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Mé féin nó an pobal: Social processes and connectivity in Irish volunteering

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Abstract

Ireland has a longstanding history of diverse volunteer action (Volunteering Ireland, 2010a). Ireland's current economic recession has impacted on the community and voluntary sector, with frequent contraction in staff numbers and incomes, and increasing reliance on volunteer participation (Harvey, 2012). This study utilised social capital theory to garner a phenomenological understanding of the contribution of volunteering to perceived social capital amongst Irish volunteers and host organisation representatives. A convenience sample of 28 participants (17 volunteers and 11 organisation representatives) was interviewed. A shift in personal and social definitions of volunteering were described, with informal volunteering increasingly replaced by structured, formalized and regulated volunteer placements. Volunteers described their experiences as contributing to increased personal well being and sense of purpose, development of friendships and meeting new people. The volunteer participants identified volunteering activity as a specified community need, providing work related experiences, fulfillment in free time and opportunity for up-skilling. Integration of volunteers into the organisation's workforce was described as dependent on duration, intensity of interaction and scope of volunteer contributions. Power differentials and a lack of trust between volunteers and staff, was described, as was a lack of volunteer recognition staff. Subsequently, some volunteers identified and aligned themselves within the wider social volunteer network rather than their host organisation. The research reflected an emergent consumerist approach to volunteering and underscores the need to preserve informal social networks of community volunteers, alongside the development of more formalized work specific routes for volunteering in Ireland.

Keywords: Volunteering, social capital, social connectivity, community.

Introduction

Ireland has a longstanding tradition of contributing to the common good (Volunteering Ireland, 2010a). A strong surge of voluntary activity grounded in social solidarity and cultural nationalism was witnessed in the late nineteenth century, for example, Conradh na Gaeilge, Muintir na Tíre and the Gaelic Athletic Association (National Committee on Volunteering, 2002). Payment for community development work, predominantly in urban areas, emerged in Ireland in the 1960s with later support from the Irish state and European Union. The Irish '*volunteering infrastructure*' began to gain ground in the late 1990s, with the formation of the Volunteer Resource Centre (later known as Volunteer Ireland), which

aimed to improve active citizenship, social capital and social entrepreneurship. The *Supporting voluntary activity* white paper on a framework for supporting voluntary activity and developing the relationship between the State, community and voluntary sector was published in 2000 (Government of Ireland, 2000). The current social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* proposes relations between the state and the community/voluntary sector to include formal recognition of volunteer contribution to civic engagement and participative democracy, the designation of voluntary activity units in relevant government departments, development of consultative mechanisms, allocation of funding, regular policy fora and government commitment to implement key actions.

Current levels of volunteering in Ireland

Current volunteer levels in Ireland are unknown. Figures from the Irish National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) published in 2003 report volunteering levels of approximately 20% of the general population, with participation higher among older individuals (40-64 years), those with higher education attainment and among those of higher socio-economic status (NESF, 2003). Those performing house duties, disabled or ill were less likely to volunteer. Statistics published by the Central Statistic Office (CSO) in 2008 showed that the most common volunteer activity was 'charitable work'. Volunteer participation was reported by 16.4% of the adult population and, similar to the NESF (2003) findings, was more common amongst older cohorts (45-54 years) (CSO, 2008). The Taskforce on Active Citizenship in 2007 also reports that national volunteering rates in Ireland are on the increase.

Volunteer participation

The definition of volunteering remains contested (Harris, 2000; Lukka and Ellis, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2003). It is essentially an activity engaged in with free choice, which does not involve remuneration and benefits those beyond an individual's immediate family network (Zappala, 2000; Brooks, 2005). Definitions of volunteering vary culturally in terms of level of participatory activity and dimensions of 'net cost' to the volunteer (Handy *et al.*, 2000; Meijis *et al.*, 2003). Research has explored a continuum of volunteering ranging from participation in service delivery in 'liberal or welfare partnership models' to 'advocacy or leisure' type activity in social democratic models (Lester *et al.*, 2004; Stevens, 2011). It can occur within statutory, voluntary and community sectors (Low *et al.*, 2007; Rochester *et al.*, 2010). Volunteering can be classified as 'formal', taking place within identified groups or organisations, or 'informal' taking place between individuals (Lukka and Ellis, 2001; Sixsmith *et al.*, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2003; Volunteering Ireland, 2010a; Hill, 2011; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Of interest is that Irish community and voluntary sectors have developed historically to deliver activities and services which in other countries are the sole responsibility of the state (Volunteering Ireland, 2010b). Previous Irish reports dedicated to active citizenship have restricted their focus to civic participation and formal volunteering/community involvement, and have observed that the valuation of volunteering participation in recent times has changed from philanthropy to reciprocity and mutual resource acquisition, with the 'giving' element of volunteering giving way to the existence of a mutually beneficial relationship (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007).

Research shows that educational level, religiosity, age and gender are significantly associated with levels of participation in volunteer activities (Sixsmith *et al.*, 2001; Kolodinsky *et al.*, 2004; Bekkers, 2005; Hill and Russell, 2009; Drever, 2010). External environmental factors such as upbringing, family and social networks shape the volunteer's choice of and level of participation, with individual motivation ranging from altruism to self interest, and with access to resources dictating individual expectations, perceptions of perceived value of contribution and situational factors relating to quality of volunteer experiences (Newman, 2001; Ellis and O'Brien, 2001; Batson *et al.*, 2002; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2003; Klandermans, 2004; Low *et al.*, 2007; Okun *et al.*, 2007; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Given the shift in Ireland to allocate greater amounts to funding to fewer organisations and the emergent drive to formalize and '*professionalise*' volunteering, the traditional altruistic values of volunteering within localised settings are increasingly set aside by volunteer demands for recognition, choice and short term assignments (Volunteering Ireland, 2010a). This occurs in line with Ireland's economic recession contributing to further uncertainty within the community and voluntary sector, with reduction in staff numbers and incomes, and increasing organisational reliance on volunteer participation. This is echoed by the Lord Mayor of Dublin in 2010 who said; "*in times of unemployment and economic difficulty, volunteering has a more significant role to play than ever*" (Volunteering Ireland, 2010a, p. 19).

Volunteering and social capital

Volunteer participation is personal and freely chosen, with volunteers needing to sense a common collective or connective purpose, align themselves with the host agency or community group, and require ongoing support and encouragement (Pathways through Participation, 2009; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Participation increases as individuals perceive levels of trust within reciprocal volunteering arrangements and over time may become entrenched within these communities (Lee *et al.*, 2009). The volunteer ethic is grounded in trust, reciprocity, sense of belonging, shared norms and values, and social embeddedness, all of which are tenets of social capital theory (Putnam, 1995; Claibourn and Martin 2000; Putnam; 2000; Mayer 2003; Wollebæck and Selle 2003; Eurodiaconia, 2010). Social capital research has underscored how volunteering impacts positively on community engagement and wellbeing, trust and normative networks in associational life (Claibourn and Martin 2000; Wollebæck and Selle 2002; Wollebæck and Selle 2003; Freitag. 2003; Mayer, 2003; Meier and Stutzer, 2004; Prouteau and Wolff, 2004; Yeung 2004; Parboteeah *et al.*, 2004). Research on the generation of social capital in volunteering has described the contribution to social capital as arising from the social interaction between groups of people or organisations joined together for the common good (Putnam, 1993; 2000; Hurlbert *et al.*, 2000; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Lin, 2001a; 2001b; Stone and Hughes, 2002; Van der Gaag *et al.*, 2004; Briggs, 2004; Son and Lin, 2008; Brunie, 2009). Micro level research illustrates how the creation and maintenance of social capital occurs as a result of interpersonal relationships formed from informal social volunteer networks. (Sixsmith *et al.*, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002; Wollebæck and Selle, 2002; Kolodinsky *et al.*, 2004; Antoni, 2009). Indeed, the Taskforce on Active Citizenship in 2006 commented on Ireland's richness in informal social networks, with the National Committee on Volunteering (2002) stating that volunteering in Ireland contributed to a key source of Irish

'social capital'. Irish research has demonstrated how volunteering has the ability to strengthen social capital and social connectiveness. Volunteer participants immerse themselves into a relational engagement, contribute to the building of social units, community or group cohesiveness, shared social values and norms, community sustainability, and ultimately economic and social development (Healy and Cote, 2001; Donoghue et al., 2006).

The measurement of volunteering impact on social capital remains problematic in terms of establishing contributory factors, and the presence of a multiplicity of confounding micro and macro level influences (Wollebæck and Selle, 2002). Volunteer contribution to social capital is dependent on individual embeddedness within volunteer and group networks of relationships, synergies between individuals and groups or communities, and degree of interpersonal civic engagement (Putnam, 1993; 2000; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; NESF, 2003; Son and Lin, 2008; Brunie, 2009). The aim of this study is to garner a greater understanding of the lived experience of volunteer participation and its contribution to social capital.

Methods

This study was conducted as part of a larger sequential mixed method study where findings from this phenomenological research were used to develop and validate a Social Capital scale to quantitatively measure volunteer social capital in Volunteer Centers in Ireland (and elsewhere) (Foley et al., 2012).

A phenomenological approach was adopted so as to identify the participant's experiences applicable to the social capital tenets of community attachment, community participation, social networks, trust and reciprocity. The research team consisted of two academic staff and a post graduate research student. The South Tipperary Volunteer Centre assisted in the recruitment of volunteers willing to partake in in-depth interviews. In total a convenience sample of 17 volunteers (nine females and eight males) and 11 organisation representatives (seven females and four males) took part in the study. As soon as data saturation was reached no further volunteers were recruited. Snowball sampling was limited to two referrals from each study participant, in order to reduce the bias effect of disproportionate membership of similar informal and formal volunteering social networks (Babbie, 1995). Ethical approval for the study was granted in 2010 by Waterford Institute of Technology research ethics committee. All participants gave informed written consent and were advised prior to participation with regard to research aims, confidentiality and ability to withdraw if and when they so wished. The demographics for the volunteer participants and organisation representatives were as follows in Table 1 below;

Table 1: Participant Details

Age	Volunteer Participants n=17		Organisation Representatives n=11	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
26-35 years	3	1	0	2
36-49 years	2	4	1	4
50-59 years	2	2	2	2
60-70 years	1	2	0	0

Data Collection and analysis

The data collection phase involved researcher ‘*bracketing*’ of pre-conceived perspectives on volunteer choices, levels of participation, experiences, processes and pathways and how they related to social capital contribution (Miller and Crabtree, 1992). In depth interviews were conducted face to face in semi public settings, and lasted between one and two hours. Interview questioning was conducted in a conversational tone and without judgement. Each interview was digitally audio recorded with permission and transcribed shortly after. The interviews included questions on volunteer social processes and experiences. The findings were plotted against identifiable social capital tenets adapted from a similar study by Eriksson et al. (2010).

Table 2: Social capital tenets observed in volunteer interviews

Social Capital Tenets	Specific Categories
Community Attachment	Sense of Community Sense of Volunteer Group Sense of Belonging
Community Participation	Participation in Associations Participation in Local activities
Social Networks	Organisation Volunteers Organisation Staff Volunteer Networks
Trust	Trust between groups Trust between volunteers Trust between staff and volunteers
Reciprocity	Altruistic Motives for Volunteering Mutual resource acquisition Self serving Motives for Volunteering

Data analysis commenced during fieldwork via ‘*phenomenological bracketing*’ which involved asking the volunteer and organisation representatives to describe and reflect on their experiences of both volunteering and volunteers (Davidson, 2000; Caelli, 2001). This phenomenological ‘bracketing’ or phenomenological reduction involved the unpacking of phenomena (in this case volunteering experiences) by setting aside the question of the real existence of volunteering and peeling away its symbolic meanings until volunteering as experience remained (Zahavi, 2003). It was then possible to focus on volunteering as an experience which contributed to perceived individual and volunteer group social capital for

the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Observational field notes and detailed memos (Caelli, 2001) were additionally incorporated into the data analysis, which involved listening to and re-reading transcripts, in order to reach a holistic sense of the data as a whole, and to assist in the identification of emergent themes (Hycner, 1999). Several briefing sessions were conducted between the researchers, in order to achieve inter-rater corroboration in the identification of initial units of meaning, placement within thematic categories and interpretation of data outliers or ambiguities (Moustakas, 1994; De Castro, 2003). The following themes emerged; *'Volunteer Profiles, Motivating Factors and Trajectories'*, *'Relationships, Trust and Sense of Belonging'* and *'Informal and Formal Volunteering Processes in contemporary Ireland'*.

Qualitative results

Volunteer profiles, motivating factors and trajectories

Volunteer activities appeared primarily to serve others in the community and consisted of a wide range of activities and tasks, with gender stereotyping evident in the selection of volunteers in some sports and special needs related placements. Volunteering was frequently described as a mechanism for meeting people and forming new and lasting relationships. Several volunteers described responding to an identified need in the community, for example, special needs, youth at risk, addiction services, elderly, and sports, as the reason for their chosen volunteer activity. Many volunteers commented on the development of reciprocity of relations in the form of *'giving and getting something back'* within their volunteer experiences, and most commonly with disadvantaged, vulnerable or special needs groups or individuals. Volunteer participants additionally expressed how volunteering changed their outlook on life, increased their social reach, heightened their awareness of disadvantage, vulnerability and special needs, and increased the amount and denseness of their social relationships. Volunteers' choice of organisation was based on their own their personal interest and perceived values of the organisation. Organisation representatives recognised the value of the community volunteers, especially in the contribution of new skills and perspectives and in addition the local knowledge they brought to the organization:

'They bring different experiences and talent to the work. They're part of the wider community, so they're bringing that perspective to the work...it's good to have that outside approach, they definitely bring value yeah, and different ideas, different approaches to the work'

Organisation Representative, Female No 8 (Active retired group).

'The benefit I've found is that the more you give, the more you get back, I think genuinely whatever time I've given to the community I got back...I think at the start you're doing it to help them but in the end it's really helping you'

Male Volunteer Participant No 8 (Youth and Community group).

There was no apparent gender difference in motives for volunteering, with volunteers reporting a variety of reasons for participation which included enjoyment, social relations, self fulfillment, new opportunities, development of new friendships and peer networks, new

learning and skill acquisition, and sense of community integration as important reasons for participation. Motives relating to social connections, socializing, companionship, helping others, sense of purpose and reciprocity were also recognised by several organisation representatives. Volunteering was described as contributing to social capital in the form of increased feelings of well being, empowerment, socialization, garnering of new skills, sense of place, purpose and positive outlook in life. In the words of one volunteer working in the youth at risk sector:

'I think it keeps you positive, it keeps you focused if it's something you really want to do, and it keeps you up to date and you get to meet new people. It kept me real. I think it's just made me aware that everybody is equal, irrespective of circumstances or what they've been through, or what they've done or what they will do, it's just to see people like that all the time'

Female Volunteer Participant No 2 (Youth and Community group).

Time spent volunteering ranged from one hour to several days per week, and was dependent on individual range of responsibilities, sense of belonging within social networks and level of social connectivity within the chosen organisation or community. Both volunteer participants and organisation representatives recognised that, for some, volunteering appeared to act as 'gap filler' activity for those with free time (primarily active retired persons, home makers and unemployed). Several volunteer participants reported habitual volunteering pathways, with choices of volunteer activities and invitations to volunteer grounded in past participation in that activity. Volunteer participants also described being approached by local residents to partake in volunteering in their community, and that the initiation of volunteering appeared spontaneous and opportunistic. Several female volunteers described volunteer participation in community activities for long periods of time ranging from 20 to 50 years in length. This volunteering commonly commenced when they were new to the community and seeking to meet people and form new relationships. In contrast, the majority of male volunteers reported shorter and transient levels of volunteering participation, ranging from one to seven years. Several organisation representatives commented on the need for younger volunteers, with some organisations over represented by those in retirement.

Relationships, trust and sense of belonging

For several participants volunteering had become engrained in their day to day life activities, and appeared very much grounded in reciprocity in civic engagement, and trust in associational individual, group and community relationships:

'It's part of my life now, being a volunteer, I really enjoy meeting people; as you're aware. I really enjoy being here, I help out wherever I can; and basically being involved with people you know. The thing about volunteering is you get into a group or groups and you just seem to stay there over all the years you know'

Female Volunteer Participant No 1 (Church Helper).

Organisation representatives described how the positive integration of volunteers within the host organisation was dependent on amount of time spent volunteering and availability of placements and on the nature of the work. Confidentiality procedures in some community based projects impacted on levels of inclusion of volunteers. These confidentiality procedures were often present when working with vulnerable individuals. Positive processes of volunteer integration into host organisations were described by some volunteer participants and all organisation representatives, with staff and volunteers viewed as equal partners and contributors to integrative work based social networks:

'I suppose I am treated like one of the team and I don't feel like an outsider, I don't feel like I am different or I can't do something, so I'm happy'
Female Volunteer Participant No 6 (Intellectual Disability sector).

Several volunteer participants described specific aspects of volunteer roles and responsibilities within a clearly defined volunteer-staff partnership. In some cases volunteers describe lonely experiences of volunteering with little interaction with paid staff and other volunteers. One volunteer reported the presence of tension between paid staff and volunteers, with volunteers viewed as being *'different to'* and in some cases *'lesser'* than staff within their host organization:

'It is part of the criteria that we don't socialize with each other (paid staff and volunteers)'
Female Volunteer Participant No 4 (Care of the elderly).

Organisation representatives observed how socializing between volunteer and paid staff in this sector remained (for the most part) confined to day to day work contact, and a small number of *'informal work related get togethers'* during the year.

When questioned about wider social networks of volunteers in the research area, most volunteer participants described meeting other volunteers at organized volunteer events and commented that this opportunity to network with other volunteers boosted their sense of belonging within a larger *'volunteering community'*. This sense of identification within the volunteer community contributed to an increased sense of civic engagement:

'There's a common bond there; what I have found is that you meet the same people, the same faces, they turn up at so many different events, there really seems to be a hardcore of people there, that will get up and volunteer and do things; you do tend to meet a lot of the same faces and you get to know one another and form friendships'
Male Volunteer Participant No 5 (Sporting organisation).

Informal and formal volunteering processes in contemporary Ireland

Several volunteer participants described how financial conditions in Ireland at the time impacted on volunteer experiences, with reduced formal opportunities to volunteer and the majority of volunteering time devoted to community project fundraising. This was

described as detracting from the value of volunteer experiences and outcomes. Competitiveness for volunteer placements was described by most volunteer participants (and also by one organisation representative) as resulting in a lack of consultation with volunteers in designating volunteer times and dates, and was seen as contributing to stress and discomfort for volunteers. In some instances, this was perceived to contribute to a sense of *'taking volunteers for granted'*. In contrast, all organisation representatives described the usefulness and contributory value of volunteers given funding and staff constraints, and observed in several cases that the host organisation could not operate efficiently without volunteers:

'I think that they assume that a volunteer should be available whenever they want them to be. They need see things from the volunteer's perspective and never forget that the volunteer is doing them a favour, not the other way around'

Female Volunteer Participant No 9 (Sporting organisation).

'We really rely so much on the volunteers, particularly in this current economic climate; so without them really we couldn't; they're a very, very, important part of our organisation'

Organisation Representative, Female No 11 (Youth organisation).

For those unemployed, day to day participation in volunteering appeared to temper feelings of perceived individual inactivity, unemployment related frustration and lack of perceived productivity. One Male participant described using volunteering to escape having to justify or explain his unemployment. In this way, volunteering appeared to contribute to increased self esteem and sense of usefulness:

'I've met a lot of people, a lot of good people, I've formed good relationships with people, I was kept busy when I was out of work or not doing anything. You feel good as well if you've gone out and done something constructive with your day, you've contributed to a cause or an organisation or you've out helped out some people, a good feeling comes from that, you know, it's not a waste of a day'

Male Volunteer Participant No 3 (Youth and Community group).

Several volunteers observed that volunteering assisted in the development of potential social networking amongst potential community based employers, with motives for volunteering becoming increasingly self serving over time. Both volunteers and organisation representatives reported that in some cases volunteering was utilized in order to gain experience within a certain service modality or specific target group, and as opportunity to up-skill or gain relevant work experience for the employment market. Several volunteer participants described volunteering participation with the sole objective of gaining work related experience:

'Particularly now with the economic situation the way it is, if you wanted a job volunteering would be the best thing to do, because not only would it get you

out of the bed in the morning, but when the economy does turn, at least you'll have networked and have made some inroads into getting some experience'

Female Volunteer Participant No 3 (Intellectual disability sector).

'It has not yet lead me to employment, but I think that in the long term, it may. I would like to think that employers appreciate that I rather do something for nothing than do nothing at all'

Female Volunteer Participant No 9 (Child care sector).

Most volunteer participants emphasized the need for greater recognition of the role and contribution of volunteers, and for volunteer experience to be equated with work based experience:

'I'd like to see volunteers and my own efforts in some ways recognised better'

Male Volunteer Participant No 6 (Religious organization).

'I suppose one thing in the career area, would be recognition from the employers of the volunteers and the voluntary work and putting experiences gained on a voluntary basis on a par with experiences gained in employment'

Female Volunteer Participant No 7 (Youth work).

Only one volunteer participant reported that payment for volunteering operated as a reward scheme in his organisation, and that his volunteering had progressed into paid employment and full integration into the organisation. In some instances the host organisation was described as acting as benefactor of its volunteers' personal development and skill acquisition for the employment market, and this was described as further undermining parity of volunteers and paid staff. The need for improved volunteer induction, training and supported experiences within both formal and informal volunteer placements was emphasized by most volunteer participants, with several volunteer participants describing leaving volunteer placements due to perceived lack of volunteer effectiveness, lack of task satisfaction and role ambiguity. However, one female organisation representative described inclusive and empowering formal induction, training and support systems for her volunteers as integrated within her organisation, and said:

'We like to think that we offer the volunteers the opportunity to participate in all of the work in the service we provide, also training and building their capacity to get jobs themselves and maybe in the future they might have the opportunity to take on some work'

Organisation Representative, Female No 10 (Helpline).

Volunteer procedures appeared to have become more regulated over time. A change in the definition of volunteering processes from informal civic networks of individuals *'helping each other out'*, toward more formalized volunteer placements was observed in recent years. Most organisation representatives recognised that informal volunteering management, training and regulatory processes in local communities remained dependent

on individual and small group networks and ties. Not all organisations had a volunteer policy and some organisation representatives described a reluctance to ascribe to formalized volunteer routes. Formal training systems were considered to deter older volunteers from taking part, thus contributing to a fragmentation of existing informal networks of volunteers within the community.

Discussion

The contribution of volunteering to social capital in the form of social relations, community and volunteer group integration, development of trust and mutual resource acquisition in community service and employment related skill acquisition is illustrated in this descriptive ‘*snapshot*’ of social volunteering phenomena in Irish volunteer and organisation experiences. The findings illustrate how social connectivity within volunteering improves social and networking skills, mutual cooperation, reciprocity and trust within groups and wider social contexts. Similar to other research, the benefit of volunteering appeared in most cases to exceed volunteer cost, in the form of increased personal well being and sense of purpose, development of friendships and meeting new people, identification with the volunteer activity and ethos of the relevant group or organisation, sense of ‘*giving something back*’ and serving a specified community need, work related experiences, productivity in free time and chances for up-skilling.

Volunteering participation appeared very much grounded in levels of free time and entrenchment within community volunteer contexts. Volunteers in this research described both habitual and transient opportunistic involvement in volunteering, and being approached in their community to volunteer. Similarly, Ruddle and Mulvihill (1999) found that personal involvement for a good cause forms the basis for volunteering. The contribution of localised knowledge provided by volunteers in existing social and community networks was valued by organisational representatives, and supports previous research by Flanagan and Sadowski (2011). Indeed, research shows that levels of volunteer participation increases as individuals perceive themselves to be more involved in their community and experience greater levels of trust within their community (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Son and Lin, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2009). Gender specific volunteer roles and placements were described in the current research, with women engaging in longer periods of community based volunteering, and men adopting a more transient approach. Similar findings are reported elsewhere (for example, Sixsmith *et al.*, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002 and Drever, 2010).

Both informal and formal volunteering appeared to contribute to social capital by stimulating a personal agency of change through reciprocity and learning exchange (Ostrom and Ahn, 2001; Mohan and Mohan, 2002; Brunie, 2009; Eurodiaconia, 2010). A shift in personal and social definitions of volunteering was described with spontaneous informal volunteering increasingly replaced by structured, formalised and regulated volunteer placements and procedures. This has been observed in the volunteering literature (Smith, 1999; Lukka and Ellis, 2001; Parboteeah *et al.*, 2004; Low *et al.*, 2007; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). The National Committee on Volunteering in 2002 recognised this shift toward volunteer formalisation in Ireland and advocated a continuum of ‘*light*’ to ‘*structured*’

management of volunteers. However, a reduced amount of volunteer places are currently available, with many volunteer placements directed at community fundraising. Participants reported that this detracts from positive volunteer experiences. Indeed, the Volunteering across Europe Country Report (2010) drew attention to the dangers relating to over formalisation, which can restrict and hamper the volunteer experience, contribute to community fragmentation and thereby reduce both individual and community social capital.

Although altruistic motives for volunteering were in evidence, the movement away from such volunteering motives appeared to represent a shift away from traditional informal volunteering processes and community serving objectives. The expressed need from volunteers for greater volunteer induction, support and formalised training routes additionally reflects a consumerist approach to volunteering. Progression routes onto paid employment serve to blur the traditional definition of volunteering, which should not involve the sole objective of financial gain (Smith, 1999). Similar to Price (2002), volunteering processes appeared increasingly utilised for self serving purposes within reciprocal relations, so as to gain experience, undertake training, learn new skills and '*fill time*' in a productive work directed manner. Despite this, personal motivation to partake contributed to heightened levels of familiarity and social relations within host volunteer groups, settings and networks, and assisted in the development of trust.

However, this research shows that social capital theory can illustrate volunteer processes, as situated within inclusive and exclusive networks. '*Inclusive networks*' relate to volunteer group relations and contribute to a sense of belonging and inner affirmation within host volunteer organisations; with '*exclusive networks*' such as wider volunteer networks operating to create links and reciprocal norms (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Warren *et al.*, 2001; Boeck *et al.*, 2009). Social capital research on volunteer participation has shown how volunteering can become exclusionary or insularised within dense social networks of volunteers (Putnam, 2000), with volunteer experiences affected by power differentials between individuals (Paik and Jackson 2011; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, varied experiences of perceived acceptance of volunteers within such organisations were described, with some volunteers describing positive experiences based on volunteer-paid staff parity and others describing lonely, isolating experiences of volunteering restricted to fundraising, with little social connection with staff or with other volunteers. Individual social capital appears then further compromised by lack of mutual communication, reciprocity and trust between volunteer and staff member. Integration of volunteers into the organisations' workforce was described as dependent on length of time, intensity of interaction and scope of volunteer contributions. However, and perhaps in direct response to these 'staff volunteer struggles', many volunteer participants described that simply being part of a wider volunteering network contributed to a sense of community attachment, belonging, community participation, social networks, trust and reciprocity.

Strengths and limitations

The volunteers and organisations interviewed for this study represented several different sectors. The sample was small, and based on participants willing to partake in the research.

However, researchers tried to include a mix of participants in respect of their age, level of experience as a volunteer and gender. Good levels of consistency were found between the experiences of participants and therefore it may be assumed that an acceptable level of data saturation was reached. Sampling bias may have resulted from the selection of participants; it is feasible that this study represents those who had a particular interest or strong interest in the topic and therefore the results may not fully reflect the views of all volunteers or organisations. With just 17 volunteering respondents, it is not possible to generalize these findings to the wider volunteering population. The research is small-scale but it provides a rich source of information that could be explored in further volunteer research. This phenomenological research does not claim to measure social capital contained or arising from volunteer experience, rather it uses a phenomenological approach to describe the lived phenomena in volunteer processes as it relates to social capital tenets.

Conclusion

This research presents an illustration of volunteering as an expression of civic engagement. Social capital tenets as they emerge from the volunteer experience are grounded in mutual reciprocity, individual and group level trust, resource acquisition and social connectivity. The social processes of volunteering were described as generating heightened levels of trust at a personal level, which also extended into the wider community. Perhaps most importantly given the contribution of volunteering to individual and community social capital, the research underscores concerns that informal humanitarian social reciprocity may be increasingly undermined by the drive to formalise the experience. There is a need to both quantify and understand contemporary volunteering trends and benefits as they relate to social capital in Ireland, and utilise this data for specific volunteer and governance policy approaches which recognise cultural and context specific dynamics, not only in relation to the host organisation, but especially in relation to community engagement and civic society. The act of volunteering shall always depend on relations between the volunteer and the 'other' in the form of an individual, group, organisation, community or society. Both volunteers and host organisations need to develop realistic expectations around volunteer roles and responsibilities, and treat volunteers well in order to preserve and protect all forms of volunteerism.

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