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Volunteering and social capital in regional Victoria

SUSAN BAILEY, SALLY SAVAGE, BEV O'CONNELL

ABSTRACT

The link between volunteering and social capital has received some attention in Australia in recent years. Of particular note to this paper is the work of Baum, Bush, Modra, Murray, Cox, Alexander, and Potter (2000), who described the contribution volunteers made to social capital in a metropolitan setting— the western suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia. The aim of this current study is twofold, to describe the contribution volunteers make to social capital through participation, reciprocity and social trust in a regional and rural setting; and to compare findings with those relating to a metropolitan environment.

In the light of differing volunteer patterns in rural and regional environments compared to metropolitan environments, we hypothesised that the relationship between volunteerism and indicators of social capital would also be different. The results from this study support the findings of Baum, Modra, Bush, Cox, Cooke, and Potter (1999) and therefore reinforce the premise that volunteers make a substantial contribution to social capital. While greater numbers of people who live in rural or regional areas undertake volunteer work, we found there are more similarities between the rural/regional and metropolitan sectors regarding volunteerism than there are differences.

Social capital refers to the trust and reciprocity that may result from people, within a community, working together towards a common goal. Engagement in public participation has been shown to improve the health and wellbeing of many people by enabling them to overcome isolation and perceived powerlessness (Labonte 1997; Onyx and Bullen 1997). Volunteering is an example of people working together cooperatively towards some agreed end point. It is likely that such an endeavour will result in the development of trust and reciprocity between people engaged in volunteer work, even if these elements were not present during the initial stages of the particular activity. Volunteerism has been depicted at the core of social capital as it embodies the key elements of social capital (Onyx and Leonard 2000).

BACKGROUND

Social capital or social connectedness is related to empowering and enhancing the health of communities and the health of people who form a community (Noble 2000, Rosenfeld 1997). The processes between people which establish networks, norms and trust, enabling coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit, is referred to as social capital. It is created as a by-product of social relationships. The benefits of social capital are available to all people living within a particular community in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive (Kawachi 1997). Social capital is a cause and effect of community development, providing the possibility for community development to prosper, whilst simultaneously being a key product of community development (Onyx 1997; Lyons 2000). Engagement in public participation, which includes volunteer activity, has been shown to result in a direct improvement in the health and wellbeing of many people by overcoming isolation and perceived powerlessness (Labonte 1997; Putnam 1993).

Community empowerment has been identified as a promoter of health, whilst powerlessness is associated with being an increased risk factor for disease...
(Baum, Bush, Modra, Murray, Cox, Alexander, and Potter 2000). Health status, in post-industrial societies, has become a measure of the power and competence of people, with research revealing that it is impossible to create health amongst people who perceive themselves to be powerless (AIHW 2002). The powerless, as objects of concern or care, appear to be immune to the health care and education bestowed upon them, with a large array of 'programs' proving to be ineffective and consequently abandoned (AIHW 2002). Ample evidence exists revealing that people who perceive themselves to be powerless experience worse health and higher levels of morbidity than the empowered (Stone 2001). Further research provides evidence that a greater number of quality social contacts that people engage in correlates with lower levels of morbidity and increased life expectancy (Rosenfeld 1997).

A study conducted by Onyx and Bullen in 1997 measured social capital in five communities in NSW, including rural, outer metropolitan and inner city communities. This study focused primarily on identifying attitudes, behaviours and knowledge-related to social capital. Results revealed that the strongest elements in defining social capital were participation within local community organisations and events, personal pro-activity in a social context, and feelings of trust and safety (Onyx and Bullen 1997). These elements may all be considered potential components of volunteer work.

Snyder and Omoto (2000) define volunteerism as 'a form of sustained helping in which people actively seek out opportunities to assist others in need, make considerable and continuing commitments to provide assistance and sustain these commitments without any bonds of prior obligation to the recipients of their services'. Others define volunteerism more broadly, that is, in terms of work being done through the free will of an individual who provides a service to the community without monetary reward (ACOSS 1996). It is obvious that some activities undertaken by individuals would be considered to be an example of volunteerism according to the latter definition, but not the former (such as, for example, ad hoc or intermittent assistance to educational facilities such as kindergartens or schools). Confusion over the definition of volunteer work has probably led to some doubts about research findings on rates of volunteer activity in reported studies. Debate continues about the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering in the scholarly literature (Oppenheimer and Warburton 2000). For the purposes of this paper, we support the latter definition of volunteerism based on the argument that all facets of community work done with free will and without monetary reward are of some general benefit to society.

Volunteerism is generally considered to benefit the recipients of service, and society more generally. In addition, volunteerism benefits the volunteer him or herself by promoting the volunteer's sense of community spirit; for example, by increasing the volunteer's feelings of helpfulness and self-worth and by possibly providing the volunteer with the opportunity to exercise skills (Snyder and Omoto 2000). It is also likely that acting as a volunteer provides companionship, social interaction and possibly friendship for the person volunteering.

The ACOSS report 'Volunteering in Australia' (1996) found that the reasons people volunteer in Australia are quite varied. In particular, though, individuals stated that personal satisfaction was a key reason for choosing to volunteer. These findings reflect the later work of Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, and Miene (1998), who found that there is a diversity of motivational factors that seem to be inherent in particular individuals and that, given the appropriate circumstances, will lead to participation as a volunteer.

According to recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data (ABS 2001), nearly one-third (4.4 million) of Australians over the age of eighteen years did volunteer work in 2000, contributing 704.1 million hours of unpaid work. For this survey, a volunteer was defined as 'someone who, in the last twelve months, willingly gave unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group' (p44). People aged thirty-five to forty-four years reported the highest rate of volunteering (40%), with sport and other recreation organisations attracting the highest number of men, and community or welfare organisations the largest number of women. Nearly three-quarters of the volunteer hours worked was undertaken regularly at weekly intervals. Almost half of all of the volunteers stated that they participated as a volunteer because it provided some benefit to the community, and a similar proportion stated that they found volunteer work personally
satisfying. People were more likely to volunteer if they lived outside a capital city (38%) compared with those living in capital cities (28%).

There is a slight gender imbalance in volunteering in Australia, with a greater percentage of women participating in volunteer work. Women were found to be, in the 2001 ABS survey, more likely than men to view volunteering as an alternative to paid work.

In Australia, in current times, the volunteer sector is perceived to be in transition and subject to contradictory forces (Oppenheimer and Warburton 2000). For example, there is an emphasis on the importance of volunteering (in the context of general recognition of the importance of social capital), while at the same time, there is concern that the number of people prepared to volunteer may decrease.

The Health and Community Participation survey, conducted in October 2001, examined the connection between subjective perceptions of physical and mental health and social connectedness within the local community. As a component of the survey, respondents were asked about their volunteer activities because such activity is considered to contribute to the development of social capital within a community (Lyons 2000). Baum et al (1999) noted that the willingness of members of a community to volunteer may be an indicator of a cohesive society and possibly of the strength of social capital within a community.

METHODS

A survey of health and community participation was undertaken in October 2001 in the Barwon and Otway regions (excluding the township of Apollo Bay) of Victoria, based on Baum et al’s work based in Adelaide, South Australia in 1997 (Baum et al 2000). The major difference between the former and latter studies was that we chose to focus on a regional demographic area, whereas Baum et al surveyed a metropolitan region. The Barwon and Otway regions (encompassing the Commonwealth electoral divisions of Corio and Corangamite) extend from Geelong to Apollo Bay, and consist of approximately 180,000 people who are enrolled to vote. The township of Apollo Bay (with a population of 1500) was excluded from this study because it was the focus of a similar small-scale project completed just prior to this study.

A cross-sectional sample of 6000 people over the age of eighteen years was randomly selected from the electoral roll. This number of participants was based on the number of people surveyed by Baum et al (2000), specifically with the aim of obtaining a response of 2000 completed questionnaires (following a single mail-out). Participants were recruited through random selection from the electoral roll in each division. All participants lived in either a regional or rural environment. The community was informed about the existence of this project through advertisements in local newspapers and radio broadcasts. A plain language statement, the questionnaire and a reply paid envelope were posted to the prospective participants. A single mail-out was conducted because the research team considered that potential participants would perceive a one-off, single mail-out to be more anonymous (and therefore would be more likely to respond accurately) than a process that involved receipt of a reminder letter and follow-up questionnaire. No identifying information was included on the survey forms. Ethics approval was obtained from the Deakin University Human Ethics Committee and the Victorian Department of Human Services Ethics Committee.

The questionnaire was descriptive and correlational. It was based on a mailed, written-response questionnaire instrument developed by Baum et al (2000). Baum et al’s instrument included demographic questions, variations of two pre-existing measures and further questions related to social capital. For the purposes of this study, Baum et al’s instrument was modified slightly in order to relate to this region of Victoria. Relationships between variables such as gender, age, income and self-perceived health and participation activities were examined.

Similar to Baum et al’s study in 2000, a profile of volunteering was gained by asking respondents to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following question: ‘Are you presently doing any volunteer (i.e. unpaid) work in the community?’ (Baum et al 1999). As with the original survey, respondents were asked to describe the volunteer work they had done in the past year in relation to the activities undertaken and organisations for which they were volunteering. Respondents were also asked their main reasons for undertaking volunteer work.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS10
for windows. Statistics used were descriptive and inferential. Chi-squared tests were used to determine associations between key variables and demographic data.

Of the 6000 questionnaires mailed out, a total of 1837 were returned completed, giving an anticipated response rate of 31%. In total, 85 responses were not used because they came from people living from outside the defined Barwon-Otway region, leaving 1752 useable completed questionnaires. Forty-eight per cent of respondents were from the Geelong area, while the remainder were spread across the Bellarine Peninsula, Surfcoast Shire, and Colac Otway shire. The sample comprised 990 females (57%) and 739 males (42%), with 1% of respondents not answering this question on gender. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 98 years. The mean age was 50.53 years (SD 17.19). Forty six percent of participants had completed only secondary school education, the majority were married (66%), 33% were employed full time, 42% reported their income in the last financial year to be $15,599 or less, 51% own their owned home, and 89% usually spoke English at home. It should be noted that the income reported here refers to the participant's own income. There was a high no response rate to the question on partner's income, which made it impossible to calculate household income.

### RESULTS

Just over one-fifth of participants \( (n = 377, 22\%) \) indicated that at the time of completing the questionnaire they were undertaking volunteer work. These participants were asked what type of organisation they did their volunteer work with. Sporting or hobby groups were listed by 14%, while another 14% listed health-related organisations and 13% listed church groups. Other organisations mentioned were: community groups (8%), school or kindergarten (6%), service clubs (4%) and the country fire brigade (3%). Almost one-third of participants doing volunteer work did not answer this question. Participants were also asked to describe the activities they have undertaken as volunteer work in the past twelve months. These responses were not categorised as they were frequently similar to the responses given to the question on the organisation with which they did volunteer work.

Table 1 presents the main reasons given by participants for doing volunteer work, and compares our results with those described by Baum et al (1999). Respondents were able to select more than one reason, and therefore the percentages in Table 1 do not total 100%. In the present study, reasons categorised as ‘Other reason’ included involvement in children’s activities, and giving something back to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Bailey et al. (2001) ( (n = 377) )</th>
<th>Baum et al. (1999) ( (n = 333) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help people</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain a sense of satisfaction</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve conditions in society</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To meet people</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To increase my skills</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve and raise awareness of the environment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pass the time</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help get paid work</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reason</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the community. There were some gender differences in the types of organisations participants did volunteer work with. More females volunteered in the areas of health, church groups and community groups, while more men volunteered in the country fire brigade and service clubs. The only statistically significant difference in the reasons for doing volunteer work was that women were more likely than men to report wanting to increase their skills ($x^2(1, N = 375) = 7.31, p = .007$).

**SOCIAL, CIVIC AND COMMUNITY GROUP ENGAGEMENT**

People engaged in volunteer work were found to be more likely to be socially active. Social activities included sporting and leisure activities, or activities that support sport or leisure activities. Social activities also included community or group activities (such as a social club or support groups), and civic activities (which included signing a petition, contacting local councillors, attending a council meeting). Table 2 shows the participation rates of volunteers and non-volunteers, giving aggregated responses to questions about social activities: sport, leisure or support activities; community or group activities; and civic engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has participated in five or more social activities in the past 12 months ($n = 1707$) * $p = .004$</th>
<th>Volunteers ($n = 268$)</th>
<th>Non-volunteers ($n = 840$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have participated in five or more sport, leisure or support activities in the past 12 months ($n = 1707$) $p = .000$</td>
<td>Volunteers ($n = 252$)</td>
<td>Non-volunteers ($n = 666$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have participated in two or more community or group activities in the past 12 months ($n = 1707$) $p = .000$</td>
<td>Volunteers ($n = 336$)</td>
<td>Non-volunteers ($n = 620$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have participated in one or more civic activities in the past year ($n = 1707$) $p = .000$</td>
<td>Volunteers ($n = 274$)</td>
<td>Non-volunteers ($n = 685$)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 'n' refers to the number of individuals who responded to a particular question.

**RECIPROCITY AND TRUST WITH NEIGHBOURS AND FRIENDS**

Volunteers were found to be more likely to assist friends and people living in their neighbourhood and to be assisted in return. Thus the concept of reciprocity is a central tenet of social capital. Table 3 shows the results of questions about assisting others. Participants were asked whether they listened to others’ problems, helped with odd jobs, lent household equipment, looked after a neighbour’s house while that neighbour was away, assisted with a neighbour’s shopping, or cared for a member of another family. This study also found that volunteers were significantly more likely to trust people in their neighbourhood, with 70% of volunteers agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, ‘Most people in my neighbourhood can be trusted’ compared with 60% of non-volunteers.

**INDICATORS OF LOCUS OF CONTROL- SENSE OF CONTROL OVER ONE’S LIFE AND COMMUNITY DECISIONS**

In response to the statement, ‘I have control over the decisions that affect my life’, there was no statistically significant difference between the response of
volunteers and non-volunteers (see Table 4). However, volunteers were found to be much more positive than non-volunteers regarding their ability to influence decisions that affected their community. In addition, volunteers were more likely to agree that by working together, people in their community could influence decisions that affect their community.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that most people undertake volunteer work for altruistic reasons and gain satisfaction from their involvement. The finding that volunteers are more engaged in social, sporting and civic activity corroborates the finding of Baum et al (1999), as does the finding that volunteers tend to reciprocate with their neighbours to a greater extent than do non-volunteers. Interestingly, while this study found that volunteers tended to possess greater trust in the people living around them, Baum et al's study did not. Perhaps this finding relates to the differing environments of the two studies. That is, perhaps there is a greater level of community trust in a regional or rural environment than in an urban environment. Further study is required to validate this suggestion.

The percentage of people who reported in the present study that they do volunteer work (22%) is considerably lower than the overall rate of volunteering reported in the ABS data (32%) (ABS 2000). This difference may be due to the fact that the questions used in each survey were worded differently. The question in the ABS survey was more inclusive, referring to unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, whereas in the present study participants were simply asked about 'volunteer (ie unpaid) work'. It is possible that some people in the present study did some volunteer work, but did not consider it to be volunteer work. Definitional issues surrounding volunteering may need further investigation.
It is perhaps more appropriate to compare the proportion of volunteers identified in the present study with the proportion of volunteers identified in two recent related surveys. The finding that 22% of the study population are involved in volunteer work is higher than the 14% reported by Baum et al (1999), but lower than the rate of 37% reported in a recent similar study in Apollo Bay, Victoria (Jennings et al 2001). It is possible that these differences reflect differences in volunteerism between metropolitan and more non-metropolitan areas. The study that reported the lowest rate of volunteerism (Baum et al 1999) was conducted in Adelaide, a metropolitan city, while the survey with the highest proportion of volunteers was conducted in Apollo Bay, which is a small rural community (Jennings, McNair, Gibson and Madden 2001). The present study was conducted in a regional city and rural areas. There were differences between metropolitan and rural areas in the ABS (2001) data also, with a lower rate of volunteering reported by residents of metropolitan areas.

This study further supports the findings of Baum et al (1999) regarding social capital and volunteerism. The finding that volunteers participate more than non-volunteers in various activities in their community supports the notion that volunteering assists in community-building in general. The key elements of trust and reciprocity (Stone 2001) were shown to be related to volunteerism, which further supports the important relationship between social capital and volunteerism.

It has been shown that volunteerism is motivated in individuals by a diversity of factors. The possibility of sustaining satisfying volunteer activity relates to a coincidence of appropriate circumstances in appropriately motivated individuals (Clary et al 1998). The six major motivating factors for volunteerism, as identified by Clary et al (1998), are altruistic and humanitarian concern for others, the opportunity for new learning opportunities and the chance to exercise existing knowledge or skills, the opportunity for social relationships with others, possible career-related benefits, to enhance positive self-regard, and to enhance positive mood and self-esteem. It is evident that this type of motivation towards volunteer activity at least partly relates to social connectedness.

Our results show general congruence with the findings of Baum et al (1999), which is noteworthy because the settings for the two studies were quite different. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the characteristics of volunteers are similar, whether or not volunteers are living in an urban environment or a regional/rural environment. In general, volunteers are more socially active than non-volunteers, more engaged in civic participation, reciprocate more with neighbours and friends, believe that they can influence the environment in which they live, and tend to trust people in their neighbourhood.

CONCLUSIONS

It is well recognised that a strong need exists for citizens of a particular society to participate and to engage with other individuals, and that important benefits stem from such participation (Putnam 1993). Individuals as well as society benefit as people interact, learn and achieve specified outcomes (Noble 2000). An important aspect of civic participation is volunteerism.

The results from this study support the findings of Baum et al (1999), and therefore reinforce the premise that volunteers make a substantial contribution to social capital. Further, the findings suggest that there are greater similarities between the rural/regional and metropolitan sectors with regard to volunteerism than there are differences.

Although the results obtained in this survey reflect the Australian Bureau of Statistics' finding that a higher percentage of people living in country areas volunteer compared with people living in metropolitan areas, questions need to be asked about the sustainability of volunteerism in the rural sector in circumstances where much financial hardship is being experienced. For example, Noble (2000) suggested that travel costs can be enormous in the rural environment, and reimbursement for these costs is rare. She also pointed out that particular services in metropolitan areas represent paid employment (ie fire fighting and ambulance), whereas in many rural areas, such services continue to be staffed by volunteers. People who live in a rural environment and who volunteer for such services may, over time, feel exploited by this disparity in service provision and support between rural and metropolitan environments. Feelings of exploitation
and disgruntlement will likely lead to a reduction in the rate of volunteerism.

It is obvious that the outcomes of volunteerism relate to improvements to various sectors of society by way of tangible goods and services. Perhaps most importantly, the process of volunteerism ought to be highly valued because it creates social capital (Onyx 2000). Therefore, both the outcomes and the process of volunteering are of value to society, in different but interrelated ways. General societal recognition of the value of volunteerism is important as such recognition helps to ensure that voluntary work is attractive to individuals.

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Dr Susan Bailey is an Associate Professor of Nursing, Deakin University

Dr Sally Savage is a Research Fellow, Faculty of Health & Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University

Dr Bev O’Connell is a Professor of Nursing, Deakin University.