

# The benefits of volunteering for psychology students

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*Within the current economic climate students are seen as needing more than a degree to succeed in securing graduate employment. One way that students chose to enhance their employability is through engaging in voluntary work. In this empirical study, undergraduate psychology students' reasons for volunteering are explored within the context of enhanced employability. Thirty-nine students provided written narrative accounts of their reasons for undertaking voluntary work. Responses were analysed together to identify key themes and subthemes. The main finding from this analysis was the large degree of cluster overlap within individual participants' responses between self and other focused motives, allowing for a model of strongly interdependent motives to emerge. Students clearly benefitted from both volunteering and the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. The findings are discussed in terms of their value for promoting volunteering for psychology students, in and beyond the context of employability.*

**Keywords:** *Employability; volunteering; psychology; content analysis; reflective practice.*

**E**MPLOYABILITY is a complex, multi-faceted construct that has been variously described and operationalised; cutting across the HE sector both nationally and internationally. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) provided a framework for understanding and organising employability factors. Their global analysis identified three main interrelated components that potentially influence a person's employability, defined as their propensity to secure employment. These are individual factors (e.g. attributes, competencies and skills); personal circumstances (e.g. household circumstances, work culture and access to resources; and external factors (e.g. labour market factors, macroeconomic factors and recruitment/selection procedures). In total, their framework gives examples of more than 115 competing potential enhancing or impeding factors within the three groupings.

Despite the complex range of definitions of employability that reside within the literature, easily the most dominant description is based on a 'skills, knowledge and experience' model. This places the responsibility at

the level of the individual and, at least in the UK, employability has become almost synonymous with possessing certain transferable skills. The origins of this skill based definition can probably be traced to the Dearing Report into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997), which argued for a focus on the development of key skills and also highlighted the importance of work experience.

Within the subject of psychology, the number of full time undergraduate students roughly doubled between 1998 to 2008, with currently over 77,000 students studying the subject (Trapp et al., 2011). In recent years, the trajectory of this expansion in undergraduate numbers has coincided with a reduction in employment opportunities as a result of the global economic crisis. This has resulted in a bottle neck of new graduates looking for graduate-level work (or indeed work of any kind), although even in times of economic plenty, positions for psychology graduates are notoriously competitive. There are multiple stakeholders with an interest in promoting employability and the issue is high on the strategic priority of most universities. Recently, the Higher Education

Academy Psychology Network, the British Psychology Society and the Association of Heads of Psychology Departments joined forces to consider the future of undergraduate psychology in the UK. This forum identified life-long employability as a key concern and priority (Trapp et al., 2011). Students themselves have recognised the challenges of securing entry into the labour market and many acknowledge the need to optimise their employment prospects (Tomlinson, 2007).

Although key commentators, such as Knight and Yorke (2004) have argued for employability skills education to have good standing by being integrated into the curriculum, many students are encouraged to enhance their employability, above and beyond what is provided by their academic studies. This may be particularly important for undergraduates enrolled on non-vocational programmes but applying for graduate positions where having some previous work experience could confer an advantage. Work experience obtained prior to graduation has been shown to clearly boost the employment prospects of psychology graduates (Reddy & Moores, 2006), although some commentators are more skeptical about the evidence for a causal link between volunteering and employability (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

Beyond the context of employability, numerous studies have shown that volunteering confers many psycho-social benefits to the individual (see, for example, Mojza, Sonnentag & Bornemann, 2010). There is, however, a paucity of empirical work that has examined students' own motivation to engage in voluntary work. An exception to this is a study of Chinese student volunteers, which used a grounded theory approach (Luping, 2011). The analysis revealed three main motivations: the traditional motivation (focused on responsibility); the modern motivation (focused on development); and the postmodern motivation (focused on pleasure). Luping (2011) used the data to

challenge a simple dichotomy between selfless and self-serving motivations. This unidimensionality of volunteering motivations concurs with earlier findings from factor analytic studies (e.g. Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). The overall aim of the current study was to use a phenomenological approach to examine the motivations for volunteering in a sample of UK psychology undergraduates.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The sample consisted of a group of 112 second-year psychology undergraduate students enrolled on an optional, innovative, extra-curricular employability programme, run by a UK psychology department. This represented just over 50 per cent of the cohort. A total of 86 students completed both parts of the assessment (simulated job interview and portfolio). One of the requirements for the programme was an engagement in a minimum of 40 hours volunteering over a calendar year. The types of schemes the students engaged in ranged from supporting local and national voluntary organisations (e.g. Mind, The Samaritans), approved overseas opportunities (such as a primate therapy initiative in Uganda), as well as volunteering that assisted the work of the university (e.g. helping at open days).

### ***Elicitation of data set***

The students were asked to consider the prompt 'Why I do voluntary work' as an optional component for their portfolio of reflective practice. They were encouraged to see this as an opportunity to demonstrate their psychological literacy (McGovern et al., 2010) by not only reflecting on the topic but also demonstrating their skills as psychology students (e.g. by drawing on any relevant literature). The students were presented with six different ways they could respond to the prompt. For this study the written narrative responses from 39 students were analysed.

### **Ethical protocol**

A consent form was included within the portfolio assessment which asked the students to sign that they were happy for the contents to be used, in anonymised form, for marketing or research purposes. Furthermore, the 'Why I do voluntary work' prompt was just one of a range of options for completing their portfolio, with many non-experiential alternatives to choose from.

### **Results**

A thematic content analysis of the written responses was conducted using the analytical guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). This revealed two superordinate themes, labelled 'Self-focused' and 'Other-focused' motivations. Within each of these, four subordinate categories were identified. These were for 'Self-focused': Personal Rewards, Employability, Skills and Personal Growth, and for 'Other-focused': Belonging, Helping, Generativity and Valued. The key finding from this analysis was the large degree of cluster overlap within individual participants' responses. An example showing the overlapping subthemes within the superordinate theme of Self-focused was the following contribution by Participant 35, which demonstrates the interweaving of Employability, Skills and Personal Growth. She wrote: *'Volunteering allows you to identify which skills you may not be good at in relation to a particular working environment and so this self-reflection helps you to flourish in a working environment and as a person'* (P35). Similarly, there was clear overlap between superordinate themes, in this example between the Self-focused subtheme of Employability and the Other-focused subtheme of Helping: *'When I admit that I volunteer for my future career development I feel selfish and egoistic. It's not that I don't have a desire to help people; in fact I hope that my job in the future involves helping people'* (P5). Overlap of Generativity and Personal Rewards is demonstrated here by Participant 22 who explained: *'There is a sense of 'passing the torch', giving information to the next generation of students and being there for them when the*

*majority of things they experience will be new to them. This kind of satisfaction is what will keep me volunteering'* (P22).

The words of Participant 5 above also exemplify a tendency for a number of participants to note the potential tensions between self- and other-focused motivations for volunteering. Moreover, a notable group of students described a journey from a starting motivation of enhanced employability towards experiencing a deep level of personal satisfaction: *'The reason I personally started volunteering was because I wanted to increase my employability by boosting my CV, as I had not had much previous experience. But as I carried out my volunteer work, I found that there were other benefits to volunteering... Volunteering has been a very positive experience for me in discovering my capabilities and highlighting areas where I need improvement, as well as enhancing my relationship with my sister and with other students at university'* (P24). Many participants also took the opportunity to apply knowledge from psychology to themselves and others: *'From a psychological perspective, Maslow (1970) would say that this positive feedback motivates me to volunteer because it helps me to fulfill my esteem needs which help me in my pursuance of self actualisation'* (P20).

### **Discussion**

This research generated a large and rich data set. For the purpose of this paper three key points will be summarised. Firstly, although a number of the factors identified support previous research, for example, the seminal work of Clary et al. (1998), this inductive qualitative approach has revealed how students' motivations are intrinsically interrelated. The tensions between different motives were palpable within the data set and the development between motives was sometimes expressed as temporally unfolding. Secondly, these findings can be used for promoting volunteering for psychology students. Explaining the convergent interface between motivations that student volunteers typically experience may help reduce the tension that some may experience.

rience. Students can feel permitted to concurrently possess self-focused goals for volunteering alongside their other-focused values. Finally, this research has embraced some of the key recommendations from Trapp et al. (2011). In particular, it provides self-report evidence of how the activities undertaken by these students have boosted their psychological literacy through engagement with the wider community and facilitated opportunities to connect their psychological knowledge to their own lived experience. Enhanced employability is achieved for these students by having gained some relevant work experience in addition to their main academic studies. The students took the opportunity to volunteer within a variety settings, including schools, hospitals and prisons; locally, regionally and internationally. This may be particularly important for psychology students hoping to move onto careers in the public sector. However, it has been clearly demonstrated that encouraging students to volunteer and providing them with the opportunity for guided reflection, has many benefits beyond the proximal goal of helping them secure a first graduate position. The career development learning shown here puts the personal into personal development planning and shows that Psychology departments can facilitate learning experiences for their students that are truly transformative. In conclusion, the findings fit with Trapp et al.'s (2011) vision of the 21st century psychology student where the focus on life-long learning, sustained employability and socially relevant activity is prime.

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