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Background

The research findings presented here are part of a three year ESRC Case studentship entitled "Space, place and volunteers: the nature, meaning and impact of volunteering in Scotland"¹. The studentship is based at the University of Dundee with Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS) the non-academic partner organisation. These findings are the second of three to be published by VDS.

This research uses both in depth interviews and self completion postal questionnaires² to gather data from current, former and non volunteers in four case study areas in Scotland: Sandy Isle (a deprived rural community), Lochlands (an affluent rural community), Parkville (an affluent urban community) and Towerton (a deprived urban community)³. Fieldwork was carried out in the period June 2004 – June 2005 and the research was completed in late 2006.

Main Findings

- Volunteering can lead to social inclusion however this is not an automatic outcome of volunteering;
- Volunteering can be a useful "strategy for inclusion" (Ellis, 2000:10-11), particularly for incomers, and this is important in rural, urban, affluent and deprived communities;
- A complex set of rules regarding the pace, extent and nature of appropriate participation in volunteering, particularly by incomers, can operate in some locations;
- Volunteering can be a means of demonstrating compliance with important community norms ("moral geographies", Holloway, 1998:31) and while the nature of these norms may vary across different communities volunteering remains a crucial route to fitting into each one
- Volunteering can help transform unsafe spaces into safe places however this change may only be experienced by the active volunteer and not the wider community.

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² This document draws only on qualitative data although quantitative data is available to further support the research findings presented.

³ Place names are anonymised

Findings

These findings focus on the meaning individuals derive from their involvement in volunteering and its relationship with space and place. The findings particularly review the role of volunteering in social inclusion and exclusion. In doing so this work is distinct from much existing research into the meaning and value individual volunteers derive from their involvement in volunteering as this frequently focuses on the role it plays in creating and widening their social networks and in developing their skills (Davis-Smith, 1998), how it may increase their confidence (IVR, 2003), improve health and well being (Community Service Volunteers, 2004) and create routes into paid employment (IVR, 2003). The research findings presented here instead concentrate on the following three key themes:

- how involvement in volunteering enables individuals to move between private and public spheres, experiencing new spaces and places as they do so;
- the role of volunteering in helping individuals negotiate their social environment, particularly with regard to the creation of feelings of belonging;
- the potential for volunteering to transform spaces and places, particularly with regard to shifting unsafe spaces into safe places.

Visible volunteering

Volunteering offers individuals an opportunity to be visible in public spaces outside of the home and visibly engaged in activities to which they attribute value:

... I think a lot of people show respect because I volunteer in a place like this, you know. I think a lot of people think, "OK, well she's not just lazing about collecting her DLA every month and there's nothing the matter with her", you know, "She's trying to go and work and keep her skills up in case she gets back to work" so I think that you get a degree of respect because of it
(Marie, volunteer with mental health project, Towerton.)

Volunteers often referred to their volunteering as a "job". While there was evidence of this in all four case study areas it was particularly apparent in Towerton and among those not in paid employment.

... if they're happy then I know I'm doing my job right. Even though it's not a job as such but I know if they're happy I'm doing my job right. Simple as that
(Ailsa, childcare volunteer, Towerton.)

For these volunteers, involvement in volunteering provides many of the functions of employment. Volunteering increases the range of spaces of activity to which they have access and increases the range of places with which they become associated. It enables them to escape the restriction of their private space and be, and be seen to be, a participant in public spaces. It facilitates their social inclusion in key aspects of community life, and aspects to which they attribute value. Crucially this was particularly the case for those living with illness or disability that may otherwise be excluded from these important places of "work".

"Incomers": performing participation

For "incomers" to an area the opportunity to be involved in meaningful voluntary activities was particularly important. As well as providing opportunities for social contact volunteering helped demonstrate to other local residents that they were a part of the local community. It helped prove that they were interested in and committed to the area and this was important in mediating relationships between "locals" and "incomers".

So it was important to kind of get your foot in the door and say "Hey, I'm here, I'm Rhona, I'm new to the area, yes I'm English, yes I'm young but I really do want to help, I want to make a difference to this place where we live"

(Rhona, volunteer, Lochlands. Rhona moved to Lochlands from the south of England)

These findings confirm those of earlier research in rural communities in England and Wales (Halfacree, 1995, Ellis, 2000). However what emerges here is that this issue is important in both the rural *and* urban communities in Scotland. It also became clear that there are complex, unwritten rules and practices surrounding the pace, extent and nature of involvement of incomers in volunteering:

But when people come into a new area they don't want to push themselves in case people say, "Who are they?" If I moved into another area I would lie low for a while and say, "Maybe I can help now?". You don't want to go in because there is a resistance to it..."

(Bob, Lochlands Councillor.)

What you don't do is go in and take over the committee and say, "I'll show you how to do it". You offer your services in some lowly way and you work your way in

(Sally, former Advice Centre volunteer and incomer to Sandy Isle from England.)

Previous research in rural England and Wales identified how volunteers "must recognise the hierarchical strategy for acceptance, understanding which groups they can join and which groups they can't" (Ellis and Enticott, 2001:11) however it is again clear that this process is in operation not just also in *Scottish* rural communities but in Scottish *urban* communities:

I don't know if this is true of other shops in Parkville, but they are a little bit um... cliquey... They're not necessarily that open to new ideas, new people and I suppose, I don't know if that's an age related thing or if it's more a Parkville thing. It might be a bit of both. But I, if I wanted to change anything about them I would like them to be a little bit more open to, you know, incomers.

(Rachel, charity shop manager, Parkville. Rachel moved to Scotland from the North of England)

Rachel highlights the way in which incomers can be experienced as "disruptive" and "suspicious" (Cresswell, 2004:121) by local residents who may be fearful of a change to "their place" (Cresswell, 1996:60). As a result local residents effectively manage the extent to which individuals secure inclusion through volunteering with participation not an automatic guarantee of this.

Unsafe spaces to safe places

This research also revealed ways in which being a volunteer transformed spaces previously considered unsafe into safe and pleasant places to be. Towerton has a reputation as a dangerous area and residents often made reference to this during interviews. While for some certain parts of Towerton or particular buildings remained out of bounds for others active involvement in volunteering had transformed these unsafe spaces into places in which they felt secure and content:

No, well there's been quite a few murders in Towerton... Towerton is quite a bad area for drugs and... it's just, it's not someplace I would want to walk about all day and I definitely wouldn't walk about at night on my own. But I feel safe in here. I feel OK in here, you know, but I think if it wasn't for here I wouldn't like to live in the Towerton area.

(Marie, volunteer in mental health project, Towerton.)

A lot of people who come here look quite intimidating but coming here to (the community centre) you realise they're not, they're not, they look intimidating and they might be, I suppose, intimidating if you were to encounter them under the wrong circumstances but most of the time they're just ordinary people who are friendly enough.

(Lara, craft group volunteer, Towerton.)

Lara refers to a community centre created in a converted pub in the centre of Towerton. During interviews with other Towerton residents it was clear that for those not involved with the centre directly, even if they volunteered elsewhere, it was still perceived as an unsafe place:

Jill: And if you spoke to a lot of people in here they wouldn't go and set foot in (the community centre). I wouldn't... I've lived in this area for seven years and I've been in (the community centre) once and it was a Saturday morning and the building was shut

Interviewer: Why is that?

Jill: Because it scares me. You walk past it and you've got all these people standing outside... and the place just terrifies me

(Interview with Jill, staff member in a different community centre, Towerton.)

That volunteering takes place within a space is not enough to transform it into a safe place for the entire community. Only the process of personally being active within the space itself brought about this transformation.

Conclusions

- Volunteering can lead to social inclusion however this is not an automatic outcome of volunteering;
- Volunteering can be a useful "strategy for inclusion" (Ellis, 2000:10-11), particularly for incomers, and this is important in rural, urban, affluent and deprived communities;

- A complex set of rules regarding the pace, extent and nature of appropriate participation in volunteering, particularly by incomers, can operate in some locations;
- Volunteering can be a means of demonstrating compliance with important community norms (“moral geographies”, Holloway, 1998:31) and while the nature of these norms may vary across different communities volunteering remains a crucial route to fitting into each one;
- Volunteering can help transform unsafe spaces into safe places however this change may only be experienced by the active volunteer and not the wider community

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