

Citizenship, volunteering and active ageing

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Abstract

Many voluntary organisations depend greatly on the unpaid services of older volunteers, a significant number of whom are women. Using data from one such organisation in the North East of England, this article uncovers the failure to link debates on citizenship with those on work-life balance, and the impact this has on clarifying citizenship issues as they relate to older people. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, our study found that volunteering is an expression of citizenship for many older people providing networks of support for both volunteer and client. This strong commitment to society and fellow citizens among older people counter-balances individualistic and instrumental reasons for volunteering promoted by the state and market. Our findings suggest that government views of volunteering as a route to paid work, as a panacea for society and therefore needing to be more 'work-like', are discordant with the perspectives of older volunteers. Rather than the promotion of the 'citizen-worker' or 'consumer-citizen', citizenship that is inclusive, interdependent and collective is arguably more beneficial to society. This is particularly pertinent at a time when shifts in welfare policy have been towards emphasising individual economic autonomy and self-provisioning, often to the detriment of older more vulnerable members of society and ultimately to networks of inter-generational trust and reciprocity.

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Introduction

“I mean, what else would one do? Anything else that you’d do would probably be a selfish thing I mean a self-centred thing. I suppose one might join some sort of club or something but you certainly wouldn’t feel it’s the being wanted I suppose, being needed is a very, very big part of it.” (Mrs Davidson)¹

Demographic ageing is one of the major challenges for many western societies and ‘active ageing’ has become a policy priority not only within the European Union, but also the OECD and the G8 (Walker 2002). The term ‘active ageing’ has had several meanings including: economic productivity; opportunities for leisure and recreation; political activism; social investment; and engaging older people as partners and givers through volunteering (Boaz et al. 2000). The link between voluntary action and citizenship has been established since the Second World War (Turner 2001a), but in recent times, the connections between volunteering, employment and citizenship have never been closer. Government initiatives in the UK promote volunteering to support public services, and to advance the wider agenda of improving civic society and promoting civil renewal (Commission on the Future of Volunteering 2008, Scottish Executive 2004). This article will consider issues arising from the literature regarding citizenship, older people and volunteering through a study of volunteering experience in one organisation working for and with older people in England.

In spite of the huge contribution that retired people make to the voluntary sector, a knowledge gap exists with regard to many aspects of volunteering in later life. This article will address the gap by focussing on older people’s experience and perspectives of volunteering as well as contributing to an inclusive view of citizenship. Our research looked at older people’s volunteering and time-inputs, the meanings that they attach to volunteering and the intersections between volunteering, leisure, paid work and caring activities. Although none of the volunteers used the term ‘citizenship’ to describe their reasons for volunteering, the activities they perform are a clear expression of it (see quote above).

Citizenship is a contested concept, particularly with globalisation, migration flows and the explosion in media, communication and information technologies (Castles and Davidson 2000, Turner 2001b). With increasing economic, social and cultural diversity, individuals are no longer members of easily defined communities with common bonds but of many cross-cutting groupings. As a result, new theorisations of citizenship have resulted, such as Yuval-Davis’ conceptualisation of ‘dialogical transverse citizenship’, i.e. citizenship as a multi-layered construct (Yuval-Davis 1999). Social analytical accounts of citizenship on the other hand emphasize civil, political and social rights and the right of access to state resources. With this ‘rights’ perspective, citizenship has been examined in relation to gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, work, consumption and disability. The concept of the ‘citizen-worker’ (Lewis 2002) in which both male and female adults play their part in the ‘adult worker model family’ (assuming greater individual economic autonomy) has come about from family and labour market shifts away from the male-bread-winner model. Academics argue that policies based on such assumptions disadvantage women, particularly older women because of their unpaid care responsibilities (Lewis 2007, Ginn et al. 2001). In this article, we examine citizenship in terms of the relationship and expectations of the British government with its citizens, and whether such

expectations concur with older people's perceptions and real life activities. We examine how volunteering as an active practice is an expression of citizenship for older people, the forms of commitment it takes, and the pressures and constraints facing older people that could discourage formal volunteering in the future.

In the following section, we will give an overview of the main issues arising from the literature regarding citizenship, older people and volunteering. Then, we will look at time-inputs in formal and informal volunteering and caring and what this has to say about older people's contribution to society. Following this, we will explore what it means to be a volunteer, drawing on the interpretations and perspectives of the interviewees. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which volunteering amongst older people contributes to citizenship: belonging and giving to society and the community. We pinpoint the failure to link debates on citizenship with those on work-life balance, and the particular impact this has on clarifying citizenship issues as they relate to older people. In seeking to promote volunteering as a form of active citizenship, the British government's policy statements on volunteering tend to highlight the rewards that can be enjoyed by volunteers themselves as much as or more than the contribution that they can make to the well-being of others.² Indeed, the instrumental value of volunteering is further promoted in the idea of 'earned citizenship' for newcomers (Kelly and Byrne 2007). In contrast, this study shows that there is a strong commitment to society and fellow citizens among older people that can counter-balance individualistic and instrumental reasons for volunteering. Our findings suggest that what policy-makers want is discordant with the perspectives of older volunteers. Finally, we will explore the proposition that rather than the promotion of the 'citizen-worker' or 'consumer-citizen', the recognition that citizenship needs to be inclusive, interdependent and collective is arguably more beneficial to society. This is particularly pertinent at a time when shifts in welfare policy have been towards emphasising individual economic autonomy and self-provisioning.

Citizenship, older people and volunteering

The substantive as opposed to formal aspect of citizenship is the focus of this paper. Citizenship is understood as practice as well as status, and is often perceived of in terms of participation as an expression of human agency (Lister 2000), not 'merely something that is handed down by a paternalistic state' (Cook 2000:156). Nevertheless, the idea of citizenship has changed as governments have attempted to reconstruct the 'citizen' in response to changes in the welfare state. Under the Conservative government, the enterprise of 'active citizenship' – to emphasize the responsibilities and participation of citizens - started in 1988 (Deakin 1995). This was criticized by many because of its exclusionary tendencies marking out the deserving from the undeserving (Dwyer 1998). In 1991, in an attempt to balance responsibilities with rights, the government launched the Citizens Charter to promote the rights of citizens, thus representing the citizen as consumer. Citizenship as 'neighbourliness' (Johnson 1992) was also encouraged to 'transform and invigorate our national life'.³ However, with cuts in public spending, support for volunteering suffered at the local level, and stricter benefit rules deterred some sections of the community from volunteering (Sheard 1995). With these attempts to reduce welfare-dependency, the government increasingly reconstructed citizens as market-oriented individuals, which

in effect marginalized, rather than placed at the centre the rights of citizens (Phillipson 1998).

Poverty research has tended to link lack of material resources to exclusion from forms of citizenship. But feminist critics argued that labour market participation should not be the only solution and arguments were made for an inclusive citizenship to accommodate difference according to gender, ethnicity, disability and age (Lister 1997, Levitas 1998). Nevertheless, the Labour government continued to give paid work pride of place among its policies to reduce welfare dependency. This welfare-to-work agenda encompassed 'active citizenship' with volunteering given greater instrumental value in providing routes into employment. The strong association of citizenship with participation in the labour market drew feminist critiques of the focus on paid work that ignored the significant contribution of unpaid caring work - mainly carried out by women (McKie et al. 2001, Himmelweit 2000). For older people beyond labour market age, citizenship defined in relation to participation in the labour market has ambiguous relevance (Craig 2004). Instead, 'independence and mobility; preservation of their own identity and dignity; choice and control, and the ability to participate as fully as possible in society in terms of their choosing' have been identified as the fundamentals of substantive citizenship for older people (Craig 2004:112). The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (2006) which extends the working age, framing older people as playing an active part in the paid labour force can be seen either as step towards recognising older people's rights and freedoms, or raising societal expectations of older people.

'Active Ageing' is a policy response to demographic aging at an international level (WHO 2002). However, the active participation of older people is mediated by their resources, means of access and the institutional frameworks that govern everyday life (Vincent 2000). Policies designed to encourage older people to 'be active' could at the same time make them feel more of a 'burden' and further excluded from society (Boaz et al. 2000). A contemporary economic concern is the drain on public funds from needy older people as users of social and health services. The ideal of a secure old age has been threatened by a fall in the value of pensions, NHS reforms and a questioning of the intergenerational contract that should support services for pensioners (Phillipson 1998, Walker 2002). However, a rapid fall in pensioner poverty has been recorded, partly due to increased government spending on pensioner benefits (Brewer et al. 2006). But money is not the only resource for citizenship. Time is also an important element (Lister 2000).

While discursive exclusion in the form of ageism can also lead to the marginalisation of older people and deny them the right to participate fully as citizens, research on older people conducted in the tradition of community studies has emphasized their active contribution to community relationships. According to a recent study that revisited the communities researched in the classic work of Young and Willmott half a century ago, older people are still vigilant about the changing fortunes of the places in which they have invested much of their lives; older women, in particular, act as 'neighbourhood keepers' (Phillipson et al. 1999:741). In addition, they sustain the infrastructure of deprived neighbourhoods because of their frequent use of local services (Scharf et al. 2002). The most usual carers for the dependent elderly are other older people, some of whom are themselves very elderly. The UK census (2001) revealed that nearly 4,000 people aged 90 and over provided 50 or more hours of

unpaid care per week to another family member or friend. The role of older people in the care of the young has been highlighted (Wheelock and Jones 2002). Indeed, caring and neighbouring by older people make a vital contribution to families and communities. The answer to the questions ‘who does the caring’ and ‘who can work without payment’ is often older people (Reday-Mulvy 1998). But apart from caring, their contributions include volunteering, providing leadership, taking part in political activity, holding family identities, culture and heritage and passing these on to the younger generations (Riseborough 1998).

From the perspective of government, formal volunteering⁴ is still one of the most prominent indicators of active citizenship. The 2005 UK Home Office *Citizenship Survey* indicated that people aged 50 – 74 were more likely to volunteer than were most younger adults. The least likely age group to volunteer formally is the over 75s, of whom only 21 per cent did so at least once in a 12 month period against 29 per cent for all age groups. The most likely people to volunteer are those in employment, with the highest levels of education and the highest incomes (Attwood et al. 2003). Data from the *Citizen Audit* support this class distinction as the longer people have been in formal education, the more middle class and the older they are, the more likely they are to undertake civic action (Pattie et al. 2003). Such data however overlooks the reality that empirically, people do not segment formal and informal (Schervish and Havens 2002), and that formal volunteering may be ‘alien to the participatory culture of deprived neighbourhoods’ (Williams 2003a:72) where one-to-one aid is more extensively used.

The most usually reported age related incentive to volunteering is to fill the vocational void left by retirement and to manage increased free time (Davis Smith and Gay 2005). However, government promoted narratives of volunteering as active citizenship and as a form of self-improvement and re-training do not sit comfortably with the reality of volunteering as a means to keep busy and fill spare time (Parsons 2000, Parsons and Broadbridge 2004). Increasing pressures towards formalisation in volunteering deter some older people who would prefer to volunteer in a more informal, less workplace-like setting (Davis Smith and Gay 2005). Indeed, the increased professionalisation of volunteers can ‘result in a disengagement from local communities and a disempowerment of citizens resulting in the emergence of increasingly passive forms of citizenship within these organisations’ (Milligan and Fyfe 2005:431). Whereas voluntary organisations are precisely those ‘spaces of citizenship’ providing opportunities for democratic participation, community decision-making and the decentralisation of power (Fyfe and Milligan 2003). Other studies of volunteering have underlined the importance of popular everyday meanings of volunteering as against the government’s promotion of volunteering as a way to accrue individual benefits through formal structures (Roberts and Devine 2004). The danger is that too much of a shift towards an emphasis on individual benefits may constrain efforts to relate volunteering to community benefits and the achievement of the common good (Arai and Pedlar 2003).

The study

The research reported here is based on a UK Big Lottery funded study of volunteers and former volunteers as well as some service-users at Age Concern Newcastle, part

of the national Age Concern Federation. The organisation was an interesting case study because of its reliance on volunteers who are over retirement age and its written commitment that all volunteers have an active, enjoyable and rewarding role to play in helping improve the quality of life for older people. Volunteers at Age Concern Newcastle perform various roles including work in the community (for example lunch clubs throughout the city), one-to-one support for others in their own homes, and leisure services, administration and management in the organisation's city centre head office.

The research aimed to identify the factors that influence older people to give of their time in formal volunteering amidst their other activities such as paid work, caring and neighbouring, in order to improve our understanding of volunteering amongst the older population. Rather than simply examining motivations, we posited that the practice, construction and interpretation of public and private roles, responsibilities and needs will determine patterns of volunteering. In order to interrogate these complex social meanings and practices, the research team placed in-depth qualitative interviews at the heart of the project.

The research began with focus groups to help plan the fieldwork and ensure that it was informed by as wide a range of volunteers as possible. There followed a questionnaire survey of Age Concern's current and former volunteers. The most substantial part of the research consisted of in-depth interviews with older people aged 55 and over. Most (four fifths) had responded to the volunteering questionnaire and the rest were users of Age Concern Newcastle's leisure and learning services. Two more focus groups followed to discuss issues arising from the interviews. The fieldwork was contextualized with the collation of relevant data and commentary from diverse sources.

In the combined sample of 134 current and 87 former volunteer survey respondents, the majority were women (80 per cent). One third were between the ages of 65-74 and just over one fifth (22 per cent) were over 75. Sixty-two per cent were retired and one third were living in one of the 10 per cent most deprived wards.⁵ Eight per cent classified themselves as not being 'White British'. The more substantial part of the research was the in-depth interviews with 76 volunteers, former volunteers and service-users, aged 55 and above. All except two of these interviewees had volunteered in one way or another in their lifetimes, not just in Age Concern. In this part of the research, we sought to interrogate in more depth the underlying meanings and attitudes to volunteering amidst these various commitments.

Citizenship and time-inputs

Time is an important element to active ageing but little attention has been given to work-life balance debates in relation to citizenship. In the questionnaire survey 'to put my spare time to good use' was the most popular response to the question about reasons for volunteering. It was selected by nearly three fifths (56 per cent) of current volunteers aged 55 or over but by only 40 per cent of their younger counterparts. This suggests a residue of unused time among older citizens that can be accessed by volunteer-using organisations. Retirement was an event that many interviewees described as contributing to their interest in volunteering. Fiona Devine (2003) found

that older people recounted that they ‘jumped for joy’ at the opportunity to volunteer after retirement. A recent study of volunteering after retirement, however, observes that older people find it difficult to fit volunteering into their increasingly busy lives (Davis Smith and Gay 2005).

Just over half of all the volunteers reported difficulties in trying to juggle volunteering with the rest of their lives. This is not surprising given the extent of involvement that they have in other activities. The survey established that Age Concern Newcastle current volunteers were active not only in volunteering but in a variety of other ways. Volunteers aged 55 and over reported, overall, quite substantial time commitments in various caring and community roles:

- More than two fifths (43%) volunteer for another organisation
- More than half (56%) volunteer informally (neighbouring and time giving on a one-to-one basis)
- Just over two fifths (42%) are members of a church or other religious organisation
- More than a third (37%) have caring commitments (i.e. caring for grandchildren or for disabled/elderly relatives)
- A third (33 %) regularly visit an elderly or sick person
- One fifth (20%) care for grandchildren.

The following table illustrates the significant amounts of time that older active volunteers who responded to the survey spent in volunteering (in Age Concern Newcastle and other organisations), informal help and caring.

Table 1: Average hours per week spent by current volunteers (aged 55 and above) in formal and informal volunteering and caring

Age range	ACN volunteering (average hrs/wk) N=107	Other org (average hrs/wk) N=35	Informal help (average hrs/wk) N=47	Caring (average hrs/wk) N=17
55-64	4.7	8.6	4.2	38.7
65-74	3.9	4.7	3.8	11.0
75+	4.2	<i>10.4</i>	4.7	26.0
All	4.1	6.8	4.9	21.3

Note: Numbers in italics indicate $N \leq 4$ in the cell

Age Concern Newcastle volunteers give their time to a wide variety of volunteer-using organisations. These were most typically associated with religion and health but also included schools and colleges, charity shops, children’s charities, residents’ and community associations, support groups for ex-service people, and women’s groups. While a number were unable to quantify the amount of time given to these organisations, nearly half (46 per cent) of those who responded positively to the question about such activity reported giving more time to other organisations than to Age Concern Newcastle.

The most typical informal activity that volunteers reported was visiting an elderly or sick person. When questionnaire respondents were asked to quantify the time they gave to ‘informal’ volunteering and caring commitments or responsibilities, time spent in these ways was not easy to calculate hence the low proportion of respondents

who attempted to do so. Nevertheless there were six individuals - five women and one man – who cared for 20 hours per week or more. We also asked respondents to indicate if their caring was ‘every day’ or ‘depending on situation’. Nine indicated that it was ‘everyday’, including six who did not quantify the time spent. Open ended comments on the nature of caring included childcare cover during school holidays, and caring for a 90-year-old sister living in the same house.

The in-depth interviews allowed us to explore gendered dimensions in the management of time. Half the men we interviewed volunteered after retirement, and some explained themselves in this way: *“I never had much time because I used to work a minimum of ten hours a day and many times seven days a week, and up to eighteen hours a day, so I never had time for anything”* (Mr Metcalfe)

Half the women volunteered after retirement but those who had not been in paid work had relatively high levels of responsibility for looking after the home and caring for family, which had an impact on their capacity to volunteer. *“My husband died, yes, aha because it is, you don’t think about doing all these things [volunteering] when they’re alive because your life’s too full, you know, you’ve got your family and your husband and all that”* (Mrs Granger).

Perspectives on being a volunteer

This section asks just how the role of volunteer is actually being seen by interviewees. On the one hand, people volunteer precisely because the work is undertaken on a voluntary basis. So volunteering is constructed in terms of leisure, because of the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from its activities. In addition, volunteering builds up self-worth, and provides valuable opportunities for personal development and lifelong learning. The freedom and flexibility of volunteering is highly valued, and the recognition of their right to choose corresponds to the representation of older people as ‘consumer-citizens’. Yet volunteers also make formal commitments to volunteering and draw comparisons with paid employment, thus displaying characteristics of active, responsible citizen-workers.

Interviewees did not always find it easy to express their personal understandings of volunteering, and might struggle to find words for what volunteering meant to them. For many, however, it was clear that volunteering gave them an accepted place in society and in their community. Volunteering in other words, was closely tied to how they understood their role as citizens, though that label was never used in the interviews. This is how Mr Wheeler explained himself:

“But that, there might be a sense of duty you know, do you know what I mean, a feeling that it’s, I owe it to something or another, I don’t know how to describe that. It’s probably a thing that I think well things have been pretty good for me and I ought to do a little bit towards sharing that around a bit.” (Mr Wheeler)

Other volunteers are less general in their references, placing themselves as contributing to a specific community rather than to society as a whole. A number of volunteers identified themselves with older people as a particular group in society, warranting more help than others:

“I wanted to sort of do some voluntary work with older people, give some of my time to older people because I think they’re a much maligned group, social group in the community and I think they’re patronized and I think that they’re ignored whereas children are right at the top.” (Ms Dodds)

In other cases, being a member of a national organisation that provides a voice for older people made volunteers feel they belonged to a wider cause. This contributes to the sense of mutual aid that is ‘characterized by individuals with a shared experience or situation working together to bring about change’ (Baines and Hardill 2005, Hardill et al. 2007) but goes beyond it. Whether it was to contribute to society as a whole, or to a specific group in society, the vast majority of interviewees looked upon volunteering in terms of reciprocity and ‘gift-giving’ (Eckstein 2001). This interpretation made volunteering a very positive experience, as it contributed to a sense of belonging. The high value placed on reciprocity among older people may be explained by the sense of individuality and self-respect that it engenders (Wilson 1993).

On the other hand, many volunteers describe what they do as fun and a source of happiness or great joy that gives them a ‘feel good’ factor. This fun-loving aspect of volunteering relates to the perspective of volunteering as a form of leisure. *“I enjoy it like, it’s good, I enjoy it. We have some good laughs with the old people. Well some of them are not much older than me [laughs]” (Mr Lamb)*

The reactions of those who have been touched by the actions of the volunteer can also be intrinsically rewarding.

“And you do, you do feel rewarded when you’ve helped somebody when they go out and say, when you talk to them because they’ve been on their own, and they get up and say eh well thank you very much pet, you know. And I say OK, that’s what we’re here for, and off they go, you know. And you can see well you know and they’re more cheerful and yes, you are rewarded for it.” (Mrs Hetherington)

The overlap between understandings of volunteering and paid work is demonstrated by the way that many interviewees frame their experience of volunteering in terms of ‘work’: *“And I keep saying, ‘I’m going back to work’ and my children say, ‘You can’t work’ and I say, ‘Well you know, back to [Age Concern Newcastle]’. ‘It’s not working’. And I said, ‘It is working, volunteering is working, don’t run away with the idea it isn’t!’” (Mrs Benn).*

The ways in which some interviewees describe their volunteering confirm it as having work-like characteristics. For example, volunteering can mirror paid work as tightly scheduled or unpredictable:

“I came to realize it’s like working in a restaurant you know, sort of for two parts of the day you’re rushed off your feet and you feel that your head’s breaking and then the rest of the day you’re sitting around like this and there’s nothing can be done, that’s just how it is, the nature of it.” (Mrs Mitchell)

Volunteers highlight features of voluntary work as purposeful and productive activity that provides structure and meaning to life (Jahoda, 1978). This is also evidenced by several references to a 'work ethic': *"It's this work ethic you know that we've been brought up with, plus the Catholic background that I'm from and I thought eeh, I'd better do some voluntary work."* (Ms Dodds)

On the other hand, another volunteer who was feeling the stress of volunteering⁶ compared it to her experience of paid employment in a negative way: *"And it's getting to be a case of I don't want to get up this morning, which is not good. I mean I was like that when I left work, I thought oh God, do I have to get up and go, and I'm feeling the same way."* (Mrs Hetherington)

Although the survey findings indicate that just over half of all the current volunteers faced difficulties in juggling volunteering with the rest of their lives, most interviewees were comfortable with the way they balanced activities on a daily and weekly basis. Common to all the interviewees is the fact that volunteering is what it is: doing things voluntarily, out of their own free will, and often on their own terms. This intrinsic quality of volunteering, of being able to *"set your own stipulations"* (Mrs Davidson), described as *"the beauty of volunteering"* by Ms Graham, is what makes many volunteers emphatic that there should be no financial rewards. *"You volunteer because you want to. That's reward enough"*, says Mrs Dutton. This however can hide a strong sense of obligation to treat time in a 'work-like' way and to be reliable for the sake of clients and other volunteers. Mrs Armstrong is one of those in such an ambivalent position: *"And I mean like I suppose if you're a conscientious person like I am, I can't just walk away from it and I'm doing something I really don't want to do once a week"* (Mrs Armstrong).

In the same way that volunteering is sometimes discussed as an extension or replacement of paid work, it can also be compared with the informal or family caregiving that (particularly female) volunteers have devoted many years to. These comparisons tend to be made in volunteer roles such as befriending, where people who have been looking after elderly parents or relatives go on to volunteer to visit older people in their homes. But volunteering in a lunch club can have elements of caring, particularly where volunteers go beyond the activities expected of them. For example, Mrs Burn as a lunch club volunteer felt it was her duty to visit a blind club member who had suddenly been hospitalised. She arrived at her bedside to find a pile of get-well cards that no one had read to her and proceeded to spend the rest of the afternoon with her. Like Mrs Burn, many of the interviewees acknowledge the informal caring content of the volunteering work they do: *"And again, sometimes people might just want to come and sit and have a chat and you can go and sit next to the table and have a bit of coffee and chat to them as well."* (Mrs Campbell)

The work that many of these volunteers do is summarized well in the description that Balbo gives of meeting social needs through caring 'service':

Unless something is added to material goods in order to link them to what a specific individual expects or wants, personal needs are not satisfied...Being there to wait, to listen, to respond; to attend to the needs and desires of others; to worry when difficulties are anticipated; to deal with one's own sense of guilt when problems are not successfully resolved; this is servicing. (Balbo 1987:53)

Interviewees' accounts of their volunteering experiences revealed that volunteering has meanings and outcomes in relation to society as well as in relation to the individual. Most volunteers loved volunteering and expressed what it meant to them in terms of enjoyment, intrinsic rewards, sociability, and personal fulfilment. This gives some mileage to the conceptualisation of volunteering as a form of leisure. But as illustrated, there are also parallels with paid work and caring activities. Ultimately, the meanings that volunteers construct around their volunteering activity are a complex mix of comparisons with leisure, employment and unpaid caring, with their underlying moral and social values and rewards. The ambivalent link between volunteering and citizenship is most apparent in the ways in which older people must negotiate the allocation of time across the fuzzy boundaries between paid work, unpaid family and caring work, informal volunteering and formal volunteering. The implications of this will be discussed in the following section.

Volunteering and citizenship in later life

The survey findings indicate that the majority of volunteers in the organisation are women. In addition, nearly two thirds are retired. Yet volunteers come from a wide range of social backgrounds i.e. from deprived neighbourhoods, from minority ethnic communities, and over the age of 75. Overall, these volunteers are more active in social and civic activities than the general population, with 68 per cent involved in at least one social group and 43 per cent involved in at least one form of civic participation. Nearly 80 per cent of the survey respondents voted in the last local election, well above the national average. When it came to reasons for volunteering, seeking to improve the lives of older people (42 per cent) and responding to requests for help (40 per cent) featured prominently.

The research suggests that volunteering is intimately – but for older people, ambivalently - linked with ideas of active citizenship. But there is a danger that volunteering is seen by government as a panacea for the problems of society without considering the very different constraints and opportunities with respect to gender and ageing. Gender inequality in the labour market is well-documented (Arber and Ginn 1991, Ginn et al. 2001), with consequences for pension provision and social insurance in later life. In spite of such inequalities, volunteering is an expression of citizenship roles and responsibilities, but it is also taken by policy-makers as a key indicator of social capital. With continuing major socio-economic changes, volunteering has been identified as a means of transforming the economic and social well-being of individuals, households and communities. For example, in the words of the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke (Home Office 2005): 'The voluntary and community sector is the invisible glue that holds society together, builds social capital and empowers individuals to make a difference in people's lives...the passion of people who give their time and talents is a great strength of today's Britain.'

With more and more women in the labour market, there are greater pressures on retired people to fill the gaps in family care, whether for grandchildren or for their fellow elderlies. This calls for more informal unpaid work time from older people.⁷ At the same time, government policy emphasizes 'welfare to work' and 'making work pay', encouraging the image of the 'citizen worker'. Volunteering is then seen in

instrumental terms as a route back in to paid work for those who are not currently active in the labour market for whatever reason. Furthermore, the role of volunteering in public service delivery brings new and greater demands on volunteers, as partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors results in tighter specifications and greater accountability. This can make volunteering even more ‘work-like’, despite the lack of pay.

The research shows that volunteering that is too ‘work-like’ and volunteering as a route to paid work sits uncomfortably with older people. In addition, it established that older people may have considerable demands on their time from family caring responsibilities and from informal volunteering. Citizenship is both a status and an active practice. As an active practice, citizenship needs time inputs to make a contribution to the common good and to social capital. However, time is relatively little discussed in the context of citizenship, with citizenship all but invisible in the ‘work-life balance’ agenda.

The different forms that people’s commitment to volunteering take become apparent in the in-depth interviews. Volunteering was widely seen as something that should not be financially rewarded, and its intrinsic rewards were very much appreciated. So volunteering was conceived of as being quite distinct from paid work, although some volunteers were keen to draw parallels with paid work. The expression of their commitment to volunteering brought out two distinct, if related, conceptualisations of citizenship on the part of interviewees. One group emphasized the norms and values they held, and saw a need to ‘give back’ to society at this stage of their lives in the light of what society had given to them over their lifetime. Another group placed more emphasis on self-help and mutual aid as the driver for their volunteering activities. ‘We’re all in this life together’ was a rallying point, and volunteering was seen as part of being wanted, being part of society and of a national charitable cause defending the rights of older people. Both these relationships of reciprocity and mutuality give expression to the understanding of citizenship as involving relationships of interdependence (Lister 1997). At the same time, volunteers were exercising their agency and choice as ‘consumer-citizens’, emphasising the importance of control and autonomy for older people.

What are the limits, then, that older people place on their citizenship contributions through volunteering? As already suggested, time constraints are an important issue, whether in terms of overall hours available or the timing of those hours over the week or the year. Interviewees made it clear that either intense careers or caring responsibilities had impacted on their ability to volunteer in the past and that particularly the latter could continue to be constraining. Volunteering can be described as leisure and recreation and in terms of pleasure and satisfaction and is then an opportunity. But when volunteering takes on a more work-like quality, going beyond the limits of what the volunteer would do without being paid – leading to a sense of being taken for granted – this will tend to discourage volunteering activity. Underlying volunteers’ management of their formal and informal volunteering, caring and other activities is their sense of what is important and valuable to them.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with some of the wider issues that can facilitate citizenship through volunteering. Voluntary organisations working together with government and statutory bodies can create the environment and provide the infrastructure and opportunities for civic participation. However, too much government input into encouraging volunteering – particularly as a route into paid employment - can have the opposite effect, and lead to volunteer perceptions that they are being foolish to work for nothing. It is very important for policy makers to appreciate the distinction between paid work and volunteer activity with respect to citizenship for the older population. One way of doing this would be to incorporate time for volunteering and active citizenship into the work-life balance debate. Thus, as older people have made clear in the interviews their right to choose to volunteer, policy-makers should consider volunteering as only one of a range of options rather than a cure-all for the threatening care-deficit in our society.

This research has shown that volunteering contributes to citizenship and civic participation, but only inasmuch as due consideration is given to the time-inputs and the values underpinning voluntary activity. In the longer term more fundamental questions may arise, such as the pension crisis and any shift in the pension age, with more people encouraged – or constrained - to work beyond the age of 65. Should we be giving consideration to a looming volunteering deficit in a scenario where well-off pensioners opt to spend their time on holidays abroad, while the rest have to continue in paid employment? The participants in this study have highlighted the social and moral rewards of their commitment to volunteering i.e. the heartfelt satisfaction of contributing and feeling a part of community, as well as the control and autonomy they enjoy in being able to do so. Government ‘spin’ that promotes volunteering by emphasising individual benefits may hinder attempts to relate volunteering to community benefits and the achievement of the common good (Arai and Pedlar 2003). Engendering an understanding of citizenship as being about interdependent relationships on the other hand would enable a valuing of older people who are no longer able to contribute, particularly in active formal ways.

In summary, formal volunteering among older people is under threat from the pressure to continue in the labour market; childcare and social care gaps needing to be filled informally by older people; government promotion of volunteering as a route to paid work and the increased professionalisation, bureaucratisation and marketisation in the voluntary sector. Our recommendations to Age Concern Newcastle included more flexible volunteer roles incorporating small amounts of volunteering that would suit people with an illness or disability. As informal volunteering is more suited to those facing various constraints, there is also an argument for greater acknowledgement of the informal unpaid care and community work that goes on behind the scenes, that results not from top-down government rhetoric based on economic priorities, but on age-old values underlying voluntary action that emphasize intrinsic and community rewards. A general recognition by the government and all sectors of society of these issues in relation to older volunteers will engender a more holistic and inclusive view of volunteering as a form of active citizenship than is being promoted at present.

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Notes

1. All the names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The Home Office website highlights the instrumental gains of volunteering (see <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/communities/volunteering/?version=1>), as it did in the Millennium Volunteer scheme, launched in 1999 (Roberts and Devine 2004).
3. Douglas Hurd, *The Guardian*, 16 Sept 1988
4. Formal volunteering is usually associated with activities undertaken through an organisation or group and is distinguished by its context from one-to-one acts of good neighbourliness referred to as 'fourth sector' (Williams 2003b). In practice, the boundaries between formal and informal can be difficult to draw and may be different for different groups (Beneria 1999).
5. This is based on the ward indices in England using the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000.
6. This volunteer was involved in selling financial products to the general public. In 2004, new regulations by Financial Services Authority required re-training of staff and volunteers. As a result, volunteers reported feeling stressed about making a mistake and losing the spontaneity of customer contact. This led to a degree of discomfort for volunteers, and eventually a number left.
7. With welfare state restructuring, the resultant mixed economies of care and increasing fragmentation have meant a greater reliance on family and friends, in particular grandparents (Money and Statham 2002) to plug the gaps between formal and informal parental care (Lewis 2003).

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