

A close-up, high-contrast image of blue liquid ripples, likely from a drop hitting water, creating a series of concentric, swirling patterns that fill the top half of the cover.

The Bauman Institute



Think Pieces

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**Time and the
'Big Society'**

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Time and the 'Big Society'

Introduction

Lack of time is regularly cited as the main reason people do not engage in volunteering or participate in other community activities (e.g. see Brodie et al. 2011; Sundeen et al. 2007). However, this paper argues that simply having enough time does not necessarily facilitate greater involvement, in part because the perceived value of people's time is contingent upon their skills and knowledge. Drawing on data from an ethnographic case study exploring community participation in a neighbourhood in Leeds, I explore issues around the availability and value of people's time in relation to local community engagement. I also consider how the intensified commodification of time in liquid modernity has shaped volunteering and people's attitudes towards giving their time for free.

A brief note about the research

The research on which this paper draws was carried out for my PhD, and the fieldwork took place from 2008-2009. The project was an ethnographic case study of a neighbourhood in Leeds – 'North Woods' – and involved 24 in-depth interviews with local residents and stakeholders; ethnographic activities including observation, shadowing and participant observation; in-depth historical research of the local area using a range of sources including official documents, local newspaper archives and academic literature; and secondary analysis of neighbourhood statistics. The aim of the research was to uncover what constrains, enables and provokes community

participation, defined as formal and informal activities concerned with tackling local issues and providing support as well as social engagement amongst local residents. This involved looking at a wide range of activities including, for example, volunteering; informal care; engagement with local agencies such as housing organisations and the police; grassroots activism; relationships amongst local residents; and involvement in decision making bodies.

From synchronicity to fragmentation

In my analysis, I was concerned to develop a collective account of how key changes in the worlds of work, housing, leisure and welfare had impacted upon the social landscape of the case study area, and consequently upon modes and domains of formalised and informal engagement within the neighbourhood. I suggested that, to some extent, the historically 'close-knit' nature of the local neighbourhood, and the tendency for residents to participate in local activities, had rested upon a particular socioeconomic context which produced relatively predictable, shared activities and experiences. Until the 1970s and 1980s, a large majority of residents of the North Woods area worked in key local workplaces, in particular in one site of heavy industry located nearby. Participants described their involvement in activities such as the pigeon racing club; rugby matches; bonfire parties; and church fetes; in which local people (particularly women) played a central role in organising and facilitating.

Participants also discussed how shared timetables of paid and unpaid work, such as wash days, pay days and shopping trips, led to shared activities and experiences and further facilitated social interaction:

...there used to be a pub called the Wood Green. And we all used to go in there when we'd finished work, especially on a Friday when we got paid.

Regular meetings and interactions within the local neighbourhood enabled important information sharing between local people, which contributed to informal modes of regulating behaviour:

When people came to do their shopping, they all stood and talked, and everybody would discuss things with them. It'd be, 'Oh, and have you heard so-and-so and so-and-so?' 'Right, we'll put a stop to that.'

In contrast, the liquid modern 'timescape' (Adam 2001) can be said to be characterised by a lack of synchronicity, in part due to the increasingly flexible work patterns demanded by the contemporary economy (Lash & Urry 1994), as well as a result of technology. Within this context, solid modernity's 'clock time' has "given way to a fragmented temporality" (Lardner 2009: 285), creating a contemporary experience of time as a kind of "disembedded electronic 'constant present'" (Ellison 2013: 13). Work time is also less uniform, leading to increased levels of changeability and unpredictability in people's activities:

...the personal timetables of people are now able to diverge to a much greater extent than previously and, in turn, this means that the uses of particular spaces at particular times has become less and less predictable (Glennie & Thrift 1996: 281)

Further, there has been a blurring of the boundaries between 'leisure time' and work time., and for many people it is increasingly difficult to disengage from work, whether due to the rise of working from home or the sense that

the use of mobile devices "intensifies collective expectations of their availability, escalating their engagement and thus reducing their ability to disconnect from work" (Mazmanian et al. 2013: 1). Further, the increase in the numbers of women entering paid work has placed greater demands upon households in terms of coordinating domestic and paid labour (Gershuny 2005).

Such ideas about the apparent diminishment of predictability and synchronicity in liquid modernity were reflected in participants' accounts of their difficulty in coordinating social activities. Several people suggested that their irregular use of particular spaces such as local shops meant regular casual encounters – important for the development of familiarity with other local residents – a rare occurrence. Whilst strong networks of family and friendship do still exist to some extent within the case study area, there has clearly been a degree of social fragmentation over time, and a decline in the kinds of formal and informal engagement discussed briefly above. The disappearance of local, shared workplaces, and increasing levels of unemployment amongst local residents, undermined shared social activities and the informal relationships which underpinned them, as did the more general 'emptying' out of the neighbourhood, in which local shops, pubs and the local dancehall gradually closed down. Other contributory factors included changes to housing policy, and an increased transiency amongst the population. During the mid-1990s, several of the older (by then retired) residents who had been involved in numerous volunteering and social activities over the years had come together to form a community association to act on behalf of the local community and to try to address some of the problems facing residents. Whilst they had been successful in achieving many of their aims, at the



time of my research the association was in decline, with none of the younger residents coming forward to take the place of the existing volunteers.

Who has time, and what is it worth?

When the participants spoke about their lack of local engagement, many drew reference to time in different ways. Many spoke about their sense of having limited time to spare, and being unwilling or unable to give what time they had to voluntary activities. Frequently, people suggested that they tended to prioritise 'quality time' with their families. The shaping of available time occurs in part through responsibilities such as paid employment, domestic work and informal care. Consequently, it is influenced by the broader socioeconomic context, as well as by factors such as gender and age, with amounts of free time varying over people's lifetimes as their circumstances and responsibilities evolve, and factors such as income also have an important influence. Whilst conventional wisdom would seem to suggest that people's leisure time is increasingly constrained, measurements of free time through time usage statistics show very little change in the amounts of time available for leisure or spent on domestic labour over recent decades (Sullivan & Gershuny 2001). However, such statistical data tends to measure time in an abstract sense, rather than as 'lived time' (Giddens 1981), and in fact people do tend to perceive themselves as increasingly pressured in terms of time because of important changes in how our timescapes are shaped.

Just like other resources, available time is unequally distributed amongst different groups, and *"the degree of time over which one has discretionary control becomes an index for ranking and distinguishing various kinds of work, class and*

occupation" (Appadurai 1996:79). People are more or less constrained in their choices about how to spend time, based on their general stock of resources. For example, whereas a lone parent may face a *"trade-off between time poverty and income poverty"* to increase their free time (Burchardt 2010: 319), more affluent households are able to buy services such as domestic help to free up time, or to restrict their working hours without creating financial difficulties. A focus on *individual* stocks of time also may be misleading as:

...the time squeeze is largely a family-level phenomenon...[because] workers are increasingly married to other workers. The fact that the family work week has increased means

that the time available for other activities in the family has decreased. (Clarkberg & Merola in Moen 2003: 36)

In particular, dual earners and single parents would seem to experience particular time pressure (Sullivan & Gershuny 2001).

The data from my research confirmed that family responsibilities have a significant impact on people's available time, and their inclination to spend this time in voluntary activities. Participants spoke about lacking available time to participate in activities due to domestic responsibilities, with particular reference made to childcare. This would appear to have been an issue historically, as well, for example research on voluntary association committee membership during the 1950s in Oxfordshire, shows that most committee members were aged between 40 and 60, because younger people *"were too occupied with rearing families and were therefore unable to participate in committee work"* (Golby 1994: 209). Indeed, any role involving informal care provision to friends and family would tend to limit

the time available for volunteering. Participants in my own research stated that their voluntary engagement evolved over their lifetime as a result of changes in their family circumstances as well as changing patterns of paid work.

For example, three participants, who at the time of the research were regular volunteers, spoke about becoming increasingly involved in voluntary activities after their children started attending school. Another spoke about starting to volunteer more frequently after her husband had died, and of how she fitted in her voluntary work with her domestic life:

I used to work at Oxfam, two afternoons a week. And to be quite honest that was as much as my husband was going to allow me to do (laughs). Maria, the manageress, she used to say she was aware of that. And, erm...of course we were never apart, and we had worked together and – we did everything together, you know. But he knew I enjoyed working at Oxfam, so he put up with it. But he didn't like it. And of course when we got home, he would say "I missed you", and I'd say "I know". Erm...then he took ill, he was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, so I left Oxfam right away, because I thought...you know, this is where I want to be. I don't want to be away from him.

Two mothers of younger children, who were not involved in any volunteering but were in paid work, both spoke about how their parental responsibilities limited the amount of time they feel they have available for volunteering. However, some younger mothers who were not at the time in paid work volunteered at the local school, which enabled them to spend time with their children, as well as fitting in with childcare responsibilities.

Interestingly, some groups, whilst having a great deal of spare time, are less likely to get involved in voluntary activities than others who have less

time. For example, unemployed people are less likely to engage in volunteering than part-time workers. As many of the participants who were active volunteers in my research spoke about the skills they had brought to their volunteer roles from paid employment, such as handling money and writing letters, it could be suggested that those who lack experience of paid employment might lack certain useful skills to offer as volunteers. It would also seem that people's perception of what they have to offer, or what a volunteer role might require of them, influences their choice of whether or not to volunteer. Several participants made reference to their apprehension that they "*might not know what to do*" in certain roles within the community association, for example. Because of the contingency of the value of time on other resources such as status, skills and knowledge, certain people's time is seen to be worth less than others', for example "*the time of children and the elderly, the time of mothers and fathers and of those who care for spouses in the home...[and] the time of prisoners*" (Adam 2003: 66). Evidence from my research showed that a surfeit of time is frequently accorded a low value, for example one participant spoke about the active local volunteers as being those "*with a lot of time on their hands*", namely older retired people, and volunteering was spoken about by one participant as "*an old biddy's job*". Usually volunteering in general was associated with older people, as something which "*gives the older end something to do*". There was a sense that volunteering provided an opportunity for these people to occupy their time, as well as the chance for them to interfere in the affairs of other local

people. Participants spoke about the free time of younger people – particularly young men – rather differently, relating this to the idea that *“the devil makes work for idle hands”*.

Whilst volunteering (as will be discussed) sometimes offers opportunities to learn useful skills, the capacity of organisations to offer this is differentiated according to the size of the organisation and the resources for training to which it might have access. Due to the pressure on third sector organisations to become increasingly professionalised, there would appear to be a greater requirement for employees to acquire formal qualifications than has previously been the case (Ockenden et al. 2009). Therefore, it is perhaps more difficult for people who lack formal qualifications to become involved in certain roles, particularly those with greater responsibility. Further, changes in the nature of third sector organisation relating to their increased role in service delivery would seem to alter the kinds of skills and responsibilities required by participants.

Volunteering and the idea that ‘time is money’

As unpaid work, volunteering can be understood as entailing by definition no reciprocity or material reward, or, as one participant put it *“You don’t get owt out of it...there’s no financial gain”*. However, whilst volunteering does not entail direct payment for work performed it is useful to understand motivations for volunteering as existing along a continuum *“from altruism to self-enhancement”* (Richard & Konstantinos 2011:1), meaning that volunteers do often benefit, to some degree, from their volunteering role. Whilst the idea that ‘time is money’ seems at odds with voluntarism, it is interesting to note that volunteers’ time is

increasingly represented in economic terms, for example through estimations of the monetary value of volunteer time. For example, NCVO estimate that *“volunteering is worth £23.1bn annually to the UK economy”* (NCVO 2012: 3), whilst the value of informal care is estimated at £119 billion

(Yeandle & Buckner 2011). However, research has suggested that a heightened awareness of the economic value of time appears to make people less likely to donate their time for free in formal voluntary activities, meaning that such efforts might be counterproductive (DeVoe and Pfeffer 2007).

Participants in my research made reference to the idea that time is money, with one – talking about his wife’s activities at the local school – saying that, as she was there so frequently *“she should be getting a salary”*. To some extent this comment highlights the tensions that can emerge from volunteers working regularly alongside paid workers, and the implications which can be drawn about the relative worth of each person’s time, but it also illustrates the idea that we are accustomed to think that *“time costs money and time makes money”* (Adam 2003: 65). Amongst my research participants, younger people (those under 40) were perceived to be less likely to volunteer than older generations, which was interpreted as them not wanting to do *“something for nothing”* and feeling they should be paid:

People won’t do anything for nothing...they want paying for it. This one woman, she said “Why should I put what I know into something there, when I had to pay to learn it? Why would I give it to you for nothing?” And it’s...you know, it’s a horrible remark, isn’t it?

Another participant, when discussing the work of the volunteers at the local community centre, expressed

admiration for them as “not many people would do it for free”.

However, it would seem that volunteering increasingly entails some form of reciprocity. For example, alongside more established forms of volunteering, there has been a growing trend in the rise of time banks as a way of facilitating and encouraging greater levels of volunteering. Tied closely to a marketised model of commodified time, they enable the gift of volunteer time to be reciprocated by or traded for the time of another:

For every hour participants ‘deposit’ in a timebank, perhaps by giving practical help and support to others, they are able to ‘withdraw’ equivalent support in time when they themselves are in need. In each case the participant decides what they can offer. (Timebanking UK 2013)

Such schemes are similar to initiatives like LETS which enable the exchange of skills, goods or support amongst members. What they would appear to demonstrate is a move towards providing rewards and/or incentives for volunteers to give their time, and for an increasing sense of volunteering in this sense as forming part of a formal framework for facilitating localised systems of co-operation amongst individuals. They also point to the deep entrenchment of economic language in everyday life, and the incorporation of voluntary activity into economic frameworks.

Voluntary activities are also used as a means of adding value to corporations, with employee volunteering – as an element of Corporate Social Responsibility activities - used by companies as a means of enhancing their own reputation, as well as positively contributing to staff morale and recruitment:

Benefits include positive effects on brand value and reputation, and the bringing to life of corporate values. Employee volunteering builds networks through collaboration with other businesses, engages companies and suppliers and can increase a company’s chances in tendering processes (Business in the Community website 2013)

In this sense, there can be said to be a ‘business case’ for employee volunteering schemes, demonstrating another way in which volunteering is used as an exploitable resource for creating economic gain.

The gift of time through volunteering

Participants in my research who were active volunteers, acting as trustees of the local community association as well as spending most days staffing the local community centre, emphasised the personal cost – in terms of time - of their voluntary roles:

It’s all meetings sometimes, and you feel that, you know, you haven’t got any time to yourself

Increasingly in the voluntary and community sector, good practice in volunteer management is seen to involve ensuring that they are not given too great a workload or commitment, that their experience is as far as possible positive, and that they do not have to meet any out-of-pocket expenses incurred from travel or subsistence costs. It is generally seen as important to ensure that volunteers feel valued, are provided with appropriate support, and are matched to appropriate roles. In practice, this can be difficult, as it relies on the capacity of organisations to provide support to volunteers, which is not always the case in smaller community organisations. Further, the trend towards commissioning and procurement of services from VCF organisations, and

reductions in funding elsewhere in the sector, means that the volunteer workforce often plays a key role in the day-to-day running of organisations involved in service delivery. Hence in some sense, cost cutting in the public sector relies upon the unpaid work of volunteers in the voluntary and community sector.

Only rarely did the research participants speak

about having purely altruistic motives for volunteering. Often, they found it difficult to articulate their motivation, drawing on perceptions of their own personality, for example one said *“we just felt like organisers”*. Equally, others find it difficult to explain why they do it, with one suggesting that the local community centre volunteers were *“off their heads”*. The idea expressed by some of the participants that they *“wanted to put something back”* into their local community implies to some extent a sense of reciprocity for something from which they have already benefited. It also was clear that people often chose voluntary activities that resonated with their own interests. For example, one participant discussed her voluntary work at the local children’s centre and school, but suggested she would be less inclined to get involved in housing related groups such as the tenants’ association because it *“wouldn’t be that interesting...it wouldn’t be for me”*. Similarly, another participant stated that she enjoyed volunteering, saying *“You’d have to, or else you wouldn’t do it”*.

Volunteering also plays a growing role in the world of work, promoted as a means of sampling different kinds of employment, and of building employability, in particular for young people. A small number of the participants involved in my research were engaged in volunteering for this reason, and working

towards qualifications in their volunteer role which would enable them to acquire paid work in their field of interest. Volunteering is also seen to be a useful way of ‘socialising’ the unemployed into the world of work, or providing opportunities for training. Of course, voluntary work in this context can be broadened out to include unpaid internships and work experience programmes. Again, the trade-offs which can be involved in giving free time to voluntary work is demonstrated by controversies over the fact that it is generally more affluent young people who can afford to take up unpaid internships to acquire experience in their field of choice. Mandatory work schemes introduced by the current government have also raised questions around the legalities and desirability of making volunteering compulsory, or forcing benefits claimants to work for their benefits on what works out as much less than the minimum wage. The growing trend for unpaid work, alongside ‘flexible’ modes of employment such as zero-hours contracts, further demonstrates the precariousness of work in the contemporary era, and highlights the differences in how the worth of different people’s time is calculated.

Conclusion

The intention here has been to demonstrate how changes in perceptions and experiences of time which have occurred in the transition from solid to liquid modernity have impacted upon collective engagement on a neighbourhood level. In particular, I have highlighted changes in the demarcation of work and leisure time, and the desynchronising of individual timescapes both within and between households, and suggested that these factors undermine the relationships and interactions which underpinned geographical community in the past. Such changes are part of more general shifts in liquid modernity away from routinised time and

continuity of experience, occupation and habitation towards flexibility and unpredictability, and the individualisation associated with consumerism (Bauman 2000). I have suggested that such fragmentation of people's time affects their ability and willingness to engage in voluntary activity, and to coordinate their work and leisure activities. It would also seem that – in response to the commodification of time in liquid modernity – there have been important changes in the practice of volunteering, and in terms of how it is understood and experienced. Volunteering appears to have been co-opted as part of a neoliberal agenda to marketise, and to recast in economic terms, activities which previously lay outside of the world of economic exchange. At the same time, it is precisely those changes associated with the neoliberal agenda which have undermined the traditional basis of voluntary action.



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“I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all”

Zygmunt Bauman

Founded in September 2010 in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, the Bauman Institute is an international research and teaching centre dedicated to analyzing major social change around the world at a time of social, economic and environmental crises.

Inspired by the sociological imagination of Leeds' Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Zygmunt Bauman, our primary aim is to conduct world-leading research and teaching in the areas of consumerism and money, power and ethics, new technologies, and social sustainability within what Bauman has termed the age of 'liquid modernity'.

We are also concerned with the on-going interpretation of Bauman's writing and the importance of his sociology for driving innovative ways of understanding and potentially transforming contemporary social life in order to create fairer and more sustainable societies for all.

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Think Pieces

These publications by the Bauman Institute are intended to communicate our research and teaching output in an interesting and accessible format. The hope is that each Think Piece will help to stimulate debate in our main areas of interest, mindful of Professor Bauman's advice never to refrain from questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our everyday life.



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