

# Connected Communities

## Exploring Personal Communities

A Review of Volunteering Processes

Mihaela Kelemen and Anita Mangan



# Background

## Executive Summary

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*Exploring Personal Communities: A Review of Volunteering Processes* investigates the idea that personal communities contribute to the public good by offering ways to transcend commonplace dualisms such as public/private and individual/collective.

The aim of the review is to explore the personal community through the lens of volunteering in order to shed light on the ways in which individuals experience and adjust to one another within and across communities. Drawing on a wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary review of over ninety books and journal articles, the report contributes four findings: it (a) positions personal communities by focusing on the idea that individualism can achieve social purposes and become a resource for public policy; (b) proposes a typology of volunteering that accounts for the multiple, simultaneous and often contradictory motivations of volunteers; (c) investigates the commodification of the voluntary sector and the loss of political voice; (d) explores the social outcomes of volunteering and the central role of volunteering in the making of personal communities. Finally, in co-operation with New Vic Borderlines, our community partner, *Exploring Personal Communities* concluded with a documentary drama created and performed by volunteers, which explored the experience of being a volunteer in Stoke-on-Trent.

## Researchers and Project Partners

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### Key words

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Personal communities  
Volunteering  
Abductive reasoning  
Documentary drama  
Community based organisations  
Quality of life  
Voluntary sector  
Public good

# Exploring Personal Communities

## Overview

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The *Exploring Personal Communities* review documents the emergence of a particular form of community in its historical and cultural context: namely, the personal community. In particular, it focuses on volunteering as a key aspect of personal community. By providing a more nuanced understanding of volunteering processes, the review evaluates the contribution of the personal community to sustaining and enhancing the quality of life of individuals in their local communities where volunteering processes take place. The review explores the idea that personal communities contribute to the common good of society in terms of offering ways for negotiating individual and collective identities via individual engagement with democratic social processes.

Our analysis of the literature begins with a definition of personal communities, continuing with a wide-ranging review of the friendship, charity, well-being and volunteering literatures. These topics are of interest to a wide range of academic disciplines. Therefore, the review is multi-disciplinary, drawing on the expertise of the grant holders and peer reviewers in the following research areas: drama and theatre studies; management and business studies; philosophy; social policy; and sociology.

In addition to an analysis of the existing literature, *Exploring Personal Communities* also engaged with members of the volunteering communities in Stoke-on-Trent. Stoke is an example of a community in post-industrial decline which relies heavily on volunteers to support many of its economic, social and cultural activities. Sharing and debating our findings with local volunteers provided a two-way knowledge transfer opportunity and contributed in a meaningful way to debates

about the economic, social and cultural possibilities for Stoke.

We worked in close collaboration with Sue Moffat, Director of the award-winning New Vic Borderlines, to develop a series of activities aimed at documenting the experience of being a volunteer and creating a new artistic company of volunteers, which culminated in a documentary performance by the volunteers entitled *A Little Act of Kindness*.

## Aims and Objectives

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The aim of the review was to explore the personal community through the lens of volunteering in order to shed light on the ways in which individuals experience and adjust to one another within and across communities. We specifically aimed to give individuals and communities in Stoke-on-Trent an opportunity to engage with our research in order to reflect on their own experiences and imagine/design new agendas that could make a difference to the quality of their lives and their local communities.

The project had six objectives:

1. Define personal communities: for example, to what extent is the personal community different from friendship and charity?
2. Establish the central role of volunteering in the making of personal communities.
3. Understand the rationale of volunteering: for example, why do people volunteer in the current context of heightened individualism and consumerism?
4. Explore the dynamics of volunteering work and the impact it has on individual volunteers.

5. Provide a critique of managerialist accounts of managing the voluntary sector in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of volunteering as a way of negotiating issues of community identity, diversity, exclusion and cohesion.
6. Document the social outcomes of volunteering: how does volunteering contribute to the greater good of the community and overall society in terms of well-being?

## Methodology

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The working brief for *Exploring Personal Communities: A Review of Volunteering Processes* was an investigation of volunteering as a key aspect of the personal community. The research was multi-disciplinary, falling within five main research areas: drama and theatre studies; management and business studies; philosophy; social policy; and sociology. As our investigation into personal communities advanced, we widened our literature search to include material from cultural studies, social gerontology, economics, critical management studies, tourism research, consumption studies and geography.

The review comprised of five distinct sections: personal communities; friendship; charity; well-being; and, finally, volunteering. Throughout the review, we queried the consensual and overly positive view of communities by adopting abductive reasoning (Locke et al. 2008), an approach that draws on an experiential understanding of volunteering and on our existing critical research paradigm. Abductive reasoning originates in American Pragmatism, a philosophical school of thought that holds that the aim of truth is not to correspond to the world but to

anticipate future experience by reflecting on present experiences, especially those that are problematic or ambiguous and cannot be resolved by using existing knowledge.

Each keyword we used in our searches produced numerous matches and we read widely before narrowing down our final selection to 39 books and 53 journal articles. In keeping with Objective 5, we found that much of the mainstream, popular literature on volunteering, charity and well-being adopted an uncritical stance to the topics. For this reason, we refined our searches to include terms such as 'discourse' and 'critical' and this approach resulted in range of challenging articles and books. While they may not be as widely cited as more mainstream papers, we believe that their findings enrich our understanding of personal communities and the role of volunteering processes in them.

## Findings

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The review has four main findings:

### 1. Positioning personal communities

We argue that the rise of 'personal communities' stems from an attempt to rethink in fundamental ways the relationship between individualism and collective/public agendas. Research on personal community aims to map out more clearly the connection between relationships happening in the private sphere and their impact on the public sphere (Wilkinson 2010). In so doing, it focuses on the idea that individualism (however defined) can in fact achieve social purposes and become a resource for public policy.

Definitions of personal communities place different emphases on the importance of individualism but they all seem to share the

idea that a personal community refers to one's social micro-cosmos, to the close ties one has with friends, neighbours, kin and workmates which give one a sense of identity (however, temporal and fragile that may be). As such, research on personal communities may have as a starting point an understanding of friendship, family relations, neighbourly relations, charity work, or processes of volunteering (Wilkinson 2010). But whatever their origin, personal communities are seen as vehicles for translating personal ties into social capital for the social good rather than just for individual self-fulfilment. Such micro social worlds (personal communities) are bearers of tremendous social capital but this is rarely acknowledged or understood by policy makers (Spencer and Pahl 2006). Finally, because personal communities respond to both individual and social/collective needs (the needs of the other), they transcend dualities such as the private/public, individual/collectivity, self/other.

## **2. Towards a typology of volunteering**

Volunteering is a complex term to define as it encompasses a wide range of activities, motivations and organisational issues. Moreover, volunteering activity crosses different sectors, communities and societies. The literature on volunteer motivations cuts across multiple disciplines and activities and much of the empirical research underlines the difficulty of ascribing just one strict definition or motivation to individual volunteers. Moreover, volunteers can experience contradictory motivations simultaneously (Steffen and Fothergill 2009). With these caveats in mind, we adopted three broad categories of volunteering motives: altruistic, instrumental and forced. Altruistic volunteering is most closely linked to contributing to the public good. Instrumental volunteering is motivated by self-interest,

where the volunteer expects to experience some personal gain. The final category of 'forced' volunteering relates to the recent trend whereby jobseekers are expected to volunteer their labour in order to gain work experience. Colloquially, a volunteer in this category is often referred to as a 'voluntold' because he or she is told to volunteer.

## **3. Commodification of the voluntary sector and the loss of political voice**

Researchers are beginning to question both the third sector's growing relationship with government in the UK and the continuing professionalisation of the sector. Critics argue that the market discourse is colonising philanthropy (Wirgaut et al. 2010) by repackaging it as a lifestyle choice where concern is expressed by engaging in consumption. While company-led initiatives encourage employees to volunteer, the employees often have no control over the actual activity. Moreover, businesses specialising in volunteer tourism often perpetuate the oppression of the communities they are purporting to help (McGehee 2012). Power and politics are thereby side-lined: charitable causes are depoliticised, those in need are marginalised, political leaders and consumers are removed from the decision-making process and ethical decisions are put in the hands of corporations.

Government investment in the voluntary sector, via the outsourcing of public services, raises questions about the balance between large and small non-profit organisations, political alignment and issues of transparency and accountability. In particular, because voluntary organisations have had to tailor their service provision to the needs of the purchaser, namely the government, the danger is that they might become merely 'instruments of the

state' (Seddon 2007: 27), thereby losing their independent political voice. Moreover, this leads to volunteers and voluntary organisations becoming complicit in perpetuating neo-liberal approaches to government (Rosol 2012).

#### 4. The social outcomes of volunteering

Our positioning of personal communities suggests that they present an attempt to bridge commonplace dualisms between private/public, individual/collectivity and self/other. We argue that volunteering plays a central role in the creation, maintenance and evolution of a personal community. For example, there is ample evidence in the literature to suggest that volunteering contributes to the greater good of the community in terms of well-being, community spirit and feelings of inclusiveness, empowerment, public service and social responsibility (Thoits and Hewitt 2001, Smith and Holmes 2012, Mangan 2009, Gooch 2004, Houston 2006, Nichols and Ralston 2011). Volunteering can be prompted by contradictory motives (Steffen and Fothergill 2009), yet it can result in both personal and social gains.

The literature review benefited greatly from the on-going debate and discussions we engaged in with academics, practitioners and volunteers and from the collaboration and activities organised by New Vic Borderlines, our community partner. Throughout these discussions, a recurring theme was that volunteering is multifaceted; it is both an individual and collective response to a perceived social need. Importantly, however, the volunteers were neither dupes nor naïve 'do-gooders'; time and again, the volunteers involved in *A Little Act of Kindness* were highly reflexive about their role in society and the political sensitivities of being a volunteer. Many, for example, refused to do tasks that had been previously undertaken by paid employees,

while other unemployed volunteers escaped into volunteering in order to reject the way that job seekers have been turned into a commodity to be bought and sold by employment agencies. These themes reflected concerns raised in the literature review and they added depth and complexity to what is often an overly positive message about the social outcomes of volunteering.

### Other outputs

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In addition to this discussion paper, *Exploring Personal Communities* also included a workshop for academics and practitioners held at Keele University and a documentary drama held at the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme. A conference stream is due to take place in February 2013, as part of the APROS Colloquium. A project website was also developed: [www.keele.ac.uk/exploringpersonalcommunities/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/exploringpersonalcommunities/)

#### **Community and Volunteering Workshop**

Keele University, 25 September 2012

The workshop was a one-day event hosted in Keele University by the *Culture, Organisation and Markets (COM)* research group, as part of the annual series of research events. The full-day workshop featured invited speakers from Essex, Teeside, Keele and Warsaw universities, as well as a presentation from Sue Moffat, Director of New Vic Borderlines. The workshop was attended by over 30 participants from around the UK and included academics, PhD students and volunteers. Following an overview of *Exploring Personal Communities*, the invited speakers presented research on staging and performance, diversity management and personal communities, the community of co-operatives and the Polish perspective on the volunteering tradition.

***A Little Act of Kindness***  
**New Vic Theatre, 10 October 2012**

Our documentary drama on volunteering, *A Little Act of Kindness*, was held at the New Vic Theatre and was followed by a practitioner workshop where the audience and volunteer performers shared their experiences and debated key issues in volunteering. Drawing on the New Vic Theatre's documentary tradition, *A Little Act of Kindness* was developed in three phases. Using our own personal communities we drew on personal contacts to find volunteers who were willing to get involved in the project. These volunteers, in turn, introduced us to others in the Stoke-on-Trent region. Our participants came from: Ford Green Hall, Etruria Industrial Museum, New Vic Volunteers, Community Payback, Community

Champions, Staffordshire Buddies, Victim Support and New Vic Borderlines Volunteers.

***Alternative Modes of Organising:  
Communitarian Dreams and Immediate  
Realities*** APROS 15, Hitotsubashi University,  
Tokyo, 15-17 February 2013

*Alternative Modes of Organising* is a conference stream in the Asia-Pacific Researchers in Organisation Studies (APROS) conference entitled 'Re-covering Organisations'. The stream is based on the review's themes and includes 18 papers with a strong emphasis on empirical research, encompassing a wide range of theoretical approaches and views from localised to cross-cultural perspectives. We intend to publish the best papers as a special issue in the *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*.

## Mapping objectives, findings and outputs

OBJECTIVE	FINDINGS	OUTPUT
1. Defining personal communities	1. Positioning personal communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <i>Exploring Personal Communities</i> (EPC) discussion paper</li> <li>■ Keele Workshop</li> <li>■ <i>A Little Act of Kindness</i></li> </ul>
2. Establishing the central role of volunteering in the making of personal communities	2. Towards a typology of volunteering 4. The social outcomes of volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ EPC discussion paper</li> <li>■ <i>A Little Act of Kindness</i></li> </ul>
3. Understanding the rationale of volunteering	2. Towards a typology of volunteering 3. Commodification of the voluntary sector and the loss of political voice 4. The social outcomes of volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ EPC discussion paper</li> <li>■ <i>A Little Act of Kindness</i></li> </ul>
4. Exploring the dynamics of volunteering work and its impact on individual volunteers	3. Commodification of the voluntary sector and the loss of political voice 4. The social outcomes of volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ EPC discussion paper</li> <li>■ Keele Workshop</li> <li>■ <i>A Little Act of Kindness</i></li> </ul>
5. Providing a critique of managing the voluntary sector in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of volunteering	3. Commodification of the voluntary sector and the loss of political voice 4. The social outcomes of volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ EPC discussion paper</li> <li>■ Keele Workshop</li> <li>■ APROS 15 conference</li> </ul>
6. Documenting the social outcomes of volunteering	1. Positioning personal communities 2. Towards a typology of volunteering 4. The social outcomes of volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ EPC discussion paper</li> <li>■ Keele Workshop</li> <li>■ <i>A Little Act of Kindness</i></li> <li>■ APROS 15 conference</li> </ul>



## On-going dissemination

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In addition to the APROS conference stream and special issue, on-going dissemination will include a conference paper (Summer 2013) and a peer-reviewed paper. This Connected Communities discussion paper will also be circulated to advocacy and support organisations in the voluntary sector in North Staffordshire in order to continue the discussion about the meaning of volunteering in today's society. A new module on not-for-profit modes of organising is also being developed for undergraduate students in Keele University.

## Recommendations for future research

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Our findings suggest that there is a gap in understanding the experiences of 'voluntolds' and more empirical research is needed to uncover what lies beneath forced volunteering and what could be done to ensure that policies on volunteering account for these 'untold stories of volunteering'. We also believe that research on personal communities and volunteering will benefit from documentary theatre approaches to co-designing and co-producing research with community members. Finally, there is a need for a more critical approach to volunteering, compassion and personal communities which questions the neutral façade of such concepts and goes beyond their taken for granted meanings and positive consequences for individuals and society.

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For a complete reference list and more detailed information on the project, please see:  
[www.keele.ac.uk/exploringpersonalcommunities/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/exploringpersonalcommunities/)

**New Vic Borderlines**, community partner  
[www.newvictheatre.org.uk/](http://www.newvictheatre.org.uk/)  
[www.newvictheatre.org.uk/77-new-vic/204-a-little-act-of-kindness](http://www.newvictheatre.org.uk/77-new-vic/204-a-little-act-of-kindness)

**External organisations and policy issues**  
[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/)

<http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk>





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