

## **Consuming values in a social market: making choices about volunteering and non-volunteering**

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### **Abstract**

Researchers have examined how many people get involved in formal voluntary action; who is most likely to do so; and, assess what benefit people feel they gain. Few have considered why people choose to champion one cause over another and why some people choose not to volunteer. This theoretical article draws on anthropological analysis by Mary Douglas on consumption to argue that when people choose to volunteer or not, decisions are affected by deeply embedded cultural factors. The analysis provides insights into the limits of what researchers can know about the motivation to volunteer and how people choose causes. It also questions assumptions about the potential to increase the volunteer workforce because people find it difficult to give entirely open answers to questions about why they choose not to volunteer.

### **Key words**

Voluntary action, cultural conservatism, civil society, consumption

### **Introduction**

Voluntary action is lauded in Western societies because of its positive contribution to building social capital and the maintenance or strengthening of civil society (Blond, 2010; Norman, 2010; Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000). Researchers generally approach this issue by exploring the social and economic 'characteristics' of those who are most and least likely to volunteer. Using categories such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, faith, place, and so on, it is shown that certain groups of people are attracted to particular types of voluntary activity and measurements are made on the comparative likelihood to volunteer and how much of it people will do. Such work can produce valuable insights, many of which are of interest to policy makers who want to increase levels of voluntary activity in order to increase levels of social engagement, build social capital and strengthen civil society.

Researchers have examined what categories of people are more likely to volunteer, but few have explored theoretically or empirically how people choose to

champion one cause over another and why some people do not volunteer. This article draws upon theoretical analysis which has its origins in the study of consumption. It is argued that the choice of one cause over another is mediated by personal interest and values which are, in turn, underpinned by deeply embedded cultural influences. Choices are culturally bounded, we argue, for a number of reasons which means that some issues are available for consideration as legitimate foci of voluntary activity whilst others are not.

This article develops aspects of the work of anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1997) who has argued that when people go shopping and choose one product over another, they are making wider cultural decisions about the kind of society that they want to live in. According to Douglas, choices are made in both active and passive ways. Deeply embedded attachments to cultural values tend to go largely unrecognised, but have significant impact on consumer choice. Choices can also be made for explicit and implicit reasons. On the explicit side, people choose to buy something because they think they will benefit directly – not just in the sense that they will have a warmer coat, but because they may benefit by impressing significant others. On the implicit side, Douglas uses the term ‘cultural hostility’ to show people may confirm their value position by *not* buying goods or services. As Douglas puts it ‘people do not know what they want, but they are very clear about what they do not want’ (1997: 18). This suggests a deeply conservative and negative process, but Douglas argues that it is a positive process because it represents an expression of cultural allegiance. In this article we develop Douglas's notion of cultural refusal in the context of volunteering and ask how people might go about the process of ‘shopping around’ for social values. We contend that, as observed in the consumer market, people who give their time to social causes may do so for cultural reasons that they may be more or less aware of.

This article does not draw upon empirical evidence to make its case. Instead, it is concerned with conceptual explanations and explores the consequences of these for future empirical work. It will be argued in the conclusion that the conceptual analysis is useful from a policy perspective as it may help policy makers develop a more realistic viewpoint of what the limits of voluntary action are – and to recognise that formal voluntary action is but one form of contribution to the maintenance of a strong civil society. The conceptual analysis will also help to inform future directions in empirical analysis of voluntary action by identifying new areas and approaches to analysis which have previously gone unexplored.

In the first section of the article we briefly review the problems associated with the definition of voluntary action and ask why it is lauded by government. The second section provides analysis of a range of factors which may affect attitudes about voluntary action across three dimensions: collective versus individual choice; grounded versus abstract motivations; and, instrumentalism versus altruism. The third section asks how people choose whether or not to volunteer for particular causes. In the conclusion, the policy implications of the analysis are discussed together with analysis of the prospects and limits of future empirical research on volunteering and non-volunteering.

### **What is formal volunteering and why is it lauded by government?**

There is little agreement nationally, let alone internationally, on how to define volunteering and less still on how to measure how much of it people do. Defining what counts as volunteering is difficult, with disagreements over, for example,

whether or not informal and private caring class as volunteering, and if any remunerated activities can be included. Wilson argues that 'Volunteering means any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organization' (2000: 215), and "volunteering can be seen as an extension of private activity in the public sphere" (200: 216). Clary and Snyder differentiate *spontaneous* helping, which refers to activity in the aid of, for example, friends, family or neighbours, from *planned* helping which involves more deliberate and scheduled activity (1998: 1517). However, Anheier and Salomon's definition is framed in its societal context:

volunteering is much more than the giving of time for some particular purpose. In fact, as a cultural and economic phenomenon, volunteering is part of the way societies are organised, how they allocate social responsibilities, and how much engagement and participation they expect from citizens (1999: 43).

This definition provides a useful starting point, but we do not want to be distracted by debates on how much volunteering goes on, nor to dwell on which categories of individuals are most likely to volunteer (for useful analyses of these issues, see: Wilson, 2000; Anheier and Salomon, 1999; Plagnol and Huppert, 2010). A more useful starting point is to ask - why is voluntary action lauded in Western societies? The answer to this question, crudely put, is that unlike non-Western societies - where individualism is more likely be subordinated to the clan, family, faith or state; people in the West necessarily assume much personal responsibility for defining their beliefs and values in the process of shaping their identities (MacPherson, 1962; Taylor, 1992; Hintze, 1975; Weber, 1976). In this cultural context, it is not surprising that the relationship between state and civil society is one of the central preoccupations of Western political philosophy.

Civil society is the location within which most formal voluntary action takes place. Formal volunteers contribute to the governance of organisations (as trustees, committee members or directors), they help with fundraising or campaigning, or they get involved with front-line work. Consensus on an exact definition of civil society is elusive, but most commentators agree that civil society is different from the state and necessarily must be separate. As Held notes: '...the "separation" of the state from civil society must be a central feature of any democratic political order' (Held, 1996: 314). Most theorists who concern themselves with Western capitalist societies (with the exception of anarchists and Marxists) agree the state is necessary to maintain and protect the realm of freedom within which civil society can operate. As Heywood notes, the state:

necessarily reflects sovereign, compulsory and coercive authority. Civil society, on the other hand, embraces those areas of life in which individuals are free to exercise choice and make their own decisions; in other words, it is a realm of voluntary and autonomous associations (1994: 43).

As an entity, civil society is sustained through the existence of relationships which are built on trust and reciprocity rather than formal or legal constraints. It provides informal mechanisms for conflict resolution, problem solving and co-operation. In sum, civil society provides the arena within which voluntary action flourishes, often to the benefit of society as a whole but also to the benefit of individuals and interest

groups which both gain and can inject social capital into civil society through their association.

There is much evidence to show that governments invest in the promotion of voluntary action in Western societies. In the UK, for example, from 1997 – 2010 the New Labour government invested significant resource to encourage more people to volunteer in the UK. Volunteering was thought to be an indicator of the depth of social capital. To find out the extent of volunteering and to assess if government investment was increasing levels of volunteering, intensive research was commissioned to produce reliable comparable measures in different areas (Cabinet Office, 2007). Following the formation of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010, enthusiasm for volunteering has not diminished – although it is evident that government financial investment in its encouragement, support and management may reduce significantly. Volunteering is an important element of the government's aim of building a 'Big Society'. The principal behind the Big Society agenda is significantly to reduce the size of the state and allow civil society to flourish.

The Big Society was intended to be contrasted with the big state that New Labour had advanced, and among other things was intended as an endorsement of the positive and proactive role that voluntary action and social enterprise could play in promoting improved social inclusion and 'fixing Britain's broken society'. By 'returning' power from the state to the citizen, social change could be put back in the hands of people and communities.' (Alcock, 2010: 380)

Much of the underlying thinking behind the Big Society in the UK is the belief that there is an untapped resource of people power (Norman, 2010; Blond, 2010; Office for Civil Society, 2010; Her Majesty's Government, 2011).

In the recent *Giving Green Paper* the size of this resource is estimated: '26 per cent of non-volunteers (~3.3m people) are willing to start giving time through volunteering.' (Cabinet Office, 2010: 20). But are people being honest when they say that they would be willing to volunteer? We are sceptical about this. To refuse the option of undertaking voluntary action may be perceived as personally discrediting – so it is not surprising that people shop around for justifiable explanations: that they have too little time; that they have not been asked; that they are put off by red tape; and so on.

Many people give time because they want to help, but there are also specific motivations which differ from person to person, and recognising this diversity is important. If we can do this, our analysis suggests that more people will give more of their time (Green Paper 2010: 20).

But the empirical basis upon which it claimed that 'people will give more of their time' is not particularly strong. Indeed, recent data from the Citizenship Survey indicates that levels of formal volunteering at least once a month has fallen to 33% of the population – at its lowest rate since 2001 (Communities and Local Government, 2011).

**Figure 1. Motivations for volunteering and consumption compared**

Consumption	Voluntarism
<b>‘Collectivist’ versus/and/or ‘Individualist’</b>	
<p><i>Collectivist</i>: consumption affected by cultural conservatism (e.g. ethnicity, class or gender based consumption choices)</p> <p><i>Individualist</i>: imperative to be 'different' from others through consumption (e.g. consumer choices to mark out individual identity)</p>	<p><i>Collectivist</i>: strongly encouraged to volunteer by peers (e.g. by long-term memberships of a church or other society)</p> <p><i>Individualist</i>: motivated to volunteer by personal interest in issues (e.g. non class/gender/age/society influenced interests - such as ecological issues or animal rights)</p>
<b>‘Grounded’ versus/and/or ‘Abstract’</b>	
<p><i>Experientially grounded</i>: consumption led by fundamental 'needs' (e.g. warmth, shelter, hunger, mobility, etc.)</p> <p><i>Non-experiential/abstract</i>: consumption led by interest in development of identity (e.g. style of clothes, house, car, food, etc.)</p>	<p><i>Experientially grounded</i>: volunteering motivated by personal experience (e.g. health problems, local environmental issues, crime, etc.)</p> <p><i>Non-experiential-abstract</i>: volunteering motivated by abstract interest (e.g. famine, torture, ecological threats in 'other' places)</p>
<b>‘Instrumental’ versus/and/or ‘Altruistic’</b>	
<p><i>Instrumentalism</i> buying products to enhance sense of identity (i.e. increasing self-worth and self-esteem and status in eyes of others)</p> <p><i>Altruism</i>: consumption motivated by empathy for others (e.g. self-denial of luxury goods, ethical shopping, buying 'fairtrade' products to help</p>	<p><i>Instrumentalism</i>: volunteering motivated by personal gain (e.g. enhancement of CV, improved social capital etc.)</p> <p><i>Altruism</i>: volunteering motivated by empathy for others (e.g. even though it may be emotionally demanding on threatening to the self)</p>

### What factors affect people’s attitudes about voluntary action?<sup>1</sup>

We argue, following Douglas, that when people choose to get involved in voluntary action, they are making decisions about the kind of person they want to be, the kind of life they want to lead and the kind of society they want to live in. The extent to which people think this through in a conscious way is not known. Nor is much known about how people choose between social causes in a crowded social market. Much can be learned from the sociological and anthropological study of consumption to make sense of this. It in order to help systemise our thoughts on the similarities between conventional choices made about the consumption of products and choices made

<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with individuals’ free choice in volunteering, consequently, the analysis does not include discussion of ‘compulsory volunteering’ schemes or ‘employee supported volunteering’.

about volunteering and social causes, Figure 1 is divided into three sections. These sections explore a range of 'binary opposites' to simplify the scope of the discussion. The analysis demonstrates, however, that exploring polarised categorical distinctions of this kind reveals more complexity in the process of decision making rather than simplicity.

### *Collective and individual choice*

Consumer choices are not purely individualistic whims, they are mediated by cultural, social and economic factors. For example, in the early to mid twentieth century, social class and gender impacted heavily on patterns of consumer choice (Bocock, 1993; Corrigan, 1997; Edwards, 2000; Falk and Campbell, 1997; Hearn and Roseneil, 1999; Lury, 1996; Shields; 1992). Consumer behaviour has become more complex in the last few decades – producing 'niche markets' which businesses are able to exploit. That stated, patterns of consumption continue to be affected by collectivist drives – that is, where people attempt, through patterns of consumption, to align themselves with others in an established, proximate or desirable social category. Choosing to volunteer is also affected by collectivist drives. Gender and class indicated the likelihood of voluntary action in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – with older, middle-class women particularly likely to choose this option. Other collectivist factors also come into play, particularly faith-based volunteering activity (Wilson, 2000).

As post-modernist theory suggests, there has been a shift from collectivist to individualist patterns of consumption (Featherstone, 1990, 1991). Undoubtedly many people feel pressure to be more individualistic but this is not to say that people find this an easy option. As Bauman (1988) has noted, too much choice can produce anxiety amongst consumers. Consequently, businesses adopt marketing and advertising techniques to reassure people that they are making the 'right' choices: the aim being to counteract the negative consequences of making the 'wrong' choices which may lead people to feel ostracised.

Volunteering choices can be shaped by awareness, encouragement or pressure to take part in activities that are socially sanctioned (or imposed) by the collectivity. Faith-based volunteering has a particularly strong influence, evidenced historically by, for example, the work of the Salvation Army, or the Christian Housewives Association – but secular organisations such as the Women's Institute have been influential too. However, a stronger emphasis on individualism can produce resistance to such pressures. Choosing *not* to engage in practices preferred by an established social reference group, in a similar way to denial of the conventional consumption choices, can be a marker of individualism. As with the case with sub-cultural groups (i.e. through the form of talk, deportment, wearing of 'unconventional' clothes, hair styles, accessories, and so on to separate themselves from the norm), volunteers can upset the expectations of significant others by engaging in voluntary action with, for example, socially excluded groups – such as those suffering from AIDs, asylum seekers and refugees. Similarly, people may upset significant others by choosing to do voluntary action which involves a measure of adventure but is also clearly dangerous. Or people may choose forms of voluntary action which are politically motivated to challenge the status quo.

The choice of such opportunities for volunteering may offend some, but lead to inclusion in other social groups (and as in the case of sub-cultural consumption practices) this is likely to be motivated by a desire to become a part of a group. Some people are, of course, genuinely eccentric and do not give a hoot about what other

people think about what they believe in, how they look and what they do. For the majority, however, there is little point in refusing conformity if it results in complete social isolation or exclusion (Chapman et al., 1999).

#### *Grounded and abstract motivations to consume*

Some forms of consumption are motivated by immediate needs such as food, shelter, safety and warmth. In affluent societies, such considerations are of lesser importance for the majority – hence the immense efforts of capitalism to ‘produce’ consumers to create new markets. This conceptual distinction usefully distinguishes between survival *needs* and *wants* which are primarily associated with identity formation (Marcuse, 1964; Lodziak, 2003). To own a functional cooker is a *need*. To desire a pink-enamelled cast-iron cooking range is a *want* which, for those who are enticed to own one, believe that it will raise their esteem in the eyes of significant others - either because people in their reference group already have one and so they feel the need to ‘keep up’, or for reasons of ‘conspicuous consumption’ – where significant others will envy them (Veblen, 2007).

Volunteering choices may also be needs motivated, especially when a desire to support others is grounded in personal experience. Examples may include parents who have a disabled child and volunteer at a group which supports these children. To give support to others which is grounded in personal experience will constitute, we expect, a significant proportion of the time voluntarily contributed in society, although we are not aware of any reliable statistics to support this assertion.

Volunteering for ‘abstract’ causes may be more likely to be the preserve of those whose understanding or empathy for social issues lay beyond their immediate personal experience. By volunteering to serve an abstract cause, people may become involved in fundraising activity for, perhaps, relief funds for disaster or famine victims, or for those who suffer human rights abuse in despotic regimes. Similarly, they may be more directly involved in campaigning against the indignities societies impose on people or animals, or the damage done to the environment in ‘other’ places. Whether their efforts are valued lies in the judgement (or prejudice) of the significant other – and therefore, the choice to become involved in such activity needs to be considered carefully. To volunteer for Amnesty International may signify ethical of moral superiority, political radicalism and/or intellectual sophistication to some onlookers – and incomprehension by others. Choosing an abstract cause may signify a stronger instrumental interest in identity formation than choices associated with grounded causes. But this is by no means certain and requires empirical exploration.

#### *Instrumental and altruistic motivation to volunteer*

All consumers have finite economic resources. Consequently, they must choose between products or services. Economists argue that consumers weigh up the ‘opportunity costs’ of one choice over another. So they may decide to buy a dishwasher to achieve one set of instrumental benefits (such as: more hygienic pots and pans, avoid a job they do not want to do, keep up with the Jones’, etc.) rather than a new television (which might have a clearer picture, a bigger screen or impress their friends). As consumers have become more affluent, making such choices has become a more sophisticated process. This is due to the development of an increasingly close link between consumption and identity formation.

When social class was a dominant influence on consumer choice, as noted above, the link between choice and personal identity was less pronounced. This is because consumption was used primarily to confirm identity – rather than to challenge or change it. When a consumer makes instrumental choices, therefore, the import is that they are seeking to achieve personal benefit. If a consumer wants to buy a fancy car, it is not just a question of having a more comfortable, reliable and faster vehicle to get the from A-to-B, but rather it is a statement about who they are, what they have achieved, and where they are placed in what they perceive to be a status hierarchy of car owners.

Altruistic consumer choices, by contrast, suggest that a wider social or environmental benefit is the objective. For the consumer who always chooses more expensive fair trade coffee, they deny themselves something else. In so doing, they may feel better about themselves. Altruistic consumers can also deny themselves products or services as a positive choice – and by refusing to consume they can make what they believe to be a positive difference to the world.

Making choices is a complex process because altruistic and instrumental motivations interact. By investing in expensive photovoltaic cells on the roof a house it can be claimed that this is an altruistic act to help the environment. It is also an instrumental choice serving both economic interests (saves money on heating bills) and status interests (by impressing people with environmental values). To suggest that instrumentalism and altruism sit at each end of a continuum is, therefore, conceptually invalid.

Much attention is given in a growing academic literature on the motivations of volunteers and the tension between altruistic and instrumental objectives (Clary and Snyder 1998, 1999; Wilson, 2000; for recent studies, see: Holmes, 2009; Meer, 2007; MacNeela, 2008; Carpenter, 2010). Less analytical treatments of this topic tend to follow the populist view that voluntary activity *should* be primarily driven by altruistic motivations; hence the delight, tabloid journalists take in revealing that the altruistic acts of celebrity volunteers were transparently instrumental attempts to seek publicity.

More complex conceptual treatment of this topic recognises that altruistic and instrumental motivations are linked. Clary and Snyder (1999) argue, for example, that volunteering serves several functions for the individual. These include value-based and other altruistic motives and also reasons of self interest such as: personal understanding and growth; skills and career development; and, social connectedness and advantage. People also volunteer, they argue, for ‘protective’ reasons, such as the reduction of guilt or to address personal problems. In sum, Clary and Snyder conclude that motivations for volunteering are multi-faceted and reject a false dichotomy between instrumental or altruistic motives.

Anheier and Salomon (1999), also recognise a mix of altruistic and instrumental motives, but emphasise the importance of social obligation, especially in faith groups when studying how people ‘choose’ to volunteer (see also, for example, Ruiter and de Graaf, 2006; Becker and Dhingra, 2001; Borgonovi, 2008). That stated, much of the research on how people choose whether to volunteer or not are rooted in a largely unquestioned belief that volunteering is a good thing for the individual and for society and is therefore, fundamentally, a rational choice. By implication, those who choose not to volunteer are tarnished by an implicit value-based accusation that they care less about the world than those who do.



### How do people choose whether or not to volunteer?

Very few researchers have addressed the issue of non-volunteering. Anheier and Salomon (1999), are an exception and have identified three main reasons: firstly, a lack of time; secondly, because they had never been asked; and, thirdly, because they had never thought about it. Such an argument only seems to make sense if it is taken as read that volunteering is a good thing and that, by implication, people who do not are in some sense socially or morally lacking. Taking a step back from the context within which such questions are asked, it becomes apparent that this issue is deeply culturally loaded – and for those people who do not do voluntary action the question could be interpreted as threatening or impertinent. The likelihood is that they do not want to discredit themselves so they will tick the box that confirms that they ‘don’t have time’, ‘didn’t get asked’, ‘got put off by red tape’, and such.

In his detailed review and analysis of the literature, Wilson (2000) gleaned clues about those people who do not volunteer against the evidence on the characteristics of those who do volunteer. He shows that a higher level of education (and by definition, higher socio-economic status) is amongst the most important predictors of volunteering because such people tend to have empathy and awareness of social problems and because they tend to be more confident because they are literate, articulate, politically astute and successful. But of course, many people with precisely these characteristics do not volunteer – the question is, why not?

It may often be the case that *not* volunteering is a legitimate choice. The emotional and time investment of the committed social worker, fire-fighter, police officer, teacher, care worker or nurse might well make them *not* think about volunteering as an option, they might not feel that they have the time, but in reality, they may *need* ‘down time’. What is more, their compassionate peers who do volunteer might not ask them because they know that their friend has contributed more already than they ever can. Not volunteering can sometimes be, presumably, entirely justifiable.

The available evidence suggests that the less well educated and those in lower socio-economic status groups are less likely to volunteer. But to what extent is this a statistical anomaly created by researchers who have failed to get people to recognise or accept that their informal contributions to community life could be ‘classified’ as voluntary action. We cannot rule out the possibility that people might not *want* to associate with the term volunteering on the grounds that middle-class ‘do-gooding’ or ‘charity badge, bangle and tee-shirt wearing’ is anathema to them. It is not that long ago, after all, that the working classes in the UK were trenchant in their avoidance of charity (see, for example, Hewitt, 1999). Formal voluntary action can be conceived as a middle-class preoccupation because it serves more privileged people well by reinforcing their culturally super-ordinate position over others. It is not inconceivable that if charities are increasingly involved in direct delivery of support to the very poorest because the state withdraws from such activity, as Big Society philosophy suggests, that attitudes about not getting involved in formal volunteering may harden.

Assessing the legitimacy of an act of charity (through volunteering or giving) in an objective way is not possible for the academic observer – because the choice of one cause over another is value based. In any one society, there may be a very wide range of value positions from which to choose (and arguably, many others yet to invent). Within one society, there may be a plethora of legitimate choices which are commonly accepted, even if they are not all equally valued. One person may respect

another person's choice (and right) to volunteer at, for example, a sanctuary for stray cats whilst not sharing (or even understanding) that person's value position at all.

Ethical reasons might well dissuade researchers from exploring some issues empirically, as will be discussed at the end of the article, but it is important not to be dissuaded from debating how people make such choices, and what the impact of these choices may have for themselves as individuals, for the cause they choose to champion, and for civil society more broadly defined.

If Douglas (1997) is right in her assertion that consumers are much clearer in their minds about what they do not want, as opposed to what they do want, then these questions could form the basis for an exploration of how people refuse or choose to support causes. In Figure 2 we present a number of reasons why people may choose not to volunteer or choose between options. In generating this conceptual taxonomy, the notion of 'cultural refusal' (or the rejection of the unknown or illegitimate), is used to help understand why people choose one cause over another. We do not necessarily argue that this is a clearly articulated or even conscious process of making choices – but rather may signify an intuitive response based primarily on received prejudices.

**Figure 2. Prejudicial reasons for not supporting causes through volunteering**

<b>Reason for not supporting a social cause through volunteering</b>	<b>Possible explanation for non-support through volunteering</b>
Inconsequential	That the social cause is of no real 'social significance'.
Illegitimate/undeserving	That nothing should be done because it is the 'fault' of the people who have the problem
Invisible	That the issue is not recognised at all due to 'ignorance' or 'cultural blindness'
Impossible	That nothing significant can be done about the problem. It's 'the way of the world'
Transferable	That it is the 'government's responsibility' to deal with this issue
Incomprehensible	That the problem is known, but simply 'not understood' for cultural reasons
Indulgent	That this problem is not worthy of further attention, 'enough has been done'

Some issues may not be recognised as options for voluntary activity at all because they are socially *invisible*. For example, in the immediate post-second war period, homelessness in many British cities was a problem due to the destruction of swathes of residential areas during the blitz. The state responded with a massive building programme. This led to the popular belief that homelessness had been solved (and for the few who chose to opt out as 'tramps' were romanticised as 'gentlemen of the road'). In reality, homelessness remained a pernicious, albeit hidden, social problem. The visibility of the issue, famously, re-emerged into national consciousness in 1966 following the broadcast of Ken Loach's BBC film, *Cathy Come Home*.

To define a cause as '*inconsequential*', would seem to require the onlooker to marshal and analyse personal, cultural, social, economic and political criteria together to make a decision. On the surface, this may seem to suggest that people must go through a complex set of thought processes. Douglas's analysis of the consumer suggests, however, that in many cases – such decisions are easily made – because moral positions are culturally bounded. British public concern about animal rights, indicated by the establishment of the RSPCA in 1824, is a case in point. From the perspective of onlookers from most other European countries, however, this national fixation with animal welfare (often, arguably, at the expense of human welfare) was incomprehensible (Ritvo, 1994, Harrison, 1973).

Some issues may be dismissed as a choice because it is *impossible* to do anything about it. Public recognition and response to some issues, for example, famine relief have a chequered history. Many dedicated people have contributed directly in such issues through the VSO for many years, others campaign or fundraise for such causes. Others may dismiss the issue because 'it is the way of the world'. Just as fashions change in patterns of consumption, social issues can occupy different positions in the list of priorities in a social market. Often championed by people with vision and courage, issues that have been ignored or dismissed can be brought back onto the social radar - as is the case when Bob Geldoff created *Live Aid*.<sup>2</sup>

Support for some causes is refused by *transferring* responsibility for its solution to others. Such arguments may emerge when it is believed that the responsibility for dealing with an issue lies with government. This is a political hot potato at present in the UK where government argues that role and size of the state should be reduced and that the Big Society should step up to fill the gaps. A particularly ambitious proposal from government is that communities should set up their own voluntarily managed Free Schools rather than relying on the state for provision. Polls of public opinion tend to suggest that this is not an option that appeals too many and that it stretches the boundaries of voluntary action too far (Politics Home, 2010; see also Beadle, 2010).

Judging a cause to be *illegitimate* requires a decision to be made. This issue could be fudged by claiming that the social worth of one cause against another is decided on the basis of a comparative judgement of impact of investment of time. However, in our taxonomy, we state that prejudice inform the decision. Refusing to consider voluntary action for an organisation which specifically helps an ethnic group about which a person feels strong prejudices would be an obvious example – but it could equally be based on class or gender and so on. Without over-labouring the point – an empirical research project may well struggle to persuade most respondents to account for their lack of support to a particular cause on prejudicial grounds. People may try to conceal prejudice by claiming that the beneficiaries of the cause are *undeserving* of their help. Depending upon the onlooker's point of view, almost any cause could be dismissed in this way. For example, some may reject the prospect of supporting people with HIV through voluntary action on the grounds that they 'deserved' to be ill due to their homosexuality. Or that volunteering to teach asylum seekers English is inappropriate because it is suspected that such people's *real* reason for migration is economic.

To state that an issue is *incomprehensible* (as opposed to being invisible), and thereby unworthy of investment of time also requires the onlooker to make a decision.

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<sup>2</sup> Live Aid was a one-off event, but the imagination behind it spurned other, longer-lasting appeals in the UK including *Comic Relief*, *Sport Relief* and *Children in Need*.

While respondents in a survey or interview might attempt to blur the line between illegitimacy and incomprehensibility to avoid admission of prejudice – but in definitional terms they are different. Incomprehensibility is about not understanding the cause. An example might be incomprehension of a newly recognised medical condition which, it is claimed, has particular behavioural or social consequences. Charities or societies which support invisible disabilities provide useful examples - such as dyslexia, ADHD or Asperger's syndrome which have been slow to win public acceptance. Once known, such syndromes can still attract prejudicial response when it is claimed, for example, that they are 'middle class' medical conditions used to disguise low intelligence or to account for naughtiness.

Judging a cause to be *indulgent*, requires a comparative judgement on relative worth. Some causes receive a lot of negative national press attention because it is claimed that they are indulgent. The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, may be dismissed in this way by some members of the general public. The dismissal is partly prejudicial – that the beneficiaries of the cause are generally wealthy (and that the ticket prices should represent the full cost of their entertainment). To volunteer to support artistic causes may be judged by some as indulgent because the motivation to do so may be transparently instrumental (either because it is a disguised leisure activity or because volunteering is a well-trodden path into employment in the arts sector). The definitional point we make is that choosing to give time to an indulgent cause deprives more worthy causes of support.

All of these examples are given to illustrate the point that the reasons why people may choose to, or not to volunteer to support particular causes are complex. In the absence of reliable evidence, the observations we make and examples we have chosen are given merely to illustrate points and are not presented to prioritise or make judgements about the value of particular causes. Gathering evidence to find out how attitudes, prejudicial or otherwise, impact upon the choice of causes that people may volunteer to support (or whether they choose to volunteer at all) would be a very difficult thing to do. In the conclusion, we explain why.

## Conclusion

In many Western societies, governments have serious concerns about disengagement from civil society and diminishing social capital due to increasing consumer led 'selfish individualism' (Jochum, 2003; Mayer, 2003; Narayan, 1999; Office for National Statistics, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998, 2001). It has become an article of faith that 'active citizenship' through formal voluntary action creates a better society. Consequently, governments have been keen to collect evidence on the extent of voluntary action to provide an indicator of the depth of social capital.

On the basis of the theoretical analysis in this article, we are not wholly convinced that non-participation in voluntary action is *necessarily* indicative of a weakening (and certainly not a breakdown) of social ties. We have argued that existing data on the extent of voluntary action and the explanation given for its practice or avoidance do not provide a complete explanation. Many people, we suspect, do a great deal for the benefit of society by going the 'extra mile' in their day-to-day lives as employees, business owners, parents, neighbours and so on.

There is a tendency amongst its advocates to raise the social value of voluntary action above other forms of social engagement. But we have argued that paid employment, family and neighbourhood life, leisure and consumption can, conceivably, serve the same purpose. All of these aspects of social life, presumably,

also have the potential to weaken societal wellbeing. It has also been argued that a distinction drawn between passive and active citizenship may be misleading. As Figure 3 suggests, active citizenship through voluntary action *can* be a positive social force. But it can be destructive too if the purpose of that activity strengthens those social structures and relationships which ultimately gives more benefit to those who do voluntary action than those who are presumed to be the beneficiaries of it. If the outcome of some kinds of voluntary action were to reinforce deference and passivity in citizens living in meagre material circumstances and with limited choices for themselves and their families – then we might justifiably ask, whom is that voluntary action best serving?

**Figure 3. Active and passive citizenship**

‘Active’ citizenship	versus	‘Passive’ citizenship
<p><i>Positive aspects:</i> formal volunteers provide support to beneficiaries which may not otherwise be available to them and also strengthen social capital and civil society</p> <p><i>Negative aspects:</i> through their ideologically motivated actions formal volunteers may reinforce existing power relationships and constrain opportunities for others</p>		<p><i>Positive aspects:</i> non-volunteers may have provided much support to others through their everyday activities in employment, family or community life</p> <p><i>Negative aspects:</i> non-volunteers may become socially isolated and self-, family-, or class-oriented and undermine civil society</p>

In the article we have followed Douglas’s lead by accepting, in broad terms, that the decision processes surrounding the way people approach the conventional consumption of products or services is a positive process because it confirms patterns of social allegiance. But having examined the consumption of social values through commitment or non-commitment to voluntary action, we realise that this is a theory which needs to be qualified. In the context of choosing which social causes a person should or should not invest in we have uncovered positive reasons, but also potentially socially damaging reasons too. Cultural prejudices run deep and as this analysis has suggested, can influence people’s choices in conscious and unconscious ways.

The analysis in this article, we hope, will help to encourage empirical researchers in this field to explore the issue in more depth to increase understanding about voluntary action. But we accept, for methodological and ethical reasons, that there may be limits to what can be achieved. Exploring why people choose to do voluntary action for one cause and not another – or whether or not they volunteer at all, as this article has argued, is a difficult project. The problem facing researchers who wish seriously to explore the actions of volunteers and non-volunteers is to determine how to collect data which can accurately measure values and motivations. This is because, as is the case in conventional consumer choice, the underlying reasons for choices are complex, often contradictory and can be ‘unrecognised’ or ‘unknown’. Consequently, asking people in-depth questions to find out what their motivations to do, or not to do, voluntary action are, may confuse them or lead them to feel defensive or affronted. Choosing to, or not to do voluntary action – and choosing which cause to support - is not a benign topic.

The outcome of people's contributions to voluntary action (or its encouragement by charities or government) cannot therefore be interpreted, uncritically, as fundamentally or necessarily beneficial to societal interests. We do not argue, of course, that doing voluntary action is a bad thing – we have merely sought to achieve clarification of the way that its benefits and dis-benefits might be analysed. The arguments we have presented imply that policy debates about the social impact of voluntary action need to be less shallow. Recognition should be given to the possibility that those who engage in voluntary action may indirectly or directly benefit as much, or more, from their investment of time than those who are presumed to benefit. Similarly, more realistic expectations and estimations about the possibility or necessity of engaging current non-volunteers in formal voluntary activity need to be considered.

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