

Rethinking Volunteering as a Form of Unpaid Work

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Abstract

This article aims to problematize the ways in which volunteering is presently conceptualized, theorized, and studied by positioning it as a form of unpaid labor. Over six focal points, the article highlights areas that deserve closer scrutiny: the question of when volunteering is work; the formal–informal and paid–unpaid distinctions of work; the notion of “choice,” especially volunteering as the lack of paid work choices; the assumption that volunteer work is similar to informal work; and a recognition that volunteering consists of many different forms of activities, not just one.

Keywords

care work, choice, paid work, unpaid work, volunteering

Introduction

In recent years, volunteering has come to be seen as something of a cure-all for maladies affecting our societies. Almost regardless of the concern, volunteering is seen to be the remedy. Those concerned with the disintegration of societies see that volunteering is part of the glue that holds them together (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Those concerned that the welfare state is unable to meet the needs of diverse populations see that volunteers can respond more effectively to these needs (McClure, Aird, & Sinclair, 2015). Those concerned that there are not enough hands or enough tax revenue to service growing numbers of older adults see that volunteers can provide those hands without having to increase tax levels (Verhoeven & van Bochove, 2018). Those concerned that older adults are lonely and “unproductive” see that volunteering is a means of staying active and connected (Onyx & Warburton, 2003). Those concerned that young people are at risk see that volunteering turns young

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people into responsible adults (Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997) and teaches citizens about social issues and civic skills (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, Chapter 11). Thus, there seems to be nothing bad to report. With volunteering viewed as a positive activity, nonparticipating groups such as young people or Black or minority ethnic communities are assumed to be missing out—and therefore subject to “participatory inequality” (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010, p. 427; Taylor, 2005, p. 121; van Ingen & van der Meer, 2011, pp. 302-303). As such, the main quest on all fronts is to figure out how to increase volunteering.

To stimulate discussion, the main aim of this article is to problematize some of the assumptions that drive this uncritical push for more volunteering. In particular, the article seeks to stimulate discussion by engaging other researchers in a recognition that volunteering is, in fact and before all else, unpaid labor. While all researchers of volunteering are apt to recognize the *unpaid* nature of volunteering, they are much less apt to recognize that volunteering is the unpaid opposite of paid labor. This, at least partly, reflects the origins of the study of volunteering, a study that has developed independently of the study of paid work. Indeed, it was not until recently that scholars of volunteering came to see volunteering as more than a leisure activity (Chambre, 1984; Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003). While there is a growing interest in the links between paid and unpaid work (Wilson & Musick, 1997), especially for older citizens (see, for example, Di Gessa & Grundy, 2017; Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Hank & Stuck, 2008), theory building and research into paid and unpaid work are largely undertaken separately, following different logics and theoretical underpinnings.

Providing an evidence-based critique of how volunteering is defined and operationalized, this article is structured according to six focal points. These points correspond to six problematic lines of reasoning in the literature, which became increasingly difficult to accept when judged against my own research of managers, volunteers, and staff (Overgaard, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Overgaard, Petrowski, & Hermansen, 2018) in nonprofit organizations. The points are the tendency to perceive “volunteering” as one form of activity, not many forms; the lack of clarity about whether volunteering is work or leisure; the proposition that unpaid formalized work is similar to informal work; the argument that choice is a defining part of volunteering; the assumption that individuals make a choice between volunteering or not rather than a choice between paid and unpaid work; and a lack of critical perspectives on the fact that volunteering is an arrangement that pushes people to work without getting paid for it.

The arguments in this article are informed by my own research area, social care volunteering. However, as it will become clear, I make no claims that my research can be transferred directly to all areas of volunteering. In fact, it is exactly that kind of unhelpful generalization that I seek to start a discussion about. Also, it is clear that the reach and consequences of the arguments presented in this article need further scrutiny. The examples provided are taken from an Australian context. With attention to other local contexts, it is hoped the insights from Australia can become a starting point for discussions across countries.

One Form of Activity

Surprisingly, most studies assume that what people do is to “volunteer” (Taylor, 2005). Hence, studies of volunteering treat “volunteering” as the organizing theme under which to study its object, rather than focussing on any specific form of work. As a result, all forms of volunteering are lumped together, although it is not immediately obvious that care work, soccer coaching, firefighting, conservation work, union activism, and “voluntourism” (Lasker, 2016, pp. 2-3) have much in common. Consequently, most research focusses on “volunteering,” rather than paid and unpaid, formal and informal forms of, for example, hospice work. An often-cited definition of volunteering is telling of this kind of conceptualization: “Volunteering means any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). This kind of definition pays no attention to the kind of activity that a person engages in. In fact, *any* activity counts—and focus is thus put on the other elements in the definition.

In this logic, people are first asked if they volunteer, that is, whether they engage in unpaid work activities. Those who do volunteer are *then* asked to identify which domain they volunteer within. Accordingly, the respondent may choose from “Culture and Recreation,” “Education and Research,” or “Health” in accordance with the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO; Salamon, Sokolowski, & List, 2003). This is a methodology promoted by the International Labour Organization (ILO; 2011), and many country-level surveys have adopted this way of formulating survey questions, including in Australia, Canada, and Denmark (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2010; Boje & Ibsen, 2006; Roach, 2006).

This kind of definition and this way of asking questions inhibit the recognition of another logic, a logic that starts with primary attention to *kinds of work* (the domain) and *then* moves on to the question of pay. If studies of paid and unpaid work were linked closely to each other, a first question would be about the types of work a person does. A secondary round of questions would determine whether this kind of work is unpaid. In this proposed logic, unpaid religious work would be researched in relation to other forms of religious work, rather than being compared with other forms of volunteering. In this proposed logic, rather than ask how religious volunteer work relates to volunteering in sports and recreation, a more pertinent question is how unpaid work within a specific domain compares with other paid and unpaid work within *the same area of work*, in this case religious work.

The current tendency to lump all forms of volunteering into the same basket seems especially problematic for a study of areas such as care work, which is such a highly regulated form of work. Conceptualizing “volunteering” as a single phenomenon thus ignores the specific occupational and sectoral contexts within which these volunteers operate. In addition, it ignores the fact that there are other actors, most importantly paid workers, who also make claims to specific forms of care work, often fiercely through union membership. Nurses, for example, engage in a number of strategies to maintain monopoly over the provision of certain skills and competencies (Overgaard, 2015a; Witz, 1990). The right to know and acquire dominance over an area of operation is not only fought through unions but also on a day-to-day basis through a number

of strategies, as documented by Overgaard (2015a). In essence, the dominant way of researching volunteers ignores the fact that paid workers operate in the same spaces as volunteers do. Thus, dominant ways of researching volunteer engagement represent a general failure to acknowledge the structures of power that organize the boundaries between paid and unpaid work (Taylor, 2005).

Wilson (2000) has similarly warned against trying to explain all volunteering activities within the same theory. In his often-quoted article (Hustinx et al., 2010), Wilson concludes,

One problem is that the generic term “volunteering” embraces a vast array of quite disparate activities. It is probably not fruitful to try to explain all activities with the same theory nor to treat all activities as if they were the same with respect to the consequences. (Wilson, 2000, p. 233)

Yet, it appears that there is a persistent tendency to think of “volunteering” in generic terms. This focus, however, ignores both what people do when they work, as well as what they do when they volunteer. This is in stark contrast to the paid workforce that is routinely studied within its own boundaries. For example, we distinguish between those who work in the health sector and those who work in manufacturing. Furthermore, we distinguish different occupations and professions within a sector from each other (e.g., nurses from social workers). When we make distinctions and think about who works in what kinds of jobs, we find, for example, that there are “work for women” and “work for men” (Bloksgaard, 2011) or that immigrants are overrepresented in care jobs in many countries (Huang, Thang, & Toyota, 2012; Shutes & Walsh, 2012; Triandafyllidou, 2013; Walsh & O’shea, 2010).

To move forward, I suggest conceptualising work based on a systematic and considered assessment of how it is possible to distinguish volunteer work from other forms of work and non-work. The distinctions especially reflect the work of Rebecca Taylor (2004), Catherine Hakim (2004, pp. 24-46) and Miriam Glucksmann (1995, pp. 69-70). Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the crucial distinctions between different areas of work, using the examples of care and entertainment. Importantly, care is considered separate to entertainment. Only once the area of work (in this case the care industry or entertainment industry) has been determined, the second step is to engage with the divide between formal and informal work, as well as the divide between paid and unpaid work within those industries. Each of these distinctions will be explored in more detail in this article.

The number 1a square in Table 1 most closely resembles what we now call ‘volunteering’ in the care industry. It is care *work*, *unpaid* and undertaken in a *formal* capacity. Notably, choice is not a necessary consideration in the definition, a point I shall also return to.

Volunteering as Work

In continuation of the argument against lumping all forms of volunteering together, it is equally important to critically engage with the question of whether all the forms of activity that we call volunteering actually constitute work.

Table 1. Unpaid formalised care work considered against other forms of care work.**Example 1: Care**

Forms of work	Formal	Informal
Paid	1b e.g. paid care assistant	1d e.g. occasional paid babysitting of younger siblings
Unpaid	1a e.g. unpaid care assistant working in a hospice every Monday	1c e.g. unpaid care for sick or elderly neighbour or relative

Table 2. Unpaid formalised entertainment work considered against other forms of entertainment work.**Example 2: Entertainment**

Forms of work	Formal	Informal
Paid	2b e.g. paid stage producer	2d e.g. students playing a paid gig at a school party
Unpaid	2a e.g. unpaid production assistant working on specific production for four months	2c e.g. school teacher operating the lights during local community play once a year

In earlier work, theorists and researchers from (predominantly) leisure studies made a call for volunteering to be included as a form of leisure activity. Taking the starting point that volunteering is leisure because it involves freely chosen activities (a point I shall return to), Stebbins (1996) uses the term, *serious leisure*, to signify how volunteering can be distinguished from other forms of leisure. Further to this, an older review article defining who is a volunteer (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996) did not even consider “work” as an element in such a definition. Others, such as Pearce (1993) and Merrell (2000), contend that volunteer work is inherently contradictory as it is both work and leisure. Merrell (2000) elaborates that there is a work element in providing a service to others while there is a leisure element in choosing to be involved in an activity, which is personally satisfying.

One thing that is clear, however, is that the leisure perspective has lost ground; most definitions now include a reference to work, rather than to leisure. Although it is a relatively new way to conceptualize volunteering, most writers *now* agree that volunteering is a form of work (Mutchler et al., 2003; Oppenheimer & Edwards, 2011). Australia may be a special case in that the conceptualization of volunteers as workers is now formally recognized by law. For example, both waged and unwaged workers are treated equally in the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* as well as in the *Fair Work Amendment Act 2013*, which extends protection to volunteers experiencing bullying in

the workplace (McGregor-Lowndes, 2014). This legislation establishes volunteering as work in formal terms and makes it clear that the leisure perspective has lost ground—at least in Australia.

Many volunteers do the same tasks as paid staff. For example, Overgaard (2015b) observed in her study of an Australian hospice the similarity of paid and unpaid work. In this hospice, one volunteer participated in a bed wash. While engaging in this bed wash, the volunteer was standing opposite a paid worker, closely mirroring the paid worker's moves. When the nurse washed the left side of the patient, the volunteer washed the right. This allowed the organization to take a nurse "off the floor" to attend a staff meeting. This volunteer had been engaged with the organization for almost 30 years. In such situations, it would seem impossible to make claims that one is working, the other not. When the same tasks take place under highly structured terms, in the same physical settings and alongside paid staff, under similar managements, and with economic and service-level gains for the organizations, we *must* recognize it as work.

Recognizing volunteering as work, as productive labor, however, instantly brings to the fore another question: When should it be paid? When it was possible to uphold an image of volunteering as leisure, it was easier to ignore the question of pay. For this discussion, it may be helpful to take as a starting point the bed-wash situation outlined above, and to consider how the Australian Ombudsman defines unlawful, unpaid, employment. Fair Work Ombudsman (n.d.) considers *employment* to include the following elements. If unpaid, it is unlawful:

- Where the arrangement involves productive work rather than just meaningful learning, training, and skill development, it is likely to be an employment relationship.
- The longer the period of the arrangement, the more likely the person is an employee.
- Is the work normally performed by paid employees? Does the business or organization need this work to be done? The more integral the work is to the function of the business, the more likely it is that an employment relationship could be found.
- If the business or organization is gaining a significant benefit from the person's work, an employment relationship is more likely to exist.

Furthermore, the homepage states (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.) that the more productive the work that is involved, the more likely it is that an employment situation exists. The Ombudsman explains that productive work is in opposition to "just observation, learning, training or skill development" (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

When considering each of these points in the bed-wash situation, it becomes clear that at least some volunteering situations meet the criteria for employment as defined by the Ombudsman. Considering that this volunteer does the same work as nurses, that a paid nurse was able to be taken off the floor to attend a staff meeting, and that the volunteer had worked in the organization for almost 30 years, it is impossible not to decide that the situation meets the Ombudsman's definition of *employment*. Yet,

researchers and policy makers insist on making a distinction between volunteering and other forms of unpaid work. Consequently, nonprofit organizations' demands on volunteers for their free labor are largely free from the accusations of exploitation that other forms of unpaid labor are subject to, merely because it is labeled volunteering. It is telling that even the Ombudsman is reluctant to list volunteering alongside the other forms of problematic unpaid labor situations on the homepage: unpaid trials, student placements and work experience, and internships (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

At the same time, it should not be taken for granted that all volunteers are working; volunteering in other domains apart from care work are more difficult to conceptualize as work. Do Greenpeace activists work when they distribute information material? Do parents of junior soccer teams work when they wash the jerseys? Do parents work when they jump in the water with their own kids at surfing lessons? Do people work when they get together to put on a local theater production or arrange to perform a dance at a local fair? That is, these activities appear more like leisure activities, even if there is an element of productive labor involved. Indeed, research suggests that when asked, people struggle to conceptualize these kinds of examples as volunteer work unless prompted (Rooney & Steinberg, 2004).

In my view, it is simply not possible—once and for all—to determine whether all that we currently call volunteering is work, or not. When leisure activities are treated as work, we create awkward situations, generate excessive paper work, and kill engagement and joy (Oppenheimer & Edwards, 2011). Furthermore, people do not immediately think of these kinds of activities as work and hence underreport when asked (Rooney & Steinberg, 2004). However, when work is treated as leisure, the situation appears even worse as we are encouraging a form of free labor without applying a critical perspective, a point I shall return to. There are possibly no easy ways to address these dilemmas. However, as social researchers, we must grapple with difficult questions, including “What is work?” I want to suggest that volunteering research can benefit from opening up to other research traditions (see, for example, Glucksmann, 2005; Glucksmann, 1995) and thereby also to new critical research questions.

Formal and Informal Lives

It is assumed that volunteers are driven by the needs of others, in the same way as is the case in the informal sphere. As such, it is often argued that the recognition that help is needed in the informal sphere is extended into the formal sphere. For example, Schervish and Havens posit that “caring behaviour is motivated by identification with the needs of others” (Schervish & Havens, 2002, p. 49). These scholars argue that the caring behavior of volunteers “is the river that rises from within the garden of our daily life and branches into streams of broader concern” (2002, p. 69). Similarly, Music and Wilson argue that “in so many ways, volunteer work is an extension of the care family members provide each other into the public sphere” (2008, p. 250). However, empirical research on Australian care workers does not support the rather idealistic assumption that the identification of others'

needs necessarily prompts people to get involved. The “spoilt” volunteers in the well-funded hospices of this study were well aware that their help was needed more elsewhere, such as in aged care centers (Overgaard, 2015b).

Instead, we should probably assume that volunteer care workers are attracted to much the same kind of work as paid workers are. Working with the dying and with cancer patients is reported to be more desirable for both paid and unpaid care workers in contemporary society than, for example, working with the disabled (Overgaard, 2015b). These findings are further supported by Jessen’s (2014) study of volunteer engagement in a Danish public aged care center. The study found that dementia patients and other vulnerable older adults were largely ignored by volunteers; volunteers would direct their attention to the older adults who were easy to work with and avoid the more difficult ones.

Furthermore, while some older research shows that volunteers are likely to separate their work lives from their personal lives more than paid workers do (Pearce, 1993), other research shows that care workers do not see their volunteer care work as an extension of their informal lives (Overgaard, 2016). Indeed, in this study, some volunteers report on specific rituals to mark off their volunteer engagement from their informal lives, such as changing clothes or changing imaginary hats (Overgaard, 2016). As a minimum, we must be critical of the notion that this form of structured volunteer care work in formal organizations is part of civil society and “the community.”

Choice

The notion that volunteering is an act that is engaged in “freely” is so embedded in studies of volunteering that it is almost impossible to engage in any form of discourse other than one that sees volunteering as the epitome of choice—at least in the Western world. As “freely” in the definition by Wilson (2000, p. 215) mentioned earlier, other definitions similarly emphasize the noncompulsory nature of work. Thus, the ILO defines volunteering in this way: “Volunteer work refers to activities performed *willingly* and without pay to produce goods or provide services for others outside the volunteer’s household or family” (ILO, n.d., emphasis added), while the (ABS; 2018) uses this definition: “The provision of unpaid help *willingly* undertaken in the form of time, service or skills, to an organisation or group, excluding work done overseas” (emphasis added). Indeed, it appears that the volunteering literature is saturated with the belief that choice is the core quality of voluntary work and therefore one of the dimensions that separates it from compulsory work programs.

However, the notion that volunteering should be easily distinguishable from compulsory work programs is difficult to uphold (ILO, 2011), in Australia as elsewhere (Kampen, Elshout, & Tonkens, 2013). Requiring work from those receiving benefits (workfare), the government program, “work for the dole” (WFD) in charitable organizations has challenged the concept of “volunteering” (Borland & Tseng, 2003; Kampen et al., 2013; Warburton & Smith, 2003). WFD was introduced by John Howard’s Coalition government in 1997 as part of a commitment to “New

Paternalism” and “Mutual Obligation” (Abbott, 2000; Mead, 2014). That “Volunteering Australia,” the peak body for volunteering in Australia, won the tender to facilitate the match between job seekers and charitable organizations prompted a discussion. Obviously, most people were struggling to see that people who are *required* to do something are doing it freely and willingly.

Furthermore, evidence shows that there are some negative effects, including stigmatization, of “being volunteered” (Eliasoph, 2011). Participation in what Kampen et al. (2013) aptly has coined “workfare volunteering” has an inferior status relative to paid work (De Waele & Hustinx, 2018). Despite being based on the assumption that volunteering can contribute to employability (Kamerāde & Paine, 2014), workfare volunteering acts as a negative signal to potential employers and hence decreases the rate of job offers for WFD participants (Borland & Tseng, 2003; Warburton & Smith, 2003). However, even if examples like the WFD volunteers are ignored for now, choice is still—at best—unhelpful for defining volunteering. A closer look reveals that the notion of working “willingly” is not just the easy exercise of choice we imagine. I suggest that the “willingly” criterion needs to be abandoned and that the basic schema outlined in Table 1 provides a more helpful and more accurate way of thinking about different forms of work.

It is possible that the assumption that needs the most scrutiny is that volunteering is a simple choice that can easily be terminated by exercising that same choice. Furthermore, we need to at least engage with the changing forms of work, various forms of unpaid training schemes, and the increasingly competitive labor markets in which standard, ongoing, and secure employment is no longer a given. In continuation of the discussion of choice, the next section will investigate the so-called “choices” that people, especially women, make to volunteer in situations where *better choices* about engaging in paid work are unavailable.

Lack of Paid Work Opportunities

Research has shown that for individuals, volunteer care work is predominantly understood in relation to the trajectories of their own paid work and their access to work (Baldock, 1998, 1990). We know from both older and newer research that some Australian women end up in lengthy engagements as volunteers when they are unable to enter the paid workforce because of lack of education and the pressures of male breadwinner gender roles and caring responsibilities (Baldock, 1990; Overgaard, 2016). Furthermore, volunteer care work can present itself as an attractive alternative to paid work: it can be professionally satisfying, it allows women and others who are outside the paid workforce to utilize the professional skills that they possess, and it allows them to enter a field of work that would otherwise be inaccessible to them (Overgaard, 2016).

Looking at volunteering through rose-colored glasses, volunteers argue that volunteer work allows them to engage in meaningful work while also allowing them to be present for their families (Baldock, 1990; Overgaard, 2016). The argument is thus similar to the one that is sometimes made for part-time work, a form of work that is

seen to be the most extensive solution to balancing an inherent conflict between work and family in many countries (Boje & Ejrnæs, 2013; Esping-Andersen, 2009). However, it is obvious that choosing part-time employment comes at a considerable cost, primarily in the form of lower wages, lack of superannuation, fewer opportunities for advancement, and limited access to higher wage industries (Chalmers & Hill, 2007). The same can be said about volunteer work.

Even more critical of the notion of volunteering as an undisputable good, some argue that *if* the paid workforce is molded around male participation to such a degree that the female population finds it difficult to manage a work–life balance, women hardly have a “choice” about working in an unpaid capacity if they want to work at all (see Hartmann, 1976, p. 775). In societies where women face the challenges of participating in a male-dominated workforce and where there is considerable pressure to be available for family, volunteering presents itself as an attractive alternative. In such societies, where full participation is difficult with family and children, volunteering is easier to manage than paid work.

Australia fits such a description in many ways (von Egmond, Baxter, Buchler, & Western, 2010). The country has a long and strong tradition of favoring men’s paid workforce participation over women’s (Castles, 2001, 2002; O’Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999). Indeed, it is reported that women are still being discriminated against in the Australian workforce. A report by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) found that workplaces continue to see pregnancy as a privilege rather than a right, and the Commission reports that pregnancy has overtaken disability as the main source of discrimination complaints (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2013, 2014). Women’s withdrawal from the paid workforce (Meagher, 2014) is also an indication of women’s inability to manage family and paid work in the current shape of the workforce. What if researchers asked, “Why would anybody work for no pay *rather than for pay?*” instead of the current underlying puzzle: “Why would *anybody* volunteer?” (Clary et al., 1998; Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996, p. 486; Clary & Snyder, 1999, p. 156) a question that seems to imply that the choice is between volunteering and lying on the couch. As a minimum, it should now be possible to appreciate that “choice” is a slippery notion and that access to *paid* work is at the heart of understanding unpaid work patterns.

Following from a realization that volunteering is a choice between paid and unpaid work, we need to rethink the research informing what (we think) we know about volunteering. For example, many who write about volunteering have described volunteers as people who sympathize with the plight of others and want to help them (Hermansen, Petrovski, & Boje, 2014; Musick & Wilson, 2008). We also know that volunteers claim they volunteer because they can participate in social relationships and because it makes them feel important (Fridberg & Henriksen, 2014; Musick & Wilson, 2008). However, can we be sure that people who work for pay do not do so for the same reasons? Perhaps nonvolunteers instead channel their urge for helping others into a paid career. Possibly, paid nurses working in hospices are even more caring, altruistic, and concerned for their patients than their unpaid colleagues. And possibly, nurses also like to work in a hospice for

similar reasons as volunteers. The claim is not that altruism, self-worth, and social relationships are without any explanatory value, but they also appear to matter for paid workers. So why is there this artificial divide?

Using the right “comparison group” may also present challenges to what we think we know about another area of volunteer research, that is, productive aging. Studies tell us that volunteering enhances health and life satisfaction in old age (Brown, Consedine, & Magai, 2005; Chambre, 1984; Onyx & Warburton, 2003) but do we know if *volunteering* in a hospice enhances health and life satisfaction more than *working for pay* in a hospice? Furthermore, these studies tend to assume that early withdrawal from the workforce is simply a matter of choice (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Pavlova & Silbereisen, 2012), while it is a repeated concern in a number of countries, Australia included, that age discrimination is a widespread barrier to (paid) work, and that unplanned retirement is linked to ageism in the workforce (Andreasen, 2014; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Thorsen et al., 2012). These considerations raise questions about whether it is reasonable to compel these seemingly “unproductive” aging people to enter into unpaid work if what they really wanted and needed was paid work.

The next and final discussion propels attention to the basic but important fact that volunteering is indeed a form of free labor and therefore has some things (although not all) in common with other forms of unpaid labor, such as slavery and feudalism, as well as more contemporary reinventions of unpaid work, such as internships, job placements, and workfare.

A Form of Free Labor

While free labor is not problematized to a great extent in the volunteering literature, researchers with other research interests are significantly more critical of the rise in free labor. It is worth considering the findings and arguments related to other forms of unpaid work that also constitute unpaid labor. Some particular forms of unpaid work, namely, internships, job placements, feminized labor, and compulsory unpaid work (workfare), deserve to be scrutinized and compared and maybe distinguished from volunteering. I have already touched on workfare and I will therefore zoom in on internships and feminized labor as other, comparable forms of unpaid labor.

We know free labor is increasingly a feature of labor markets in the form of internships. The rise of internships has attracted significant attention, not least internships in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Operating in the somewhat collapsed distinction between education and work, internships have become the norm across many occupations and professions. It is this difference between “wanting to do” and “being able to be paid to do” that makes volunteers comparable to internships. Both forms of unpaid labor allow organizations to utilize unpaid labor to accomplish more without having the expense of a salary. Also, internships—much like volunteer work—embody a desire on the part of the individual to be emancipated from the drudgery of labor itself (Carrotworkers’ Collective and Precarious Workers Brigade, 2012).

As they are elsewhere, internships are common in Australia. A recent survey by the Department of Employment indicated that 58% of respondents aged 18 to 29 had participated in some kind of unpaid work experience (Oliver, McDonald, Stewart, & Hewitt, 2016). However, mandatory internships are only one aspect of the push to do unpaid work. Even if not forced, in advanced capitalist society dominated by the ethos of neoliberalism, individuals are increasingly *expected* to be self-disciplined, socially responsible, and committed to their work. They are expected to work not because they must but because they should be seen to enjoy going to work. We “put great value in overworked bodies, self-investment and responsibility,” as the Carrotworkers’ Collective and Precarious Workers Brigade (2012) put it. By appealing to these norms, it is not difficult for organizations to obtain more work than is being paid for—whether it is called internships, placements, or volunteering.

It is also worth considering arguments made and repeated by feminists: When it comes to feminized labor, there is a consistent inability to fully acknowledge the productive value of it and to pay accordingly. Many efforts by second-wave feminists went into identifying and conceptualizing women’s work as productive labor (Borchhorst & Siim, 2002; Dahl, 2010; Hernes, 1987; Holst, 2006; Kittay, 2001; Waring, 1988). In stark contrast to the notion of choice in the volunteering literature, a central argument in feminist writings on care is the existence of an ideology of altruism that compels women to provide their services without getting anything in return, a notion often referred to as “compulsory altruism” (Land & Rose, 1985). That “money drives out love”—that workers should be motivated by the good they do, not by the money they earn—is an argument that is almost endemic to all care work (Chua & Clegg, 1990, p. 148), even if a highly contested argument (Meagher, 2007). It appears that these kinds of perceptions run like an undercurrent in the volunteering literature, too.

Concluding Comments

The main aim of this article is to problematize some of the assumptions that researchers and policy makers make about volunteering and point to the ways in which these assumptions make it difficult to see that volunteering is foremost a form of unpaid labor. We need to consider whether the particular term, *volunteering*, makes it harder to see this form of labor for what it really is. It appears to me that we need a new language and new analytical tools to separate volunteering from “choice” and from the relationships in the informal spheres, to link volunteering more closely to paid work while also reflecting on how unpaid work is embedded in paid work structures.

I suggest that a simple matrix according to *formal–informal* and *paid–unpaid* distinctions provides a better way forward. By using such a basic schema, it is possible to investigate the boundaries between unpaid, formalized work and other forms of paid and unpaid, formal and informal types of work in relation to other forms of the *same kind* of domain, rather than across domains. Thus, I suggest that studies would benefit from narrowing their focus to one form of unpaid labor and relate it directly to the

settings, actors, logics, and discourses that belong to that specific field of work, rather than reaching across and comparing it with other forms of volunteering. Only then can we start to see the power structures that are built into different forms of paid and unpaid work. Taken together, the six discussion points are meant to increase discussion as well as reflection on own practices and to trigger a new research agenda in the study of volunteering, a research agenda that pays more attention to the links between waged and unwaged work.

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