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Denning, S

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# **Persistence in Volunteering: An Affect Theory Approach to Faith-Based Volunteering**

Stephanie Denning

*Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Cheetah Road, Coventry University, Coventry.  
CV1 2TL*

Email: [stephanie.denning@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.denning@coventry.ac.uk); Twitter: @SJ\_Denning; ORCID:  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1636-6539>

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# **Persistence in Volunteering: An Affect Theory Approach to Faith-Based Volunteering**

## **Abstract**

This paper responds to the question of how volunteers persist in volunteering. The geographies of voluntarism have explored patterns and motivations for volunteering, but a gap remains to understand how people persist in volunteering. This gap is crucial to address if voluntary sector projects are to be sustainable by retaining volunteers. This paper questions how volunteers persist in volunteering in a faith-based context through volunteers' narratives from a church food poverty project 'Lunch'. It contributes to two key agendas in the geographies of religion – faith as performed in people's daily lives and faith-based organisations – because volunteering was a way for Lunch volunteers to act out their faith. To understand Lunch volunteers' persistence, this paper utilises affect theory to draw out from their faith-based narratives how volunteers are affected by their experiences; how volunteering could mean more to volunteers than what was represented; and how fleeting moments could be as significant as ongoing experiences. Overall, bringing the geographies of religion and voluntarism together, this paper argues that persistence in volunteering is a continual process of motivation, action and reflection in which factors from the past, present and anticipated future feed into volunteers' motivations to persist in volunteering or not.

## **Keywords**

volunteering, faith, geographies of voluntarism, geographies of religion, affect theory, food poverty

## **Introduction**

In response to the increasing reliance upon the voluntary sector to respond to UK food poverty, this paper addresses the critical question of how people persist in volunteering. Across the social sciences, there is plentiful research into food poverty itself, but less into how and why people volunteer with groups responding to food poverty (Cloke, May, & Williams, 2017). Indeed, the geographies of voluntarism have explored the who, where and why of volunteering (Milligan, 2007), but a gap remains to understand how people persist in volunteering. This is necessary to address if projects relying upon volunteers are to be sustainable and retain their volunteers. As much of the UK food poverty response is through faith-based organisations, this paper addresses this gap in the geographies of voluntarism by critically examining how people persist in volunteering at a faith-based project ‘Lunch’ that I established and ran to respond to holiday hunger. In doing so, it contributes to two key concerns in the geography of religion: faith-based organisations, and how people variously perform their religious faith in their daily lives. Within attention to faith as performed, this paper builds upon the growing affect theory approach to faith-based research in order to engage with how volunteering can hold more meaning for volunteers than what is represented in the actions of volunteering (Lorimer, 2005). Overall, this paper contributes to the geographies of religion and voluntarism with an understanding through affect theory of persistence in volunteering as a continual process of motivation, action and reflection in which different factors from the past, present and anticipated future feed into volunteers’ motivations to continue volunteering or not. This contribution is preceded by three insights drawn through affect theory from Lunch volunteers’ narratives: first, how volunteering impacts volunteers rather than only the “recipient”; secondly, how an experience can mean

more to volunteers than what is represented in the action of volunteering; and thirdly, how fleeting moments are as important as ongoing events in affecting volunteers' persistence.

Whilst Cloke, Johnsen, & May (2007) suggest that the voluntary sector is under-researched, geographical approaches to volunteering can be broadly summarized around three themes: institutions, identity, and ethos. First, approaches to volunteering with an institutional focus are often framed in terms of austerity and the voluntary sector taking the place of the retracting welfare state. Debates here have focussed on voluntary organisations in relation to neoliberalism and the "Big Society" agenda (Slater, 2012; Williams, Cloke, & Thomas, 2012). For example, Conradson (2003) explores the voluntary welfare response at a community drop-in centre in New Zealand. When volunteering is related to the welfare state, then it can be scrutinized in terms of citizenship and social capital to question the degree to which volunteers are compliant with government and welfare cuts and/or contribute towards a community (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). Secondly, amongst geographical consideration of volunteering and identity, the work of Baillie Smith, Laurie, Hopkins and Olson (2013; 2015) explores the development of religious subjectivities of volunteers at a faith-based international charity, and the impact of faith-based volunteering upon young people's transition to adulthood. Following this focus on international volunteering, Griffiths and Brown (2017) and Griffiths (2018) explore experiences of volunteering in relation to affect theory, drawing out volunteering as an embodied experience. Volunteering in relation to identity can also recognize volunteers' motivations in relation to austerity, for example Holdsworth (2015) shows how young people may use volunteering to improve their employability in a context of declining job opportunities. Thirdly, an ethos framing on volunteering sets volunteering within the geographies of morals and worth (Barnett, 2014) and emphasizes that a person may volunteer from a moral motivation or to improve oneself (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005). Such an approach can overlap with an

institutional frame on volunteering. For example, Conradson (2003) in the aforementioned study of the community drop-in centre extends this in relation to a social care ethic, questioning how provision is given. There can therefore be tensions at voluntary organisations between responding to need, and the resulting institutional relationship with the state.

Building upon these approaches, where wider social science research has focussed on volunteers' experiences this is predominantly in terms of motivation (for example Cloke, 2010). However, as well as understanding volunteers' motivations, if voluntary groups are to be sustainable then how people persist in volunteering also needs to be understood (Buckingham and Jolley, 2015), particularly as voluntary organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and keep long-term volunteers (Aydinli et al., 2016). The notion of persistence moves beyond motivation and a more general sense of "continuing in volunteering" to recognize the challenges and deterrents that volunteers can face, and how volunteers reflect on their volunteering experiences. To focus on persistence is not to emphasize the negatives in volunteers' experiences, but rather emphasizes the choice that volunteers have in whether to keep on volunteering or not: persistence emphasizes that a person's commitment to volunteering is never guaranteed (Cloke, et al., 2007). It is therefore not enough to understand how people are motivated to volunteer. Rather, we also need to understand how a person reflects and persists in volunteering, which in an institutional volunteer framing could be called retaining volunteers (Denning, 2017).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I frame the paper within the geographies of religion, and secondly affect theory. Thirdly, I expand on the research context of responding to children's holiday hunger through participatory methodologies. I then turn to how volunteers persisted at Lunch. Two key themes were clear in volunteers' narratives for how volunteers persisted at Lunch: their experiences of volunteering, and how

they reflected upon volunteering. Both of these themes were affected by volunteers' Christian faith as their actions were performances of their faith.

### **Faith-based Volunteering and the Geographies of Religion**

Attention in the geographies of religion is increasingly turning to how a person's religiosity, faith and/or spirituality is more than an identity and has the potential to impact upon every aspect of a person's life. In this paper, following the positionality of the Lunch volunteers, I understand faith in a largely Protestant sense as the personal relationship between an individual and God (Brace, Bailey, Carter, Harvey, & Thomas, 2011) which varies for each person and temporally. In particular, there has been increasing attention to religious subjects within the context of the role of religion in the construction of meaning and everyday practices (Sutherland, 2016). I follow Sutherland's argument that we need to take this further in order to explicitly explore religious subjects in relation to the transcendent, one reason being in order to give attention to how religious subjects produce theologies daily. In this respect Vincett, Olson, Hopkins, & Pain (2012)'s study of young people's religiosity in Scotland is poignant because in focussing upon religion and daily life, they found that the young people's idea of authentic religiosity necessitated religious performance every day of the week, and beyond worship spaces. This is important because it leads to a recognition that religion, faith and spirituality can be performed by acting subjects. Dewsbury and Cloke (2009, p. 699) explore this further through the notion of spiritual landscapes: spaces which are manifest through practices, happenings and existence, and where for each acting person there is a 'performance of believing'. This is significant because it shows how faith can be translated into action; in other words performed.

Overall then, religious performance can take place in any space and is used in this paper to refer to how people can act out their faith in their daily lives. Hence, this takes us

away from a single focus on spaces of worship to research that looks at the role that faith plays in people's daily lives (Brace, et al., 2011; Holloway, 2003). Following this focus, this paper adds to research which has begun to consider religious performances through affect theory, for example Holloway (2013) on performance in a structured worship space, and Williams' (2016) scrutiny of religious performance in a Pentecostal addiction rehabilitation centre. In this respect faith is both performed by individuals as they act out their faith in their daily lives, and faith is also an affect because it changes how people act. This paper contributes to the developing affect theory approach in the geographies of religion in order to understand how volunteers persist in faith-based social action.

A second burgeoning focus in the geographies of religion is on faith-based organisations. Faith-based organisations can take a variety of forms with different degrees to which faith is explicit, but broadly all respond to a form of need (Cloke, Thomas, & Williams, 2013). When religious faith plays a part in motivating people to volunteer, then their volunteering can be understood as a performance of faith. In the UK, faith-based organisations are becoming increasingly important welfare providers in the context of declining provision from the welfare state (Davie, 2015; Dinham and Jackson, 2012). A prime example of this is the work of Trussell Trust foodbanks which have a Christian ethos. Whilst the ethics of the relationship between faith-based organisations and the welfare state has been debated (for example by Lambie-Mumford and Jarvis, 2012), concern in the geographies of religion can move beyond this to show that volunteers' performances of faith – acting out their faith through volunteering – means that volunteers' actions and response to food poverty are about more than just food. For example, making use of ethnography and interviews at a Trussell Trust foodbank, Cloke, et al. (2017, p. 703) discuss how foodbank volunteers can understand their responding to need as being 'in the meantime'; not condoning the existence of food poverty, but through faith finding it necessary to respond with the hope

that the situation will change in the future. Being a faith-based organisation, many of the volunteers at Cloke et al.'s case study foodbank are Christian, and so their approach to volunteering can be taken further to understand it as a performance of faith. In this way the foodbank becomes about more than food, for example as a space of care, with importance placed upon the relationship between volunteers and clients, and faith influencing the way this is approached. Therefore as well as faith being performed by people volunteering through their acting out their faith, it also impacts upon the ethos of how people respond to need. Volunteering could of course be about more than food in non-faith contexts, but this paper focusses upon volunteers' persistence in a Christian faith context at Lunch.

This combination of key concerns in the geographies of religion – of faith as performed in people's daily lives, and attention to faith-based organisations – presents an opportunity to better understand how volunteers persist in volunteering. Approaching volunteering and faith-based organisations through performance is advantageous because when we recognize the impact of the transcendent in performances of faith (Sutherland, 2016), then we cannot only focus on the volunteers' activities, for example giving food. Rather, in order to comprehensively study faith, we must recognize the ontological status that faith plays for acting subjects; a concern that has been neglected in the geographies of religion (Bailey, Brace, & Harvey, 2009; Stump, 2008). Only then can we truly appreciate how it is that faith is performed, and how faith can motivate people to volunteer and persist in volunteering with faith-based organisations. By making use of empirics from running a Christian based TLG lunch kitchen, this paper focusses upon specific Christian faith performances of volunteers at Lunch but encourages future research to explore other contexts. This paper develops the geographies of religion's approach to faith as performed through the theoretical lens of affect theory. Affect theory gives four specific insights for understanding persistence in volunteering, which the next section turns to.

## Volunteering and Affect Theory

In the previous section I noted that affect theory has begun to be utilized more in the geographies of religion to understand faith performances (for example by Holloway, 2013; Williams, 2016). In this paper I argue that affect theory gives four insights for understanding persistence in volunteering, which I examine in a specific Christian faith-based context whilst recognising the potential for wider application to other faiths and non-faith contexts. Affect is a central concept within non-representational theories, originally drawing upon philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze. Affect and non-representational theories emphasize the body as being relational (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Vannini, 2015) and prioritize everyday experience (Lorimer, 2005; McCormack, 2010; Vannini, 2015). Hayden Lorimer (2005, p. 84) calls non-representational theories ‘more-than-representational’ theories to acknowledge how affect can be less easily articulated, but ultimately to emphasize what is unrepresented in daily life, more than what is unrepresentable. In this paper, I follow Lorimer’s understanding of more-than-representational theories, and break down the component parts of affect theory in order to give an understanding of persistence in volunteering that engages with how volunteers are affected by their experiences for volunteering to be a process with a continual cycle of motivation, action, and reflection.

To begin with the concept of affect, Spinoza defines this in his work *Ethics* (1996, IIIdef3; III postulate 1): affect is a concept that grasps the human body’s increasing and decreasing power to act. Spinoza specifically refers to human bodies (for example Spinoza, 1996, III postulates 1, 2) and so in this human volunteers are the affective bodies. In the act of volunteering, the human body is affected in both immediate and lasting ways. Hence, as well as being about embodied experience as in Griffith’s (2017; 2018) analysis of

volunteering, affect theory also emphasizes that affect is more than the body, and this in turn affects the body for future action and whether it will persist in volunteering.

Secondly, a key and often overlooked component of affect theory is affection. Affections are the resultant bodily forces of the encounter with affect that give expression to the change occurring in the body and its power to act; this translates into the state of being affected (Spinoza, 1996, IIIdef3). Affection is a way that we can understand affect as between bodies, and the immediate and durable influence of affect that shapes ongoing behaviour. The distinction between affect and affection is key: whilst an affect operates between bodies, an affection is about the state of the body itself, and the impact of an affect upon a body (Deleuze, 1988, 1997, 2007). This distinction is poignant for understanding volunteering because it emphasizes that past experience, and therefore how the body is affected, is imperative to what the body can do next. To focus on affect over affection – as in much of the work in affective geographies to date – rather than place both affect and affection as integral to human experience – is to miss one side of how the body's power to act plays out, and in turn, how action comes about (Hardt, 1993). Rather, when taken together, affect and affection give an understanding of volunteering that relates to past affects upon a body, a body's current state, and its possibilities for action in the future (Wade and Hynes, 2013).

The third aspect of affect theory is affective capacity. For Spinoza (1996, IIIdef3), affective capacity refers to what the body can do, resulting from the body's power to act increasing and decreasing as it is affected. Different bodies have different affective capacities, and these will change over time as the body is affected (Spinoza, 1996, IIIdef1-3). Building upon affective capacity is the concept of conatus; the body's desire to persevere in existence (Spinoza, 1996, IIP6). Montag (1999) construes the Latin word root of conatus as being *conatur* referring to striving and endeavouring. In relation to affective capacity,

Spinoza (1996, IIP11S) gives the example of a person being in pain as having a decreased affective capacity and lessened conatus because they are less able to act than a healthier person who will have a greater affective capacity. What conatus allows us to understand then, is how the body pushes forward towards future actions (Spinoza, 1996, IIP6). Crucially, persevering in being is not necessarily synonymous with persevering or persisting in action. This is because conatus shows us that a person is unlikely to continue in an action, such as volunteering, if that action is negatively affecting the body because this would negatively impact their conatus. This reiterates the importance for voluntary organisations to understand how their volunteers persist in volunteering because even if a person is motivated by their faith or another altruistic ethos, if the experience is negative then there will likely be similar volunteering opportunities which the volunteer could turn to instead to meet the same motivation.

Taking these three components – affect, affection, and affective capacity with conatus – together, affect theory gives four insights for understanding persistence in volunteering. First, affection is important for understanding the impact that volunteering has upon the volunteer. This is because we not only see volunteers' affects upon others, but also how through affections they are capacitated for future action. To reiterate, the volunteer's affective capacity – not just the traditional recipient's – is changed by the volunteering experience. Secondly, following Lorimer's (2005, p. 84) conception of 'more-than-representational' theories, affect allows us to appreciate that to the volunteer, the experience of volunteering can mean 'more-than' what is represented in the action itself, such as giving food. Thirdly, in affect theory each and every experience has the potential to affect a body (Spinoza, 1996, IIIdef3); it is not the duration of the event that makes it significant, but rather how the body is affected (Dewsbury, 2010). Therefore, affect theory emphasizes that fleeting moments can be as important as longer events for influencing whether a person will persist in

volunteering. Finally, the combination of affect and affection, and the production of affective capacities mean that affect theory gives an understanding of volunteering as a process; how different factors (including motivation and experience) from the past, present and the anticipated future feed into volunteers' motivations to continue volunteering or not. Hence, drawing these insights together, affect theory shows how persistence in volunteering is a continual cycle of motivation, action, and reflection.

Whilst these four insights could be applicable to persistence in a variety of volunteering contexts, in this paper I explore them in terms of faith-based volunteering in the specific context of volunteers at a faith-based project, Lunch. The insights from affect theory for understanding persistence in volunteering therefore become: first, how volunteering can take on a meaning related to a person acting out their faith and to theology; secondly, how that faith motivation can be affected by volunteering experiences; thirdly, how passing moments can be theologically significant to volunteers; and fourthly, how faith feeds into the cycle of motivation, action and reflection for persistence in volunteering. This is because the combination of affect and affection in action means that once faith is understood in terms of affect, then in terms of action it is what results from these affects – ergo how we are affected and reflect on these affections – that is crucial for how we act in the future, and persist in acting or not. These insights will be drawn out throughout the remainder of the paper from Lunch volunteers' narratives.

### **Research Context: Responding to Children's Holiday Hunger**

Holiday hunger is a dimension of food poverty, referring to over three million UK children being at risk of not having enough to eat in the school holidays (APPG on Hunger, 2017).

TLG is a Christian charity that has lunch kitchens across the UK providing children with the equivalent of a free school meal in the school holidays. Over twenty months I established

and ran one TLG lunch kitchen (“Lunch”) in an area in the top five percent of deprived areas nationally. In establishing and running Lunch, the research combined elements of action research, participatory geographies and ethnography. In particular, the research process aspired for positive social change (Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabhlok, 2011), and made use of a cyclical process of action and reflection in the development of the project and research questions (Cahill, 2009). Under my leadership, Lunch was established and opened across seven school holidays. Primary school aged children accessed the project through living in the local area, and came for an hour of play-time before sitting down together for a hot, healthy lunch. Project sustainability was crucial to the ethics of the research. From the outset I gained funding for the project to run for two to three years, and noted other possible funding bodies for future applications. After the research period, I handed over the running of Lunch, which continued to run successfully.

Lunch relied upon volunteers to cook the meals and to run the play activities. There was no religious content for the children at Lunch; the emphasis was on responding to hunger and facilitating play. It was the volunteers’ Christian faith, the project’s Christian ethos through TLG as a faith-based organisation that specifically engages with churches, and the fact that it was run through a church that made Lunch a faith-based activity. The majority of volunteers were from Anglican churches in and beyond the local Lunch area giving a variety of ages, occupations and backgrounds. Each volunteer will have had their own personal understanding of their Christian faith, and in the following quoted narratives from volunteers I give contextual detail of each volunteer’s faith position where known. Had volunteers at Lunch come from a wider diversity of churches outside of Protestant/Anglican traditions, it is likely that their faith positions would have been more diverse. The volunteers were split into two teams: play and cooking. On one day there were typically three people in the cooking team and up to ten people in the play team. With seventy-eight volunteers in the research

period, the group of volunteers varied day-to-day with some coming regularly, and others not. At Lunch we met hunger on a variety of levels which moved beyond the statistics of food poverty to the experience of responding to hunger. To capture these experiences forty-two of the seventy-eight Lunch volunteers completed solicited diaries and/or interviews. Twenty-eight volunteers wrote diaries giving one hundred and ten entries; the shortest being from one day, and the longest set of entries over fifteen months. These longitudinal diaries were particularly advantageous to understand volunteers' journeys over time, and the diaries gave volunteers choice over what to write about within the general remit of writing about their motivations and experiences (Meth, 2003). Eighteen volunteers took part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Where the research focuses on faith, this is emergent from volunteers' narratives; faith was not assumed as a key motivator for volunteering. I also kept a diary of my experiences establishing and running Lunch. It is by means of the volunteers' narratives that through the concept of affect I explore the persistence of volunteering at Lunch. I am concerned here with volunteers' persistence once they have started volunteering at Lunch, rather than how faith originally motivated them to volunteer; that is the remit of a separate paper. The nature of the research also means that this paper is concerned with how people did persist in volunteering, rather than why people stopped volunteering.

Following the ideals of action research, the analysis was a cyclical process of action and reflection (Cahill, 2009). As an ongoing process through the fieldwork, I thematically coded diary and interview transcripts to draw out key themes in volunteers' persistence. Upon repeating this process multiple times, key quotes were then extracted and used in the formal writing of the research, but the themes are influenced by analysis of all research participants' narratives. It is likely that my narrative influenced how I interpreted others' narratives, and I endeavoured to acknowledge this throughout the research analysis and writing by noting convergences and divergences in our narratives. The geographies of

religion have debated the effect of researchers' positionality (Bailey, et al., 2009). In-depth reflections on my positionality at Lunch are the remit of a separate paper. However, in brief, my positionality was of both researcher and volunteer, and Christian, but from outside the local area because I did not worship at Lunch's host church or live in the local community. As a result, my positionality varied temporally as both an "insider" and "outsider" at the Lunch host church and Lunch, and it took time to establish positive relationships with key gatekeepers. This journey influenced my focus in the research on persistence in volunteering because persistence became a dominant theme in my own and others' experiences at Lunch as we endeavoured to establish and run Lunch, for example in recruiting volunteers, advertising the project to local children, sourcing funding, and planning activities. My having participated alongside the volunteers was also formative in how I was able to understand and interpret volunteers' narratives (for example echoing the discussion on ethnography by Williams, 2017). Throughout this paper's discussion, framing volunteers' reflections (using pseudonyms) within their ongoing narratives and positionalities helps to avoid making reflections more concrete than they were intended. Action research emphasizes developing context specific understandings rather than world view generalisations (Greenwood, 2015). I therefore do not aim nor claim to be representative of TLG as an organisation, nor representative of all faith-based volunteering. Rather, I am concerned with moments in my daily experience of running Lunch and the experiences of other volunteers at Lunch. This builds upon the call made by Sonnino and Hanmer (2016) for more place-based understandings of responses to food poverty. What is generalizable from this paper is understanding volunteering as a process with a continual cycle of motivation, action and reflection.

## **Persistence in Volunteering at Lunch**

People signed up to volunteer at Lunch around a month before each individual holiday rather than committing to volunteer for a longer period of time or indefinitely. For understanding persistence in volunteering this is significant because it meant that people needed to consciously decide each time if they were going to volunteer; their persistence in volunteering could never be assumed. The episodic nature of volunteering at Lunch also meant that volunteers' commitment to persist in volunteering at Lunch was relatively short term at any one point – the longest period being the six weeks summer holiday – which heightened reflection on the question of whether a person would volunteer again when asked for the next school holiday. The research was able to tap into these heightened, ongoing reflections on their experiences at Lunch through asking volunteers to write longitudinal diaries. Amelia, a volunteer from outside the local area who then became part of the Lunch host church congregation, asked a question that is key to the persistence of action:

Somebody saying “it’s such a great project” [so people will want to keep volunteering] it took me up short and I thought well I really hope you’re right. I’d like to be a nice person but actually if I was having a miserable time would I still do it or would I find another project?

(Amelia, interview, September 2016)

Amelia was surprised at another person's assumption that people would continue to volunteer at Lunch because of it responding to holiday hunger and being a “worthy cause”. Her reaction questions if this is enough. Spinoza's (1996) concept of *conatus* – that humans desire to persevere in being – is particularly useful here because it shows that a person is less likely to continue in an action if it is negatively affecting them. To reiterate, *conatus* therefore allows us to appreciate Amelia's concern that a project being “worthy” does not immunize volunteers from being challenged by their experiences, and if circumstances

dictate, from seeking an alternative and more positive experience elsewhere. This extension of persistence in relation to conatus mirrors wider social science research on volunteering, for example that by Wilson (2000) which emphasizes the problem of volunteer burnout. The problem of volunteering experiences not matching a person's conatus could be translated to reflect research by Yanay and Yanay (2008, p. 65) who argue that a person may stop volunteering when there is a difference between what they feel they 'ought' to do and their 'actual' experiences. Therefore, in contrast to voluntary sector research that has found the reason a person stops volunteering is due to a change in circumstances (NCVO, 2015), this paper understands persistence in volunteering as a process because a person is changed by how they are affected.

I now turn to two key themes in Lunch volunteers' persistence which are drawn from the thematic analysis of their narratives: their experiences of volunteering with children, and secondly, their reflections on Lunch more broadly.

### *The Experience of Volunteering with Children*

As I explore in a separate paper, the majority of volunteers at Lunch were motivated by their personal Christian faith to volunteer, and in this sense when they volunteered at Lunch they were acting out their Christian faith. This idea of volunteering as a performance of faith frames this paper's discussion of persistence. Within this, how experience compared to their preconceptions, and how volunteers were affected and reflected on these experiences through their Christian faith was crucial for whether a person would persist in volunteering. Each day at Lunch, volunteers were affected by their expectation of what the experience would entail. This was the case both before their first day volunteering – affected by preconceptions – and afterwards as they and I were affected by previous days at Lunch. In drawing out particular moments that volunteers shared in their narratives I reiterate how affect theory priorities

fleeting moments as much as routine because these can significantly change a body's affective capacity, which in turn affects whether people persist in volunteering.

The children's behaviour at Lunch affected volunteers, as James – a play team volunteer from the host church who shared that he 'felt called by God to come and experience life in urban priority areas' – reflected:

There will be sometimes when you'll feel really down because of how the kids have been, and there will be times when you feel really encouraged because of how the kids have been, and there will be times when you've been tired and they've sent you down and they'll be times when you're tired and they've raised you up. That's a variable.

(James, interview, August 2016)

Recognising within affect and non-representational theories that bodies are relational (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Vannini, 2015), the children's behaviour could both encourage and discourage volunteers. James recognizes his affective capacity in approaching a situation, for example one of tiredness, and that the children could change this capacity positively and negatively as they 'sent you down', or 'raised you up'. Fleeting moments are important then, in that they can significantly change a body's affective capacity, which in turn affects how the next fleeting moment is approached and dealt with. James came from a context of being relatively familiar with church youth work, and from my observation – and that fact he still volunteered across youth groups – had become relatively resilient to the variable nature of the children's behaviour and this fitted within his understanding of being called to such work by his belief in God. James later trained as a Church of England priest which shows the vocational nature and affective power of his faith. For a new volunteer not used to this context, their affective capacity in terms of whether they would volunteer again could be cut short by fleeting moments. For example another volunteer, Alexandra,

encountered and cleared up two flooded bathrooms and a corridor on her second day volunteering at Lunch after some children blocked the sink with a towel, seemingly on purpose. In her diary Alexandra reflected that she was disappointed in the children's behaviour, and although she related it to being important that Lunch provided potentially impressionable characters with a safe place to play, she did not volunteer again. Affect theory is poignant here for understanding persistence in volunteering for two reasons. First, James and Alexandra's experiences and reflections show the degree to which affections from affective bodies in fleeting moments can last beyond that moment, and contribute to a decision to persist in volunteering or stop volunteering. Secondly, affection emphasizes how the volunteers were impacted by the volunteering experience as much as the children. It is important then, that affect is a relational concept, recognising that we each have the capacity to affect and be affected, and we cannot isolate ourselves from experience. Ultimately, a volunteer's affective capacity would affect how they approached each situation with the children, and in turn how they were affected and would act in the future.

Moments with the children at meal times took on a theological dimension for Violet – a cook from a privileged area and church – both in the moment and in reflecting afterwards.

Great to see the children developing – one used a knife and fork for the first time to cut up her own dinner, another tried something new, and another helped bring the dirty plates back into the kitchen. It felt like family life rather than an institution, and that makes all the difference, I think – a real foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

(Violet, diary, October 2015)

Violet was encouraged as a cook to see the children enjoying the food and developing throughout their time at Lunch; she was positively affected by the joy and growth exchanged between the affective bodies of the children. However, the second line is

poignant. Violet reflects on these moments not just as eating together but as ‘a real foretaste of the heavenly banquet’; to her Christian belief in eternal life. To another person this could have been a secular setting around food, but to Violet the meaning is changed by her liberal Anglican Christian faith and in other words how her experiences volunteering are an acting out – a performance – of her faith. Indeed, Violet commented that writing her diary after each day at Lunch formed for herself a theological process and reflection. This is one example where the research remit did encourage volunteers to capture their reflections, but reflections did not take place purely for research purposes, and events took on a meaning that was ‘more-than’ the action itself for volunteers, reiterating the benefit of an affect theory approach to faith-based research. Violet’s extract here builds upon others from her diary to build the sense of the importance she gives to Lunch – including eating together, a developing sense of community, and mirroring Biblical teachings – in a way that extends beyond herself and her own self-reflection to encourage her persistence in volunteering.

Tony, an elderly volunteer from a privileged area and church, was at the centre of one fleeting moment at Lunch that was recalled by many volunteers afterwards and became known as “the carrot incident”. Tony’s reflection on this gives a prime example of how fleeting moments could take on a greater meaning to encourage volunteers to persist:

Interesting two attendances almost consecutively. A gang congregated around my dominoes, gradually learning how to play. We stuck together for lunch where Jonah, excitable and enthusiastic, stuffed so many raw carrots that they regurgitated in spectacular manner.

Then [the next day] the great rewarding moment... in comes Jonah, recognizes me, face lights up, rushes over, grabs the dominoes, calls his friends and away we go...

Lunch – a contrast, Jonah effervescent as always, Joseph slowly plods along and merely nods. Not a word but a smile at the end. It’s been a delightful experience.

(Tony, diary, August 2016)

Affect theory emphasizes the relationality between bodies in this extract – how over time Tony developed relationships with the children and was affected by these interactions. In addition to his diary, Tony spoke to me about how he understood every action as integral to his Christian faith as an Anglican/Quaker; and so volunteering at Lunch was a performance of his faith. In this extract, the impact of Jonah’s action and the pleasure that Tony gained from this developing relationship is clear. Non-representational and affect theories emphasize bodily experience: Tony writes about becoming part of a gang that sticks together, and Jonah rushing over to play with Tony. Indeed, Tony’s enthusiasm to volunteer prevailed even through events such as “the carrot incident”: when five year old Jonah’s enthusiasm for carrots resulted in a bodily event that immediately affected Tony with a loss of appetite, and later became an amusing story. This raises an important point that it can be overly simplistic to refer to positive or negative affections because an experience could both negatively and positively affect a volunteer. It is necessary to recognize that social action projects can be critiqued for “doing to” or silencing a community, rather than approaching a community as an active agent for change. Lunch attempted to address this by running through a church imbedded in the local community, and with volunteers from the local community. In this vein, putting emphasis on how volunteers are affected goes some way to negate the binary of giver and receiver in the volunteering experience in terms of showing that volunteers can also benefit from their volunteering experiences. Tony was volunteering at a project that primarily gave Jonah a healthy meal, but Tony is also affected, and from his writing we can see that Jonah seeking Tony out profoundly affected and mattered to Tony. Tony’s experiences at Lunch and how he reflected on these – how he was affected – were important

for whether he would persist in volunteering. However, it is also important not to romanticise volunteering – not all volunteers were affected by ‘incidents’ as positively as Tony, for example Alexandra and the flooded sink.

Tony’s account and how he was affected hence shows how Lunch could be a space of care that had more meaning than just play and food. Here there is a comparison to Cloke, et al. (2017)’s argument that foodbanks can be spaces of care because the foodbank is about more than food provision. However, to talk about community through affect theory is not in a romanticised sense that plays up participation, and plays down conflict. Rather, affection gives us an understanding of community where each person is affected by their experiences. For Tony it was these experiences that affected him to re-ignite his faith-based motivations and to encourage him to persist in volunteering. Over time his health deteriorated and he was unable to volunteer, but his commitment to Lunch was such that he began fundraising for the project instead. An analysis through affect theory therefore shows how Lunch was about more than food, and that volunteering at Lunch affected volunteers to such a degree that it impacted upon their future action, and whether they would persist in volunteering. Understanding volunteering in relation to faith and performance therefore gives a different way of understanding people’s volunteering experiences, particularly compared to more traditional conceptions of volunteering through institutions such as in relation to social capital or citizenship. Such approaches emphasize the organisational and societal gains of people volunteering (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003) rather than how volunteers themselves are changed and the meaning that volunteering holds for those volunteers. It was the meaning that volunteering experiences held for volunteers that was important for whether they would persist in volunteering.

### *Reflecting upon Volunteering*

The above extracts include reflections on specific moments with the children at Lunch.

Within volunteers' narratives there is also a more general sense of reflection on Lunch which fed into people's decisions of whether to persist in volunteering. Some, but not all, of the Church of England Lunch host church leadership volunteered at Lunch which meant that both present and absent bodies reflected and decided on its future. Paul, a part of the church leadership who was present for much of Lunch, reflected on the type of atmosphere he endeavoured for at Lunch's host church as part of his understanding of Christian faith as being 'alongside' people:

And something I've really tried to model is an atmosphere of come on in, everyone can play a part in different ways, everyone is welcome, but you are up against battles and other people's instincts are to police things and be gatekeepers rather than to be permissive and I think you can see that in some ways in the story of Lunch.

(Paul, interview, March 2016)

Affect theory facilitates an analysis of this experience in a way that moves beyond the organisational space of volunteering (for example see Conradson, 2003) to practice and relationships at Lunch. Paul uses the word 'atmosphere' which can be mapped onto the recent development of affective atmospheres in affective geographies. Paul attempted to engineer a particular affective atmosphere at the church, but this had limited success of how others were in turn affected because a single body – in this case Paul – cannot generate an atmosphere on its own (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016). This meant that Paul could not control how affects from his body were in turn received; an atmosphere affects different people differently (Bissell, 2010), and no atmosphere can entirely be engineered and instead remains transient (Anderson, 2014). Paul does not give detail of how he 'tried to model an atmosphere' so I can only make inferences and continue to

overlap our narratives: he writes that broadly he wanted an atmosphere at the church where people from different backgrounds could work together to a common cause. I can add to this that at Lunch I endeavoured to do this with volunteers coming from a variety of churches and life experiences, and infer that Paul saw this as adding to the atmosphere he ‘tried to model’. However, Paul also refers to ‘the story of Lunch’: this was not the end point. The continuing story of Lunch is shown by the reflection of Clara, a volunteer from the Lunch host church who started volunteering eight months after Lunch started running. Clara reflected on a positive sense of team at Lunch and that people were brought together through their common aim as Christians of responding to children’s holiday hunger.

I think there is a unity and purpose, unspoken, and we all want the best for the children and nobody seems to take offence or anything so I think it’s a lovely team.

Although we come from all those different churches, the unity and purpose is there.

(Clara, interview, August 2016)

It is poignant that Clara refers to this commonality as ‘unspoken’. In going beyond representation as ‘more-than’ (Lorimer, 2005, p. 84), affect is an ideal means through which to understand this unity. Clara is affected, then, by the affective compatibility between volunteers which she links to the fact that people come from churches. For Clara their common Christian faith overrides what could have been a point of difference that they came from different areas. This draws out how affect theory shows persistence in volunteering as a process: Clara and others were motivated (affected) by their Christian faith to volunteer, which Clara experiences at Lunch as she recognizes that people have come to volunteer from a variety of churches. She then positively reflects on this perceived affective compatibility between volunteers, which encourages her to persist in volunteering: a continuous cycle of motivation, action and reflection.

It was an ongoing challenge for myself as the co-ordinator, with the help of

others, to plan menus that were hot and healthy as per TLG's charity standards, but also something that the children would eat, and ideally enjoy. Violet – a volunteer from a privileged area – was particularly challenged by food in the first summer holiday. Here she reflects on a conversation with Camilla, another cook. This shows the role of their Christian faith in their reflections and how they were affected for future action.

After Camilla and I had been talking about what might be the liberation theology aspects of the project yesterday, reality bit today, and bit quite hard. We did chicken curry which was pretty much universally disliked by the kids and it forced us into facing how disempowering it might feel for them, arriving at the table to find a plate of food there. They'd had no choice about what went onto their plate, and our menus often include stuff that's all mixed in together rather than being served as separate items. They're also getting to know each other, so peer pressure is important and once one says "I don't like..." it's hard for the rest not to follow suit.

(Violet, diary, August 2015)

Violet and Camilla reflected on the children eating at two levels: first, practically and reflecting in the moment, there was a problem for a project aiming to respond to holiday hunger when food was not eaten. Practically, Violet and Camilla wanted the children to eat and were committed to this aim – this is a literal, bodily reflection on the practicalities of Lunch that affected Violet and Camilla. Secondly, they reflected beyond the literal food to relate the experience to liberation theology. This presents a very particular interpretation of the theology of a faith performance in terms of social action and combines their liberal Anglican faith positions with a theology that is more commonly associated with Roman Catholicism: Violet and Camilla later expanded that coming from the theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, liberation theology refers to God having a bias for the poor which not only motivated them to work for justice, but also to learn from the poor

about the grace of God (Goizueta, 2004). This builds upon the aforementioned possible tension at projects such as Lunch where the children could be framed as those who are helped, rather than those who can enact change. Violet and Camilla's reflection shows that they were concerned about this at Lunch, and as a result of their reflections the way food was served was changed to give children more choice. This gives us a different kind of understanding of how citizenship and social capital can develop through volunteering: rather than countering hedonism (Durkheim's understanding of social capital (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003), or fostering trust in a social organisation (Putman on citizenship (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003))), this was about challenging the power relations in how Lunch functioned and in learning from the children. Violet and Camilla's discussion shows how volunteers' faith and experiences at Lunch could challenge each other: a faith motivation to volunteer does not make a person immune from being challenged by acting. Yet, affect theory takes us further than this: Violet and Camilla were committed to Lunch in that they wanted to resolve this theological tension in their experiences. In this sense their motivations to volunteer were being continually re-ignited by their volunteering experiences. Therefore, how the body is affected by an experience, and how it reflects on that experience – taking reflection beyond itself – and the power of the ideas associated with that experience, is then formative in the continual development of a faithful volunteer, and how that volunteer will next act.

## **Conclusions**

Volunteers are increasingly being relied upon for UK welfare provision. Faith-based organisations are playing a crucial role in responding to need in the UK, in particular in responding to food poverty. However, volunteering is voluntary by its very nature, meaning a person can at any time end their commitment. Therefore, if voluntary sector responses to

food poverty are to be sustainable then it is crucial that we understand how people persist in volunteering in order to retain volunteers and to lessen the need for continual volunteer recruitment. Hence, whilst the geographies of voluntarism have addressed how people are motivated to volunteer, there remains a gap in understanding how people persist in volunteering.

This paper has responded to this gap and questioned how volunteers persist in volunteering in the specific context of one Christian-based TLG project responding to children's holiday hunger, where the majority of volunteers were Christian. In doing so, as well as contributing to the geographies of voluntarism to understand persistence in volunteering, it has contributed to the geographies of religion in terms of two key agendas – performances of faith in people's daily lives, and faith-based organisations – as volunteers' narratives showed that their volunteering at Lunch was predominantly a performance of their Christian faith. Building upon the growing use of affect theory with the geographies of religion, this paper has analysed Lunch volunteers' narratives in terms of persistence through affect theory. Overall, what this has achieved is to show how persistence in volunteering is a continual process of motivation, action and reflection because volunteers are affected by different factors (including motivation and experience) from their past, present and the anticipated future for whether they will continue volunteering or not. Whilst this paper has drawn on volunteers' narratives from a Christian based project, the notion of persistence of volunteering as a process gives a broader contribution to the geographies of voluntarism because it extends the foci of institutions, identity and ethos further than motivation to how people are affected by their experiences of volunteering for whether they will persist in volunteering or not. Indeed the affective qualities of volunteering are not claimed to be exclusive to the faith-based volunteering context. I therefore encourage future research to

take this question of persistence in volunteering to wider contexts, including to projects that are not faith-based, and to projects that are of faiths other than Christianity.

Three further insights from affect theory feed into understanding persistence in volunteering as a process: how volunteers are affected by their experiences; volunteering as having more meaning than what is represented; and how fleeting moments are as important as ongoing events in affecting future actions. In the remainder of this conclusion I take each of these in turn for the specific Christian context of Lunch, whilst encouraging future research to explore these insights in other faith and non-faith contexts.

First, volunteers were affected by each experience at Lunch. How they reflected on these changed their affective capacity for future action and affected whether they would persist in volunteering. One event could simultaneously increase and decrease volunteers' affective capacities meaning it is too simplistic to refer to only negative and positive affections in volunteering. That said, the more negative affections are important to raise in order to avoid romanticising the volunteering experience. However, volunteers were also positively affected by their time with the children in a way that increased their affective capacities and encouraged them to persist in volunteering. Affect is advantageous here to understand the volunteers and children as relational bodies, which helps us to begin to break down the binary of giver and receiver in volunteering. This is important in order to recognize that both volunteers and the traditional "service-user" are affected by their meeting, and it is not only the service-user that can benefit. At a leadership level there were attempts at Lunch to engineer a particular affective atmosphere to welcome new volunteers, but there were also moments of tension between different members of the group and ultimately an atmosphere cannot be individually engineered because it is generative of multiple affective bodies. That said, volunteers' common aim of responding to hunger, and the shared faith of many was a point of commonality, and adds to an understanding of faith-based social action as faith being

performed beyond worship spaces in people's daily lives. Volunteers' faith and their understanding of volunteering as being an acting out – performance – of their faith affected how they interpreted their experiences at Lunch. The Lunch volunteers' reflections shows that faith does not make volunteers immune from being challenged by their experiences, but that faith can affect how they reflect on these experiences, and whether they will persist in volunteering.

Secondly, volunteers were affected by the children's behaviour at Lunch, and how they then reflected on this affected their persistence in volunteering. In terms of their reflections, volunteers' Christian (predominantly Anglican) faith could result in an experience with the children, such as eating together, having more meaning to the volunteers than what was represented in the action, for example Violet relating eating together to 'the heavenly banquet'. In this regard, volunteers' affective capacities impacted upon how they were affected: Violet's faith affected her reflection whereas a negative episode which decreased volunteers' affective capacity early on in volunteering could affect their conatus – their desire to persevere in existence – to mean that they decided to stop volunteering. A desire to persist in existence is therefore not necessarily synonymous with a desire to persist in volunteering, and if these come into conflict it is likely that conatus will take precedence.

Finally, fleeting moments are also crucial and could have a lasting impact upon how a volunteer reflects upon, and gives meaning to their experience. Affect theory shows us that faith is important in Lunch volunteers' narratives, but in the context of the body being relational, and being affected by past and possible future experience. Here then, affect shows us that it is not the duration of an experience which makes it significant in the degree to which the body is affected. Rather, different moments affect people differently, and take on a significance which contributes to the cycle of action and reflection for a volunteer to persist over time. What affects one volunteer to deter them from volunteering can affect another

volunteer to encourage them to persist. Ultimately these affects and affections contribute to how volunteers understand and reflect upon their volunteering experiences in deciding whether to persist in volunteering in a process that is a continual cycle of motivation, action and reflection.

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