepts: *habitus* and *narrative*.

Habitus as an embodied practice is “caught or taught” (Collins 2002:149). It describes the historically situated, socially and culturally learned ways of knowing and doing what is expected, and what is regarded as ‘normal’, informed by particular contexts and interactions. Habitus constrains peoples’ motives, behaviour and ways of being to various degrees by producing conscious or unconscious strategies, but does also allow for a degree of agency and negotiation (Bourdieu 1977:72). Narrative injects a greater degree of agency into habitus, as well as an appreciation of contextual and socio-cultural effects, through different personal life events, conscious social interaction and conversation (Collins 2002:152; Scheuer 2003:145). The concepts of habitus and narrative are useful for exploring volunteering within the framework of Higher Education, where the reasons and goals for volunteering may be very different for individuals, as well as between individuals and institutions: “when we seem to be doing the same thing we may not be doing the same thing” (Collins 2002:151).



## **Fieldwork and Planning**

### *Scope*

Durham University is an ideal institution in which to carry out this research because it offers opportunities for volunteering at student and staff level, involves many types of volunteering and engagement activities that receive different levels of support and control, and enables volunteering experiences to be compared to formal strategy and policy positions. However, I quickly came to realise that even though it is only one institution, I could not carry out an effective qualitative study of the multitude of volunteering activities, groups and stakeholders associated with Durham University in the time available. This problem was magnified as each fieldwork encounter generated new potential projects, volunteers and avenues of exploration, and demonstrated a problem that is characteristic of qualitative and ethnographic work: the need for a trade-off between breadth and depth of research. Whilst needing to find a way of reducing the scope of my research to manageable proportions, and acknowledging that any such decisions are always going to be somewhat arbitrary, I nevertheless wanted to minimise my involvement in the active selection of who to involve and who to exclude from this project. A solution appeared to lie within the phenomenon that I was researching.

Academic knowledge and research exist within a network of exchanges and communications, where those involved in seeking and providing knowledge manoeuvre within the confines of existing discourses, structures and rituals (Foucault 1971:18). Depending on what the researcher does, who the researcher meets, what feelings those activities and meetings engender, and what choices the researcher makes, each fieldwork experience follows a very different and constantly changing path. It is for this reason that the path itself needs to be explicitly acknowledged and reflected upon, as being both instrument and product of research (Sanjek 1990:398). In a similar way, networks and relationships are crucial to both volunteering (Putnam 2000:20, 117) and volunteering research. How those connections are formed and constrained within a particular set of structures or institutions is as important to the experiences and outcomes of volunteering (research) as the networks themselves. It was for this reason that I decided to use my own developing network of volunteer connections, emerging from an initial core of staff and student volunteers, organisations and ‘key’ contacts, to

manage the project's scope and shape the direction of my research. The selection and interpretation of data, and by extension what is recognised or excluded either implicitly or explicitly as 'volunteering' at Durham University, is also unavoidably influenced by the researcher, which negates to a certain extent the claim to grounded research, at least in the strict classical sense that pre-dates theorists such as Charmaz (1990) and Dey (2004). I therefore used as far as possible the meanings and boundaries of volunteering suggested through interviews and other fieldwork encounters, as a further attempt to reduce my active participation in the selection or exclusion of the many volunteer activities and groups that I encountered by following my network of connections.

Even within these parameters, the possibilities for research were very wide and it was necessary to draw a more arbitrary line. I decided to exclude a detailed investigation of overseas outreach projects such as Sport in Action Zambia (DU 2014a) or Durham University's involvement in Project Sri Lanka (PSL 2014), focusing instead on volunteering within the immediate Durham region. I did not look specifically or systematically at volunteering in all of the sixteen Durham colleges, partly because of time constraints but also because a report was recently published that addresses this topic in some detail (Robinson et al. 2012). It was for this reason, again, that I did not include a comprehensive study of the University's sports volunteering and outreach programmes that are run as part of Team Durham, which have been the subject of a recent report (SUNEE 2012) and a PhD thesis (Hayton 2013). Exceptions to these exclusions were made where students and staff talked to me about their college or sporting outreach activities within the context of their own personal experiences.

Finally, I did not address the wider category of 'unpaid' staff and student activities, which would be a significant project in itself, although references made by research participants to the debates about the 'grey' areas of unpaid internships and work experience that exist between volunteering and paid work were included. Considering whether or not to include work experience, internships, charity events and fundraising in the scope of my research formed part of a much broader series of questions: What is volunteering? What does it mean to different people? How does one establish research parameters for a term that is so difficult to define? On the one hand, these are all

questions that are addressed in various ways during my research; but on the other hand, parameters are necessary at the start of the research process in order to maintain an element of control over project scope.

### ***Sampling***

The emphasis placed on qualitative, subjective and cultural data, and the elicitation of different understandings of volunteering and the public role of Higher Education, made it appropriate to use a purposive, non-probability sample (Bernard 2002:181), involving the deliberate selection of research site(s), groups and individuals, informed by the scope and nature of research (Bryman 2008:375). However, I refined this approach by identifying potential research participants and organisations through a form of ‘targeted’ snowballing, whereby groups and individuals were identified on the basis of data emerging chronologically from interviews and other fieldwork contacts. This reflected the decision to use my own emerging volunteer connections and network to shape the research scope and data collection progress. ‘Targeted’ snowballing and a grounded approach to sampling illustrates further that the experiences and outcomes of research are informed by networks and connections; a completely random approach to selecting research participants, groups and projects, whilst reducing researcher influence, would miss the organic and relational effects of social networks.

### ***Fieldwork Sites and Samples***

Fieldwork takes place within different relationship networks. The sites themselves are often multiple, negotiated, subject to power differentials, and liable to change. Hierarchies within which fieldwork sites exist are informed by discourses and orders of discourse, and fieldworkers are subject to similar tensions and constraints as those experienced by participants navigating those sites as part of daily life (Foucault 1971:8-9; Fairclough 2000:170). Different relationships exist between associated fields; for example, the ways that political ideologies, power relations and social practices are variously represented and managed in Higher Education, government, industry or the voluntary sector. The fieldwork for this project took place in a number of diverse but overlapping relationship networks, with implications for the way in which I was

situated, and responded to, as both a researcher and as a postgraduate student member of the University.

Durham University extends across two campuses, each with its own distinct history and character. Volunteering and engagement interests are informed to a certain extent by the particular relationships that each campus has with the immediate area in which it is located, as well as the higher level priorities and drivers reflected by central management decisions and the Durham University Strategy (DU 2010a). My research involved university management, staff and student volunteers, volunteer organisations in the region, and other community partners. I conducted interviews at various university sites in Durham and at the Queen's campus, situated twenty miles to the south in Stockton. Other meetings, volunteering events and fieldwork encounters, both planned and spontaneous, took place in Durham and further afield in the County Durham area, and it was during these meetings that I identified people who I hoped would take part in more formal interviews.

It was not unusual for enthusiastic volunteers and volunteer organisers to agree to be interviewed but then fail to respond to subsequent contact. What this group appears to have in common is being over-stretched, attempting to meet multiple sets of obligations, and performing several roles often in addition to their own studies or job. In other cases, despite expressing an initial interest in my research, people were reluctant to be interviewed. Some evaded further contact; others promised to meet but kept finding reasons to cancel; several agreed to be interviewed but asked for confirmation that my goal was not to criticise their organisation. The last situation was more common amongst undergraduate students in elected or executive positions and very recent graduates in new sabbatical roles. This illustrates how important it is to consider roles, status and authority in different contexts, which may inform perspectives and social realities of potential research participants and in turn affect how they are likely to interpret a request for interview, or how they might wish to present themselves, the groups, and the activities with which they are associated. These points are as much about ethics as they are about the difficulties of recruitment or self-presentation, which is something that I address in more detail later on in this chapter.

Interview samples were balanced as far as possible for factors such as age, gender, socio-cultural background, occupation (for staff) and discipline (for undergraduate and postgraduate students). However, this was secondary to the emphasis on following up connections emerging from my own developing networks, and illustrates once more the trade-off that may be necessary between structure and a more grounded approach to research.

### *Activities and Timeframe*

My original plan was to spend approximately one year observing and closely participating in voluntary or community engagement activities organised through Durham University's Experience Durham programme – including regular periods of time with the Staff Volunteering and Outreach (SVO) and Student Community Action (SCA) teams on both campuses – as well as colleges, other university organisations, and voluntary and community organisations within the wider region. It became apparent after a few weeks that, whilst informative and interesting, participating regularly in SCA and SVO organisational activities and events was not necessarily the best way to approach my research questions, which were less about the amount and type of specific volunteering activities and more about individual and institutional approaches to agency, power and morality in relation to the meanings and language of giving and volunteering. Even in the cases of highly committed volunteers and volunteer organisers, their activities form a relatively small part of their wider lives, much of which is regarded as private and separate from day-to-day work and study: a consideration that I explore further in the next section. Such events were very useful, however, for making contacts that enabled me to arrange the further discussions and interviews that proved to be a more appropriate ethnographic method than long-term immersion for the purposes of this project.

### *Hierarchies of Qualitative Research*

A mainstay of traditional ethnographic fieldwork, participant-observation generally involves deep immersion in a society over time, exploring social beliefs, practices and phenomena in different socio-cultural contexts, and investigating at first hand the meanings that structures, norms and patterns of behaviour have for different people (Forsey 2010:567). However, not everything is open to observation; there may be issues of access, privacy, time and location (Hockey 2002:209; Bryman 2008:403, 468; O'Reilly 2009:156). In contemporary Britain, for example, structures, lifestyles and the type of social phenomena that are frequently investigated are such that living amongst research participants and groups of interest in a convenient geographical area may be both inappropriate and impractical.

This can be remedied to a certain extent by augmenting observation with additional material, documents and interviews (Bryman 2008:468), although the very use of the word 'augment' illustrates a continuing tendency to situate different ethnographic methods in a hierarchy. Becker and Geer (2004:246) present participant-observation and interviewing as different methods along a continuum, with unstructured interviewing (in-depth conversation) being the least distanced from participant-observation. Whilst they claim not to dismiss interviewing as a valid method they nevertheless locate it as both other to and lesser than participant-observation, to be used where other methods cannot be applied. Ethnographic description is often opposed to interview data, which is regarded as inferior to other forms of qualitative data collection (e.g. Crang and Crook 2007:35). Forsey (2010:558) counters this view with the observation that researchers often under-estimate just how much data is heard rather than observed through conversations, stories and participation in events: what he refers to as "engaged listening". He challenges those researchers who claim that observation is the superior method to re-visit what they really do when engaging in ethnography, and consider how much of it involves "engaged listening", even if they are not actually using the interview method (Forsey 2010:560).

Going further, Forsey (2010:562) suggests, such is the dominance established by participant-observation, that other methods involving listening are subsumed into it – conversations, interviews, stories, speeches – rather than being used and evaluated as ethnographic methods in their own right. Where there is a specific focus of research, however, interviews are often more appropriate compared to the more haphazard and spontaneous nature of participant-observation (Bryman 2008:468). And yet, contemporary society’s increasing familiarity with technological forms of communication and entertainment influences forms of interaction and intimacy: “In a world of consultants and confessional chat shows, interviewing begins to resemble a form of participant-observation” (Hockey 2002:220). Seen in this light, the very criticisms commonly directed towards interview methods – as distant, partial, fragmented or artificial – also characterise much of the everyday interaction in Western societies. This new environment has been described as the “interview society” (Forsey 2010:568; Silverman 2013:39). That is to say, life in developed and usually Western societies is frequently conducted through a series of situated, verbal interactions that reflect the style of qualitative interviews more readily than that of traditional participant-observation.

Silverman (2013:134-135) warns that there is a tendency for some qualitative researchers to privilege the ‘open-ended’ interview over other types of interview or quantitative methods, a common explanation being that this approach values the voice and priorities of the research participant but within the boundaries of research aims and key project questions. He goes on to comment that the current trend towards confessional interviews is informed by a cultural and historical shift in behaviour and attitudes, making it more likely for people to share – or perhaps perform – their thoughts in an interview ‘setting’; it would therefore be advisable for researchers to take that same shift into consideration when interpreting critically what is actually said in interviews, and why. Whilst not denying the role and importance of qualitative interviews, Silverman (2013:39-40) sounds a note of caution: it is unwise to assume that the interviewer is extracting only the private thoughts, feelings and experiences of an individual, untainted by social influences and external circumstances.

Notwithstanding this caveat, semi-structured interviews combine a degree of control with a flexibility that privileges as much as possible the ‘voice’ of the person being interviewed, whilst enabling data comparison across interviews and allowing interview schedules to be modified to reflect individual responses (Jewkes and Murcott 1996:560, 562; Bernard 2002:205). This offers one way of addressing possible biases in research structure or questions (Bryman 2008:436), and is useful where time or opportunities to re-interview are limited, and when eliciting conscious, verbal data for textual grounded or discourse analysis.

In the same way that qualitative research does not equate to ethnography, not all qualitative interviews are ethnographic. An ethnographic interview is “like an in-depth conversation that takes place within the context of reciprocal relationships, established over time, based on familiarity and trust” (O’Reilly 2009:125). Less structured than a semi-structured interview, it takes the form of a more mutual and relatively equal dialogue, allowing for the participant’s own interests and priorities. For this reason, biographical interviews are a good example of ethnographic interviewing (O’Reilly 2009:126-128), and with their relatively open format are likely to be more suitable than more structured approaches when investigating wider life experiences, because they emphasise the historical background and social construction of events (Bryman 2008:440; Forsey 2010:568; Holdsworth 2010:434). This makes it a useful technique for exploring the changing meanings and motives that people have for volunteering (or not volunteering) and the effect that volunteering may have, or had in the past, on wider social and professional life.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Agar (1987:124) highlights a paradoxical issue of ethnographic analysis: “the more attention paid to detail, the less the coverage that is possible”. Two other related questions in ethnography are firstly, how to balance theory and description without either over-generalising or under-explaining, and secondly, how to describe or explain phenomena or practices in such a way that conveys complexity and detail without a loss of clarity and coherence (Strathern 1991:xiii).



My research navigates a path between rich description, theory and analytic structure, seeking to weave together stories, experiences and interpretations of volunteering through a combination of participant-observation, other fieldwork encounters, both semi-structured and biographical interviews, and material gathered from documentary sources. I wanted to capture people's experiences as far as possible in their own words, allowing them to focus on their current volunteer relationships, priorities and interests, as well as incorporating wider life experiences and past events which potentially have a significant impact on attitudes to volunteering, social justice, and civic participation.

### ***Participant-Observation***

I used an ethnographic diary to record a combination of participant-observation and casual encounters, fieldnotes, and initial memos that were later developed into ideas about analysis, early categories and themes within the data. Information about themes and theoretical relationships captured through memoing appears to be comparable to Bernard's (2002:376) explanation of analytical field notes and lends authority to the researcher's findings. For example, whilst my memos at this stage in the research process were still fairly crude, they helped to keep track of variations within apparently common themes during the initial coding exercise. Whilst using a single document, the different types of diary entry are distinctive and separately identified.

Returning to a previous comment, my original intention to focus on a participant-observation approach was not the best way to address this project's key questions. However, my research experiences support the view that whilst participant-observation can be about data collection through sharing experiences and interactions, it can also act as a way to gain access into a group or community, developing trust and relationships, in order to more effectively gather data through other means such as interviewing (O'Reilly 2009:152).

What emerged from different levels of participant-observation was a combination of relationship building, data collection and opportunities to make contact with people in order to carry out future interviews. Each encounter introduced me to a varied and often unique set of people, experiences and attitudes, but at the same time, patterns gradually developed that made sense of the different aspects of volunteering as well as the different ways in which I was able to collect data.

I found myself performing several identifiable roles during my period of fieldwork:

**Observer:** As an observer, often in a casual college setting, I had a number of serendipitous encounters with volunteers, community workers and staff members, in which I initiated conversations or became a more passive – but not covert – member of the transient conversation group. It was during such meetings that I found out more about barriers to staff volunteering, got introductions to local police and council volunteer co-ordinators, and even received an invitation to a regional conference on volunteer governance. In a more formal capacity, I spent several days a week with the staff and student volunteering staff, over a period of months at the start of my fieldwork. This was how I familiarised myself with the university's formal volunteering structures, got to know a number of volunteers and organisers, and identified many people who later agreed to be interviewed.

**Volunteer Organiser:** An unexpected outcome of spending time with the staff volunteering team was that I ended up organising a one-off staff and student Team Challenge that involved a series of conservation activities at a local wildlife centre. Not only did I learn a great deal about the policies and processes that can both help and hinder the organisation of such an event, I was able to empathise with much of what other organisers spoke about in later fieldwork encounters and interviews.

**Volunteer:** Perhaps unsurprisingly in a project about volunteering in Higher Education, I also drew on my own varied experiences as a volunteer. I took part in a number of

activities: volunteering in a personal capacity as a dog sitter for three months, and with a local mental health centre, where I am still involved; helping out at college events and college-run community engagement activities; and playing a small role in a long-term relationship between Experience Durham and an American university. I went on litter-picking walks, wrapped presents for a local hospice and helped to landscape a woodland burial ground, which is where I first met the University's Conservation Society. In this way, I was able to gain experience not only of different activities and groups, but also the relationship between values and motives, activities, and levels of commitment over varied periods of time.

### *Interviews*

The value of verbal interaction, both in and about daily life, lies in normal relationships and ethnographic encounters, but also more formally, as a way to discuss what may not necessarily come out in spontaneous conversation or observation (O'Reilly 2009:126). This is where different types of interview play a central role in data collection. The need for sufficient data must be balanced against time and cost limitations, taking into account not only the time required for interviewing but also to transcribe, code and analyse the resultant material (Bernard 2002). I conducted forty-four interviews, each taking between one and three hours. Out of the twenty-four women I spoke to, eleven were students (seven postgraduate and four undergraduate), ten were members of non-management university staff, and three belonged to other organisations. Two of the women agreed to a second, longer interview. I also interviewed eighteen men, of whom four were students (three undergraduate and one postgraduate), eight were members of university staff (including three senior managers), and six belonged to other organisations.

I started each interview with an ethnographic and biographical approach that encouraged research participants to talk about their personal experiences and views of volunteering within the context of their own life events, and then moved on to a semi-structured section which addressed specific areas of interest. The interviews explored different meanings and ways of understanding the term 'volunteer'; perceived social,

professional and cultural encouragement or pressure to take part in some form of volunteering or community engagement activity; and the extent to which experiences of volunteering contrast with high-level institutional rhetoric and volunteer policies. Interview schedules were tailored slightly to reflect likely areas of interest for the four main groups represented in my research: staff volunteers, student volunteers, university management, and partner organisations. Where permission was given, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

During a period of time spent with the staff volunteering team in the first few months of fieldwork, I also produced a number of case studies for use at a volunteering event and for general recruitment. This exercise was less a direct part of my planned research, and more about my need to offer some tangible exchange for the assistance and support that I received from SVO during my fieldwork. All those involved agreed that I could use the case studies in my research. They were a close fit to my own areas of interest focusing on why and how staff members volunteer; what sort of experiences they had; and their perceptions about how staff volunteering is valued by colleagues, departmental managers and the University. As with the main set of interviews, case studies were based on recorded and transcribed interview data. The subset of data to be used in the case study was made available to the SVO team and approved by the staff volunteers before use; all other material remained confidential.

### ***Documentary Evidence***

Data from participant-observation activities and interviews were supplemented with documentation produced by different areas of the University, including strategy documents, information about university volunteering and engagement in websites, SVO/SCA databases and handbooks, and articles from student newspapers. Although offering a rich source of useful information about the different drivers, priorities and engagement activities within the University, this type of secondary evidence should nevertheless be treated with caution since it is neither peer-reviewed literature nor data collected specifically for this project.

I collected a wide range of additional material during fieldwork, beyond the interview transcripts, participant-observation notes and university strategy documents that formed the core of my data collection: for example, copies of college newsletters, posters, volunteering leaflets and marketing information. Some items offered useful additional data for future analysis; but sometimes I simply found that the act of physically handling and sorting relevant artefacts offered inspiration and insights into relationships, structures or particular events.

### ***Managing Data***

Returning to an earlier point in this chapter about the value or plausibility of grounded theory, and the need to find a balance between the voices of research participants and the researcher's active participation during all stages of the research process, there is the added complication of handling large amounts of data. Questions to be considered include: at what point in the process should raw data be reduced to what is arguably relevant to the research topic and question? By what criteria should that selection be made? How can the impact on research participant voices and priorities be minimised, whilst at the same time enabling the effective management of data? These questions are also critical when deciding what approaches to use during the stages of coding and analysis.

I applied qualitative forms of analysis to the data collected through participant-observation and semi-structured or biographical interviews, seeking patterns and themes emerging from interviews and fieldwork encounters. Recorded interviews were manually transcribed and coded; interview transcripts and my ethnographic diary were then further organised and coded into themes, using an MS Excel spreadsheet to assist in the manipulation of large segments of data. Low-level themes were refined and merged into higher level categories that addressed this project's key questions and areas of interest. In the next section, I address the analysis and coding process in more detail.

## **Coding and Analysis**

### ***Software vs Manual Coding***

Possibly because of the prevalence of software packages that are now available for performing qualitative analysis, e.g. Atlas TI (2014) or NVivo (2014), along with perceptions of their reliability and efficiency, I encountered implicit – and sometimes explicit – expectations that I would use such a package during this project. And yet this decision is far from obvious or easy, and whether or not to undertake manual or electronic coding depends on a number of factors, including available time, cost constraints, size of project, researcher preferences and experience, and research design (Saldaña 2013:26). There is no replacement for the human element of interpretation, data choice and use of intuition, and learning a new tool at the same time as undertaking a project can potentially lead to spending more time and cognitive effort on the tool than the data collection and analysis.

My solution to this dilemma was to combine a manual approach in the early stages of coding and analysis with limited use of the data management functions in MS Word and MS Excel at later stages; I did not use an integrated software package on this occasion. I started this process by becoming familiar with hard copy interview transcripts and diary entries, on which I highlighted, annotated and identified possible themes and first cycle codes – an extension of the far more informal review of ongoing interview transcripts – that informed later interviews and fieldwork encounters as well as providing the basis of further stages of analysis. Initial coding was refined in MS Excel, using the simple yet powerful filtering and sorting functions to manage and organise data at different levels of analysis, and to explore more abstract or related concepts in the text and code through higher level themes and categories.

### ***Coding***

Whilst it has developed and changed over the years, grounded theory is in principle characterised by an iterative process of data collection, analysis, category identification and theory generation, repeated until one reaches the point of theoretical saturation where all data is coded and no more themes emerge (Dey 2004:80). This classical

approach aims to extract and refine concepts through a somewhat messy process of constant comparison of emerging data, and to establish relationships within and between datasets and themes (Bryman 2008:415). In contrast, Dey's (2004) approach constrains his data collection, analysis and refinement within a more defined framework and to research questions that explore a specific social process, which he justifies as a trade-off: "depth of knowledge for breadth of inquiry" (Dey 2004:84). It is this latter approach that my own research more closely resembles, and in a further departure from classical grounded theory, I found that time constraints during the fieldwork period, the length of interviews and the time required for transcription meant that high-level ideas and themes initially emerged on a more ad hoc basis, captured in my memos and fieldnotes rather than through transcription and analysis of early interviews.

Although useful for guiding theoretical sampling and refining interview schedules, this does not reflect the idealistic but impractical goal of iterative data collection, transcription, analysis and refinement, proposed by early grounded theorists. The later stages of coding and analysis, however, were performed in a more conventional and structured manner, making extensive use of analytical memos which have traditionally been regarded as crucial to any grounded approach. Analytic memos reflect and organise early thoughts about data collection, interpretation, interesting areas to follow up, and potential new questions. They enable the researcher to engage critically with the data but on a more personal level than formal coding (Saldaña 2013:40) and form a "transitional process" between coding and writing-up, although the cut-off point between the two is not always fixed or clear (Saldaña 2013:50-51).

### ***Making Steps and Voices Explicit***

Grounded theory may be about giving a voice to research participants, but that voice needs to be analysed and interpreted, initially by the researcher and later by different audiences. There are consequently varying degrees of participant and researcher voice, and the balance changes throughout the different stages of research. The remainder of this section outlines a number of options that were appropriate for analysing this project's data, ranging from In Vivo coding that uses peoples' own words to researcher-

generated codes and categories, in which I attempt as far as possible to use or reflect research participant language. However, even where categories are based on grounded data and emergent codes with supporting evidence in the form of direct quotations, there is a significant element of active researcher involvement in the choice, exclusion, interpretation and explanation of that data.

### *Coding Cycles*

How much to code is always a central question (Saldaña 2013:16). In the case of my own research, after performing an informal pre-coding review of interview transcripts and other field data to identify potential codes and patterns, I decided to include the full content of every interview for early cycles of coding, but some data were subsequently discarded at a later stage in the process, where there was too great a digression from the project's key areas of interest. Interviews underwent a line-by-line coding process, although actual codes were not necessarily applied to each line; in some cases it was more appropriate to code a sentence or short paragraph. Reflecting the emphasis on participant-generated data, I did not use my ethnographic diary to generate low-level codes but all diary entries were reviewed for their relevance to key project questions and then organised in such a way as to support and supplement codes emerging from interview data.

Stages or cycles of coding serve to organise and refine data for different levels of analysis (Saldaña 2013:3). My choices for the early stages of coding can be located in what Saldaña (2013:83-84) describes as elemental methods that facilitate the later refinement and development of codes and themes. In Vivo coding focuses on research participants' voices and language, using single words or phrases, which is particularly useful for groups whose voice(s) may be marginalised (Saldaña 2013:91, 93). This is relevant when contrasting volunteer experiences and opinions with management policies, exploring the sometimes contentious relationships between university managers, staff and students, or highlighting perceived inequalities between the University and local community groups that may usually go unspoken or unnoticed. Process coding favours active terms that focus on actions, concepts and processes



(Saldaña 2013:96) and is useful for identifying interactions, roles and relationships, the relative status and hierarchical positions of stakeholders and organisations, and potential areas of conflict or change. Initial coding combines In Vivo and process coding; it is very open and flexible, breaking data into smaller parts for close review, comparison and contrast within and between datasets (Saldaña 2013:100-101). Particularly useful where different types of data are used, such as interviews, notes on participant-observation, and other supporting documents, it is also the closest match with the approach that I have used in early stages of coding and analysis.

Later cycles of coding involved re-coding original data to further refine, organise and categorise research material, in order to identify higher level themes and concepts, and the relationships tying codes and categories together (Saldaña 2013:207-208). It is common to find variations as well as relationships within codes and categories, and these irregularities, dissenting views and contradictions also form patterns within and between datasets (Saldaña 2013:6); indeed, as Agar (1980:10) observes, it is variation rather than uniformity which is characteristic of much narrative ethnographic research. Those relationships and variations form the basis of the sections in each main chapter of this thesis. It should be noted, however, that moving from low-level codes to higher level codes and categories arguably means that later cycles of coding become progressively less grounded, not only because of active researcher participation in interpretation and selection processes, but because codes generated from individual voices tend to become integrated into multi-vocal composites.

This later stage focused on consolidating similar areas of previously coded data into “emergent themes” within and across datasets: what Saldaña (2013:210) describes as pattern coding. I found this useful for identifying and exploring motivations for behaviour, especially in volunteer relationships and social or professional networks. Similarly, focused coding develops categories based on similarities, patterns and themes in the coded data (Saldaña 2013:213), but with the caveat that whilst categories are a useful way to organise data, one should not assume that codes gathered into a particular category necessarily share “a common set of features” (Dey 1999:69-70).

### *From Data to Theory: Codes, Themes and Categories*

Although data collection and analysis is – at least in principle – an iterative process in grounded theory, a clearer distinction is made between descriptive data and theory. Ideally, codes and categories represent ideas and concepts to be further developed through a closer analysis of data, exploring how and why those categories come into being, rather than simply providing a descriptive snap-shot of an observation or a phenomenon at a particular time and place (Charmaz 1990:1167). Hence the use of theoretical coding, the purpose of which is to identify a key (core) theme and theory of research that addresses or integrates all other codes and categories and best explains the topic or phenomenon that is being researched (Strauss and Corbin 1998:144-145; Saldaña 2013:223). However, in the event that a key theory cannot be developed from the analysed data, Saldaña (2013:252) states: “I will be satisfied with my construction of a *key assertion*... a summative and data-supported statement about the *particulars* of a research study, rather than the suggested generalizable and transferable meanings of my findings to other settings and contexts”.

Saldaña’s statement is in keeping with this research, which takes place in an ethnographic setting, where there is always an element of doubt about the degree to which results and/or theory can be transferred beyond the field or population of interest. Furthermore, some classical grounded theorists (e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1998:281; Glaser 2005:17 cited in Saldaña 2013:224) have argued that codes applying only to a limited number of interviews or field encounters, whilst interesting and instructive, are insufficiently supported by evidence to be regarded as appropriate candidates for a central theme. Saldaña (2013:227) offers two qualifications to this point: firstly, that codes which are not widespread enough to suggest an emergent theory can still be used to provide useful categories with explanatory power; and secondly, that quantity alone should not be the criteria for identifying potential key categories or emergent theories. I have adhered to this more flexible approach which allows for a wide-ranging selection of relevant categories and themes that form the structural outline of each of the following chapters. Rather than looking for original theories or one key theme, I have

coded, analysed and interpreted data within the framework of pre-existing theory, for the most part focusing on tensions within the reciprocal gift.

### ***Integrating the Research Data***

Some methods and themes are more vulnerable than others to criticisms of representing a particular agenda rather than the 'truth', which is itself a partial and contested concept. In particular, themes emerging from interviews and other fieldwork encounters that are based on narratives and experiences may be difficult to verify. The combination of grounded and thematic types of analysis and wider ethnographic knowledge from a variety of sources results in new avenues of exploration, and more complex and nuanced levels of understanding, compared to approaching the issue from one perspective (Agar 1987:123-124).

### **Ethics and Reflexivity**

#### ***Situating Researcher, Research and Audience***

The fieldworker brings his or her total past experience into the field (Agar 1980:92, 98), and the characteristics, history and events that make up an individual's reflexivity are increasingly regarded not only as inevitable but of great value (Okely 2009:3). There is a continual need for personal, cultural and intellectual reflexivity, and awareness that the researcher's experiences and preconceptions will affect choices of research topic and methodology, the broader research process, and relationships made in the field (Cohen 1987:203-204; Davies 1999:3).

Whilst the researcher is not necessarily in a position of greater power than research participants when accessing a community or eliciting information, the balance of power is still generally in the researcher's favour when interpreting and presenting findings (Mullings 1999:338). However, the concept of ethnographic authority has moved through a number of stages in relation to both field of study and audience. The traditional idea of representation has given way in turn to discourse, to the avoidance of

representation and, most recently, to a post-modern idea of co-production in which an ethnographic account is read and understood within the framework of the reader's own experiences and reflexivity, which is not necessarily that of the researcher, or of the society of interest (Strathern 1991:7) or even other readers. The link between research decisions, changing degrees of ethnographic authority, and involvement with the society or group of interest, illustrates the intimate relationship that exists between reflexivity and ethics.

The extent to which people are prepared to share information is closely connected to the degree of trust that they have in the researcher; sometimes this emerges from a relationship developed over time, and on other occasions may be in response to the perceived role or status of the researcher. Almost everyone that I interviewed in the course of this project, whether university staff, students or volunteer organisers, had a good understanding of the social research process, which is perhaps unsurprising given the environments in which they operate. However, it is crucial to remain aware of the ethical implications of this type of work since research participants may misunderstand or forget the nature of the research 'relationship', especially over time or in a less formal fieldwork environment. This awareness was particularly relevant where the people I was interacting with were also known to me as volunteers, university colleagues or college friends. It also highlights the importance of informed consent as a central theme in ethical guidelines (ASA 2011).

### ***Informed Consent, Anonymity and Confidentiality***

I provided anyone who agreed in principle to take part in interview sessions with a brief outline of the project and information about informed consent, their role in the research process, and the ways in which I intended to use their data. Informed Consent forms confirm anonymity but with the caveat that information about roles and activities may suggest identity on occasion, particularly in a relatively small environment or community setting. One way to mitigate this situation is by removing or changing names and identifying information; another is to create composite people or locations. In both cases, there is a need to balance discretion with an accurate representation of

data. It was not always practical to obtain written informed consent for participant-observation, especially for spontaneous encounters or large events. However, this project did not involve any covert research; peoples' privacy was respected and no-one was misled about the reasons for my presence or involvement in volunteer-related activities. Verbal consent to participate in this study was obtained prior to including data from individual or small group encounters, and information about my research was provided to anyone expressing an interest.

The dilemma of whether or not to identify institutions or organisations is compounded when researching somewhere as easily identifiable as Durham University. Hiding the identity of such a distinctive institution is very difficult (Cohen 1987:206), which in turn makes it relatively easy to guess the identity of some individuals based on their roles or activities within faculties, colleges, societies or as external partner organisations. Furthermore, volunteering and engagement activities on both campuses of Durham University have developed within a very specific historical and socio-economic context. Without acknowledging the complicated relationship between the University, Durham and the surrounding regions of the North East, much of the information gathered during the research process would have limited value. The compromise that I use is to identify Durham University and the formal volunteer organisations therein, but to disguise the identities of external partner organisations, and to change or remove names of individuals who helped with my research.

Anonymity is not the same as confidentiality, which was also extended to anyone taking part in this project. This returns to the idea of trust and respect being crucial to any relationship, and that information shared during the course of the research process should be regarded as privileged, so that using it in no way compromises an individual's or group's wellbeing, reputation or position. It became clear quite early on during fieldwork that this notion extended beyond my own research, informing the ethical values expressed by several of the staff, students and volunteer organisers that I talked to. In several cases, students told me that they were introduced to voluntary organisations as part of their own academic research, and subsequently stayed on as volunteers. Not only did they have to reconcile the requirements of ethical research with

those of volunteering, but they had to take both into consideration when speaking with me, particularly when their volunteering activities involved working with vulnerable individuals or groups.

Although I was not seeking to address controversial topics in my research, this project explores explicitly the types of values, norms and ideological beliefs which may cause people to question the nature and function of volunteering and other forms of giving, as well as the motives of others involved in volunteer activities or management. There is further potential for anxiety when probing for information during interviews or any participant-observation interaction, where somebody may reveal more than they intended. For these reasons, the researcher should at all times remain aware of cultural and personal differences in style and attitudes to privacy (Bernard 2002:216), and make it clear that interview data and other material may be withdrawn at any time. It was not uncommon during interviews for people to seek reassurances about confidentiality, particularly after making what might be perceived as negative comments, and on one occasion I was asked to omit a passage critical of the University from my analysis. One person declined to have our interview recorded and transcribed; it was the transcription rather than the recording that was problematic. I had an injury at that time, which prevented me from writing, and there was no objection to recording the interview in order to make less detailed notes at a later date.

### *Insider/Outsider Dilemmas*

My own volunteering activities vary in terms of motive, commitment and types of activity. I volunteer for fun, for interest, to use my skills and develop new ones; it offers a chance to get outside and blow away the academic cobwebs; it is also an opportunity for research. Whilst I enjoy volunteering and feel a certain sense of duty to share my time and skills with others, I have no strong commitment to a particular cause.

However, I find that I tend to volunteer on a more regular basis where I feel an element of obligation or empathy. Reflecting what many people have told me about their own volunteering, different motives are linked to different activities, which consequently affect my subjective experiences, goals and interactions. Nevertheless, it would be

dangerous to assume that this offers me any privileged insight into the way other people value or understand volunteering.

As a postgraduate student at Durham University, a ‘native’ of one of its colleges, and a volunteer both within and outside the University – but not a member of staff – I am situated as both insider and outsider (Mullings 1999:340). Time and familiarity with my environment did not necessarily make the process of fieldwork any easier, reflecting the view that the degree to which a fieldworker becomes embedded in a community often depends on early or existing relationships, but whilst introductions may prove helpful in making some contacts they can also be a hindrance (Agar 1980:79; Sixsmith et al. 2003:579). I found this to be the case when an attempt by one staff member to introduce me to a student volunteer organiser backfired with the result that all future attempts to make contact were rejected. It is likely that I was identified by the student as ‘belonging’ to a group with whom it turned out there were some long-standing tensions.

Even where a researcher has been in the field for some time and established working relationships, this does not mean that observations cease to be primarily the “descriptions of an outsider” (Kusenbach 2003:459), and acceptance by one or more groups does not necessarily entail greater understanding (Geertz 1974:45). The observations may become richer, but they are still rooted in the experiences and interpretations of the researcher rather than the individuals or communities of interest (Kusenbach 2003:460). Any attempt to observe social phenomena as an objective outsider, and to privilege the view of the researcher without having consideration for the social context and situation may lead to a distorted picture (Bourdieu 1977:1).

Conversely, one of the dangers of studying social phenomena and relationships in a familiar environment or culture is that one becomes culturally complacent, and makes possibly unfounded assumptions about attitudes or behaviour due to over-familiarity (Davies 1999:3). A central concern in the interpretation of interview and other fieldwork data, even where both researcher and research participants are from a similar environment or culture and who share the same language, is that there will be particular

variations and nuances in norms, assumptions and the use of language which may lead to distortion and misunderstanding in interpretations (Becker and Geer 2004:247). A related problem can occur where the person being interviewed shares assumptions of sameness with the researcher, and may therefore fail to challenge or check their understanding. My own level of integration therefore made it crucial to remain critically aware of the risk, during interviewing and participant-observation, of both over-estimating sameness and under-estimating difference. An additional factor to be taken into consideration at Durham University, which increases the potential for both cultural misunderstanding and the richness of data, is its large contingent of international staff and students. The social and cultural diversity of the University is reflected in experiences, attitudes and expectations of volunteering, and adds an interesting dimension to researching 'at home'.



## CHAPTER 3 – VOLUNTEERING AND THE ‘DURHAM DIFFERENCE’

### **Introduction**

Engagement and volunteering occur at many levels in Higher Education and for many reasons; there is great variation within and between institutions, in relation to both participation and the degree of university management support (Robinson and Hudson 2013:190). Durham University is often described as having a strong tradition of community engagement and volunteering (Gregory 2010:2), with a commitment to working with local communities for mutual benefit and to develop long-term, sustainable relationships (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008:1).

In this chapter, I briefly outline some of the ways that Durham University enables, manages or constrains staff and student volunteering, and introduce organisations and individuals that have informed my research. Official accounts about the development of centralised staff and student volunteering programmes are contrasted with some of the perspectives, stories and experiences of those I spoke with during my fieldwork. Finally, I set the scene for questions, debates and contradictions about volunteering in UK Higher Education which are explored at a more theoretical and critically discursive level in later chapters through the lens of gift exchange.

### **Student Volunteering**

#### *Just Part of the ‘Student Experience’?*

The Durham University Strategy (DU 2010a) illustrates an awareness of the need to engage with public engagement discourses and also to prepare students for a competitive job market, through its emphasis on the importance of educating students for leadership and social responsibility. The University’s concept of a ‘rounded education’ is manifested not only through academic programmes but “through opportunities to excel outside [the] formal learning environment” (DU 2010a:16). It is for this reason that Michael, a senior university manager, told me that volunteering “fits

within our educational strategy”. In spite of the recent emergence of optional academic modules that involve elements of volunteering, and the mandatory community placements required of medical students at the Queen’s Campus (Russell 2011a), student volunteering at Durham University continues to be regarded as an “active choice” that remains separate or at least additional to a mostly academic curriculum (Gregory 2010:4-5). Students are nevertheless strongly encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities, many of which are recognised as volunteering although, as I discuss in later chapters, this recognition is sometimes contested.

Something that almost every person I spoke with from Durham University agrees upon is that whilst it is important to get a good degree, there is also an expectation that students will gain additional extra-curricular skills and experiences. As one postgraduate told me, “there’s all that about the ‘Durham Difference’”, and student volunteering is regarded by the University as a useful opportunity for offering those developmental and extra-curricular activities. Undergraduates Mia and Andrew, for example, are close friends who volunteer together and work on the same college projects. They did not get involved in volunteering immediately in their first year but have always been aware of the opportunities available to them:

It’s drummed into us, it’s not your degree, don’t let your degree get in the way of your education.<sup>2</sup> Do volunteering, do extra things, so students would be silly, I think, not to do anything outside of their degree, and that’s definitely kind of what’s put across, especially here [*Mia: Undergraduate volunteer, college project leader*]

One of the first things I was told by a staff member who manages many of the sports volunteering and outreach projects reinforces this view:

It gives the individuals the opportunity to show themselves what they are capable of and increases their skill set [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

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<sup>2</sup> This is in reference to a quotation attributed to Bill Bryson, Chancellor of Durham University between 2005 and 2011, which he used in a number of Matriculation and Graduation ceremonies.

Rachel went on to say that Durham students have “the potential to make a huge difference” and that organised university volunteering is increasingly geared towards student interests and expectations.

This combination of service and self-interest, which I address further in Part II of this thesis in relation to tensions within gift theory, is a common theme that is mentioned both inside and outside the University. Ben was a student volunteer at Durham University, as both undergraduate and postgraduate. He is now a senior officer with Durham Constabulary and puts a lot of emphasis on extra-curricular experience when talking to current students at the start of term or at college careers events:

Don't worry about your degree. Get your degree, because it will be a brilliant degree from Durham University and you won't have a problem for the vast majority of occupations around that. How do you set yourself apart from the crowd? One of the things you can do is through the extra activities that you do, whether that's getting a job, dealing with people, experience of the work place or through internships or through volunteering, or a combination thereof [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

Robin is a recent graduate who spent a year working for the University in a sabbatical staff role, to organise staff and student volunteering. Like Ben, she was an active volunteer during her time at Durham and told me that it is not uncommon for enthusiastic students to get involved in “a bit of everything”, including college projects, university activities and often more independent activities as well. Charlotte, an active undergraduate volunteer organiser, made a more pragmatic observation shared by many of the people I spoke with: that activities with the greatest value tend to be those that can be documented, evaluated and put on a CV. This supports the widespread view that student volunteering is a valuable way of gaining work experience and increasing employability (CEEC 2011:5; Robinson et al. 2012:39).

### *Volunteering Organisations or Organisations Who Also Volunteer?*

Durham University combines college projects and volunteering activities with university-wide organisations, all with varying degrees of autonomy, as part of a wider environment that encourages participation and leadership in a variety of societies and sports teams (Gregory 2010:4). In addition to organisations explicitly dedicated to student outreach and volunteering, which are introduced in later sections, I have come across a number of societies focusing on more specialist activities that include an element of volunteering without this being a central part of their identity. The Conservation Society (DU 2014f) and the Durham University Pro-Bono Society (DU 2014g), for example, include activities “which could be considered as student volunteering” (Gregory 2010:10) although each reflects their society’s aims rather than responding to more general community needs. In the case of the Pro-Bono Society, known as DUPS, there is also a close association between its activities and its situation as an “umbrella organisation” for existing Law School projects. Without actually forming part of the curriculum, all of its projects are designed to enable students to apply what they have learned in their lectures, “for the benefit of the local community” (DU 2014f). Other groups, such as Nightline<sup>3</sup>, tend to be identified as volunteers because they help others at considerable personal cost.

Finally, there are those extra-curricular activities that are more difficult to classify. The Durham Award, for example, is run by the Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre (CEEC) and “gives you the recognition for all the things you do outside of your degree” (CEEC 2011:11). It is intended to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate personal development as well as increasing their employability, through a combination of university involvement, community engagement – including volunteering – and work experience (DU 2014h). The structure of the Durham Award is not dissimilar to the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, also available through the University. With one exception, the opinion of those I spoke with is that the community engagement stage of neither scheme should be regarded as volunteering, because the emphasis is placed more on personal gain than service to others – a theme that I discuss

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<sup>3</sup> Nightline is a confidential listening service run by student volunteers, which currently operates across forty universities in the UK (DU 2012a).

further in Chapter 6 and which supports the view that the classification of students as volunteers or non-volunteers can be viewed as too simplistic (Smith et al. 2010:69-70).

### *Inside or Outside the University?*

It is not unusual for community-focused volunteering to be classified and managed separately to internal activities such as running university clubs or sitting on committees (Darwen and Rannard 2011:178). Similarly, a national umbrella organisation, Student Volunteering England<sup>4</sup> (2004 cited in Darwen and Rannard 2011:177; Squirrell 2009:14), emphasises the value of centrally organised volunteering in local communities, which raises questions about control, agenda, and the potential exclusion of internal or independent voluntary activities. Student Volunteering England went further, excluding all internal volunteering roles from their definition of formal volunteering (Squirrell 2009:14). This reflects a concern expressed by one student volunteer organiser I spoke with, which I explore further in Chapters 4 and 8. She told me that students can do the same thing for their Junior Common Room (JCR) and for a charity; in many cases, the former will not be classed as volunteering but the latter will. However, Smith et al. (2010:78) warns against too extreme a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ volunteering, arguing that “students who volunteer are active both within their university and in the wider community, and future researchers, educators, and policy makers would do well to recognise, and measure, both internal and external volunteering contributions”.

It is this more balanced approach that fits most comfortably with the views of most volunteers and managers that I spoke with. Robert, a senior university manager, argues that internal activities are not only considered to be volunteering, but enhance the University’s ability to contribute to wider society:

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<sup>4</sup> Student Volunteering England merged with the larger national organisation, Volunteering England, in 2007 (Finnegan and Brewis 2012)

I think at the end of the day it's all volunteering because part of it is that the University itself is a community and you put stuff back into that, and in fact, putting stuff back into the University community is maybe one of the ways of developing the University in a way that allows it, as an institution, to make a bigger contribution as a university [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

At a more fundamental level, the widespread opinion from staff and student volunteers, as well as volunteer organisers, is that if an unpaid activity involves giving up time to help others, then it is volunteering because, as Robin explained:

They are giving up a lot of their time to help causes, whether it be in the Uni or outside the Uni [*Robin: SCA staff*]

However, a very small number of volunteers, whilst not rejecting the idea of internal volunteering entirely, place greater value on activities that are directed outwards for the benefit of others. Simon, an undergraduate volunteer, argues that it is too extreme to say internal activities cannot be volunteering but not unreasonable to suggest that external, community-facing volunteering may have greater value for all parties involved.

Samantha agrees, saying:

I think I like the value they've placed on the external side of it, and I think there is an argument to be made that...doing something for a group of people that you don't interact with day to day has more, sort of, kind of, honour or purity to it [*Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer*]

What tends to emerge in the following chapters is that regardless of formal definitions, parameters and value judgements, there are certain activities that students are likely to put on their CV under the category of 'volunteering', including organisational roles in clubs or societies and participation in college Executive Committees.

I shall now go on to describe some of the formal, university-based organisations under which student and staff volunteering is carried out at Durham University.

## Student Community Action

Approximately three quarters of universities included in a recent study currently have an SCA group or similar organisation (Robinson et al. 2012:37). Durham University SCA has existed since 1989, and until very recently it operated as an independent charity based in the Students' Union (DU 2014i). Whilst its physical location remains unchanged, SCA gave up its independent status and became a Durham Student Organisation<sup>5</sup> in 2012, with implications for structure and governance which are discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

A Student Executive Committee organises the day-to-day running of volunteer activities. Members are elected annually at the SCA Annual General Meeting, and supported by a team of project leaders. Whilst SCA is a university-wide organisation, it also has a presence in individual colleges through its SCA Ambassadors, whose job it is to promote activities and encourage students to get involved. In addition to the student-run Executive Committee, SCA has three full-time staff members who are responsible for the overall running of projects on both campuses and ensuring that SCA complies with university regulations. Described as student-led and community-centred, SCA “has long been at the centre of the Durham student experience” (DU 2014i) and increasingly reflects the wider University ethos of combining service with self-interest. As one of the SCA staff members explained, student-led projects meet the aim of the University to develop student employability:

I think from the University's point of view it probably is better because it means they can develop their skills and stuff [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

I am told by both students and staff that there is a lot of pressure on students to get involved with some form of extra-curricular activity, although this is not necessarily made explicit. Andrew, a third year undergraduate, describes a “feeling” that lots of people at Durham do some volunteering:

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<sup>5</sup> The Durham Student Organisation framework was introduced in 2011, enabling those student organisations not recognised as Student Unions or independent charities to operate within the organisational and governance structure of the University (DU 2014n)

There's no top-down 'you should do this, you should do that', but I think it's something you pick up on as you go through Durham [*Andrew: Undergraduate volunteer*]

This can be a source of stress where students want to get involved with high profile projects which are more competitive due to popularity or limited places, such as the Durham Award (DU 2014h) or Van Mildert College's Young Person's Project (DU 2014j). As Pippa explained:

I was aware of it when I started university but even like, four years on, I think it's probably getting more and more stressful to make sure you're doing all of that stuff [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Volunteering can be seen as offering a more accessible and inclusive option because, as a former SCA Coordinator explained, SCA will usually be able to offer something to any students who want to volunteer:

If you want to do something you will be able to do something, even if it's not what you wanted to do overall [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

David, a former SCA Director, told me that SCA had about six hundred student volunteers in 2012 who contributed over ten thousand hours on both campuses; Pippa, in her role as SCA staff member, offered a similar figure for the following year. Although Pippa acknowledged that being a registered SCA member does not equate to active involvement, she maintains that there does seem to be a general increase in volunteer activity:

We had a thousand people at the Project Fair...and a lot of our projects are at capacity [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

More than thirty-nine SCA projects (DU 2014k) are open to all students, although some require volunteers to undertake training before becoming active participants, especially those involving children. SCA volunteers have traditionally been very keen to take part in projects that involve children and young people. David's own introduction to SCA was through CATSS (Children Achieving through Student Support), which has always been a popular and high profile project with a high level of competition from students who want to get involved. He also highlighted the value of 1-1 tutoring, which attracts over one hundred students every year who help young people in GCSEs and A-Levels.



Just some of the many other activities include tea parties, befriending older people, working with mental health organisations, dog walking and conservation projects.

## **Staff Volunteering**

### ***SVO and the Phoenix Project***

Whilst becoming increasingly established in the private sector, “staff volunteering in universities is relatively new and underdeveloped” (Robinson et al. 2012:39). Durham University’s formal support for a staff volunteering programme emerged from the Phoenix Project: an initiative based upon existing community engagement and volunteering activities in the University, and with the aim of creating a more coherent strategy and framework to unite “staff, students, facilities, expertise and networks” (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008:1). SVO was originally one of the four main strands of the Phoenix Project, in which it was proposed that all staff be given the opportunity to volunteer for a certain number of days during work time. The remaining strands were more abstract and appear to have been only partially implemented, but nevertheless reflect the University’s stated aims of extending staff volunteering to both campuses (Phoenix@Queens), to develop the University’s role as being both in and of the region (Phoenix Places) and finally, to encourage the local voluntary and community sector to work more closely with the University (Phoenix Challenge) (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008:5).

Although not recognised as volunteering activities by the University, SVO also helps students to run various community-based projects – mainly for modules in the Business School and Computer Sciences – because, as Nicola commented, there was nowhere else for them to go. She explained that this is due to a lack of centralised university organisation to coordinate the various community-based learning activities that go on across different departments.

### *Five Days*

There are other university ESV schemes, including Birmingham, LSE, Imperial College and Bristol, which offer opportunities to volunteer during paid working time, and Durham is amongst those that offer a generous number of days and enjoy high levels of participation (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008:5; Gollan 2011:4). When I first met Robert, a senior manager who has been closely involved with the development of the University's public and community engagement programmes, he spoke at length about the Phoenix Project that was finally launched in 2009 and "regarded nationally as very innovative". Robert describes Durham University as being "ahead of the curve" for volunteering and engagement initiatives in Higher Education, especially in relation to staff volunteering. Historically, he said, there have been lots of student volunteer groups at Durham University, ranging from SCA and other student-led societies to college projects and more independent organisations. What makes Durham "more unusual and more distinctive" has been the introduction of the SVO scheme with its five days of volunteering during work time, subject to Line Managers' approval. Offering a more tangible illustration of Robert's positive outlook, Durham University received the UK Volunteering Forum's *Investing in Volunteers for Employers* (iVE) accreditation for its SVO scheme in 2012, and was the first of the five North East universities to receive such an award (DU 2012c; iVE 2012).

In the early days of SVO, there was some confusion about how many days were available for staff to volunteer during working time. James, for example, became aware of the scheme when it first started in 2009 and immediately expressed an interest, but he found that:

They were a bit disorganised to start with, because, for example, they didn't have any concept of how many days you could have and that was something that came later [*James: Staff volunteer*]

The value of being given time off to volunteer in work time was frequently mentioned by people I spoke to both within and outside the University, and is used to exemplify the support and commitment of top management to the volunteering programme. Bee describes the allowance as very generous, and a signal of the University's commitment to volunteering:

It's very keen, or why would it give five days per person, per member of staff, to enable them to go out and volunteer? [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

However, the constraints placed on how many people are actually able to use all this time is rarely mentioned.

It is often assumed that all university staff members have the right to volunteer in work time and some senior managers perpetuate this belief. Robert, for example, repeated the erroneous view that:

SVO offers all staff the right to five days volunteering in work time per year [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Neil, an Experience Durham manager, clarified to me that although all members of staff can in principle apply for up to five days at their Line Manager's discretion, this is not an entitlement but a provision that comes with the caveat that the time request fits within the "operational work of the department". Another Experience Durham staff member told me that the offer of up to five days to volunteer in working time is based on what some commercial organisations offer:

I don't know if there was ever any consideration given that if every staff member took the five days, what that would actually mean [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

Nicola acknowledged that it would be problematic if everyone took the full allowance of five days to volunteer during working hours, especially people working in smaller teams.

All staff volunteers that I spoke with agree that support from top management is crucial, but most add that the SVO staff volunteering scheme would not work unless Line Managers were also supportive. June, an administrator in the Business School who also organises most of their staff volunteering, told me that managers are reasonably supportive because staff volunteering has been approved from the very top within the Business School. However, she went on to say that it depends very much on your role and who your manager is:

I think some teams find it more difficult than others [*June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Such views offer some support for literature arguing that a commonly cited barrier to participation in staff volunteering activities is lack of Line Manager support, either through poor communication or an unwillingness to allow staff time out for other activities (Brewis 2004:23). This would suggest that top-level support and a formal policy is not always enough for the effective implementation of ESV programmes.

### ***Access to Volunteering: Academics and Support Staff***

Bussell and Forbes (2005; 2008:376) explore how far volunteering is integrated into wider university culture, highlighting what they perceive as a need to make the most of Higher Education core competencies in ways that link staff volunteering to education. Such a view implies that most university staff volunteers will be drawn from the ranks of academics, and whilst this may not always be the case they observe that volunteering is easier for some staff than others, depending on their role, seniority and available time. Awareness of ESV programmes is often limited, especially in relation to what is available and how to get involved. Participants in Bussell and Forbes' (2005:15) study felt that policies should apply equally to all types of staff, in all faculties and departments, and that all eligible staff should be made aware of their right to take part in the programme. This reflects research data suggesting that marketing and recruitment messages do not always reflect a problem, recognised by Brewis (2004:21-22), that access to ESV programmes is by no means equal for all staff and is linked implicitly to levels of education and job seniority.

It has been suggested that academics may find it easier than support staff to take part in ESV activities because their timetables tend to be more flexible and they generally have greater autonomy over their activities and role (Bussell and Forbes 2005:14). And yet, a common message from SVO and departmental volunteer organisers at Durham University is that support and administrative staff are more interested in getting involved than academics, and that the negative response from some academics to invitations to get involved in volunteering can be disheartening:

You rarely get academic staff; it's mainly the support side who volunteer  
*[Caroline: SCA staff]*

The missing link for the SVO programme, said Nicola, is engaging academic staff. She told me that one way to attract academics might be to target “the programme directors”, who are very good at engaging with community partners on some of the student placement courses. Another possibility might be to develop more specialist niche roles, drawing on a particular individual's skill sets:

It's something that I can entice an academic with *[Nicola: Experience Durham staff]*

Neil has anecdotal evidence and stories about which groups tend to volunteer more from within the University's staff. The Business School, Procurement, and the Support Services team from Queen's Campus, for example, are all encouraged by management to volunteer. He suggests that academics are less likely to volunteer through SVO, “for all sorts of reasons”: they're too busy, their roles are more spontaneous and less structured, they do extra work already which is not regarded as volunteering, or they have a different self-image, although this is not to say that academics never volunteer. Robin, who has spent just under a year trying to recruit more staff members for SVO activities, suggests that it may simply be that academics are more likely to volunteer in their own time than during work, not only because their schedules are often less structured than other types of staff, but because some departments may already be incorporating engagement activities into their main areas of research.

### ***Barriers to Volunteering: Occupational Status***

Staff volunteering is regarded by some as a day off. James put together a team from his department to paint a Scout Hut, and said some of those who didn't want to do it grumbled that the volunteers were getting a free day's holiday. Greg, too, said that he finds some people just do not want to volunteer and resent those that do if it is in working time, saying things like:

I'm not doing that kind of rubbish...you just run off and we'll do all the work *[Greg: Staff volunteer]*

There may also be a misperception amongst some staff members and their managers that taking a paid day off to volunteer will burden those who are left with making up the 'lost' time. Beth is the SVO Advocate for her college, and in principle has the job of raising awareness and encouraging all staff to get involved in the volunteering programme. In reality, she said, it is difficult to engage with those "frontline delivery staff" who have traditionally been harder to reach, and she suggests that SVO could target different groups of staff, especially porters, housekeeping and other non-academic occupations. Beth is aware that depending on their occupation and status, some staff have greater flexibility to volunteer in work time than others:

If I said, right, I'd like to take a half a day in whatever time, then we can plan for it. But the head chef can't...It's regrettable, isn't it? *[Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer]*

What these examples illustrate is that attitudes and volunteer behaviours vary between people with different occupational status (Peloza and Hassay 2006:375). Durham University offers a flexible working environment for some, but the sort of flexibility that enables staff to volunteer during working hours depends very much on role and position:

Volunteering in Higher Education is down to when you're available  
*[Greg: Staff volunteer]*

The SVO team are aware of this problem, and Robin acknowledged that it is unusual for Line Managers to support volunteering requests from catering and cleaning staff, who are seen as being there to just do their job:

We've tried, but they're just not keen *[Robin: SCA staff]*

One solution that has been implemented at several colleges is to combine staff 'away days' with community volunteering projects. However, there is some doubt about whether college and staff team days are really voluntary:

We've already had anecdotal stories that some of them aren't all that keen, and because it is a team day, it's very much a compulsory day to go and do it *[Nicola: Experience Durham staff]*

In spite of these doubts, Robin told me that one recent project involved clearing and tidying the lake at one of the colleges, and SVO encouraged catering and cleaning staff

from the college to take part. The advantages of doing the work on their regular site, she said, were that they could see the benefits and were able to do a couple of hours here and there throughout their working day without appearing to take too much “time off”.

### ***Team Challenges***

The aim at Durham University has been to get at least 10% (350) of staff involved in university-organised volunteering (Robinson and Hudson 2013:191), and Team Challenges are one-off day events frequently regarded as an opportunity to increase overall levels of staff volunteering. From her perspective as both staff volunteer and SVO Advocate, Beth told me that Team Challenges serve as a useful introduction for new volunteers, often addressing concerns that staff may have about time or commitment, and the fear that:

If you decide to be a volunteer, you’ve signed up for life sort of thing, like you have to do this for evermore [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

Team Challenges are also often approached by staff as a welcome diversion, and a chance to get out of the office:

Most of the time we were gardening in the absolute pigging rain, it was lashing down, but it was all good fun [*Mary: Local volunteer coordinator*]

For others, the way in which Team Challenges have emerged as a preferred approach to staff volunteering is cause for some concern, particularly because a large group doing one team event is probably less effective than many individuals volunteering for different projects and groups. Bob argues that there has been a shift in volunteering from quality to quantity, with a focus on numbers and targets that may be partly connected to the location of SVO within Experience Durham, with its emphasis on sport and goals:

Now...it’s all about the bloody numbers, I think, especially when it became part of Experience Durham... You either win or you lose, it’s 3-nil or it’s not. So to get to the point of having over 10% of the workforce volunteering, the best, the quickest way of doing that is to set the rules of the game...quickest way of doing that seems to be to set up Challenge

Team events where you get fifteen people at a go, you know? [Bob: University academic, staff volunteer]

Bob goes on to say that Team Challenges are easier to organise and a great photo opportunity, but fail to use people's skills and expertise, which "is OK, but it's bloody limited really".

### ***Working with Limited Resources***

Most university funding of SVO – Neil wouldn't give me an exact figure – goes on the salaries for the SVO staff. There is not much left for an operational budget but Neil said that not much is needed beyond a small budget for training. Both Neil and Nicola say that they would like to spend more time on their volunteering roles but limited resources and other demands on their time mean that they need to review how to do things. Neil commented that SVO is considering focusing on fewer organisations but in more detail, observing that they have to "cut resources to suit their cloth". Nicola is more positive, saying that in its first few years there was a lot of work done to promote SVO and to engage departments but the team now feels that the programme has reached a natural equilibrium:

We've now reached five hundred and eighty registered volunteers, and we've got a good network across the University. We've reached the stage now where departments are actually contacting us to come forward to do Team Challenges and that keeps us fairly busy... So there's just a natural programme that is now rolling without us actually proactively really supporting it [Nicola: Experience Durham staff]

She goes on to clarify that this approach is at least partly because a lack of resources makes it difficult to manage a larger number of partner organisations or to keep track of volunteers. There has been a gradual move towards more effective monitoring of all university-supported volunteering, said Nicola, but it is taking time and the problems encountered support the view in existing literature that evaluating the level and effectiveness of staff volunteering is often problematic due to a lack of data, time and commitment (cf. Benjamin 2007:80).



## **Durham and Queen's Volunteers**

Talking about the impact that the University has had on the region, Robert, who has played a central role in the development of its social and economic agenda, observed that it can be easy to forget that Durham University is now split across two campuses. Historically, he continued, Queen's was not developed as a campus in its own right and there can be a suggestion that it has been perceived as different, lesser and 'Other'. I also found this perception to be apparent in some of the comments made about student volunteering.

Until recently, Queen's Campus has often been referred to as something of an afterthought by student volunteers based in Durham City. I met Charlotte when she was a third year undergraduate, and in her first year as the Queen's Campus representative on the SCA Executive Committee. She told me that she had been "kind of aware that SCA was in Durham", and was shocked to discover that until she recently got involved, there was no student volunteer representative for Queen's Campus. There are now two students organising the Queen's Campus volunteering, and more students from Queen's are starting to do volunteer projects in both Stockton and Durham:

It's kind of bridged that gap...we're not just one campus, we're a part of Durham University which is serving the whole of the North East  
*[Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer]*

For some, there is a similar concern about staff volunteering, and that not being based in Durham will make people feel left out. Bee organises volunteering for staff based at the Queen's Campus, and she is worried that staff from some departments may not always feel that they have the same opportunities for organised volunteering because projects are more likely to take place in or near Durham. Another view of the Durham-Queen's dynamic proposed by Pippa, as Queen's SCA Officer, is that staff and students at Queen's are perfectly happy to be separate and that they should celebrate what they do in their own right:

I don't think they understand, people from Queen's are proud that they're from Queen's, like, they don't want to just come to Durham all the time  
*[Pippa: SCA staff]*

However, even students who are proud to be at Queen's acknowledge that with approximately two thousand students at the moment, they have less experience and less capacity to fill the same number of projects as Durham:

You might have an amazing idea for a project but if you haven't got the volunteers to kind of make it happen...you can't really make it work  
*[Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer]*

The journey between the two campuses takes about forty minutes by bus, which is free for students, but the perception gap can seem much bigger. Students at Queen's are aware of the reluctance felt by many students in Durham to come to their campus on a regular basis, although as Robin commented:

I think it's on a lot of people's Bucket List to go to Queen's before they leave Durham *[Robin: SCA staff]*

In spite of the growing relationship between the two campuses, Pippa said that there is still an assumption that for student volunteering at Queen's to be sustainable, representatives on the SCA Executive Committee need to be willing to travel to Durham.

## **Experience Durham**

Part of the shift from peripheral to mainstream university activity has been the transition of student volunteering from being an informal, extra-curricular service to an organised and integral part of university experience, although this is more apparent in some institutions and disciplines than others (Brewis 2010:439). However, without formalised, top-down management commitment, the sort of innovation and change that accompanies volunteering programmes is unlikely to have lasting, structural effect (Brewis 2010:447). As one senior manager said to me, providing an infrastructure for staff and student volunteering indicates that Durham University values these activities, but it still relies on continuing support and financial investment from senior management:

The importance of that was the political importance of actually signalling, we recognise that this is an important thing to be doing  
*[Robert: Senior university manager]*

The most recent signal sent by the University has been the creation of Experience Durham, an umbrella organisation that pulls together student sport, music and the arts, as well as volunteering and outreach, with the goal of developing “a coherent model of extra-curricular activities” (DU 2010b:1).

Whilst the University’s purpose may have been to make more effective use of resources and offer a variety of challenging extra-curricular opportunities that benefits both the community and a wider group of students, concerns were expressed by some student groups, including SCA, when Experience Durham was finally launched in 2011, and an article in the University’s student-run newspaper reported fears about the autonomy and future of student-led organisations affiliated with the Durham Students’ Union (DSU) (Battersby 2011). Robin’s observation that “the whole point of Experience Durham” is to enhance student employability and to help the University rank more highly in League Tables, is in keeping with the Experience Durham Strategy (DU 2010b:1), which places emphasis on the student experience, personal development and employability, all of which contribute to the status of the University.

### ***Team Durham and Sports Outreach***

Even before the creation of Experience Durham in 2011, the University’s sport programme – now marketed as Team Durham – had been actively involved with local schools and major sports clubs in Durham since 1983, with a focus on sport-related outreach and community engagement (Gregory 2010:8). Over two hundred students are involved with projects run mostly by sports staff and using university facilities; they work with what are often described as ‘hard to reach groups’, including children with behavioural problems, ex-offenders, recovering drug users, and homeless people (Robinson and Hudson 2013:196; DU 2014l).

Speaking with the Dean of Experience Durham at the beginning of my fieldwork, I learnt that this involvement with local authorities, schools and community groups extends beyond Durham University. He told me that a common interest in sport and

community engagement resulted in cooperation across the five universities in the North East, with informal discussions eventually leading to the formation of a regional partnership known as Sport Universities North East England (SUNEE).<sup>6</sup> Team Durham was described to me by a senior university manager as embracing the idea “that sport is used as a way of engaging with some of the disadvantaged communities from the area”, but I have not included Team Durham Community Outreach in this project, partly because it is not exclusive to Durham University and partly because Team Durham and SUNEE are already the subject of a recent PhD thesis (Hayton 2013) and extensive report (SUNEE 2012).

Although Experience Durham now supports a wide range of centrally organised university volunteering and outreach activities, sport remains a focal point and this is likely to inform the way in which volunteering is valued and directed. However, the early assumption made by university staff that students doing sport-related degrees would immediately want to get involved in the early sport volunteering programmes proved incorrect:

In 2000 it was very difficult to get students to volunteer and the expectation was that sports students would volunteer because they needed to and others wouldn't, and actually we've had hardly any sports students that do volunteering on the sporting projects, which is strange  
*[Rachel: Experience Durham staff]*

Experience Durham and SCA tend to have different areas of special interest. Student volunteering and outreach activities organised by Experience Durham quite often deal with challenging groups and what could be perceived as riskier projects, whereas SCA has traditionally been more of a community service group. However, the majority of students who now come to volunteer with Experience Durham, said Rachel, are not high performance sport people and their interests tend to reflect a growing blurring of boundaries between the original sports outreach activities and areas that were traditionally the domain of SCA:

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<sup>6</sup> The five universities involved in the SUNEE partnership are: Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland, Northumbria and Teesside (SUNEE 2012).

A lot of our placements are talking to people or making cups of tea for people, just getting involved and breaking down barriers [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

Rachel estimated that over the last year there have been about eighty active projects and six or seven hundred students regularly volunteering, if SCA, Experience Durham and sports volunteering efforts are combined.

### ***Taking on SVO and SCA***

SCA became a Durham Student Organisation after voting to become part of Experience Durham in 2012. Rachel told me that when SCA was an independent charity, much of its funding came from HEFCE. When that funding ran out in 2006, the University started to think about how it could support SCA and where they could be placed within the University's organisational structure. The whole process was discussed for about five years before it actually happened, said Rachel, and well before the creation of Experience Durham:

Without being rude, I think five or ten years ago everyone put up their hands and said 'who wants Student Community Action' and backed off... The Union didn't want them, the University wanted them but didn't know where, and as I said, it took five years to get to this point but I think it was a natural progression [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

The SCA Executive Committee worked with Experience Durham to create a set of standing orders, seeking a mutually acceptable agreement about what the students and the University wanted SCA to be. Caroline was an SCA staff member during the transition period, and told me that it was left to the students to make the final decision whether or not to move SCA into Experience Durham. The move has not been without its problems, particularly in relation to organisational governance, which I discuss further in Chapter 5.

Since SVO came into being only a year or so before Experience Durham and was part of the same overall initiative to improve the long-term relationships between the University and the surrounding region, there was relatively little difficulty with organisational re-adjustment or issues of governance and leadership. As Robin put it,

SVO is a lot more structured than SCA because staff members have their own jobs to be doing and they want their volunteering opportunities to be facilitated rather than organise their own projects. In January 2012, the SVO team moved to Maiden Castle, the site of the Graham Sports Centre and home to Team Durham, as part of a wider move to consolidate organised staff and student volunteering into the Experience Durham group. The main change, said Neil and Nicola, is that although they both have official SVO roles, they have also been picking up roles more associated with Experience Durham and less exclusively to volunteering.

## **Recruitment and Communication**

### ***Interest and Demand***

Although not everyone wants to volunteer, getting involved in a wide range of activities is generally regarded as the best way to fully enjoy the years at university, and a failure to get involved with extra-curricular activities, especially those associated with helping others, can be a cause for regret:

It just didn't even cross my mind...looking back I wish I had done something to help, to do, just, anything, but I didn't, to my shame [*Jack: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Some students throw themselves into activities later in their university career to make up for lack of earlier involvement. This was how Pippa first got involved as an undergraduate:

I was quite lazy in my first year really and I was really ill, so I was off for like six months which was just silly, but when I came back in second year I was like, I'm going to do all this stuff, I'm going to get involved in things [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Although he is a keen volunteer now, and actively involved in various college outreach projects, Andrew told me that he does not remember being aware of what SCA was until he thought about getting involved:

It's got a stall at Freshers' Fair and I thought I might go and look, but it's just one of hundreds of things [*Andrew: Undergraduate volunteer, college project leader*]

Freshers' Fair is often the first time students hear about SCA, and there can be a perception that if you miss it, along with the SCA stall, then you have missed the chance to volunteer. Laura observed that students may not realise there are other ways to get involved:

I suppose there might be a tendency for students to think they've always got to go through that route in order to be a volunteer [*Laura: Postgraduate volunteer*]

However, volunteer fairs don't attract everyone and can put some people off, like Jenny, who told me:

Those things are boring and they're crowded. No-one likes those things, don't do it...If I want to volunteer, I'll go find it myself [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

### ***Getting the Message Across***

The message from both university staff and local volunteer organisers is that Durham student volunteers have the potential to make a real difference, but people outside the University may not be aware of what the volunteers do unless they, too, are involved in or benefiting from the activities. There is a realisation that internal and external awareness of the University's volunteering organisations could be improved, but Rachel admitted that there is no clear strategy about how to address the problem:

I think it's not always recognised by the County and perhaps we don't advertise it enough. I see people every day who say, I had no idea you and SCA do that, but whether it's something we need to advertise or not is another matter [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

She clarified this point, explaining that the potential advantages of wider advertising may not be enough to justify use of limited time and resources:

If you weigh up how much time you have got...I suppose we'd need to have someone marketing full time [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

Internal advertising is not without its problems either, in spite of widely circulated generic emails about volunteering projects, website bulletins and weekly newsheets. People have told me that in both colleges and departments they tend to ignore what does not appear to be of immediate relevance or urgency, especially when they are busy or

swamped by emails at the start of the academic year. When I spoke to my friend, Michelle, towards the end of the Michaelmas Term, she was still going through emails from October:

And I think it's unfair, we should be allowed to slowly ease our way in, in some capacity, but not this bombardment. It's just ridiculous, it's unfair [*Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]

Charlotte agrees that there is too much information to take in, "especially when it comes to volunteering", and Jenny told me of her concern that with so much information coming in, it is easy to disregard things that might have been enjoyable:

I think one of the problems with that is, eventually, God it's another one of those emails, and you just delete it, right? [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

There are regular updates about volunteering opportunities in Durham University publications such as the 'Dialogue' (DU 2014m) magazine for staff and students, said Robin. She claims to read everything that she receives about volunteering and other activities, but a large number of the staff and student volunteers I spoke with told me that information needs to be interesting, relevant and quick to read, or it gets ignored. Greg, for example, told me that he has a look through the University's regular bulletin but unless something grabs his immediate attention, he is unlikely to continue reading.

### ***Awareness of Experience Durham***

Members of the Experience Durham team tell me that they have noticed a change in student demand for volunteering opportunities in the last ten years, even before the University started to take a more formal interest. Based on her experiences in the years leading up to the creation of Experience Durham in 2011, Rachel speaks of an increasingly proactive approach being taken by students:

If you asked me in 2002 that I needed ten students to come and teach ex-offenders football, I would have been pulling my hair out – how am I going to get those students? And now those students are knocking down the door, so I think the whole ethos of students changed from being 'we're the desperate ones, we need help' to the students going 'where are you, we're going to find you, what can we do for you?' [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]



However, it is not always clear whether this new demand reflects a change in student values or whether they are simply more aware of the need for extra-curricular activities; nor does it necessarily indicate a greater awareness of the University's more central involvement in volunteer organisation. Not everyone wants to volunteer, and as Jane told me from her perspective as a third year undergraduate who regularly volunteers and gets involved with other extra-curricular activities:

There really are some people who just don't want to engage like that; all they want to do is play rugby for the University or something...or there's people who are here for a degree [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Whilst the demand for volunteer opportunities may be increasing, awareness of the work that Experience Durham does in the region, generally or through sport, is by no means widespread. Jonathan enjoys college sport and volunteering but told me:

I haven't really, particularly in my two years, heard a lot about sports getting involved with community, High Schools, Primary Schools; so I think the University could do a lot more to encourage it [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Jack did not come across SCA or any other volunteering group in his first two years at university, and nor did Jenny, a postgraduate student who has always enjoyed getting involved in volunteer activities. Both told me that they had not heard of Experience Durham, and at a more general level I have found only limited awareness of Experience Durham from students who are not already involved and do not take part in university sports. Even Mary, a local volunteer coordinator who helped SVO develop its early Team Challenge activities and has current links with SCA, said that she "didn't realise there was a link in to Experience Durham".

### ***Targeting Postgraduates***

Volunteer organisers at Durham University are increasingly trying to find out why so few postgraduates appear to be engaging with formal college or university volunteering activities. Michelle, who started a postgraduate volunteer group at her college three years ago, told me that "it's very hard to engage postgraduate students". One concern is that postgraduates are "not really served by SCA, with the best will in the world" [*Neil:*

*Experience Durham staff*]. Nevertheless, postgraduates are being increasingly targeted by Experience Durham, particularly because, along with staff, they are seen as potentially filling the gap left by undergraduates who usually go away for the summer. Rachel told me that since most student volunteering is done by undergraduates, their long absences during vacations can affect the momentum of projects. In a long gap, she said, “kids go elsewhere and often don’t come back”. This in turn can cause problems for justifying the funding and continuation of projects. However, Rachel also told me that recruiting postgraduates can be difficult. She hypothesised that they may feel that they have more professional and life experience, so that volunteering is less necessary; they may be more focused on their academic work; and they often have family commitments:

Without being stereotypical, postgraduates probably have a bit more going on in their lives [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

Furthermore, whilst Experience Durham staff are aware that they could probably do more to engage postgraduate students, their managers insist that there is a limit to what can be done with the resources available.

### ***International Students***

Another group in danger of being forgotten, and that was rarely mentioned during my interviews with university managers or volunteer organisers unless prompted, is the international student body. Making up approximately 14% of the undergraduate student body, there are relatively few international undergraduates at Durham University (DU 2014d). Similarly, international postgraduates form only 11% of the overall student body although they account for 40% of all postgraduates (DU 2014d).

When she was telling me about the development of Experience Durham, which has traditionally been sports-centred, Rachel acknowledged that they have not had many international student volunteers, adding that:

I don’t know if that’s our fault or not [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

On the other hand, a very different story emerged from the postgraduate volunteering project which Michelle's college asked her to manage:

They approached me and said they wished to help get people that are [at Ustinov], who are predominantly, I think 60% or more of the students here are international ... Predominantly it was for the international students [*Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]

Michelle suggested that this reflects what she regards as one of the priorities of Durham University and her college, which is to integrate international students into the wider community.

Assumptions tend to be made about the needs, interests and priorities of international students, especially postgraduates, which may inform their decision about whether or not to volunteer. Paul describes international students as:

A very difficult group to get to. They're isolated often into families, especially postgrads who've got families; they're isolated into, a lot of them live out of Ustinov... far more live out than live in, and they're very focused [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Based on her experiences as a student counsellor, Beth suggests that assumptions about who does or does not volunteer are often based on national or cultural stereotypes, as well as choice of discipline or career goals:

I have got anecdotal evidence quite recently of people being surprised – it's awful really – of being surprised that it was Chinese students who turned up to do whatever, possibly because it was the first time that had happened [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

What these statements suggest is that cultural variations in how volunteering is understood and valued (Hustinx et al. 2010:358) should be taken into consideration when seeking both to attract and manage international students or staff volunteers, but also that they should not be excluded and may well surprise with their interest.

### *Volunteering and Gender*

Few research participants raised issues relating to gender and volunteering, either in terms of recruitment or more generally. In one case, Pippa suggested that male students seem to be “very busy doing other things”, so perhaps spend less time on volunteering, particularly with SCA. She added that they do not appear to be embarrassed about their volunteering interests, and may just be choosing to focus on other forms of participation and leadership on college projects or sports teams. At a different level of the organisation, Robin, when I spoke to her about her new role as an SCA staff member, mentioned that the two new sabbatical SCA staff roles will be “filled by guys”. She suggested this might be a good balance for that coming year because the incoming SCA Executive Committee would be entirely female. Whilst such an arrangement could potentially be indicative of Prochaska’s (1988:82) gendered hierarchy of volunteering, there is no suggestion that this is a regular occurrence. In fact, Pippa added that for the last four years both the Durham and Queen’s Campus Coordinators have been women.

A gendered bias in staff as well as student volunteer participation may simply reflect the demographics of a particular college, department or occupation. June explained that the Professional Services team in the Business School is predominantly made up of women, which may explain why so many of the volunteers from this group are also women:

I’ve got a guy in my team; if there were more guys in the team then more of them would come ...we hardly get any blokes applying for when we have jobs in the team [*June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Although a detailed analysis of the power relationships between gender, occupational status and participation in volunteering is not within the scope of this project, June’s observation is interesting in the context of previous comments in this chapter that staff volunteering at Durham University tends to attract support and administrative staff much more than academics. Whilst contradicting some recent literature (e.g. Bussell and Forbes 2008:376) suggesting that academics are more likely to find opportunities to take part in ESV programmes, this situation offers some support for the statement that “staff participation in volunteering is heavily skewed in most institutions towards female and non-academic staff” (Gollan 2011:4). Future research might benefit from asking whether staff volunteer recruitment strategies should pay more attention to the

dynamics between gender and occupational status, as well as seeking to attract individuals based on interests and skills.

### **‘Raising and Giving’ is not Volunteering**

One further consideration in both establishing and limiting the scope of this research are the complex and often contradictory ways in which people distinguish between fundraising and volunteering. UK Higher Education has a long tradition of ‘raising and giving’ (RAG) and Durham’s version is the popular and well-publicised organisation known as DUCK (Durham University Charity Kommittee). Robin, in her role as SCA staff member, told me that the distinction between SCA and DUCK is not always made clear. In spite of the recent shift of SCA from independent charity to Durham Student Organisation, the two groups still share an office in the Students’ Union building, not to mention many similar aims and activities. Members of DUCK, for example, often describe their work as “giving back to the local community”, which is also the phrase used by many volunteers. However, most staff and student volunteers that I spoke with do not consider DUCK to be a volunteering organisation as such. This is not to say that other volunteers at Durham University would necessarily agree with the viewpoints of those I spoke with, but in line with the grounded approach previously described in Chapter 2, I have excluded DUCK’s activities from the scope of this particular project.

Whilst “volunteering is viewed as being at the core of DUCK’s work” (Gregory 2010:7-8), its focus is less on general volunteering and more on enabling students to fundraise for a variety of charities. I come across this distinction in a number of different ways. Andrew suggested that students are more aware of DUCK than of SCA because of the effectiveness of its fundraising publicity:

SCA is volunteering; that’s just going and doing something but it’s not actually saying ‘give me some money to do this’ [Andrew: *Undergraduate volunteers, college project leaders*]

James, a staff volunteer, went further by insisting that fundraising and volunteering are completely different because “volunteering is giving of your time”. Jenny expressed a similar opinion, but made an additional point from the perspective of someone who

might give as well as raise funds, that volunteering time is easier than donating money whilst she is a student, as well as being more personal:

I really like doing volunteering as opposed to donating money, for two reasons. One, I'm broke, as many people in Higher Education are, and two, just because it has more of a connection to the things you're doing  
*[Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer]*

She appreciates the opportunities for direct interaction, commenting that volunteering is far less appealing where there is no opportunity to meet the person that she is helping. The themes of service, mutuality and personal relationships in peoples' experiences of volunteering occur regularly throughout my fieldwork and are explored in later chapters.

## **Conclusion**

Official rhetoric and formal descriptions of staff and student volunteering and engagement at Durham University are for the most part positive and uncritical, with an emphasis on "communicating a powerful message that the institution values and supports community involvement" (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008:6). Dominant discourses of volunteering focus on enhancing the student experience, strengthening the University's ability to excel in the areas of education and research, and demonstrating an effective agenda of local, regional and international community engagement.

What this chapter has introduced is the idea that a closer examination of volunteering policies, practices and experiences paints a slightly different picture, in which the boundaries between what is and is not recognised as volunteering are unclear, and where the pressures to volunteer and barriers to doing so often remain unacknowledged. The student volunteering landscape is varied but fragmented, combining student-led organisations and societies with increasingly centralised, university-run projects, and a consequent need to re-negotiate power relationships and volunteer identities. Staff volunteering is less diverse but faces its own challenges and complications. The remainder of this thesis develops the perspectives and experiences of staff and student volunteering. These call into further question official stories, agendas and motives, by

exploring different volunteer relationships and discourses within and beyond the University. The lens of gift exchange casts the organisations involved, the policies introduced and activities undertaken in a new light.

## **PART II**

“This work was strictly voluntary, but any animal who absented himself from it would have his rations reduced by half”

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*



## CHAPTER 4 – VOLUNTEERING IS OPTIONAL AND OBLIGATORY

### Introduction

Whilst not without its critics, Mauss's (1990) *Essay on the Gift* "bears within it the seeds of virtually every important study of gift giving that has succeeded it" (Osteen 2002:2) and identifies many of the dichotomies surrounding gift exchange that continue to be expressed both by researchers and their participants. The paradoxes and tensions inherent to reciprocal gift exchange are not dissimilar to the tensions within volunteering: "contemporary treatments of the gift revolve around these problems of freedom and autonomy, calculation and spontaneity, gratitude and generosity, risk and power" (Osteen 2002:14). The choices that people make in relation to the time, effort or risk associated with giving and volunteering are mediated by social structures, situations and norms as well as personal agency; "they are not made in a vacuum" (Osteen 2002:33). For example, a strong belief in individualism and autonomy has become so integral to some cultures, over different historical periods, that it permeates every level of society and is regarded as underpinning the development of both character and morality (Freie 1998:14). This is problematic for those who seek to re-educate people in the virtues of community service and civic participation and to reduce the focus on self-interest and instrumentalism.

Part II of this thesis re-examines the volunteering organisations, activities and experiences introduced in the previous chapter by the staff and students I spoke with at Durham University, using perspectives of reciprocal gift exchange that call into question a number of popular normative views that are effectively summarised by Rochester et al. (2012:18): that volunteering should be freely chosen; that people should not be forced, or punished for not volunteering; and that they should have a choice in what to do, when, and how often. Furthermore, they should be free to volunteer for their own reasons and without being judged about their motivations.

The complex, changing and often contradictory ways that people understand volunteering, generally and in Higher Education, quickly became apparent during interviews and fieldwork encounters. Joe, for example, comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo; he arrived in the UK some years ago as an asylum seeker. Speaking last year at a university seminar in the North East about diaspora and volunteering, Joe explained that the idea of volunteering varies between different cultures, and that it takes time for some people to adjust to dominant meanings in the UK and other developed or northern countries. He had grown up with the idea that volunteering is a form of “civil duty” (as opposed to civic duty) including para-military service; it is used to bolster political regimes and ideology, he said, with punishment for non-compliance:

Volunteering was forced labour [*Joe: Volunteer and asylum seeker*]

This is very different to the diverse accounts that I have encountered during my fieldwork in and around Durham University, where the idea of mandatory or ‘forced’ volunteering is treated with caution and even claims that volunteering should be a moral imperative are usually tempered with a respect for individual autonomy. Charlotte is an undergraduate who organises student volunteering at Queen’s Campus in Stockton. She told me that although people volunteer for their own agendas, it is more beneficial where people feel an inner sense of obligation “to make a difference”. Pippa, who was a student volunteer before becoming a staff member of SCA, is adamant that:

You can’t make people volunteer who don’t want to volunteer...you can push so far but at some point you maybe need to accept that some people don’t want to volunteer [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Both of these opinions acknowledge the existence of external influences and more internal motives, but Charlotte’s emphasis on the individual’s choice between self-interest or a more altruistic approach and Pippa’s assertion that volunteering cannot be enforced perhaps under-estimate the often unconscious effects of power relations and normative constraints acting on and through individuals and groups. What these different experiences suggest is that there is often an uneasy relationship between obligation and autonomy, which has implications for both selfhood and behaviour. Even where ‘voluntary’ activities are not enforced, the obligations we feel towards ourselves, to others, and to society more generally, are informed by a combination of internal and external constraints as well as personal choice.

This chapter and the two that follow explore the idea that volunteering is both optional and obligatory; it involves autonomy as well as dependence and unequal power relations; and it recognises both altruistic and self-interested motivations. These themes are closely interwoven and appear throughout the thesis, and for this reason each of the chapters in this section represents not so much a change in subject matter as a change in emphasis. In the remaining sections of Chapter 4, I explore the paradoxical view that volunteering, when seen through the lens of the gift, is both free and obligatory, and that there is a complicated relationship between personal volition and different socio-cultural norms. I use experiences of university volunteers and some of the organisations with whom they have developed relationships to illustrate different responses to discourses of institutional and personal obligation, and the way in which conscious and unconscious influences on agency and selfhood inform how volunteering is valued and understood.

### **Privileges and Social Obligations of Higher Education**

A growing conviction in UK Higher Education since the nineteenth century has been that “the enjoyment of privileges carried social obligations” (Soffer 1994:205), a view that was firmly embedded within a conservative, hierarchical framework of traditional society associated with the idea of political duty, patriotism, and the aims of advancing a particular set of national and cultural values (Soffer 1994:25). This differs considerably to the ideas of equality, pluralism and mutual partnership that dominate current discourses of volunteering and research; and yet, the principle of obligation to others less fortunate than ourselves is a common theme that appears throughout my fieldwork, albeit with differing opinions about the role of the University. A Pro Vice-Chancellor at Durham University, for example, told me that the students are in a privileged position, not necessarily because of their backgrounds but because of the opportunities afforded to them through their education. He suggested that this realisation may underpin at least some of their reasons for volunteering:

They’ve worked hard to get here, no-one’s denying that, but by virtue of being here they’ve got opportunities that are denied to others, and I think a lot of them, actually, are aware of that and think OK, well, maybe an afternoon a week or an evening a week, we can start putting something back [*Pro VC, Durham University*]

This position is stated more directly in a recent article published by the University's student-run paper, which includes the exhortation that "students should know that coming to Durham, regardless of college, is a real privilege and with that privilege comes great responsibility" (Kasstan 2012:1). However, whilst the majority of student and staff volunteers I spoke with repeated what has almost become a mantra about Durham University privilege, opinion is divided over the association of that privilege with responsibility and by extension, the obligation to volunteer.

The Pro Vice-Chancellor's view of student privilege appears to have been interpreted by some as a position which not only reinforces a stereotypical contrast of wealthy students with the disadvantaged 'Other', but which also presents volunteering as a form of reparation, although this opinion is repeated more by staff members who organise volunteering activities for students than by staff and student volunteers themselves:

Personally, I think all Durham University students should be expected to undertake volunteering activities within groups that are not as fortunate  
*[Pauline: Staff member, student volunteering organiser]*

There is a risk that such a broad assumption of student privilege masks inequalities within the University as well as outside it, and putting pressure on students – or staff – to volunteer may not always have the desired effect. Jenny, for example, is a Canadian postgraduate spending only one year in Durham. Although a keen volunteer herself who is passionate about social justice and community action projects, Jenny told me that she does not believe that people should feel compelled to volunteer or be subjected to sanctions for not doing so, and argues that the University should "stick to its remit" of academic education and research:

It's nice that your institution gets people together to do volunteer work, but honestly, I don't think it's any of their bloody business...I don't think you should be frowned upon by society for not volunteering *[Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer]*

Another keen volunteer, Charlotte worries that a sense of obligation rooted in more external pressures might discourage people from volunteering, or result in them undertaking voluntary activities because they feel that they are being given no other option:

It's just kind of a sacrifice that you have to make, which is a bit of a shame really because it kind of takes the whole spirit, that kind of enthusiasm and passion out of volunteering [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

A related concern expressed by an SCA staff member is that firstly, volunteering becomes an obligation where there is a perception that it must be done for a CV and that secondly, an activity ceases to be voluntary where it is the result of an implicit or explicit obligation.

### **Early Influences and the Social Constraints of Community**

Just as the norms and obligations of the gift combine the security of social cohesion with the restrictions of social control, so tradition and habitus offer a conditional cohesion to groups (Bourdieu 1977:163) and a structure within which individuals may exercise varying degrees of agency. The example that parents offer their children through the provision of positive role models, a home environment that encourages volunteering and engagement, and the development of relevant skills and interests, illustrates what Wilson (2012:188) describes as “the roots of prosocial behaviour”. This combination of early experiences, teaching and demonstration that forms “a larger set of cultural understandings passed on to them by their parents” (Wilson 2000:218) is likely to establish a habitus for children that will shape their attitudes toward volunteering in later life. However, rather than being fixed from an early age, habitus is modified by later experiences (Bourdieu 1977:87) and Wilson’s (2000:219) assumption that such cultural understandings are conscious appears to overlook the unspoken and continuous influence of social and cultural norms over the life-course. Both early examples and dominant social discourses help to shape our behaviours, including the decision of whether or not to volunteer (Wilson 2000:218; Squirrell 2009:9), although the extent to which volunteering may or may not become a part of the university experience – as students or members of staff – is likely to be informed by a more complicated and varying set of social and economic factors.

### *Family and Friends*

Being raised in a particular environment will often foster the development of a caring approach to life, and in the case of staff and student volunteers I spoke with, growing up surrounded by a volunteering ethos had a strong influence on their later activities. Mary has volunteered all her life, from walking dogs as a child to working in Oxfam throughout her university career. She is now an active member of her community, runs a local volunteer centre, and provided assistance to Durham University's staff volunteering programme when it first started:

Me mam was a foster parent for a long time, so we always had different children in the house. I know it wasn't volunteering but it's kind of that thing, giving something back [*Mary: Local volunteer coordinator*]

Pippa, who volunteered with SCA as a student before taking up a sabbatical staff role after graduation, was also brought up in a family that has always volunteered:

It's kind of been a family ethos, more than anything else, volunteering's always been there [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Where there is a history of family volunteering there may be a strong expectation to continue this tradition. Jane is a project leader with SCA; she has two brothers who have volunteered for Doctors without Borders (Médicines sans Frontières), and an older sister who volunteered whilst at university. As a result, she said:

I genuinely think that in my family, it would be a bit odd if I didn't want to do something, to give something [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

However, family and cultural values vary and volunteering is not always regarded as a useful or important activity. Esme, who is Indonesian, did not have the opportunity to volunteer until she completed her postgraduate education and came to work at Durham University. She told me:

My family just told me to study and get a degree. So I never really have the...I think now my cousin was saying there are volunteering opportunities, but it was not a concept for us growing up [*Esme: Staff volunteer*]

Like Esme, Greg comes from a family that never did any volunteering but his mother is a nurse and Greg also spent a number of years working in the health services. He

acknowledges the influence of family and friends, as well as colleagues, in his decision to undertake various types of volunteer work over the years:

Because of the type of work I've done, I'm more likely to find people who are willing and aware of the idea of volunteering. If you're not working round a particular shift and taking a day, but something needs to be done or somebody needs to go to hospital, you'll go and do it on a day off. And I think you tend to socialise with people who are similar to you...you wouldn't necessarily spend a great deal of time with someone with entirely different values to yourself, and it's all about value bases I think, whether that value base is from your friends or your family, or from the work environment or whatever [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

It seems reasonable to suggest that there is a difference between friends exerting an influence in the decision to volunteer and becoming a volunteer in order to make friends, which may be an effective strategy but also generates quite limited relationships within the confines of a particular activity (Holdsworth 2010:433). During my own research, a mixed picture emerges. Going further than the indirect connection between Greg's volunteering and the caring values that he shares with his friends, Esme told me explicitly that she originally volunteered because she had no friends when she first came to work at the University and felt terribly lonely:

I was really lonely and I wanted to meet people...I didn't know anybody in Durham, so I thought, I have to do something, so this is how I joined Red Cross [*Esme: Staff volunteer*]

Michelle is also very clear that one of her reasons for volunteering has always been to make friends, but this is currently giving her a problem. Upon arriving in Durham from the United States, Michelle joined a branch of the international voluntary group that she has worked with for many years, but is finding that her hopes of friendship are not being fulfilled, to the extent that she is questioning her involvement:

My exchange is friendship, that's what I get out of being...with people of like mind. I'm not getting that and I'm getting increasingly frustrated with my involvement because of that, but it's not something that I can push on people, nothing that I can ask of people [*Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]

Other students report having a more positive experience. Friends do not necessarily talk with each other about their volunteering, but it may play a role in how social bonds are

formed. Before spending a sabbatical year as an SCA staff member, Pippa got involved as a student volunteer with “proactive friends” who had similar interests, although friends who volunteer do not necessarily do so together. Caroline also had a number of like-minded friends when she was an undergraduate; they all got involved with student volunteer projects but:

We never did the same volunteering. I never really saw it as social, where I would take my friends along [*Caroline: SCA staff*]

The influence exerted by friends works in more than one direction, however, and when volunteers find their friends or colleagues are less supportive they may need to draw on more internal values and motivations, or fall back on other sources of encouragement. Esme, for example, told me that most of her co-workers “think I’m nuts”, and Jane said that if she had listened to her friends, she probably would not be volunteering now. She went on to attribute her decision to do so to having a supportive family with a “historical background of volunteering”.

### ***Encouragement at School***

One such source of encouragement is the “inspirational teacher” (Holdsworth 2010:432), a key actor in many volunteer narratives and often reported as being more influential than family. This offers an interesting alternative to Francis’ (2011) findings, which highlight the importance of primary social references – family and close friends – but offer little information about secondary social references, including teachers and other, more distant role models. Wilson (2000:219) considers the role played by schools, but not individual teachers, when instilling the values and motivations that lead to volunteering in young people. He endorses the view that early exposure to a volunteering ethos encourages volunteering in later life, during and beyond time spent in education.

No-one that I spoke with talked about any particular individual who encouraged them to volunteer at school, but many of the younger undergraduates I spoke with went to schools that encourage volunteering and other forms of participation to varying degrees and for different reasons. Common themes around recent school support for



volunteering, often presented as being strongly related, are the need for a competitive university application, evidence of personal development through helping the community, and the importance of building a good CV, although Jane's experience from three years ago offers an interesting exception. Everyone in the sixth form at Jane's school, she said, took part in the school's community action programme, but the value placed on volunteering varied with a student's university plans:

Each person was assigned to either critical thinking if they were going to be an Oxford candidate, and go do something like philosophy and economics and all the crazy things, and then for the people who weren't doing critical thinking or going off to Oxbridge, you either had to find some activity to do yourself or start volunteering [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

The outcome of this division of activities was that Jane spent her two years in the sixth form co-ordinating lunches once a week, for people at a local sheltered accommodation. She has been an enthusiastic and committed volunteer ever since, but never applied to Oxford or Cambridge.

### **Levels of Commitment and Obligation**

Expressing an interest is not the same as committing to something, and volunteering entails many different levels of commitment and obligation. James, for example, finds that volunteering forms a significant part of his life that he would miss if he stopped:

It's what I spend most of my life doing when I'm not at work [*James: Staff volunteer*]

Samantha, on the other hand, said that she considers volunteering to be important but it does not take up a lot of time:

It takes up a couple of evenings a week, it's not too much, too strenuous [*Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer*]

A problem mentioned by the keynote speaker at a volunteering event organised last year by Experience Durham, is that people may be scared that signing up for volunteering involves an instant long-term commitment. Extra time spent volunteering can also be regarded as simply too much after a long day. Michelle organises volunteering activities in a college that has a high percentage of international students; she told me that staff

and students who are often studying and working in an unfamiliar language, which requires additional effort, have little time for other activities:

I think it's just another department of life that they really don't want to spend energy on, because they're already tired from all the other things they've done [*Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]

Volunteering needs to fit around staff and student workloads, as well as other commitments. The cyclical nature of volunteering through different life stages is mediated by the effects of work, family and health in terms of commitment and interest (Wilson 2012:189). Some people find it relatively easy to juggle work, volunteering and social life, but there are stages of life when finding that balance can be much harder. It may become less of a priority for a while, even for keen volunteers like Jenny:

I will volunteer less this year than I used to at home, I know I will, because I'm here for a year and I have a dissertation to write, and I'm moving home [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Several staff volunteers mentioned the difficulty of combining volunteering with raising a family or doing a demanding job, although they would like to do more after retirement:

I remember when I was younger, in my twenties, and I didn't have money but plenty of time, and then there was a big period of time when I was working full pelt and with a young family and had neither money nor time [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

Jenny accepts that when people are really busy, volunteering is often one of the first things to fall by the wayside:

Which, in my opinion, honestly, is kind of fair, because once you've done this and you have a steady job or whatever, you can then choose that time to volunteer [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

The requirement for long-term and regular commitment varies. Whilst there are numerous opportunities for staff and students at the University to get involved in volunteering, one person I spoke to from Durham County Council suggested that students are perhaps better suited to smaller, shorter term projects. He explained that student volunteers usually leave after three years and are away during the holidays, and although this might work for smaller, one-off projects, it impedes the development of

long-term relationships. A similar concern was expressed by the director of a local charity in relation to the staff volunteering programme. Even where staff are able to use the full five day annual allowance to volunteer during working hours, she observed that this is not particularly useful to organisations who need longer-term support.

Students also need to consider exams and essay submissions as well as holidays when they are less likely to be in Durham. A member of staff who has worked closely with both student volunteers and college Executive Committee members suggested that the problem is not lack of commitment, but that student commitment can usually only be for discrete packages of time, which may not always suit the requirements of volunteer organisations:

The University wants...people to volunteer but it has to realise that this huge pot of very talented people are not actually as appealing as potential volunteers as the University might want to think [*Richard: College staff*]

Although there are volunteering activities that require a reasonable level of commitment to make an effective contribution, some organisations are prepared to offer different roles to suit varying levels of availability. Jonathan, for example, is a volunteer with Durham Constabulary and appreciates the flexibility that is offered to students:

There's not too much pressure on you as a volunteer to do work, which is always good [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

The view of one police officer who organises volunteering for Durham Constabulary is that in order to effectively manage and support student volunteers, it is essential to understand that they have other pressures and demands on their time, and take that into account. There are certain periods when students are less likely to be available, he said, but projects can be tailored accordingly:

It goes back to the students having a bit of a chaotic lifestyle, you know, you've got to accept that [*Philip: Durham Constabulary*]

As Michelle put it, talking about the difficulties of recruiting volunteers at her college, it is important to remain open to doing new things but don't get over-committed and don't be afraid to say what your time constraints are. Organisations would much rather know in advance and plan around limited availability.

## **Expectation vs Requirement**

Volunteering is deemed to be a ‘respectable’ (socially acceptable) use of time for those who are out of work or looking for work, as well as developing skills and offering avenues for development and fulfilment that may possibly be unavailable through paid work (Wilson 2012:187). It is increasingly also regarded as an appropriate activity for students who are perceived, fairly or not, as having plenty of free time and as being morally obliged to offer some sort of payment in return for the privilege of being in Higher Education. On several occasions I was told that there is often an expectation that students will find something useful to do with their spare time, or in the long holidays before and during university. Having the option during that time to choose between paid work and volunteering or other unpaid positions depends as much on economic circumstances as it does on inclination. Nevertheless, there is a difference between not needing to earn money as a student and not making a contribution to society. Anna, for example, has been involved in voluntary projects and community service since she was a teenager, in Germany and the United States:

It just never came into my mind to find a job and actually earn money for what I’m doing; it’s like, what can I do to volunteer? [Anna: *Postgraduate volunteer*]

However, Anna is now realising that she needs to do more than volunteer as she comes to the end of her postgraduate programme, and although she retains the strong belief that society will suffer a great loss if people go through life refusing to do anything that is unpaid:

I’m getting to a point now where I kind of realise that volunteering won’t feed you for life [Anna: *Postgraduate volunteer*]

When actions and choices are described as voluntary, it is important to ask whether they are voluntary for all or whether some people’s choices are constrained through personal or external circumstances, perhaps leading to negative outcomes should the ‘voluntary’ act not be performed (Sanders 2012:44-45). There is a difference between the expectation and the requirement to volunteer; although the latter may appear to be a contradiction in terms, it is a concept that staff and students raised both implicitly and explicitly during our conversations. At a volunteering event organised recently through

Experience Durham, several audience members criticised the idea of requiring people to volunteer, commenting that personal choice is a critical element not only in the decision to volunteer or not, but also in the choice of activity:

Volunteering is what it says, and if you're conscripted into it, it becomes a totally different animal [*Audience member, Q&A session*]

James, as a staff member who both participates in and organises volunteering events, fully agrees with this sentiment. He stated that there is no point pressurising people to volunteer, because if you do a hard sell they just back out, which is a waste of everyone's time.

The next two sections illustrate how some of the expectations and requirements to volunteer are expressed in different ways for students and members of staff. In the case of both groups, pressure to volunteer is inconsistent in its execution and its effects; it elicits different reactions that are related not only to university occupation – staff or student – but also to the attitudes and circumstances of individuals.

### **It's What We Do**

The concept of mandatory student volunteering is becoming more popular in many countries, particularly in the United States where there has been a rise in mandatory volunteering in high schools and some but not all universities and Higher Education institutions (Wilson 2012:189), although its effectiveness as a way to encourage future long-term, value-based volunteering has also been questioned (e.g. Stukas et al. 1999). Durham University does not mandate voluntary activities, although the dividing line between volunteering and obligatory placements or community-based activities that form part of some academic programmes is not always clear.<sup>7</sup> However, the pressure that students might feel to volunteer is not just about whether or not an activity is optional or mandatory, nor is the expectation that students will become involved in volunteering activities always made clear. Jane, for example, is in her final year as an

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<sup>7</sup> Although an interesting area for future research, the sometimes controversial concept of mandatory volunteering in schools and Higher Education, as a form of community service or as a required element of an academic programme, does not fall within the main scope of this thesis.

undergraduate and balances her studies with regular volunteering as well as her role as an SCA project leader. She told me that although there is now a clear relationship between employability and volunteering, the connection is not always explicitly made when students arrive at university for the first time. Students seeking advice in the Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre (CEEC), she said, are usually asked whether they have experience through charity work or volunteering but:

Nobody says in the first year, you must volunteer, or we think you should volunteer [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Jane's experience is one of several examples I came across during my fieldwork, and in each case, the students I spoke with appeared to acknowledge a link between the implicit expectations for students to arrange their own volunteering and to make themselves more employable. In some ways, Durham University's approach of providing students with the facilities and resources to participate in extra-curricular activities, including volunteering, without actually making such activities mandatory, has similarities to the recent introduction in some UK universities of what has been called a Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). Claiming to address concerns that the UK Honours Degree fails "to describe, and therefore does not do full justice to, the range of knowledge, skills, experience and attributes of a graduate in the 21st century" (UUK 2007:5), HEAR emerged from the 2007 Burgess Report. It was proposed as a "key vehicle for measuring and recording student achievement" (UUK 2007:5), including volunteering and other extra-curricular activities, provided the activities are those which the institution in question can evaluate and verify (UUK 2007:7-8). Implementation of HEAR is well underway, with the participation of some but by no means all UK universities; in 2013, according to the initiative's website, there were twenty-seven institutions involved (HEAR 2014): Durham University is not one of them.

As part of the HEAR initiative, an achievement report is issued for all graduates whether or not they have done much to fill it, whereas choosing not to become involved in Durham University's extra-curricular activities produces no tangible evidence of the 'failure' to do so, although involvement is nevertheless regarded as a valuable way of

demonstrating personal development and improving employability. At first glance, this might appear to be a significant difference between the two approaches. However, Holdsworth and Brewis's (2014: 211) reference to HEAR as an example of the shift from a "control" to a "discipline" society, where students become personally responsible for developing their own employability and universities are expected to provide opportunities and resources, suggests a closer relationship between HEAR and student volunteering at Durham University. Furthermore, in a competitive environment where students increasingly have a portfolio of extra-curricular experiences to draw on, including volunteering, a report that draws attention to someone's lack of involvement may prove to be redundant.

In spite of an article in the University's student paper claiming that HEAR would shortly be implemented at Durham University for all undergraduates (Lee 2012), this is not something that any student I spoke with was aware of, and a senior university manager explained to me that there are no plans to introduce it at Durham in the foreseeable future. Although he was not aware of the details of the HEAR initiative, he expressed misgivings about its impact, should some students have fewer opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities than others:

If there is a requirement that someone has to declare something along the lines of numbers of hours volunteered or something to that effect and one person gets a big number and another gets a smaller number, then it's not to do with motivation; it's more to do with opportunity [*Michael: Senior university manager*]

I went on to ask some of the student volunteers, more generally, what they thought about the idea of an achievement report that would evaluate people on the extent of their non-academic participation, which could include whether or not they volunteer:

I think people will suddenly be thinking, oh yeah, that's something there, our employers are going to see that. I'm going to fill that in really, really well [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Jane explained that she recognised the potential for such a report to demonstrate one's employability, but that she would also be concerned that people might be penalised if they have interests or commitments that do not fit the criteria of an official, externally

designed report. Jenny, too, expressed concerns about the different access and opportunities that individuals may have to take part in extra-curricular activities:

There are people who honestly cannot do it...all of their money and all of their time is put into their school work, and they're then somehow going to be graded less than someone who has more...I don't think the friend who spends all of their time with her child or at school should somehow get a worse grade than me because she's not, quote/unquote, 'working as hard' [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Despite implicit and sometimes explicit expectations for students, and to a lesser extent staff, to get involved in volunteering, some university managers who are involved with engagement and volunteering initiatives still appear to associate SCA with enthusiastic and spontaneous participation, community-facing activities, and more altruistic motivations. This is in spite of its recent move from independent charity to a centralised university organisation, where the latter is associated more with instrumental and normative motives for volunteering. Paul, for examples, claims that:

It would be incorrect to say that we press-gang them into the programmes, but we heavily encourage them: 'this is part of what we do' and so on. Whereas I think in SCA, there are people who walk through the door and have a real interest in doing something, helping the community in some form, whatever that may be [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Robin confirmed that the idea of encouraging students to volunteer without forcing them to do so has traditionally been important to SCA staff and project leaders, who until recently have had a more explicit focus on service to the community.

### **Annual Staff Reviews**

Just as it has been suggested that mandatory volunteer activities cannot really be regarded as "volunteering" (Booth et al. 2009:234), Nicola – in her role as an SVO manager – questions whether staff volunteering and ESV schemes should be regarded as voluntary. Arguments for saying that they should not emphasise two key normative points in existing literature: that volunteering should involve free time that is given without coercion and for no financial reward (Bussell and Forbes 2008:375; Rochester



et al. 2012:109). Nicola describes this as returning to “the very fundamentals of volunteering”, telling me that this is one of the reasons that she sees SVO not as volunteering but in terms of how the University engages more generally with communities:

I would really prefer to call it an Outreach Programme or Staff Engagement Programme [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

In relation to the presence or absence of coercion, the influence of corporate or institutional values may result in employees feeling obligated to participate in ‘voluntary’ activities; even more so in an uncertain employment market. This combination of institutional values, obligation and insecurity was implied by one university manager as he explained why it is that a relatively high number of non-academic staff get involved in the University’s volunteering programme:

If you look at the University, the turnover rates of staff are very low. In other words, once people arrive here, they stay here. I think with a lot of the non-academic staff, then almost by definition a lot of them are local, and they recognise that, two things: firstly, it’s very different to a lot of areas around it...and they, well, they recognise that they’re in, they might not be in the best paid jobs but they’re actually, by and large, secure jobs and they’re also aware of the labour market position outside...they’re coming from environments where they understand what the downside of de-industrialisation has been [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

On the one hand, some staff may be more inclined to volunteer in order to ingratiate themselves with management. On the other hand, having a greater awareness of the economic circumstances in the North East and the supportive role played by the voluntary sector may lead to a more developed sense of compassion and willingness to help. In this way, volunteers may simultaneously take up the roles of both donor and recipient in a complicated gift relationship.

There is a less subtle form of coercion, however, that has emerged from the increasing awareness that staff members at Durham University are in principle allowed to volunteer up to five days a year in work time. Some departments – particularly in the Business School – now require staff to complete and reflect on at least one day’s volunteering every year as part of their Annual Staff Review (ASR):

It's not forced, well, it is, as part of that sort of, as a target in their ASR  
*[Nicola: Experience Durham staff]*

Using staff volunteering hours in this manner is more common in some departments than others, and there is no consistent approach across the University as a whole for requiring or even encouraging staff to volunteer as part of their ASR. It is unclear what sanctions, if any, would be applied should ASR-related volunteering not be done. Nevertheless, Experience Durham and the SVO team are increasingly hearing from staff who have been told to do some volunteering for their review, as part of longer-term career planning or for personal development. Robin feels that this is the wrong approach:

That's not volunteering. That's, 'I have to do this because it's part of my job' *[Robin: SCA staff]*

June, a staff volunteer in the Business School, suggested that interpretations and acceptance of 'forced' volunteering vary depending on whether the activities are undertaken by individuals on a regular basis or as part of an organised team activity. Where staff members have a volunteering activity built in to their ASR, she said, there is often an "unwritten expectation" that this will be done as a departmental Team Challenge rather than as individuals. This can lead to a dilemma for those who need to reconcile their professional targets with a commitment to the ideals of volunteering:

I must admit, I have issues with almost telling people they have to volunteer one day a year *[June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser]*

There is a fine line between encouraging and pressuring people to volunteer, which is perhaps not always realised by those, like Bee, who are passionate and committed themselves:

I think people who are like me, the volunteer coordinators, you've got to be enthusiastic yourself about it, and committed, and you've got to be strong enough to sort of really, if people don't want to do it, OK then, that's fine, but what would you do then, what would you like to do that would help? As I say, when people out there said, oh I really haven't got the time, I said, OK then, we'll bring it in-house and do it in-house then, so I'm not really letting people off the hook *[Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser]*

The uncertainty and inconsistency surrounding this area of staff volunteering, and the fact that some staff continue to request activities in order to comply with elements of their annual review, are interesting in relation to explanations of staff volunteering that rely on Booth et al.'s (2009:231) understanding of gift exchange. Their argument is that since volunteering is in principal voluntary, this type of relationship can have no "explicit contracts" since there is no way to penalise someone who chooses not to reciprocate after receiving benefits from the company in the form of assistance to volunteer: they simply stop volunteering. However, more traditional ways of understanding the gift relationship that encompass the wider social environment (e.g. Mauss 1990; Godbout 2000) acknowledge the ability to both penalise and encourage through social controls and norms.

### **I Have Obligations Now**

It is not uncommon for activities that start out as voluntary to take on a stronger element of obligation (Turner 1974:175), which raises questions about the nature of obligation as both external (coercion or pressure) and internal (moral imperative), and about the need to balance this with gain and the counter-intuitive choice to undertake an obligation freely (Rochester et al. 2012: 21). Staff, students and graduates who enjoyed and valued their time at university or in their college may want to volunteer as a way to show their appreciation, and a sense of responsibility often emerges from feelings of gratitude or identification with a group. Anna, for example, said that she got involved with her college's Graduate Common Room (GCR) Executive Committee because she has enjoyed herself and wants to do the same for others. Nicola, too, is a fairly recent graduate and told me:

At the moment all my sort of volunteering time is based about supporting back into the University...I see that as my way of giving back [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

One of the first college friends I made at the start of my postgraduate research is a German economist who has never identified himself as a volunteer and claims not to believe in altruism. When I asked why he helped out during our last college induction week, he said that someone organised his own induction and made him feel welcome, so it only seemed fair to help out. In a similar way, students who received support and

encouragement to get into university may want to do the same for other young people. As an undergraduate, Robin took part in her college's Young Persons Project, which is about widening educational participation in fifteen and sixteen year-olds:

I kind of wanted to do that just because of the help that I'd been given to try and apply to college and university [*Robin: SCA staff*]

Paradoxically, some voluntary roles involve a more formal element of obligation or sense of responsibility that may be difficult to simply walk away from. Nicola joined her former college's SCR (Senior Common Room) Committee in the belief that anyone who wants to attend college events should contribute towards their organisation:

I'm just one of those people who like to be involved, and I've been involved with the JCR and I've been involved with the MCR and, you know, my view is always for events to happen in college at the SCR level there has to be someone to organise it [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

When the SCR President stepped down last year there was an expectation that Nicola, who was Vice-President by this time, would step into that role, which is very much what happened. It was a situation where the initial choice to become Vice-President had been voluntary, but the subsequent responsibilities involved an element of obligation. Similarly, Anna has undertaken a number of organisational roles within her college, sometimes at the expense of her academic work:

No-one forced me to do it but I have obligations now [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Mark's involvement with his college's JCR Executive Committee was very gradual. Initially sceptical about what he regarded as "the shouting and waving" of student politics, he took a role in the organisation of various events, and eventually stood for election as the JCR President. Mark told me that there is no point in volunteering or standing for a position of responsibility if you are not prepared to take it seriously:

It wasn't an obligation to stand for President but the moment I stood, I saw it as an obligation that I do a good job [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Positions on a college Executive Committee are frequently described as being more like an unpaid job than volunteering, and there is an implication that helping to run a college

is regarded as being of greater value than community service. Anna and Mark both distinguish between volunteering, and voluntarily taking on the responsibilities of a committee member:

I think there's a bit more pride about it...I wouldn't call it volunteering anymore because you take on a job, an unpaid job, but a job nonetheless  
*[Mark: Postgraduate volunteer]*

### **One Big Family**

Durham is a collegiate university, and extra-curricular involvement – including volunteering – is as important at college level as it is to the University more generally. However, people experience and value colleges in very different ways, which is likely to influence the bonds of both friendship and obligation. Jack, for example, said he did not enjoy living in college during his first year and as a result tends not to participate in college sports or other activities. Laura, an undergraduate, and Samantha, a postgraduate, enjoyed their time in college but both now 'live out' and as a result find it much harder to get involved with their colleges. Jenny lives in her college but prefers to get more involved in departmental or general university activities. In her case, she explained, it is because she comes from a Canadian university and has never encountered the collegiate system before:

It's a very weird system to me *[Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer]*

Anna, on the other hand, became deeply immersed in her own college as soon as she arrived in Durham. She gets annoyed that so few students in the college are prepared to take part in its organisation or get involved as volunteers:

I think it's important that more people volunteer...You demand people are doing stuff but you're not willing to take even a minute to sit down and do something like, people, the general meeting is for everyone. We have sixteen hundred students; we're lucky if we get twenty-five people in the room *[Anna: Postgraduate volunteer]*

Mark is more relaxed about the difficulties of finding students to help around college, but he also suggests that volunteering is an inappropriate term to use for a close relationship that can, for some, be more like being part of a family. Ironically, he

suggested, it may be this very closeness that makes it difficult on occasion to find people to help out:

It's the way that they view the JCR, and it's because we say we're one big family, and family's a very good word to use because you wouldn't let down your friends; you would let down your family...It's sort of like, you know, your mum tells you to put the dishes away or load the dishwasher but you've probably got something better to do, whereas if you went to a friend's house and their mum asked you, would you mind, of course you'd do it without questioning and you'd wonder if you'd done it right [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

One possible explanation for why some people are less likely to feel an obligation to help their college 'family' draws on Komter and Vollebergh's (1997:749) distinction between "exchange" and "communal" relationships, where each is characterised by varying expectations of reciprocity. The former typically involves more distant ties and greater expectations of reciprocity; there is less reciprocal obligation in the latter but closer ties of family and friendship (Komter and Vollebergh 1997:749). However, closer ties are no guarantee of mutual support and far from being subject to the habitus of what Wilson (2012:188) describes as the "family of origin", college 'families' sometimes seem to illustrate the saying that familiarity breeds contempt.

## **Exploitation**

A common opinion from a number of staff members and postgraduate – but not undergraduate – students who spoke to me is that volunteers are taken for granted and that once someone becomes known as a volunteer, there is a tendency to assume that they will be willing or able to help out on every occasion:

Once you're in the open and once they know you, and once you have done something for them, they just expect it to be done again [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

This certainly seemed to be Nicola's experience, as she juggled working for the University with volunteering for her old college. She found that people within college would start ringing her up during the day, expecting that she was going to respond to emails, and felt that they could pass her contact details on to alumni to deal with

enquiries because “I’m taken for granted at that point”. Student volunteers, too, may feel that they are being taken for granted. I noticed some signs around Anna’s college, stating that the Executive Committee is made up of volunteers, and asked her if these were put up for a reason:

We did definitely have a reason for it, because we had, especially last year, a lot of people that came in demanding things from us...And that’s why we decided it is important for people to know that, people don’t seem to realise that the GCR Committee is all volunteers. We are all volunteering [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

She may be annoyed at the lack of student involvement with college organisation, but Anna also argues that asking too much of volunteers may have a negative impact on their personal life, as well as damaging their goodwill or willingness to volunteer in the future, although this does very much depend on the type of voluntary activity and an individual’s commitment:

It’s frustrating because you don’t have a life...when I get called in to do something it influences my life with my friends and my partner, and if my partner’s called in...then it’s my evening that’s ruined [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Despite being taken for granted, Anna says that she just wants to help out in order to prevent things going wrong and because she doesn’t want her college to look bad. Other students, however, may have taken on an unpaid position in return for a financial bursary, which is sometimes described as a voluntary role. They might feel that they are taken advantage of but do not always feel comfortable about saying so. As Ellie put it:

Like, would you dare say no? ...I almost regret applying for that scholarship; I wouldn’t do it again, to be fair, I wouldn’t, if I studied here another year, I wouldn’t do it again. I think I’d prefer spending the money than having the rent [*Ellie: Postgraduate volunteer*]

I discuss the link between autonomy, financial need and institutional power in more detail in Chapter 5.

## **Finding a Balance**

Wilson (2000:220) suggests that time spent volunteering is inversely proportional to time spent working, although a more complex breakdown suggests that whilst part-time workers volunteer more than full-time workers, those who do not work at all tend to volunteer the least. Applying this argument to students, survey data from the academic year 2009/2010 finds that whilst 70% of students cited pressures of study as a reason for never volunteering, students who study and work part-time are also more likely to volunteer than students who do not work (Brewis et al. 2010:x). This supports Putnam's (2000:191) comment that busy people tend to be more involved with their communities, although not necessarily in a voluntary capacity.

Whilst many students are keen to get involved with volunteering or other extra-curricular activities, they also tell me there is only so much that they can do in the time available. Jonathan volunteers with the Durham Constabulary, but this means that he has no extra time to get involved with SCA or Experience Durham:

When you're a student as well, you've just got so many things to balance and do [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Samantha, who prioritised her studies over volunteering as an undergraduate, suggested that students may have the perception that volunteering requires more time than it actually does, when it might just involve a couple of hours a week. They may also be wary of making a commitment because they don't always know how hard they might need to work for a future exam or essay deadline. A current undergraduate supported these observations:

I kind of knew about SCA but I wasn't really involved when I first started university. I went to the Fresher's Fair and things like that but I was working part time and knew I had my degree and was kind of, like, I don't really have time to do all these type of things [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Nevertheless, some commitments are more time-consuming than others, and when an entire day needs to be given up to volunteering activities, including travel, students may need to make that time up at the expense of other social activities. Fay volunteers once a



week at a school near Sunderland; it takes at least two hours to get there and back by public transport:

That is why I have no time to social [sic]; it is definitely an issue with work, I think. I just spend my time in the library [*Fay: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Some volunteers find it easier to fit extra things in than others. As an undergraduate, said Caroline, she did not consider two or three hours every week or every fortnight to be a big commitment, and still found time for other societies and social events. Samantha, on the other hand, chose to withdraw entirely from one voluntary activity with a conservation charity because she was unable to commit what she felt was an appropriate amount of time. She told me it was better to step back whilst she concentrated on her academic work, rather than perform the role poorly. Final year students often face a dilemma of balancing volunteering and other activities with the demands of exams, although they handle it in different ways. Where Charlotte is scaling her volunteer activities down in the final year in order to focus on exams, Jack now takes volunteering more seriously to make up for the time he failed to get involved during the second year. He is becoming increasingly aware that his time at university is drawing to a close and wants to make the most of every opportunity, but knows how much work needs to be done as well:

So I would say I'm probably limiting myself with what I can do [*Jack: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Undertaking extra-curricular responsibilities can be stressful, especially when combined with study and possibly additional paid work. I asked Anna how she balances the demands of her MA programme with her college projects, volunteering and other work responsibilities:

I don't. I'd say I spend 60-70% of my time on volunteering [and] projecting, and the other 40% or 30% are like study [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

She went on to explain that balancing studying with other responsibilities sometimes feels beyond her control. There are times in the year when there is very little to do other than study, and other times when studying has to take a back seat in spite of the risk that

she will receive lower marks. David, a former SCA Director, also commented at our first meeting that his grades started to slip in his third year because of too many volunteering commitments. This is the case for many students who commit to organising a particular event. At my own college, the first major events of the academic year take place in early October, during induction week, and the organising committee will have worked hard for several months over the summer in addition to their academic commitments. Late one evening after all the preparations for a recent induction week were finally completed, Anna still had to prepare for a meeting in her department on the following day, and another organiser almost wailed:

I can't remember what my PhD is about [*Eloise: Postgraduate, induction week organiser*]

It was a similar story during one of our annual postgraduate conferences, which gave me the rare opportunity to catch up with two of my friends. Rose had just returned from a year's fieldwork, and Michelle was helping to organise the conference in addition to her regular volunteer work. As part of her college bursary, she is expected to organise volunteer training and other activities, and feels obligated to put a lot of effort into the role. Rose was amazed that Michelle was doing all this and asked when she found time to do her PhD:

In my spare time [*Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]

Finding a balance between study, work and volunteering is not always easy, and part of the challenge is for individuals to manage their time. Speaking about the commitment of Nightline volunteers and committee members, for example, Simon told me that whilst an organisational role might not entail very many formal responsibilities, there are always those who will push themselves to do more:

You're never being forced to do stuff but you might be the kind of person that makes themselves do too much...so you'll never be finished because the more that you do, the more there is to do next week [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

Then there are the periods when other commitments get in the way of volunteering, especially around the exam season, and it becomes crucial to delegate responsibility:

I think that part of being part of a team, and working well with a team, is being able to go, I cannot work on this right now so I'm going to walk away. It actually takes more courage to do that, I think, than to stay there and keep working [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

For some staff as well as students, volunteering takes up a lot of time and there is a danger of doing too much. Esme told me that she used to do quite a lot with the Red Cross, but reduced her volunteering activities so that she didn't get "burnt out". Her colleague, Greg, observed that one of the dangers of staff volunteering, individually or as a team, is being tempted by an interesting activity that takes place during a busy period at work. He went on to explain that staff members with the seniority and flexibility to schedule much of their own work may need to make this decision for themselves, but the University is unlikely to allow staff to volunteer during working hours where job performance suffers as a result:

The University doesn't have to give you time; it wants to give you time, but not at the expense of getting your job done properly [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

June thinks that mixing work and volunteering is a good idea, but also that it is important for staff not to take on too much, and organisers should help them to find an appropriate balance. Sometimes, she told me, people are so enthusiastic that they don't really think about the implications of offering extra time, and how it might affect other parts of their personal or family life.

### **Trustees, Risk and Legal Obligation**

A different type of voluntary obligation that is often overlooked or under-estimated, is that which comes with the responsibilities of becoming a trustee. In what may initially resemble comments from previous sections, the role of trustee is voluntary but comes with very real obligations. An important point of contrast, however, is that being a trustee potentially carries the risk of personal legal and financial liability, albeit to a lesser degree since the 2006 Charities Act (HMSO 2006) introduced the option of indemnity insurance (Cabinet Office 2007:F2). As the manager of a local charity grants foundation observed, the greatly amended 2006 Charities Act introduced so much extra

bureaucracy and accountability, in order to address concerns of fraud amongst other things, it has had the effect of discouraging some people from getting involved in the governance of voluntary organisations. What she described as a combination of limited awareness and anxiety about the obligations of trusteeship emerged during several different encounters during my own research.

The unexpected result of a casual conversation at a college function was an invitation to attend this year's North East Governance Conference, organised by SkillShare North East, a company providing training for volunteers and community groups in the region. The primary function of this event was to provide information about recruiting and supporting trustees for regional charities and volunteer organisations. Emphasis was placed throughout the day on the importance of obtaining appropriate training and knowledge in order to remain sustainable and successful in the voluntary sector. This is especially true for those volunteering on committees and as trustees, who may lack a full understanding of their strategic, legal and financial accountability. The event's keynote speaker defined charity trustees as:

Those persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity [*Solicitor, expert in Third Sector governance*]

It is a legally and financially accountable role although terminology and definitions vary, which may cause concern and confusion, and she added that people are often unaware of their responsibilities as trustee or their scope for involvement. Several people at the conference commented that they had never had the position of trustee so clearly laid out, but at a later workshop discussion there was widespread agreement that one of the greatest problems of attracting trustees is that the very information deemed essential to make an informed choice about whether or not to take on the role also has a tendency to frighten people off. There is a particular problem attracting younger trustees, who see the value and potential of the role, but need to consider fears, obstacles and sometimes a very real risk exposure.

Until recently, one of Mary's roles as a local volunteer coordinator has been to provide training for anyone – including staff and students at Durham University – involved in

the governance and administration of voluntary organisations in the region. Her observations reflect the stories I heard at the Governance Conference: it is a struggle to find trustees, especially younger people and students, and there is often insufficient understanding of what the role entails. Mark and Anna, for example, have both held voluntary positions on the Executive Committee of their respective colleges, which involved significant legal and financial responsibilities. This was due to changes in the University's governance arrangements, emerging from the 2006 Charities Act (HMSO 2006) and further structural changes made by the University in 2011 (DU 2014n). They explained that where colleges have chosen to remain an independent charity rather than becoming a university organisation, some members of the student Executive Committee must also act as trustees. The degree of accountability this involves is not always made clear when students first take on these roles, and although training is increasingly available to new student trustees, neither Mark nor Anna were initially aware of the potential risks:

I am still probably slightly terrified that somebody will find that I did something during my year that's horrendously illegal. I certainly wasn't aware of it, but that's just the way it goes I suppose [*Mark: Undergraduate volunteer*]

I found a similar situation with some of the volunteer groups that I worked with during my fieldwork, although the larger organisations have a greater awareness of both the responsibilities and risks associated with trusteeship. Bob works for the University, and volunteers at a long-standing educational centre that works with a number of national and local healthcare providers. He has been on the centre's Board of Trustees for many years and is confident about the level of training and skills that each trustee brings to the organisation, although he told me that the responsibility of the role can make it easy to forget that trustees are volunteers. In Bob's opinion, the organisation where he is a trustee is "so well run" that the responsibilities do not feel onerous:

I'm absolutely sure that things are, kind of, solid, and we've got massive bloody resources anyway [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

However, he remains very aware that the increasing focus in recent years on the legal and financial liabilities and accountabilities of charitable organisations has had varying

effects on charities and their trustees, depending on overall levels of experience, structure and resources.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter illustrates a number of ways in which the gift offers a useful framework to explore or transcend dualistic ways of understanding volunteering as either an optional activity that is freely undertaken, or something that people are expected to do in order to fulfil very different ideas of social or civic obligation. On the prevalence of the gift across cultures, Mauss (1990: 3) observes that “in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily”. Of greater relevance to ‘modern’ societies, with their diverse and changing views of individual autonomy and social responsibility, is his comment that the gift is “where obligation and liberty intermingle” (Mauss 1990:83). The gift is also discussed by Godbout (2000:17) in relation to obligation and loss of freedom. He introduces a personal, family-like dimension to the gift relationship that curtails liberty whilst at the same time offering conditional security. This is not dissimilar to Malinowski’s (1966:51) idea that human behaviour is informed by traditions of courtesy or obedience to authority, a duty to family or friends, and a desire to meet with public approval. However, Malinowski (1966:9, 12) also proposes a complicated mix of social sanctions, upbringing and interests that have the effect of encouraging but not enforcing varying degrees of conscious and unconscious obedience to norms and customs.

A similar combination of explicit pressures and more subtle encouragement has emerged in this chapter, in relation to volunteering at Durham University and the ways in which individuals embrace, accept, or resist different types of obligation. There is a change of focus in the next chapter, as I move away from questions of individual agency and the extent to which volunteering is freely undertaken, towards a more institutional perspective that explores how volunteering fits into a more formal organisational framework.

## CHAPTER 5 – AUTONOMY, DEPENDENCE AND POWER

### Introduction

Contradicting Bauman's (2001:96) opinion that "voluntarism, individual freedom, self-assertion are all synonyms of the emancipation from communal ties", the perspective of reciprocal gift exchange situates volunteering within a web of social norms, ties and relationships, which may foster the illusion of choice and spontaneity but also constrains the autonomy of individuals and organisations. In this chapter, I move on from questions of personal volition and obligation in volunteering to the relationship between autonomy, dependence and power at a more institutional level, exploring the differences between organisational and financial autonomy, and the impact this may have on wider relationships within a university. This sets the scene for the discussion in Chapter 6 about the complicated relationship between altruism and self-interest.

Conservative government neo-liberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly those of rolling back state-funded services and increasing privatisation, led to an expanding role for local government services as well as greater expectations of and need for the voluntary sector (Wright 1994:1; Davis Smith et al. 1995:2). The UK coalition government followed a similar route with rhetoric about "concerned citizens acting in a voluntary capacity" (Rochester et al. 2012:xiii-xiv) and its controversial flagship policy, the Big Society, has been identified as one of the policy areas most likely to affect current and future volunteering. Early arguments in support of the Big Society justify cuts in welfare and other government services on the basis that enabling the public to prioritise and deliver services at a local level results in greater autonomy and community empowerment (Cabinet Office 2010; NAVCA 2012). However, critics of the Big Society point out that the call for volunteers and the promises of choice and autonomy are simply a way of shifting responsibility (and cost) away from the government; furthermore, the voluntary sector itself has not been immune to funding cuts, which hampers its efforts to deal with increasing demands on its resources (Bubb 2011; Rochester et al. 2012:xiv).

Of course, not all volunteers are part of the formal voluntary sector, and their activities extend beyond the provision of welfare and filling the gaps left by decreasing government involvement and funding (Sheard 1995:116-117). Nevertheless, these national policies are having a significant effect, generally and also at university level. Voluntary organisations need to take on greater responsibilities for services that were for a long time managed and provided by the state; increasing competition for and scarcity of funding requires business-oriented application processes and the generation of reports to demonstrate value and impact; and funding is increasingly contingent on the ability to meet externally defined targets, whether or not they are useful or relevant to the organisation's core aims (Rochester et al. 2012:221). Prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act, universities were protected by royal charter from direct state interference, but the rise of auditing, assessments and targets, as well as the link between university rankings and state funding, illustrates a more indirect threat to "academic autonomy" (Shore and Wright 2000:68-70).

The tensions between the need for public funding and the loss of autonomy which accompanies growing dependence on such funds, offers just one illustration of the way in which volunteerism cannot be separated completely from either the state or market forces (Prochaska 1988:3-4). I address similar tensions between autonomy and dependence in this chapter: the way in which a desire for leadership can lead to the 'Othering' of the University by students; the tendency for professional organisations to question the competence of both volunteers and students; and the need to balance the funding and support available through a centralised infrastructure with the bureaucratic limitations this places on both organisational and financial governance.

### **Illusions of Autonomy**

There can be an assumption that volunteering offers greater individual autonomy compared to a paid job, simply because it involves no salary or contract and has been freely undertaken. As one postgraduate said:

I'm not getting paid so nobody can tell me what to do [*Michelle:  
Postgraduate volunteer organiser*]



However, this is likely to be disputed by people who volunteer through a sense of obligation or voluntarily undertake a commitment with a particular set of responsibilities. Continuing the previous chapter's theme that volunteering is optional and obligatory, I found that responsibility is sometimes opposed to autonomy when contrasting different types of voluntary activity which are perceived as entailing different levels of commitment. Anna, for example, compares the responsibility of her role on a college Executive Committee with what she regards as the more autonomous but less demanding volunteering done by SCA:

You can say, OK, I'm willing just to offer one hour a week where I go talk to elderly people or I go to teach children certain sports or whatever  
*[Anna: Postgraduate volunteer]*

The combination of a perceived lack of autonomy with a sense of obligation results in a degree of resentment for some volunteers, especially students who undertake one-off projects or regular activities that interfere with their studies. Developing her original comment in Chapter 4, about the potential to exploit students who lack money and status, Ellie explains why she "would not dare say no" to the people asking her to get involved in volunteering and projects:

They all have a PhD or have a professorship or have been quite well known in their fields, and obviously you want to be in their good books, so at the same time it's like, I could be doing my summatives, I could be doing my dissertation, instead I'm sitting here writing notes for you...you know? *[Ellie: Postgraduate volunteer]*

A further example emerging from my fieldwork tells an even more complex story, illustrating the uneasy relationship that often exists between different groups in a Higher Education institution, and offering an interesting distinction between organisational and financial autonomy. Whilst attending a college-run volunteer training workshop, I met a student who volunteers with Durham Nightline, the confidential, student-run listening and information service that has been operating every term night since 1973 (DU 2012a). Although it has not been operating as a Durham Student Organisation, the University provides Nightline with an office and a phone line, although funding comes mostly from JCR Executive Committees and DSU fundraising activities, as well as one external funding body, the GM Morrison Charitable Trust, which donates £1000 per year to Durham Nightline (DU 2012b). As a member of the Nightline Executive

Committee, Simon makes a distinction between reliance on university funding for all or some of an organisation's running costs, and autonomy in the sense of governance and policy decisions:

We are autonomous, we're not controlled by the University in our governance... We are given the office and the actual phone, and the use of the phone, by the University, and they give us Wireless as well for example, and they maintain the office for us... but that's the end of, that's what they do for us [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

At the same time, however, there is an acute awareness of vulnerability and the risk of losing financial support, which would appear to contradict Simon's initial claim about Nightline's autonomy:

At any moment the University could just change their minds and there's nothing that we can do [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

Simon went on to explain that although some of the smaller student organisations have retained their nominal independence by not becoming Durham Student Organisations, Nightline's annual income does not meet the minimum threshold of £5000.00 required to register as an independent charity, which results in a rather ambiguous status:

I'd love to register us as a charity but unfortunately I can't... we need to have a better relationship with the University in order to be able to guarantee our own future quality and our sustainability [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

As a result, Nightline is informally described by Simon as "an unregistered charity" and its relationship with the University is currently unclear:

There's nothing really written down or formally established [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

This is something that Simon has been working on because, he said, it is a precarious position for the organisation to be in. The problem is compounded by Nightline's emphasis on providing an anonymous and confidential service to students, and its insistence on remaining unaffiliated:

[We are a] very arms-length group of people who you don't see... it's very easy for Nightline to become very isolated from the University and from the Union [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

This one example encapsulates the themes and debates that I address in the remainder of this chapter: the nebulous status of both students and volunteers in relation to the University; concerns about wider relationships with and within Higher Education institutions; the constraints of formality and legislation; and the link between power, funding and autonomy. The focus in this chapter is primarily on centralised student volunteering and student concerns about governance and autonomy. An absence of similar comments from staff volunteers and organisers that I spoke with – with the exception of whether or not staff are free to volunteer in the first place – may reflect different motives for volunteering, or the different organisational structure of the staff volunteering programme. SVO was never an independent charity; it has always been a centralised university programme run almost since its inception from within Experience Durham, emphasising volunteer service rather than leadership and personal development.

## **The University as ‘Other’**

### ***Tension and Mistrust***

Both staff and students often prefer to undertake their volunteering independently of an institution, but where an institution does offer support and resources, the opportunities for volunteering may increase (Robinson and Hudson 2013:190). To this end, managers from the University and Experience Durham argue that they offer expertise and a supportive infrastructure that broadens the potential scope of volunteering without actually taking control away from the students, although they also state that students have got to want to work with the University in the first place:

You can't come along and say, 'I'm going to support you, whether you want it or not', you know? *[Robert: Senior university manager]*

The same managers contrast this position to what they regard as a mistaken tendency by student organisations to treat the University as separate and ‘Other’:

They've got this idea, there's this thing called 'The University' which is, somehow they're not quite sure about it, but hang on, you're part of it!  
*[Robert: Senior university manager]*

The decision in 2012 to bring SCA into Experience Durham, transforming it from an independent charity to a Durham Student Organisation, resulted in changes to its governance and scope. Robin joined the SCA staff after completing a post-graduation sabbatical role with Experience Durham; she also volunteered with SCA during her years as a student. Consequently, Robin's understanding of the different groups involved in this new relationship enabled her to recognise that whilst such a move might make organisational and financial sense, there are likely to be some practical and ideological problems to overcome:

Obviously the DSU is independent of the University; the DSU staff and sabbatical officers have their ideas about how it should work...I think there's such a clash in what they're trying to do in some ways...because they've got a completely different structure [*Robin: SCA staff*]

One such problem appears to reflect the wider tensions between the student body and university management. As a senior manager who has been closely involved in developing the University's centralised volunteer programme within a wider framework of sport and engagement activities, Paul told me that the DSU is hostile towards Experience Durham, whose managers have in his view been unfairly accused of placing too much emphasis on high-level sport and not enough on volunteering:

What I do find is that we are continually attacked by Durham Students' Union, who think we're too elitist and we don't have enough people involved...Well, it took us fifteen years to get sports to where it is; we're not going to change it overnight [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Managed by Experience Durham but with their office physically located in the DSU building, Robin describes SCA as being stuck in the middle of this hostility and unable to distance itself from either party. Whilst she realises that it is important for them to work with the DSU, because "they are the voice of the students", Robin is also aware that SCA is formally a part of Experience Durham now, and as such they are in a position to benefit from "an awful lot of help and money, time and advice".

The situation is not dissimilar to the relationship between students, the University, and its sixteen colleges, which have varying degrees of perceived and actual autonomy depending on their status as maintained colleges or independent charities (DU 2014n).

As one manager explained:

The colleges think that, a lot of them, not so much now, but sort of thought they were autonomous institutions. Actually they're not, they're part of the University and they wouldn't exist if they weren't in the University [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

The importance some colleges and student societies place on autonomy and governance, in contrast to those that have chosen to become Durham Student Organisations, is yet another reflection of the tension that sometimes exists between the student body and the University. For Anna, who is closely involved in the running of her college, it is important for colleges to be independent and not “under the University’s rule”.

However, a very different view tends to emerge from some staff members who organise more centralised volunteering and engagement activities:

They say at the moment, Durham Students’ Union is all student-run. I’m sorry, but the Durham Students’ Union actually isn’t any more student-run than Experience Durham. We all have senior management staff that are university employees and we all have student execs and student sabbaticals. I don’t see any difference whatsoever [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

Rachel’s point of view appears to suggest that although students are permitted to have a certain amount of control over volunteering projects in order to further their personal development and as part of the student experience, any claims to or perceptions of student autonomy are no more than an illusion. It is this issue of student autonomy that I discuss in the following sections.

### ***The Student (Led) Experience***

The idea of student-led volunteering is hard to define. Debates over the extent to which student volunteering at Durham University can or should be student-led address not only the organisation of volunteering activities but also the relationships between students, staff and university management. SCA has traditionally been described as “a student-led, student-focused organisation” (DU 2014i) and as such it offers many opportunities for students to become project leaders, although it also makes the SCA

staff roles potentially more demanding because of the requirement to support multiple projects. Pippa was given a lot of autonomy when she ran an SCA children's project as an undergraduate and appreciates the development opportunities that were made available to her. However, after spending the year after graduation working as a volunteer coordinator, she told me that she now understands that enabling students to run their own projects has implications for the very small team of SCA staff:

As an officer, you have got a lot to keep track of [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Based on her own experiences as an SCA coordinator, Caroline described the paradoxical situation where, because of the extra work required to monitor multiple, student-led projects, there are too many SCA projects for the staff to support effectively without the help of student project leaders. However, whilst both Pippa and Caroline support the idea of a student-led volunteer organisation, they also told me that responsibilities need to be clarified:

Something that's really difficult is the student-led thing because it's really good and the Exec have been amazing this year but it's sometimes really difficult to know who's responsible for what [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

In keeping with their wish for autonomy, it should follow that the students decide what they want to do in SCA rather than the SCA staff, but in Robin's view they can lack focus:

I think at the minute there's a lack of what the students actually want, so we know what we can do to get on with our job [*Robin: SCA staff*]

This perhaps goes back to the problem, identified in the previous chapter, of finding a balance between volunteering, study and other commitments. In contrast to Robin's description, however, Charlotte is far more independent in her attitude to volunteer organisation. Although university support is important, she said, it must not diminish student leadership because students benefit from leading, managing and helping people; it develops valuable skills and potentially useful networks. She likes being part of Experience Durham, but also said that it is very important that SCA remains student-led:

If a university does all that for you, it kind of takes away from some of that experience [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Experience Durham managers are well aware of the suspicions that student-led organisations may harbour about the University's motives for centralising activities, and of the desire of students to do things for themselves:

You have to get into the system and get them into a position where they a) believe in what you're doing and b) realise that you're not trying to take them over, so they can carry on and you're not going to do anything... They don't like university staff getting too involved [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Robert agreed that there is a lot that Experience Durham and the University can help with, and although he sympathises with students who want to "keep control of what they think is theirs", he is also aware of the need to provide a duty of care to all members of the University, as well as protecting its image:

I keep saying, it's not that we want to control it but we do need to know... because of very practical things like Health and Safety issues associated with volunteering, for projects overseas and so on, where, like it or not, these will be seen as Durham University [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

A recent change to the volunteering area of the Experience Durham website reflects this shift away from student autonomy towards a more centralised approach. In a subtle but significant re-wording, "many of the SCA projects are student-led" (DU 2014o) but this description is no longer explicitly applied to the organisation itself. It remains to be seen whether SCA will reflect this change of status in their own publicity material for the coming academic year.

## **Competence and Professionalism**

### ***Patronised and Undervalued?***

A visiting academic involved in student volunteering and community service activities in his own institution recently said to me that liking and respecting students, and "seeing the best in people instead of the worst", is a key part of keeping students engaged. I have found a similar sentiment being articulated by staff members such as Rachel, who recognise that without student volunteers, the University would have been unable to engage with such large sections of the surrounding community:

We couldn't do anything without the students and the students we work with, we have the greatest respect for. They know far more than us, they have much more fantastic ideas. We need them to put the spark in everything [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

And yet, Experience Durham takes responsibility for much of the organisation and administration of student volunteer projects, and some staff appear to assume that in spite of their creativity and enthusiasm, students can't or won't want to do certain things:

In some ways we felt the students weren't able to run the projects because we worked with such hard to reach groups...we take a lot off the shoulders of the student projects [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

This protective attitude is not always welcomed. It is the opinion of several student volunteers I spoke with that the University under-estimates and patronises students, placing constraints on what they are permitted to do:

Sometimes the University has an attitude of, 'Students? Oh, they don't know what they're doing! Let's go in there and let's put the adults in charge; let's sort this out'...you feel that sort of patronising look and the way that they're talking to you [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

It is not just undergraduates who feel patronised. Anna is a 24-year old postgraduate with many years of volunteering experience, and in her opinion:

What it boils down to is, that just because we're students we're not taken seriously all the time [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Charlotte argues that it is important for the University to respect students and listen to them, and when decisions are made that affect volunteering or other aspects of community engagement, students who are closely involved in these activities should be consulted:

I think a lot of the time as well...some particularly high members of university staff can sit in their office and, like, they just read about everything online or hear about it second hand. They're not there on the front line, they're not talking to people in the local community, they don't know the different areas, they don't know what's going on [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

The frustration that these students may feel as a result of what they regard as the University's refusal or failure to recognise their abilities and commitment offers an



interesting contrast to a more traditional understanding of the university experience as a period of age-related liminality (Van Gennep 1960; Sherry 1983:160), which I introduced in Chapter 1.

### ***Volunteer and Professional Hierarchies***

Referring primarily to European countries, Anheier and Salamon (1999:43) have argued that notions of a “do-gooder” volunteer are often associated with ideas of volunteers as unqualified amateurs and as less vital compared to professionals in similar roles, or even not required at all. However, contemporary volunteers are increasingly experiencing a change in both attitude and role, with a growth in professional-volunteer partnerships and overlaps between the private, public and voluntary sectors.

Consequently, voluntary organisations are often forced to become more professional, specialist, centralised and accountable (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003:179), at the expense of a less formal but more autonomous way of operating. In many cases, the increasing levels of formality and bureaucracy have resulted in volunteer organisations being run by a combination of paid and volunteer staff (Sheard 1995:116-117).

There is a question of whether critical organisational roles can or should be performed by volunteers at all, since there may be a greater requirement for reliability and commitment that cannot reasonably be demanded of a volunteer. Richard, a college staff member who is also a former police officer, gives the example of police volunteers who are recruited into coordinator positions, which has had the effect of forming a “volunteering hierarchy” in which they are no longer regarded as volunteers. The implication is that the additional commitments of an organisational role simultaneously remove it from the realm of volunteering and give it greater value than the activities of a ‘normal volunteer’ which may not require as much effort. Another type of hierarchy places less emphasis on responsibility and more on the extent to which activities serve the purposes of those undertaking them. As both student and police volunteer, Jonathan has always been very clear that his main priority is to improve his chances of getting a job after graduation. He suggested that in spite of the increasing reliance of most institutions on volunteers, they remain at the bottom of a hierarchy of unpaid activities:

There's always going to be the fact that volunteering is sort of at the bottom. I think internships and reward certificates and achievements are above volunteering [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

The distinction between being a volunteer and working in a job that organises volunteering activities is not always clear, especially where both activities are associated with the same institution. Nicola said that she sometimes finds it difficult to distinguish between her personal volunteering, which has been largely university-based over the past year, and her job as a university employee, which includes the management of staff and student volunteering activities:

Working on the Staff Volunteering team, the lines are very blurred, you know? [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

In a similar fashion, both Robin and Pippa found it strange to make the transition from being an SCA volunteer to taking on an SCA sabbatical staff role:

I think the thing that's really difficult from moving from that role, actually, is, 'cos you're a student who's been leading on stuff, but actually when you're an office member you're the facilitator [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Although she tells me that she still misses her time as an SCA volunteer, Caroline explained that one of the first lessons learned by new SCA staff members is that commitment and enthusiasm for a job involving volunteer organisation is not the same as volunteering. The job involves volunteering, she said, but "it's still a job".

### ***That Voluntary Sector Feeling***

Even committed volunteers and organisers can on occasion be critical about the informality of volunteering. For Greg, motivating volunteers offers a different set of challenges to motivating professionals in a work environment. Instead of outlining a job requirement or issuing an instruction, it can be more a case of:

I need someone to do this if you want to get involved; it's a bit mucky, it's a bit nasty, is there anybody interested in doing this? [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

Len, a transport manager for a local charity, told me that volunteers are cheaper but paid staff are usually more reliable, and although Amy, in her capacity as resource manager

for a local education centre, finds that volunteers may be as skilled and reliable as paid staff, she also acknowledges that they are more likely to leave:

I don't want to become too over-reliant on people because I know the majority of all volunteers are here as a stop gap [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

Formalisation may therefore be a consequence of volunteer managers or volunteers seeking status for their activities, or hoping to provide confidence and reassurance about the services being provided (Rochester et al. 2012:221). The above concerns also support perceptions that volunteering activities are often under-valued unless they at least have the appearance of a professional structure. A related concern that I heard on several occasions is summed up by Amy:

I think when you're in the voluntary sector sometimes people don't take what you do that seriously [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

The corollary to this view is that volunteers may not be considered for similar paid roles that become available. One of the first conversations I had at the start of my fieldwork was with a woman from Zimbabwe, visiting her daughter in my college; we just happened to be sitting next to each other in the college's coffee shop. She told me that she has been a volunteer all her life, and made the observation that in volunteering organisations, when people are employed in paid roles they are generally brought in from the outside. No-one, she said, seems to think of employing the people who are already working there in a voluntary capacity. Echoes of this early conversation returned towards the end of my fieldwork, with Anna's recent discovery that few potential employers are interested in her volunteering experience and do not value it as "work". She feels disillusioned because:

Volunteering organisations and charities value your skills and expertise when you are volunteering for them, but if a job opening comes up, it doesn't occur to them that you could do it, and they don't want to lose a useful volunteer [Anna: *Postgraduate volunteer*]

Commenting on the organisational abilities of the voluntary sector, Dahrendorf (2003:xiv) describes "a delightfully creative chaos", with the implication that however

well-meaning, volunteering is somehow lesser than professional or state-run activities. In her own ethnographic research, Joseph (2002:102) offers a more nuanced interpretation, highlighting the concerns expressed by people working in a voluntary capacity who feel a tension caused by two sets of values being compromised: the desire to be professional and provide a good service, and the belief that “community-based” activities should value loyalty and personal connections over professionalism and bureaucracy, even if this means that some activities are not done so well. Increasing expectations of professionalism, as well as legal and financial accountability, are problematic for the organisation and management of volunteers and the voluntary sector, which is necessarily different to the private sector (Davis Smith et al. 1995:6). SCA and Experience Durham staff, as well as staff volunteers who are responsible for organising voluntary activities, told me that the perceived or actual need to be more professional carries a cost in terms of training and bureaucracy. Volunteering organisations are:

Feeling the importance of being seen as more professional than maybe they were ten years ago, and there’s a massive burden goes with that  
*[James: Staff volunteer]*

Whilst agreeing that things have changed in the voluntary sector and that it is becoming far more professionalised, the manager of a local day centre in Durham does not accept that this means having to lose what he describes as that “voluntary sector feeling.” However, he insists that organisations have an obligation to do the right thing for volunteers as well as those they help, whether it be for policies and procedures or for reasons of health and safety:

Which is a bit of a bind at times but we’ve got to make sure it’s right  
*[Stuart: Volunteer manager, local organisation]*

Stuart went on to tell me that it is common for staff working at the day centre to also work there in a voluntary capacity, as well as the regular volunteers and trustees, several of whom are staff and students from Durham University. Some see the activities as separate to their paid role; others regard them as mutually beneficial activities that strengthen wider relationships:

I see my role holistically...and to be honest, volunteering is in that  
*[Stuart: Volunteer manager, local organisation]*

Nevertheless, there remains a fear amongst many individuals and organisations that “ultimately, there is a real danger that too much formalisation and control will damage the spirit and characteristics of volunteering” (Rochester et al. 2012:230), which often appears to be more like unpaid work, with less scope for volunteer “creativity or autonomy” and too much bureaucratic control.

## **Independence and Infrastructure**

### ***Formality and Control***

Recent strategy for volunteering at Durham University has been partly about encouraging new activity but also about increasing the visibility of, and relationships between, what is already in place:

There’s a lot going on under the radar and to some extent, part of the last five years has actually been trying to get above the radar rather than under it [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Robert went on to talk about the position being taken by the University: people need to understand that high-level policies are not about controlling volunteers and volunteer groups, but about providing an infrastructure that would allow them to make better use of limited resources from within a formal university-run organisation. Such a position reflects the views that infrastructure is highly important to volunteering (Wilson 2012:192) and that one effect of increasing formalisation and top-down volunteer management has been the emergence of a “volunteering infrastructure” (Rochester et al. 2012:223).

References to infrastructure in previous chapters have emphasised the positive contribution made by a centralised approach, supporting volunteers and enabling a more effective use of resources. In this section, however, infrastructure is associated with a growth in bureaucracy and control, which volunteers and organisers alike receive with mixed feelings. At one end of a wide spectrum of opinions, Michelle – who is from the United States – gets impatient with what she can and cannot get done, observing that a problem in the UK and particularly in traditional institutions such as universities is that

everything moves very slowly. Current volunteering culture in the UK, in her view, focuses on protecting the organisation or institution, due to issues of litigation and accountability, even if this slows down or prevents the help and involvement offered by volunteers. At the other end of the spectrum, there is Rachel's view that although students are "doing a fantastic thing", they need to be safe because the University may be liable if something goes wrong:

I think the Students' Union looks very different to how it did twenty years ago, and it needs, unfortunately in times of litigation, you know, the way we're moving, it has to be [Rachel: *Experience Durham staff*]

Most of those people I spoke with fell between these two extremes.

### ***Bureaucracy and Red Tape***

With the growing number of projects now on offer to student volunteers, SCA staff members spend less time going out with the students and more time supporting project leaders. They have noticed an increase in bureaucracy and paperwork, partly because of changes in legislation and partly because of the more formal way that SCA now structures its projects as part of Experience Durham. Some, like Caroline, "don't mind that sort of paperwork" and recognise both the need for and benefits of a greater degree of formality and structure, but others find the increasing red tape to be cumbersome. Bureaucracy is seen as a barrier to volunteering and rather tedious; there are even those who change their minds about volunteering because the application process for certain projects can take so long, particularly those involving the police or prison service. Jonathan, for example, discussed the situation with fellow students who were also considering applying to volunteer with the police:

A lot of them sort of pulled out because it actually takes that long to get the forms filled in [Jonathan: *Undergraduate volunteer*]

The growth in organisation, centralisation and accountability, which has been a consequence of the increasing importance and visibility of volunteering in social life, may be discouraging some people from becoming volunteers (Fahey 2005:204). As an external volunteer coordinator with links to the University, Mary agrees that the formality that is becoming an increasing part of volunteering can be off-putting:

It's almost like applying for a job and it is scaring people off [*Mary: Local volunteer coordinator*]

DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) security checks<sup>8</sup> are frequently criticised as being too slow, too standardised and having only limited relevance to volunteer activities, but there are exceptions where volunteers describe this type of bureaucracy as necessary and even beneficial. Greg joined the Territorial Army when he was an undergraduate and the Voluntary Reserve not long after that; he also spent several years volunteering as a Special Constable. He recognises that different types of volunteering have different levels of risk and therefore require different approaches to safety and security:

I'd say it's a reasonable level of red tape to go through. If I want to go and work in Oxfam, there's not the same level of red tape as to go join the police, but for obvious reasons, if you're doing something with national security you want to have a level of checking done [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

Jane has been both volunteer and SCA project leader, working with a charity that supports prisoners and their families in County Durham. She explained that project leaders help potential volunteers with the complicated application process, especially for projects involving more complex security requirements. In the case of her own project, she told me, there can be a long gap between completing a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check – now known as the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) – and getting final prison security checks done, but there are still a limited number of activities that can be done in the meantime. In spite of the long delay in completing security checks, Jane commented that this is not necessarily a bad thing:

Most people find it really beneficial to spend that first three to six months down in the visitors' centre so they know exactly how the system works...the visitors' centre environment is quite alien [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

In other words, although going into a prison for the first time as a volunteer can be a shock, the delay in organising security checks allows for adjustment and training. It also enables new volunteers to show their commitment, and gain the organisation's trust.

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<sup>8</sup> CRB checks have been replaced by the DBS after the merger of the CRB with the International Safeguarding Authority (ISA) (HM Government 2014)

## **Policies, Power and Funding**

A growing dependence on limited funding is also symptomatic of the increasing efforts made by successive British governments throughout the twentieth century to provide mass, low-cost education; to control Higher Education via funding constraints; and to develop economic and efficient business models for managing universities (Collini 2012:34). Early threats to university autonomy came from the emergence of new and sometimes incompatible interest groups in the wake of developments in industry, capitalism and democracy. These outside interests and influences were resisted successfully for many years and university autonomy was justified on the grounds of continued service to national goals and the ideals of civic responsibility, but challenges to traditional forms of Higher Education intensified with the changes in the twentieth century political and economic landscapes (Soffer 1994:13-14).

Significant attempts to reduce university autonomy came in 1919 with the creation of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals – now called Universities UK – which was linked to a new University Grants Committee (UGC) and the introduction of government funding for universities after the First World War (Soffer 1994:16). Collini (2012:33) highlights two more key dates for UK Higher Education that illustrate the relationship between policies, power and funding: firstly, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was introduced in 1986<sup>9</sup> with significant effect on the shape of future research grants, areas, goals and methods that reflected dominant epistemologies and funding body policies; and secondly, the 1988 Education Reform Act included changes to academic tenure and the replacement of the UGC with funding bodies<sup>10</sup> that were able to align government and university agendas “by making funds dependent upon compliance in carrying out various reforms or in meeting specific targets” (Collini 2012:34).

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<sup>9</sup> The RAE has since been replaced by the REF (Research Excellence Framework), completed for the first time in 2014 (REF 2014)

<sup>10</sup> The UGC was a precursor to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (Shore and Wright 2000: 67)



Whilst not directly linked to university volunteering, both changes shaped and reflected the move towards an audit culture in Higher Education. The social, economic and political decisions emerging from audit processes which “determine the allocation of resources and can seem crucial to the credibility of enterprises” (Strathern 2000:1) highlight both the moral and financial roots of accountability. Bureaucratic norms shape practices and values not only in terms of what is correct but what is regarded as morally right; they act as “instruments for new forms of governance and power” (Shore and Wright 2000:57). Practices that are recognised as valid are likely to comply with the requirements of this new “audit culture” and to demonstrate an increasing emphasis on targets, evaluations and reports (Strathern 2000:1-2; Power 2003:379). These developments appear to vindicate a series of predictions about the future of UK Higher Education, which suggested that two themes emerging from the late twentieth century would be “instrumentalism and retrenchment” (Slee 1990:88). However, Slee’s confidence that neither theme would be particularly effective or long-term appears to have been misplaced.

In an explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between policy and power, Goddard (2009:4) and Furco (2010:379) observe that funding policies are an effective vehicle for influencing university practices, and usually reflect institutional rhetoric and ideology: the values of funding bodies and policy makers, as well as the decisions about who should receive support and who should not. Institutions focusing on volunteering and community engagement activities that are responsive to social needs are best placed to benefit from increasingly limited funding. As a result, universities and voluntary organisations are likely to adopt a form of “philanthropic particularism” (Komter 2005:143), supporting causes and interests most in sympathy with the social priorities and political views of institutions and funding bodies (Seabury 1975:7). Tensions and mismatches between the agendas, needs and values of powerful institutions and of community organisations may therefore have a detrimental effect on the communities they serve (DeFilippis et al. 2010:15), and once funding and top-level support is lost, volunteering programmes often find themselves on the periphery and struggling to continue. For this reason, financial vulnerability due to short-term or limited funding does not just affect volunteer activities. The knock-on effects are also felt by

“community partners” who invest time, money and effort in working with the staff and students of Higher Education institutions (Furco 2010:378).

### ***Funding and Targets***

One of the Durham University college websites states that “being a community means being respectful friends, not being members of a dominant tribe” (DU 2014p). This can be a challenge when the tensions between the DSU, colleges and the University, between faculties, or between SCA and Experience Durham, are fuelled at least partly by disagreements about how to prioritise and manage activities with a dwindling budget. Hence different groups with similar interests and activities may be wary of working together, as a senior manager put it, because they fear losing status and resources:

It’s part co-operation but to some extent it’s competition as well. It may not be expressed in those terms but in practice, it’s people really seeking to carve out agendas, or to protect territories [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Such a comment on university resources offers an interesting example of the link between funding, power and parochialism. It also complements the argument that departmental or faculty budgetary control constrains interdisciplinary initiatives, since there is a tendency to view outside funding sources as a potential threat due to the reduced ability to exercise control, and those with current control want to protect their interests (Boyer Commission 1998:14).

Volunteering provides a much needed service, especially where funding or support is unavailable from other sources. Pippa fears that many university and community organisations in Durham would not otherwise be able to continue, especially as the effects of funding cuts become deeper and more widespread:

I think there’s quite a few groups that just wouldn’t survive without volunteers [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

The manager of a local education centre agrees that volunteers are crucial for an organisation lacking in funds:

We're really underfunded. I would say the first thing that always hinders us is funds, so we've always got to think of, you know, a creative way around kind of financial dilemmas [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

However, opinion varies about what constitutes a lack of funds, which may in turn inform how different people in the same organisation respond to issues of both funding and autonomy.

Bob, for example, is a volunteer trustee for the same organisation where Amy works. His view is that small charities and community organisations are particularly vulnerable, and whilst well established organisations may have greater financial security, there is no guarantee that funding streams will continue:

We've just been going for a very long time and we've been careful as well. So the funding comes from, the core funding comes from Social Services, essentially. It never goes up; it occasionally reduces, through inflation basically [Bob: *University academic, staff volunteer*]

A third view, expressed by a colleague of Amy and Bob, is that independent organisations with a relatively sound financial position have greater freedom of action in relation to policy decisions compared with organisations who are more dependent on external funding bodies for support, but where there is a requirement for funding there will never be complete autonomy:

If we don't want to do something, we won't necessarily do it, and I think it's because we're an independent organisation and I think a lot of day care services in Durham County Council, they just have a three line whip, you know, you've got to do it, tough, you know? [Stuart: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

“Voluntarists find it difficult to resist the temptation to accept public funds, but they worry that a growing dependence on the state will undermine their independence” (Prochaska 1988:4). This dilemma has been apparent in much of the funding received for volunteering in UK Higher Education. Between 2001 and 2006 a significant segment of contemporary funding for volunteering came from the HEACF, focusing on outward-facing community participation and student development (Darwen and Rannard 2011:179), although critics (e.g. Annette 2010:459; Hartley et al. 2010:395)

have commented that the underlying motivation appears to serve the interests of Higher Education rather than the wider social good. Whatever the motivation, funding for university-run volunteering appears to be increasingly linked to regional and national Higher Education policies and institutional drivers. The three key areas for most UK university strategies are currently: research and education; business engagement and employability; and public engagement (Darwen and Rannard 2011:180). To qualify for funding and often to remain in existence, volunteer activities must demonstrate relevance to the core activities of Higher Education. There is also a need to provide evidence of the type of impact valued by funding bodies, and show an integrated engagement with and between Higher Education institutions, private and public sectors and the wider community (e.g. REF 2011).

Volunteer organisers from Durham University comment frequently about such requirements. One of the biggest barriers to getting sustained support and funding, said an SVO manager, is the difficulty of quantifying and researching the impact of volunteering to the satisfaction of funding bodies. Funding is often conditional on meeting certain targets, which constrains decisions about a project's scope and direction. Rachel found this to be the case when she started working for the University in 2000, organising sports volunteering and outreach activities. She was initially working on an ad hoc basis, but was asked to put in an application for some HEFCE funding to support a longer-term role in a more sustained programme:

We were successful...and it was around student volunteering so we had to get, it was a target of a hundred students a year volunteering in the community [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

The ways in which organisations must comply with the targets set by external funding bodies have implications for the way in which volunteer programmes subsequently develop. It also informs the type of evidence that funding bodies consider acceptable when evaluating the success of those programmes.

### *Funding and Values*

A common requirement for obtaining funding or justifying volunteer programmes is to provide evidence of value and impact, but establishing the economic value of something is difficult when output is neither obvious nor measurable in economic terms. The SCA staff, for example, were having a discussion about the purpose and meaning of monitoring, impact and change:

Their smile tells you that they're happy. Why do they need to be developed as people? They're kids, they just had a fantastic weekend...I get it all that it's to do with getting grants...I think it's good from that respect but some of it's just, just let people be. But you do need it for funding and grants and that sort of thing [*Robin: SCA staff*]

When attempting to define and measure the benefits and impact of student volunteering, there is a tendency towards anecdotal evidence and a lack of empirical data, which does not fit easily with the increasing demands of internal evaluation and external target achievement, both of which are crucial to contemporary volunteering when applying for funding and shaping policies (Squirrell 2009:19).

In many ways, Paul describes himself as a “numbers man” and accepts that quantitative data can be helpful to funding bodies, but he also argues that it does not present the full picture:

It's interesting that people are always asking for evidence...but my concern around a lot of the evidence is that it's quantitative; it's facts and figures. That's helpful if that's all they want, but it doesn't actually get you to where you need to be [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

He suggested that funding agencies may be more interested in knowing how their investments are used than in the underlying values of a particular cause. I heard a similar story from an undergraduate volunteer organiser:

If you're applying for funding then they'll go, we want to see this, this and this, and it's kind of like, well we can't really give you this, this and this but we can kind of show you a photo to prove it, we can show you a video, and that makes it very, very difficult, [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Charlotte said that one of the things she has learned is that gaining endorsements and support from funding bodies, for a particular cause or project, entails presenting things

in a certain way, “even when it’s not that type of project”. However, what the experiences of both Paul and Charlotte appear to indicate is that producing the type of evidence demanded by funding bodies may create a distorted picture of volunteering projects.

## **SCA: From Independent Charity to Experience Durham**

### ***When the Funding Runs Out***

Volunteering initiatives are closely bound up with the availability of funding and initially, the scope of the University’s volunteering programme was very limited. Before the creation of Experience Durham in 2011, when centralised student volunteering was still separate from SCA and focused largely on sport volunteering in the community, HEFCE funding enabled the employment of one person in a role dedicated to the organisation of student volunteering and community engagement. Since its inception, however, Experience Durham has continued to receive other funding from diverse voluntary and sporting organisations, which enabled the team to expand and take on more challenging, long-term roles:

That gave us another person for three years...we’ve had Football Foundation funding...we then had HEFCE funding again to enable us to deliver a programme across the five North Eastern universities...Sport England twice...so actually in that twelve years we’ve had, I don’t know, I’d probably need to look at it, £2 million of funding? [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

Some additional external funding was available for a number of years from organisations such as One North East and Beacons for Public Engagement (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2008; Beacon NE 2013), but eventually:

That money flow came to an end [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Rachel told me that ever since HEFCE funding ended for Durham University volunteering in 2006<sup>11</sup>, Experience Durham has had greater success than SCA in attracting alternative financial support because of its size, experience and contacts:

We've been much more successful at being able to get out and get funding, and joining with other agencies and doing a lot of community outreach work, and that helped us to keep going and moving forward  
*[Rachel: Experience Durham staff]*

The initial lack of university support after the loss of HEFCE funding, said Caroline, made the future of SCA as an independent charity uncertain:

That was quite a significant portion of the funding for SCA, but at that time the University gave very little to SCA...so it was not really knowing how it would continue, where the money was going to come from  
*[Caroline: SCA staff]*

Consequently, the need to find alternative funding was a strong incentive for SCA to eventually become part of Experience Durham, although it was not until 2012 that this move finally took place:

If we hadn't done it, we'd have had to cut projects. It's allowed us to develop  
*[Caroline: SCA staff]*

### ***Trading Security for Independence***

Brewis (2010:447) observes that “the interest of university authorities in directing or supporting students’ voluntary action in the UK is relatively new, as historically volunteering was an extra-curricular activity that was largely student-led”. This has proved to be a valuable source of funding, particularly in times of economic difficulty, but it is important to bear in mind those views (e.g. Prochaska 1988:4; Dahrendorf 2003:xiv; Kendall 2003:11) that highlight the potential risk of becoming too dependent on external or controlling bodies, whose support may be contingent on voluntary activities following particular agendas.

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<sup>11</sup> HEFCE funding for university volunteering in the North East did not cease completely in 2006. Rather than supporting separate university projects, funding was focused on the delivery of sports/community outreach projects through Sports Universities North East England, created in 2006 (Warburton 2006:72)

Rachel said that she believes most university and volunteering staff regard SCA's move to Experience Durham as a good thing, but that the students automatically felt that there was an undercurrent of secrecy. She went on to say that some students will always try to politicise a situation, simply because they can:

If you tried anything with the students, they're always, it's a conspiracy...you're going to change everything and we don't trust you  
*[Rachel: Experience Durham staff]*

However, not everyone wanted SCA to become part of Experience Durham and some feared the move would result in a loss of autonomy, although this fear does not appear to have materialised:

I voted to stay as a registered charity, I think, purely because I thought, uh oh, we're going to start, we're going to lose the value of the student element if we're going to become part of this Experience Durham *[Jane: Undergraduate volunteer]*

Caroline takes a more pragmatic view, accepting that there was always going to be some sort of trade-off. In this case, greater security for SCA comes at the expense of a degree of independence, although supporters of the move to Experience Durham argue that it is good to be a formal part of the University infrastructure, and Caroline has not found the new relationship to be particularly constraining:

There are things that happen, that get fed down, that we have to do as part of the University, but they're few and far between and they're not particularly strenuous *[Caroline: SCA staff]*

Far from being an imposition, Caroline and Robin both consider, from their perspectives as SCA staff members, that Experience Durham offers a gateway into a wider university-level network that supports the management and development of staff and student volunteering:

We've had more support, and we're starting to create more links with different people in the University, so staff volunteering, community outreach, Team Durham, marketing, communications, and the Alumni Office, colleges...which is a definite improvement *[Caroline: SCA staff]*

And yet, Robin has found that in spite of having been part of Experience Durham for almost a year when we spoke, SCA volunteers are still not always aware of the structures and support that are now available. In other words, the simple existence of a



volunteer network or centralised infrastructure is not enough, unless people choose to use it and communicate its existence more effectively.

## **Conclusion**

Bauman (2001:50) comments on the irony that those who no longer need – or feel the need – to be dependent may forget the help and communal support they once received and which helped them to achieve their current state. What this chapter suggests is that a degree of dependency is often unavoidable, especially where funding and autonomy are linked to other issues of identity and power relations. Sometimes that help is welcomed and sometimes it is regarded as intrusive and constraining. For example, Pippa told me that in spite of the increasing support and funding that is now available and usually appreciated, SCA finds it difficult to balance what she describes as different community needs, student demands, and the University's priorities:

At the end of the day, we're funded by the University, so while they want us to go and put a good image out and stuff, fundamentally, they are funding us so that we can do this stuff for students [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

This illustrates a dilemma that is highly relevant to the ideas I have explored in this chapter, particularly that the relationships within a community, including that of a university, are played out through “loyalty and obligation, as much as interest” (Turner 1974:35) and as such entail a certain loss of individual or organisational freedom. It also looks forward to the next chapter, which focuses on a third key theme in both gift exchange and volunteering: the relationship between altruism and self-interest, and the degree to which serving the needs of others can be balanced with the economic and political challenges currently facing Higher Education institutions.

## CHAPTER 6 – EXPLORING THE TENSIONS BETWEEN ALTRUISM AND SELF-INTEREST

### Introduction

Most people I spoke with during my fieldwork referred to volunteer ‘opportunities’. This is a word which can be used in various ways, ranging from opportunities for volunteers and organisations to meet a community need, to simply participate in an activity, to meet a personal need, or for volunteers to acquire some form of tangible gain. Such a broad range of individual and social meanings is significant in relation to the debates about whether volunteering should or can be completely altruistic, the degree of self-interest that is involved in the decision to volunteer, and the gains that may be acquired from doing so.

Godbout (2000:181) attempts to transcend what he regards as the “false duality” between altruism on the one hand and self-interest on the other, which he suggests tends to emerge from overly utilitarian explanations of the gift. His observation appears to be just as true for volunteering as it is for the gift; in each case, explanations that privilege one or other end of the spectrum appear to be associated with the extent to which they are constructed from within, and constrained by, an economic framework. In a similar challenge to dualistic interpretations of giving and volunteering, Wilson’s (2012:176) use of Snyder and Omoto’s (2008:3-5) definition would initially suggest that his understanding of volunteering is framed by mainly altruistic criteria: “freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organisations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance.” However, he goes on to clarify that in reality, acts of volunteering cannot be so narrowly constrained.

Statements in volunteer literature about the key benefits of student volunteering usually include references to academic and personal development, improved confidence and social awareness, increased employability due to the development of skills, and an

enhanced CV (Brewis et al. 2010:7; Darwen and Rannard 2011:181; Paine et al. 2013:3). Some students want to try out potential career paths, or pass their learning on to others through their volunteering; other motives have been described as habit, duty, or simply because volunteering can be fun (Holdsworth 2010:422, 427-429). Universities also benefit from motivated students and improved community engagement, and the community is able to draw on a pool of creative and enthusiastic volunteers (Darwen and Rannard 2011; Francis 2011). However, whilst employability, skills, and enhanced learning emerge as key themes, Holdsworth (2010:427) argues that “it is not a sufficient reason for volunteering”. She goes on to suggest that employment may not be a key motivator at all; it can also be regarded as a welcome yet unintentional benefit.

There are similar tensions between altruistic and self-interested motivations for organised staff volunteering, or Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) as it is often known, although perhaps understandably there is less emphasis placed on employability. ESV benefits are associated, at least in theory, with a mutually beneficial commitment to both staff and community through support and partnerships (Peterson 2004:616); improved brand and marketing; a sharper competitive edge; and a visible indicator of corporate social responsibility (Bussell and Forbes 2008:371). This applies as much to ESV programmes in Higher Education as in industry. However, although this type of volunteering appears to involve “a hope that goodwill will be generated through these programs and a desire to meet the needs of the community” (Benjamin 2007:80), there is also a suggestion that the main goal is to benefit the organisation and its employees (Bussell and Forbes 2008:372).

In this chapter, I use the current literature as a starting point from which to suggest that the relationship between altruism, self-interest and other motivations for volunteering in Higher Education, at least at Durham University, is changing, situated and inconsistent. Staff and students reproduce dominant discourses of employability, gaining a rounded education and helping vulnerable groups or individuals. However, examining volunteering through the lens of the gift also reveals concerns about the negative effects

of reciprocity and the way in which too great a focus on personal gain has the potential to damage relationships and limit a volunteer's commitment.

## **Blurred Lines**

### *Shades of Altruism and Self-Interest*

Meanings and boundaries of volunteering are informed at least partly by changing beliefs about who should, or should not, gain from volunteering and it is now common to recognise a “blend of self-interest and altruism” (Rochester et al. 2012:22), although another increasingly popular view is that there should also be an emphasis on public rather than personal benefit. Similarly, Titmuss (1970:268) suggests that altruism exemplifies a universal capacity which receives more or less encouragement and opportunity for expression depending on a society's organisation, values and institutions. This is apparent in the conflicting demands and priorities of Higher Education which inform how universities establish, value, and direct their various core and peripheral activities (May and Perry 2013:199). Consequently, there is a danger that activities such as volunteering or community service may become less attractive if one does not or cannot participate in areas that are tangibly rewarded, or which are beneficial to an individual's career.

Whilst more complex motives usually emerged during the course of a conversation, I found that initial comments from staff and students alike emphasise that volunteering is about giving time, experience, and skills, and that everyone has something to offer. A much smaller number clarified that volunteering should be about giving that time and help for no personal or tangible return; of those, two added that this does not mean volunteering should actually involve a financial loss:

You shouldn't have to subsidise it with cash as well [*James: Staff volunteer*]

Amy, as a local volunteer manager, is “amazed and thankful” that so many people just want to help out at the educational centre where she works. A staff volunteer organiser from Queen's Campus made a similar observation that demonstrations of unconditional

help often astonish people, who cannot understand why anyone from the University would want to come and help them:

They say, what are you doing here, what are you doing here from the University? We say, well, you know, we want to just help you in whatever way we can, and they're kind of quite stumped by that [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Although supporting a cause for no personal gain is often mentioned as an ideal, the suggestion that any volunteering activity can be entirely without benefit is usually met with a degree of scepticism and it is becoming increasingly unusual for people to talk about their volunteering in terms of offering service for nothing in return:

Altruism isn't a word we hear very often these days [*Tim: Durham County Council*]

Much more common is the idea of willingly giving time to help others for no immediate material gain but with an acceptance or expectation of some sort of future benefit, which may include improved skills or enhanced employability but may also offer nothing more than personal satisfaction. As enjoyment or satisfaction combine with the desire to help others, however, the boundaries between altruism and self-interest become increasingly blurred. Even people who volunteer to help others, said Pippa, will also probably do it for enjoyment or "to get a warm fuzzy feeling", and in her view it is not always easy to decide at what point these motives become selfish.

### ***What's In It for Me?***

"It is undeniable that in many cases people volunteer for an activity only if it is in their interest to do so" (Wilson 2012:182). A recurring theme throughout my fieldwork is the claim that there is always a degree of selfishness in people's actions, although this is not necessarily regarded as negative or invalidating other reasons for volunteering. In some cases, it indicates the self-awareness associated with making a conscious decision about how to best use a limited amount of personal time; in other cases, volunteers offer far more time and effort than they can afford but it is with a clear expectation of some sort of positive future return:

I'm not doing it just...because I love the world or because I like people  
*[Anna: Postgraduate volunteer]*

Charlotte, who spends most of her time organising student volunteering at Queen's Campus when she is not working on a degree in marketing, is concerned about those students who do nothing that has no obvious practical and quantifiable gain. As a result, she fears that community volunteering may be valued less than work experience or other university activities, by those seeking tangible benefits to further their career prospects. Michelle has encountered a similar attitude; her friends would not get involved with anything without asking what was in it for them, and Michelle told me that she simply does not have that mentality. However, she also acknowledged that she does not volunteer for purely altruistic reasons:

I'm looking for friendship and I can't say black and white that that's an utterly altruistic reason for volunteering *[Michelle: Postgraduate volunteer organiser]*

There can be a degree of ambivalence towards the meaning and value of incentives that sometimes accompany roles that are described as 'voluntary', especially those that illustrate the link between economic and moral values (Sanders 2012:60). A recent member of a college Executive Committee told me about the free or discounted accommodation that is provided in return for undertaking certain executive positions. She sees this as an incentive, but not the main reason, for taking on the role, adding that a free room that is a little bigger than the others is not worth working "24/7":

No-one gets anything out of doing this. I mean yes, the President does get a free room but...not many people know that *[Anna: Postgraduate volunteer]*

In Anna's case, there is also an element of self-confessed resentment or jealousy that came with the realisation that as a college volunteer she was working for nothing whilst there were students who were receiving bursaries or other incentives for similar activities, but in the context of college-run projects.

In contrast to the idea of volunteer incentives, it is also common to measure volunteering not only through the beneficial impact of activities but through the

perceived cost to volunteers. How these benefits and costs are defined, however, varies within and between societies and over time (Rochester et al. 2012:19). A very small number of volunteers I spoke to suggested that enjoyment is a type of gain, and therefore reduces the value of volunteering because there is no personal cost; on occasion they even question whether such activities can be considered volunteering at all. Jane, for example, is on the Executive Committee for the University's Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. She does not consider this organisational role to be volunteering because it is something useful that she wants to do; she got her gold award, as well as learning how to manage finances and apply for grants:

I would see volunteering as somebody else had the primary benefit  
*[Jane: Undergraduate volunteer]*

People may also get involved with something they enjoy and find interesting without spending much time reflecting on the benefits to themselves or others, and with few concerns about whether their activities are volunteering or not. Nicola continues to volunteer with her old college as well as organising staff volunteering; she says that she often does things that are interesting and enjoyable without stopping to think about what or who she is helping. For Robin, volunteering simply falls into the wider category of 'socially respectable ways to fill time' outside of study and work:

I'm never going to join a sports team and I don't play a musical instrument and I think it was always something I enjoyed doing for something to do, because I never really viewed it as volunteering *per se*  
*[Robin: SCA staff]*

Whilst insisting that volunteering should be more about helping others, Samantha nevertheless recognises the importance of enjoyment:

I don't think you'd do it if you didn't enjoy it. That's one of the things that defines volunteering *[Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer]*

Of interest where applied to staff volunteering, Titmuss (1970:221) observes that in economic terms, "the 'cost' of any activity is the most valuable use to which the resources devoted to it might otherwise have been put – the social opportunity cost". One example of this approach dates back to the very early days of SVO, when senior

managers took part in a gardening Team Challenge that was staged as a publicity event. On the one hand, the decision was defended as being more than just a stunt:

The first thing they did when we took on Staff Volunteering was to get the V-C and the Treasurer out for the afternoon, digging a garden... They were there and worked, so let's put that in perspective, just as hard as anyone else, but yes, we had the press there and the media there, and there were pictures taken and they were on our website: 'the V-C buys into volunteering' [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

On the other hand, one staff volunteer's interpretation of this occasion was that when senior managers take part in a volunteering event, it can be seen as a good 'photo op' which demonstrates the University's support for staff volunteering, but it can also be regarded as a poor use of their time:

I would be happier if I knew that on a week by week basis they were also doing something of greater relevance to their professional skills [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

It was interesting that in a later interview, the same volunteer explained that she chooses her own voluntary activities and causes through a similar evaluation of how usefully her time would be spent, and yet in her case she feels a sense of guilt for doing so:

I'm closing my eyes because it pains me to say it, but you've got to find something that you think is, is, is a good use of your time [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

### ***Ideologies of Self-Interest***

As well as enjoyment, other less altruistic motives for volunteering include the desire to obtain social status or authority (Davis Smith 1995:15), and I came across several ways of understanding volunteering that are explicitly self-interested. Anna, for example, sees volunteering as an opportunity to "pick up on some skills without actually having to work". There are also those volunteers who get involved in organisational roles because they enjoy the sense of power that sometimes comes with being in a position of authority and "being the top dog" can appeal as much as the desire to help:

I like being in charge, and I like managing people [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Jack said that he does not believe that the activities and outcomes that are increasingly encouraged through universities are conducive to altruistic behaviour:



You go there to increase yourself, increase your own prestige, increase your own, like, basically your CV, the qualities you have, but in terms of giving back, you're only doing it to get a better job; a better job and more money [*Jack: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Jonathan agreed that volunteering is much more than having something to put on your CV. It is character forming, although not necessarily in a way that puts others first:

It is really important to just be able to lead other students or be able to be in control [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Statements like these offer support for views that it is unusual to volunteer for only altruistic reasons (Bussell and Forbes 2008:375) and that some students actively deny any motivation associated with helping others, preferring to cite a sense of personal challenge and satisfaction (Holdsworth 2010:430). Such is the strength of the modern "ideology of self-interest" (Osteen 2002:17), volunteers may even feel uncomfortable offering an altruistic or socially-oriented explanation for their behaviour.

This is just one of the reasons why it is vital to know what people want when they choose to start – or end – their volunteer activities. Whilst staff and student volunteers question the University's success in this area, as do local volunteer organisers, there is a more general view amongst those I spoke with, extending beyond Higher Education, that volunteers of any age must feel that they are respected and taken seriously:

And not just being used as slave labour... [They must feel that] they are very much an integral part of what's being delivered [*Len: Transport manager, local organisation*]

Greg as a staff volunteer, and Pippa as an SCA staff member, both emphasised how important it is to know what volunteers want and as far as possible enable them to do it. Identifying interests and motives is a crucial element of recruiting volunteers "because that's your key to getting people", as Pippa put it. At the education centre in Durham, Amy agreed that it is important to get to know volunteers and understand what they are willing or able to do, whether they are student and staff volunteers or students fulfilling the requirements of a placement, but she finds that matching volunteers with an appropriate activity and finding a balance with what they want to do and what the organisation needs is not always easy.

## **Dominant Discourses**

### ***Employability***

Smith et al. (2010:69) assumes that a central motivation for student volunteers focuses on gaining “work-related experience, skills, and qualifications”, and most of those I spoke with acknowledged that there is increasing sympathy for people using volunteering to get a job. An undergraduate student told me that a lot more is now expected of students for no immediate financial return, and volunteering offers a useful route into a company:

If you can afford to give your time for nothing, and in return you kind of get an experience in their organisation [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

This sentiment is echoed by Jane, who is finding that potential employers appear to value volunteering activities, although she has yet to find a job:

I definitely talked about my volunteering as kind of an experience, and employers really seem to value that in conjunction with studies, to have that regular commitment and without monetary reward [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Volunteering is also described as a useful way to gain insights into professional roles for both students and staff:

If you enjoy the volunteering side of it, you’re going to enjoy the professional aspect of it as well [*June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

A similar attitude is apparent in organisations that support and manage volunteering activities, especially for students, and who increasingly promote volunteering in a way that reinforces discourses of employability. When I went into the University’s Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre (CEEC) office a couple of years ago, I was directed towards a publication that emphasises ways that “volunteering can give direction and focus to your career” by following a set of steps designed to “help you create your personal pathway to success” (Volunteering England 2008). The tone of this document complements the pragmatic acceptance by many staff and students that, regardless of an individual’s moral values or motivations, volunteering has become part of the modern job seeker’s toolkit.

In her capacity as a former SCA volunteer and Experience Durham staff member, Nicola has found that there are some areas where students struggle to find a job without the relevant experience, particularly in environmental and conservation work or in education. However, volunteering is more important for getting some jobs than others and the different ways in which particular types of volunteering are used and valued by potential employers may vary between countries. Fay, for example, has been a teacher for many years in China. She came to Durham University to do a PhD in Education, and over the last year she has volunteered on a weekly basis in primary and secondary schools in Sunderland. She told me that in China this is a requirement for all undergraduates and postgraduates who wish to teach, and she volunteered in schools throughout her original teacher training. Talking about finding employment in the UK, however, a local volunteer manager observed that volunteering is useful but more in terms of personal development than gaining relevant experience, which employers may not take seriously. In spite of this, she acknowledged that volunteering does offer a way for students to learn about the world and how things work, which is advantageous for early job hunting.

### ***Gaining an Edge and Rounding Your Education***

In spite of some doubts about its effectiveness as a vehicle to enhance employability (Paine et al. 2013), volunteering is increasingly regarded as a key part of student work experience. As a postgraduate and volunteer with several years of business experience, Michelle told me that volunteering is always a valid thing to put on a CV. Similarly, the prevailing attitude at senior management level towards organised volunteering appears to be that:

There's good things in it for the University and there's good things in it for you, it's the sort of thing you can put on your CV [*Robert: Senior university management*]

Samantha, too, worked part-time whilst volunteering at the Durham Wildlife Trust to gain practical experience in environmental management:

It was mainly to improve my CV...because I'd been to job interviews and they said, you haven't got enough experience [*Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Furthermore, students who described Executive Committee or college positions as being more like unpaid jobs that are of greater value than volunteering, were nevertheless also ready to describe them as a form of volunteering that is particularly suitable for getting good jobs in business related roles:

Whatever other reasons you have to volunteer, it does look good on a CV and especially in business, if you have experience as a President or a Trustee, you have quite a good chance of better jobs [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

However, the importance or relevance of putting volunteering on a CV varies for different types of work. Anna and her friends are finding that both volunteering and college executive roles are less valued for getting a job in business or academia:

And when you realise that, it's a case of, I did all this shit for nothing [*Anna: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Rather than looking at volunteering as being directly linked to employability, it may be more useful to consider it in relation to the wider university experience, and as part of a broader education that is designed to set students apart in a competitive world. As an officer in the Durham Constabulary, Philip gives regular presentations to criminology students as a way of recruiting police volunteers:

I say, take a look around the class now. You're all doing the same degree, you're all going to be chasing roughly the same jobs. Why am I going to employ you? ...You need to have something different and volunteering gives you that [*Philip: Durham Constabulary*]

His colleague agrees, recommending that extra activities, whether in the form of a job, completing an internship or through volunteering, is what "gives you the edge".

Undergraduate and postgraduate students reflect these opinions, sharing a firm belief that volunteering will potentially add to their career prospects and offer a tangible demonstration of extra-curricular participation:

Everyone's going to leave here with a 2:1 and they need something else to put on their CV [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

University managers and staff caution students that getting a 2:1 or a First is not enough anymore, and that employers want evidence that students put something back into the system. However, Simon expressed concern that volunteering has become a standard extra-curricular activity that students looking for work must complete, to the extent that it is becoming a less effective way of standing out from the crowd:

The amount of competition that there is for work now means that people are jumping through all kinds of hoops. Now they're inventing new hoops to jump through and over time, the hoop is getting higher and higher [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

Jane appeared to feel the same way, arguing that even if every student has volunteering experience and a good degree, employers will always find something new to look for. But whilst the graduate job market is “really tough”, and although it is a useful thing to talk about in interviews, she also said that there is a limit to how much students should volunteer at the expense of working on their degree.

Quite apart from its alleged importance in enhancing employability, most of the student volunteers I met said that they consider volunteering to be a crucial element in their personal development, seeing it as helping to develop a combination of self-discipline and thoughtfulness for others. Whilst this aspect of volunteering is rarely mentioned by staff volunteers, one university manager described volunteering as a journey of sometimes frightening but usually rewarding self-discovery, or as Charlotte put it:

A kind of way for people to find themselves [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

She went on to observe that a university degree forms a very small part of someone's CV and tells potential employers relatively little about a student's interests, talents, or the sort of person that they are. For Ben, who became an officer in the Durham Constabulary after completing his postgraduate studies, work experience and paid jobs counted towards his personal development as much as volunteering, but a full appreciation of what he gained from all his student activities has only come with time and reflection.

## **Cycles of Giving and Receiving**

There is a tension between the “obligation to give” and the “obligation to reciprocate” (Godbout 2000:186), where each has different implications for spontaneity and calculation, and the way in which subsequent relationship dynamics develop. There are many types of reciprocity; all differ from purely economic market exchange (Godbout 2000:92) and are associated with different levels of social distance or emotional bonds that form a spectrum of relationships (Osteen 2002:4; Komter 2005:123). Reciprocity can refer to one specific act in return for another; it can also be more generalised, referring more to an expectation of future returns than a specific act, and not necessarily involving the same person. This type of generalised reciprocity relies on general feelings of trust and trustworthiness, and develops from frequent social interactions through which people may begin to feel responsible for each other and in principle act for the common benefit of all (Putnam 2000:21).

By associating greater social distance with fewer expectations of reciprocity but not necessarily of altruism, Komter (2005:123-124) appears to present a fairly linear progression from charity, to volunteering, through to providing more personal forms of care, where there is a direct link between the giver and the receiver. However, giving and volunteering in the context of contemporary organisations result in a set of more complex gift relationships that emerge through what appear to be unequal stages of giving and receiving from initial donors, corporations, or institutions, through a series of managing organisations, to the final recipients. This suggests that the extent to which a gift is either ‘pure’ or reciprocal depends on the stage of the transaction and the relative power differential between donor and receiver. Consequently, not only does the nature of giving change at different stages; so does the nature of reciprocity (Stirrat and Henkel 1997:66, 68).

In relation to Godbout’s (2000:133) preference for the term “spiral” when discussing cycles of reciprocity, the complexities of student and staff volunteering in Higher Education obscure whether volunteers are initiating a “spiral” of reciprocity or participating in an existing, multi-stakeholder relationship. Reasons for volunteering

that involve giving back, either to society, a community or an institution, suggest that some volunteers situate themselves in the position of recipients who are volunteering as part of a perceived debt or obligation. For example, some staff and students volunteer in order to demonstrate appreciation to people or institutions who have helped them in the past (Chapter 4). However, another way of looking at apparently self-interested motivations for volunteering such as increasing employability and developing skills is in the form of anticipatory reciprocation: rather than initiating a gift as donors, volunteers are aware of their relatively insecure position and feel a need to build up future credit. This is very different to the belief that those in a position to offer help or service are in some way dominant or superior to those they are helping, although the term obligation is often used in this situation as well, and in each case the boundaries between altruism and self-interest are never clear.

Associated with the idea of reciprocity is the increasingly widespread view that volunteering should be mutually beneficial, and that “helping others is good for the donor as well as the recipient” (Wilson 2000:231). That is not to say that there will be an equal exchange of time or services; more that “volunteering is not a ‘gift’ to a less fortunate person but an exchange from which the volunteer also derives a benefit” (Rochester et al. 2012:18). This is not a recent idea: Beveridge (1948:9) was very clear that the two main motives for volunteering should be mutual aid as a form of self-help, and philanthropy, which he also described as “social conscience”. In addition to these motives, he considers “personal thrift” (the importance of saving) and business gain that comes from “meeting the needs of one’s fellow-citizens”. In this way, he extends and links the ideas of self-interest and mutual aid, bringing together the individual and society in a way that seeks to transcend the divide between altruism and self-interest in a manner not dissimilar to Aristotle’s (2004:176) idea of the “self-lover”.

My own research supports Stirrat and Henkel’s (1997) argument that volunteering relationships are complex and multi-directional, with different ways of understanding altruism, self-interest and reciprocity at different stages of the process and between different stakeholders. One university manager stated categorically that reciprocity is

about expecting the recipient of an action or service to immediately offer something in return, but in his opinion that is not what volunteering is about:

I'm doing it because I think it's a good thing to do; I'm not doing it because I will then want you to do something. That's not why I'm doing it...maybe other individuals will have some sense of reciprocity; you know, they'll say I've done this for you, now it's your turn to do something [*Graham: Senior university manager*]

Graham's opinion, however, was in the minority. A more common theme throughout my fieldwork is the idea that the benefits acquired from volunteering should be a mutual, two-way process that ideally involves a fairly long-term relationship. As Michelle and Ben both put it, there needs to be a balance of altruism and self-interest; everyone needs to benefit from a volunteer relationship, which should always be reciprocal. For Michelle, it is simply that "there has to be someone on the other side". Ben's understanding of the potential gains of co-operating with the University appear to be more pragmatic and ambitious. Talking about a new Police Volunteer-Internship initiative between Durham Constabulary and Durham University, he is clear that both partner organisations and the University need to get out more than they put in to supporting volunteering:

It's got to be symbiotic. We've got to get out more than we put in; the University's got to get out more than they put in, or the students have, and the sum total's got to be something better than we had as individuals [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

However, reciprocity and mutual gain does not mean that volunteers and beneficiaries need to benefit in the same way. In his time with Nightline, Simon told me he has come to believe that volunteering is about helping others but it is also about developing skills and offering opportunities that may not otherwise have arisen. As a student police volunteer, Jonathan's view is that the reward for volunteering is having the knowledge that you are making a difference, and also gaining something practical from it. This raises a question that is considered in the next section: how much does the balance of giving and receiving matter?



### ***Giving Something Back and Receiving More Than You Give***

A group of students from a university in the United States made their first visit to Durham in the summer of 2013, as part of a volunteer outreach programme. Their programme director called the visit a learning opportunity: a chance for the students to “learn from and give back” to the community. Similarly and in spite of her emphasis on developing skills for the future and to get a good job, Anna told me that volunteering is about giving something back and doing something for someone else. This reflects Nicola’s comment that staff and students offer all sorts of reasons for deciding to volunteer, but:

No matter what they started for, generally it will all come back down to ‘I want to give something back’ [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

In spite of this, people cannot always articulate why or what they are giving back. James, a staff volunteer, offered the common explanation that volunteering is about giving something back but denied that this was in return for anything specific. There is also a suggestion, which I address further in Chapter 9, that students may be unclear about what and why they are giving back, in a community where they have no connection:

Particularly students coming to Durham, have not been in this local community, they haven’t got a local connection to it, so they, what are they giving back to? [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

With an increase in bureaucracy, budgetary controls and the institutional control of volunteer activities (Kendall 2003:11) comes a tendency to become de-personalised and forget that charity and volunteering both benefit “the benevolent as well as the beneficiary” (Prochaska 1988:80). In the midst of such political and economic manoeuvring, it is perhaps easy to lose sight of other motives for participating in or supporting volunteerism. Central to the reciprocal gift is the sometimes competitive idea that “we must give back more than we have received” (Mauss 1990:84), and yet, volunteers often say that they receive more than they give:

So it’s not about being Lady Bountiful [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

It was a similar story for Cathy, a grant manager with a regional community foundation that works with SVO and the Students' Union from time to time. Her introduction to volunteering came whilst she was working in London during the 1990s, after seeing a sign in an Oxfam shop that was asking for volunteers to keep it open. She told me that she went in thinking that she was saving the Oxfam shop and ended up getting far more out of it than they did, meeting all sorts of people who were volunteering for all sorts of reasons: for example, the lonely, the unemployed, and international students needing to improve their English. Her second experience of volunteering was in County Durham, helping at her children's school. That role led directly to her current job, leaving Cathy with the firm belief that volunteering benefits all parties.

Bee got involved with a charity supporting young homeless men as part of a one-day SVO Team Challenge and has continued the relationship as a regular volunteer over the last two years. She has found that becoming more aware of, and learning about, other people's situations and stories develops tolerance, empathy and understanding; it helps a volunteer to grow as well as helping others:

Everybody gains from it because sometimes it's there but for the grace of god, you know? And students and staff can recognise that [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Jane volunteers in a local prison and agrees with this view. Being introduced to an unfamiliar environment and new experiences, she said, has broadened her horizons:

I think it's made me a better person [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Local volunteer organisers and staff who manage the centralised volunteering activities at the University have all told me that volunteer activities and organisations offer students an insight into the sort of world that they might never have otherwise encountered. For example, students who volunteer at the education centre where Amy works often become upset when they are faced with difficult circumstances, and she says that "it is a real eye opener for them" when they become aware of the extent of the poverty that some people live in. This last example is an interesting illustration that learning or gaining from a volunteer experience does not mean that it does not also come at some personal cost.

What appears to emerge from these experiences is the idea that volunteering develops a sense of empathy and compassion, even where there is also a hope for future gain. When Ben was a Special Constable during his time as a postgraduate in the 1990s, volunteers got their bus fare but there was no other sort of incentive at that time. Fortunately, he said, his PhD was well funded so money was not a great concern. On the one hand, he describes his “selfish side” which was investing for the future, but on the other hand:

I suppose it’s a bit of a karma thing as well. If I put in here, somewhere I’m just going to get a return [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

A contemporary and colloquial way to describe this belief might be to say ‘what goes around, comes around’, but the sentiments expressed here also reflect a much older desire for balance, reciprocity and empathy that has been described for many centuries, in many cultures, religions, and more secular philosophies, as positive and negative manifestations of the ‘Golden Rule’ (Putnam 2000:135). Whether it is rooted in the wisdom of Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by and Mrs Be-done-by-as-you-did (Kingsley 1863), the Old Testament command to “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18, The Bible, KJV) or the Hindu concepts of dharma and “universal compassion” (Ganguli 1883-1896:235), this way of understanding volunteering is both social and reciprocal. And yet in spite of what may be the best of intentions, reciprocity – when looking at volunteering through the lens of the gift – is not without its problems, as I illustrate in the next section.

### ***Gratitude, Dependence and Resentment***

A crucial element in the modern context of giving, in Godelier’s (1999:5) view, is that a gift is impersonal and made without the expectation of any return other than – possibly – gratitude. I would question this idea and also the implicit suggestion that gratitude is somehow a less significant form of return that involves fewer bonds than a more ‘traditional’ gift. Expectations and obligations to give or receive, and the potential outcome of the inability or failure to reciprocate vary with society, culture, role and status (Sherry 1983:160). Mauss (1990:84) refers to “the unconscious and injurious patronage of the rich almsgiver” which denies the reciprocation that, from his perspective, is a fundamental aspect of sociality, to the extent that humans continually

seek to perpetuate the cycle of giving, receiving and reciprocating, striving not to always be the passive receiver.

Similarly, it is argued that the obligations associated with reciprocation and gift exchange have an element of balance and personal satisfaction even where that balance is asymmetrical. Denying that obligation through charity or what is intended as a 'pure' or 'free' gift, may introduce an unwanted degree of dependence into a relationship (Parry 1986:458). In her exploration of gratitude, Komter (2005:7, 67) links the concept of reciprocity with Mauss's (1990:13) "spirit" of the gift and Simmel's (1950:388) "moral memory of mankind", arguing that gift exchange is an active, continuing process that goes beyond objects, involving emotion and sense of self. Bourdieu (1977:5, 171) writes about the delayed and often disguised nature of reciprocity: that delaying a return gift or service, or returning something different, perpetuates a mass lie or delusion preserving the idea that we give without expectation of return. In none of these examples does the idea of gratitude sit comfortably with an impersonal and neutral understanding of the gift.

The Maussian position highlighting the dangers of dependency and resentment reflects a general theme running through my fieldwork. A more explicit reference to the importance of helping rather than giving, and encouraging people to get on their own feet because there is a danger that gifts may result in inequality and dependency, was mentioned by two people. Firstly, a visiting academic expressed the view that:

Giving not only has connotations of dependence, which is a concern...but also, it creates power inequalities [*Frank: Community Engagement Director, visiting university*]

Speaking about the student volunteer exchange programme he is involved with, and about volunteering more generally, Frank was adamant that service should not imply dependency. His concern is that community volunteering or service can lead to an attitude that:

Somehow I've got something to give, that you have nothing to give...And yet, there's a lot of energy and positive pride that they have in their communities, and I'm sure this is true in the communities that I visited yesterday, [driving round] the pit villages of Durham, so I do know the word can be controversial in itself [*Frank: Community Engagement Director, visiting university*]

Secondly, and related to this opinion, are the negative social consequences of what Jenny described as a forced gift, whether it is a gift of time or money, and the danger that help which is not offered with "a good heart" will breed resentment and hostility, especially if it is not welcomed in the first place:

If what goes over is hostile, what comes back is going to be hostile too [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Each case supports an idea to which I return in Chapter 9: that problems can potentially arise as a result of concentrating effort and resources too much on "disadvantaged and poor neighbourhoods", and that focusing "on what is lacking in a neighbourhood" risks reinforcing the differences between wealthier and poorer groups (Kearney 2003:55).

## **Is Virtue Ever Its Own Reward?**

### ***Recognition***

Recognition and reward by an employer organisation may inform some employee attitudes towards volunteering, with a lack of recognition often resulting in the discontinuation of volunteer activities (Booth et al. 2009:233). Whilst directed towards staff programmes, this statement is interesting in relation to comments made by student as well as staff volunteers at Durham University. There appears to be a difference between self-interested volunteering that is motivated by gain, and a desire to be appreciated; absence of the latter may be frustrating but it does not appear to have stopped the people I spoke with from continuing their activities.

Anna told me that colleges are not always good at thanking students who get involved, although it depends to a large extent on who is in charge. This year, she said, her College Principal has been very good about thanking volunteers, but last year:

I don't think I ever heard a single thank you from college in the whole year, and then you kind of think, why am I doing this? [Anna: *Postgraduate volunteer*]

In spite of this lack of appreciation, she went on to explain that she could never imagine not getting involved. Some volunteers, like Jane, claim that they have no need for a reward but recognise that other people do:

I don't need to socialise with volunteers. It's something I do; I don't need to think, oh let's go celebrate volunteering... That's great, but for me personally, I don't need a pat on the back [Jane: *Undergraduate volunteer*]

Beth expressed a similar opinion, suggesting that staff volunteers do not want a "pat on the back" from the University or from their Line Manager. The strongest signal that it values staff volunteers, she said, is the University's offer of time to volunteer in working hours. Jane went further, suggesting that thanks and rewards may cause sceptics to question the motives for staff or student volunteering. She is concerned that there might be a perception that people volunteer in order to get recognition or tangible evidence of participation:

Which then, essentially, defeats the object slightly...it's against the spirit of volunteering really [Jane: *Undergraduate volunteer*]

This resonates with my own experiences over the last two years, during which I have received a certificate for two separate volunteering activities organised within my college, although this may say more about the attitude towards volunteering of the activity organiser than it does about the volunteers themselves, since on neither occasion was it made apparent that any formal recognition would be forthcoming. Nevertheless, Jane's volunteering "spirit" may live on through the idea that sometimes it is just about quietly putting in that little bit of extra effort to help out, which does not always fit into contemporary ways of understanding and publicising volunteering:

I've done stuff Durham University, the bosses, don't even know about, or if they do know about it they've kept their mouths shut [Alex: *Staff member, unofficial volunteer*]

In spite of this almost subversive attitude, as well as more general problems and frustrations experienced along the way, and the occasional lack of appreciation, all the volunteers I spoke with during my fieldwork said that what they do is worthwhile,

whether it be volunteering or providing the support and infrastructure to make staff and student volunteering possible:

This is over and above everything else we do, so it's quite challenging to fit it in, but it's worthwhile [*June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

As for Anna, she insists that she doesn't know any other way to do things. She sees people sitting in their college rooms, studying constantly and getting better grades than her, but when I asked her if she has any regrets, she smiled and said, "I enjoy myself more".

### ***Volunteering and Research***

Volunteering paves the way for other forms of academic exchange that illustrate the multi-directional and complicated nature of giving (back) and receiving. Community organisations are often supportive where students want to combine volunteering and research to help them achieve their academic goals. The choice of module or research topic may even emerge as a result of that volunteering, as it did for Jonathan:

I'm hoping to do my dissertation on police and volunteering as well, so it's enabled me to talk to a lot of other volunteers that I can hopefully then interview next year as part of my study [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Sometimes, however, organisations that might be expected to have a greater involvement with student research, perhaps because of existing ties to the University, are surprised at the suggestion of combining research with volunteering. Laura received a positive response to her request to undertake fieldwork at a mental health day centre where she also volunteers, but upon first broaching the subject with the volunteer manager:

She said that she hadn't had many students come to her about research, which we all find surprising because we thought mental health especially is an area people are looking into in the University [*Laura: Postgraduate volunteer*]

In Laura's case, the idea of acquiring and then sharing knowledge was intended as a form of thanks to the day centre that gave her an opportunity to improve her skills and experience through volunteering. Amy, as the organisation's volunteer manager, said

that she welcomed the idea but also commented that she and the people who use the centre have sometimes found it challenging to separate “the Researcher” from “the Volunteer”, especially since service users do not necessarily appreciate the difference or fully understand the nature of a researcher’s relationship with the centre. More generally, whilst volunteering offers excellent research opportunities within the bounds of ethical requirements, students agree that it is not always easy to separate the two roles. Jane, for example, acknowledged that it is important to remain aware of the different relationship dynamics:

When I’m at NEPACS, I’m a volunteer first, then I’m a student, so at the moment it’s kind of integrating the two a little bit [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

It is for reasons such as this that combining volunteering with any form of research presents a potential ethical dilemma, especially where vulnerable individuals are involved. This is as true for my own research as it is for the volunteers I spoke with, and illustrates one way in which the gains to be had from volunteering should be tempered with a consideration of the potential cost to others.

### ***Helping Others or Cheap Training?***

Staff volunteering is often recognised by Higher Education institutions as a valuable way to disseminate the role and work of universities to a wider audience and addresses concerns about social and environmental awareness and responsibility (Bussell and Forbes 2008:317; NCCPE 2010a). In addition to enhancing a university’s social and academic profile, it is useful for developing universities as businesses, an increasingly important aspect of contemporary Higher Education (Bussell and Forbes 2005:7) in the current economic climate. In spite of meeting several undergraduate and postgraduate students who combine their volunteering with research, a more general dissemination of knowledge was rarely mentioned by the staff volunteers or organisers that I encountered during my fieldwork, although a postgraduate researcher in the final stages of a PhD in Geology spoke about the importance of scientific outreach at a focus group we both attended. She appreciates the opportunity to explain her work to those outside the topic or academia more generally, because it helps to clarify her own understanding. As with the majority of volunteers I have spoken with, she also described outreach as being



good for her CV and an opportunity to “give back”. Also in common with most volunteers making a similar claim, she could not explain why.

A more controversial benefit is that some companies consider the skills developed through volunteering to be an alternative or equivalent to training that offers employees broader recognition of, and flexible opportunities for, professional development (Brewis 2004:21). Whilst it depends on the background and interests of individual staff members, Nicola has found during her time with SVO that volunteers working in Support Staff roles tend to place a higher value on the teamwork and leadership skills that they acquire through volunteering, compared to staff in other occupations. It is less usual, she observed, for Line Managers or staff at management level to say they have gained many new skills, although volunteering appears to benefit their self-confidence. Other views are more critical, arguing this may be used to replace more expensive and formal training programmes; also that it discriminates against those who are unable to volunteer, perhaps due to time or other commitments, or those who have other activities and interests (Peterson 2004:616; Bussell and Forbes 2005:6). However, whilst staff volunteering at Durham University is certainly described by organisers as a welcome opportunity for cheap training, I did not come across any negative comments about unequal access to training for non-volunteers:

We do have formal team development as well, but it costs money [*June: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

In contrast to the use of volunteering as an additional or alternative means to train staff and student volunteers, the education centre where Amy works places a lot of emphasis on training everyone who helps at the centre, whether they are members of staff or volunteers:

Training costs money but it is a worthwhile investment [*Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

For Amy, training makes the volunteering experience more meaningful as well as providing skills for the future. It prepares volunteers – including staff and students from the University – for particular situations, and helps them to work more effectively.

### ***Questioning Dominant Discourses***

Contrary to dominant discourses that emphasise an increasingly instrumental agenda for volunteering, a growing number of researchers challenge the view that students (e.g. Holdsworth 2010; Darwen and Rannard 2011) and staff (e.g. Pelozo et al. 2009) are always driven by instrumental motivations and benefits. However, Holdsworth (2010:423) also argues that rather than reflecting a more altruistic approach, this may simply be that they are not driven by any sort of “goal-oriented motivations”. Smith et al.’s (2010:69) findings suggest a complicated picture that is informed by multiple factors including type and length of volunteering, and predict that although student volunteers will in general put greater emphasis on instrumental motives, regular volunteers appear to value altruistic motives more than occasional volunteers. Another variation is proposed by Handy et al. (2010:499), in which frequency of volunteering does not differ significantly between students seeking to develop a CV and those with other motives, but rates increase overall in countries which appear to value volunteering. Similar complexity emerges from studies of staff volunteering. Qualitative evidence suggests that employees are aware of the benefits accrued through intra-organisational volunteering (Pelozo and Hassay 2006:373; Pelozo et al. 2009:382), which raises the question of whether this leads people to favour internal over external volunteering, especially where they face time pressures and other commitments. My findings suggest not, and as with Smith et al.’s (2010) study of student volunteers, the suggestion has been made that each type of volunteering may satisfy different types of personal motivation.

### ***Questioning Discourses of Employability***

One of the key reasons offered for Durham University’s growing support of student volunteering, and why support has become much more focused in the last three years, is to improve student employability and skills:

If you’re saying does volunteering lead to better opportunities in the job market, clearly it does [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

And yet, the same managers responsible for shaping the University’s message about volunteering and engagement also insist that whilst an emphasis on employability will

have “pulled a few in” who might otherwise have not volunteered, they are in a small minority:

And long may it stay like that [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

This ambivalence is reflected in both student and staff explanations for volunteering. Robin recognises the perceived or actual need to volunteer in order to get a job although she denied that this has been a motivation for her own volunteering:

It’s just not any of the reasons why I choose to do it [*Robin: SCA staff*]

When the move to Experience Durham was being discussed in 2011, there was what Paul described to me as open hostility from the DSU and some members of the SCA Executive Committee, when university management increasingly linked volunteering to employability and skills development. He said that their response was:

You cannot talk to us about that, that’s not why people volunteer at Durham. People volunteer because they want to volunteer [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Nevertheless, Paul also observed that there has recently been “a big sea change” within the Students’ Union and SCA about why students should get involved with volunteering. His assessment appears to be supported not only by the comments from many of the student volunteers that I spoke with, but also the new DSU Strategy (DSU 2012), in which five key drivers specifically address the Union’s “core mission” to enhance the student experience. The first driver, in particular, highlights the importance of extra-curricular activities such as volunteering to the development of employability and skills: “We will develop structures and projects which support these existing activities and will help students to improve their employability through participation in existing and new student-led activities and programmes” (DSU 2012:6).

Despite the widespread shift towards a more pragmatic view of volunteering that combines self-interest with more altruistic or at least less reflective motivations, uncritical support for its role in enhancing student employability is far from unanimous. Charlotte is beginning to look for a job and finds that when she talks about volunteering

in interviews, potential employers focus on quantifiable achievement at the expense of less tangible impact, which makes her feel uncomfortable:

I can quantify it in terms of how many people are on my projects, how many people I've managed to help recruit, but in terms of actually doing the project myself and not kind of the managing side of it, I don't want to go, 'I've benefited seven old people' [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Her concerns are shared to a certain extent by local volunteer organisers, one of whom commented that too much emphasis is placed on employability, which obscures the importance of volunteering as an activity that is freely undertaken and freely ended.

### ***Spotting the CV-Padders***

Part of Pauline's job is to organise sport volunteering at Queen's Campus, which usually involves working with schools and youth clubs in disadvantaged areas. She repeated the popular narrative that students are now realising the importance of volunteering experience to their future careers, but added that whether they all come away with a feeling of achievement or are just "going through the motions" for their CVs is difficult to say. She finds that some students are very motivated and progress to running their own projects; others will turn up for their activities regularly and do everything that they are asked to do, but appear to gain little from the experience. Samantha, a keen postgraduate volunteer, shares Pauline's concern that people who volunteer infrequently or for a one-off occasion in order to have something to put on their CV are less likely to get involved in something that they really care about. Simon also said that commitment is probably more likely where future career concerns are less obviously important:

The best volunteers are there because they're passionate and interested. This can include people who are also doing it for their CVs, but if you have someone that isn't there for their CV at all, you are guaranteed to have a committed volunteer [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

For Robin and Charlotte, too, people who enjoy volunteering are different to those who volunteer only to fill a CV, and they suggested that there is a fine line between doing the latter and wanting to show a potential employer the sort of person you are:

While for some people it's more of a CV filler, for me it's a side that I do want to show employers, that I do care about what's going on around me  
[Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer]

Mark takes the more cynical view that CV-fillers look for "easy" and "amazing" opportunities in order to look good:

It just looks nice, sounds nice [Mark: Postgraduate volunteer]

He acknowledged that a lot of people in Durham volunteer but suggested that they are generally CV-padding, which shows in their lack of interest and passion. People who are passionate about what they do, he argued, are lost in it; they are telling their own story whether or not anyone is really listening:

They don't pin you to the wall, do they? When you talk about something someone's passionate about, they'll pin you to the wall about it, and I struggle to meet people who say they volunteer who pin you to the wall about it [Mark: Postgraduate volunteer]

Such opinions reflect literature suggesting there is a need to be aware of not only the differences between volunteers and non-volunteers, but also between people who volunteer with different levels of commitment, since this tends to inform and be informed by reported motivations for volunteering in the first place (Peloza and Hassay 2006:375; Smith et al. 2010:77).

### ***Moral Imperative***

A problematic relationship exists in the case of both giving and volunteering between motivations and outcomes (Badhwar 1993:91): is one more important than the other, and what are the implications where someone benefits from an altruistic act? Ehrlich's (1995:87) position is that altruistic intent is more important than outcome, but this is countered by Komter's (2005:28) argument that, even where the motive for giving or volunteering is benevolent and made with good intentions, poor execution of an activity or the inability to reciprocate – whether or not reciprocation is expected – can result in anxiety or resentment on the part of the recipient. And yet, the notion of a moral and

selfless volunteer continues to be held up as an ideal, even by those who also embrace the fruits of self-interest.

Staff and students were active volunteers long before Experience Durham got involved, and before the University started to emphasise the importance of employability or skills development:

They were doing it because they thought it was something they ought to do. Moral imperative, if you like [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

This leads to a related problem, that economists and other social scientists tend to privilege a view of humans as always motivated by rational, calculating self-interest. The problem becomes a paradox when combined with the philosophical view that self-interest cannot be moral, yet morality is central to being human (Badhwar 1993:93). An alternative position is that the moral value of an altruistic act is rooted in the very self-interest and autonomy that is critical to an individual's sense of personal integrity and selfhood (Badhwar 1993:115-116).

For example, exposure to organised volunteering may lead to both greater self-awareness and scepticism relating to one's own and others' motives, and in some cases, "volunteering experiences challenge conventional views about volunteering that posit the volunteer as a saviour who can unselfishly help others" (Holdsworth 2010:431). This is what happened to Simon during a gap year spent in East Africa. It was the experience of being disillusioned and doubting the motives and benefits of overseas volunteering, he told me, which informed his later reasons for volunteering with Nightline when he came to Durham University. Anonymity is a crucial part of Nightline, he said, and preserves boundaries of safety and discretion when Nightline volunteers are off-duty. Everyone in the organisation is anonymous except for the three "public faces" of the Training Officer, the Publicity Officer and the Director:

Some people prefer the anonymity to the public face and other people don't. Other people like to be able to tell their friends about it [*Simon: Undergraduate volunteer, Nightline*]

It was that very anonymity that offered Simon a way to deal with the moral dilemma of whether or not he was volunteering for the right reasons. However, he also admitted that his executive role within Nightline played a part in securing a summer job, which supports a common theme that even the most altruistic of intentions may also result in material gains.

Motives and outcomes may affect how a volunteer is perceived but again, it depends how people understand the term 'volunteer', generally and in relation to other forms of unpaid activities such as placements or internships:

If you say to somebody, I'm a volunteer, I would say that the general perception would be the kind of, 'you are a good person' vibe coming to you; if you said I am an unpaid intern, they would go, 'oh, you're really exploited'. So, yeah [*Laura: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Laura went on to suggest that in a society or institution where volunteering is traditionally valued as a worthy activity, volunteers may be imbued with a degree of moral authority simply by virtue of their activity, irrespective of motive or outcome.

### ***Religion***

It is common but by no means inevitable for concepts of altruism, mutual support and reciprocity to be "underpinned in many cultures by religion" (Rochester et al. 2012:16), although this is manifest in different ways and not exclusive to particular religious groups. It is also common for religion to be described as "a fertile source of volunteer motivation" (Wilson 2012:182-183), although this may be due to an individual's wider life story which informs both belief and the decision to volunteer. Furthermore, there may be a distinction between being exposed to volunteer opportunities through faith organisations, and volunteering because of religious conviction (Holdsworth 2010:432).

I encountered few explicit references to religious belief during my fieldwork and they referred only to Christianity, although this is likely to be a reflection of the demographic make-up of the North East (ONS 2012) and of Durham University, as well as the volunteer networks that informed my fieldwork, rather than an indication of how

volunteering is valued more generally by staff and students who adhere to different belief systems. As someone from the County Council said:

County Durham is not the most diverse place on Earth and frankly, you know, when we're talking about faith groups, mainly in County Durham, in terms of volunteering projects, it's Christians of a number of different denominations [*Tim: Durham County Council*]

The University offers a different picture with a relatively high number of international students and academic staff, although the majority of non-academic staff are from the UK (DU 2014q) and international students still only form 21% of the overall student body, a figure which drops to 14% amongst undergraduates (DU 2014d). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many staff and students, both international and from the UK, belong to religions other than Christianity, but no data is available for religious affiliations within the University. Only one member of staff and a member of the Durham County Council referred to religion in relation to volunteering; none of the student volunteers I spoke with mentioned their religious convictions at all. This surprising result may reflect the priorities of the particular people that I encountered in my own volunteer network, which was not intended to offer a quantitative or generalizable dataset, and their choice of what information to share with me in relation to their volunteering activities.

As someone whose religion is closely related to volunteering, Bob helps a charity that has its origins in the Methodist Church located next door. He spoke briefly about his religious upbringing in the context of some very difficult life events and a childhood with few privileges:

I was brought up a Christian, so giving was terribly important and the greatest privilege, really, to give [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

He went on to comment that religious organisations contribute a lot to the voluntary sector, and to communities more generally:

We're a very secular society actually, but I think a lot of religious organisations do, you know, put the foundations there for a lot of things that are good in the voluntary sector, and if it wasn't there, heaven knows what would happen to be honest [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]



Without mentioning any particular belief system this time, Tim agreed that faith communities make a significant contribution to life in County Durham as:

A huge volunteer force for good [*Tim: Durham County Council*]

The only other indirect reference to religion came from Samantha, a postgraduate who volunteers at St. Nicholas's Church in Durham Market Place, helping to welcome international students to Durham. 'Amigos' is a group run by the church and does not operate as part of the University, but it is for people who are at the University. However, although Samantha volunteers with 'Amigos' at the start of each academic year, she said nothing about a religious motivation for this activity or volunteering more generally.

## **Conclusion**

Debates about the relationship between volunteering, altruism and self-interest in Higher Education are informed by a broader series of discourses and rhetoric about the public role of Higher Education. A common question is, how are the interests of individual volunteers related to those of universities or the communities in which they are located? Direct or indirect costs incurred by a university in its support for volunteering offer a clue because "nowhere is the distinction between meaningful contributions and opportunistic functionalism more evident than where the potential beneficiaries do not directly reward universities for their involvement" (Benneworth 2013:8). At a more personal level, there is an increasing focus on the needs of individual volunteers, including their interests, goals and ambitions, over the needs of organisations and communities (Wilson 2012:202).

I have identified a broad range of attitudes towards motivations for volunteering, with a shift towards greater acceptance of personal and institutional gains, although concerns remain about the effects that a more instrumental agenda will have on the spirit of volunteering. Dominant discourses at Durham University include the idea of volunteering as part of the wider student experience, its importance to enhancing employability, and being the right thing to do as part of the University's outreach and

community engagement programmes. However, stories and experiences of volunteering do not always reflect dominant discourses; nor do they always fit other themes of the gift and volunteering covered in previous chapters. In particular, where students feel pressured to volunteer, whether it is to increase their employability, to demonstrate extra-curricular achievement or because they feel socially obligated, there is a question which extends beyond whether or not volunteering is freely undertaken (Chapter 4) and asks whether volunteering in these circumstances can ever be altruistic. It is understandable that staff place less emphasis on motives of employability and work experience, but the same question can be asked where pressure is exerted to volunteer as part of an annual review or for team development and training. Resistance to pressures to volunteer may generate actions that are seen as subversive or resentful but I found no evidence that this reduces the likelihood that staff or students will volunteer, or affects the quality of volunteering experiences.

Attempts to transcend the dichotomy of self-interest and altruism may lead to the social paradox made famous in 1936 by Dale Carnegie (Osteen 2002:22), where sincerity and empathy for others nevertheless leads to personal reward, but which can also be understood in relation to a range of much older cultural and religious values: “be concerned about others, but sincerely, not for utilitarian motives, not as a means to an end but as an end in itself. And when you do this you will also reach the goal of material success, as a bonus” (Godbout 2000:79-80). However, rather than such paradoxes being problematic for understanding the gift as a social phenomenon, Osteen seems to be suggesting that the very complexities of the gift force us to re-think and challenge the restrictive and binary thinking that is, at least partly, the result of dominant philosophical schools of thought and political ideologies emerging since the Western Enlightenment. These points also exemplify the way that “gifts trouble our categories” (Osteen 2002:22), as does volunteering. Ideas about categorising volunteering are developed in Part III, in which I explore how the social nature of the reciprocal gift is reflected in our perceptions of volunteering networks and relationships, and how ideology and language affect the negotiation of complex and changing volunteer discourses and identities.

## **PART III**

“Virtue comes through contemplation of the divine, and the exercise of philosophy. But it also comes through public service. The one is incomplete without the other”

Iain Pears, *The Dream of Scipio*

## CHAPTER 7 – SOCIAL BONDS AND VOLUNTEERING NETWORKS

### Introduction

The gift plays a complex but key role in creating, maintaining and also destroying relationships, depending how the gift relationship is managed: “when one party always gives and never receives, the relationship will have very little chance to endure” (Komter 1996:3). Furthermore, different social and cultural attitudes to giving inspire exclusion and in-group solidarity as well as cohesion and inclusiveness (Titmuss 1970:81). It may be that some people prefer the looser bonds of trade, barter and charity, which have different rules and fewer obligations in comparison to a gift relationship (Godbout 2000:142). However, others may feel a need for the greater social ties that come with the gift, resisting systems which situate them in the role of nothing more than consumer or philanthropist and thus deny them the mutuality and personal interaction that exists between giver and receiver. The modern gift fulfils this need by offering relationship networks that fill the void of impersonal economic transactions with social meaning: “With the gift, something else emerges, a grace that we badly need” (Godbout 2000:146).

In Chapter 7, I use this more personal aspect of the gift to look at some of the relationships and social bonds of volunteering at Durham University, including the different ways that staff and student volunteers, university managers and local organisations perceive the value of social networks and long-term relationships. I consider the importance of volunteering and social networks in relation to feelings of both belonging and exclusion, the way in which belonging to a group or organisation does not necessarily equate to active participation, and the changing attitudes towards the importance of long-term relationships and commitment in volunteering.

## **Networks, Belonging and Exclusion**

There have been different and independent inventions of the term “social capital”, all varying in detail but placing a similar emphasis on the value of social ties (Putnam 2000:19). One of the earliest uses of the term was in relation to the role that communities play in education: “good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among individuals and families who make up a social unit...a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community” (Hanifan 1916:130). Other examples include that of Pierre Bourdieu, who regards forms of symbolic, social and economic capital as being intertwined through family, friends and close networks, as well as goods. He argues that the maintenance of long-term relationships is necessary to facilitate both social connections and economic exchanges (Bourdieu 1977:178).

However, the relationships facilitated through social capital are not necessarily inclusive or long-term. Putnam (2000:22-23) distinguishes between “bridging” and “bonding” social capital: the former reaches out to disparate groups, whereas the latter is inward looking and may reinforce group cohesion at the expense of relations with other groups. He argues that the weaker links of “bridging” social capital are more effective for the development of generalised reciprocity across wide-ranging social networks. A third form of “linking” social capital is described as enabling and facilitating vertical relations between community and state. In contrast to bridging and bonding social capital which are characterised by different types of long-term relationships and ties, this latter form is more “tactical and instrumental” (Somerville 2011:57). It recognises the different interests, priorities and norms that may exist within state and community partnerships, resulting in the need for a different form of relationship based on need, use and ad hoc mutual benefit rather than long-term ties (Somerville 2011:77).

A relationship also exists between social capital and social exclusion. Extending Putnam’s (2000) comment about the potential problems with bonding social capital, Somerville (2011:63) suggests that any type of social capital is potentially “exclusionary and divisive” as well as potentially beneficial, just as community can be

either exclusive or inclusive (Delanty 2003:12). Different degrees of capital and networking opportunities, divided along different socio-economic and cultural lines such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, occupation or region, present different opportunities and life chances. Godelier (1999:1) associates the increasing need for research into gift exchange with the current state of global and particularly Western societies which are “in the process of excluding more and more people”. He adds that in a world that is increasingly characterised by the widening gap between rich and poor, and a reliance of the vulnerable on wealthier countries, groups or individuals in times of need, “the call to ‘give’” comes from all sides (Godelier 1999:5). Volunteering potentially offers a useful tool for addressing social exclusion, providing “access to social networks, opportunities for empowerment, opportunities to learn and develop skills, improved physical and mental wellbeing and the chance to experience the satisfaction of making a contribution” (Kearney 2003:47). However, there are groups who – because of their social exclusion – may find it difficult to volunteer in the first place, and related to this is the problem that individuals and groups who may potentially benefit from taking part in voluntary activities, through increasing their social capital and skills, are also the hardest to reach and encourage (Deakin 2001:74-75).

The above literature tends to use the unemployed, the elderly, or people with disabilities to exemplify the effects of economic or social isolation. My research, however, has focused on the staff and student volunteers at one particular Higher Education institution rather than addressing volunteering amongst diverse groups in wider society. There was an implied link between occupational status and access to staff volunteering (Chapter 3) and concerns were expressed by some student volunteers, which were also acknowledged by organisers, about not having sufficient time or financial resources to participate in some extra-curricular activities (Chapter 4). As Beth put it:

I'd hate to think that somebody wanted to do something voluntarily and couldn't, because there was a cost involved to them [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

Other than this, issues of social exclusion and social capital were not explicitly mentioned by the individual volunteers or volunteer organisers that I spoke with. At an institutional level, however, the sometimes negative effects emerging from an unequal relationship between the University and local organisations can be understood in terms

of the tensions between social exclusion and social capital. I address these points in more detail in Chapter 9.

### ***Volunteering Networks***

Philanthropy does not necessarily involve active community engagement; it can be, and often is, an individual act. However, whilst philanthropy may not be an integral part of social capital, social networks provide opportunities for helping others through contacts and access to resources, as well as through relationships that develop bonds of reciprocity and a sense of mutual responsibility for others (Putnam 2000:116-117). Staff and student volunteering in Durham, for example, benefits from the support and interest of a wide network of academics, senior members of colleges, and the University. A former student volunteer who went on to become an SCA sabbatical staff member told me how useful it is to have such contacts, because “it can only increase the amount of opportunities for students” [*Caroline: SCA staff*]. She added that volunteering also helps to develop staff networks, especially through participation in SVO Team Challenges, supporting the comment of another staff volunteer, Beth, who described SVO as being involved with a large and growing network of partner organisations beyond the University. She sees more and more volunteering opportunities being generated as these relationships develop:

It’s enormous, an enormous network when you think about it, and the tentacles just reach out, I think is nice way to describe it [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

Bob is a long-term volunteer as well as an academic at the University and stated firmly that social networks are “absolutely vital” in every sort of relationship:

It’s about what can be said to who, really; how not to put your foot in it, and how to make things work [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

As a senior member of the Administration and Support team at Queen’s Campus as well as a staff volunteer organiser, Bee agreed with Bob’s assessment, finding that professional networks are a crucial part of volunteer recruitment. However, she also highlighted the potentially constraining effect of Putnam’s (2000:22) “bonding” social

capital, acknowledging that focusing on a particular network in which she already has a recognised position may have reduced her motivation to contact harder to reach groups in other networks:

It's predominantly admin staff because I chair the Admin Network down here, so those are the teams that I try to get at...that's my network and those are the people who know that I'm coming for them, you know, so it's easier to get at them than it is academic staff [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Charlotte offered a contrasting example that reflects Putnam's (2000:22) more inclusive "bridging" social capital:

[SCA is] creating a community in a way...you're a part of this larger scale thing going on. It's one thing that since I've come on the Exec Committee, I've kind of realised a lot more; I'm not just one person, one little volunteer down in Queen's, I'm a part of this full-scale organisation that's going across the North East [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

She drew on her early experiences as a volunteer from Queen's Campus in Stockton, describing the greater opportunities that have emerged since the Durham and Queen's Campus volunteers started to work together more closely. Charlotte also told me that becoming a part of SCA addresses the isolation that is felt by smaller projects, by allowing people to affiliate with a wider network that offers a sense of security and encourages like-minded groups to work together.

### ***Doing With and Doing For***

Whilst volunteering is frequently regarded as one of the crucial elements of social capital, Putnam (2000:116) agrees with John Dewey that there is a difference between "doing with" and "doing for". Social capital and networking may facilitate volunteering through interaction, co-operation and the development of trust, but these concepts are not synonymous with volunteering (Wilson 2000:223). Furthermore, the effects of social networks on volunteering and engagement vary with the size and consistency of different relationship groups, including family, close friends, acquaintances and colleagues (Wilson 2012:191). Whatever the size of a group, it tends to involve or affect more people than the actual members (Eckstein 2001:832). On the other hand, there is a difference between being an official member of a group and being actively involved in



its organisation; membership lists can therefore be a misleading measure of engagement and participation (Putnam 2000:58).

In spite of the increasing acceptance that volunteering to help others is not incompatible with the enjoyment of becoming involved in group activities, it is nevertheless common for volunteers to distinguish between giving and participating:

There must be an element of external giving...rather than just doing stuff as part of your community [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

This point of view returns to the dilemma addressed in earlier chapters: that it is difficult to draw a line between personal cost and personal gain when actively contributing towards the wellbeing of one's own community. A related area, in which many volunteers I spoke with recognised a difference, is between volunteering to organise a society or team and simply being a member. Jenny, for example, made it clear that the responsibilities she undertakes as a volunteer are very different to the enjoyment she experiences in society activities which are organised by others:

I'm part of the historical combat society. I'm a member, therefore I'm not a volunteer. I benefit from the people who are the club heads, the board members...I'm in the historical combat society solely because I want to hit other people with weapons [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Jonathan, an undergraduate who volunteers within the University as well as with Durham Constabulary, agreed that there is a difference between participating in an organisation or student society for enjoyment and volunteering on an Executive Committee in order to help or enable the members. However, whilst he initially argued that "leadership, commitment and involvement" are key characteristics of being a volunteer, he then acknowledged that those same characteristics may be used to separate volunteers from organisers:

People who sit on these Exec boards have volunteered themselves forward...I can see perhaps that they would see it as not a voluntary position because of the fact you're more committed and involved [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

The almost hierarchical distinction seen here between types of volunteering role and levels of commitment is reflected in a comment made by Caroline, who was an active student volunteer before joining the SCA staff:

I was never a project leader or on the Exec; I was a volunteer [*Caroline: SCA staff*]

This sort of ambivalence resonates with discussions raised in Chapter 4 about the extent to which unpaid roles that involve defined responsibilities and a high degree of commitment, such as student executive positions, can really be described as voluntary. It also looks ahead to the idea that different ways of understanding and valuing volunteers and volunteering are informed by diverse narratives and experiences.

### ***Volunteering is Normal***

For some students, the decision to volunteer seemed almost inevitable after coming to Durham. As postgraduate and undergraduate respectively, both Anna and Jane agreed that it is normal to move from ‘participant’ to ‘organiser’ as a part of getting older. After volunteering at school and college, they described the decision to continue as volunteers when they entered Higher Education as a natural progression:

Once I’d finished sixth form it was kind of the natural thing to do at university...and SCA, Student Community Action, seemed the most logical way of doing it [*Jane: Undergraduate volunteer*]

However, this is not always the case and many students do not get involved in volunteering until they come to university, if at all; even then it may not be the obvious choice. Jack recently completed a geography degree; he said that he has enjoyed volunteering in the past but did not get involved with volunteer projects in Durham until the start of his third year because he had felt so overwhelmed by the initial transition to becoming a student:

It was a very new experience being at university, as it is for everyone. I suppose I closed into a shell...volunteering at the time wasn’t an option for me; it just didn’t even cross my mind [*Jack: Undergraduate volunteer*]

This offers an interesting contrast to the argument commonly put forward by volunteer organisers that volunteering is an excellent way to adjust to university life. As Nicola put it:

It's actually giving them that sense of some connection with another environment and helps them really set off [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

She explained that she has come across many students who struggled when they first arrived in Durham, and found the transition into university “quite challenging, quite difficult”, but in contrast to Jack’s reaction of retreating into his shell, she said that they found a solution in developing their volunteer relationships.

## **Activities, Team Challenges and Relationships**

### ***Time, Trust and Relationship-Building***

Putnam (2000:136, 186) observes that there is a strong link between levels of social trust, social capital and volunteering, and a further link between civic engagement and educational attainment. Wilson (2000:220) goes further, associating higher levels of education more specifically with political volunteering and activities that require a high level of literacy, as opposed to community work and activities requiring greater social skills. This is particularly interesting, since it is the latter types of activities that still tend to characterise most Experience Durham staff and student projects, in spite of comments about a greater need for volunteers who are willing to use their academic and professional skills.

### ***It's Not Just Gardening***

People may be motivated to undertake different types of activity for different types of cause, and at different periods in their life (Wilson 2000:216). In the case of staff volunteering, activities are often but not necessarily linked to academic and professional skills (Bussell and Forbes 2008:371), although it is possible that such findings have as much to do with the interests and occupational status of the staff being interviewed as they do with overall trends in staff volunteering. Other literature suggests that staff

members often prefer to do something completely separate to their day job, such as gardening or environmental projects (Robinson and Hudson 2013:192), although this raises a dilemma of whether it is better to encourage activities that appeal to volunteers' interests or activities that meet specific organisational needs. Although organisations generally respond positively to the contributions made by staff volunteer scheme 'Team Challenges', Brewis (2004:19) points out that in spite of the potential to use a wide range of professional skills, the staff from the company where she carried out her research tend to do mainly "painting, decorating and building".

This is also a concern that I hear mentioned in my own fieldwork. At a seminar last year on diaspora and volunteering held at Northumbria University, I met a member of the Diaspora Volunteering Alliance. Her comments reflected what I have been told about Durham University staff volunteering, both by the University and by other organisations: that when staff offer to volunteer, they often want to paint walls but the Alliance would prefer to benefit from their professional skills. She added that "no-one bothers" to find out the needs and interests of either the volunteers or the organisation, so it can be difficult to engage or to identify appropriate activities. Similar sentiments were expressed by the manager of a small charity operating in County Durham, which works closely with Experience Durham and offers sports activities to young people who have some sort of disability. What the charity needs, she said, is volunteers with the professional skills that help organisations comply with the same legal and financial requirements that large companies must follow.

It was the same story during a recent SVO Team Challenge, in which a series of project reviews of local charities and voluntary organisations were carried out on behalf of a regional community foundation. The foundation's manager explained that a significant risk for small charities is a lack of professional skills. She added that "passion is vital" but that other key abilities are also required, and that particular problem areas are in administration, marketing, media and IT. It is often difficult to identify or even admit to those gaps, she said, and even harder to "plug them", especially when relying on volunteers and operating on a very limited budget. Steve, a WRVS (Women's Royal Voluntary Service) manager who recently visited Durham for a volunteering and

engagement event organised by Experience Durham, made a similar comment and added:

Not to be demeaning to people who like doing gardening or decorating, but perhaps they should consider expanding into more professional or support activities [Steve: WRVS Manager]

As Steve suggested, one way to address perceptions about the low status of volunteering is to call it something else (Rochester et al. 2012:179); this approach would appear to be associated not only with the language of volunteering but also the esteem in which different activities are held. In a similar manner, there are those who refer to specific activities done in a voluntary capacity rather than the more generalised activity of volunteering, and of professionals who describe their voluntary work as pro bono. However, it is unclear whether a focus on recruiting volunteers who have certain professional skills is entirely for the benefit of organisational and community needs and relationships, or whether it also reflects – at least to some extent – the desire of some volunteers or institutions to undertake activities that are likely to advance their own situation.

### ***One-Off Projects Don't Build Relationships***

The importance attributed to trust and commitment in both literature and evidence from my own fieldwork applies to both institutions and individual volunteers. This may become problematic with the projects and activities commonly associated with staff volunteering schemes, where volunteering is short-term and changeable, because there is little or no opportunity to develop a trusting relationship. Furthermore, the type of volunteering which may suit staff, either to meet their time constraints or personal interests, and is therefore promoted by employers who wish to attract more staff volunteers, may not meet the needs of so-called partner organisations (Brewis 2004:23). These concerns offer further indications that volunteering may not be primarily for the benefit of the community, but for the employer organisation and its staff volunteers.

Samantha volunteered on a regular basis with a wildlife organisation in the year between completing her undergraduate studies and embarking on a PhD, but said she now prefers to take part in multiple short-term voluntary activities. She told me that she believes that relationships can emerge from one-off projects, arguing that the camaraderie that develops is a different kind of relationship, but not necessarily inferior, to that of long-term involvement. Another view, however, is that the value of volunteering lies in the relationships that are built up and that it is difficult to build those sorts of relationships in a day. As Caroline put it:

I don't think it matters, but the one-offs don't have much impact...there's a very limited range of relationships you can build and influence you can have [*Caroline: SCA staff*]

Similarly, Robert, as a university manager and volunteering 'champion' and Beth, as a staff volunteer, both said that they feel it is better for staff and students to get involved with activities that offer longer term benefits. Although stating that there is nothing wrong with digging gardens or taking part in other one-off projects, they also argued that volunteers who want to get more involved in a project should be prepared to commit for the long term and not "just parachute in and out again" [*Robert: Senior university manager*]. Bob, as both staff volunteer and academic, with a research interest in community relationships, suggested that in relation to long-term benefits, Team Challenges have only a limited impact but it's better than nothing:

It doesn't involve very careful thinking about relationships and sustaining the relationships, and all the rest of it: a bit disappointing, to be honest [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

His concern, continued Bob, is that the short-term nature of Team Challenges is not conducive to the development of long-term relationships between the University and voluntary or community organisations.

Local organisations share the opinion that long-term relationships are important, although with a pragmatic recognition that this is not always possible. The day centre where Amy works as a manager has a long-standing but fluid relationship with SCA:

Our relationship with the University through SCA is very important, but the relationship is with the organisation rather than individuals because students and staff members move on each year *[Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation]*

There are currently very few members of university staff involved with the centre, although the managers and trustees would like to change this. Amy told me that the centre usually recruits about six students every year, as volunteers or to complete an academic placement, but that they usually move on after a year or two. Although these relationships are valued, she explained that a relatively short period of involvement has implications for the types of activity that volunteers may be able to get involved with. Long-term volunteers are especially useful at the centre because they build up strong relationships and a rapport with individuals:

It's important that the role of a particular volunteer is suitable to the amount of time they will stick around. If you want people to open up to volunteers, then they need that time to get to know them *[Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation]*

As a student volunteer at the centre, Laura agreed that as people get to know and trust you, opportunities emerge for closer involvement:

*[The centre] is all about relationships and building relationships [Laura: Postgraduate volunteer]*

She added that community networks and personal connections are the best way to find out what people really need.

Such narratives reinforce a popular theme that recurs through many encounters with staff and student volunteers at Durham University: in contrast to some literature suggesting that an increasingly accepted view is that 'modern' volunteering tends to be more ad hoc and short-term (e.g. Holdsworth 2010:422; Smith et al. 2010:68), even the most self-interested volunteering is frequently associated with trust, the need to feel valued, and the development of relationships over time.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 7 is the first of three chapters in Part III that examine how social networks and the bonds of obligation are linked to volunteering relationships, discourses and identities, through the different effects of social norms and power relations, as well as the enabling and constraining aspects of agency and structure. The themes addressed in this chapter support the view that social capital and networking facilitate volunteering through the development of social interactions, co-operation, and trust (Wilson 2000:223). Social networks also appear to be associated with norms of behaviour including pressures to fulfil expectations that arise from belonging to a group or maintaining relationships over time (Putnam 2000:20). However, social networks do not equate to active community involvement or participation in organised or regular activities such as volunteering (Putnam 2000:94), and in spite of the frequent assertion that long-term relationships are essential to the generation of trust, recent developments in university volunteering strategy, especially amongst staff members, appear to focus on short-term, one-off projects. In the next chapter, I explore further the conscious and unconscious effects of social norms and expectations on the development of different volunteering behaviours and language, and highlight the contingent nature of contemporary volunteer discourses and identities.



## **CHAPTER 8 - THE CONTINGENT VOLUNTEER: DISCOURSES OF UNIVERSITY VOLUNTEERING**

### **Introduction**

What previous chapters suggest is that not only does student volunteering fit into an “overall narrative of volunteering” (Darwen and Rannard 2011:177) that both shapes and is shaped by social policies and norms; it is also increasingly represented as a central part of the ‘university experience’, a term which is both descriptive and rhetorical. As a rhetorical device, it sends a message of aspiration and expectation, and draws together the diverse experiences of university into a unified and idealised whole that reflects institutional goals and discourses. Actual university and volunteering experiences as opposed to the rhetorical ideal, however, are subjective and diverse for both staff and students; they are positive and negative, successful and disastrous, private and public. Such diversity is found not only in how university life is experienced but how it is articulated through narratives and discourses.

In this chapter, I explore narratives and discourses of volunteering at Durham University in relation to institutional rhetoric, conscious and unconscious influences on selfhood, and the way in which identities, like relationships, may be shaped or constrained by social norms and obligations. I ask how and why the language of volunteering might be changing, and how this reflects or informs ways of valuing volunteers, and of accepting or rejecting different volunteer identities.

### **Stories, Narratives and Discourses**

The self is often described as a complex, socially constructed and changing combination of stories, past experiences, traditions, norms and individual characteristics (MacIntyre 1981:201). The risk, however, is that experiences and traditions become naturalised through rhetoric and ideology; they become taken for granted and increasingly difficult to articulate or challenge as they move beyond the realm of discourse to include the

often unconscious effects of doxa. Bourdieu (1977:164) describes doxa as the “misrecognition” of arbitrary order for natural order, which is accepted without question even though it is historically and culturally constructed and situated. It forms a central idea in the shift from discourse to ideology, and illustrates the power of language in different contexts and institutions. Thus rhetorical persuasion generally represents particular social or cultural norms, ideals or preconceptions, and part of this cultural persuasion is about portraying something as natural, as opposed to just one option out of many (Carrithers 2005:579, 581). As a result, whilst it is not impossible to think critically about what has become habitual, it does become harder (Douglas 2002:45). In a similar manner, the power of ideology lies partly in the fact that it is not presented as an ideology, but as natural ‘reality’ that is learned unconsciously and without being explicitly taught: “what is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying*: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition” (Bourdieu 1977:167).

Foucault (1971:7) presents the idea of discourse as structured and rule-bound; more than just words, discourse is shaped through the rituals of social and linguistic form, content and process. He highlights in particular the importance of ritual institutional and academic occasions, where strict conventions shape what is said, and how; also what is not or cannot be said. In spite of structural constraints, however, both discourse and the extent to which it is accepted or resisted, varies between societies, groups and institutions, and over time (Foucault 1971:8). Whilst Agar (1987:113) acknowledges the power of written and verbal discourse, stating that “public policy is made of language”, Hall (2004:345-346) makes a further distinction when he comments that Foucault focuses on “discourse” rather than “language”, recognising the active, political and potentially confrontational nature of language use that informs the development of society and social relations. He goes on to say that Foucauldian discourse goes beyond written or spoken language, encompassing a far broader range of activities that inform thoughts, beliefs and behaviour across individuals, groups and institutions; it also produces socio-cultural meanings that vary within different contextual and historical periods.

People are thus to a certain extent constrained by their roles and subjective positions within society and also by “orders of discourse” (Bourdieu 1977:82). Coined by Foucault (1971:28), this term describes the varying norms and conventions linked to power and ideology, which shape and constrain both our choice and use of different discourses and actions. Structures and institutions produce different orders of discourse, although it should not be forgotten that discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures. Furthermore, the influence of social structures and discourses does not necessarily prevent the use of agency or creativity (Fairclough 1989: 17-19). Social and political practices and beliefs, too, are often embedded in and reflected by orders of discourse and unconscious language use, and as such they resist alternative explanations (Fairclough 1989:2). Foucault’s (1980:95) critical discursive approach seeks to identify those practices and beliefs in society that are taken for granted and normalised, in order to expose inequalities and the uneven effects of power. This is because although mechanisms of power often go unnoticed and unchallenged, once something is questioned it becomes visible; it is harder to continue the illusion that certain practices and beliefs are ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ once inequalities and alternatives become apparent (Fairclough 1989:2; Kendall and Wickham 2004:141), although those mechanisms of power do not necessarily become easier to overcome.

Even allowing for different degrees of agency, discourses and ideology offer a way of exercising moral and social control over volunteers and non-volunteers through a variety of norms and sanctions. Discourses are not fixed, nor do they exist in a social, cultural, political or historical vacuum (Hall 2004:347). Furthermore, the power of discourse is such that it may have an effect even if not initially true (Hall 2004:348), making itself true through repetition and the reinforcement of particular attitudes and behaviours. In this way, a naturalised ideology is presented as normal rather than as arbitrary and constructed (Bourdieu 1977:76). David Lammy’s statement, for example, that “we all know that graduates need to be equipped with the right skills to succeed in the workplace” (UUK 2009:4) epitomises contemporary rhetoric and ideology within Higher Education. It is difficult to argue against the value of educating young people for future employment, yet there is also an unspoken, naturalised assumption that appears to privilege this purpose over others, implying that this has always been the case. In a

similar way, contemporary ideologies of volunteering, as a route to employability or self-development, imply that current approaches are normal, lasting, and not the result of contemporary economic circumstances and dominant socio-political discourses.

### *Language and Discourses of Volunteering*

Activities related to volunteering are increasingly described in different terms. Various possibilities have been suggested for this change, including the desire to appear more inclusive, to influence social norms, or to increase perceptions of the numbers involved. However, it has been observed that “the shift in language has been largely an elite-led process, and has not really been adopted on the ground” (Kendall 2003:6). I found evidence of this in my own fieldwork. As a visiting faculty member from an American university put it, the language of volunteering and civic engagement reflects current trends, particularly in academic circles:

I think there's just this progression from volunteering to community service to civic engagement, but I think it's just because it's the sexy word for now, the catch-phrase that everybody's paying attention to...I think it's also that the progression is on the academic side versus the organisation side. Most of the non-profits still use 'volunteering'  
*[Veronica: Community Engagement Director, visiting university]*

This is interesting in relation to developments in volunteering at Durham University, particularly the increasing tendency of staff volunteer organisers to state a preference for umbrella terms such as ‘engagement’ or ‘outreach’ to cover all service-related and engagement activities, in contrast to local statutory and voluntary organisations who favour more traditional language.

After spending much of his time at Durham University as an enthusiastic member of SCA, Ben has retained a link with student volunteers now that he is a senior officer with Durham Constabulary. He finds that in societies or institutions where ‘volunteer’ is a favoured term it can be difficult to oppose, and explained that he used this to his advantage when setting up a new police Volunteer-Internship Programme for students:

I used that terminology because volunteering, I think, is so well understood in the organisation, to the extent that they accept that unpaid people have got a massive contribution to make [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

Ben added that volunteering is also a recognisable and accepted piece of terminology, both within Durham Constabulary and the University. Amy made a similar observation that volunteering is a recognised and socially approved activity:

When you use the term in rhetoric, a lot of volunteering, it's quite 'in' at the moment, isn't it, to say you volunteer or you've done some volunteering [*Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

However, other opinions more closely match Veronica's comment that there has been a shift in the language of volunteering and engagement in Higher Education. During her year as an SCA staff member, Pippa has found that the term 'volunteering' can be both a "buzz word" and a "turn-off", which is a problem for marketing and recruitment:

It's very much split down the middle, I think, and how the hell do you target people? [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Pippa also makes a distinction between volunteering and taking part in a voluntary activity. As a student, Pippa told me she knew that she wanted to be a volunteer and found herself all sorts of projects to get involved with, but commented that other people may want to do a specific activity rather than join a general volunteering group. Consequently, this may lead to another recruitment problem because traditionally, she said, SCA has never been a group that promotes multiple specific projects:

We have to be 'volunteering', but then I don't know if we should push to do more stuff where we're just targeting different areas [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

What these diverse stories indicate is that volunteering is not universally recognised as a positive term; nor do its multiple and blurred meanings remain stable or even widely agreed (Kendall and Knapp 1995:66). Just as the changing semantics and language of corporate social responsibility reflect a move away from the term 'volunteering' in larger businesses and institutions, it appears that there is a similar change taking place in

Higher Education. One SVO manager explained how she first became aware of this change outside the University:

I went to a conference last year which was very much about global corporate volunteering, and they were moving away from the time of calling it volunteering and were coming up with different ways to describe it [*Nicola: Experience Durham staff*]

Within the University, a professional WRVS<sup>12</sup> manager attending an event organised last year by Experience Durham asked whether there is an opportunity to work with marketing and recruitment representatives to find an alternative name for ‘volunteering’. He explained that the term can be off-putting, particularly to men, and added that it is useful to advertise and tailor specific activities to appeal to people’s specific interests. Several other people that I have spoken with over the last couple of years also told me that ‘volunteer’ is an unfashionable word, and may even discourage some people from getting involved. Speaking about the sports volunteering and outreach programmes developed by Experience Durham, Rachel’s opinion of the term ‘volunteering’ is that:

I don’t think to the general everyday person, it’s a very fashionable word, to be honest...I try not to use the word a lot because we like to use ‘projects’ [*Rachel: Experience Durham staff*]

In a similar vein, Nicola told me that the SVO team has been discussing recently whether or not they should change their name to something more “catchy” and “marketable”.

Kendall and Knapp (1995:72) try to find ways of understanding meanings of volunteering in ways that de-emphasise the so-called negative aspects and emphasise currently popular concepts of equality and participation. The gift, on the other hand, offers a way to incorporate both the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ elements of volunteering, by framing what are often described as negative or divisive aspects, such as power

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<sup>12</sup> The WRVS (Women’s Royal Voluntary Service) was renamed the Royal Voluntary Service in 2013, after the completion of my fieldwork, to reflect a more inclusive, non-gendered approach (Royal Voluntary Service 2014)

relations and inequality, as inevitable and necessary parts of both giving and volunteering.

### **Meanings and Motivations**

One of the areas in which volunteering has undergone a significant change of image is the extent to which it is no longer regarded as a form of charity; increasingly the view is that volunteering involves “mutual support and reciprocity” (Rochester et al. 2012:176). However, perceptions remain that perpetuate the image of top-down benevolence or patronage, and more negative views of “do-gooders” or middle-class philanthropists. This is described as a problem of “image, brand, culture and vision” (Rochester et al. 2012:177), and a failure to challenge narrow meanings of volunteering or to value a broader understanding of what volunteering might become.

### ***It Doesn't Matter What You Call It, As Long As You Do It***

A staff volunteer from the Business School said that different people like to do different things and that “volunteering can be whatever you want it to be”. As Amy put it, when I first met her at a mental health day centre in Durham, “we all volunteer in our own way”. However, other people I spoke with support another view; that whether or not something is classed as volunteering is often decided by others:

You are giving up your time, but it's not classed as volunteering, I don't think it is, in a kind of, well I don't think it's acknowledged as volunteering [Pippa: SCA staff]

On the one hand, activities of people who identify themselves as volunteers may not be recognised, but on the other hand, new ways of representing traditional relationships extend the idea of what volunteering is. Tina, for example, uses the example of volunteering to help people in local communities:

It's what we used to call being neighbourly [Tina: Staff volunteer]

A common dilemma faced by staff and students alike is that even where they are helping others, enjoyable activities don't always feel like volunteering, and the line becomes even more blurred where volunteering and work are done in the same place. It

is not just staff and students at the University who take this view. Amy gives art lessons in a voluntary capacity at the centre where she also works as a resource manager and volunteer coordinator:

I don't always think of it as volunteering, it's just that I do things that I enjoy doing with people, but they're not necessarily part of my job description. They're not done in the times I get paid to work [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

A slightly different approach is that volunteering is about what you do; it doesn't need a label or to be acknowledged by others:

If anything comes up and I've got the time to do it, I will try and help...I don't go round telling anybody, I just do it [Alex: *Staff member, unofficial volunteer*]

There is a view expressed by organisers more than the volunteers themselves, that people have always volunteered without necessarily realising what they were doing, or perhaps only with hindsight. Amy, for example, told me that she took her neighbours' dogs for walks when she was younger, went shopping for people, and then after graduating from university spent time helping a homeless charity, working in their soup kitchen:

I think I actually always volunteered. I just think that sometimes you do things without always knowing you're a volunteer [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

As far as Bee is concerned, it is the activity and its impact on others that counts; what people want to call their volunteering is not important:

That doesn't matter, as long as you're doing it [Bee: *Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

Tina offered an example that illustrates this viewpoint, explaining that people who don't see themselves as volunteers, and would never offer to volunteer, will nevertheless do things to help others, or perhaps because they just do something that interests them which happens to involve others at the same time. They may also identify a specific activity, rather than seeing volunteering as a more general activity in itself. She gave an example of this approach from her own family:



My husband wouldn't ever volunteer but when I asked him to take a group of lads fishing, no problem, but he's not volunteering, he's just fishing [*Tina: Staff volunteer*]

Yet another position – albeit a rare one in my fieldwork – claims that the activity itself is more important than the occupational status. Mark spent a year volunteering at a local swimming club, where he was recently offered a similar but part-time paid role:

It feels weird because I probably would have done it anyway...The voluntary thing is irrelevant really...it was never about the volunteering, it was about the kids and the swimming, I think [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

This situation exemplifies the way in which boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred between volunteering, outreach, and even activities that attract a very low salary (but also tend to require hours in excess of the agreed contract). Talking about his swimming club activities, Mark explained:

It's still basically volunteering, and also fundamentally I'm spending a lot more than eleven hours a week doing it, you know, with the planning and everything else [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Holdsworth (2010:422) argues that student volunteering is portrayed as the potential solution to so many social and educational problems, as well as providing opportunity for personal and civic growth that “it is unlikely that one activity can meet such an impressive range of outcomes”. Robin summed up this fluid, ideological and contested nature of volunteering, when we were talking about both staff and student volunteering at Durham University:

I suppose everyone would like [it] to be the same thing to everyone but it's not and it's never going to be [*Robin: SCA staff*]

It is for this reason that there is a need to recognise that the motives of both individuals and groups will be selective and varied when deciding how and why to volunteer in different circumstances, and that perceptions and experiences are likely to reflect the way in which different people value volunteers and volunteering activities.

### *The Proper Thing to Do*

Whilst it may not be the immediate or natural choice of activity for staff or students, one postgraduate told me that volunteering has become more “mainstream” and normalised in Higher Education. She explained that volunteering is regarded as something that is useful to both volunteers and institutions, and is therefore perceived as being of greater value:

People are encouraged to volunteer, to forward their career or to look like a good person [*Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer*]

In a contrast to this instrumental perspective of why students feel that they should volunteer, Jenny used an illustration from her parents’ and grandparents’ generations to suggest that the moral idea of the “proper thing to do” has changed. The combination of explicit and implicit social expectation remains, but she expressed concern about the degree of pressure that is now exerted on students and the wider population to volunteer and the disapproval that faces those who choose not to:

It wasn’t that you were expected to help, you obviously would, right? It was the proper thing to do, but not in the way it’s the proper thing now, which is people are actually going to judge you if you don’t [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

A further example of the pressure exerted by institutional expectations came when I was told by one senior manager that it is not only necessary to find out what new students are willing or able to do; the University and its colleges also seek to instil in new students the values and expectations that are associated with the University’s goals and priorities:

There is a fundamental problem which you can’t avoid with students, because each year a third of them leave...the point is that each year you’re going to get a new cohort, who, if you like, have got to be socialised into understanding how things are [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

A more critical view from one postgraduate volunteer is that the University’s rhetoric on volunteering and engagement does not translate into real commitment. Opinions such as this fit closely with Somerville’s (2011:51) suggestion that terms like “participation” and “engagement” are common rhetorical devices, used to define and justify particular approaches to community, but on closer examination, often revealing

the ideological or interest-driven motives of those supporting the community engagement activities. His concern is that genuine involvement and participation may be limited since “those already well connected tend to get better connected” (Somerville 2011:80), leading to issues of access, inequality and uneven representation. In Mark’s case, he said that in spite of talking about the importance of student involvement and engagement, the University does not really help students who want to put these ideals into practice:

I think the University is extremely lazy, actually. They love to spout about how you should, don’t let a degree get in the way of your education, they absolutely love these lines and whatever, but I don’t think they proactively push anything at all, in fact they probably make things worse by, you know, the way that they structure their timetables [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Mark added that uneven university academic scheduling makes it hard for some students to volunteer effectively:

Workloads were never evenly balanced, they always had huge peak periods in them, and if you wanted people to actually have outside lives and outside things, they would do it a lot better [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

On the one hand, it is possible that Mark’s personal disappointment with his initial attempts to engage with Experience Durham may have contributed to this more generalised opinion about the University. He expressed his surprise at the lack of enthusiasm with which his expression of interest was received:

It was weird, it almost felt like, they were very eager to give you all the information and yeah, come and get involved, but there was no, we hope to see you next week. It was all sort of expecting you to be the proactive one, and I found it quite strange [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

On the other hand, there is no suggestion that Mark was not prepared to be proactive himself; it was at this point that he found his own volunteering opportunity at a local swimming club. Furthermore, if Mark’s experience is added to other stories I have been told about the difficulties of balancing volunteering with study commitments and a lack of awareness in both staff and students of Experience Durham, it could be argued that the University’s desire to present a socially responsible image is not necessarily reflected in an effective integration of curricular and extra-curricular activities.

In contrast to this negative portrayal of the University's support for volunteering, other stories suggest that image and rhetoric are not incompatible with commitment. For Bee, it is not enough to help; it is just as important for people to see students and staff from the University doing something that they regard as valuable, and in her view volunteering is a visible and entirely positive way of doing this. Nevertheless, whilst enthusiasm about a positive image may be genuine, it could also indicate an uncritical acceptance of volunteering which fails to question why such activities are supported, and does not appreciate the importance of image when appealing to ideologies, norms, and identities (Komter 2005:19), or when representing volunteering in accordance with particular agendas and discourses. Talking about the positive effect on staff team morale and communication when everyone gets together to volunteer, for example, Bee's opinion is simply that:

Everything is win-win in the volunteering as I see it [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

There are practical situations where the term "win-win" appears easier to justify. Bee has a team of staff volunteers at Queen's who help young people gain work experience by bringing them in to different departments to learn office skills. She sees this as a "win-win" situation because volunteering "adds value" to the working day, as well as helping people in the community:

It gives our staff the opportunity to mentor people, it gives our young staff the opportunity to look after another young person and guide them through as well, so it's a learning programme for everybody really [*Bee: Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*]

This is not an unusual attitude in the volunteers that I spoke with, who have met their primary goal of participating in an activity or cause that helps others. It is possible that concerns about rhetoric, commitment and institutional agendas are more likely to emerge where staff and students have encountered barriers or problems in their efforts to volunteer, or undertaken more challenging roles that involve complicated organisational and financial relationships.

### *Volunteer Identities*

Whilst the mechanisms of social bonding and obligation underpinning the gift may still be relevant in ‘modern’ societies (Mauss 1990:5), contemporary motives for giving are complicated and constrained by other dominant ideologies and norms that result in contradiction and inner conflict (Osteen 2002:18). When this perspective is applied to volunteering, there are those who attribute the changing nature of voluntary motivations to wider changes in social trends and the emphasis increasingly placed in many developed societies on individualism and choice (Holdsworth 2010:422). Alternatively, there are those who argue for a combination of individualist and collectivist drivers, oscillating between a range of ‘traditional’ helping and self-interested motivations depending on context and biographical circumstance (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003:170). Consequently, Holdsworth (2010:434) describes the unwillingness of some students to identify either with employability or altruism as key motivations for volunteering as a rejection of such ideologies and “normative discourses”. It is noticeable that the far smaller body of literature that addresses staff volunteering, whilst including discussion about the values and interests of volunteers, pays little attention to the idea of discursive volunteer identities.

There are also students who openly articulate self-interested, Machiavellian reasons for volunteering as a means of furthering their own ends rather than only the ends of others. This is not to say their motivations are not valid, just that they are recognised for what they are: “We are witnessing the emergence of ‘clever volunteers’ who are able to...negotiate their volunteering journeys and maximise individual benefits” (Holdsworth 2010:422). Other contemporary literature suggests that volunteers increasingly appear to place greater focus on one-off projects and short-term volunteering that involves less commitment over time (Rochester et al. 2012:103; Wilson 2012:194). Putnam (2000:405) regards this trend as symptomatic of a decline in civic participation and weakening social bonds, but it has also been described as “an unintended consequence of modernity” (Smith et al. 2010:68). Rather than being regarded as a point of concern to be remedied, Smith et al. (2010) propose that such a trend be embraced and used, and that volunteer recruitment policies should be adjusted to attract these new volunteer discourses and identities.

There is often a negative perception of volunteers as “activists and do-gooders” (Squirrell 2009:23), so it is ironic that “activities that seem to be truly selfless are the most esteemed” (Wilson 2000:218). This latter view reflects the hypothesis proposed by Cnaan et al. (1996:375) that someone is more likely to be regarded by the public as a “real volunteer” if their chosen activity carries a net cost. From this perspective, according to several undergraduate and postgraduate students in Durham, saying that you are a volunteer is a way of representing yourself in a positive way:

The word ‘volunteer’ does have connotations of...giving yourself over to a better cause, so maybe if you want to portray a certain image of yourself [*Samantha: Postgraduate volunteer*]

This form of self-representation may have more tangible advantages. Potential employers are looking for evidence not just of volunteering but of what Jonathan called a “volunteering identity”, which offsets a student identity and lasts as long as you continue to volunteer:

Student and partying is already linked together, so that’s always going to be like that, but I think when you become a volunteer, that’s something you sort of carry along with you [*Jonathan: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Extending the idea even further, one senior university manager claimed that committed volunteers are a different kind of person to those who volunteer for more instrumental reasons:

I do think when volunteering is a core part of what they do at university, when it takes up a significant part of their time and becomes part of their social life, I think they are a different kind of person and you need to deal with them slightly differently to volunteers who may be motivated more by the opportunity to develop their CV [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

However, such an assumption runs the risk of privileging one aspect of an individual’s fluid and complex identity, as well as perpetuating what may well be unrealistic stereotypes. It also appears to under-estimate the influence of increasingly dominant discourses of self-interest that are associated with changing perceptions of the social role and image of volunteering (Fahey 2005:207).

The key characteristics of Fahey's (2005:205-206) 'moral volunteer', for example, include: doing something out of the ordinary, helping the community without any financial motive, and placing an emphasis on altruism. Whilst this is an Australian study and may therefore reflect attitudes emerging from a very specific set of cultural and historical experiences, it is also a commonly adopted identity which is often associated with fostering social cohesion and addressing issues of perceived social and moral fragmentation. However, it also appears that this type of volunteer is situated on the periphery of volunteer organisations in terms of agency, authority and access to resources, which may have a negative impact on the ability to perform effectively. Fahey (2005:206) suggests that this may lead volunteers to reject the 'moral volunteer' discourse in favour of a volunteer identity that enables them to acquire the power and resources that they want or need, and is less likely to situate them as inferior to paid staff doing the same or similar roles. This relatively new form of self-interested volunteer has become a common focus of academic and business research and volunteer literature, and is frequently opposed to the more traditional 'moral volunteer', being more demanding as well as more pragmatic.

Based on examples from my own fieldwork, it would appear that volunteer identities are informed by a wide range of requirements and characteristics. There are those who talk about 'real volunteers', like Amy, who suggested that there is a difference between taking part in self-conscious and possibly self-interested organised activities, and simply looking after people who need help:

That's real volunteering, but then you have very structured volunteering, don't you, you almost have a t-shirt saying 'I'm a Volunteer' [Amy: *Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

For students, this idea of having a visible identifier becomes more literal at many university and college events, although it is not the case with staff. At the start of every academic year, the organisers of clubs and societies – including SCA – are easily identified by their branded clothing, and students helping during Freshers' Week wear t-shirts with variations on the message 'I Can Help'. At my own college's barbecue last summer, one of the first things said to me when I turned up to help in the morning was "where's your t-shirt?"

For others, visibility appears to be much less important and there is greater emphasis placed on ability and commitment. During the opening meeting between a college volunteer group and a local dog rescue charity, for example, the organisation's Chief Executive described his 'ideal volunteer' as "regular, long-term, trusted, reliable and capable". An interesting variation of this type of volunteer came from Anna, who describes herself as a "professional volunteer" as well as being a postgraduate member of her college's GCR, not because she is paid but because of the time and experience that she can offer. Finally, I came across a more value-based and cultural understanding of volunteering from Mary, a regional volunteer coordinator in County Durham, who had strong links with SVO until she emigrated to Australia last year with her family. Before leaving, she commented that the voluntary sector in Australia appeals to her because it is, in her view, closer to what volunteering used to be in the UK: 'pure volunteering' as opposed to 'grey volunteering' that incorporates work placements, internships and the employability agenda, which is "not what volunteering should be about". Not only is this last example closer to the idea of a 'moral volunteer', but it also appears to reject the increasing tendency for individuals and institutions to combine volunteering with business and industry-oriented agendas.

### ***Volunteering Values and Valuing Volunteers***

In spite of the wide array of volunteering causes, activities, motives and interests, there are those who perpetuate an assumption that certain types of people are more likely to volunteer, and that this will lead to a sympathetic bond. For example, Michelle told me that people with "volunteering natures" always look for ways to help others, and Greg commented that volunteers "understand each other". This risks making a further assumption that people doing the same sort of volunteer activities will have the same way of looking at the world:

There's a group of people with the same kind of mindset who are doing the same kind of work [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

Such a way of understanding volunteering appears to reflect the wider dangers of adhering to an understanding of culture which fails to recognise contradiction, dissent or diversity (Wright 1994:3), or that privileges homogenising explanations of consensus and community (Jewkes and Murcott 1996; Kearney 2003:43). For example, what Beth,



a college counsellor and staff volunteer, considers to be an appropriate mindset for “a reasonable member of society” is likely to be highly subjective and liable to change over time and in different cultural, or social, environments. A key contribution offered by anthropological perspectives may therefore be ways of understanding, constructing and contesting meanings of culture that value the importance of context, situation, identities and relationships (Wright 1994:3).

### **Conclusion: The Contingent Volunteer**

In this chapter, I have explored the close association that exists between discourses, social norms and some of the volunteer identities available to or embraced by individuals and groups in different contexts. Discourse combines both language and social practices – what people say and do – in the production of knowledge, shaping and constraining thoughts, beliefs and behaviour across groups, societies and institutions over time (Hall 2004:345-347). It establishes what is or is not regarded as acceptable or ‘correct’, which is not necessarily the same as being factual, through the association of knowledge and power. Hall (2004) illustrates this point using the example discourses of ‘madness’ and ‘punishment’ – areas of interest to Foucault (1989, 1991) – but I would argue that the same approach can be taken with volunteering. Using criteria originally developed by Hall (2004:347), discourses of volunteering could be said to provide statements about ways of knowing about or understanding volunteering in a particular time or culture, and there is a historical and social context for what is deemed an acceptable way of understanding or talking about volunteering. Discourses of volunteering also present subjects that reflect contextualised situations and are attributed with particular characteristics, such as the ‘clever volunteer’ (Holdsworth 2010:422), the ‘moral volunteer’ (Fahey 2005:203), or the various forms of volunteer that I have encountered during my own fieldwork.

Smart’s (1993:405) concept of gift exchange as a series of “contingent performances” recognises the blurred and changing boundaries between the gift and the market economy, and the role of both sectors in the maintenance of social cohesion. Osteen (2002:25) uses this perspective to illustrate how “shifting relationships are dramatized,

created, dissolved.” It supports Osteen’s own distinction between norms and rules, where the latter’s reliance on rigid structures fails to allow for the gift’s flexibility and uncertainty. This is not dissimilar to Musick and Wilson’s (2007:397) consideration of trends that suggest volunteering is undergoing significant change in response to wider social, political, economic and demographic changes, some of which encourage volunteering and some of which do not. They suggest that the nature of volunteering activities is also changing: they cite the examples of a rise in environmental projects, a decline in religious and self-help groups, and a shift towards formalised and organisational volunteering, but they also cite a more general move away from long-term commitment towards “more sporadic, contingent volunteer activities”. That is to say, there is an increase in more flexible arrangements that recognise the need or desire of volunteers to manage their time in more discrete, changing, and autonomous packages. In this way, the ‘contingent volunteer’ is driven less by a particular moral or instrumental motivation, or even by the rejection of dominant discourses, and more by a sensitivity to changing contexts and a pragmatic response to different circumstances that takes into consideration the interests and resources of both the volunteer and wider society.

In the final chapter, I will take a more institutional perspective in order to re-examine different ways of understanding moral and instrumental motivations for staff and student volunteering, in relation to changing attitudes towards the public role of Higher Education and the often overlooked inequalities of wealth and power that exist within university-community relationships.

## CHAPTER 9 – COMMUNITY, PARTNERSHIPS AND HIERARCHIES OF POWER

### Introduction

It has long been believed that education is one of several arenas in which we can “reweave the fabric of our communities” (Putnam 2000:402). Reflecting the paradoxical and ambiguous tensions between altruism and self-interest in gift theory, Higher Education policies increasingly foster the view that volunteering is about both serving the community and providing a social education for young people (Ehrlich 1995:76; Brewis 2010:443).

During the second summer of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to spend time with students and staff from an American university who were visiting Durham as part of a ten-week summer engagement programme. After spending six weeks on placements with non-profit or voluntary organisations in their home state, the students had come to the UK to do the same thing with organisations already working with Experience Durham. The visit was described to me as a learning opportunity and a chance to participate in the community as “servant leaders”, as directed by the community, to improve and enrich their own lives and those of the people with whom they worked. I had a number of conversations with their Programme Director about volunteering, service, and the public role of Higher Education, and he repeated what is increasingly becoming a mantra for supporters of volunteering in Higher Education, generally and in the UK:

To be an engaged campus is of incredible value, for the student, for the university as a whole, and the community in which it resides  
*[Programme Director, visiting university]*

He went on to say that whilst some might look upon volunteering as “do-goodism” that has nothing to do with a university’s mandate of research, teaching and scholarship, one of the consistent narratives emerging from Higher Education institutions is the notion of engagement.

In this chapter, I move away from the rhetoric, norms and constraints encountered during individual and group volunteering experiences towards a more institutional focus that considers the way in which volunteering fits into a wider framework of public and community engagement, and how this might inform the relationship between Durham University and the surrounding region.

### **The Public Role of Higher Education**

Debates about the role of Higher Education are situated within the wider context of global economic, political and social challenges and rapid change (Goddard 2009:4). In a time of increasingly straightened financial circumstances, support and funding for Higher Education is often linked to a perceived awareness of and contribution to national interest and the public good (Furco 2010:376; Benneworth 2013:17), and at an institutional level there is frequently a high degree of dissonance between academic and external perceptions of the way in which Higher Education performs, or should perform, its civic role (Furco 2010:375; Collini 2012).

Collini (2012:86) reflects on the contemporary tensions between political and socio-economic needs, and the view that for many ‘the University’ represents a transcendence of such demands and pressures; far from being required to become closer to wider society, ‘the University’s’ responsibility to society is best served through withdrawal. He refers to this as “a protected space in which thoughts and ideas...can be pursued to the highest level” (Collini 2012:87) and which has remained an over-arching aspiration for many institutions in spite of the increasingly dominant discourses of employability and engagement. Increasingly, however, the wide-ranging and demanding expectations being placed on contemporary universities in relation to civic participation and public benefit contrast strongly with earlier ideals and aspirations; university-community engagement is increasingly regarded as a practical way of addressing social, economic and political agendas at regional, national and global levels (Williams and Cochrane 2013:67). Hence Collini (2012:x) reiterates Seabury’s (1975:x) argument of three decades ago: that universities cannot and should not be entirely detached from state or

society, even if this leads to issues of autonomy and tension over the extent to which they are expected to contribute to the welfare of society.

Universities have traditionally associated higher learning with moral and civic goals but the manifestation of these goals is often perceived as being more abstract than practical, focusing on an implicit relationship between core academic work and a wider social good rather than explicit engagement with public needs and community interests (Goddard 2009:6; Furco 2010:375-376). Furthermore, the demand for social responsibility is often juxtaposed with the need for research and scholarship, leading to a tension between academic, political and social expectations. Not all UK universities emphasise citizenship and civic responsibility in their core activities, choosing instead to focus on research, education and employability (Annette 2010:453), but recent years have seen an increase in the support and funding of volunteering programmes. UK initiatives such as the Beacons for Public Engagement (NCCPE 2010b), the funding for which ended in 2011, have sought to bridge the gap between universities and the wider community, fostering mutual respect and genuine partnership whilst embracing a social responsibility to help disadvantaged communities, often through outreach and volunteering (NCCPE 2010a; UUK 2010).

However, it has been suggested that whilst public engagement rhetoric appears to aspire towards mutually beneficial socio-economic partnerships between Higher Education institutions and the wider community, in the case of both engagement and volunteering some universities continue to focus on their own day-to-day concerns (Hartley et al. 2010:395) or to privilege functional motives and outcomes, regarding community partnerships as an opportunity to further their own interests (Annette 2010:459). Support for volunteering in Higher Education is thus closely related to university core activities and drivers, mediated by government policies privileging partnerships with industry, regional and global needs of the economy, and the revival of public engagement (Ehrlich 1995:94; Darwen and Rannard 2011).

## **Public Engagement, Community Engagement and Service**

There is a great deal of variation in the way that engagement is understood as a concept and how it is put into practice, at Durham University and in Higher Education more generally. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (Robinson et al. 2012) highlights the relationship between public engagement and the role that Higher Education plays – or should play – in the world; it links the academic role of universities with a corporate approach to social responsibility that extends beyond academia. Closer to home, a report on college engagement at Durham University asserts that “there can be no doubt that community engagement provides valuable experience for those who take part as well as being of considerable benefit to the community” (Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie 2010:2). I spoke with one senior manager about the University’s changing and developing approach to engagement. He told me that Durham University has always had departments and people who have been especially active and interested in public engagement, for various reasons. Social Sciences have a strong interest in Youth and Community courses, for example, and the University once had a tradition of offering intra-mural courses, teaching Masters Programmes to students from the local area. More recently, he said, the focus has moved towards sports volunteering and outreach, partly because of a shift in university policy and partly because of the personal interest and support of the current Dean of Experience Durham:

The University eventually woke up to its importance in terms of political position [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

What emerges from these various positions is that there are many ways of understanding public and community engagement (NCCPE 2009), all of which involve a different balance between social responsibility, self-interest and expediency. This has implications for the ways in which universities engage with wider society, and also for the relationship between community engagement and volunteering. Public engagement forms part of an increasingly dominant narrative, arguing that one of the roles of universities is to serve the wider needs of society, “bringing the outside world into the region, and the region into the outside world” (Russell 2011b) through the dissemination of knowledge and the formation of mutually beneficial relationships with other organisations and community groups. This is especially true in Durham, with its

large, influential and internationally diverse academic body. For some, public engagement is also referred to as community engagement with the terms being used interchangeably, but for others, community engagement is regarded as being closer to home than public engagement; that is to say, the relationships and mutual interests that a particular university has with the region in which it is situated (Russell 2011b).

Although this is not always the case, it is a useful distinction that helps to illustrate some of the different ideas about public and community engagement, and indicates that whilst a community engagement programme may incorporate volunteering, the two terms are not synonymous. Thus, the “Community and Place” section of the Durham University Strategy 2010-2020 (DU 2010a) incorporates international, regional and local public engagement, relationships with schools, community engagement and volunteering activities, in a way that closely reflects Goddard’s (2009:24) understanding of university engagement that encompasses the social, cultural and economic development and wellbeing of communities in a local and global context.

The drivers underlying university engagement initiatives, including volunteering, often reflect a need to make research socially relevant and useful; to widen access to Higher Education institutions (which is also linked to contemporary issues of tuition fees in the UK); to enhance student employability and skills; and to support policies of global internationalisation. With so much at stake, claims that engagement policies are driven largely by a sense of social responsibility should not perhaps be taken at face value and community initiatives should not be accepted unquestioningly as a ‘good thing’ for everyone (Russell 2011b). In addition to questions of terminology, there continues to be disagreement about whose needs and interests should be served by engagement and volunteering initiatives. Edwards et al. (2001:444) draws on Boyer’s (1990:65) recommendations for future Higher Education to reach beyond individual, academic learning, and to consider more widely applicable and socially relevant education within an academic framework that benefits students and community alike.

In spite of this, the role and priority of service as envisaged by Boyer's (1996:35) "scholarship of engagement" often appears to be inverted, primarily to benefit university goals of research and learning, and to enhance or broaden student experiences. There is a concern that motives and benefits focus too much on the student experience and the economic priorities of universities, even where this also translates into practical benefits to communities (Humphrey 2013:107). A similar problem is highlighted for staff volunteering schemes. Brewis (2004:20) comments that too great a focus on corporate interests may have a negative impact on participation, if staff members believe that insufficient attention is being paid to their own interests and values. However, whilst this concern opposes corporate and staff needs and interests, it fails to mention the importance of structuring volunteering activities around a community's needs and interests.

The pressing need to measure and evaluate a university's contribution to the community, where a significant element of that contribution is neither tangible nor financial, is closely linked to policies of engagement and volunteering. Related to this is the perceived need to address perceptions of academic 'ivory towers' and the view that universities are out of touch with contemporary and real-world concerns (Goddard 2009:14). However, a common problem encountered by academics seeking to engage with the community is that whilst believing in the value of their efforts, both to community organisations and the research and teaching agendas of universities, measuring and demonstrating that value is very difficult (Hart and Aumann 2013:48). Tensions exist between funding for university engagement programmes and the need for "immediate pay back", which is generally gained through the more lucrative drivers and core activities of teaching and research. Furthermore, the demands of funding bodies and university management for quantifiable, short-term outputs and evidence of impact (the economic bottom line) contrast with more qualitative but harder to define benefits that may only emerge over a longer period of time (Humphrey 2013:106).

There is a lack of empirical and rigorous evidence for the effectiveness of community-based initiatives and volunteer activities. Such evidence as there is tends to focus on student impact, and fails to take into consideration the benefit to 'off-campus'



communities and other stakeholders. This may be indicative of research and institutional priorities that privilege outcomes to students and Higher Education institutions, using communities as a means to an end to enhance volunteer experience and employability. University volunteer organisers should not lose sight of the fact that community organisations have needs; the focus should not purely be on the benefits to student and staff volunteers (Edwards et al. 2001:445-446, 460). This view is supported by both student and staff volunteers from Durham University, as well as people from the community organisations with whom they work, who state that reasons for volunteering are often very personal, and that volunteers are more interested in contributing their time to those organisations to which they have a link, rather than supporting the University's needs or goals.

### **A Commitment to Engage**

The inclusion of community engagement in university strategies is frequently driven by a combination of funding and policy requirements, with the potential use and value to institutions taking priority over the value to communities. However, this does not mean that community engagement and service will become, or be accepted as, integral to the core purposes of Higher Education, which are widely stated as teaching and research (Williams and Cochrane 2013:75). Although the “tripartite mission composed of research and discovery, teaching and education, and public service and outreach” (Furco 2010:380) is shared by many of the world's universities, most institutions weight these elements differently in accordance with the individual institution's focus and priorities, and usually privilege research and teaching over other activities.

Boyer (1990:15) refers to the combination of teaching, research and service in terms of “the myth and the reality of academic life”, in which service runs a poor third in the competition for value and support, and there is little integration of these three streams in the wider yet inflexible academic experience. Put another way, university commitment to community engagement “is more smoke than fire, more rhetoric than reality” (AASCU 2002:13). By situating teaching and service as emerging from research, he argues, there is not only an unequal division across what he perceives as three equally

important facets of education, but also an assumption of causative direction which misses the potential benefits that research and theory may gain from the more practical, service-oriented aspects of education. On a more practical level, the general public and members of Higher Education institutions may be more interested in dealing with real, day-to-day problems than with more abstract concepts of democracy and social justice, especially in times of social and economic difficulty (Hartley et al. 2010:395).

Robinson and Zass-Ogilvie's (2010) report on community engagement in the colleges of Durham University emphasises the importance attached to this type of activity, focusing especially on helping disadvantaged areas in the North East. The report's main aim was to gain a better understanding of the University's community engagement from a college perspective, focusing on activities taking place on the Durham City and Queen's campuses. Although the report was not primarily about volunteering, it makes brief reference to the University's staff and student volunteer organisations (SVO and SCA), although there is no mention of any independently organised volunteer activities undertaken within the University. The report was produced shortly before the publication of the Durham University Strategy 2010-2020 (DU 2010a), which identifies "Community and Place" as one of three key ideals embedded in the University's core activities of Research and Education. These ideals emphasise the importance of developing and nurturing mutually beneficial relationships between the University and the surrounding area, because "Durham University is shaped by the places in which we live, study and work" (DU 2010a:2). Volunteering and community engagement programmes also feature in Experience Durham's strategy (DU 2010b), which was designed to fit into the higher-level University Strategy (DU 2010a), but it has also been acknowledged by a university manager associated with engagement initiatives that the current situation emerged at least partly from a convenient set of economic and social circumstances:

[Although] they are committed to engage with their local communities and beyond...some of it was luck, some of it was planned [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

Taken at face value, these statements appear to challenge Goddard's (2009:20) assertion that university strategies rarely emphasise the relationship between a university and wider society. However, whilst it is a common staff opinion that the University's strategy is "all about what a wonderful thing volunteering is" [*Richard: College staff*], it is also common to follow this statement with the caveat that commitment to volunteering is not always apparent, either in everyday management decisions, the criteria by which students are selected for the University and its colleges, or the practical support offered for volunteering activities. For example, it was made clear to me by a senior manager associated with public engagement policy that the University's commitment to volunteering must not come at the expense of its primary focus on research excellence; it can only work where this commitment is not in conflict with the University's core drivers. He went on to clarify that the University's engagement agenda will not be defined in terms of local need; it is about how perceptions of need fit into the key drivers of research and education:

What we have to do is define ourselves around excellence in research and education, and then you look for the connections. And where there's a fit there's a conversation. But that means being very explicit about what you can't do and won't do, and therefore not raising expectations that you can't deliver on [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

This offers a very different perspective compared with the view that rather than service being a third and preferably equal arm of Higher Education – which is still far from the case in many, if not most, institutions – the ideal is to go a step further and place service at the centre of Higher Education, and have other aims fit into this overall service mission (Goddard 2009:4).

I asked some of the staff and students involved in volunteer organisation whether they were conscious of this caveat in the University's engagement strategy. Their understanding, they said, was that volunteering and outreach activities are useful to the University at the moment because they facilitate the demonstration of social responsibility and achievement of impact targets, in both industry (e.g. iVE 2012) and academia (REF 2014), although the activities themselves are not the main priority. As Bob asserted, from his perspective as researcher, academic and staff volunteer:

Behind the rhetoric of community engagement and partnership, the truth is, universities are busy from the top...dancing to the tune of REF<sup>13</sup> and all the rest of it [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

At the moment, I was told, Durham University is much more focused on research excellence, and it is not always clear how service fits in or for whose benefit it is supported. Nicola, for example, went on to explain that from her perspective as an Experience Durham staff member, things have moved very quickly and there has been a huge change in priorities within the Higher Education sector over the last couple of years. The initial enthusiasm and focus on community engagement, she said, is being taken over by other concerns. Nicola explained that although public engagement and community engagement are still highly thought of, key areas of interest are now internationalisation and the student funding regime, which in the University's eyes, are probably far bigger strategic priorities and with far bigger risks that need to be managed.

Another staff member went further, suggesting that volunteering is valued more for its positive effect on the University image and for enhancing student employability, than for its ability to address needs in the surrounding community:

I think they're pleased with the effects that [student volunteering] can have on the community because it is important, and I think it's good for the image of the University, but I think in terms of the University supporting volunteering, yeah, they're doing it to make their students employable and to give them skills and opportunities [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Although a senior manager from Experience Durham was adamant that the University Strategy (DU 2010a) seeks a balance between helping communities and supporting students, which is reflected in its commitment to and support of organised volunteering, one postgraduate I spoke to, who has volunteered within and outside the University as well as being deeply involved in his college's JCR, takes a different view:

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<sup>13</sup> The Research Excellence Framework (REF), completed in 2014, is – as its name suggests – concerned with excellence in research. One component of this in the latest iteration of research excellence assessment is impact, defined as “any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period” (REF 2011).

They're looking for league tables and I think they're looking for tick boxes, I think it's all quite superficial... I think the people who are actually involved, care; I think the people above, don't, to be blunt about it [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

New challenges facing UK Higher Education from the end of the twentieth century have resulted in increasing national and international interests, at the expense of both local relationships and the traditional social role of universities. More recently, tension has been growing between the continuing global aspirations of universities, and pressure to take a greater role in regional economic and social life (Williams and Cochrane 2013:68), and the suggestion of one academic that I spoke to is that this tension also highlights the status gap between different institutions. Those aspiring to a leading international position, he said, may feel that regional community involvement is best left to less ambitious or less successful institutions:

I think the view perhaps in the Higher Education sector as a whole is, we can leave that kind of more local connectedness to the others... down the League Tables of institutions, with perhaps stronger local roots [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

This suspicion is supported by a senior manager who explained that there has been a shift in focus over the last few years since the inception of Experience Durham:

There were people in the University Council who in that sense would have argued that we should be a regional university. No, no, no, no: we're a university in a region, but we're a national university and if we're good at being a national university then we can do stuff in the region with people in the region, that frankly Sunderland can't do... Now, if Sunderland wants to define itself around what, for want of a better term, people in Sunderland want it to do, that's fine but it's not for us [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Far from promoting a narrative of mutual benefit and partnership, this comparison of another university in the region unfavourably with Durham, and citing its focus on community interests and needs as a point of difference, reinforces the very reputation for elitism and distance that Durham University claims to be challenging. A number of students reinforced this suggestion even further, telling me that Durham University is often perceived as a "very southern" university with the implication that southern universities are regarded as both socially and academically 'better' and the only

difference for Durham is the accident of its geographical location. It was a student from Teesside who told me that:

I don't know, it's really hard to describe, but even though we are like, a northern university, we kind of, we have a southern standard [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

In a more explicit acknowledgement of international ambition, Durham University management considers volunteering and outreach projects, including those in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Jordan, to sit firmly within the framework of community engagement, and that their engagement remit therefore extends beyond the immediate region:

What has been important to stress is community doesn't equal local. Well, sorry, community may equal local but it doesn't necessarily equal North East [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Whilst the University's relationship with the region may now be secondary to its international ambitions, this was not always the case. There are those who clearly remember that:

If you go back many, many years, this University had much greater rootedness in the region [*Bob: University academic, staff volunteer*]

As I illustrate in the next section, however, past or contemporary claims about the University's local 'roots' have not always led to a close or cordial relationship with its local neighbours.

### **In the County but not of the County**

In spite of the increasingly popular belief that "universities should aim 'to be of and not just in the community'" (Humphrey 2013:103), some university managers are acutely aware that their support of volunteering and community engagement comes as a surprise to some people because historically, Durham University has been seen very much "as in the County but not of the County" [*Robert: Senior university manager*]. Similarly, in the early days of the Experience Durham programme, Durham University's commitment to community engagement and outreach was often questioned. One manager who has played a long-standing role in the development of sport volunteering at the University told me that people would say:

There's a castle on the hill in Durham, isn't that where you should be?  
And seriously, that's what we had to live down [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

It is not unusual to find tension between the University, other city institutions, and residents of Durham, as illustrated in recent local and university press articles (e.g. Lee and Ablett 2012; The Journal 2012; Northern Echo 2014). I found it interesting that one of the most frequent complaints I heard from police, residents, politicians and volunteer organisers focuses not on student behaviour or noise, although these problems were mentioned, but on the perception that neither Durham County Council nor the University are managing community cohesion in residential areas. There is a further perception that some senior university managers are often unaware of the local resentment towards them, unlike the students and volunteer staff I spoke with. They are fully aware that students are regarded as an imposition, and elicit hostility because of the effect their accommodation requirements have had on housing prices and availability:

The house prices in Durham are ridiculous and the primary reason for that is that the landlords can afford to buy them and rent them out for extortionate prices to students...if you go like, ten minutes out on a bus to one of the little villages, you realise there is quite a lot of deprivation in the North East, whereas Durham centre is actually quite well off because only the wealthy individuals and students can afford to live in the centre [*Robin: SCA staff*]

In spite of this, advocates of volunteering and community engagement from the University, Durham County Council and community organisations agree that although there have been problems, the University is trying to improve relationships with its neighbours. They told me that the biggest benefit of volunteering is to bring the University and the wider area closer together, reducing tensions and encouraging people to get to know each other:

If you know each other and understand each other better, then you don't end up having fights between the two [*Jenny: Postgraduate volunteer*]

This optimism was echoed in the view of one staff volunteer organiser that hostility between 'locals' and 'students' is unnecessary and avoidable, and also in the idea that

volunteering creates a positive community relationship, helping to offset the negative experiences that some residents may have had with loud or disruptive students. It shows people that “we’re not all hooligans” [*Jenny: Undergraduate volunteer*] and makes the University visible in a different way, demonstrating the value of students and showing that they are not just a nuisance. Whilst one student argued that volunteering also helps challenge what some regard as an unfair stereotype, it should not be forgotten that Durham University has a relatively high proportion of students from independent, fee paying schools (DU 2014e):

The students are there boosting the economy but straightaway they have these perceptions of students, particularly for Durham because it comes straight after Oxford and Cambridge, people think you’re a kind of, like a rich, Jack Wills-wearing person that blows money in the designer shops, you don’t support the local economy...yeah we do have some people here who are quite posh, they do come from privileged backgrounds, but we’ve also got people from every culture in the world and every background in the world and we’re all completely different people, and people do care about what’s going on [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

As a recent SCA staff member explained, students can completely take over the population, and whilst businesses may be happy about this, a lot of people find it “really annoying”. It may help to squash some of the stereotypes to see students:

Actually getting off their backside and doing stuff in the community  
[*Pippa: SCA staff*]

One police officer I spoke to said that it is necessary to go beyond support and encouragement for student volunteering; it is also important that the University helps students integrate into the city of Durham and the surrounding area, and part of that help is around setting standards and laying ground rules for behaviour:

I believe that the University and the individual colleges should set an example, should lead by example [*Philip: Durham Constabulary*]

In a similar vein, a staff volunteer told me that the University has a duty of care to integrate with the community, although volunteering forms only a relatively small part of that social inclusion and most people are probably unaware of the work that volunteers actually do. He suggested that such a lot of volunteering activity is unseen



and unheralded that people may appreciate the work being done, but remain oblivious of the University's role, which limits the opportunities for improving relationships:

You see a set of people out in their jeans, digging weeds up, and that's it unless the University publicises what's being done; you don't do it for the glory, you do it to get it done [*Greg: Staff volunteer*]

A degree of cynicism is not uncommon about the value of staff and particularly student volunteering, which may lead to resentment of their activities and a response of:

Who do these students think they are, coming into our community? [*Tim: Durham County Council*]

From the viewpoint of another police officer, the negative impact of Durham University and its students is restricted to a small and well-defined "footprint", whereas the positive impact of volunteering is far wider-reaching, although it does not necessarily benefit those people who, perhaps, need to have a better relationship with students. The example he gave was the difficulties faced by long-term Durham residents who have gradually seen their neighbourhoods become overtaken by students, so that term-time can feel like a never-ending round of parties whereas the vacations leave whole streets deserted. Students involved in volunteer and engagement activities argue that the University has made a positive impact on the surrounding area because of student volunteering and by making its facilities available for other people to use.

Unfortunately, the argument that Durham is better off having a university is sometimes presented in a manner that suggests a degree of arrogance and superiority that is very different to narratives of service or giving back to the community. One recent postgraduate put it this way:

The amount of jobs that they get through the University, be it as cleaners, be it as secretaries, be it as whatever, you know, there's just so many things that they would only have because of us [*Ellie: Postgraduate volunteer*]

Opinion is split over whether students are likely to feel obligated to, or emotionally invested in, the area that they often come to only in order to study. Some find it unlikely, but others observe that organising and working on volunteer projects has made

some students realise that whilst they may not be residents, they are more than just students at the University:

It is our community and it is important for us to somehow make that impact [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

And yet, as an SCA student organiser at Queen's Campus, Charlotte went on to recount a story suggesting that in Stockton, at least, many residents are unaware of the Durham University student volunteers and resent what they perceive as the University's lack of interest and respect for the wider community. The SCA volunteers at Queen's, said Charlotte, had heard about a stall in the indoor market that the University owned but did not use. They got permission to set up the stall one Saturday early in the academic year, in order to talk to people about what goes on in Stockton:

We found two things: first of all, that most people who came and spoke to us didn't have a clue and they were kind of, most people didn't even know the students were there because we're kind of just across the river...And then the other thing we realised as well was that the University had owned this little stall for, I'm not sure how long; they've never actually opened it...straightaway the guy next door said, 'we really struggle to get people to come into this indoor bit for the businesses. If we had another strong business there'...it's kind of building knock-on business for everyone else [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Not only was this "a bit of a bad representation of the University overall", Charlotte concluded, but it gave SCA an extra obstacle to overcome in their efforts to make a positive contribution.

### **Camelot and the Durham Bubble**

"It may sometimes be hard to imagine, but somehow students from affluent backgrounds and with limited experience engage successfully with people far less privileged than themselves" (Robinson and Hudson 2013:190). This statement was reflected by a number of people that I spoke to over the course of my own fieldwork, although it was generally applied to student rather than staff volunteers:

We're still distinct from the surrounding area; look where most of our students come from [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

It reinforces popular stereotypes of both Durham University and the surrounding region, but also appears to overlook a number of points: that so-called elite universities do have local students; that not all students are affluent; that not all volunteers are from affluent backgrounds; and finally that not all volunteer activities are necessarily for the benefit of so-called disadvantaged individuals or communities. At a charity where I recently started volunteering, for example, I was ‘buddied up’ with a volunteer who read Sociology at Durham University some years ago. She mentioned that it was very hard fitting in, being older and a single mum, as well as a local. In a slight twist to the usual stereotype, however, another student volunteer from Queen’s Campus told me:

I find it really difficult because I’m originally from Middlesbrough...my strong northern accent will be blaring out [but] as soon as I go, but I’m from Durham, even though I might be the most northern person you’ll ever meet, they immediately think, you’ve got a lot of money, you’re from a really privileged background, and I’m like, I’m from down the road from you [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

With the prevalence of such views, which are by no means limited to Durham University and the UK, it is understandable that Ehrlich (1995:77) argues that service in Higher Education should once again take a central role, in order to address perceptions of Higher Education as no more than “privileged enclaves” and factories to produce employable graduates.

Whilst failing to challenge such stereotypes of Durham students, a more positive approach I heard was that volunteering can bring privileged students together with young people who might not otherwise come into contact with the University, and they all then have the opportunity to learn from each other:

It’s mixing two worlds that wouldn’t normally collide [*Beth: College counsellor, staff volunteer*]

Unfortunately, another way of looking at this collision is that Durham University symbolises a dichotomy of wealth and hardship in the region that can lead to resentment and hostility:

You’ve got one of the wealthiest, most prestigious universities in the country [and] all the villages all around, incredibly poor, incredibly poor, economically deprived; it’s quite a combustible mix on a Friday and Saturday night [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

The former comment came from a keen staff volunteer and the latter from a police officer, which suggests that how students are perceived and the potential effects of privilege are highly contextual. The above comments also suggest that although volunteering is certainly an opportunity to make students, who may well be from a privileged background, aware of the inequalities and hardships that they might not otherwise expect to experience, it also reinforces the often cited “Durham Difference” that sets the University apart from the surrounding area.

Influential institutions that are involved in social, educational and economic organisation tend to be regarded as distant and separate, and people are often unaware or sceptical of their wider contributions to everyday life. Thus people will often see Durham University as:

An ivory tower institution. . . much as a lot of people will see Police Headquarters as an ivory tower institution, and City Hall [*Ben: Durham Constabulary*]

Some community organisations are keen to take any opportunity to help break down the real and perceived barriers that exist between the University and the surrounding region, but others may be wary of getting involved, because the University is regarded as something remote and separate to their daily lives. As one volunteer organiser said:

It’s something that’s there in a huge part of the city in which they live, but it’s unreachable [*Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

This view was echoed by the manager of a charity providing subsidised travel for community and voluntary organisations, who told me that there is a high degree of ignorance about what the University actually is:

This place is like Camelot to the people who live around it, you know [*Len: Transport manager, local organisation*]

That sense of distance and ignorance may stem at least partly from the tendency for university life to be very insular, especially in a collegiate system. Colleges offer a place of safety that some students may not always need or want to venture far away from, which is why escaping the “Durham Bubble” is often described as potentially beneficial for everyone. Charlotte is now a confident volunteer who travels round the region, but

said that she barely moved from her department and college for the whole of her first year:

I was quite content in my one little community there [*Charlotte: Undergraduate volunteer*]

Similarly, a recent graduate who got involved with SCA as a staff member was shocked to find out how few students venture outside Durham, even after three or four years, except for a short visit or holiday to established tourist areas. As a result, they have no idea what is in their own area. Her view is that students should know about where they are living for several years because they are using the facilities; the least they can do is to find out what the issues are and where help is needed. This is just one of the reasons she gave for why the University has a responsibility to the region, and why it needs to find a balance between what it takes and what it gives back. She was very clear that:

The University's plonked in the middle of a massive community and I think there is some responsibility for the University to kind of have some sort of impact [*Robin: SCA staff*]

The "Durham Bubble" is not just about location; it is also about perceptions of student privilege, and volunteering is often regarded as a useful way to pop that bubble. The opinion of another SCA staff member was that getting people out of that little community is useful:

Especially for somewhere like Durham [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

This opinion is shared by several volunteer organisers, one of whom observed that:

A lot of the students at Durham University seem to be quite privileged...and I think it does them no harm to actually, you know, see a bit of the real world [*Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

However, she went on to acknowledge that it is not just students who can live in a bubble, and told me how lovely it is for "the folks" who come to her organisation to have the opportunity to meet new people:

We were just laughing because we have a new student with us and she's from Dover, and people have been amazed...they've responded to Dover like it's the most exotic kind of place... 'cos sometimes people here have lived in the little Durham bubble [*Amy: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

Bauman (2001:57) uses the term “bubble” in a different way, to describe oases of privilege where selective, successful and influential groups exist in what he regards as “a community-free zone”. These zones are temporary, bland and convenient; a collective of “casually encountered and ‘irrelevant on demand’ individuals” whose interactions and dealings remain free of commitment, obligation or wider social bonds. Whilst Bauman’s viewpoint may be overly critical in relation to students’ enthusiasm and beneficial intentions, it fits quite comfortably within a wider set of arguments that question the motives for contemporary engagement policies in Higher Education. Hartley et al. (2010:396), for example, opposes academic and democratic epistemologies in which expertise is often characterised as existing in a privileged and socially-isolated ‘ivory tower’ and where the acquisition of knowledge is restricted to those with the requisite social, economic or educational background. They go on to observe that the relatively recent focus on civic engagement coincides with a period of increasing criticism of Higher Education, which has been perceived as shifting its goals away from the public good towards economic profit and individual interest (Hartley et al. 2010:400). Partnerships between universities and their local communities are increasingly regarded as just one opportunity to improve mutual understanding and challenge this perception of universities as ‘ivory towers’ (Squirrell 2009:3). To this end, one commonly cited role of universities is to form a bridge between surrounding communities, wider society, economic markets, and academia, with an inward focus through teaching and research, and an outward focus through participation (Annette 2010:453; Goddard 2009:4).

There is a suggestion that building or maintaining community links is considered especially important in some older, Russell Group institutions. One possible reason is that these institutions tend to have a large international or at least non-local student body and hence fewer community ties; another is that the perceived or actual gap between a university and the surrounding region leads to a greater degree of suspicion or resentment (Bussell and Forbes 2008:371). This is supported by the opinion of one police officer who works with a number of student and staff volunteers: the higher a university’s reputation, he suggested, the harder it must work to reduce the gap between the university and the wider community, to reduce scepticism of its motives and

perceptions of distance. Thus, the more Durham University can do the better, with research projects at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and bigger projects that directly benefit the North East or Durham and the surrounding area.

Related to this view is the common perception that institutions receiving public funding or other forms of financial support are obligated to act for the public benefit (Goddard 2009:4). In this light, student volunteering can be regarded as a form of bridge building that fosters local community relationships, which may also address perceptions of elitism and exclusivity (Darwen and Rannard 2011:183). However, whilst the idea of volunteering to help build bridges with the wider community was frequently mentioned during my fieldwork, it does not follow that the University's motives are always recognised as beneficial or selfless. Referring to the University's problematic reputation as a very selective institution, one postgraduate commented:

Traditionally, there's not a lot of northerners who come to Durham. I think they don't want it to look like it is 'us and them' and they're trying to build bridges [*Mark: Postgraduate volunteer*]

This more critical view, which returns yet again to the idea of a north-south divide, proposes that the University supports volunteering in order to manage and improve its local and regional image.

### **Partnerships in the Community**

In spite of its support for volunteering and the rhetoric of community engagement, a number of volunteer organisers and representatives of the region's Voluntary and Community Sector feel that it can be difficult for outsiders to "infiltrate" the University and even harder to retain its attention:

Even though you're working with the best interests of the University and the students at heart [*Len: Transport manager, local organisation*]

However, the exact nature of this perceived failure to engage varies. On the one hand, a member of Durham County Council is aware of the University's staff volunteering programme but has had limited contact with SVO in the last couple of years. On the other hand, the manager of a local volunteer centre explained that there is a perception

that SVO engages well with the community whereas SCA does not. She clarified that a lot of the work done by SCA volunteers is “really good stuff” but it is usually organised internally by the University, and there is an opportunity that is perhaps being missed for the students to become more involved with external groups:

They cut themselves off by saying we’re just going to do in-house stuff, so we’ve never got them on board [*Mary: Local volunteer coordinator*]

The explanation offered to me by a recent SCA staff member for this change in focus is that more in-house activities give students greater leadership experience, but in a safe, university-controlled environment. Nevertheless, the view of voluntary organisations is that this reduces the ability of SCA to get closer to the surrounding community:

It’s a real shame for groups in the city [*Mary: Local volunteer coordinator*]

Approaches to community action and development involve varying degrees of top-down power and bottom-up decision making abilities. Somerville (2002:40) situates voluntary work within the classification of “development for the community”, which may have a beneficial intent but the implication is still that there is a greater degree of power being operated on the community, compared with more democratic and participatory approaches. He goes on to cite the work of Gilchrist (2004:14), with its reference to an “underlying patronising ethos”, and suggests that recipients are judged as deserving or worthy of support in relation to criteria set by a more dominant group. The narratives of mutuality that are woven through the current Durham University Strategy (DU 2010a) would appear to challenge this approach, and managers who support and fund volunteering initiatives claim to work with community organisations as partners:

Almost by definition this will always be a partnership. It will always be with someone, not working on someone, which again somehow is something I’m very strongly insistent on. This is always working with so it has to be, you have to be working with people who want to work with you. You can’t just parachute [in] and say, here’s the answer [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Nevertheless, assumptions or claims of mutuality may overlook hidden forms of power and inequality. For example, a belief that the University has skills and expertise that community organisations can put to good use in a way that benefits both parties, may



actually perpetuate a situation whereby the ‘University’ is regarded as separate and superior to a lesser ‘community’. Implicit or explicit references to mutuality often seem to carry an unspoken assumption of equality and partnership, yet fail to articulate the ways in which benefits are actually mutual, and overlook the very real differences in wealth and influence that often exist between the University and other organisations.

A slightly different way of looking at community engagement that still highlights issues of power, unequal relationships and constraints is through Bauman’s (2001:33) idea of “engagement-through-domination”. He describes the period of the Industrial Revolution and the early development of a capitalist economy as “an era of engagement” in which the dynamics of labour and ownership, whilst unequal, resulted in bonds of mutual dependency between workers and capitalists. However, the dependency and ties of “engagement-through-domination” come at a cost. In contrast to narratives of mutuality and partnership, Bauman describes such relationships as sites of “perpetual conflict”, a description which should perhaps be taken into account when considering the wider contemporary relationships between the University and surrounding region that extend beyond volunteering activities. The combination of engagement and conflict can also be linked to ideas of the gift as both necessary and potentially destructive to relationships, through the complicated dynamics of gratitude and resentment which I have addressed in Chapter 6.

The relatively recent trend for promoting staff volunteering is described as “part of a move away from a traditional philanthropic model of corporate giving...towards a partnership model” (Brewis 2004:15). However, whilst language and rhetoric appear to describe a move away from unilateral charity and an unequal power dynamic, towards relationships of greater equality and mutual benefit, Brewis (2004:16) observes that beyond the current rhetoric of partnership, “few relationships between large firms and the voluntary and community sector can in fact be described in this way”. Applying this observation to Durham University, narratives of mutuality and partnership are often brought into doubt, not only by the experiences, motives and values of staff and student volunteers but by the statements of those very managers who developed the current strategy and policies of engagement. Almost every staff and student volunteer I spoke

with – even those who also talked about volunteering in terms of partnership – expressed a desire to help those in need, and understood that need in relation to the wealth and influence of the University, and in contrast to the varying levels of deprivation in the surrounding areas (Worthy and Gouldson 2010:37; Inequality Briefing 2014). In Durham, for example, there is a perception that levels of need grow as you get further away from the city, which is a problem when most volunteering is done closer to home:

Without people going a bit further out we're never going to meet the biggest need [*Pippa: SCA staff*]

Distance is unfortunately often a problem, especially for students, due to a lack of financial resources and transport. SCA were talking about getting a car for several years, and recently obtained a lease car, but there are still concerns about cost, storage and insurance. Someone I met from Durham County Council reinforced the perception that students tend to volunteer closer to where they live and study:

I would say if anything, you know, a greater benefit could be had, by broadening the geographical reach of where students are volunteering...it tends to be Durham Centre [*Tim: Durham County Council*]

Speaking about the projects run by Experience Durham, one manager simultaneously challenged the view that student volunteers do not venture far from the city, and continued the themes of deprivation and meeting a need in Teesside and Durham:

A lot of our projects actually are in Durham, with the outreach areas, the pit villages, and that way out towards Hartlepool...we've got our client groups that are not dissimilar from Teesside. They're just not on our doorstep [*Paul: Senior university manager*]

In spite of this, those volunteer organisations I contacted agree that Durham University members need to get out more and become more involved with local community groups, finding new areas of need. Some years ago, during the early days of the SVO programme, someone was brought in from a volunteering centre to help the University reach out to smaller groups:

I did some different stuff that perhaps the University hadn't thought about. So we had groups of staff volunteering; volunteers put together craft activities for a toddler group which has some just hilarious photos...a lecturer in astrophysics or whatever, cutting out giant octopuses or something [Mary: *Local volunteer coordinator*]

Mary went on to explain that getting involved with smaller voluntary groups and charities would help the University connect with the wider community, but they need to appear less intimidating because many “grass-roots groups” may not consider the University as a potential partner:

They could make it much less of a scary place for a lot of people to imagine...a lot of local groups that are run by really local people who maybe have had generations of miners or whatever who just don't have anything to do with the University [Mary: *Local volunteer coordinator*]

The desire to reach out to others is a frequently occurring theme, but even where there is a genuine commitment to making a difference and the best of intentions, sharing educational skills, interests and resources may unintentionally reinforce a sense of ‘otherness’ between the University and what one staff volunteer described as “the people out there” [Bee: *Staff volunteer, volunteer organiser*], who may otherwise have limited access to Higher Education opportunities. There are organisations that are not intimidated by the University and see themselves as being in an equal and reciprocal relationship, but this may well be because some of their volunteers hold positions in the University or other influential organisations.

For example, an academic at the University who is also on the Board of Trustees for a mental health centre takes the view that the University has many academic and sporting resources and facilities that it can share:

[We] are not frightened of the University – I think that's important – and see it as a potential resource in a way that other organisations might not...We're not seeking largesse from the University, far from it. The University get a lot from the relationship with us, that's how we see it [Bob: *University academic, staff volunteer*]

Other members of the same organisation are more diffident about the relationship, and there is an acceptance that, as much as the University may be willing share its resources and facilities, community groups may not necessarily be regarded as a priority:

I do realise, you know, that there's more calls on the University's time, and people paying nine grand a year want to have access to the gym; they don't want a community group doing it at the same time [*Stuart: Volunteer manager, local organisation*]

What this appears to illustrate is the prevalence of voices within a community, and the tendency to associate an individual's or group's status not only with different degrees of authority but the terms upon which relationships with a more powerful group will be negotiated (Jewkes and Murcott 1996:562). Furthermore, the complex and cross-cutting relationships existing between membership groups in the University and local voluntary organisations support the idea that individuals have different occupational and social affiliations, some of which become more dominant in particular contexts or situations and may be associated with either co-operation or conflict (Turner 1996:238-241, 273).

### **Mutual Partnership or Noblesse Oblige?**

The idea that “universities predominantly reflect and reinforce class and power” (Robinson and Hudson 2013:189) offers a stark contrast to more egalitarian narratives of partnership and mutuality. Frequently regarded as elite and privileged institutions, they are socially and industrially powerful with little room – at least traditionally – for the poor and disadvantaged, except as “objects of study” or the recipients of charity and patronage. No less feudal but perhaps more socially benevolent is the argument put forward by Bourdieu (1977:180), that the rich and powerful acquire much of their power from the community in which they live, and on whom they rely for support. In return, they are obligated to show generosity, support the poor and disadvantaged, and take the lead in community organisation. However, generosity is also associated with power and control, as Bourdieu (1977:195) illustrates with a Kabyle saying about the asymmetrical and constraining nature of reciprocity and obligation: “A gift which is not matched by a counter-gift creates a lasting bond, restricting the debtor's freedom and forcing him to adopt a peaceful, co-operative, prudent attitude”. A parallel to this situation might be that universities are frequently criticised by the public as being elitist,

exclusive and undeserving of public funding, especially in times of general economic hardship. Those same universities may seek to bridge the gap with the public, using time and resources to address local concerns and to share their facilities and skills. Whilst benefitting the public, it also constrains beneficiaries of the University's generosity from criticising the institution.

When invited to talk about official policies of volunteering and engagement, powerful institutions such as Durham County Council and the University tend to emphasise the importance of corporate social responsibility and being a good neighbour (e.g. County Durham Partnership 2011; DU 2013:5). However, acknowledgements that Durham University has a responsibility to engage with the area tend to be rooted in the obligations that emerge from wealth, rather than a desire to engage in a mutual relationship between equal partners. A staff volunteer from Queen's insisted that organisations in a position to help people get on in life, through education or work, have a duty to get involved wherever they can; a point also made by a senior manager responsible for supporting engagement activities:

[I] would argue quite strongly that the University, particularly here, for a university like this in a region like this, actually does have a responsibility [*Robert: Senior university manager*]

Local volunteer organisations agree. Referring specifically to the staff volunteering programme, a volunteer coordinator confirmed that university volunteering schemes are considered to be a good innovation but there is an opportunity to do much more, which resonates with the conclusions of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report about engaging with disadvantaged communities (Robinson et al. 2012). Although one enthusiastic staff volunteer suggested that the wealth and privilege obligating Durham University to engage with the region should not be understood purely in terms of money or influence, but through the qualities of energy and the talents of its students and staff, the majority of opinions expressed suggest that there is a fine line between the University having a social responsibility, and acting out of more traditional, class-based ideas of patronage and power.

This common sentiment resonates with the argument of Hartley et al. (2010:398) that attempts by some Higher Education institutions to participate in and support volunteering and engagement initiatives are driven by accusations of a lack of “democratic purpose”. Related charges of engaging in nothing more than public relations exercises or noblesse oblige suggest that claims of community participation mask what some perceive to be a perpetuation of academic expertise and superiority. Such arguments may well under-estimate the good intentions of many institutions, but a university’s “elite status” is often reinforced by the very activities that are meant to build bridges with other parts of society, through a display of wealth, facilities and resources that often focuses around sport, culture and the arts (Williams and Cochrane 2013:75). Whilst not denying the potential impact of such activities, this is nevertheless an illustration that university-community relationships are not necessarily those of mutual or equal partners.

## **Conclusion**

Hidden hierarchies of power are often embedded within socio-cultural, economic and political frameworks, which seek to reflect and perpetuate dominant values and interests by offering plausible and acceptable discourses. In this way, Parry’s (1986:453) emphasis on “*ideologies of reciprocity and non-reciprocity*” introduces elements of ‘truth’ and power to the idea of gift exchange: it is not just about different concepts of reciprocity, but about the discourses and power relations surrounding those concepts, that are used to convey a particular representation of the ‘truth’ about a society or social phenomenon.

Exploring volunteering within a gift framework that recognises the combination of mutuality, relationships and reciprocity, can in one way reflect what appears to be a rhetorical and linguistic shift from ‘volunteering’ to ‘community engagement’, and from philanthropy to a more equal partnership. However, whilst the popular trend towards terms such as engagement and partnership attempts to emphasise two-way or multi-way relationships in contrast to discourses of volunteering as hierarchical, elitist or patronising, this consequently tends to miss or suppress the very aspects of power,

inequality and obligation that are characteristic of both gift exchange and many community engagement relationships.

What I have suggested in this chapter, and Part III more generally, is that the normative expectations, institutional power, self-interest and moral responsibility that characterises the complex give and take nature of contemporary volunteer relationships complements the tensions inherent in reciprocal gift exchange: in each case, there is a delicate balance between the agency and self-interest that is often assumed to underpin ideas of individual selfhood, and a more collective interest in maintaining long-term relationships over time and in different personal, professional and institutional contexts. Finally, there is the underlying awareness, sometimes subtle but nevertheless present, that whilst those relationships may be mutual, they are rarely equal.

## CONCLUSION

### **Volunteering and Engagement in Higher Education**

Writing about the American university system, Boyer (1990:xii) repeats a widespread lament: “At no time in our history has the need been greater for connecting the work of the academy to the social and environmental challenges beyond the campus.” To do this effectively, he argues, Higher Education must extend its interests beyond academic research and teaching, and renew its links with the wider world through a better and more inclusive utilisation of its skills and resources. Similarly, contemporary researchers are increasingly studying volunteering in Higher Education within the context of community engagement (e.g. Furco 2010; Hartley et al. 2010). Such views complement the shift in focus towards socially relevant programmes that now form a key element of contemporary UK Higher Education policy (Edwards et al. 2001; Squirrell 2009; Furco 2010).

A growing trend in recent years has been to promote mutually beneficial partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors. In the context of Higher Education, this has led to an evolving and increasingly centralised relationship between staff and student volunteers, industry, universities, and their communities (Brewis 2011:3). This appears to be indicative of the growing political and institutional involvement in, and control of, volunteering and a trend towards using the rhetoric and practice of volunteering to support national, social and industrial priorities. The politically-motivated control of knowledge enables the production and re-production of socially constructed discourses that become accepted as natural, and are therefore less likely to be questioned or resisted (Foucault 1980:93-95). For example, representing contemporary ideologies of volunteering as increasingly normalised, as a route to employability, or for personal development, implies that current approaches are normal, lasting, and not the result of contemporary economic circumstances and dominant socio-political narratives. In a culture where volunteering is valued and increasingly expected, either morally or economically, it is a useful way to develop status and to



define or emphasise a particular role or position within the group: a combination of serving both self and others (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003:173).

It is in this context that my research has sought to explore some of the experiences and discourses of staff and students volunteering in Higher Education through the lens of reciprocal gift exchange. Over the course of approximately eighteen months, I set out to explore some of the experiences, perceptions and agendas of volunteering at one university in the North East of England. Focusing specifically on Durham University, I spoke to different individuals and groups about some of the socio-cultural, moral and academic influences that may affect the decision whether or not to volunteer or support volunteering, and how subsequent relationships have developed between staff and student volunteers, organisations and institutions that they work with, and the University. I wanted to find out whether and how these volunteering experiences, narratives and relationships are informed by different social norms, discourses and ideologies about morality, altruism and self-interest. At the institutional level, I was interested in how the apparent gap between the rhetoric and the realities of volunteering experiences and policies becomes apparent through the different and sometimes conflicting language and narratives of volunteering at Durham University.

Results suggest that at a management level, Durham University represents staff and student volunteering as the 'natural' thing to do, as a route to employability and personal development. It is increasingly accepted that volunteering benefits both giver and receiver, and that self-interest is not incompatible with 'doing the right thing'. However, there are also concerns in some quarters that focusing on volunteering as a vehicle for finding a job, as part of the curriculum, to meet targets, or to improve the University's image, has a negative impact on activities and organisations that do not fit dominant discourses or the needs of volunteers. This is not to deny the value of volunteering as a route to personal and professional development, especially in a difficult economic climate. Nevertheless, some values, motivations and outcomes of volunteering do not appear to reflect what is becoming an increasingly dominant narrative of 'employability'.

By exploring the unequal and sometimes difficult relationships between a wealthy institution and other organisations in a relatively deprived area, I have also touched upon: how volunteering fits into different popular and academic ideas about the public role of Higher Education; the sometimes problematic relationship between the University and the region in which it is situated; and finally, how volunteering fits in to some of the expectations and stereotypes that are associated, fairly or not, with Durham University. Volunteering is described in terms of bridge building, or addressing perceptions of elitism and exclusivity. Nevertheless, despite narratives of partnership and mutuality, the University is also described as distant, privileged and separate from the community in which many of its staff and students live and work, suggesting that university-community relationships are not necessarily those of mutual or equal partners.

### **Understanding Grounded Experiences of Volunteering through the Lens of Gift Exchange**

The lens of gift exchange offers a useful way to highlight, unpack and explore elements and paradoxes of volunteering in such a way as to recognise and value both the positive and Booth et al.'s (2009) so-called 'dark' side of volunteering and community, rather than overlooking aspects of volunteering that do not fit comfortably within a particular ideological or epistemological framework. The concept of gift exchange is useful for exploring the give and take of community engagement and participation, including volunteering. It also illustrates some of the potential issues of power, inequality and social norms, and how far these structural and institutional constraints shape our actions and decisions.

My ethnographic encounters with staff and student volunteers, institutions, volunteer managers, and organisations external to Durham University, indicate that contemporary volunteering is associated with ideas about responsibility, social cohesion, community, partnership, and a rather vague notion of 'giving something back'. However, both students and staff also emphasise the importance of individual employability and success, personal development, and awareness of an increasing pressure or even

requirement for individuals to volunteer. Where staff and organisers talk about volunteering in order to fulfil a requirement in annual staff appraisals, for example, there is an implication that failure to comply may carry negative consequences, although nobody I spoke to had actually found this to be the case. Equally, whilst some students talked about the perceived need to volunteer in order to compete in a highly volatile employment market, the situation is far more complex and the link between volunteering and employment can be both tenuous and inconsistent. There is a widespread acceptance across all the groups involved in my research that altruism and self-interest are not incompatible in the spheres of giving and volunteering. Nevertheless, I noticed a difference in attitude between senior university managers and many of those involved in volunteering activities or organisation, about the socio-economic role and importance of volunteering in relation to the interests and priorities of the University. There is frequently an implied or explicit criticism where the University is perceived to privilege its own priorities and needs over those of the surrounding area, or where it is seen to promote volunteering in order to enhance its status, image or competitive position, in spite of couching volunteering policies in the language of responsibility and partnership. However, it could also be argued that such a stance is entirely understandable in the context of the increasing pressure that is placed on universities to be self-sustaining and economically successful.

What these divergent opinions illustrate is that firstly, meanings and representations of volunteering vary within and between groups and that secondly, personal, social and intellectual reflexivity and preconceptions are likely to inform the way in which motives and behaviour of both individuals and institutions are interpreted and judged. This is just as true for researchers as it is for research participants, and reinforces how important it is to be aware that data are filtered through multiple life experiences and world views.

## **Rhetoric and Realities of Volunteering**

Meanings and explanations for volunteering change over time and between societies, reflecting particular socio-economic and political circumstances. Interpretation also depends on agendas linked to rhetoric, ideology, attitudes to giving, and power. It is common to find a gap between top-level strategic policies and lower level operational plans and activities (Humphrey 2013:107). Political and economic imperatives form an integral part of contemporary volunteering: through the increasing dependence of volunteer organisations on institutional or external funding; through the waxing and waning influence of opposing ideologies which – in combination with social and economic constraints – impact both the policy decisions and direction of voluntary activity; through rhetoric about the contribution volunteering should or does make to the social role of public Higher Education; and finally, in the ways that social policy and financial expedience inform the balance between instrumentalism and moral imperative, when deciding whether or not to volunteer. In relation to the links between altruism and instrumentalism, Bourdieu's understanding of the gift as "political" (Schrift 1997:15) can usefully be applied to volunteering: it is not just about whether or not "generosity and disinterestedness are possible", argues Schrift, but also what is necessary to achieve this state and ensure that people have an interest or reason to be generous, within the wider social context beyond immediate personal self-interest.

The 'reality' of volunteering as experienced by individuals and groups at Durham University, and those organisations with whom they interact, changes in response to the ebb and flow of internal and external influences, priorities, interests and goals. Partnerships develop between groups where particular conditions and circumstances converge; goals may be more effectively achieved through some form of cooperation, although not necessarily between equals. However, as conditions and circumstances change, so do those relationships. In each case, volunteering will be differently understood, valued, promoted, supported and experienced.

One of the effects of rhetoric is to privilege dominant narratives and constructions of volunteering at the expense of others, especially when it emerges from a position of

power or authority. Looked at from an interpretive, qualitative and critical viewpoint that recognises the existence of multiple, situated and changing social realities, which are constructed and re-constructed from different events, histories and narratives, the idea of a gap between rhetoric and reality becomes more problematic in several ways: firstly by implying the existence of a single reality to which rhetoric is opposed; secondly, by legitimating one type of (non-rhetorical) reality over another and overlooking the complexities and contradictions that may exist within multiple and changing realities and perceptions. What emerged from my own research was that far from presenting a coherent and inclusive narrative of volunteering, there is both diversity and disagreement with regard to types of volunteering, motives, meanings and uses of the term 'volunteer' at Durham University. Furthermore, there is far greater complexity and inter-group tension within the University surrounding volunteer activities, organisations and management than is apparent at first glance or based on official publications and websites.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Implications**

### ***Gift Exchange***

Using a framework of gift exchange has enabled me to explore issues of obligation, social expectation and the effects of unequal power relations that are often ignored or under-estimated, both in volunteer literature and theories of community. It has also allowed me to address some of the inconsistencies and paradoxes surrounding questions of altruism and self-interest that emerged in accounts of staff and student volunteering motives and experiences, not to mention management volunteering policies.

Researching the gift in contemporary, capitalist societies, where “the habit of giving and its associated ideas of generosity seem to run at odds with ideologies sustaining capital accumulation” (Sykes 2005:2), offers a useful illustration of how the gift is understood as universal, yet also culturally specific and inconsistent in its effects. For example, Sykes (2005:2-3) repeats the question asked by Mauss (1990), about why people feel obligated to give back what they receive, but she goes on to ask why this obligation is

stronger in some people than others, even where they come from similar cultures and backgrounds, and are surrounded by similar normative influences. Similarly, I have found that differences in how volunteering is understood and valued exist within as well as between cultures, and are informed by background, upbringing, and the different types of activities that people become involved in. Furthermore, the same volunteer activities are often valued differently across groups and cultures, and over time; such variations are commonly linked to social and political ideologies, religious beliefs, and also the perceived needs and interests of both volunteers and those they seek to help (Wilson 2000:219). Perceptions about what staff and student volunteering in Higher Education is – or what it should be – are also shaped by multiple and conflicting experiences, beliefs and values that serve to reinforce the difference between what Jewkes and Murcott (1996:556) call ‘ideological’ and ‘descriptive’ views of volunteering.

The difference between descriptive and ideological, or normative, ways of understanding the gift, in itself and in relation to other forms of exchange and circulation, affects epistemological and methodological elements of research (Komter 2005:18). Anthropology considers both the descriptive and the normative, and takes a more holistic approach compared with other disciplines in terms of seeking to understand ways of being and what it means to be human as a “totality of human experience” (Sykes 2005:1), which also reflects a Maussian approach to the gift. The implications for anthropology are that by exploring the gift economy as part of a wider social whole, Mauss demonstrated the value of and the need to explore societies and institutions in their totality. This differs from anthropological approaches which identify, catalogue and document aspects of society and social phenomena in isolation (Douglas 1990:xix).

### *Volunteering in the Community*

Gift exchange has been described as playing a central role in the construction and negotiation of personal identity, informing the norms and experiences of social interaction, hierarchy, and selfhood (Yan 1996:14). It has also been said that the gift “establishes or confirms a relationship between people [as] a kind of cornerstone of society” (Sykes 2005:1), which closely reflects the description in Chapter 1 of volunteering as “social glue” (Kearney 2003:45). These individual and social aspects of the gift and of volunteering have emerged throughout my research in relation to motives, experiences and discourses of volunteering activities.

Whilst volunteering takes place for many reasons, and is not synonymous with community engagement, Robinson et al. (2012:3) cites staff and student volunteering as a key way in which universities can make a “contribution to the local community”. This is the same message that emerged from many of my fieldwork encounters, although opinions varied in relation to individual and institutional motives, and the extent to which the University’s contribution to communities and groups in the area is either recognised or valued. My findings support the view that ‘community’ is a problematic concept, and that ways of understanding it shift as a part of wider debates, especially in sociology and anthropology (Cohen 2002:165). Meanings and uses of community change in relation to social, political and economic perspectives, and over time, as well as varying in accordance with individual and academic interpretations (Delanty 2003:1). Furthermore, in agreement with Somerville (2011:51), I have found that whilst the use of terms such as ‘partnership’, ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ are common rhetorical devices that are used to describe and justify particular approaches to community, on closer examination such terms go beyond description and often reveal the ideological or interest-driven motives of those supporting community engagement activities.

### *Methods and Voices*

A central notion within “the ideology of community” is that a group or an institution may be represented by certain individuals (Jewkes and Murcott 1996:561). This can in turn lead to assumptions of coherence and consensus that should be treated with caution, since they can mask differences of opinion and power relations within groups whose dynamics, values and interests are themselves constantly changing. One way to reduce such assumptions is to select research methods that enable the gathering, analysis and interpretation of data in a manner that acknowledges the multiple voices of individual research participants (Schweizer 2000:76-77), whilst at the same time seeking to minimise the imposition of outside interpretations that privilege dominant theories or particular cultural values. By combining ethnography with a bottom-up grounded approach and top-down discourse analysis, I was able to analyse data from different perspectives and interrogate the effects of social relationships, normative expectations and power within different volunteering contexts. In this way, I demonstrated how differences in perspective, research method and interpretation are informed by, and also inform, understandings of wider social, economic and ideological concepts (Komter 1996:3).

As a final comment on method, I have now experienced for myself, through the different stages of fieldwork and during my engagement with volunteers in and around Durham University, that research can never be entirely detached from the researcher. Reflexivity is not unique to fieldworkers but they turn “this normal strategy of reflective persons into a successful research strategy” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:227). When selecting research topics and methodology, or defining, capturing and interpreting data, it is crucial to remember that the researcher is socially, historically and intellectually situated. Another way of putting it is that “ethnographers help to construct the observations that become their data” (Davies 1999:5) with their own experiences and preconceptions, how they shape the design and execution of their research, and through relationships that they have with their research participants. In my case, the voluntary roles that I took on and the friendships that emerged during my fieldwork, both within and beyond the University, resulted in a far deeper level of closeness and trust with some research participants than I might have otherwise achieved with more superficial



or short-lived relationships. However, this same closeness made it harder on occasion to retain a critical awareness of both the field site and my research participants.

Furthermore, as I have addressed in the next section, my own social and volunteer networks certainly offered a useful way to identify participants but this also had the effect of limiting my own experiences, as well as my awareness of the experiences and perspectives of others.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

It has been said that “every framework tends to conceive the world in its own terms” (Schweizer 2000:43), and that ethnographies are no more than interpretations of ‘social reality’ (Geertz 1973:15-16). Ethnographic studies are not intended to be widely representative, and consequently my results offer an inter-subjective account of certain groups within one Higher Education institution, based on the experiences and viewpoints of different research participants. Similarly, the categories and themes produced using a grounded theory approach, however credible and rooted in raw participant data, apply only to a limited sample and field, offering a partial representation of ‘reality’ in a particular time and place (Glaser and Strauss 1967:225).

Although the ethnographic nature of my research, with its focus on volunteering at a single university, limits the extent to which my conclusions can be generalised to other institutions, I have nevertheless illustrated the complex and situated nature of both volunteering and the gift, insights which I feel have a wider applicability and relevance. Rather than attempting to make inappropriate generalisations, future research could potentially expand my sample and field site to include staff and student volunteering at each of the five universities in the North East of England in one larger study. Described in the Introduction to this thesis as a distinctive regional group, the universities are all situated within a deprived geographic area but each has very different aspirations and interests. Future research that uses a similar approach to the one I have taken here and asks the same questions, would offer the opportunity to compare and contrast the effect of social, economic and demographic differences and similarities between institutions, on volunteering experiences, values and policies.

Social relationships and networks play a significant role in both gift exchange and volunteering, offering opportunities for partnership and involvement. However, they also have the potential to constrain or even prevent other opportunities. Following my own developing network of contacts during the fieldwork stage of my research, for example, sent me down one particular path, along which I experienced a number of different realities of volunteering at Durham University, but will also have missed many more based on the experiences of other volunteers that I did not meet. The nature of both research data and volunteering experiences varies in relation to how networks and relationships develop, in such a way that a small change early on might have produced a very different picture of volunteering at Durham University. My personal experiences and encounters were therefore situated, contextual and partial, yet they revealed patterns and relationships that could be further investigated or compared with experiences emerging from alternative paths or networks during future research.

The diversity and contradictions that I encountered within and between groups of staff, students, university managers and community partners, illustrate that in spite of the many common themes emerging about experiences and values of giving and volunteering, the effects of social mechanisms of control that are associated with the gift remain inconsistent and are mediated amongst other things by occupational status, wealth, connections, and socio-cultural background. This suggests potential areas of future research into staff volunteering in Higher Education. Just as some researchers are interested in exploring the negative aspects of gift exchange, Booth et al. (2009:244) suggests future avenues of research that investigate the possible “dark side” to formal programmes of staff volunteering: in particular, the effects of fear, job insecurity and power differentials on volunteer motivations and experiences. This resonates with comments from both academic and administrative staff about the relationship between a perceived need to volunteer and the precarious nature of the employment market. It also suggests an interesting juxtaposition with other comments about barriers and a lack of access to staff volunteering programmes, based on occupational status and power differentials.

Finally, although personal histories and stories are often criticised by those supporting a more structured research approach as being anecdotal and unreliable, I have found them to be a useful resource for questioning dominant narratives that tend to overlook or deny the value of individual experiences. Stories that challenge the status quo reinforce the diversity of volunteering experiences, turning a spotlight on perspectives that privilege consensus and the power of dominant social or intellectual discourses.

### **Recommendations**

Just as one should take care when generalising about the data and conclusions emerging from ethnographic or grounded research, recommendations should also be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the findings and themes around which this thesis is structured suggest a number of points to consider in relation to volunteering policies and experiences associated with Durham University. Perceptions and criticisms voiced by research participants do not reflect the view of all stakeholders; nevertheless, the following section presents areas which would benefit from further exploration or clarification, in order to address concerns or to clear up misunderstandings.

University managers that I spoke with told me that recent volunteering policy has focused on providing an infrastructure that makes more effective use of limited resources, from within centralised volunteering organisations, and that seeks to offer benefits for the University, students, staff, and the wider community. However, concerns have been voiced by staff and student volunteers as well as local volunteer organisers about a perceived mismatch between the University's volunteering rhetoric and its actual commitment, in relation to management decisions, practical organisation and support, uneven academic scheduling, and unequal relationships with volunteers and organisations within and beyond the University.

### ***Communication and Recruitment***

The ways in which different stakeholders regard ‘volunteering’ as both a positive and negative term is a problem for those seeking to design consistent advertising and recruitment messages. Whilst there has been some informal discussion about replacing ‘volunteering’ with what some staff and student organisers regard as more popular or inclusive terms such as ‘projects’ or ‘outreach’, there is a danger that this might alienate as many people as it attracts. Care should also be taken not to make the assumption that volunteers have a similar worldview or way of valuing what they do, which misses the diversity that has become apparent through narratives about motives, interests and commitment.

The incorrect belief held by some students that missing a visit to the SCA stall at Freshers Fair means missing the opportunity to join SCA altogether may be reinforced by subsequent emails about their volunteering activities being sent only to those who have signed up to SCA. Ironically, staff and students also express their frustration about they describe as excessive levels of volunteering information provided in other emails and newsletters, especially at the start of the academic year; the result is often that potentially interesting opportunities are missed or ignored. A re-evaluation of how promotional emails and activity updates are worded and circulated, and how people respond to their content, would help staff and student organisers refine the way in which current and potential volunteers are targeted, and potentially improve their understanding of the values, activities and outcomes that motivate different people.

Questions of recruitment and motivation are inextricably linked, and it should be remembered that the motives of staff and student volunteers, as well as their choice of cause, are often very personal and not necessarily about serving the University’s priorities and interests. Hence there is a need to know that volunteers want and why, and what they are (or are not) willing and able to do. Local organisations and volunteers that I spoke with question the University’s ability and commitment in this area.

### *Autonomy and Control*

As with discussions of gift and community theory (Bauman 2001:4), tensions between university management and the student body can be explained at least in part by different ways of responding to the trade-off between security and independence. One major source of tension has been the growing centralisation of volunteering and community engagement activities, and the effect this may have on the autonomy of student-led and DSU organisations. In the case of Experience Durham, for example, managers and staff organisers argue that they offer support, funding and advice but that they do not seek to control or limit student autonomy, and that suspicion or hostility is therefore unwarranted. However, based on the experiences and comments of both staff and students, there is also a perception that university staff and volunteer organisers have doubts about student abilities, commitment and reliability; and that students need support and protection. Student volunteers respond that this view is patronising, and under-estimates what students are willing and able to do. They argue that there is a need to listen to, respect and consult students, especially in activities where they are closely involved with and knowledgeable about an activity or programme. A balance is needed between maintaining the safety of all volunteers, protecting the University's reputation and establishing clear areas of responsibility on the one hand, and appreciating the benefits of student-led organisations on the other, particularly where their activities contribute to the development of networks, leadership skills and an ethic of service.

### *Use of Resources*

There is a degree of confusion surrounding SVO's offer of up to five days a year for staff to volunteer in working time. This is often incorrectly assumed by staff and managers alike to be a right, rather than a provision which depends on Line Manager's approval and impact on departmental operations. Even where staff are able to volunteer for all five days, however, managers from external charities and voluntary organisations comment that this can be of limited use because many organisations need regular, long-term help. In addition to reminding staff volunteers and university managers of SVO policy details, including a clarification of what is meant by operational constraints, it may be beneficial for SVO to take a more proactive approach to matching up individual volunteers with particular activities and organisational needs. However, as one manager

acknowledged, this would require greater resources than are currently available; as with advertising and measuring the effect of volunteering, it is necessary to offset potential benefits against time and cost.

### *Unequal Access*

The common questions of whether or not volunteering is freely undertaken or ended, and the degree to which it can or should be altruistic, obscures the issue that for some students and staff, there are a number of barriers that prevent them from volunteering in the first place. These include the need for paid work; professional and study commitments; and looking after a family. It is important that the University and its colleges recognise firstly, that economic, domestic and academic circumstances inform peoples' abilities to both take on and refuse unpaid activities; and secondly, that making too many demands on volunteers can have a negative effect on their paid or academic work, personal lives, and the goodwill that encourages future involvement.

The difficulties experienced by SVO when attempting to engage with some staff are due to a number of reasons, including lack of staff interest, poor communication, and discouragement by managers. Unequal levels of support for, and involvement in, staff volunteering appear across faculties and departments. Whilst the SVO policy theoretically applies equally to all staff members, I was told by several staff volunteers and managers that it is unusual for volunteering requests to be received by or supported for catering and cleaning staff. There is therefore a good argument to investigate the possible correlation between volunteering, power and occupational status (Wilson 2000:221). It is likely that opportunities for staff members to volunteer, either as individuals or as part of a Team Challenge, are constrained by different degrees of autonomy and flexibility that are associated with status, rather than operational requirements. Consequently, volunteer policies and recruiting strategies may be missing or ignoring a significant group of potential participants.

### ***Effective Engagement***

Research participants have said that staff and student volunteers have the potential to make a real difference in the area; but also that they lack a widespread presence beyond the University. Even within the University, there is limited awareness of Experience Durham, or its relationship with SCA and SVO; an appreciation of what any of these organisations do often fails to extend far beyond the individuals and groups who are involved, or who benefit from volunteer activities. The University may wish to establish whether an awareness of staff and student volunteering, as well as the dissemination of its wider engagement activities, is reaching the right individuals and groups. In particular, are the people benefiting from volunteering and engagement programmes the same as those who have expressed concerns about their relationship with the University? Lastly, a review of how the University engages in the long-term with other organisations and groups in the surrounding area would be a useful first step in responding to comments from some local volunteer organisers that it can be difficult to attract and retain the University's attention. Rather than focusing on individuals and organisations who find it relatively easy to interact with the University, there may be longer-term benefits in working more closely with those who in the past have felt intimidated, patronised or burdened by gratitude.

### **Final Thoughts - Gifts, Virtues or Obligations?**

Researching a selection of staff and student volunteering experiences, policies and rhetoric at Durham University has provided one particular example of how we exist within a set of shared structures and constraints, yet at the same time negotiate our existence and identities in relation to different socio-cultural, political, religious and economic values, individual experiences, circumstances and life histories.

Consequently, interpretations of social expectations and ideas about morality or responsibility tend to be highly subjective and contextual, illustrating the culturally and socially specific nature and changing manifestations of a universally recognised social phenomenon such as the gift.

I started this thesis by writing about perceptions of social cohesion, obligation and community in a rapidly changing world, attitudes to civic participation, and the public role of UK Higher Education. By situating volunteering in this wider context and exploring it through the lens of gift exchange, I asked a series of questions that could be summarised in the following manner: should staff and student volunteering in Higher Education be regarded as a gift to others, a sign of virtue or a social obligation?

My fieldwork encounters and interviews with research participants about their experiences of volunteering have supported each of these descriptions to varying degrees, during different circumstances and life stages. For most of the staff and students I spoke to, volunteering at Durham University involves a combination of all three. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, the traditional divide between altruism and self-interest is transcended in a manner not dissimilar to the tensions and paradoxes found within reciprocal gift theory, and it was unusual to find a volunteer who did not place as much value on personal development and enjoyment – rather than material gain – as they did on social obligation. In this way, what Aristotle (2004:176) described as the moral actions of the “self-lover” might perhaps be better described in the words of Somerset Maugham (1931:221): “It is pleasure that lurks in the practice of every one of your virtues. Man [sic] performs actions because they are good for him, and when they are good for other people as well they are thought virtuous”.



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