

# THE GIFT OF VOLUNTEERING AND THE VIRTUES OF SELF-LOVE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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*This article outlines some of the intellectual, social and political relationships between contemporary interpretations of gift exchange and volunteering in Higher Education. It questions often dichotomous ways of understanding volunteering as altruistic or self-interested, explores changing uses and expectations of volunteering in Western society, and considers the rhetoric and realities of volunteer support, motives and experiences, in relation to institutional priorities and drivers.*  
Keywords: gift exchange, altruism, volunteering, public engagement, higher education.

*Članek oriše intelektualna, družbena in politična razmerja na primeru sodobnih interpretacij menjave darov in prostovoljstva v visokošolskem sistemu. Prevpriša mnogostrane, diboimne načine razumevanja prostovoljstva med altruizmom in egoizmom ter raziskuje spremenljive uporabe izraza prostovoljstvo in njegovo uporabo v zahodni družbi. Upošteva tudi retoriko in udejanjenje prostovoljske podpore, motive in izkušnje, predvsem v razmerju do institucionalnih prioritet in ciljev.*  
Ključne besede: menjava darov, altruizem, prostovoljstvo, javno udejstvovanje, visoko šolstvo.

## INTRODUCTION

Epistemological and methodological challenges to more traditional anthropological approaches have increased in recent years, particularly with regard to social relationships and power. Critical and subjective perspectives question many aspects of what was previously taken for granted about the nature and purpose of social phenomena, and what it means to be human in a particular time, place and society. Whilst anthropologists re-examine their engagement with and understanding of human societies, institutions and daily lived experience, there is a re-appraisal taking place in many Higher Education institutions, in relation to their engagement with national and global rhetoric and policy, at a time of increasing social, political and financial uncertainty.

Contemporary concerns about socio-political, economic and demographic change and the perceived decline of social cohesion (Putnam 2000: 18) have led many governments to support and fund volunteering and volunteer research as one way of encouraging civic participation among young people (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2008: 3; Hustinx et al. 2010: 350; Smith et al. 2010: 65). Closely related to these concerns is the long-standing debate about

the public role of Higher Education Institutions (Boyer 1990; Collini 2012), their changing relationships with government and industry (Goddard 2009), and the increasing emphasis placed on volunteering as a route to employability and skills acquisition, as well as service and personal development (Furco 2010; Goddard 2009). Volunteering is increasingly regarded as an integral part of the “good society” (Kendall 2003: 2), supporting social, economic and political wellbeing by encouraging community participation and generating social capital (Putnam 2000). This has been reflected in a resurgence of academic interest in voluntarism, particularly surrounding the diverse and often conflicting meanings, motives and uses for volunteering in different contexts.

It is within this context that I take up the lens of reciprocal gift exchange to explore aspects of voluntarism in UK Higher Education, using anthropological theories of the gift (e.g. Godbout 2000; Komter 2005; Mauss 1990; Osteen 2002) to re-visit some of the value-laden and often dichotomous ways of understanding volunteering as either altruistic or self-interested and in so doing, explore some of the changing uses and expectations of volunteering in contemporary, Western society. Focusing primarily on existing gift and volunteering literature, but also including some examples from my own ongoing research,<sup>1</sup> I consider not only the individual but the social realities and narratives of volunteering in UK Higher Education, and how multiple, contested and situated meanings of volunteering reflect different political, economic and social values. In an increasingly challenging socio-economic climate with fierce competition for public funding, I also ask how the term volunteering is understood and used in narratives of public engagement and the social role of universities. Finally, how does the language of volunteering and of the gift mediate power and social relationships between volunteers, Higher Education institutions and voluntary organisations?

## MORALITY AND THE VIRTUE OF SELF-LOVE

Although there is a widespread belief that “there can be no community, nor a stable society, without a shared moral culture” (Etzioni 2000: 9), MacIntyre (1981: 6) makes the uncomfortable observation that since individuals and societies have been influenced by a myriad of competing or mutually incompatible norms and values over different periods, “there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture”. This is illustrated by multiple beliefs about individualism, collectivism and social obligations, oscillating between the altruistic desire to act for the benefit of others and the self-interested goal of maximising one’s own gains, as well as culturally-specific manifestations of morality, including attitudes towards giving and volunteering.

The Enlightenment association of morality with altruism offers just one view of humanity,

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<sup>1</sup> I am currently undertaking a qualitative, critical study, which is not yet published, focusing on staff and student volunteers at one university in northern England and its relationships with other community groups and voluntary organisations in the same region.

with the paradoxical belief that altruism combats a so-called ‘natural’ human egoism and rational self-interest, which has the result of opposing morality to human nature (MacIntyre 1981: 212). However, Western understandings of morality and virtue have also been deeply influenced by Aristotle (2004: 176), who transcended this divide with the statement that “the good person should be a self-lover, since he will help himself as well as benefit others”. That is to say, one cannot pursue individual good without also pursuing common wellbeing, and by failing to help others in our society, we thereby fail to help ourselves (MacIntyre 1981: 213). In effect, this argues that “being moral is in most individuals’ self-interest” (Badhwar 1993: 91), although Badhwar continues that a moral outcome to a self-interested act does not address the question of whether self-interested motivation can, in itself, be moral. This continues to present a challenge for philosophical arguments rooted in a dichotomy of altruism and self-interest that also views humans as essentially rational, calculating and competitive.

The view that a trade-off between self-interest and the collective good is central to the maintenance of social harmony acknowledges the constraining and normative effects of communal obligation as an inherent part of social life: “choice is overborne by duty” (Turner 1974: 35). Another anthropological approach to exploring the tension between autonomy and duty, and a way of transcending the dichotomy between self-interest and altruism, lies in the argument that human sociality is underpinned neither by competition on the one hand, nor by “disinterested kindness” (Carrithers 1992: 48) on the other, but by co-operation and inter-dependence; we exist in a system of expectations and obligations. From this viewpoint, volunteering as a force for social cohesion is closely related to both concepts of power and reciprocal gift exchange (Layton 1997).

## PARADOXES AND IDEOLOGIES OF THE GIFT

Gifts and gift exchange are subject to multiple, contested definitions and research perspectives, informed by different ideological and intellectual worldviews about individual and collective motivations for behaviour (Komter 1996: 3; Osteen 2002: 2). Whilst the phenomenon of the gift may be universal, different interpretations of both ‘pure’ and ‘reciprocal’ gift exchange are historically and culturally situated (Parry 1986: 453). Reciprocal gifts are rhetorical, and a key element of human communication (Sherry 1983: 157). Gifts are not only concrete objects; they can also be symbolic, offered in the form of services, or used to reflect and perpetuate existing social norms, values and expectations (Sherry 1983: 159), through giving and receiving, but also through the sanctions that can result from not doing so. In his deeply influential *Essay on the Gift*, Mauss (1990: 4) situates the traditional gift at the heart of the wider social system. Komter (2005: 1) associates the gift with relational bonds and solidarity, likening Maussian gift exchange to a form of social glue, mediated by “the triple obligation to give, receive and give back” (Caillé 2000: ix): something we adhere to without necessarily being aware of the underlying reasons, or at least by participating in a mutual deception that the gift is free and

voluntary (Bourdieu 1977: 171). These interpretations regard the gift as crucial to social cohesion, but also as inherently unequal due to the often unspoken pressure always to reciprocate (Godbout 2000: 132) which is driven by power and status, as well as gratitude (Levi-Strauss 1996: 18; Mauss 1990: 6-9, 50-53).

Research into gift exchange is informed by the intellectual and personal reflexivity of researchers. A common criticism from Godbout (2000: 128), for example, is that economists are inclined to force the gift into an economic framework or a liberal capitalist ideological perspective; in either case, the result can be a distorted or incomplete understanding placing too much emphasis on individualist or utilitarian motivations. Conversely, Laidlaw (2000: 617) attributes the tendency for anthropologists to pay less attention to the idea of a 'pure' gift to Mauss's influence on gift theory, which has resulted in a research focus on "enduring social relations" which regards the gift as critical to social cohesion and community: both entail a measure of obligation and reciprocity and therefore exclude the idea of a disinterested gift that has no social ties.

Both Mauss (1990) and Bourdieu (1977: 177) challenge the notion of the 'pure' gift, made voluntarily and with no thought or expectation of return, on the basis that this misunderstands the relational nature of both giving and reciprocating (Douglas 1990: ix). Titmuss's (1970: 80) work on anonymous blood donation, which he describes as giving "to the unknown few or the unknown many", is often cited in defence of the existence of a 'pure' or altruistic gift. However, he also recognises that motivations are rarely straight forward. Even without tangible reward or direct gratitude, it is difficult to escape the awareness of impact, that this act will probably help someone in the present or future, and the knowledge that blood donation usually relies on bonds of generosity and obligation (Titmuss 1970: 101). This is much closer to a Maussian understanding of the gift. Furthermore, Titmuss's (1970: 82) understanding of "acts of giving" as forming both part of a social process and part of selfhood appears to express a position that fits within the framework of reciprocal gift exchange; each are informed and regulated by social norms and mechanisms that govern the order, form and style of giving, receiving and reciprocating.

Viewed in a positive light, reciprocity brings a wider and more general benefit to all, through improved relationships, trust and care: bonds which are neither purely altruistic nor purely self-interested (Putnam 2000: 21). However, some people manage to show gratitude better and more gracefully than others (Komter 2005: 7). It is for this reason that although the combination of sincerity, empathy, obligation and mutual benefit has led to the reciprocal gift being described as "an invitation to partnership" (Sherry 1983: 158), there is also a danger that gratitude may develop into a sense of resentment, reflecting Mauss's (1990: 83) observation that not everyone welcomes the bonds of obligation. Bourdieu (1977: 195) illustrates the connection between giving, responsibility, power and gratitude using a Kabyle saying: "The rich man is 'rich so as to be able to give to the poor'"; the unspoken corollary being that such generosity also gives the rich man power, through which the recipient may be influenced or controlled until such time as the gift is reciprocated. His work with the Kabyle also indicates

traditional views of social conformity in opposition to individual autonomy that reflect the Maussian gift, and exemplifies some of the problems that may be experienced in reconciling the gift to modern societies that place greater value on individualism and autonomy: “Doing one’s duty as a man means conforming to the social order, and this is fundamentally a question of respecting rhythm’s, keeping pace, and not falling out of line” (Bourdieu 1977: 159).

The complexities of ‘modern’ life in many societies, the increasingly blurred boundaries between private, public and financial spheres (Godbout 2000), and a greater emphasis on individuality, all mediate the underlying social effects of gift exchange. However, an interpretation of the reciprocal gift as being both freely chosen and obligatory, both conscious and unconscious, with underlying mechanics of mutuality, responsibility and social norms (Sherry 1983: 158), can still be used to address more modern debates that often emerges in discussions of philanthropy and volunteering. This is because ideologies of altruism and of self-interest, whilst on the face of it antithetical to each other, are both integral to the understanding of gift exchange, reciprocity and power relations (Parry 1986: 453). Using language not dissimilar to Titmuss’s (1970: 101) description of blood donation as a gift “to unnamed strangers”, Godbout (2000: 64) situates volunteering in the area of “the gift to strangers”, a modern manifestation of reciprocal gift exchange recognising that the market economy extends relational ties beyond the traditional grouping of tribe, friends and family.

## VOLUNTEERING AND THE GIFT

By extolling the “virtues of democratic pluralism inherent in voluntary action”, Prochaska (1988: 2) illustrates a popular, contemporary perspective associating voluntarism with the concepts of equality, freedom and civic participation. This offers an interesting contrast to the complex relationship between voluntarism and Maussian gift exchange, in which ideas of community and social cohesion are underpinned by hierarchies of obligation, reciprocity and power. Such differences in ideological perspective have epistemological and practical implications for describing and researching voluntarism, as do the different positions afforded to voluntarism by successive governments, depending on prevailing dominant political perspectives, moral norms and economic circumstances.

There is a temptation when researching voluntarism within the framework of gift exchange to focus on beneficial aspects that may heal the breaches in an increasingly individualistic and fragmented society. However, the potentially negative aspects of the gift should not be overlooked (Komter 1996: 5-6; Osteen 2002: 13). Although processes of gift exchange and reciprocity may be central to social integration, they signal not only a sense of membership and belonging, but also different degrees of social distance (Sherry 1983: 158). Research suggests that levels of giving and volunteering are linked to class, occupation and education, and can therefore be “negative and excluding” (Komter 2005: 9) through the creation or reflection of socio-economic divisions and inequalities: those who give, volunteer or participate in other

collective activities tend to have the most, and be the greatest recipients (Putnam 2000: 358), whereas those who contribute least also receive the least, yet are often the very people in most need (Bourdieu 1977: 181) or who might benefit from the possibilities opened up to them through volunteering.

This type of division also serves to reinforce the importance of social networks, in providing opportunities for helping others through contacts, access to resources, and through relationships that develop bonds of reciprocity and a sense of mutual responsibility for others. In his exploration of the various reasons that social capital is associated with giving and volunteering, Putnam (2000: 121) suggests that some people may share common traits of generosity and gregariousness, and belonging to social networks makes it more likely that people will be asked to give or get involved; once someone becomes known as a joiner or helper, they are more likely to be asked. However, active social networks do not equate to active participation in organised activities and whilst volunteering is frequently regarded as one of the crucial elements of social capital, Putnam (2000: 116) agrees with John Dewey that there is a difference between “doing with” and “doing for”. Furthermore, whilst social capital and networking may facilitate volunteer activities through interaction, co-operation and the development of trust, they are not synonymous with volunteering (Wilson 2000: 223).

### CONTESTED MEANINGS

As the above references to social norms, community cohesion and civic participation suggest, it is becoming increasingly unusual to encounter examples of contemporary volunteering and volunteer research that do not also refer to the concept of community. As with the gift, volunteering and community are subject to different, often conflicting interpretations, and tend to be understood in relation to popular and academic assumptions, stereotypes and expectations. In both cases, diverse attempts at definitions are indicative of what is valued, required, included or excluded from a concept or phenomena, and may be used, explicitly or implicitly, to pursue or constrain particular agendas (Joseph 2002: xxiv). Whether rooted in shared interests, values or physical location, anthropologists increasingly seek to understand how the term ‘community’ is used rather than how it is defined, and recognise that meanings depend very much on individual and group perceptions (Cohen 1985: 8). Meanings of community tend to be both descriptive and normative, with debates focusing as much on the perceived loss of community, as on how to define it (Jewkes and Murcott 1996: 556). In relation to popular views that community cohesion is “about equality of opportunity, about shared norms and values, about trust, about respect for diversity, about belonging, about interdependence and about working together” (Kearney 2003: 45), the role of volunteering is often framed as contributing to the building of a resilient, democratic and cohesive society. However, the common association of community or volunteering with consensus, trust and common values runs a risk that diversity and dissent will be overlooked or ignored, with some

norms, values and voices being privileged over others, especially where decisions are made by socially or politically dominant groups (Cohen 1985: 12; Jewkes and Murcott 1996: 562). Most so-called communities actually appear to consist of a number of heterogeneous groups, characterized by competition as well as co-operation, rivalry as well as common interest, and all with different needs and voices (Rapport 1993: 190; Jewkes and Murcott 1996: 561-562).

Meanings, explanations and uses for volunteering are constantly changing, reflecting socio-economic and political circumstances as well as stakeholder agendas linked to rhetoric, ideology and power. One widely, although not entirely, accepted definition of volunteering is: “unpaid work performed within an organised setting to the benefit of other individuals, organisations, or the society at large” (Komter 2005: 126). Another definition of volunteering which emphasises autonomy, altruism and without being explicit seems to privilege value-based actions, is attributed to the Association for Research on Voluntary Action and Nonprofit Organisations: “All kinds of non-coerced human behaviour, collective or individual, that is engaged in because of a commitment to values other than direct, immediate remuneration” (Steinberg and Powell 2006: 4). However, the first example overlooks the role of informal activities and neither definition reflects the growing acceptance of instrumental and self-interested motivations that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary volunteer literature. Other attempts to define volunteering prove similarly problematic, and reflect what I was recently told by an organiser of student volunteering: “I suppose everyone would like volunteering to be the same thing to everyone but it’s not and it’s never going to be.”

As the remainder of this article will indicate, there is no single definition of student volunteering in UK Higher Education although it is usual to find references to commitment, free time, unpaid activity and benefiting others (Darwen and Rannard 2011: 177; Wilson 2000: 216). However, Wilson (2000) also acknowledges the ongoing debate about whether the idea of volunteering is compatible with any financial payment as a reward, or where people consciously undertake a poorly paid but socially useful role. More recently, it is also common to find references to formal activities organised through an institution (Komter 2005: 126; Smith et al. 2010: 66) as opposed to individual or informal activities. There is also a tendency for wider meanings of volunteering to become conflated with more inclusive and policy-driven concepts such as public or community engagement. Meanings become even less clear-cut when volunteering becomes attached to academic outcomes, employability or mandatory service.

Different definitions of volunteering in Higher Education are frequently characterised as much by what is excluded as included (NCCPE 2009: 14) and it is not uncommon to exclude internal, unpaid roles involving university societies and clubs, in spite of the opportunities for personal development and employability that most universities are keen to promote. Ironically, it may be these informal or internal activities that limit the time available for more formal volunteering. Another dividing line exists between the formal requirement to volunteer and normative pressure to do so. The latter may not be contractually enforceable, but failure to comply may still carry sanctions and social or economic penalties (Titmuss 1970: 83) for an individual or a group (Eckstein 2001: 832). These distinctions reflect the current importance

attached to agendas of community engagement (Edwards et al. 2001: 446). The wide ranging and demanding expectations now being placed on contemporary universities in relation to civic participation and public benefit contrast with earlier abstract ideals and aspirations, and university-community engagement is increasingly regarded as a practical way of addressing social, economic and political agendas at regional, national and global levels (Williams and Cochrane 2013: 67). In this context, student volunteering is regarded as a valuable form of community engagement, and a way of demonstrating outward-facing, socially relevant activities (Williams and Cochrane 2013: 74). Unfortunately, this approach and the way in which programmes often juxtapose the terms ‘university’ and ‘community’, may also have the perhaps unintended side-effects of reinforcing perceptions of universities being separate from the regions in which they are located.

### OBLIGATION OR OPPORTUNITY – CONCEPTS OF STUDENT VOLUNTEERING

Komter (1996: 3) refers to a frequent caveat in gift theory: false dichotomies of altruism and self-interest risk missing insights into motivations to give, and the role of gift exchange in wider socio-cultural settings. The same could be said for motivations to volunteer. Concepts of student volunteering cover a broad range of activities, from extracurricular service to projects linked to the outcome of academic programmes, sometimes as an alternative to internships, and increasingly to gain work experience: each entails different motives, outcomes and impact, falling into different and sometimes contested categories of volunteering which reflect the tensions between altruism and self-interest and also the growing recognition that volunteering can play a central role in Higher Education core activities (Brewis 2010: 439; Darwin and Rannard 2011: 177). Just some of the complexity of student volunteer motivations and outcome is illustrated in my own research by one recent graduate’s comment:

“It wasn’t until I got to university and started volunteering...that I really realised that volunteering has the power not only to help out the people you are trying to help but also to really influence what you are interested in, and what you want to get out...”

In addition to the problematic matter of definition, to understand volunteering in a Higher Education setting it is necessary to consider the broader framework in which it is situated. The early roots of volunteering in UK Higher Education lie in the social and religious reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Brewis 2011: 3); the growing recognition that “the privileges of higher education carried social obligations” (Brewis 2010: 440) led to the emergence and steady expansion of student volunteering in the twentieth century. Increased political and social awareness in the 1960s and a rise in overseas volunteering led to the rise of greater activism and practical work to address perceived needs in the community, in conjunction with better communication between universities at a national level to co-ordinate activities. Recent government support for Higher Education volunteering has



resulted in expanded activities, higher profile, recognition of volunteer contribution, and the belief that volunteering has a positive effect on career prospects (Holdsworth 2010: 421). Yet in spite of positive intentions and an overt rejection of perceived middle-class “do-gooding” (Brewis 2010: 444), student volunteers still face criticism that they remain relatively privileged in comparison to those communities they seek to help, and whilst governments emphasise the central role of volunteering in the battle against economic decline and perceived social fragmentation, the development and subjective experiences of volunteering in UK Higher Education remain under-researched (Edwards et al 2001: 446; Francis 2011: 4).

Existing research is dominated by business and educational approaches, with few contributions from anthropological or critical perspectives. Discussions centre on motivations and barriers to volunteering; stakeholder needs and benefits; and the requirements for obtaining or retaining funding. There is a tendency to privilege individualistic and instrumental motives, with the result that recruitment strategies often focus on functional benefits of volunteering (Francis 2011: 9). It is perhaps ironic, given the criticisms of perceived student privilege, that students have also exemplified a group traditionally released from expectations of reciprocity, generally because of an assumption - not always justified - of youth and relative poverty (Sherry 1983: 160). Seen through the critical lens of gift exchange, however, discourses of volunteering in Higher Education generate a sense of social obligation extending beyond instrumental motivation, and students have the chance to once again become part of the cycle of giving and reciprocating.

Statements about the key benefits of student volunteering usually include references to academic and personal development, improved confidence and social awareness, increased employability due to the development of skills and an enhanced CV (Brewis et al. 2010: 7; Darwen and Rannard 2011: 181). Some students want to try out potential career paths, or pass their learning on to others through their volunteering; other less reflective motives have been described as habit, duty, or because volunteering can be fun (Holdsworth 2010: 422, 427). Universities also benefit from motivated students and improved community engagement, and the community is able to draw on a pool of creative and enthusiastic volunteers (Darwen and Rannard 2011). However, whilst employability, skills, and enhanced learning emerge as key themes, Holdsworth (2010: 427) argues that “it is not a *sufficient* reason for volunteering”. She goes on to suggest that employment may not be a key motivator at all; it can also be regarded as a welcome yet unintentional benefit.

Recent studies focusing on the meanings and wider experiences of volunteering in diverse UK universities, and the ways students make sense of dominant discourses about volunteering and civic engagement (Brewis et al. 2010; Holdsworth 2010) have deepened survey-based research with the use of qualitative and biographical interviews. Findings support other articles challenging the ‘me first’ and ‘CV’ motivations for volunteering (Darwen and Rannard 2011; Francis 2011); they also suggest volunteering is not all about altruism either (Holdsworth 2010: 421). The complex and nuanced meanings emerging from in-depth, qualitative data reveal the reflective nature of many students’ motivations to volunteer, and the way in which altruism

and self-interest co-exist to varying degrees on a wide spectrum of motives, as exemplified by one postgraduate student who told me:

“I honestly think you have to believe in what you’re doing it for. As much as I say it’s totally fine to do it if it’s going to go on your CV, I still think whatever you’re doing, you need to believe in the end result of that thing, not in the extra benefits you’re going to get.”

Exposure to organised volunteering may lead to both greater self-awareness and scepticism relating to one’s own and others’ motives. Holdsworth (2010: 431) argues that in some cases, “their own volunteering experiences challenge conventional views about volunteering that posit the volunteer as a saviour who can unselfishly help others”. She also found that it is unusual to volunteer for only altruistic reasons, and some students actively deny any motivation associated with helping others, preferring to cite a sense of personal challenge and satisfaction (Holdsworth 2010: 430). This was certainly true in my own research, with views ranging from “I just do the things I like doing; it just happens to be volunteering” to “I don’t like to say I like helping people...because I don’t like helping people; I’m probably a bit more self-centred than that.” Such is the strength of the modern “ideology of self interest” (Osteen 2002: 17) that some people may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed offering an altruistic or socially-oriented explanation for their behaviour.

Whilst the mechanisms of social bonding and collectivism that underpin the gift may still be relevant in ‘modern’ societies (Mauss 1990: 5), contemporary motives are further complicated and constrained by other dominant ideologies and norms that may result in contradiction and inner conflict (Osteen 2002: 18). Consequently, Holdsworth (2010: 434) describes the unwillingness of students to identify either with employability or altruism as key motivations for volunteering as a rejection of such ideologies and “normative discourses”. Some attribute the changing nature of voluntary motivations to wider changes in social trends and the emphasis increasingly placed in many developed societies on individualism and choice (Holdsworth 2010: 422). Alternatively, there are those who argue for a combination of individualist and collectivist drivers, oscillating between a range of ‘traditional’ helping and reflexive motivations depending on context and biographical circumstance (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003: 168). There are also students who openly articulate a self-interested, Machiavellian reason for volunteering, which is not to say the motivations are not valid, just that they are recognised for what they are: “We are witnessing the emergence of ‘clever volunteers’ who are able to... negotiate their volunteering journeys and maximise individual benefits” (Holdsworth 2010: 422). Contemporary volunteers increasingly appear also to place greater focus on occasional, one-off projects and short-term volunteering involving less commitment over time. Putnam (2000: 405) regards this trend as symptomatic of a decline in civic participation and weakening social bonds, but it has also been described as “an unintended consequence of modernity” (Smith et al. 2010: 68) which, rather than being regarded as a point of concern to be remedied, should be embraced and used, and that volunteer recruitment should be adjusted to attract these new volunteers.

## VOLUNTEERING AND THE PUBLIC ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

At an institutional level, there is frequently a high degree of dissonance between academic and public perceptions of the way in which Higher Education performs, or should perform, its civic role (Collini 2012; Furco 2010: 375). Writing about the American university system, Boyer (1990: xii) argued that Higher Education must extend its interests beyond academic research and teaching, and renew its links with the wider world through a better and more inclusive utilisation of its skills and resources. Similarly, contemporary researchers (e.g. Furco 2010; Hartley et al. 2010) increasingly study volunteering in Higher Education within the context of community engagement. Such views complement a shift in focus towards socially relevant programmes that is now a key element of contemporary UK Higher Education policy (NCCPE 2009).

Universities have traditionally associated higher learning with moral and civic goals but the manifestation of these goals is often perceived as being more abstract than practical, focusing on an implicit relationship between core academic work and a wider social good rather than explicit engagement with public needs and community interests (Ehrlich 1995; Furco 2010: 375-376). Furthermore, the demand for social responsibility is often juxtaposed with the need for research and scholarship, leading to a tension between academic, political and social expectations. Collini (2012: x) reiterates Seabury's (ed. 1975: x) arguments of three decades ago, which have lost none of their relevance and are central to the debates about governance and funding: that universities cannot and should not be entirely detached from state or society, even if this leads to issues of autonomy and disagreement over the extent to which they are expected to contribute to the welfare of society.

Not all UK universities emphasise citizenship and civic responsibility in their core activities, choosing instead to focus on research, education and employability (Annette 2010: 453), but recent years have seen an increase in the support and funding of volunteering programmes. UK initiatives such as the Beacons for Public Engagement, the funding for which ended in 2011, have sought to bridge the gap between universities and the wider community, fostering mutual respect and genuine partnership whilst embracing a social responsibility to help disadvantaged communities, often through outreach and volunteering (NCCPE 2010; UUK 2010). However, it has been suggested that whilst public engagement rhetoric appears to aspire towards mutually beneficial socio-economic partnerships between Higher Education institutions and the wider community, in the case of both engagement and volunteering some universities continue to focus on functional motives and outcomes, regarding community partnerships as an opportunity to further their own interests (Annette 2010: 459; Hartley et al. 2010: 395). Support for voluntarism is thus closely related to Higher Education core activities and drivers, mediated by national policies privileging partnership with industry and the revival of public engagement (Darwen and Rannard 2011). In an explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between policy and power, Goddard (2009: 4) and Furco (2010: 379) observe that funding policies are an effective vehicle for influencing university practices. Institutions

focusing on volunteering and community engagement that are responsive to social needs are best placed to benefit from increasingly limited funding. As a result, universities and voluntary organisations are likely to adopt a form of “philanthropic particularism” (Komter 2005: 143), supporting causes and interests most in sympathy with the social priorities and political views of funding bodies.

With an increase in bureaucracy and institutional control of volunteer activities comes a tendency to become de-personalized and forget that charity and volunteering benefit “the benevolent as well as the beneficiary” (Prochaska 1988: 80). In the midst of such political and economic manoeuvring, it is perhaps easy to lose sight of other motives for participating in or supporting voluntarism. A further problematic relationship is that between motivation and outcome for giving or volunteering (Badhwar 1993: 91): is one more important than the other, and what are the implications where someone benefits from an altruistic act? Describing the positive experiences of a student whose initial introduction to volunteering was through a mandatory course requirement, Ehrlich (1995: 71) states that “a commitment to the well-being of others is an electric force for good”. However, Ehrlich’s position that altruistic intent is more important than outcome is countered by Komter’s (2005: 28) opposing argument that, even where the motive for giving or volunteering is benevolent and made with good intentions, poor execution of an activity or the inability on the part of the recipient to reciprocate – whether or not reciprocation is expected – can result in distress, anxiety or resentment.

Current approaches to organised student volunteering have been greatly influenced by the Russell Commission Report (Russell 2005) and The Commission on the Future of Volunteering (2008), which focus on the voluntary activities of young people in relation to civic development (NCCPE 2009: 11-12), although it should be noted that not all young people are students, and not all students are young. These inquiries build in turn on the Dearing Report (Dearing 1997), commissioned by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which acknowledges the importance of the social and economic relationship between Higher Education institutions and their local communities. In this light, student volunteering can be regarded as a form of bridge building that fosters local community relationships, which may also address perceptions of elitism and exclusivity (Darwen and Rannard 2011: 183). However, Hartley et al. (2010: 398) argue that the attempts of some Higher Education institutions at participation and engagement are driven by accusations of a lack of “democratic purpose”, and the related charges of engaging in nothing more than public relations exercises or noblesse oblige, in which claims of community participation may mask what some perceive to be a perpetuation of academic expertise and superiority. This may well underestimate the good intentions of many institutions, but a university’s “elite status” is often reinforced by the very activities that are intended to build bridges with other parts of society, and through a display of wealth, facilities and resources that often focuses around sport, culture and the arts (Williams and Cochrane 2013: 75). On the one hand there may be confident organisations with strong university links, such as one group I came across who were clear that “we’re not seeking largesse from the university, far from it. The university get a lot from the relationship

with us.” However, I also came across smaller and more vulnerable groups, of whom a local volunteer coordinator said “there’s a huge voluntary and community sector out there but... it’s predominantly smaller groups, and you’ve got to work out a way of connecting with those groups that’s not going to intimidate them”. Whilst not denying the potential impact of such activities, these examples nevertheless illustrate that university-community relationships are not necessarily those of mutual or equal partners.

## VOLUNTEERING, SERVICE AND THE CURRICULUM

Reflecting the paradoxical and ambiguous tension between self-interest and altruism in gift theory, Higher Education policies foster the belief that volunteering is about both serving the community and providing social education for young people (Brewis 2010: 443; Ehrlich 1995: 76). This duality is apparent in Annette’s (2010: 451) question about the role that UK Higher Education should play in developing citizenship. Echoing Prochaska’s (1988) earlier views on volunteering and democracy, he focuses on student community-based or service-learning and the way it is increasingly used to support the values of democracy in Higher Education through an association with volunteering and civic duty. Emerging initially in the United States but becoming increasingly widespread, service-learning “brings together volunteering and learning by doing” (NCCPE 2009: 30). It represents an ideological vision of Higher Education, situated within wider debates about the public role of Higher Education, increasing access to education, and reducing the power of political and economic elitism (Annette 2010: 452; Zeitlin 2001: 424).

It has long been believed that education is one of several arenas in which we can “reweave the fabric of our communities” (Putnam 2000: 402) and to this end, Putnam supports community-based or service-learning programmes, including voluntary activities in the community. However, it should be noted that volunteering is not the same as community engagement or community-based learning: the latter may involve aspects of voluntarism, but the terms are not interchangeable. Furthermore, the incorporation of volunteering into academic programmes, via community-based learning and formal recognition of activities, raises questions about motivation, commitment, and the vulnerability of certain causes compared to others depending on their popularity, academic relevance and how well they fit into agendas of employability (Darwen and Rannard 2011: 183). This concern is not unrelated to the views of other critics, warning that mass university education linked to political visions of social relevance threatens academic standards and free, critical thought (Boyer 1990: 6), especially if community-based learning is poorly planned or executed (Furco 2010: 385).

## CONCLUSION

The politically-motivated control of knowledge enables the production and re-production of socially constructed discourses that become accepted as natural structures and are therefore less likely to be questioned or resisted (Foucault 1980: 93-95). Representing contemporary ideologies of volunteering as the ‘natural’ thing to do, as a route to employability, or for personal development, implies that current approaches are normal, lasting, and not the result of contemporary economic circumstances and dominant socio-political narratives. In a culture where volunteering is expected and valued, either morally or economically, it is a useful way to develop status and to define or emphasise a particular role or position within the group: a combination of serving both self and others (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003: 173). In the case of student volunteering, it is increasingly accepted that volunteering may benefit both giver and receiver, and that self-interest or personal gain are not incompatible with altruism and doing the right thing. However, there are also concerns that focusing on volunteering as a vehicle for finding a job, or as part of the academic curriculum, may have a negative affect on those activities and organisations that do not fit dominant discourses or the needs of volunteers. This is not to deny the great value of volunteering as a route to personal and professional development, especially in a difficult economic climate, but some values, motivations and outcomes of volunteering do not reflect what is becoming an increasingly dominant narrative of ‘employability’.

Political and economic imperatives form an integral part of contemporary volunteering: through the increasing dependence of volunteer organisations on institutional or external funding; through the waxing and waning influence of opposing ideologies which – in combination with social and economic constraints – impacts both the policy decisions and direction of voluntary activity; through rhetoric about the contribution that volunteering should or does make to the social role of public Higher Education; and finally, in the ways that social policy and financial expedience inform the balance between instrumentalism and moral imperative, when deciding whether or not to volunteer. The combination of normative expectation, institutional power, self-interest and moral responsibility that characterises the complex give and take nature of contemporary volunteer relationships complements the tensions inherent in reciprocal gift exchange: in each case, there is a delicate balance between the agency and self-interest that is often assumed to underpin ideas of individual selfhood, and a more collective interest in maintaining long-term relationships over time and in different personal and professional contexts. There is also the underlying awareness, sometimes subtle but nevertheless present, that whilst those relationships may be mutual, they are rarely equal.

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## DAR PROSTOVOLJSTVA IN VRLINA LJUBEZNI DO SEBE: ANTROPOLOŠKI POGLED

Prostovoljstvo vse pogosteje pojmuje kot sestavni del »dobrih družb«. Tudi zato številne vlade po svetu podpirajo in financirajo prostovoljstvo in raziskave s tega področja, s čimer

preprečujejo domnevni zaton družbene kohezije in spodbujajo civilne iniciative med mladimi. Vse bolj se uveljavlja tudi mnenje, da človeška družbenost temelji na sodelovanju in soodvisnosti – kot družba naj bi obstajali v sistemu pričakovanj in obvez do drugega. S tega vidika lahko prostovoljstvo povežemo tako s konceptom moči kot tudi z menjavo darov. Pričujoči prispevek torej uporablja teorije o recipročni menjavi darov, pri čemer ponuja pregled literature o prostovoljstvu in na primeru visokega šolstva v Veliki Britaniji predstavi spremenljivo dojemanje prostovoljstva, katerega široka paleta se giblje med altruizmom in egoizmom. Obravnava tudi spreminjanje prostovoljstva in pričakovanja ljudi v sodobni zahodni družbi, ki so povezana s tem pojavom. Piše še o tem, kako se jezik o prostovoljstvu in obdarovanju uporablja kot sestavni del naracije pri informiranju ljudi o javni udeležbi in družbenih vlogah univerz ter o mediaciji razmerij med prostovoljci, visokošolskimi institucijami in prostovoljskimi organizacijami.

Da bi prostovoljstvo razumeli v kontekstu visokega šolstva pa moramo upoštevati tudi širši kontekst, v katerem deluje. Premik fokusa k javni participaciji je ključni element v sodobnih visokošolskih politikah Velike Britanije. Britanske iniciative, kakršna je denimo Svetilniki za javno udeležbo (*Beacons for Public Engagement*), so skušale zapolniti vrzel med univerzami in širšo skupnostjo, pri čemer bi spodbujali vzajemno spoštovanje in partnerstvo, hkrati pa bi skušali – pogosto z dostopnostjo in prostovoljskimi programi – upoštevati družbeno odgovornost, da bi tako pomagali pri krajsani skupnostim. Eden od rezultatov takšne spremembe perspektiv je, da se sodobni raziskovalci vse bolj pogosto posvečajo prostovoljstvu v kontekstu javne udeležbe, ki pomeni rastoče področje na področju javnih politik in praks.

Članek predstavi še potrebe po nadaljnjih raziskavah družbeno-kulturnih, moralnih in akademskih vplivov, ki ljudem sporočajo, zakaj se plača postati prostovoljec. Visokošolske institucije namreč marsikdaj sledijo politikam prostovoljstva na temelju napačnih predpostavk. Čeprav teoretski okvir menjave darov ponuja alternativo instrumentalni in utilitaristični perspektivi, so prostovoljske organizacije, ustanovne institucije in ključni odločevalci in snovalci politik pogosto predvsem pod vplivom ekonomskih in merljivih spodbud in rezultatov. Boljše teoretično, praktično in empirično razumevanje prostovoljskih izkušenj in motivov, povezanih z visokošolskimi politikami in širšim družbeno-političnim kontekstom, bodo omogočili učinkovitejše upravljanje prostovoljstva in rekrutiranje ljudi, kar bo vplivalo na ocene o vplivih prostovoljstva, ki prispevajo k dobrobiti vseh deležnikov, hkrati pa se iz tega področja napajajo družbene teorije, bogati pa se tudi literatura o prostovoljstvu. To je posebej pomembno pri razmisleku o rezih v financiranje javne sfere in mednarodne razpise za akademsko sfero in prostovoljske organizacije.

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