

Informal Volunteering, Inequality, and Illegitimacy

Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly
2022, Vol. 51 (3) 527–544
© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/08997640211034580
journals.sagepub.com/home/nvs



Jon Dean¹ 

Abstract

This article argues that informal volunteering (the unstructured giving of one's time to help friends, neighbors, or community) has been ignored or understudied within research and policy. With data frequently showing higher rates of informal volunteering among women, people of color, working-class communities, and other often discriminated against groups and qualitative research demonstrating the value of informal volunteering within poorer communities, such positioning serves to reproduce dominant narratives around volunteering, reinforcing social inequalities. Using Bourdieusian critical theory from largely U.K.-based working-class feminist scholars, this article contributes to the nonprofit literature by showing how such a formulation adds to the legitimacy of middle-class cultures and delegitimizes working-class ones, especially at the current neoliberal conjuncture where volunteering experiences are encouraged to be used as a tool of distinction and employability. However, the article cautions against conceptualizing informal volunteering within existing formal volunteering frameworks, as doing so may further hollow out community life.

Keywords

capital, community, helping, informal volunteering, social class

Introduction

Within the canon of research into volunteering, the activity known as “informal volunteering” has a strange presence. Although scholars and researchers into voluntary action are always keen to stress the difference between formal volunteering (organized

¹Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Corresponding Author:

Jon Dean, Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics, Heart of the Campus, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield S10 2BQ, UK.

Email: j.dean@shu.ac.uk

voluntary roles undertaken for nonprofit or public sector organizations) and informal volunteering (giving one's time, perhaps on an ad hoc basis, to help one's friends, neighbors, or community), the former dominates the research literature with lip service paid to the latter (D. H. Smith, 1995). Drawing on evidence mainly from the case of the United Kingdom, this article uses sociological theory and empirical research from working-class feminist scholars of class and community life to critique this lack of attention through asking three critical questions: "How are boundaries drawn around different forms of nonpaid work, and whom do these boundaries benefit?" "Whose purpose is served by maligning everyday care or not thinking of it as 'work'?" and "What relation should informal volunteering have to policy?" It is argued that with policy practitioners and nonprofit researchers focusing on formal volunteering, the activities of those people who are more likely to participate informally are rendered "invisible" (Crittenden, 2019). As these individuals often come from disadvantaged or discriminated against communities (Egerton & Mullan, 2008; J. D. Smith, 1998; Taylor, 2005; Woolvin & Hardill, 2013), it is argued that such a skewed focus reinforces socially legitimated middle-class behaviors and delegitimizes and disrespects working-class ones (Skeggs, 1997, 2004a, 2004b). Informal and formal volunteering are not the same, and should not be treated the same, but they should be shown the same focus and attention, and we may need to rethink informal volunteering: how we define it, value it, and operationalize it in policy.

The article is organized as follows. First, it briefly outlines how nonprofit sector researchers have addressed informal volunteering's lack of presence within the canon of voluntary action research, often rendering it invisible. It then discusses the differences between rates of participation in formal and informal volunteering, particularly along social class, race and ethnicity, and gender lines. These data (drawn largely from the U.K. context) demonstrate how informal volunteering can be considered a more equal site of participation, which exacerbates the problem of its lack of focus within academic literature and policy. The theoretical and social context is then presented through a brief discussion of Bourdieu's (1986) theories of capital and, more prominently, how they have been applied to working-class women's informal voluntary work by theorists and researchers such as Skeggs, Taylor, and McKenzie. Examples are drawn from ethnographic, autobiographical, and theoretical literature where authors have used cultural and symbolic capital, and value in their analyses of the classification of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" social behaviors to demonstrate how socially constructed notions of capital discredit and diminish roles not filled by a hegemonic (White, male) middle-class. The theoretical framework is applied to the debate around (informal) volunteering to highlight how behaviors that are not seen as middle-class can be delegitimized or forgotten by both public and nonprofit arenas.

The article's discussion argues that we have to understand the broader framework of privilege within which this delegitimization happens, recognize the value of activities that are not currently symbolically or socially valued as good when compared with formal volunteering, and challenge the notion that cultures are valued dependent on "who can deploy them as a resource" (Skeggs, 2004a, p. 174). Expectations of community life and our idea of volunteering should not be narrowed, and instead recognize

the value of existing social networks in disadvantaged communities. Yet finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, the article argues that we should not think about informal volunteering through the same conceptual frameworks as formal volunteering, but instead just offer it the same attention and “value.” Although formal volunteering has been economized and transitioned into a tradable “experience,” which can be exchanged for value (Dean, 2014; Holdsworth, 2017; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011), choosing to do the same to informal volunteering (where, for example, young people would be encouraged to compete on their résumé to be the best neighbor) would further hollow out notions of community, which research on individualization and the decline of community have noted.

Informal Volunteering: Problems of Definition and Its Status in Research

Informal volunteering: Giving unpaid help as an individual, for example to friends, relatives or neighbours. *Not counted as volunteering for the purposes of this study.* (Low et al., 2007, p. 126, emphasis added)

Defining informal volunteering may be easy in a dictionary sense, but drawing its boundaries and avoiding differential interpretations of the term are difficult, especially when, for most people, we have perfectly useful synonyms for it: helping, kindness, neighborliness, and so on. The acts often associated with informal volunteering (visiting an elderly neighbor, giving advice, looking after a property, or looking after the domestic pet of a friend) are more likely to be undertaken without realizing that the activity counts as volunteering. The terms of scholars may register differently with people from different backgrounds, and this may account for the differential answers, as authors such as Taylor (2005) argue:

The language used to describe these acts may not be readily analogous to “volunteering” but be seen as “helping,” and the acts themselves may not be visible through conventional means of measurement: that is not to suggest that they should be formalised, but that they should be acknowledged in assessments of the participation landscape within a community. (Woolvin & Hardill, 2013, p. 287)

Tonge et al. (2012, p. 590) found that although young people from poorer backgrounds were less likely to volunteer, the distinction was small, which was attributed in part to the fact that “natural helpfulness and community participation” may occur outside the formal definition of volunteering in the survey questions. As Taylor (2005) cautions, volunteering statistics are based on surveys that tend to assume people define themselves *as* “volunteers” and what they do *as* “volunteering.” These surveys are potentially less likely to capture informal activities because people tend to forget them as ordinary bits of everyday life, things (one may assume) a survey would not be interested in. Similar difficulties in distinguishing between formal and informal volunteering are found in longitudinal work (Lindsey & Mohan, 2018, p. 86).

As our understanding of formal voluntary participation has grown substantially, research into informal, “mutual aid” style giving has not (D. H. Smith, 1995). For example, the *Helping Out* survey (Low et al., 2007) was the most in-depth and comprehensive study of volunteering ever conducted in the United Kingdom. Yet as the study’s glossary (quoted above) shows, informal volunteering was not central to understanding the extent of voluntary activity in that study, “not counted” as volunteering, despite its prevalence and importance. Informal volunteering is “the most common type of human helping behaviour but one of the least studied” with a “scarcity” of published studies on the topic (Einolf et al., 2016, p. 223, 236). Research into informal volunteering is also often side-lined within the voluntary sector research establishment, which serves to keep the problem maligned (Einolf & Smith, 2011). Ignoring informal volunteering leads to iniquitous ideas about “what counts” as volunteering and participation. Carson (1999) cautioned that a failure to value informal volunteering as high may unfairly disregard the participation of those racial and ethnic groups or nationalities more likely to engage in informal volunteering. Informal volunteering by older adults of color is often not recognized and excluded from official counts (Crittenden, 2019). Unpicking the demographics of participation in informal volunteering in more detail is therefore covered next.

Participation in Informal Volunteering

Informal volunteering is generally done more frequently than formal volunteering (CNCS, 2018; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport [DDCMS], 2018; Taniguchi, 2012); Taniguchi (2012) found that 13.5% of individuals in her U.S.-based time use study volunteered informally in any one day, against 7.5 formally, although informal volunteering tends to be for fewer hours. Although research has shown that there is a long-established link between an individual’s education and socioeconomic resources and their participation in volunteering (Egerton & Mullan, 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2008), where certain operational procedures and practices of volunteer-involving organizations are more likely to appeal to and fit in with the more confident behaviors of the middle-class habitus (Dean, 2016), this is significantly less true for informal volunteering (J. D. Smith, 1998). The Community Life Survey (DDCMS, 2018) is the annual U.K. government report on rates of voluntary participation in England. It shows the following:

- Although regular (once a month) participation in both formal and informal volunteering has decreased in recent years, over half of respondents report doing some informal volunteering (defined as “giving unpaid help to individuals who are not a relative”) at least once a year.
- Although unemployed people are traditionally found to have lower rates of formal volunteering than employed people (Rochester et al., 2010), this survey indicates similar if not slightly higher rates of informal volunteering among unemployed people.

- People with a limiting long-term illness or disability have the same rate of participation in formal volunteering as those without (24%), but are much more likely to volunteer informally (34% against 26%).
- Rates of both formal and informal volunteering are higher for females than males, but the difference is higher for informal volunteering.
- In the majority of instances, people of color have lower rates of reported regular formal volunteering than White people, but higher rates of informal volunteering than White people.
- Although there is a clear positive correlation between someone's rate of regular formal volunteering and their level of deprivation (15% for the most deprived quintile, 29% for the least deprived quintile), there is no difference for informal volunteering, with a rate of informal volunteering for all five quintiles of deprivation of 26% or 27%.

Although the relationship between formal volunteering and disadvantage or minority status is long established, these data indicate that informal volunteering plays a larger role in the lives of those traditionally excluded or socially discriminated against groups (women, the disabled, people of color, and those suffering from disadvantage and the unemployed [admittedly imperfect descriptors for social class]) than those in hegemonic social groups. The association between informal volunteering and area deprivation is also far less marked than for formal volunteering (McCulloch et al., 2012). Partly this is because informal volunteering may be an activity that is easier to access than formal volunteering, lacking the bureaucracy associated with assisting an organization. As Davies's (2018) work on barriers to volunteering among young people from deprived areas shows, objective barriers (such as lack of resources, lack of information, school constraints, and spatial inequalities) and subjective barriers (such as perceptions of formal volunteering as "uncool" and emasculating) impede participation in formal volunteering but not informal volunteering.

The voluntary sector in the United Kingdom and elsewhere plays a formalized part in society, where its work is generally conceptualized as service and work rather than mutual aid and activism (Rochester et al., 2010), with the operating structures of most nonprofit organizations similar to those in the public and private sectors. Volunteering itself has become a strategy utilized by both governments and individuals to try and overcome social and economic obstacles, such as the effective delivery of welfare programs, to developing employability among young people. These strategies have been relatively ineffective, with evidence from the United Kingdom showing that despite a slew of volunteering policies and initiatives over the past 40 years, volunteering rates have remained remarkably stable (Lindsey & Mohan, 2018). Instead, a discursive rather than quantitative change has taken place, entailing a gradual shift in volunteering, from a rather free-form activity, rooted in everyday behavior, to an institutionalized and organized activity (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

People in deprived communities are almost universally found to have lower levels of formal participation than those in wealthier areas. The vast majority of formal volunteering in England is undertaken by a middle-class section of society, with a

“civic core” of 7.6% of the population undertaking 49% of formal volunteering hours (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012), and the proportion of citizens in this core negatively correlates with area deprivation (Alcock et al., 2012). Such obvious statistical differences allied with the backgrounds of those who are in position to design social policy can lead to policy ideas and interventions which focus mostly or solely on formal volunteering (Dean, 2016). Formal volunteering “is more characteristic of the volunteering culture of affluent than deprived wards . . . This means that policy initiatives to increase formal volunteering focus on a culture of volunteering more characteristic of affluent than lower-income areas” (Williams, 2003, pp. 288–290). For example, the previous Scottish Government’s *Volunteering Strategy* contrasted the benefits of formal and informal volunteering, positing that it was the former that was viewed as being able to tackle issues such as poverty and disadvantage (F. Smith et al., 2010, p. 265). It is one example of how informal voluntary work is forgotten by “utilitarian” social policy (Mckenzie, 2015). Therefore, it is argued that through not extending studies of volunteering to informal and neighborly activity, a hierarchy of voluntary activity is promulgated—effectively side-lining and ignoring the everyday altruism of a much wider, often socially disadvantaged proportion of the population, forgetting that there is immense social value to be found there. If we are worried about barriers to volunteering among disadvantaged groups, maybe we should look at what volunteering those disadvantaged groups are doing rather than replicating failed interventions (Lindsey & Mohan, 2018).

In a market where voluntary sector organizations are increasingly asked to demonstrate their impact or economically estimate the value of their activity (through mechanisms such as Social Return on Investment), it is more difficult to accurately quantify the social and economic value of informal volunteering. Informal activities can appear insignificant if measured solely on the criteria of resources and outputs (Rochester, 2013). However, one estimate has suggested that informal volunteering is worth US\$1.7 trillion to the world economy annually (Einolf & Smith, 2011). Monetizing neighborliness and informal, everyday care in this way could be seen as problematic or reductionist by those who would say that voluntary action reveals a higher value than that indicated by the wage provided to do it (voluntary organizations in social care settings, for instance, have long argued that being visited in hospital by a volunteer, or a voluntary phone-calling service for isolated elderly people provides a qualitatively different service to one staffed by paid workers with different motivations). But when in the United Kingdom and the United States volunteering is seen through the dominant paradigm (Rochester et al., 2010) of work and service, such a formulation makes some sense for formal volunteering.

So far, this article has used previous research and publicly available data sets to outline how informal volunteering is often much less a site of differential participation than formal volunteering, or indeed that disadvantaged groups are often more likely to participate in informal volunteering than formal volunteering. It has indicated that informal volunteering is somewhat invisible within research into voluntary action and how the language used by those studying volunteering may be exclusionary. It now moves onto using critical theory and examples from qualitative sociology to assess

both the importance of informal volunteering to disadvantaged communities and how the invisibility of informal volunteering serves to delegitimize those behaviors in such communities that enable them to “get by.”

Cultural Capital, Value, and Legitimacy

In developing the theory of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1984, 1986) argues that resources such as education, employment and transferable skills, and cultural consumption make up the forms of capital which allow groups, individuals, and communities to become symbolically valued. It is accumulated over time through the pedagogical action of the family, the wider social formation, and social institutions in which the individual is involved. The people of local areas where one or more of these agents does not support the inculcation of cultural capital will therefore be, it is argued, in subjective deficit. Furthermore, while cultural capital may be what you make of it, opportunities to make something of it, and what counts as cultural capital, are a significant source of inequality. Certain capitals cannot be transferred into economic or educational advancement in all circumstances because they are not *legitimate* in all circumstances. “It is only when cultural capital is sufficiently legitimated that it can be converted into symbolic capital—the prestige or recognition which various capitals acquire by virtue of *being* recognized and ‘known’ as legitimate” (Lawler, 2008, p. 128). It is symbolic capital that gives these resources their power. Symbolic capital is many things: prestige, where respect is commanded rather than earned because of social status, and those without status are dismissed. It is credit, recognition, and appreciation (Bourdieu, 1984), where social actors are game players, trying to “win” at the multiplicity of social games underway at any one time. People use “symbolic strategies” (Bourdieu, 1989) to impose their vision of the social world—and their position in that world—on others around them, visions that are self-interested and attempt to make what they do appear like the legitimate and right thing to be doing.

Cultural capital does not become cultural capital until it is traded, and it cannot be traded on equal terms because different capitals are differentially symbolically legitimate: “Capital has to be regarded as legitimate before it can be capitalized upon, before its value is recognizable” (Skeggs, 2004a, p. 17), which is highly problematic for certain groups because in a classed, racist society it is the embodying of Whiteness and middle-classness which deems one a person of value (Reay et al., 2007, p. 1042). The working-class women who Skeggs (1997, p. 161) researched utilized the forms of capital to which they had access, but they rarely had access to the forms of capital “which are convertible in an institutional system, such as the cultural capital of the middle-classes, which can be converted and traded-up through education and employment into symbolic capital and economic reward.” While denied wider *exchange-value*, the women’s capitals had local *use-value*, which can only be understood once they are put to use. Therefore, we need to think about *use-value*, a contextual understanding of norms rather than valuing all activity in relation to dominant (neoliberal, middle-class) paradigms. “This means we can explore how something has different

values in different relations, different contexts, enabling us to break through the dominant symbolic understandings promised on exchange" (Skeggs, 2004b, p. 89).

There has been some application of these ideas to volunteering. Jones (2006) has argued that giving is a potential demonstration of moral worth and presents certain values that are regarded as "tasteful" or desired, and that individuals can volunteer and give to gain this symbolic credit (Wilson & Musick, 1997). The moral "distinctions" present in volunteering have also been highlighted in Snee's (2013) work concerning the motivations of young people who take gap years, who create narratives of "worthwhile" experiences, which combine "doing good" with hedonistic social activities. There is a link between economic and moral value, where the employment of cultural resources "tends to normalize middle-class experience" (Skeggs, 2004b). Such normalization is inherent in current, government-led discourses of participation and a form of middle-class consolidation (Skeggs, 1997, p. 5). Dowling (2016) discusses volunteering's "recoding" under neoliberalism where engaging in charitable activities becomes synonymous with augmenting the "human capital" of a volunteer, thereby "inscribing it in an individualised ideology of entrepreneurialism and self-interest." If volunteering is to be economized as a cultural activity and made into a property that can be exchanged for value, we have to understand the broader framework of privilege within which this happens, recognize the value of activities that are not currently symbolically valued as "good," and challenge the ability to value cultures dependent on "who can *deploy them as a resource*" (Skeggs, 2004a, p. 174). Formal volunteering, when, for example, seen through the prism of an extra-curricular activity for young people to participate in, is not equally accessible (Putnam, 2015), reinforcing the barriers to opportunity it potentially offers.

Informal work, care work, and paid work are interdependent (Egerton & Mullan, 2008) and need to be examined holistically. Taylor (2005) argues that gendered and classed narratives dominate volunteering and challenges the fact that while there has been some research exploring the existence of informal support networks within working-class communities, particularly the role of reciprocal domestic arrangements between women, "these working-class forms of reciprocal labour and community support, however, were never defined as voluntary work" (Taylor, 2005, pp. 125–126), continuing,

The distinctions between working-class and middle-class unpaid work, formal and informal work and between those who call themselves volunteers and those who do not, are crucial in understanding contemporary narratives of unpaid work. Issues of power, privilege and respectability on the one hand, and community support, solidarity and reciprocity on the other, are likely to be embedded in the meanings and practices that exist today.

Recent approaches in research and policy have focused on increasing formal voluntary activity to foster the development of social capital, active citizenship, and social inclusion, forgetting about informal volunteering in the process (Woolvin & Hardill, 2013; Woolvin & Rutherford, 2013). Yet giving one's time outside of the formally organized

structures of volunteer-involving organizations is vital in the day-to-day operation of social life, especially in poorer communities (Stack, 1974), where close family and mutual volunteering are strong neighborhood characteristics helping people cope with “poverty, unemployment and wider processes of social exclusion” (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2141). These benefits are allied with ones that show informal volunteering to have much more significant outcomes for increasing participation rates for people at risk of social exclusion (Williams, 2003). Yet these achievements, because they occur in unstructured environments, are more difficult to measure and, as a result, less likely to receive attention. Working-class women get doubly delegitimized, as there remain socially constructed assumptions about what counts and does not count as “work,” generally along gender lines, with unpaid labor and community care not seen as economically productive when actually it is an activity that allows economies to continue (Irving, 2008).

Informal Community Work: Capital, Class, and Illegitimate Behaviors

[T]he poorest sections of our society are often named and known as people of little “value,” and the neighbourhoods they live in have come to represent the “chaos” and “lawlessness” of Britain’s “underclass” through a de-valuing process that is connected to practice, and predominantly through the legitimization of cultural resources connected to middle-class lifestyles. (Mckenzie, 2016, p. 35)

Einolf and colleagues (2016, p. 236) argue that we have limited knowledge on the role informal volunteering plays in society. I would argue that we have more information on it than we think, but that knowledge is not necessarily in the usual places volunteering researchers look. Instead of examining nonprofit research journals, we should turn to the sociology of community and working-class life, which fully documents the role informal volunteering plays in helping communities “get by.” “Getting by” is a Bourdieusian sociological concept which argues that bonding social capital (bringing similar people closer together) enables communities to get by—cope with the difficulties of everyday life but remain in a relative social and economic stasis—whereas bridging social capital (bringing different people together in weak ties) enables people to “get on”—ergo becoming socially mobile but less embedded in their locale. For many poorer people, their neighborhood is a source of bonding social capital enabling them to “get by,” rather than an arena for bridging social capital enabling them to “get on” (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001, p. 2105). Formal volunteering for voluntary organizations is well established as a vehicle for those with more educational qualifications, for instance, to develop weak ties as a route to build careers (Egerton & Mullan, 2008), whereas informal volunteering serves more as a bonding mechanism.

In her recent study of the St Anns estate in Nottingham, Lisa Mckenzie (2015, 2016) analyzes the sense of belonging and community which develop in an area of poverty, crime, and immense stigma and negative stereotyping from the wider locality. Drawing on deep ethnographic data and her position as an insider researcher who lived

in St Anns, Mckenzie details the complex social ecology in which local people live. Instead of the “bleakly homogenous landscape” portrayed by politicians of council estates, Mckenzie finds both a collective adaptation to conditions and cooperation in “getting by.” The residents of similar areas may not have the capitals recognized and legitimated by wider society, but they have capitals nonetheless and participate in a local system where they and their families are valued and have a shared reliance. The young mothers on the estate rely on informal childcare, helping and looking out for each other, a system which aided the women’s family security, made possible by “being known.” Such security is found in Skeggs’s (1997, 2004a) research, where working-class women, in their local situation, were able to produce value for themselves, both from and despite wider negative attributions of their social positioning. Yet central to our question here is how this value does not translate externally and how crucial volunteering in one context matters little in another. Mckenzie (2015, pp. 84–86) tells us about Tony, a St Anns resident and former champion boxer, who spends his time in the local boxing gym, giving lessons and talking about the sport which is his life. He is a well-known local character, well liked and respected, and an asset to the community, but because he is not in work, his social and cultural capital is inherently localized and untradeable. Similarly, Mckenzie (2015) recounts the local women who “often worked voluntarily and unofficially within the community, although they were rarely acknowledged for the work they did” (p. 205). The belonging which comes from being valued and respected in St Anns is a valuable crutch to those who live there, but only in St Anns, whereas to wider Nottingham this belonging was seen as a negative. One’s class position, determined to a large extent by the prevalence of wealth or poverty in the area in which one is brought up, plays a hugely significant role in access to cultural and social resources.

Such a relationship can also be seen in various pieces of U.S.-centered scholarship. Christine Walley’s (2009) autobiographical account is of the hidden and not so hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) suffered by her family throughout 20th-century Chicago, an account documenting the crumbling facade of the American Dream. Walley focuses on the informal networks of her family’s working-class neighborhood. She highlights the support structures that arose as the steel mills shut, and the working-class men of her family and neighborhood were made redundant. “Given that his role as family provider was central to his identity, as it was for many men in the area, the closing of the mills devastated my father” (Walley, 2009, p. 127). This led to the trauma of being out of work, in areas where having a job and keeping up the appearance of civil standing were vital. Walley recalls how, as the stigma of unemployment hit and as the suicide and alcoholism rates of the area dramatically increased, her father stayed home to smoke incessantly and watch nothing but the white fuzz of the broken television. However, in response to the crisis, the close-knit community found informal networks to support each other; when the formal networks such as company pensions and government subsidized welfare had failed, the informal community support structures proved vital. Local groups of residents brought her family care baskets, and neighbors left anonymous bundles of money in their mail box, acts also found in Forrest and Kearns’s (2001) research. Carol Stack’s (1974) *All Our Kin* showed how

Black families in poverty were intertwined in a web of swapping goods and favors, which did not lift them out of poverty (“get on”) but did help them survive as a network (“get by”), findings somewhat replicated in more recent ethnographic work among disadvantaged Americans (e.g., Desmond, 2016/2017). Similar narratives can be found in recent popular histories of the working-class (Todd, 2014), just as Young and Willmott (1957/2007) highlighted the reciprocal childcare, companionship, and “mutual aid agency” (Butler, 2015, p. 19) in working-class communities in East London 60 years ago. Lewis’s (1961) misappropriated “culture of poverty” research in Mexico showed a similar resilient and defensive value system of mutual solidarity. Today, Tyler’s (2019) research into community responses to austerity economics—where women who cannot afford to both work and care for loved ones need to batch cook and freeze meals to ward against their neighbor’s future hunger—is another example of what Balani (2019) terms “the kinship of the fucked-over.”

Discussion: Rethinking Informal Volunteering

Rethinking Definitions

Given these arguments, and given the aforementioned trouble with definitions, inequalities, and the bounds of inquiry, should voluntary action researchers withdraw from “informal volunteering”? Reading the nonprofit literature, one frequently finds informal volunteering mentioned merely because authors say they are not talking about it, as a way to draw a line of demarcation around formal volunteering, the actual subject of their study. At first instance, the lack of charitable organization or associational presence in the realm of informal volunteering could make us question whether the object we are discussing is volunteering. Surely words such as helping or neighborliness are more useful as concepts. Terminologically, this argument has merit if we wish academic concepts to bear resemblance to how ordinary people talk about their own lives. The activities outlined in this article as informal volunteering are generally embedded in different kinds of social practices, perhaps related more to interdependencies in community life. To apply the word “volunteering” to such activities is to put things in a contextless framework, seeking to take the dominant paradigm approach to formal volunteering (Rochester et al., 2010) and extend it into the realm of the kind neighbor. But how volunteering is defined exists independently of how individuals define it, because generations of scholars and legal professionals have worked to serve policy and legislation which required a precise compartmentalization (Cnaan et al., 1996), the constructions of which definitions emerged from people’s usage. To remove the label “volunteer” from people who undertake informal volunteering, which part of “doing things without pay, of one’s own free will, for the benefit of someone else” would we be saying they weren’t doing? To spend time worrying about terminology and definition distracts us from the core work of inclusion, representation, and the politics of legitimacy. I do not think that voluntary action researchers should pull back from thinking about informal volunteering because the social relations in which it is embedded are different: instead, this difference needs to be recognized, and policy and

practice need to learn from informal volunteering's importance in communities in which high levels of formal volunteering are not recorded.

Rethinking Policy

Volunteering researchers need to increase our efforts to examine informal volunteering, because these everyday behaviors of helping and kindness can provide deep insight for the successful functioning of voluntary agencies and improving the lives of beneficiaries. We should intensify our research into informal volunteering, to build our evidence base as to what this form of voluntary action means for people, to see what the nonprofit sector can learn from the voluntary action occurring outside of any sector, and maybe try and reverse tendencies toward introversion and isolation which correlate strongly with unhappiness, irrespective of wealth (C. Smith & Davidson, 2014). But what is perhaps most important, and what the studies discussed here show, is that we should not try and study, think about, and design policy concerning informal volunteering through the prism of formal volunteering. It has been argued that in focusing only on formal volunteering when measuring and supporting voluntary activity, volunteering policy fails to acknowledge the extent of the "below the radar" participation which takes place (Woolvin & Hardill, 2013). There are gaps in the provision of public services which are currently bridged by informal volunteering and assistance, and we do not have a full picture of or ability to measure this participation (Woolvin & Rutherford, 2013). It means different things to different people, and we need to examine value systems external to the dominant value system (Mckenzie, 2016, p. 31) on their own terms, often qualitatively. Informal volunteering should be paid attention to and counted, but also treated as different, not merely the weird forgotten cousin of formal voluntary action. One positive intervention witnessed during the writing of this piece is the launch of the new Scottish Government (2019) volunteering strategy *Volunteering For All*, which not only discusses informal volunteering as much as formal volunteering, but addresses its importance for disadvantaged groups ability to "get by," but recognizes the challenges in building social mobility on it, when it has a different character and tenor to formal volunteering. This is in stark contrast to the recent Civil Society Strategy for England (HM Government, 2018), which ignores informal volunteering's value, a major (yet predictable) oversight, especially given the importance of mutual aid in getting communities through the coronavirus pandemic.

Rethinking Value

A current tension is whether volunteering has become too instrumentalized, especially for the young, who, through myriad government policies in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, have been told to volunteer to build up their résumés and bolster college applications (Dean, 2014; Holdsworth, 2017; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011), with the added unfairness that some young people from poorer or ethnic-minority backgrounds face discriminatory structural barriers holding them back even if they do participate in such "hope labour" (Taylor-Collins, 2019). It seems discriminating, therefore, if informal

volunteering is not socially credited, valued, or legitimated in the same way as formal volunteering; if it were, then those individuals (often women, people of color, those with disabilities, the unemployed, those experiencing disadvantage [DDCMS, 2018]) who may be undertaking informal volunteering more, or for whom it plays a more significant role in their life, could use it to “sell” themselves to potential employers or educational institutions as those with more exchangeable cultural capital do. Volunteering policy and culture which excludes informal volunteering isolates those who choose to give in this way and draws a line of demarcation between what is seen as “good” or valued volunteering and that which is not. As shown, informal volunteering does not conform to the desires of the market, as it does not produce marketable exchange-value (although it may provide the support that allows these to develop). An individual who goes for a job interview would undoubtedly be encouraged to list their formal volunteering experiences on their résumé, but not their informal ones, such as being a good neighbor or occasionally mowing the lawn for an elderly person on their street. There is a heavily classed “symbolic economy” (Skeggs, 2004a, p. 77) where some behaviors and not others attribute value, and as such aid mobility and advantage. The inequality in the legitimation of volunteering is another area in which the working-class “are not allowed access to the resources and technologies required for self-production” (Skeggs, 2004b, p. 91), and instead are forced to “dis-identify with their working-classness, their culture, in order to ‘self-improve’” (Mckenzie, 2016, p. 27) in the “accepted” middle-class way. We need to build subjectivity from alternate use-values based on living life with a different (not worse) set of values. There clearly is, in St Anns or post-industrial communities, a strong sense of collectivism and social value, but few material resources or external respect. As the work of Mckenzie and other feminist scholars of class shows, each locality has its own social order, with different resources and identities prescribed different values, which are exchanged for different rates, with their “worth” perhaps out of kilter—and “always read as immoral” (Skeggs, 2004b, p. 91)—with “mainstream” value systems: a local, contextualized capital, in line with the argument for situated and embodied geographies of volunteering (F. Smith et al., 2010). By engaging more with informal volunteering, we are in turn challenging the “entrenched universalising values of the centre” (Shields, 1991, p. 277).

However, I want to offer a note of caution, and in effect argue against such a—supposedly logical—conclusion. There are some (e.g., Dean, 2015; Rochester, 2013) who worry that voluntary action has lost its soul somewhat under the auspices of neo-liberalism, that it is a problem that formal volunteering has become something young people are encouraged to “collect,” as volunteering is fundamentally changed in the process, forming part of a “cult of experience” (Holdsworth, 2017). Njie’s (2018) work on microfinance in Gambia demonstrates how the state has a desire to take advantage of the informal, interpersonal loans and saving scheme “osusu,” with dangers in trying to monopolize, formalize, and “use” informal community relationships for state purposes. Similarly, in very practical terms, if we start to build a society where a line on a résumé about regularly looking after a neighbor’s dog or babysitting for a friend is given similar exchange-value as an occasional formal voluntary shift at a homelessness shelter, does the former not just become another resource to compete

over (or exaggerate, or lie about)? One cannot decry the marketization of community life (Dean, 2015) and then say we should marketize more of it. It would be wrong to think of informal caring in the same way as formal volunteering: we would not want people competing over how much they have looked after their friends and neighbors akin to the way applications lead them to compete using their formal volunteering. Yet nor would we wish those (young) people who continue to provide overwhelming love and support within their kinship circles to be denied the opportunity to make use of that commitment to “get on.” As someone who regularly does recruitment events for prospective students at my university, a potential student who spoke of their caring responsibilities, their neighborliness, and the continual support they offer to those around them would appear to me to possess the very characteristics that we look for in our students and fellow citizens. But the way social rules work, one doubts a student would “sell” themselves like that. The data point to the inequality of the current situation; keeping things as they are reinforces existing hierarchies, fails to dissect assumed morality of the middle-classes (Savage, 2003), and amplifies preexisting inequalities, the opposite of what civic participation is normatively meant to do (Eliasoph, 2013)—but to change the situation and value informal volunteering *in the same way* as we value formal volunteering risks damage. Instead, the nonprofit research community can start by showing the same attention to informal volunteering as to formal volunteering and encouraging policy practitioners, as seems to have started in Scotland, to do the same. Informal and formal volunteering are not the same, but they should be treated equally. By building on the small but growing number of empirical volunteering studies informed by Bourdieu’s theories of symbolic and cultural capital (Davies, 2018; Dean, 2016; Harflett, 2015; Snee, 2013), this gap can be bridged. This work should happen in multiple contexts within and across communities and countries—a limitation of this article is that it has focused almost entirely on the U.K. and U.S. contexts due to space constraints, and the position of informal volunteering in relation to wider social relations will exist differently elsewhere, such as less unequal, more social democratic states.

Conclusion

What does it mean to take a critical approach, as the convenors of this symposium requested, and what does it mean to take a critical approach to the concept of informal volunteering? Within my own discipline, a critical sociology seeks to uncover the “most profoundly buried structures” of the social world (Bourdieu, 1996) and bring to the surface those things that we take for granted, allowing us to examine those parts of everyday life that are neither neutral nor natural, but have become unthinking orthodoxies. It is the critical scholar’s aim to examine those things we have stopped thinking about. While all scholars interested in voluntary action may turn to examine informal volunteering, a critical approach asks different questions. Academic inquiry may examine the extent and type of informal volunteering, counting and codifying it, analyzing it against standard socioeconomic variables (gender, race, class, location), or identifying its intersection with other voluntary or civic activities, or asking about

its antecedents and motivations. Such measurement is useful and important, but only tells us so much about buried structures. The critical questions I have explored here ask “How are boundaries drawn around different forms of non-paid work, and whom do these boundaries benefit?” “Whose purpose is served by maligning everyday care or not thinking of it as ‘work’?” and “What relation should informal volunteering have to policy?” These are not questions that have definitive answers, but should be elevated from their position of minority concerns within volunteering scholarship, both as a *scientific* pursuit, to learn all we can about the social world, and as a *political* imperative because if the crises in care and community continue, alongside an increasingly instrumental approach to volunteering, capitalism’s dominance over the informal realm of voluntary help and care will happen before we notice.

Authors’ Note

This article has been long in the making. It would not have been possible without the support of colleagues and critical friends at various conference presentations and the detailed, supportive work of anonymous reviewers. Finally, many thanks to the hard work and vision of the three editors of this special issue.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Jon Dean  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3338-1957>

References

- Alcock, P., Macmillan, R., & Bulloch, S. (2012). *The worst of times*. Third Sector Research Centre. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/reports/futures-dialogues-docs/bpp1-worstoftimes.pdf>
- Balani, S. (2019, April). Viewpoint: Apna—One of our own. *Discover Society*. <https://discover.society.org/2019/04/03/viewpoint-apna-one-of-our-own/>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14–25.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power*. Stanford University Press.
- Butler, L. (2015). Michael Young, the Institute of Community Studies, and the politics of kinship. *Twentieth Century British History*, 26(2), 203–224.

- Carson, E. (1999). Comment: On defining and measuring volunteering in the United States and abroad. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 62(4), 67–71.
- Cnaan, R. A., Handy, F., & Wadsworth, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 25(3), 364–383.
- CNCS. (2018). *Volunteering in U.S. hits record high; Worth \$167 billion*. <https://content.gov-delivery.com/accounts/USCNCS/bulletins/21b2aaa>
- Crittenden, J. (2019). Volunteering as a strategy for combatting social isolation. In L. W. Kaye & C. M. Singer (Eds.), *Social isolation of older adults: Strategies to bolster health and well-being* (pp. 119–134). Springer.
- Davies, J. (2018). “We’d get slagged and bullied”: Understanding barriers to volunteering among young people in deprived urban areas. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 9(3), 255–272.
- Dean, J. (2014). How structural factors promote instrumental motivations within youth volunteering: A qualitative analysis of volunteer brokerage. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 5(2), 231–247.
- Dean, J. (2015). Volunteering, the market, and neoliberalism. *People, Place and Policy*, 9(2), 139–148.
- Dean, J. (2016). Class diversity and youth volunteering in the UK: Applying Bourdieu’s habitus and cultural capital. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 45(Suppl. 1), 95–113.
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. (2018). *Community life survey 2017–2018*.
- Desmond, M. (2017). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. Penguin. (Original work published 2016)
- Dowling, E. (2016). Valorised but not valued? Affective remuneration, social reproduction and feminist politics beyond the crisis. *British Politics*, 11(4), 452–468.
- Egerton, M., & Mullan, K. (2008). Being a pretty good citizen: An analysis and monetary valuation of formal and informal voluntary work by gender and educational attainment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 59(1), 145–164.
- Einolf, C., Prouteau, L., Nezghina, T., & Ibrayeva, A. (2016). Informal, unorganized volunteering. In D. H. Smith, R. Stebbins, & J. Grotz (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of volunteering, civic participation, and nonprofit associations* (pp. 223–241). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Einolf, C., & Smith, D. H. (2011, November 17–19). *Informal volunteering: A vast and neglected part of the nonprofit sector [Paper presentation]*. The 2011 ARNOVA conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Eliasoph, N. (2013). *The Politics of Volunteering*. Polity Press.
- Forrest, R., & Kearns, A. (2001). Social cohesion, social capital and the neighbourhood. *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2125–2143.
- Harflett, N. (2015). “Bringing them with personal interests”: The role of cultural capital in explaining who volunteers. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 6(1), 3–19.
- HM Government. (2018). *Building a stronger civil society: A strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises*. Cabinet Office.
- Holdsworth, C. (2017). The cult of experience: Standing out from the crowd in an era of austerity. *Area*, 49(3), 296–302.
- Hustinx, L., & Meijs, L. (2011). Re-embedding volunteerism: In search of a new collective ground. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 2(1), 5–21.
- Irving, Z. (2008). Gender and work. In D. Richardson & V. Robinson (Eds.), *Introducing gender and women’s studies* (pp. 160–184). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, K. (2006). Giving and volunteering as distinct forms of civic engagement: The role of community resources and personal integration in forming helping. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 35(2), 249–266.

- Kearns, A., & Parkinson, M. (2001). The significance of neighbourhood. *Urban Studies*, 38(12), 2103–2110.
- Lawler, S. (2008). *Identity: Sociological perspectives*. Polity Press.
- Lewis, O. (1961). *The children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican family*. Penguin.
- Lindsey, R., & Mohan, J. (2018). *Continuity and change in voluntary action: Patterns, trends and understandings*. Policy Press.
- Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A., & Smith, J. D. (2007). *Helping out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*. Cabinet Office.
- McCulloch, A., Mohan, J., & Smith, P. (2012). Patterns of social capital, voluntary activity, and area deprivation in England. *Environment and Planning A*, 44(5), 1130–1147.
- Mckenzie, L. (2015). *Getting by: Estates, class and culture in austerity Britain*. Policy Press.
- Mckenzie, L. (2016). Narrative, ethnography and class inequality: Taking Bourdieu into a British council estate. In J. Thatcher, N. Ingram, C. Burke, & J. Abrahams (Eds.), *Bourdieu: The next generation* (pp. 25–36). Routledge.
- Mohan, J., and Bulloch, S. (2012). *The idea of a 'civic core': What are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales?* Third Sector Research Centre. Third Sector Research Centre. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-73.pdf>
- Musick, M., & Wilson, J. (2008). *Volunteers: A social profile*. Indiana University Press.
- Njie, S. (2018, November 15–17). *Poverty, community, gender and microfinance in Gambia [Paper presentation]*. The 2018 ARNOVA conference, Austin, TX, United States.
- Putnam, R. (2015). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. Simon & Schuster.
- Reay, D., Hollingworth, S., Williams, K., Crozier, G., Jamieson, F., James, D., & Beedell, P. (2007). “A darker shade of pale?” Whiteness, the middle classes and multi-ethnic inner city schooling. *Sociology*, 41(6), 1041–1060.
- Rochester, C. (2013). *Rediscovering voluntary action: The beat of a different drum*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rochester, C., Paine, A. E., & Howlett, S. (2010). *Volunteering and society in the 21st century*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Savage, M. (2003). Review article: A new class paradigm? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(4), 535–541.
- Scottish Government. (2019). *Volunteering for all: Our national framework*.
- Sennett, R., & Cobb, J. (1972). *The hidden injuries of class*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shields, R. (1991). *Places on the margin: Alternative geographies of modernity*. Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. SAGE.
- Skeggs, B. (2004a). *Class, self, culture*. Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (2004b). Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and “the self.” In L. Adkins & B. Skeggs (Eds.), *Feminism after Bourdieu* (pp. 75–96). Blackwell.
- Smith, C., & Davidson, H. (2014). *The paradox of generosity: Giving we receive, grasping we lose*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D. H. (1995). Some challenges in nonprofit and voluntary action research. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 24(2), 99–101.
- Smith, F., Timbrell, H., Woolvin, M., Muirhead, S., & Fyfe, N. (2010). Enlivened geographies of volunteering: Situated, embodied and emotional practices of volunteering. *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 126(4), 258–274.
- Smith, J. D. (1998). *The 1997 national survey of volunteering*. Institute for Volunteering Research.

- Snee, H. (2013). Doing something “worthwhile”: Intersubjectivity and morality in gap year narratives. *The Sociological Review*, 62(4), 843–861.
- Stack, C. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a Black community*. Basic Books.
- Taniguchi, H. (2012). The determinants of formal and informal volunteering: Evidence from the American time use survey. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 23(4), 920–939.
- Taylor, R. (2005). Rethinking voluntary work. *The Sociological Review*, 53(Suppl. 2), 119–135.
- Taylor-Collins, E. (2019). *Working-class girls and youth social action: “Hope labour”?* Third Sector Research Centre. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/tsrc/hope-labour.pdf>
- Todd, S. (2014). *The people: The rise and fall of the working class 1910-2010*. John Murray.
- Tonge, J., Mycock, A., & Jeffery, B. (2012). Does citizenship education make young people better-engaged citizens? *Political Studies*, 60(3), 578–602.
- Tyler, I. (2019). *Stigma machines*. Zed Books.
- Walley, C. (2009). Deindustrializing Chicago: A daughter’s story. In H. Gusterson & C. Besterman (Eds.), *The insecure American: How we got here and what we should do about it* (pp. 113–139). University of California Press.
- Williams, C. (2003). Developing voluntary activity: Some policy issues arising from the 2001 Home Office citizenship survey. *Social Policy and Society*, 2(4), 285–294.
- Wilson, J., & Musick, M. (1997). Who cares? Toward an integrated theory of volunteer work. *American Sociological Review*, 62(5), 694–713.
- Woolvin, M., & Hardill, I. (2013). Localism, volunteering and devolution: Experiences, opportunities and challenges in a changing policy context. *Local Economy*, 28(3), 275–290.
- Woolvin, M., & Rutherford, A. (2013). *Volunteering and public service reform in rural Scotland*. https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/235107/volunteering_and_public_service_reform.pdf
- Young, M., & Willmott, P. (2007). *Family and kinship in east London*. Penguin. (Original work published 1957)

Author Biography

Jon Dean is an Associate Professor in Politics and Sociology at Sheffield Hallam University. His research focuses on inequalities within the nonprofit sector and volunteering, social theory, and qualitative methodology. His book *The Good Glow: Charity and the Symbolic Power of Doing Good* was published by Policy Press in 2020.