

This article examines the special role of volunteers in the formation of social capital. While there is a growing recognition that volunteering is important and does contribute to social capital, there is very little understanding of the micro-processes involved. A qualitative study of volunteers and their clients examines these processes. The argument of the article is fourfold. Firstly, that volunteers play a key role as community builders by creating new organisations and services. Secondly, that volunteers play a key role in developing bonding, intra-community links. Thirdly, that volunteers play a mediating role in community networks, particularly between professional and lay networks. Fourthly, that, 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 position, they may be instrumental in creating, or alternatively obstructing, broader community networks. That is, they play a potential bridge-builder or gatekeeper role in network building – a role that may facilitate or impede inclusiveness.

The special position of volunteers in the formation of social capital

Jenny Onyx, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Rosemary Leonard and Helen Hayward-Brown, University of Western Sydney, Australia

Introduction

This article examines the special role of volunteers in the formation of social capital. There is a growing recognition of the role of social capital in maintaining a healthy and vibrant civil society. Volunteering is

a core component of social capital. As social capital comes to be recognised as important, so there is a revaluing of volunteering, not only in terms of the outcomes it produces in goods and services, but also in terms of the process.

However, there is little understanding of how this process occurs. This article seeks to examine the micro-processes by which volunteering may contribute to social capital.

For the purposes of this article, we accept Putnam's definition of social capital:

Those features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1993).

A major focus of the literature on social capital is the building of capacity – the capacity of the community to facilitate co-ordinating actions or to solve collective problems. Communities with high levels of social capital, it is argued, are more likely to be able to build the organisational infrastructure or to mobilise the community action necessary to establish services or deal with an emergency – which may then generate further social capital. What is less clear is how this process occurs.

We take volunteering to refer to the willing provision of unpaid labour. Most analyses restrict the concept

to formal volunteering within the context of a formal organisation, and it is usually measured as such. The provision of the unpaid work of caring and informal neighbourly support is not usually considered as volunteering, and is seldom measured, although it is also likely to contribute to social capital. We refer to this as 'informal volunteering'. In all cases, unpaid labour is a contribution to the well-being of others and the community at large. At the broader level, we identify the vital role of participation within the civic life of the community. This is also unpaid but not usually counted as volunteering. It may be referred to broadly as citizenship. All these activities, and more, contribute to the development of social capital.

The relationship between volunteering and social capital has not been fully explored in the literature. In some cases, volunteering is seen as an equivalent concept to social capital. Some international comparative studies use incidence of volunteering as a proxy for social capital (see, for example, the discussion by Dekker, 2002). However, the relationship is more complex than this would suggest. For example, Putnam (2000) questions the connection, on the

grounds that reciprocity is usually seen as an important aspect of social capital, but reciprocity *per se* is not considered a feature of volunteering. Social capital, he argues, is about doing *with* other people rather than doing good *for* other people. We would argue that volunteering contains more reciprocity (that is, mutual gain) than this emphasis on altruism would suggest, but also that not all volunteering is necessarily beneficial for others. Nonetheless, most forms of volunteering generate social capital of some sort, although not all social capital is based on volunteering (Onyx and Leonard, 2000).

Volunteering and social capital are also empirically linked. A major empirical study by the first author (Onyx and Bullen, 2000) developed a measure of several aspects of social capital. Using this social capital scale, they found that formal volunteers in New South Wales community centres scored the highest social capital scores of any group, and across all measured factors (Onyx and Bullen, 2001). Those who volunteer on a formal basis are also actively involved in informal networks of care and support in addition to their formal volunteering work. We can conclude that formal volunteers generate

considerable social capital.

The distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital

Recent discussions distinguish between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital appears to be characterised by dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localised trust. Discussions of bonding and bridging to date suggest a model of society with cohesive, well-bonded groups linked to each other by loose ties. However, the concept of 'bridging' in particular remains unexamined. There are at least three ways in which the concept appears to be used in discussions of social capital, and the three uses do not necessarily go together:

- To refer to relationships that cross demographic divides of class, age, ethnicity etc (see, for example, Portes, 1998).
- To refer to bridges across structural holes, or gaps between networks that are not necessarily of dissimilar people, but where there has hitherto been little connection. Such gaps may occur, for example, as a result of geographical distance (see, for example, Burt, 1997).

- To refer to the capacity to access resources such as information, knowledge and finance from sources external to the organisation or community in question (see, for example, Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

A recent study of the mechanisms of networking (Leonard and Onyx, 2003) suggests that even bridging links are normally made through close ties – those normally described as bonding. People prefer to make bridging contacts through the intermediary of those they personally know and trust. The exception occurs in the case of professionals. People are prepared to bridge through loose ties comprising those professionals they trust as ‘experts’ (Giddens, 1990), but who also have shown a commitment to the wider community. Such professionals normally operate within, or in partnership with, the kind of community organisation in which volunteers are also active. It is possible that volunteers themselves create a bridge between ordinary members or clients and those professionals who are acting in a semi-volunteer role themselves.

The argument of the article is fourfold. Firstly, that volunteers play a key role as community builders by creating new organisations and services. Secondly, that volunteers

play a key role in developing bonding, intra-community links. Thirdly, that volunteers play a mediating role in community networks, particularly between professional and lay networks. Fourthly, that, given their key location in community networks, they also play a key role in developing bridging links with other organisations and communities of interest.

Methodology

The work reported here draws on an analysis of ten focus groups of women volunteers in New South Wales. This analysis was extended and corroborated by a series of follow-up individual interviews with clients, volunteers and their organisational co-ordinators.

Focus groups were obtained from two regions. One was centred on the south-west of the Sydney metropolitan area, a densely populated, largely working-class urban area marked by high growth, low levels of services and multiple social needs. The second centred on the Central West of New South Wales, a diverse rural region facing pressures of rural decline and similar levels of social need. There were focus groups in five country towns. Altogether, a total of 120 volunteers took part in the focus groups. The characteristics of the volunteers who

Table 1 Characteristics of volunteers

	South West Sydney	Central West
Age average (range)	58 (20s to 70s)	57 (teens to 80s)
NESB (number)	32% (16)	4% (3)
Hours per week volunteered (average)	8.5 hours	9.0 hours
Total number of organisations named	48 (9.6 per group)	77 (15.4 per group)
Number of participants	50 (6 to 14)	70 (10 to 18)

attended, and a breakdown of their organisations, is summarised in Table 1.

The focus group questions concerned paths into volunteering, personal benefits, relationships with clients, perceived outcomes for the community and for the organisation, and issues and problems arising. Each focus group ran for two hours. The discussion was recorded and transcribed.

Individual interviews were then held with a total of sixty people, divided equally between rural and urban, and including equal numbers of volunteers, co-ordinators and clients (ten of each in each area). Each interview explored in more detail the questions that were raised in the focus groups. In the case of the volunteers, some individual volunteers who had attended the focus group were

included to identify any discrepancies between the group and individual perception. The organisations they worked for provided a range of human services. In the city, the services addressed palliative care, home maintenance, family support, disability, cancer support, migrant education, day care for frail aged and drug abuse. In the country, volunteers were involved with youth activities, welfare service provision, palliative care, health services and auxiliaries, school activities, respite care, country women's associations and breast cancer support. Additional triangulation of data was then obtained from those who held a different position in relation to the volunteers, either as co-ordinator or as client of the volunteer services. All interviews were taped, transcribed and coded using nudist vivo software. For the purposes of this paper, only that data that has a

direct bearing on the research questions will be reported.

The role of volunteers in developing services

The first question concerns the role of volunteers in community building – that is, in developing organisations and services as the need arose. There was indeed a great deal of evidence that this occurred, particularly in rural areas. Examples discussed in focus groups and interviews included: a new cancer cottage; a new Care Flight helicopter; disabled facilities; dementia facilities; the Out of the Garage Youth Band; a dialysis unit; a fundraising concert to renovate a community hall:

Because the hall needed renovations, they had a fundraiser for the hall and the community is now back together again. That was all voluntary. But it was for the community's benefit ... it was a get-together. So I think it bound the community together (focus group, Central West).

In rural areas there was a general sense of 'helping to keep the wheels moving' for the community. For example, maintaining the Police Community Youth Club (PCYC), co-ordinating the local agricultural show, supporting the Royal Flying

Doctors' Service and the Regional Art Gallery, dealing with the homeless and maintaining the Bush Fire Brigade.

With a few exceptions, organisations in South West Metropolitan Sydney were well established. There was very little sense of making something new, creating a new service or lobbying for new legislation or better facilities. However, a number of volunteers were able to identify examples of their own involvement in establishing services in the past:

I joined Women in the Community ... they started the Women's Health Centre and also the B Neighbourhood Centre ... we started off by promoting tests for breast cancer and we got a doctor on site ... [Workers] are paid now. They weren't in the beginning, because we never got any money ... but they got a grant, and of course it's all grants now, you know (volunteer interview, SW Sydney).

Part of the difference between rural and urban volunteers hinged on the extent to which the services had become professionalised. In most cases, services appear to have been established by volunteers, who then sought funding to continue or expand these services. As funding was obtained,

professional (paid) workers took over more and more of the service delivery, including the administrative infrastructure. Many of those who helped to establish the service on a volunteer basis then moved into a management committee role and continued to take an interest in the governance of the service. The quotes above illustrate that governance role. There are many other examples:

Because I am chairperson ... once a month I probably meet with the co-ordinator or the programme manager for the service and we talk about issues that were relevant to her (volunteer, Central West).

Where the service had become highly professionalised, the volunteer role was reduced to a more routine and marginalised support role, particularly in urban areas. However, in small communities, such funding was less likely to become available, and volunteers were more likely to maintain their activist role.

Volunteers as bonding agents

The second question concerns the role volunteers play in developing bonding, intra-community networks. Both focus groups and volunteer interviews provided many examples of this activity:

The sense of community is obvious, but it is built up on volunteers. So if someone is sick, the town will rally around and raise the money that is needed (focus group, Central West).

In urban Sydney the sense of bonding was less with the community as a whole and more with other volunteers in the same organisation:

Just keeping in touch with the other volunteers ... because you become a tight network. You are working at a kind of level that you share things with other volunteers, that you probably would never share with other people again ... so of course you form bonds with them as well (volunteer, SW Sydney).

Volunteers are normally encouraged to maintain strict boundaries with clients, so there is little opportunity to generate a wider sense of bonding with the community as a whole in urban Sydney. It is different in rural areas, where volunteering and community life are more likely to merge. There is also a strong sense of reciprocity:

I think because we were all from similar backgrounds really with the same aim ... It was done for fun

and everybody was very much a volunteer and we were doing it for our children ... we met some nice people and we had fun on the weekends (volunteer, Central West).

Clients themselves generally express enormous appreciation of the organisation and the volunteers. Several acknowledged that coming to the organisation gave them a sense of community. For example, a parent support group in SW Sydney offered the only opportunity to break through the isolation experienced by young mothers in new housing estates:

Even though I don't have my children here – they are in school already – but I still come ... it is like a family sort of thing ... when you are stressed out, we talk about things ... by talking, even if nobody can help you, just by talking and it is all OK, there are other mothers who are the same and who go through the same things (client interview, SW Sydney).

The mediating role of volunteers

The third question is whether volunteers play a mediating role in community networks. Of particular interest was the extent to which volunteers were able to mediate between professional and client, or

between professionals and members of the community. This role is a little less obvious than the bonding role, but nonetheless vital.

There appear to be several circumstances in which mediation occurs. One is within the organisation itself. In a number of cases, the clients felt able to approach the volunteer with problems that they would feel uncomfortable about revealing to the professional:

I've had two disclosures from the members of my group, of serious sexual assault, because I was there ... that have never come to light, because these people have never actually been in the presence of someone that they thought they could tell (volunteer interview, SW Sydney).

Clients frequently expressed a preference for receiving a service from a volunteer. They want a professional service in the sense of accurate information and advice. And they want this service to be reliable. But they also value the personal touch, the sense of being valued as a person, not just as someone's job:

Yes, it could be quite possible that I will give her a ring again ... not only

because she is a member of the ... foundation, but my wife likes her too, so she comes more or less as a visitor and we have a yarn and we exchange our view about sickness (client interview, Central West).

Sometimes the volunteer is the first point of contact for people seeking information about a service:

Usually women will ring up and they will want to know about the group, or a woman will ring up and say, 'I've just been diagnosed – what do I do?' ... I will let them know that they have a right to a second opinion and there are specialist ... nurses in hospitals to actually link in with one of those (volunteer interview, SW Sydney).

Volunteers may also mediate between the organisation and the external community:

All of a sudden you have this immense knowledge ... so you have everyone coming towards you and asking all this information ... You just have friends of friends that will come and ask you because they know that you work there, so you are forever volunteering that information whether you want to or not (focus group, SW Sydney).

Particularly in south-west Sydney,

many examples were given where volunteers were able to offer a service simply because they were not seen to carry the weight of authority, and yet could meet the client's needs to some extent:

I have been head to head with two officers [from the welfare department] ... in the case conference ... it made a lot of difference to the person. Once the client realised that he knew the rights and this officer was actually overriding this person's rights, and not being heard, I spoke up for that person ... I will advocate for them as much as I can (volunteer, SW Sydney).

In these cases the volunteer is regarded as a kind of para-professional, one that is positioned in the overlap between the professional world and the world of the community. The volunteer is not a professional, but an ordinary citizen in the local community. But by virtue of her training and experience within the organisation, she has access to a great deal of information that is useful to the community. In seeking access to that information, people may feel more comfortable asking a friend than approaching formal, professional sources. Indeed, the distinction between professional,

volunteer and client is further blurred because of the quite frequent overlap between roles over time. So, for instance, the majority (eighteen out of twenty) of co-ordinators indicated that they had previously been volunteers themselves. Five of them currently acted both as volunteer and as co-ordinator. Several volunteers indicated that they had previously been clients, and several clients indicated that they also contributed, or hoped to contribute, as a volunteer as circumstances permitted.

The role of volunteers in bridging

Volunteers can play either a positive or a negative role in bridging across community divides.

There were many positive examples of volunteers working to bridge community differences. In south-west Sydney there were many cases of volunteers bridging across ethnic divides. This kind of bridging featured in five out of the ten interviews, and also featured in some of the client interviews:

There is such a high population of non-English speaking people, so just knowing what is out there, to say, 'Look, there are Arabic nurses, there are group nurses, there are

centres that can help you' ... our group is actually probably about seventy per cent non-English speaking ... having volunteers in the local community can get a lot done for your local community. It can, actually – we found it can unite cultures, that is one of the big things here. Cutting the isolation that some people feel when they are diagnosed with cancer (volunteer interview, SW Sydney).

There is cultural help ... a lot of them help with speaking Lebanese to another mother ... and everything sort of becomes very equal and we are not sort of like 'that race and that religion', it's all equal, we are just women and we are just mothers together and we don't become racist ... but we still bring culture in and we will learn from each other's culture and what is acceptable and things like this (client interview, SW Sydney).

Bridging the ethnic divide brought considerable personal learning to the volunteers as well. In these quotes, as in virtually all the interviews, volunteers were aware of, and emphasised, the reciprocal nature of giving and learning:

You are dealing with people that are outside your personal circle ... You have to also accept how they

do things; it may not be how you would do things ... you can't sort of try and change their values and morals, because everyone is different (volunteer, SW Sydney).

So I mean, I learnt a lot from her too and of her culture and the way they do things and stuff. So I got a lot out of the clients too (volunteer, SW Sydney).

Bridging occurs not just across ethnic divides, but across class, age and disability divides. Several groups focused on the value of bringing the old and the young together. For example, one volunteer organised special events in which kindergarten children visited the aged day care centre:

When [the children] had done their little programme ... they were allowed to go loose and go and talk to all the [aged] members. They go around – you would be amazed, they would go around and some of them would say, 'Oh, would you like to sit on my lap and have a talk?' and you would be amazed what they talk about (volunteer, SW Sydney).

In rural areas, bridging took on another form. Fundraising required bringing in support from many sources, and in doing so uniting

business, local government and the community:

Well, when we had the official opening of our base out here, we had to organise a local appeal ... I asked one of the very well-known business people in town if he would chair that appeal ... a lot of it was raised through corporate donations ... I just booked up at the Mall [to sell the raffle tickets] and ... we had a roster going six days a week, all day, a couple of hours at a time ... and we had a big opening ball (volunteer, Central West).

The bridging links occur not only between organisations, but also may extend outside the community. This is particularly important for country towns. Again, there is strong evidence of reciprocity:

Well, people from all over NSW are sponsored ... I think it is the friendships you make and the interaction with people that have done other things and are doing other things and have been other places, and you sit down and you interact and you think, 'Oh, isn't that interesting?' You don't have the wireless or television on and you are talking on a one-to-one basis, and I think this is awfully important (volunteer, Central West).

There were also a few examples of community fragmentation. One example occurred in south-west metropolitan Sydney. A volunteer reflected on her thirty-year history of volunteering in the same local area. She was an anglo woman who had been active in developing new services and in community bonding activities over the years. But as she laments, things have changed – ‘As an Australian moves out, a foreigner moves in’:

Because, dare I say it, the ‘wogs’ that are here. I know that an estate agent in B ... I was going to develop my ground ... and he said to me, ‘God, why don’t you get out?’ and I said, ‘Oh, I don’t know why, I was just born here and will probably die here,’ and he said, ‘Look, your side is full of Asians and the other side is full of Lebanese, so get out, just pick up your things and walk out.’ I don’t think I could tackle that, you know (volunteer, SW Sydney).

These ‘foreign’ people ‘look after their own’, but do not join the existing organisations and services, many of which are now folding owing to lack of volunteer support, or have become entirely professional services. The volunteer resents the changes, but has not attempted to develop any community strategies for bridging. Organisations that do provide a

service are concerned with the professional delivery of services to meet specific identified need, rather than to develop links between different segments of the community. The result is a fragmented, divided community, in which the original anglo residents feel threatened and isolated.

There were no similar examples of community fragmentation in rural areas, but there were hints of situations where volunteers acted as gatekeepers of the culture. Not everyone was welcome, and in particular people who were different were less acceptable. Several volunteers spoke of their own difficulties in being accepted as a newcomer in a community, even after many years. One woman in a focus group mentioned privately to the facilitator her concern that Aboriginal women were excluded. This was not mentioned in public. However, in a private interview one volunteer who had been active for forty years and had been instrumental in initiating many local organisations nonetheless made the following comment while talking about church attendance:

They don’t use the pulpit for political propaganda, which a lot of them do, and once they start talking about Aboriginal land rights and waving the Aboriginal land rights flag on the

tops of their church roofs – I mean, it sends me right off. I know a few people that have left the church because of that, and was quite a generous donor to the ... church (volunteer, Central West).

In another example, recruitment as auxiliary volunteer in a regional hospital was by word of mouth, and deliberately excluded those who were 'different'.

Discussion

The data provide rich evidence of social capital, and give some insights into how this is developed. We examined volunteering in terms of four categories of role: developing services, bonding, mediating and bridging. The first two categories provide the type of connection that might be expected. Volunteers as active citizens work together to identify, create, fund and govern new services to meet identified needs in the community. Virtually all services in all communities seem to start like this. Generally it is the collective act of volunteers that establishes new services, including the establishment of branch services of existing organisations in new areas. As these services become established, then government funding may be sought. Some services, such as parent support and senior citizens' outings, may

never receive funding, and they continue to be provided on a volunteer basis. Some organisations continue to generate considerable funds for themselves and require little if any government funding. Indeed, some of the auxiliary associations actually subsidise government services. Other services do receive funding and over time become professionalised. The volunteers that established the service then take on a governance role, as members of the management committee or board. Eventually, such a role becomes less attractive or necessary, and the service passes into professional hands, often within a large organisation. Volunteers may continue to play a token or marginalised role, but their tasks become deskilled and their vision limited.

Even at this marginalised, deskilled end of the spectrum, there is considerable evidence of bonding social capital generated within the community, providing support and connections to clients and members of the organisation, creating wider friendship networks among the community of volunteers and creating a web of caring relationships in the wider community. Almost every transcript of clients, volunteers and co-ordinators provides examples of

this networking and mutual support. It is this work that creates the 'glue' so often referred to in the social capital literature.

The other two categories are less obvious. However, the potential mediating role of volunteers may be the most important of all in creating and maintaining a sense of community. Our society is increasingly managed by highly qualified and specialised professionals. Citizens are expected to place their trust in these expert systems (Giddens, 1990). But in the shift from the traditional trust of known acquaintances to the trust in the expert, something is lost. Indeed, there is evidence of a growing distrust of expert systems, as citizens become more aware of the contested nature of much expert 'knowledge' (Beck, 1999). There is also pressure for professionals to produce more, for more people, more quickly and at lower cost. Time is limited. Fear of litigation leads to a reluctance to appear too personally attached to individual clients. There is no time or opportunity any more for the house visit, for the relaxed conversation, for the affectionate enquiry into people's welfare. The experts may well provide a technically excellent service, but they are much less likely to provide the warmth of the human connection. Their specialist knowledge also may cause a

communication barrier, as they adopt a technical language that is beyond the grasp of the lay person. Intimidated, clients are afraid to ask for the information they need in readily accessible language.

This gap is often filled by volunteers. Usually the volunteers in question are either former professionals themselves or have acquired enough training and experience to enable them to play a para-professional role. But they have more time. They are able and willing to visit the housebound. They have time to talk. They know what it is like and can provide the information requested – or at least they know where to find it. Above all, they demonstrate acceptance and respect for the person, regardless of who that person is. In terms of Giddens's levels of trust, volunteers may combine both traditional and expert trust. For this reason, other members of the community may turn to them in preference to professionals and disclose more. The volunteer then becomes a crucial node in the communications network, connecting the client or community with the world of expert systems.

The fourth category is the most problematic. Bridging can mean several things. It may mean accessing external sources of expertise, finance or opportunity. It may mean bridging between different

organisations within the community. It often means acceptance of difference and a bridging across demographic divides. It may mean breaking down traditional hierarchies of discourse and privilege. Communities may have high levels of bonding social capital, yet remain intolerant of outsiders and of marginal groups. This is not only disadvantageous for the people who are marginalised, but also prevents the community as a whole from gaining access to new ideas and skills that may be necessary for its continued survival.

What, then, is the role of volunteers in the generation of bridging social capital? The data provide mixed evidence. There are many examples of volunteer actions that build bridges across demographic divides within the community as well as constructing important bridges to the outside world of people, ideas and skills. However, there are also a few examples of volunteer actions that prevent such bridges of inclusiveness, or even destroy those that have already been built. Of course, professionals and ordinary citizens are equally capable of building or destroying bridges. What remains to be identified are the conditions that maximise the likelihood of positive bridging networks emerging.

Our conclusion is that volunteers should be seen as central to the creation and maintenance of local networks of trust, reciprocity and the potential to identify and solve problems. Our evidence suggests that Putnam (2000) is wrong in separating volunteering and the generation of social capital. On the contrary, volunteers play crucial and quite specific roles in generating new services, creating bonding links, mediating between professionals and the wider community and building bridging links within and between communities. Their location as network nodes places them in a vital gatekeeping role as 'keepers of the culture'. Such a position bestows great power. This power may be used destructively, to prevent the formation of bridging links, but most often it is used positively to enable the development of a strong and inclusive community.

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