

Is Volunteering Voluntary? Exploring The Dark Side of Volunteering

Heather Hunter, Margaret Hills de Zarate, Marion Findlay
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK

Introduction: Volunteering is recognised as playing an important role in supporting positive mental health and wellbeing. Whilst there is a range of research evidence on the health benefits of volunteering and the motivation to volunteer, there is less emphasis on the experience of volunteering itself. Currently in the UK, disabled welfare claimants are required by workfare programmes to undertake mandatory unpaid community work or risk financial sanctions. Claimants may be forced to give up a meaningful volunteering role for one deemed more appropriate to gaining employment. This contradicts the notion of volunteering as an activity undertaken freely.

Objectives: Drawing on the notion of occupational therapy as political and occupation as many sided including that of a dark side (Twinely, 2013), this paper will explore the dark side of volunteering whilst considering the current socio-cultural and political context.

Method: This Participatory Action Research project involved a group of adults with lived experience of mental illness engaged in unpaid voluntary work in the community through personal choice as part of their journey of recovery.

Results: The preliminary themes emerging from this research highlight issues of personal power, autonomy and choice contrasted with experiences of disempowerment through control exerted by a range of systems and policies affecting vulnerable groups.

Conclusion: The research findings demonstrate inconsistencies and contradictions of engagement in voluntary work and this paper ultimately asks the question "Is volunteering voluntary?"

References

TWINELY, R., 2013. The dark side of occupation: a concept for consideration. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*. Vol. 60, pp. 301-303