

Review: One step forward and two steps backward? Towards a theory of voluntary action

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Dekker, P., and Halman, L. (2003), *The values of volunteering: cross-cultural perspectives*, New York, Boston, Dordrecht, London, Moscow: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.


Milligan, C., and Conradson, D. (2006), *Landscapes of voluntarism: new spaces of health, welfare and governance*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Smith, D., Stebbins, R., and Dover, M. (2006), *A dictionary of nonprofit terms and concepts*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Every one of us who is engaged in the study of voluntary action owes a considerable debt of gratitude to the veteran American scholar David Horton Smith. As well as his monumental and irreplaceable book on *Grassroots Associations* (Smith, 2000), a stream of articles and essays has flowed from his pen over the past forty years. But, important as it is, his publications record may be less significant than his achievements in developing the whole field of research in non-profit and voluntary sector organisations and voluntary action by founding the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (now ARNOVA) in 1971 and the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* (now the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*), which he edited for the first five years of its life.

It is entirely consistent with his concern for the field as a whole rather than his own work that, in 1972, he set out on what many of us would see as the quixotic enterprise of laying the foundations for the development of 'a general theory of the nonprofit sector'. He saw the task as 'bringing together the parts of some thirty different fields, disciplines and professions into a new field and association' (Smith et al, 2006:ix). This involved 'identifying the terms most frequently used in those existing fields for the common phenomena of associations, volunteering, the nonprofit sector and voluntary action, broadly conceived' (*ibid*).

More than thirty years later Smith remains convinced of the need for a general theory – the lack of one, he argues, is a 'critical weakness of this field' (*op cit*, p.1). And he is still pursuing this aim by concentrating on 'the terms and concepts that have been found useful in past research and theory' and giving them 'clear, consistent definitions'




(*ibid*). The most recent product of this approach is *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* in which Smith and his co-authors, Robert A. Stebbins and Michael A. Dover, set out to provide us with 'a definition of the interdisciplinary, interprofessional field of nonprofit and voluntary action studies' (*ibid*).

During the past three decades there have been some notable contributions to the development of theories of voluntary action, but they have tended to illuminate single aspects or dimensions of the field rather than enable us to build a general theory. The exception to this is the pioneering work of David Billis (1992), whose theory of the voluntary sector is based on the idea of three unambiguous social 'worlds' which provide different means of addressing social need: the personal world of family and friends; the associational world of membership organisations; and the bureaucratic world of corporate entities and statutory agencies. By locating voluntary agencies in an ambiguous area where the associational and bureaucratic worlds overlap, Billis provides us with the means of understanding the distinctive nature of these hybrid organisations and the complex challenges involved in managing them. Similarly, less formal voluntary action can be explained by locating it in another ambiguous zone, this time formed by an overlap of the associational and personal worlds.

Other significant contributions have tended to focus on understanding some but not all of the range of organisations mapped by Billis. The bold concept of the Commons developed by Roger Lohmann (1992) is coterminous with Billis's world of associations, where other theoretical perspectives have been contributed by Margaret Harris (1998) and David Horton Smith himself (2000). The field of self-help and mutual aid groups has received similarly authoritative and encyclopaedic treatment by Thomasina Borkman (1999). Volunteering – essential voluntary action by individuals – has also been the subject of important theoretical work by, among others, Ram Cnaan and his colleagues (Cnaan and Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan *et al*; 1996) and one of the co-authors of the *Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Stebbins, 1996; Stebbins and Graham, 2004); an attempt to synthesise theories and concepts of volunteering has been made by Rochester (2006). And an important new review of the literature of philanthropy (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2007) has provided an overview of another key area of study.

Billis aside, the development of theory about voluntary and non-profit sector agencies has on the whole focused on specific aspects of their organisation and management, such as governance and accountability (see, for example, Cornforth, 2002; Leat, 1996). It is arguable that this lack of general theory-building is due to three interrelated factors. The first is that undue attention has been given to the biggest organisations in the field, which constitute a small number of the whole but are a minority which disposes of the great majority of the field's income and employs most of its staff. This bias tends to reflect the early hegemony in US (and cross-national) studies of the non-profit sector exercised by economists whose focus was on measuring the scale of the sector and on trying to account for the existence of non-profit forms within a market economy. And thirdly, there has been the problem of the 'sector'. A great deal of time and effort has been given over to attempts to define what is an artificial construct invented simultaneously in the UK and the US. As a result, mapping borders has been seen as more important than understanding the variety and diversity of voluntary action.




So, we have some important theories about parts of the field but we don't have a general theory. How far do Smith and his colleagues help us to make good that deficiency? The book starts promisingly by grouping key concepts identified by searching the literature into ten 'meaningful sets' (p. 1). The first of these comprises an overarching set of thirty-four general concepts 'relevant to any researcher in the field', while the other nine relate to more specific areas of the field of non-profit and voluntary action studies.

The general set of concepts runs from Altruism and Association to Volunteer Administration and Volunteerism by way of Citizen Participation, Civil Society, Grassroots Association, Leisure Activity, Nonprofit Management, Self-help Group and Social Movement. The nine specific sets of concepts are focused respectively on Nonprofit Political Activity (consisting of thirty-five terms), Associations (thirty-four), Volunteers (twenty-seven), Philanthropy (thirty-one), Nonprofit Management (twenty-three), Volunteer Administration (eighteen), Leisure (twenty-seven), Religion (thirty-one) and the Law (thirty-one terms).

The authors point out that these collections or sets of concepts are not mutually exclusive: 'some terms or concepts find their way into two or more clusters, especially the first cluster and some other cluster' (p. 6). Nor do they claim the lists to be comprehensive: 'scholars with different interests could undoubtedly add more terms to these sets ... and possibly even add an additional set or two of their own' (*ibid*). They represent, however, a serious attempt to describe and classify a complex body of knowledge and field of study.

As such, the framework could make a major contribution to the development of a general theory if put to use and subjected to further examination and testing. Infuriatingly, however, after briefly discussing the perspective that underpins it, the book quite abruptly abandons the conceptual framework and becomes an alphabetical dictionary or glossary which offers definitions of all the 290 terms it has introduced so far plus another 900 or so. In the process we lose sight of the bigger picture, as we are presented with a gazetteer rather than the map of the field we really need. The choice of a dictionary as the preferred form of reference work means that the authors have missed the opportunity to create a thesaurus – to use the framework they have identified to provide a means of classifying words and phrases 'according to underlying concepts and meanings' (Kirkpatrick, 1988: ix) in order 'to help writers and speakers clarify and shape an idea they wish to convey and which it is difficult to capture or to express clearly' (*loc cit*, vii).

Alternatively, rather than Roget they might have taken Dewey as their model. Just as Roget's system of verbal classification has stood the test of time since it first appeared in 1852, so too has Dewey's decimal system of classifying knowledge, developed in the 1870s, provided the means of organising library collections ever since. Smith and his fellow authors' framework resembles both the six main classes and 990 subheads used by Roget and the ten classes and hundred subdivisions developed by Dewey, but it has not been put to the same use.




And, in any case, the dictionary's attempt 'to help us move toward commonly held definitions in nonprofit sector research within and across nations and languages' (p. 10) is flawed. In what is no doubt an attempt to be comprehensive, the glossary contains a number of terms whose relevance to the field of study is obscure. The very first entry, for example, defines 'absolute monarchy', which may at a pinch describe the style of some voluntary sector managers but is not a term in daily use. And the book remains somewhat parochial in its use of terms and with respect to the range of sources on which it draws. Overall, the *Dictionary* fails to meet the expectations raised in its opening chapter and has to be seen as a missed opportunity to build on its initial insights.

Evidence both of the absence of an overarching theoretical framework for the study of voluntary action and of the need for a conceptual map of the field is provided by two significant collections of essays published in the past few years (Milligan and Conradson, 2006; Dekker and Halman, 2003). The first of these – *Landscapes of Voluntarism* – provides us with a wealth of material and some important new perspectives on voluntary action, health, welfare and governance. It is a volume that will take its place not only in the university library but also on the shelves of many individual researchers (including the author of this review).

Like all edited collections, however, *Landscapes of Voluntarism* suffers from unevenness of quality and inconsistency in its focus and tone. This is exacerbated by the heterogeneity of the subject matter, which encompasses welfare provision in five different countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US and the UK), considers a wide range of locations (urban and rural, national and local) and focuses on some very different aspects of voluntarism and welfare: from the voluntary sector as a whole (Macmillan and Townsend), mental health, primary care and public health (Barnett and Barnett) to counselling (Bondi) and charity shops (Parsons).

The thread that links the collection together is provided by the academic discipline of geography. The editors rightly point to the increasing contribution made by geographers to non-profit and voluntary sector scholarship, and highlight the importance of the concept of the shadow state developed by Jennifer Wolch (1990), who has contributed a foreword to *Landscapes of Voluntarism*. The authors of the individual chapters are either geographers or have adapted and applied approaches developed by geographers. Their contribution represents 'new and innovative work by researchers working ... in states where issues of voluntarism and participation have become increasingly important for the development and delivery of social welfare policy' (p. 7). Their concern is with the 'unfolding landscapes' of 'how and where voluntary actors are involved in ... planning and provision' and 'an examination of ... new forms of governance' and they are also interested in 'the organisational spaces of individual voluntary organisations' (*ibid*).

The aim of the book as a whole is to demonstrate the nature and value of the perspective that geography can bring to the study of voluntary action in the general field of health and welfare. It is intended to provide the evidence to support the editors' view that 'this scholarship has a significant part to play in advancing the social



scientific understanding of voluntarism' (p. 291). This is more easily accomplished in specific contributions rather than from a more general reading of the book as a whole. The editors themselves describe previous work on voluntarism by geographers as 'disparate' (p. 5) and point to the 'heterogeneity' of the discipline itself (p. 286). As a result, it is difficult to capture the essence of what geography brings to the party beyond the very broad brush of a valuable and often overlooked need to give proper consideration to the important of 'place' in shaping the manifestation of voluntary action.

The heterogeneity of the discipline is probably only part of the difficulty involved in identifying with any precision the contribution that geography can make to voluntary sector studies. The nature of the field itself – and our lack of a shared conceptual map of its boundaries and major features – is of equal importance. The extent to which the authors of individual chapters are aware of major contributions to the literature of the field varies considerably, as does their ability to engage with it in framing and reflecting on their own work. This may be due in large part to the lack of a general theoretical framework to provide a guide through the literature of the field.

As a result, *Landscapes of Voluntarism* resembles a well-stocked store cupboard: it is full of nourishing ingredients but you need to bring your own recipe with you if you are to make the best use of its contents.

The second of these two important edited collections – *The Values of Volunteering* – fits quite comfortably into the framework developed by Smith and his colleagues, concentrating as it does on volunteering. But, even in an area where important ground-breaking work by Cnaan and his colleagues (Cnaan and Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan *et al*, 1996) has provided a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the phenomenon of volunteering, there is a theory deficit: in their introductory chapter Dekker and Halman suggest that the contents of their book 'make clear that there is still much to do in order to gain a better understanding of volunteering both as regards its variation across cultures and in terms of its diverse meanings and functions for the individual. Present research on volunteering is highly fragmented and often too one-sidedly focused on policy questions' (p. 16).

The unifying theme of this collection seems to be not so much the 'values' of volunteering, as highlighted in the title, but the 'cross-cultural perspectives' of its sub-title. Four of the chapters are based on explicitly transnational or cross-cultural concerns. No fewer than nine authors, led by Luca Meijs, discuss perceptions of volunteering in eight countries using the definitional framework developed by Cnaan and his colleagues (*op cit*) and report that, while there was significant agreement at each end of the volunteering spectrum, there were also some interesting divergences and that there is a need for further refinement of the approach. The next two chapters draw on the rich quantitative data of the European Values and World Values studies. Virginia Hopkinson looks at the rates of volunteering globally and offers some hypotheses to explain the variations between countries, while Ronald Inglehart charts the changing nature of people's engagement as volunteers in a time of cultural shifts. Finally, Salamon and Sokolowski use data from the Johns Hopkins study to

identify different patterns of volunteering in different countries and seek to explain the variations.

The next five chapters focus on specific geographical locations, looking at different perspectives in Canada, Mexico, Romania, Norway and the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe. While each of these chapters has different starting points, Wolleboek and Selle's account of changes in the associational make-up of Norway's voluntary and community sector brought about by differences between generations seems to me to make their contribution qualitatively different from the others in this section and a bridge into the final two chapters, which appear to have strayed in from another book altogether. Here the emphasis has shifted from a holistic view of volunteering to a sharp focus on volunteering as *participation*. Halman looks for, and doesn't find, a mutual connection between volunteering and democracy, while in the intriguingly entitled 'Cultivating apathy in voluntary associations', Nina Eliasoph draws on ethnographic studies to challenge the widespread belief that participation in associations broadens citizens' horizons and encourages their involvement in political activity.

Wisely, perhaps, and unlike Milligan and Conradson, Dekker and Halman do not provide us with a concluding chapter. They do not try to draw together the common themes underpinning the connection or to sketch out an agenda for future research. This is a little ironic, because it would have been a less challenging task than that faced by the editors of *Landscapes of Voluntarism*. The scope of the subject matter of *The Values of Volunteering* is comparatively narrow and the variety of perspectives among its contributors more easily aligned.

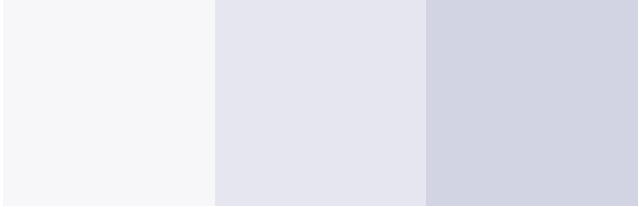
The lack of a conclusion of this kind may well be evidence of two related factors. The first is that – with a few exceptions – those of us who study voluntary action are either not interested enough in the development of theory at more than a very parochial level or lack the courage to risk failure by attempting it. And the second is that the task is so very challenging: we need to develop more or less simultaneously both the overall framework or conceptual map and each of the different elements of which it needs to be composed. David Horton Smith and his colleagues may have failed to satisfy the expectations raised in the opening chapter of *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts*, but the need for a new generation of scholars to take on Smith's mantle is clear and compelling.

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