

THE LINKS BETWEEN FAMILY AND VOLUNTEERING: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

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This summary brings together what the existing evidence tells us about the links between family and volunteering. It looks at how family not only shapes the involvement and experience of volunteers, but how families can get involved in volunteering together. Three key questions are explored here:

- How does family status, life events and family dynamics influence volunteering?
- How can volunteering affect families and family members?
- What are the barriers and impacts of families volunteering together?

Background

Volunteering is often viewed as an individual activity – something that people do in their spare time for a variety of personal reasons. Yet, volunteering is very much shaped by a range of factors that are external to the individual, including the family. Family context and relationships can affect not only how, why and when people volunteer but also why they stop.

The research and evidence summarised here explores this link between family and volunteering. It is based on a review of academic articles and practice documents from the UK and elsewhere. The review is part of a new research project being carried out by NCVO and the Universities of Birmingham and Salford, and funded by Sport England, Pears #iwill Fund,

Greater London Authority and the Scouts Association. The research project will look to improve understanding of how families engage with volunteering and how organisations engage with families through volunteering. The research will be used to support volunteer-involving organisations that want to develop or enhance volunteering opportunities for family members.

The aim of the review is to identify evidence on families and volunteering to ensure we make the most of the existing knowledge and also to identify gaps that our research project will need to explore and address.

Our approach to the review

We searched a series of online databases and journals for articles that discussed family and volunteering and found 232 relevant documents that spanned a number of different fields and disciplines over the last thirty years. Most articles focus on volunteering that takes place through a group, club or organisation (formal volunteering) rather than more informal forms of participation. Many of the studies are based on analyses of large-scale surveys, primarily in the United States and most explore the influence of family and family status on volunteering rather than family members volunteering together. In our searching we recognised that families are varied, complex and diverse. We used a broad definition of family which includes extended families, single parent families, gay and lesbian families, blended and non-custodial

families (including step-parents and step-children) and families without children.

Here we provide a summary of the key findings from the review. First, we explore the links between family and volunteering and then we look at volunteering that takes place with other family members – ‘family volunteering’.

How family status and life cycle events affect volunteering

Marriage and having a spouse who volunteers is linked to volunteering

Many of the studies we reviewed point to a positive relationship between marriage and volunteering. These suggest that married people are more likely to volunteer compared to single people, particularly if the spouse volunteers (Nesbit, 2012b; Taniguchi, 2006). Marriage has been found to increase social contacts and networks, opening up opportunities to be asked to volunteer (Smith and Wang, 2017) and if a spouse volunteers this can have a strong influence on their partner (Nesbit, 2012b). There is less evidence on the links between volunteering and having a partner but not being married.

The relationship between marriage and volunteering might, however, be influenced by a number of factors. Newly married women (but not men) have been found to be less likely to volunteer, only returning to their former volunteering patterns after a few years (Einolf and Philbrick, 2014). Gender and the dynamics within the family will also have a bearing on involvement, including whether time spent volunteering is seen as compatible with marriage and family life and the way roles and responsibilities are carved up within the household (Kim and Dew, 2016; Moen and Flood, 2013).

Parenthood has a major effect on volunteering

When a new baby is born into a family, involvement in volunteering is found to dip because of the time and attention needed to

look after young children (Nesbit, 2012a, Oesterle et al, 2004). Volunteering, however, increases when children reach school age (Einolf, 2018; Taniguchi, 2006), when parents experience an increase in the ‘*obligation, the motivation, and perhaps the number of invitations to volunteer*’ (Rotolo and Wilson, 2007, p500). Indeed, a number of studies have shown how children open up opportunities for parents to get involved in volunteering, often through schools and sports (Caputo, 2010; Ravanera et al, 2002).

The evidence is less strong on the link between the age of parents and volunteering. Some studies suggest, however, that young parents volunteer less due to the lack of time and effects of low incomes on teen motherhood (Fang et al, 2018; Peters et al, 2012). Single parenthood has also been linked to lower levels of parent volunteering (Lancee and Radl, 2014) and this appears to be particularly the case for single parents with pre-school children who may lack the support married parents have (Sundeen, 1990).

Caring responsibilities can impact on involvement in volunteering

The evidence on the effects of caring on volunteering is mixed and based on a limited number of studies. The care of grandchildren has been linked to lower levels of volunteering among grandparents because of the reduced time they have available and the tiredness caused by looking after children (Arpino and Bordone, 2017). Similarly, women’s caregiving to older relatives has been linked to reduced involvement in volunteering (Taniguchi, 2006).

Other studies, however, highlight a link between care giving and increased volunteering, arguing that the social connections carers have provides more opportunities for volunteering and increases the chances of being asked to get involved (Burr et al, 2005). One study found that carers may choose to get involved in their communities in more informal ways as they are less able to commit formally to organisations and groups (Pettigrew et al, 2018).

Gender influences the effects of separation and divorce on volunteering

Exploring the links between separation, divorce and volunteering also presents a mixed picture. On the whole, studies suggest a positive link between volunteering and marriage and most (but not all) highlight a decline in involvement following divorce (Lancee and Radl, 2014). The loss of social networks is thought to be important here as *'divorced people lose the social contacts that connect them to volunteering activities'* (Lancee and Radl, 2014, p849).

The effects of divorce and separation on volunteering, however, seems to differ for men and women. Research suggests that women experience increased financial strain following divorce resulting in reduced volunteering, whereas for men the increased social isolation leads to lower levels of involvement (Kim and Jang, 2019).

The effects of family on volunteering

Parents can be strong role models for their children

Many of the reviewed research studies point to a strong relationship between parental and child volunteering – if parents volunteer then their children are more likely to volunteer in childhood and as adults (Grimm et al, 2005; Perks and Knoecny, 2015). This relationship has also been found across other forms of participation, including community activism (Janoski and Wilson, 1995). Parents (and other family members such as siblings and grandparents) inspire and influence children, passing on values, attitudes and behaviours that promote and encourage (or discourage) helping others, community involvement and volunteering (Wiepking and Bekkers, 2007; Taylor-Collins et al, 2019). Religion can also play an important role, with religious involvement in childhood associated with higher levels of volunteering later in life (Nesbit 2012b; Vermeer and Scheepers, 2012).

In short, family (and parents in particular) have a strong influence on their children's involvement in volunteering. Family transition and the separation of parents during childhood can, however, affect this passing on of values as well as opportunities for role modelling. Distress in a parent's relationship when growing up as well as poverty have been identified as 'risk factors' in the development of values that promote helping others and as having a negative effect on volunteering into adulthood (Ottoni-Wilhelm and Bandy, 2013; Voorpostel and Coffe, 2015).

The strength and nature of family ties matter

The nature of relationships and connections within families has been found by a number of studies to influence involvement in volunteering (Duke et al, 2009; McNamara and Gonzales, 2011). Strong bonds between children and parents are linked to higher levels of involvement, with studies highlighting the importance of shared activities between the parent and child, parental warmth and closeness (Duke et al 2009; Fletcher et al, 2004). Positive relationships with parents and grandparents have been identified as predictors of *'meaningful civic participation'* among young people where *'closeness and bonds within the family'* are found to lead to *'strong linkages beyond it'* (Muddiman et al, 2018, p14).

Not all studies however, make this positive link between family closeness and volunteering. There is limited evidence which suggests that closeness to parents could in fact have the opposite effect and that staying close to parents discourages *'caring for the world outside of one's own circle'* (Pavlova et al, p2213).

Family can encourage and support involvement but may also put on pressure

Family members can play an important role in encouraging other family members to volunteer. Among young people, this can be influential. In the UK's 2015 Youth Social Action Survey, 63% of 10 to 20-year olds involved in meaningful social action said family encouraged them to take part (Cabinet Office and Ipsos MORI, 2016). The extent to which people feel pressure from

families or a sense of obligation to get involved is less clear, although this has been highlighted in a small number of studies where volunteering for some individuals was found to be *'driven more from a sense of duty, rather than from free choice'* (Ellis Paine, 2015, p5).

As well as encouraging involvement, families may also provide support to other family members in their volunteering. The evidence on the effects of this is limited, however a few studies suggest that family support can help volunteers to manage the demands and impacts of their role (Malinen and Mankinen, 2018), with links made to the improved satisfaction of volunteers and retention (Kulik, 2007).

Family can act as a key route into volunteering but might also be a barrier to involvement

Individuals can become aware of a cause, organisation or volunteering activity because another family member is involved or they might be asked directly by a family member to volunteer. Indeed, the evidence suggests that the higher the number of people volunteering in your household the more likely you are to get involved (Nesbit, 2012b). Partners and children have been particularly identified as important influencers and triggers for involvement in volunteering (Brodie et al, 2011). A number of studies point in particular to how children can provide parents with a route into volunteering as they support their child's needs and interests through involvement, for example, Brownies and Scouts groups, School Parents' Associations or children's sports clubs (Brodie et al, 2011; Einolf, 2018; Ravanera; 2002; Wiepking and Bekkers, 2012). Parenthood can also play a role in shifting priorities, redirecting parents' volunteering efforts to other activities more focused on their children (Brodie et al, 2011).

Whilst children can provide a route into volunteering, there are a number of studies which show younger pre-school children can act as a barrier to involvement due to the time parents spend looking after them (Gray, Khoo, and Reimondos, 2012). Indeed, more broadly,

family can limit or stop involvement for other members. The 2017/18 Community Life Survey found that among those who don't take part in formal volunteering, one in four said looking after their children or the home was a barrier to taking part (DCMS, 2018).

Volunteering may be negotiated and shared within families

Alongside other roles and responsibilities, such as paid work, childcare and housework, volunteering may be negotiated within the family. There is limited evidence on how this happens and the effects of this within the household, however a small number of studies highlight this as important (Ellis Paine, 2015, Smith, 2010). They argue that the time and energy used for volunteering is *"negotiated, renegotiated and kept in balance, in an attempt to ensure the relationships remain fair and are not seen to become exploitative"* (Ellis Paine, 2015, p6). The role of men and women in the household and the structure of the family will influence this. Single-parent families, for example, may have less capacity and time to share and negotiate roles and responsibilities with other family members (Ellis Paine, 2015).

There is some limited evidence on volunteer roles being shared between family members, for example, sharing seats on a committee. Within communities, it has been found that roles may be divided across different activities meaning particular families are especially active and influential (Ellis Paine, 2015). Voluntary roles might also be 'inherited' and passed on to other family members, with some children volunteering for the same organisations their parents did (Jones, 2018).

Impacts of volunteering on families

Volunteering may have positive knock on effects for family members

The difference volunteering makes to individual volunteers themselves, including enjoyment, happiness and improved well-being are well documented (McGarvey et al, 2019). Less attention has been paid, however, to how these

benefits may then have a knock-on effect for other family members or for the family as a whole. If individuals are happier this may then have favourable effects on their families (Stebbins, 2015). A small number of studies explore the positive impacts of volunteering on family members. Connections have been made between volunteering and reduced stress and tension of those providing care to children (Lin, 2018), improved relationships and communication within families and increased awareness of community issues among family members (Lawrence and Matthieu, 2018). One specific area of volunteering, parental volunteering in schools, has been particularly highlighted to benefit children within families (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2017). Parents are seen to bring a range of different skills to schools (Body et al, 2017), improving the confidence, educational achievement and behaviour of students including their own children (Burke, 1999 quoted in Haski-Leventhal et al, 2017; Neymotin, 2014).

Volunteering can adversely affect family life

One recent study found that one in 10 people who have had a negative experience while volunteering said that it had negatively affected their family life (McGarvey et al, 2019). This is a particular concern amongst those frequently volunteering. Other evidence on the negative effects on family is limited, although in-depth research from the UK has highlighted how volunteering can lead to tension or resentment within families if family members feel that less time is being spent with them or that family responsibilities are being neglected (Brodie et al, 2011; Ellis Paine, 2015). Volunteering has also been linked to the disruption of routines and schedules within families (Cowlshaw, 2008 and Morrow-Howell, 2009). Research with volunteer fire fighters and emergency workers shows how tensions may also be 'strain-based' where stress from the volunteer role affects family life (Cowlshaw et al, 2010a). The evidence suggests that particular types of volunteering, including roles that are demanding with high levels of

stress, can have different kinds of effects on family life and relationships.

Volunteering with other family members

While the evidence above focused on the links between volunteering and families, in this section we look specifically at volunteering that takes place with other family members – 'family volunteering'. Overall, there is a lack of research on family volunteering, particularly from the UK. Much of the evidence reviewed here draws on research from organisations in the US and Canada.

Family volunteering needs to recognise the diversity of families

The way that we define, understand and talk about family volunteering needs to reflect the wide variety of family types and look beyond the 'traditional' idea of the family (Shaw 1997). A useful definition comes from Porritt (1995, p2):

"Family volunteering occurs when family members volunteer together in community service activities. They may come from different generations, in combinations such as parent/child or grandparent/parent/child, or from the same generation, such as adult partners, or brother/sister" (p2)

It is important to think about volunteering more broadly than this, however, to include families involved together in more informal ways within their communities. The review found very little research in this area.

There is interest in getting involved in volunteering with other family members

Research on the volunteering experience in Great Britain has found that nearly one in five (18%) of those interested in volunteering said that they would like to give unpaid help together with their family (19% for those who have never volunteered) (McGarvey et al, 2019). The evidence suggests that for young people, getting involved alongside families and friends would be particularly attractive. Another study found that

nearly one in three (31%) of those aged 10 to 20 years not involved in social action or donating over the year would be encouraged to get involved if they could do it with family or friends (Cabinet Office and Ipsos Mori, 2016). Creating opportunities for families to volunteer together could be one way to engage individuals (and families) who haven't recently volunteered or who have never got involved.

It is unclear how many people currently volunteer with members of their family. A recent global volunteerism study has found that amongst adults and children who volunteered over the course of the year in the UK, just under a third (29%) did so with other family members. This is reportedly lower than in other countries such as the US (40%), however these findings were only based on a survey of 500 people in each country (Points of Light, 2018). Many more people are also likely to be involved with their families in informal ways in their communities.

Spending time together and family bonding are important motivators

Time together, opportunities to bond as a family and having fun are key reasons people give for getting involved in family volunteering (Points of Light, 2018; Littlepage et al, 2003). For adults, the chance to act as role models and instil values in children (such as the importance of helping others) as well as religion have also been identified as motivators for family volunteering (Littlepage et al 2003; Points of Light, 2018). For children, feeling safe through volunteering with other family members has been highlighted (Points of Light, 2018). People may also get involved for reasons unrelated to the family, including for example, a desire to make a difference or to help others (Jalandoni and Hume, 2001; Points of Light, 2018).

Perceived lack of time can act as a barrier to families volunteering together

As with volunteering more generally, time is seen as a key barrier to getting involved in volunteering with other family members (Hegel and McKechnie, 2003). In part, this is likely to reflect of the life stage of the family with parents

balancing the demands of work and family life (particularly those with pre-school aged children). One study found that families can face particular challenges with scheduling and being able to find a time when all members of the family can get involved in volunteering together (Littlepage et al, 2003).

Overall, the review found that there is a lack of evidence on other barriers families experience to family volunteering, particularly in the UK. Studies in the US and Canada however, point to a perceived lack of opportunities for families, particularly those suited to children or those that can accommodate them (Evergreen, 2006; Haski-Leventhal et al, 2017; Hegel and McKechnie, 2003). Similarly, there is limited research on the challenges organisations face in involving and supporting family volunteers. In the US and Canada, identified barriers have included a lack of funding and staff capacity and concerns about the impacts, risks and liabilities of involving families and children (Hegel and McKechnie, 2003).

Family volunteering can bring benefits to family members by enabling them to spend time together and share experiences

The small number of studies exploring the impacts of family volunteering suggest that it can help family members to spend quality time with one another and bring families closer together (Bird, 2011; Germann Molz, 2016; Littlepage et al, 2003). The sense that family members are achieving something together and the sharing of experiences through volunteering are highlighted as important (Bird, 2011; Germann Molz, 2016). A few studies have found that volunteering as a family can give individuals a different perspective of the family and family members. An evaluation of a pilot of a family volunteering initiative at the National Trust found that *'family volunteering made families think more about the value of spending time together by providing an environment for quality family time, a chance to bond and see one another in a different light.....activities involving parents and children working alongside one another (and not differentiating on ability or age)*

ensured team-work, a sense of shared achievement' (Bird, 2011,p 16).

Few studies have explored the possible negative drawbacks of family volunteering, although tension within families, the costs of volunteering and lack of independence among children have been highlighted (Reilly and Vesic, 2002; Littlepage et al 2010). Some of the most useful discussions come from the field of family leisure which highlights how different family members will experience family leisure in variable ways and that individuals can experience both positive and negative impacts from their involvement – while activities might bring a sense of satisfaction, they might also involve *'work, effort, and sometimes frustration and lack of enjoyment'* (Shaw and Dawson, 2001).

Key learning from the review

This review points to the important role of family in shaping volunteering motivations and patterns. Family acts as an influencer, motivator and recruiter (Nesbit, 2012a), however it can also act as a barrier to involvement. Family status, family transition and distress within families are shown to affect these patterns.

Giving families opportunities to volunteer together has been suggested as one way for organisations to engage with a wider and more diverse audience and make volunteering more accessible for those facing barriers to volunteering, including families with young children, single parents and families in transition. Indeed, families have been described as an *'untapped demographic'* (Volunteer Canada, nd) and a *'rich vein only just beginning to be explored'* (Saxton and Harrison, 2015, p63).

However, the review shows that overall there is a lack of evidence on family volunteering. There are particular gaps on the extent and nature of family volunteering opportunities in the UK, the involvement of families in informal volunteering at the community level, and the barriers and impacts for families, especially 'non-traditional' families. There is very little evidence which explores the organisational perspective, especially in the UK.

There are available some good practice guides and resources for families on how to get involved in family volunteering, and, for organisations on how they can develop opportunities and support families (see Hegel, 2004 and Volunteer Now, 2013), however, these are largely developed for a US or Canadian audience and are outdated.

This review has highlighted that future work and research focused on the family and volunteering needs to consider the following issues:

- The diversity of family types and the evolving nature of the family – family structures are changing and different people and cultures have different experiences and understanding of 'the family'. Future work needs to recognise this diversity
- The broad spectrum of volunteering and the need to consider the influence of family on more informal volunteering (not just volunteering through formal organisations) as well as the involvement of families in informal ways in their communities
- The influence of socio-economic status, education, religion, gender and ethnicity on family and on volunteering
- Who is making decisions and who is 'representing' or speaking for the family - the need to listen to different voices and explore the different experiences of family members, including children
- The different gender roles and different levels of power and voice within families and how this might affect volunteering choices and experiences
- The possible coercion and inequality within families and the need to consider that shared family activities may not be viewed in a positive way by all family members
- The negative experiences and outcomes of volunteering and family activities

alongside the benefits for family members and organisations

- The different ways organisations and groups engage with families in the UK and how opportunities are developed and communicated
- The experiences of organisations and groups in involving family volunteers in the UK and the differences and similarities with other forms of volunteering, and in particular with other group volunteering opportunities and activities.

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