

# ***Third Sector Review:*** **Reflections on volunteering**

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## **Abstract**

*Volunteering is a very important aspect of the third sector and civil society more generally. Volunteers have the highest levels of social capital and are active citizens. Volunteering is very much alive and well in Australia and New Zealand, though perhaps it is taking a different shape. The past 20 years have seen the growth of a volunteering infrastructure in Australia, and an enormous expansion in research – and hence in levels of understanding of volunteering, how it operates and with what consequences. ANZTSR and Third Sector Review have been an important part of this evolution.*

## **Keywords**

Volunteering; social capital; Australia and New Zealand.

## **Introduction**

My interest in volunteering has primarily occurred because I saw volunteering as a crucial aspect in the creation of social capital, particularly at the community level (Onyx 2001, 2003). Many studies have identified the motivation for volunteering as being both for personal benefit and for the benefit of others (Kenny et al. 2015). We know, for instance, that older people who volunteer are healthier and live longer (Onyx & Warburton 2003). We also know that volunteers have the highest levels of social capital, including higher levels of trust, community participation and informal networks (Onyx & Bullen 2001). They are active citizens.

At one point there was some concern that both social capital stocks and volunteering was diminishing in Australia at least, with more women in the workforce and fewer people able or willing to spend the necessary time (Lyons & Fabiansson 1998). We now know that volunteering is very much alive and well in Australia and New Zealand, though perhaps it is taking a different shape.

Some statistics illustrate the state of play. In Australia the Bureau of Statistics provides periodic data. Most recently, the ABS's General Social Survey results for 2014 suggest that formal volunteering – that is, unpaid work given freely to an organisation – increased continually from 1995 to reach a peak of 36% of the adult population in 2010, but then declined to 31% in 2014, with the recent drop occurring for both males and females. Still, it appears that roughly one third of Australian adults continue to volunteer. In New Zealand the picture appears similar (Volunteering NZ 2016), with 30.6% of New Zealanders undertaking some formal volunteer work (i.e. for a group or an organisation) in the four weeks before the General Social Survey. Over the last 20 years there has been some debate concerning the definition of 'volunteering'. Of particular interest is the level of informal volunteering – that is, helping people outside the family. This helping may be significant but is not usually counted in formal surveys. However, the recent Australian General Social Survey did attempt to assess this, and found that informal volunteering is higher, at close to 50%. Nearly everyone (95%) felt able to get support from outside the household in times of crisis, suggesting strong overall social capital networks.

Of particular importance to the growth of volunteering in Australia, and to our greater knowledge of the dynamics of volunteering, was the development of Volunteering Australia at the national as well as state level. I was particularly impressed by the creation of a new journal, *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, under the management of Annette Maher. The journal included a mixture of peer-reviewed research reports and non-reviewed but nonetheless informative reflections by practitioners. ANZTSR and *Third Sector Review* were supportive of this process. The *Australian Journal of Volunteering* published a commemorative edition in 2001, the International Year of Volunteers. It noted that some

32% of the civilian population over eighteen years old were volunteers at that time, a growth of 8% over the 1995 estimate, with the increase occurring in all age groups and across both sexes (p. 5). More recently, Volunteering Australia has modified its definition of 'volunteering' to include some forms of informal helping. This increased interest in volunteering has led, over the past two decades, to a much more sophisticated understanding of the importance of volunteering and of its changing nature. It was therefore very unfortunate that in 2012 Volunteering Australia (until then located in Melbourne) lost much of its federal funding and the journal ceased publishing on a regular basis from 2009.

In 2013 a national volunteering conference was hosted by Volunteering South Australian and Northern Territory. At this conference a research stream was once again incorporated in the general conference, and a research round table discussed the need to strengthen relationships between academia, government and the sector, and to develop ways to make academic research more widely applicable for the field. The new CEO of Volunteering Australia, by this time located in Canberra, lacked the resources to significantly pursue this agenda. Nonetheless, four papers from this conference were subsequently published as a special feature in *Third Sector Review* in 2014. In 2016 a national Australian Volunteering conference was again held, with conference papers submitted for publication to a special edition of *Third Sector Review* for publication in 2017.

As I have written in this journal and elsewhere, volunteering is key to the formation and maintenance of social capital at the local community level. While feminist critiques of the 1970s and '80s suggested that volunteering devalued women's domestic and caring roles, an analysis of social capital and its impact on the social and economic functioning of society provides a new perspective. Social capital is generated through participation in social networks, most of which occurs outside paid employment. As with traditional caring roles, much of the work of community network maintenance is done by women, and is often invisible, unacknowledged and unmeasured. With the focus on social capital, this work may be both recognised and positively revalued.

Network maintenance may occur through participation as volunteers in formal organisations or community events. It may also occur through informal friendship links or simple neighbourliness. There is now mounting evidence of the crucial role such network maintenance plays in the sustenance of a healthy civil society, political stability and economic development (Onyx & Leonard 2000).

In a larger ARC qualitative study, we examined the micro-processes by which formal volunteering generates social capital (Onyx 2003). We identified four distinct ways in which volunteers assist in community level social capital. First, volunteers may play a key role as community builders by creating new organisations and services. Second, volunteers play a key role in developing bonding, intra-community links. Third, volunteers play a mediating role in community networks, particularly between professional and lay networks. Fourth, given their key location in community networks, they also play a key role in developing bridging links with other organisations and communities of interest. Given this key locational position, they may be instrumental in creating or obstructing broader community networks. That is, they play a potential bridge-building or gate-keeping role in network building, a role that may facilitate or impede inclusivity.

As volunteering has become better recognised and understood, the structures in which community service volunteering occurs have become increasingly well supported but also more controlled within the bureaucratic structure of large charitable organisations. Volunteers are more carefully selected, trained and supported, but also managed within strict ethical guidelines. As I have identified (Onyx 2013), this can lead to a situation where the very essence of the caring volunteer/client relationship can be put at jeopardy. Indeed, the best volunteers are those who 'break the rules' and occasionally cross the boundary between a professional caring role and friendship. I believe the whole point of volunteering in this context, and of the creation of social capital networks, depends on the volunteers' capacity to form real person-to-person connections separate from the formal and detached professional care provided by paid professional workers.

Much of the recent research on volunteering has identified new and different ways in which volunteering may now occur. While the traditional volunteering in community services, such as that mentioned above, continues, there are many very different forms of volunteering emerging. For example, in a collaborative ARC project with Volunteering Australia, we explored the nature of short-term episodic volunteering at the ANZTSR conference in Adelaide in November 2006 (Leonard et al. 2007). We identified that volunteers sought greater flexibility in the hours they volunteer: short-term options, one-off volunteering opportunities, family volunteering and virtual volunteering opportunities. This requires more careful matching of volunteer and potential client/community needs.

One such opportunity for new forms of volunteering occurred in the New Partnership Project, promoting development in outback towns through voluntary programs for 'grey nomads'. Grey nomads are defined as people aged over 50, who adopt an extended period of travel independently within their own country. Many grey nomads spend considerable time exploring the inland of Australia and visit many outback towns. Many small outback towns are experiencing decline, especially those that are dependent on resource industries. They experience reduced government and private services, and a loss of employment opportunities. The evidence suggests that grey nomads make a substantial economic contribution to rural communities. We found that grey nomads had a wide range of skilled trades that could be of use to people in isolated rural communities on a volunteer basis. Most grey nomads would try to experience all that an area had to offer before moving on, extending their stay if there were activities of interest. They were enthusiastic about experiencing and learning about the outback. They valued the information provided by locals. They enjoyed community events, such as fairs and barbecue fundraisers. About half of those interviewed identified voluntary activities as part of their future plans. A few had worked on stations for the experience of that lifestyle. Over 80% reported good or excellent health. Grey nomads formed strong social networks among themselves, and to a limited extent these networks of support extended to the local communities. The

research suggested that there is untapped potential for the development of mutually beneficial relationships between grey nomads and isolated rural communities through voluntary programs. That ARC project proceeded to actually facilitate such volunteer projects in half a dozen outback towns, with some outstanding results (Onyx & Leonard 2010).

There are many other specific forms of volunteering. One is international volunteering, in which trained and skilled volunteers from Australia and New Zealand spend several months in (usually) a developing country, working with and directed by a local organisation to assist in capacity development. One research paper explored the supports and barriers to successful outcomes of the Australian volunteers for international development, managed by AusAID, and reported in the 2014 feature edition of *Third Sector Review* (Hawkes 2014).

There is another category of volunteer that is rarely discussed or even identified, yet which may be even more important – not only to the development of social capital but also to the capacity of civil society to produce social change. These are the activists. They are citizens who act voluntarily to form new networks and organisations to deal with urgent social or environmental problems. They take the initiative, come together, identify paths of action, perhaps protest, and perhaps construct alternative or new projects or services. Arguably, they form the highest form of active citizenship. They are volunteers but seldom identified as such.

One such example was discussed in the *Third Sector Review* special issue on environmental organisations in 2012. Climate Action Groups (CAGs) emerged all over Australia in response to urgent concerns about and need for a response to climate change and the dangers already identified (Kent 2012). These grassroots groups are strongly associated with place. They are not managed by any national formal organisation, but rather generate their own action, developing alternative practices towards a low-carbon society. They do, however, network with other similar CAGs in order to share ideas and potentially to collaborate. They are generally driven by their members' passion for change, and operate within their own resources.

Other examples of citizens coming together to create new community projects on a voluntary basis have been documented in small rural communities in Australia, Peru and Sweden (Onyx & Edwards 2010). Whole communities are able to come together, to 'reinvent themselves' in order to generate new forms of enterprise and services to meet urgent social and economic needs. They are entrepreneurs, and they may ultimately generate economic wealth and jobs for the community. But they are also volunteers.

A particularly strong example of voluntary citizen action occurs in response to a disaster. Immediately following a disaster, normal community infrastructure is likely to be immobilised or destroyed. Government action will be mobilised, but that takes time. The immediate need for help must come from the affected community itself. Citizens come together, provide material and social support to those in greatest need, pool the available resources, self-organise. Examples of this happening were explored at the ANZTSR conference in Christchurch in relation to the Christchurch earthquakes, which destroyed much of the city. It became clear through that discussion that much more needs to be understood, especially by government bureaucracies in their coordination with existing community infrastructure and grassroots networks. The special issue of *Third Sector Review* in 2014 documented some aspects of third sector response to the earthquakes, as did the panel of keynote speakers at the conference. The point to be made, however, is that these are active citizens working voluntarily within their communities to assist fellow citizens in need and to rebuild or adapt local organisational capacity. Similar stories could be found following major Australian bushfires. Some of these citizens might be paid for their efforts, but most are not. They are simply volunteer activists who care about their community and their fellow citizens.

It is the stuff of these actions that create viable, thriving, happy communities. Much more needs to be studied and documented in order to understand better the nature of volunteering, and the generation of social capital.

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