Researching the psychological contact of volunteers

The limited amount of previous research into the psychological contract of volunteers has usually adopted a positivist methodology, adapting measures from studies of paid employees. For example: Liao-Troth (2001, 2005), Farmer and Fedor (1999, 2001), Starnes (2007), Kim et al. (2009) and O’Donohue and Nelson (2009). This has been heavily influenced by Rousseau & Tijoriwala’s (1998) seminal paper. However, this research has failed to explore the psychological contract as socially constructed; influenced by the expectations of both volunteers and managers about the nature of volunteering, in contrast to paid employment. The managerialist agenda of previous research has undervalued juxtaposing the perspectives of managers and volunteers and has explored conflicts only as a reflection of misunderstandings, rather than as potentially reflecting a conflict of interests.

It is proposed that the psychological contract of volunteers could be valuably researched adapting the social constructionist approach of Herriot et al (1997), who used interviews to explore ‘critical incidents’, as perceived by employers and employees.

Such research would build on an exploratory study (Nichols and Ojala, 2009), work on employer sponsored volunteering, and fits well with the methodological strengths of Management School staff. The psychological contract is likely to vary between volunteers in different organisations. The choice of organisation to research will depend on access, but the proposed supervisors of this study have contacts with a range of volunteer organisations. The research would build on a critical view of the dominant approach to researching the psychological contract (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). It will contribute to understanding of the management of volunteers which to date can be criticised as merely adapting principles from the management of employees (Schulz, et al, 2011).

Propositions about the psychological contract of volunteers which could be explored by the research include:

- Volunteers will expect greater autonomy within their psychological contract than do employees.
- Volunteers will expect a higher relational component in their psychological contract than do employees.
- For volunteers, the experience of volunteering may well be a contrast to that of employment in the respects above.
- Volunteers may perceive their relationship with their manager or organization as having elements of consensus or conflict.
- Employees’ perception of paid work as characterised by conflict or consensus might influence their expectations of being managed as volunteers.
- The ideological currency of the contract will be very important to volunteers as volunteering is propelled by personal values.
- Volunteers who understand volunteering as predominantly unpaid work, activism, or serious leisure, will value different components of the psychological contract.
- The management of volunteers involves understanding the volunteers’ psychological contract; the subjective meaning of their volunteering.
Volunteer managers have to understand differences between managing volunteers and employees and adapt their management style accordingly. Failure to do so will create a conflict.

The psychological contract will vary between different types of volunteer organization. For example, one would expect it to be different in a small organizations run entirely by volunteers, with an flat management structure and egalitarian ethos; compared to a large organizations run by paid staff.


The supervisory team are Jon Burchell and Geoff Nichols. Jon’s main interest is employer supported volunteering and Geoff’s are volunteers in sport. Either could be contacted for an informal discussion.

Details of their research are on the Management School web site.
http://www.shef.ac.uk/management/staff/profile/nichols.html
http://www.shef.ac.uk/management/staff/profile/burchell.html