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**TAKING SUBJECTIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY SERIOUSLY:
IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM FOR RESEARCHING
VOLUNTEER MOTIVATION**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contributions a social constructionist paradigm can make to researching volunteer motivation, by reflecting on an active membership study of volunteer netball coaches at a New Zealand high school. Social constructionism is based on philosophical assumptions which differ from those of positivism and post-positivism, the dominant paradigms for understanding and representing volunteer motivation. It highlights the social processes through which people give meaning to their motives and views researchers as necessarily implicated in this meaning-making process. Through a critique of the extant literature on volunteer motivation and an illustration of the insights of social constructionism from our empirical study, we consider how our research could be different if we took subjectivity and reflexivity more seriously.

Keywords: volunteer research, motivation, social constructionism, sport, youth

Introduction

It is often said that the success of non-profit organizations is highly dependent on the ability to attract, develop and retain the services of people who “willingly give time or work for good or welfare of others without expectations of compensation or reward” (Mannino et al., 2011, p.128). For this reason, the study of volunteers and their motives has been a longstanding interest for researchers seeking to unlock the ‘holy grail’ of motivation. If we can better understand what motivates volunteers, the belief is that Third Sector organizations can develop a volunteering experience that provides a good fit with those motives, thereby generating high levels of performance and commitment (Bassous, 2015; Bidee et al., 2013, Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Musick and Wilson, 2008; Smith 1994).

Underpinning most research on volunteer motivation is a belief in the existence of a ‘real world’ that we can generate objective knowledge of through scientific research. This knowledge is seen as being generalizable across contexts and can form the basis of predictions about the future (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). Scientific studies of volunteers are seen as producing useful, practical knowledge for Third Sector organizations and understandably, these organizations are often willing to invest in funding such research.

Our observation is that while research on volunteer motivation is characterized by a high level of conceptual and methodological sophistication, comparatively little attention has been given to discussing the philosophical beliefs or assumptions that underpin the field. This is characteristic of knowledge communities generally, which, in striving to maintain and grow their legitimacy, often operate in isolation, rarely

engaging in debate with radically competing views, thereby limiting theoretical and methodological innovation and creativity (Amin and Roberts, 2008; Gergen, 1997; Hibbert et al., 2014; Van Maanen, 1998). This means that as individual researchers we are generally comfortable when discussing our research topic and methods, but far less comfortable when asked to reflect on our philosophical approach (Willmott, 2014).

At the risk of over-simplifying what is a complex topic, our objective in this paper is to explore how our paradigm assumptions shape the knowledge that is generated about volunteer motivation in the Third Sector. We do so by locating ourselves within social constructionism, which we believe has received insufficient attention in this literature. The roots of social constructionism can be traced to Kuhn's (1962) theory of scientific paradigms and to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. More recent theoretical developments have been led by Kenneth Gergen (1985, 1999, 2001, 2009). Social constructionism has gained a foothold by offering a significant challenge to conventional psychological understandings. It is concerned with examining the processes by which people describe and explain their place in the world, positing a "radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world" (Gergen, 1985, p.267). Social constructionism challenges assumptions about truth, neutrality and objectivity, as well as the primacy of the individual as the unit of analysis for generating knowledge.

In this paper we explore the potential contributions of social constructionism through a study of a volunteer netball coaching programme at a New Zealand high school^a. Our intention is to draw on aspects of the study – its 'findings' but also the way we

went about conceptualizing and undertaking the research, to illustrate what a constructionist worldview can offer the field of volunteer motivation.

We organize these contributions around the concepts of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reflexivity’ (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000; Cunliffe, 2003). Both refer to the idea that reality as we know it is constructed between people (i.e. intersubjectively) through meanings and understandings developed in particular contexts (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). We consider this observation both in relation to the participants in our empirical study, as well as ourselves as researchers. Specifically, the four contributions we identify are: understanding knowledge of volunteer motivation as a social construct which gives rise to action, giving emphasis to the social and cultural context within which volunteering takes place; attending to the social processes through which people give meaning to their motivation; and seeing researchers as co-constructors of volunteer motivation.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of the debate about paradigms in social science research. We then introduce functionalist theory, which has its origins in psychology and is a widely-used approach to the study of volunteer motivation. We critically review this theory from the paradigm of social constructionism and then outline some alternative approaches to functionalism, which are more attentive to understanding motivation as a social process. This review of other approaches is also a critical review, since we argue that while these researchers understand their research worlds as subjective, they have not been sufficiently reflexive about the subjectivity of their research practices. We conclude by considering the implications of our paper for the practice of researching volunteer

motivation.

A Brief Overview of Paradigms in Social Science

In thinking about how to position this paper for our audience, we assume that our readership is interested in discussions of research paradigms but not necessarily deeply immersed in those debates. In providing this brief introduction, we acknowledge that it is a simplification of the issues, but a simplification that is necessary for meeting the aims of the paper within the space available. We hope our contribution will stimulate further and deeper discussions on the pages of this journal.

A challenge of engaging with the literature on the philosophy of social science is the lack of consensus about the categories and terminology used. For the sake of clarity, we adopt the terminology and approach taken by Guba and Lincoln, who have written on the topic for more than 30 years (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; 1994; 2005; Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). Thus, we use the term ‘paradigm’ to describe a worldview comprising assumptions about the nature of that world, their place of people in it, and how knowledge of that world can be generated and understood – but note that elsewhere paradigms are referred to as ‘perspectives’ (e.g. Crotty, 1998).

There are also different labels given to the components of paradigms.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify three ‘levels’ of basic beliefs: ontology, epistemology, methodology; Crotty (1998) articulates four ‘elements’: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, method’; whilst Creswell (2007) has five ‘assumptions’: ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetorical, and methodological.

For Guba and Lincoln (1994) paradigm beliefs are best surfaced by asking three, interconnected questions: the ontological question – what is the nature of reality and what can be known about it?; the epistemological question – what is the nature of the relationship between the inquirer and what can be known?; and the methodological question – how can the inquirer go about finding out what can be known?

Positivism and post-positivism are based on the ontological belief in the existence of a single reality – a ‘real world’. In answer to the epistemological question, both paradigms value objectivity in the relationship between the researcher and the object of enquiry. In relation to methodology, both share a belief that the scientific method is the best route for developing generalizable knowledge that can form the basis of predictions about the future (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2011). There are important differences, however, between positivism and post-positivism. The latter assumes that full understanding of the truth and total objectivity might not be possible, and has a greater acceptance of qualitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Nevertheless, given the strong resemblance between positivism and post-positivism, we have decided – for the sake of clarity, and without wanting to deny the differences between them – to group them under the heading ‘positivism’.

Social constructionism has a different answer to Guba and Lincoln’s three questions. It adopts a relativist ontology – the belief that multiple realities exist, as local and specific shared, social constructions. The epistemological position is subjectivist, which assumes that knowledge is created in the interaction between the inquirer and

the inquired, which leads to a methodological approach that recognizes and allows for reflection on this interaction (Gergen 2001; 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011).

A recurring debate in the philosophy of social science concerns whether paradigms are oppositional or can be accommodated within a single conceptual framework. Again, we adopt the position of Guba and Lincoln, which has shifted over time, from a view that “the basic beliefs of the paradigms are believed to be essentially contradictory” (1994, p.116) to a “cautious” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p.117) acceptance that certain combinations of paradigms, such as positivism and post-positivism, are commensurable. However, Guba and Lincoln maintain a belief, which we share, that other combinations, such as positivism and constructionism remain incommensurable, because of their oppositional ontological and epistemological assumptions. It is possible to believe in a singular reality, or multiple realities, but it is difficult to mount a convincing claim, within a single conceptual framework, for the belief in both. We note that Crotty (1998) rejects this “necessary link” (p.10) between ontology and epistemology, arguing that “realism in ontology and constructionism in epistemology turn out to be quite compatible” (p.11), but this is not the position we adopt, and the intricacies of this debate are beyond the scope of this paper.

Having established the boundaries of our enquiry, and our treatment of terminology, we move now to an analysis of the literature on volunteer motivation.

Representing Volunteer Motivation through a Functionalist Lens

Psychological approaches to the study of volunteer motivation see volunteering as a “motivated phenomenon, propelled by motivational forces that lead individuals to

seek out volunteer activities” (Mannino et al., 2011, p.129). One dominant psychological approach, especially within the context of amateur sport volunteering, is functionalist theory (Amis and Silk, 2005; Busser and Carruthers, 2010; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Houle et al., 2005; Misener and Doherty, 2009; Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

Articles using functionalist perspective often begin with a narrative that whilst many people volunteer, many others do not – offering the promise that the ‘problem’ of non-volunteering can be reduced through a better understanding of what motivates volunteers (Stukas et al., 1999). Such an approach has clear practical implications for organizations faced with the challenge of attracting, retaining and developing volunteers (Cuskelly et al., 2006). A key principle of the functionalist approach is that people will seek out volunteering activities to satisfy certain motives. This ‘matching’ between the motives of the individual and the characteristics of the volunteer role is understood as informing the decision to volunteer (Clary et al., 1998; Omoto and Snyder, 2002). From this functionalist perspective, then, volunteers are cost-benefit maximizers, who make informed choices based on a rational assessment of their needs and goals, as well as the likelihood of the task being able to satisfy those needs and goals (Davis et al., 2003). The title of this journal *Voluntas* – from the Latin ‘volo’, to wish, is suggestive of this high level of agency.

This is not satisfaction narrowly defined as self-interest, however. Typically, functionalist studies find volunteer motivation as existing on a continuum between purely altruistic and purely self-serving motives, with most individuals reporting multiple motives (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Kim et al., 2010). The functionalist perspective also sees volunteer motives as dynamic – they can shift over

time, as people age and encounter different experiences. Motives can also differ between people in the same volunteering role for the same organization (Omoto and Snyder, 2002).

Within functionalist theory, inventories are used for “capturing and assessing the diverse motivations that individuals can and do have for volunteering” (Mannino et al., 2011, p.131). The most well-known inventory is the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), developed by Clary, Snyder and colleagues (Clary and Snyder, 1991; Clary et al., 1998; Snyder and Cantor, 1998). The VFI is divided into six functional motives: Values – the expression of altruistic values; Career – increasing job prospects; Social – developing and strengthening social ties; Understanding – opportunities to learn; Enhancement – building self-esteem; and Protective – escaping one’s problems, reducing guilt. Respondents to the questionnaire are presented with a list of 30 possible reasons for volunteering, with five reasons representative of each of the six factors, and asked to indicate how important each reason was for them in doing volunteer work. Adding to the appeal of functionalist studies is their large sample sizes, which aids reliability and validity which enables results to be generalized beyond the specific research context in which they were produced, making them of potential relevance to all in the sector, regardless of size, activity or location (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Small, 2009; Stukas et al., 1999).

From the worldview of social constructionism, functionalist theory is seen as just one way of producing knowledge to represent volunteer motivation. A central principle of social constructionism, as articulated by Gergen, is that our objects of study make no requirements about how we talk about and understand them. Objects “acquire their

meaning not from real-world referents but from their context of usage” (1985, p.267), within a tradition or community. For objects to be meaningful for members of a discipline, paradigm, or particular theoretical approach, a set of agreements is required. Examining these agreements is useful for gaining insight into how we come to understand objects, but perhaps more importantly, for creating opportunities to understand them differently, thereby spurring creativity and innovation.

The emphasis functionalist theory gives to rational choice is challenged by social constructionism. Rather than starting with the assumption that we are individuals who can come together to form relationships, it encourages us to see relatedness as fundamental to our existence (Gergen, 2009). That is, everything that happens in the world is a relational process and we should study it from that starting point. Even though volunteering generally takes place as a group activity, functionalist theory is very much focused the individual as the unit of analysis (Haski-Leventhal and Cnaan, 2009). As Wilson (2012, p.190) concludes: ‘few would deny that people’s behaviour is influenced by their social context, but this notion has taken a back seat to the idea that individual characteristics explain volunteer work.’”

Whilst the VFI does account for ‘social motives’, it understands these as possessed by individuals, as drivers that can propel individuals to enter into relationship, rather than acknowledging that such motives are the product of interactions between relational beings. In addition, the VFI defines social motives narrowly as the development and strengthening of social ties as it relates to the people close to the volunteer, such as friends and family. Underplayed is the broader societal expectations around volunteering. The functionalist literature deals with that by

creating a new category ‘mandatory volunteering’ (Stukas et al., 1999), such as when students are required to engage in forms of community service as a condition of their graduation from school. But ‘mandatory volunteering’ misses the grey areas between ‘free’ and ‘mandatory’ volunteering, where there might exist a shared understanding of volunteering as a cultural norm (McDonald and Warburton, 2003).

To achieve generalizable results, functionalist theory either ignores institutional influences or treats them as stable, with the organizational context of volunteering seldom explored in depth (Puffer and Meindl, 1995; Studer and von Schnurbein, 2013). For social constructionists this devaluing of context is problematic.

Constructionism adopts a relativist ontology – a belief that multiple, socially constructed realities exist, and that these are locally produced and specific to the persons who create them (Guba, 1990). So, while for positivists, context is a means to a generalizable end, for social constructionists, context is everything.

We have argued, thus far, that functionalist theory is a particular representation of volunteer motivation, based on a set of agreements in which motivation is understood as a “primal power capable of moving people to action” (Gergen, 1985, p.271). In offering our critique from the location of social constructionism, our intention is not to discount its worth to the volunteer field. It provides valuable insights, but like all paradigms, by focusing on certain aspects (the individual, rational cognitive processes) it diverts attention from other paradigms that offer different insights. It is to these alternatives that we now turn.

Alternative Approaches for Representing Volunteer Motivation

While the paradigms of positivism and post-positivism predominate in research on volunteer motivation, there is growing representation from different paradigms (Ganesh and McAllum, 2009). Our purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive overview, but to suggest that while this innovation is welcome, there is more that could be done to embrace the insights of social constructionism.

Rather than assuming that questionnaires such as the VFI provide a transparent window for viewing the already formed, inner worlds of respondents, attention can be focussed on the processes by which people give meaning to their 'motivation' (Silverman, 2013). Sivan (1986), for instance, encompasses both a consideration of the internal psychological functioning of the individual, context and cultural issues, as well as interpersonal relations that shape motivation. Liao-Troh and Dunn (1999) draw on Weick's (1979) notion of sense-making, a cognitive process through which individuals construct an understanding of their world, to examine managers' perceptions of volunteers' motivation. They conclude, contrary to earlier studies, that there was no significant difference in the attributions of volunteer motivation made by managers and volunteers. Kreutzer and Jager (2011) draw on the sense-making concept to show how the different perceptions of volunteers and paid staff about their organization's identity resulted in intra-organizational conflict.

There is no doubt that these studies acknowledge that volunteer motivation operates within a subjective domain. However, we have observed a tendency for studies such as these to treat "research worlds as social constructions, but not research practices" (Charmaz, 2008, p.398). The result is a one-sided exploration of the subjectivity of the researched, whilst the subjectivity of the researcher largely evades scrutiny. An

example is Grönlund's (2011) study of the ways in which volunteers experience and associate volunteering with their identities through an analysis of their life-stories. In outlining her theoretical approach of narrative identity, Grönlund highlights the always reflexive, subjective, value-laden construction of narrative yet the analysis of the data demonstrates no such self-awareness. Whilst she acknowledges, at the end of the paper in a discussion of limitations, that "the insights of the researcher are central" (p.871), these insights are never discussed. Furthermore, Grönlund states that "another researcher might have used different ways of analysis and arrived at different conclusions" (p.871), seemingly allowing an acknowledgement of subjectivity in the process of data analysis, but not data collection. The article concludes by cautioning against generalizing the results of the study, given there were based on 24 interviews – the implication being that generalization would be possible and appropriate if the sample had been significantly larger.

A more reflexive approach is adopted by McDonald and Warburton (2003) in their ethnographic study of a non-profit organization that involved three researchers in the field. Acknowledging that each would have their own interpretation of the data, the researchers presented and defended their coding in "critical dialogue" (p.386). The aim was to ensure, as far as possible, that "the interpretations of the observations were held in common, exterior to the subjective interpretations of the researchers" (p.386). So, whilst there is some recognition of subjectivity and reflexivity, there remains an assumption that in 'high quality' research such influences can and should be eradicated. While this is a common and pragmatic response to the dominant "discursive boundary" (Jacques, 1996, p.19) of science and the scientific method, such trade-offs can result in confused philosophical commitments, producing studies

that will never meet the standards of scientific inquiry, nor are consistent with the beliefs and values underpinning non-positivist paradigms.

We are supportive of the diverse range of alternatives for examining volunteering and volunteer motivation as a process. In particular, we are encouraged by studies that problematize “the dominant assumption in the literature on volunteer work that it is undertaken primarily as a matter of individual choice” (O’Toole and Grey, 2015). However, we find it curious that even in studies that highlight the complexities of locally-produced, complex social relations that are not reducible to individual motivations to volunteer, there is relative silence on some valuable insights from social constructionism. In the remainder of the paper, we draw on our empirical study of volunteer netball coaches to illustrate these insights.

The Empirical Study

Our study took place at a girls-only high school based in New Zealand.^b It is a large school by New Zealand standards, with more than 1300 students, and more than 800 of those are involved in one or more of the 24 sports offered. The most popular of those is netball, the premier sport for women in New Zealand, with the national team second only to Australia in the number of world championship victories. At the school, more than 400 students play across more than 40 teams, most of which are coached by senior students in groups of two or three. Coaching is a considerable commitment – the season spans 22 weeks including the winter months and with matches played on a hard court, wet weather does not result in cancellation of games. Each coach is required to take their team for one training session per week and coach the team for one game on a Saturday. The student coaches are all volunteers – the

only formal reward being a certificate presented to each at a school assembly, although coaches who do three years receive an honours certificate at the annual formal sports awards evening. Typically, the demand for student coaches exceeds the supply of volunteers, however this trend has reversed in recent years, with more volunteers than available coaching positions. As a result, the school's sports coordinator has had to turn away inexperienced coaches and suggest that they coach at primary school level (ages 5-12) and return to the high school netball community when they are older. This increasing supply of student coaches got us thinking about volunteer motivation.

There were a range of reasons why we adopted social constructionism. We felt it could offer a novel contribution to the literature, but there were also more practical considerations. One of the researchers, Julie had a strong connection to the high school having previously volunteered in her final three years as a student. Throughout the study she was employed in a part time role of netball convenor at the school and she was also head coach of the school's premier netball team. Thus, an active membership methodology, in which researchers take part in the core activities of the group, was appropriate (Adler and Adler, 1987). Locating our study within a social constructionist paradigm was also appropriate, given Julie's deep understanding of the context would have made it difficult for her to adopt the position of the objective researcher desired by positivism and post-positivism. We knew that Julie's knowledge of the context would shape the findings of the study and we were attracted to a paradigm positioning that would regard her insider status as a strength rather than a weakness of the research.

Whilst the active membership approach is well suited to a constructionist stance, it is not without its challenges. Adler and Adler (1987, p.51) note the importance of having “escape routes” that ensure the researcher’s commitment to their academic role, including periodically withdrawing from the research setting and sharing their perspective with those of outsiders. This was achieved in our study with Julie undertaking full-time study on top of her part-time commitment to the school netball programme. Her co-researcher was a full-time member of faculty and had no involvement with the netball programme, enabling us to analyse the data from a critical, theoretically informed stance as recommended by Adler and Adler.

The data consisted of Julie’s observations and reflections on her role in the netball programme. She noted her initial observations and expectations in a journal and discussed these with her co-researcher to shape the literature review and research design phases. Throughout the project she reflected on how these thoughts and observations were transformed through her interaction with the participants. The other primary source of data was a series of semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with focus groups of two or three student coaches. We decided that more heavily structured interviews would not have provided the space for our participants to explore areas of interest to them, but we wanted some structure to create some control over the direction of the interviews, which we felt important because of Julie’s familiarity with the participants.

We supplemented the interviews with focus groups, which we also assessed to be consistent with our preferred paradigm. Focus groups offer valuable insight into shared understandings, while allowing for debate and differences of views, and are a

useful opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences (King, 2004). A total of seven focus groups were conducted, lasting approximately one hour each, with 14 participants aged between 15 and 18 years. Each participant and their parents were required to sign a consent form as part of the formal ethics approval process of our university.

An important consideration was how Julie's insider status might influence the study. Within the focus groups, she drew on her familiarity with most of the participants to create a relaxed, informal environment. Rather than simply asking what motivated the students to coach, Julie got them to reflect on their understandings and experiences of volunteering, as well as their views on why their peers coached. They would often discuss the questions between themselves and took the conversation in their own direction at times. A pattern developed whereby participants would reflect back on their time when they were in teams coached by senior students at the school. The participants were cheerful but took their role as participants seriously and appeared to answer all the questions openly.

Data were analysed inductively in accordance with King's template analysis (King, 2004). King's template analysis was selected because of its suitability for a social constructionist approach, with King acknowledging that there are "multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, which depend upon the positions of the researcher and the context of the research" (King, 2004, p.256). There is a view that empiricist 'techniques' like coding reflect positivist assumptions of objectivity and therefore should be shunned in research informed by social constructionism (St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014). However, we took the view that coding was a useful technique

for synthesising the data – by seeing it as part of the process of critical reflexivity rather than a technique for capturing an objective reality (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). Our analytical process begun with a content analysis of the transcripts, looking for words, phrases and issues that appeared frequently. We then supplemented this data with critical reflections on the interviews and focus groups, which incorporated Julie’s reflections not just on what the respondents said, but on her interactions with them and how that influenced the interview/focus group. The result of our data analysis is the three distinctive features of a social constructionist approach to the study of volunteer motivation that we outline in the remainder of this section.

Giving emphasis to the social and cultural context

A consistent pattern in the focus groups was the emphasis given to the strong influence of the school culture. Netball has been a part of the life of the school for 150 years. In the excerpts below we can see the importance of shared understandings around what it was like to be a volunteer coach:

Julie: Going back to coaching. We have too many student coaches for the number of teams we have. Why do you think that is?

Janet: I guess it has become a tradition, you know, like once you’re Year 11 or 12 and you become a senior player. As long as I’ve been here, you just start to coach in Year 11. Lots of girls want to give back to the school and the netball community.

‘Giving back’ might be understood in functionalist studies of volunteer motivation as an altruistic motive held by individuals, or a desire to strengthen social ties, but by

privileging social relations rather than the individual, we give primacy to the shared history and tradition around netball at the school. Thus, the motive ‘giving back’ can be seen as a product of these historically and contextually situated relations, rather than some internal essence. Another interesting element of the social transmission of understandings around being a volunteer netball coach was expressed by Hillary:

Julie: I’m trying to work out why that is, why so many people like to coach?

Hillary: I think it’s because it buzzes around the school that coaching netball is so much fun.

Julie: Really?

Hillary: Yeah, I mean that’s why I’ve always been keen, you know, I remember Janet telling me that it was a lot of fun. It actually does buzz around the school.

A number of participants conveyed the view that at this school, at this time, it was fashionable, or ‘cool’ to coach. One said that in primary school she always volunteered to look after the new kid because it was cool. But at this school, “you don’t want to get stuck with the new person anymore”. It was cool to coach netball – again illustrating the salience of the context in shaping the construction of motivation.

Examining the social processes through which motivation is constructed

From the standpoint of social constructionism, empirical research in the form of interviews and focus groups is not a process for ‘collecting’ data on these pre-formed, already influential motives (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Rather, ‘motivation’ becomes

something that is ‘constructed’ during the interview or focus group, as a form of “social action” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000, p.798) as participants talk to each other and to researchers. In the extract below, two participants, Rachael and Sarah are asked by Julie to articulate their views on why other people volunteer to coach. This approach of getting respondents to articulate others’ responses is distinct from functionalist approaches, which focus on respondents’ reports of their own motivators:

Julie: Why do you think others at school do it?

Rachael: I think it’s because it is a social thing for some people. And I definitely, I love bossing people around, it’s true. I think some people do it more – this will sound bad – but more to make themselves look good.

Sarah: I would agree with that.

Rachael: I would say that I more do it because I like helping people, but I think for other people it is quite a competitive thing. Obviously not for us because of the team we had, but for others some coaches who are close friends get quite competitive in a friendly way.

Sarah: It is good for your record to have netball coaching.

Julie: So it is quite respected to have netball coaching on your record?

Rachael: Yeah. I know some people that did it for leadership positions and stuff.

Sarah: I didn’t know that it affected that at all.

Rachael: Yeah, I wasn’t even thinking about it back then. It probably would be one of my reasons now but back then it wasn’t.

Rachael's explanation that her main motives were altruistic, whereas others were driven by more instrumental reasons, was a recurring theme in the focus groups. Rachael has no ready access to the cognitive states of others, and is constructing their motives in this conversation. This could be given a number of interpretations. It could be a projection – a defensive mechanism where Rachael denies she is herself motivated by self-interest by attributing these motives to others. Another interpretation is that Rachael is drawing on societal discourses of volunteering and its relationship to leadership, in which volunteering has become a moral imperative and which therefore places pressure on volunteers to report a range of altruistic motives (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2000). Yet another explanation might emphasize the particular context of this high school, since a number of participants shared the view expressed by Rachael that in order to occupy prestigious leadership positions within the school, there was an understanding that students needed leadership 'experience' and coaching was an easy way to gain this experience. Regardless of the explanations attributed to the passage above, it is a useful illustration of the importance of attending to the social interactions through which people give meaning to their motives, as well as those of others.

The researcher as co-constructor of volunteer motivation

In active membership studies researchers share a common interest with participants and identify more closely with the research settings, which draws them closer to the subjects and makes it more likely they gain richer data (Rochford, 1985). This is illustrated in the extract below, where Julie is talking to Hillary and Lucy, whom she had previously coached in the senior netball team. Julie also knew Hillary's mother.

Julie: Ok, what other reasons for why you think the others coach? I know your Mum coaches lots, do you think this had made an impact on your coaching?

Hillary: I definitely think it has, I mean she coaches Alice's team, my sister, and I remember going up there so I could get a ride. I would be there for 20 minutes of training and it actually just looks like fun. It genuinely is a lot of fun for people that enjoy netball. To be part of the sport that they're coaching. Like passing on their knowledge especially. And I also think it's cool to kind of feel like you're the boss. Like I'm not going to lie. It's actually cool. You get to tell them what you think of the game and pass on your opinion?

Lucy: You also get to see how much you know as well. And you realize that you know a lot more than you do.

Hillary: Yeah and coaching definitely tells you what kind of person you are. Like how well you do it.

Julie: Yes, I get that, because when you are a player in the team, and for example at Wing Attack you can't say to the Goal Keep "I think you should be doing this", but when you're a coach, it's like 'Brilliant, I can tell all of you what I think you should do!'

Lucy and Hillary: Yeah! [laughing]

We can see in the excerpt above Julie's role in the process of motive construction. Her own experiences of the school netball programme become data, giving her deeper awareness of the experiences shared by the participants, as well as enabling her to

cross-check her own experiences against theirs (Adler and Adler, 1987). It would have been difficult for Julie to position herself in positivism's 'disinterested scientist' role, as somebody who could make neutral observations of the object of study without influencing it.

In presenting this data, and to recognize the role of the researcher in constructing it, we felt it important to include Julie's comments, as well as those of the participants. As Silverman (2013) observes, it is routine in qualitative data analyses to include only extracts of the respondents' talk, with researchers' contributions to the co-creation of the data remaining hidden. This is often accompanied by the analytical approach of "anecdotalism" – including transcript extracts which illustrate/support the argument being made, rather than seeing the interview dialogue as a processual activity to be analysed (Silverman, 2013 p.154).

Discussion: The Value of Taking Subjectivity and Reflexivity Seriously

In this paper we have explored the idea that our knowledge of volunteer motivation is a social construction which gives rise to action. The assumptions underpinning functionalist theory, which we have given particular attention to, are 'functional' for both researchers and practitioners – a shared belief in an established scientific method that generates knowledge which can be used by Third Sector organizations to recruit more volunteers/and or support, retain and enhance the experience of their existing ones. We have argued, from the paradigm of social constructionism, that this is but one means of understanding the topic.

In our experiences as students and teachers, exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research is a topic approached with some trepidation, partly because of its complexity, but also because of the often-polarized nature of the debate. At the same time, however, we have been drawn to reflect on the philosophical assumptions we make about our research. In ‘dipping our toes’ in the often turbulent waters of research paradigms, our objective is not to antagonize positivist and post-positivist researchers of volunteering. Social constructionism offers a critique of the assumptions underpinning psychological approaches to motivation but we do not intend that to mean that these approaches are misguided, or wrong. On the contrary, social constructionism is intended to augment and supplement such an approach to knowledge, not to displace it (Gergen, 2001). We are attracted to it because of the potential it offers for thinking differently about how we can explain the phenomenon of volunteering in particular contexts. The need for different perspectives is an issue of some urgency, given growing concern about the dearth of new thinking and novel theory development in organizational research (Cummings and Bridgman, 2016). The dynamics of academic publishing reward incremental development of knowledge but this reinforces rather than challenges the underlying assumptions of theories, reducing the possibility of constructing substantively new questions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

We are also attracted to social constructionism because of the potential it offers for reflecting not just on the phenomena we investigate but also on ourselves – in particular, our role as researchers. In this section we consider the implications of taking subjectivity and reflexivity more seriously, by which we mean acknowledging the various ways in which our knowledge of volunteer motivation is constituted

through social relations. These implications relate to the insights we identified – giving emphasis to the social and cultural context within which volunteer activity takes place; attending to the social processes through which people give meaning to their motivation; and seeing researchers as co-constructors of volunteer motivation.

Gaining insight into the context of volunteering is aided when researchers have intimate knowledge of that context, through their experience as participants. Having spent five years as a student herself at the school, and several years in the netball programme following her graduation, Julie was able to reflect critically on the institutional traditions and norms that she had been socialized into, and which the participants articulated in the focus groups. She was better able to understand the ways in which these cultural dynamics were meaningful to students, because they held meaning for her. Julie used her intimate knowledge of the context to ask well-informed questions and steer the conversation to areas which were likely to generate lively discussion and debate. Julie's prior relationship with the participants was also a strength, in our view. Because she had already established rapport with them, there was an openness and depth to the focus group interviews that would have been difficult for a researcher unknown to the participants to achieve.

Of course, by acknowledging these subjective aspects of the relationship between Julie, the context and the participants, we are in no position to make claims that the knowledge we produce is valid, reliable and generalizable, as understood within positivism. Instead, our response is to abandon the assumption that the data we generate is independent of us (Rhodes and Wray-Bliss, 2011). From the position of social constructionism, what might well, in a positivist study, be labelled 'bias' and

either ignored or noted in the ‘limitations’ section of the paper, becomes ‘subjectivity’ – a strength in a constructionist approach.

Once it is recognized the extent to which the researcher is implicated in the construction of motives for volunteering, reflexivity must become an essential part of the research process (Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). A genuinely ‘relationally reflexive approach’ (Cunliffe, 2011; Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013) is not merely confined to working with the data, but runs the entire span of the research process from initial conception to completing manuscripts for publication.

This requires, we believe, a high level of reflexivity. The process of this research certainly heightened our own self-consciousness. It was a matter of learning as we go – drawing from our engagement with social constructionism and critically reflecting on how those beliefs and assumptions could inform our study. We acknowledge there are things we could have done better, to be more in keeping with a social constructionist approach. The co-creation and co-production aspects would have been stronger had we shared our analysis of the data and even our early drafts of this manuscript with our participants, to add richness and depth to the contextual conversations (Hibbert et al., 2014).

Becoming relationally reflexive researchers also requires, we believe, more than a little courage. We suspect that part of the reluctance to more openly embrace subjectivity and reflexivity is the pressure on us as researchers to “conform to normative expectations of legitimacy” in our established knowledge communities

(Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 281). One of the first questions we considered in undertaking this project was ‘it might be interesting and novel, but who will publish it?’ We were encouraged by this journal’s openness to research from a range of paradigms (for example, Bloom and Kilgore, 2003; Roca, 2007; Shacar; 2014; Ward, 2015) but note the same cannot be said of all journals in the field of volunteer studies.

The main aim of this paper, as reflected in its title, has been to consider the implications of social constructionism for *researching* volunteer motivation. But, if we take the position that volunteering research is saturated with subjectivity, how might research from this paradigm be useful for practitioners in the Third Sector? The challenge here is to overcome the assumption that only supposedly ‘objective’ knowledge has practical value. We encourage practitioners to be sceptical of knowledge where context has been stripped away to offer generalizable insights (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). There is much to be learnt from a deep understanding of the social interactions that occur in particular places, at particular times, with particular investigators, and having ‘insiders’ involved in that research process can add to that depth. Compared with questionnaires, our context-rich case study can yield genuine insights that can strengthen practice.

Questionnaires put limits on the diversity of responses that can be offered in discussions around volunteer motives. There might be motives that researchers have not thought of, that might be unique to the context being studied. We found that asking participants to talk more widely than just ‘what motivates’ them was valuable. Discussions around why they thought others volunteered, whether they felt they were expected to volunteer and other cultural cues provided different ways of thinking

about motivation in this setting. It should be acknowledged however, that the quality of the research depends, to a large extent, on the willingness and ability of all involved to engage in reflection. The role of the researcher in gaining the trust of the participants and creating an environment conducive to these reflections is key, and the difficulty of this should not be underestimated.

An added benefit of constructionist research such as this is a potential ‘Hawthorne effect’ - the positive behaviour response when individuals are aware they are being studied (Landsberger, 1958). Experiments conducted at the Western Electric Company’s Hawthorne Plant during the 1920s showed the lift in motivation of the workers when interest was being shown in them. We observed this in our empirical study – the participants were enthusiastic about having an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as a netball coach with a researcher who had shared experiences and understandings. Whilst this is an advantage of qualitative research in general compared with quantitative approaches, the value placed by social constructionism on the ‘voice’ of participants is likely to enhance this effect. In a sense, we were fellow participants and they were fellow researchers, which made us all highly invested in the project. It is conceivable that as a result of their positive experience their engagement with the netball programme might increase, improving their skills as coaches, creating a more satisfying experience for those whom they coach and encouraging those younger students to be coaches themselves in future years.

Conclusion

The impetus for this research was initially a desire to understand the reasons for the substantial increase in volunteer netball coaches at this high school. While we are in

no position to explain this phenomenon with any certainty, what we can conclude is that there are multiple factors at play, which can be understood from multiple paradigms. Had we adopted a positivist approach, such as the VFI, we would probably have discovered that individual coaches would have reported responses across the six motives which make up the scale, incorporating both altruism and self-interest. What we have presented here tells another story – of volunteer motivation as a socially negotiated process. It is a story of societal norms around volunteering and its connection to the concept of ‘future leaders’, of the school’s netball tradition which accords high status to those who coach, and of how netball coaching, at this time in this school, has become a fashionable thing to do.

We made these empirical observations by exploring our research site through the paradigm of social constructionism, which sets out to unsettle taken-for-granted ways of generating knowledge about the world. By denying the possibility of a truthful, objective description of the world, it does not claim to be offering the truth. Our representations of the world are always limited, always partial (Jovchelovitch, 2001). Social constructionism is a paradigm – itself a social construction. This relativism is a source of antagonism in debates – how can we say one construction is better than another? How can we judge the quality of research from a social constructionist paradigm? Clearly, the conventional, scientific standards of validity, reliability and objectivity will not do, since the possibility of each of these is denied. Within the community of constructionists, agreements have emerged around criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity – both of which flow from a freely acknowledged subjectivity of the research process, which we have advocated in this paper (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln et al., 2011).

Research paradigms and their respective ontologies and epistemologies are abstract, complex and contentious. Rather than getting snared in philosophical debates, we believe social constructionism is most usefully thought of as a source of creativity. It is a resource that enables us to think deeply about what we take for granted, and by doing so, to open up new possibilities for how we can think and act differently in the future.

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Endnotes

^a High school students in New Zealand are typically aged between 13 and 18 years.

^b To protect the identity of the organization, the participants and ourselves (the latter for the purposes of blind review) pseudonyms are used throughout.