

The challenges of the new institutional environment: an Australian case study of older volunteers in the contemporary non-profit sector

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ABSTRACT

Increased emphasis on efficiency and regulation is changing the nature of the non-profit sector in western countries. In this paper, we explore the impact of these contemporary changes on older, more traditional volunteers. Specifically, we use neo-institutional theory as a framework to explore the micro-effect of these processes in one large, multi-service non-profit organisation in Australia. The findings of an ethnographic study are presented using an analytical template comprising: (1) the observational space; (2) the conversational order; (3) the content of talk; and (4) areas of resistance. Findings from these categories provided evidence of two institutional orders – one a traditional way of operating consistent with a charity model, and the other, a new, dominant approach driven by market forces. It was found that older, more traditional volunteers struggled to maintain the old order as well as to make the transition to the new order. If organisations are to benefit from a pool of potential volunteers and if older people are to benefit from the social and health advantages associated with productive ageing, there are important implications in these findings. Older people are able to make a successful transition to the new order, but organisations need to be more proactive in facilitating the change. In particular, organisations need to reject ageist cultures and practices, provide training and skills development, and to work collaboratively with older people.

KEY WORDS – older volunteers, charity, non-profit sector, neo-institutional theory.

Introduction

In western countries, the non-profit or third sector is a significant component of institutional life (Salamon and Anheier 1996). The sector has a central role in civil society between the state and the market, and is said to

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provide a buffer that protects vulnerable individuals from the excesses of the two (Wolfe 1989). Volunteers are important producers of social capital and are integral to the success and viability of the sector (Onyx, Leonard and Hayward Brown 2004; van Til 2000). Estimates for Australia, for example, indicate that volunteers give 836 million hours of their time to over 700,000 non-profit organisations (Department of Family and Community Services 2005). Such figures also show that, as in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, volunteer numbers tend to decline in later life, but that older volunteers give more time to their volunteer activities than any other age group (Department of Family and Community Services 2005; see also Davis Smith and Gay 2005, Narushima 2005; van Willigen 2000). This suggests the importance of older volunteers to the contemporary non-profit sector.

There is growing global evidence that the non-profit sector is facing strong external pressures to change the way it operates (Brown *et al.* 2000; Lyons 2001; Saul 2004). In particular, it has been argued that the imposition of the market forces that emphasise efficiency, as well as growing attention to regulation and risk management, are undermining the traditional institutional order of the sector (Brown *et al.* 2000). The implications of such changes are profound, and have the potential to impact significantly on the 5.2 million volunteers (34 per cent of the Australian population) who currently give their time to non-profit organisations (Department of Family and Community Services 2005).

This paper uses neo-institutional theory as a theoretical framework to explore the impact of change on older, traditional volunteers in a case study of one large, international and multi-service non-profit organisation in Australia. The use of neo-institutional theory is important as it allows examination of voluntarism and volunteers as key constituents and active agents in the non-profit sector's institutional context (Di Maggio and Powell 1991). It allows us to explore the impact of extraneous change on the institutional order, and specifically, on older, traditional volunteers. The paper begins with a brief review of the issues that face the contemporary non-profit sector in western countries.

The new institutional environment

The non-profit or third sector is undergoing fundamental and often disruptive changes in the ways it conducts its activities. These result from the sector embracing the values and approaches of the private market or, in short, becoming marketised (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Galaskiewicz

and Bielefeld 1998; Lyons 2001). Simultaneously, governments are reducing the size of the public sector and the value of contracted out services to the non-profit sector (Smith and Lipsky 1993). As government funding to the sector adopts quasi-market models, several dilemmas are being created for the many organisations that deliver human services (Lyons 1997). Generally, they are forced to compete for funding, which pressures them to adopt business practices and priorities (Gaston and Alexander 2001). Yet marketisation and the creation of a competitive environment create many tensions for a sector that was founded on civil society principles of collaboration and is staffed by volunteers (Eikenberry and Kløver 2004).

Such transformative change presents new challenges to the operation, structures and management of non-profit organisations (Saul 2004). Concurrent with the pressure to become more competitive, there are demands for the more professional organisation of volunteer activities. Governments are both funders and regulators of the sector, and dictate the conditions under which aspects of work are carried out (Lyons 2001). A new legislated regulatory environment has emerged, such as changes to workplace health and safety requirements, which is having a profound effect on organisations (Brown *et al.* 2000). The legal environment is becoming more complex and restrictive, resulting in the need for organisations to be actively involved in risk management and volunteer and client protection (McGregor-Lowndes 2003).

In addition to becoming risk conscious, external pressures are also challenging organisations to become much more highly regulated. Non-profit organisations are subject to increasing controls and regulation, at the same time as they are expected to become more efficient, flexible and responsive to changing needs (Brown *et al.* 2000). These environmental pressures are also leading to profound changes in the sector's social relations, with the new ethos requiring clearly-focused, instrumental-based interactions, and professional management. Distinctions between paid staff and volunteers can become blurred, leading to further tensions (Lie and Baines 2007). All these changes challenge traditional social relations in a sector that still comprises many charitable organisations staffed by volunteers as amateurs and altruists (Brown *et al.* 2000). The sector is highly dependent on volunteers, but as Lie and Baines (2007) have suggested, little is known about how these organisational changes impact upon the capacity and commitment of volunteers, and particularly those volunteers accustomed to working in a traditional institutional environment.

It has been suggested that one result of these changes is a split in the sector between a declining, traditional, 'charity' model and a new model

run on business lines and incorporating elements of social enterprise (McDonald and Mutch 2000; Zappala 2001). In the alternate models, volunteering is based on quite different motives, commitments and skills, with traditional volunteers engaging for affective rather than instrumental reasons, exhibiting relatively unbounded commitment, and motivated by a value system founded on the idea of devotion to the welfare of others (Brown *et al.* 2000; McDonald and Mutch 2000). As Zappala (2001) suggested, many of these volunteers are older, female, unskilled and not in the labour market. By contrast, new or social enterprise volunteers engage for largely instrumental reasons, such as seeking experience for employment or for status rewards, and exhibit specific and limited commitment to the organisation (Zappala 2001). The differences could be described as between a 'warm and fuzzy' and a more 'business-like' approach (McDonald and Mutch 2000).

Extraneous pressures on the non-profit sector are resulting in new forms of volunteering, which require changes in the organisational cultures of both staff and volunteers (Saul 2004). Previous studies have also shown that they also create various tensions and challenges for the sector (McDonald and Warburton 2003). There is, however, very little empirical evidence about the specific impact of these changes on older, traditional volunteers and their responses to change (Lie and Baines 2007). As authors such as Narushima (2005) suggest, however, the potential contribution of older people as volunteers merits more attention. Reacting to this gap in the literature and to explore these processes and the impact on older volunteers in some depth, this paper presents a case study of one large multi-service organisation in Australia.

The theoretical framework

To understand better the process and impact of organisational change on traditional volunteers, we used neo-institutional theory drawn from organisational sociology as a theoretical framework (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 1995). This theoretical perspective suggests the existence of distinct organisational fields or communities of organisations, which have a common meaning system, a shared normative perspective, and that exhibit distinct modes of organisation (Jepperson 1991; Scott 1995). Neo-institutional theory draws on this notion of institutions to explain the conditions and processes by which particular ways of organising come into being, stabilise and endure (Lowndes 1996). Organisational fields provide a socially-constructed blueprint for action that is generated and maintained through the interactions of the participants (Barley and Tolbert 1997).

The role of these participants is the focus of the present study, as neo-institutional theory explicitly posits a significant role for human agency.

From the perspective of neo-institutional theory, the non-profit sector has a unique institutional order quite distinct from other organisational fields (DiMaggio 1987; Powell 1988; Zilber 2002). One distinctive characteristic is the reliance on volunteers. They act or engage deliberately and, as key constituents of the non-profit sector, are critical to the way the institutional order is created and maintained (McDonald and Warburton 2003). Yet neo-institutional theorists have argued for more micro-level analyses to uncover the institutionalising practices of human agents (Barley and Tolbert 1997). Berger and Luckmann (1967), for example, have suggested that institutions need to be repeatedly constructed and reconstructed by social actors. It is the continuous enactment of practices and meanings by organisation members that constitutes and maintains institutions, including their taken-for-granted nature (Scott 1995; Zilber 2002). This all suggests a need to explore in depth how these processes operate in the Australian non-profit sector.

In particular, there is a need to examine the role of volunteers in the context of significant external change. Neo-institutional theory has been criticised in the past for its emphasis on institutional stability and its neglect of the processes of change (Hoffman 1997; Kondra and Hinings 1998; Powell 1991). Some have argued that human agency is an important factor in institutional change, and that participants go about their business in organisations in conscious and thoughtful ways (Greenwood and Hinings 1996). Zilber (2002), for example, explored institutionalisation in a Rape Crisis Centre in Israel as the interplay between actors, actions and meanings. She described the institutionalisation of feminist ideology at the centre, and how the introduction of a competing institutional order (therapeutic volunteers) led to tensions and challenges over the actions and meanings of its practices and culture. The available evidence suggests a key role for volunteers in determining the institutional order of the non-profit sector. We thus draw on neo-institutional theory as a framework by which to explore how changes to the institutional order of the non-profit sector are impacting on older, traditional volunteers in one organisation, and to examine their responses to these changes.

Research design

This paper draws on ethnographic research and specifically on observations, archive data and interviews. These sources and methods are appropriate for the principal purpose of the study, to explore how

volunteers engage in the construction of the institutional order (Brewer 2000). In Stake's (1998) methodological typology, we have conducted an instrumental case study designed to understand a particular social process. As noted by Yin (1994), case studies are not universally generalisable, but are theoretically generalisable. Preliminary research found that the study organisation had two distinct institutional orders, namely traditional and new ways of operating that are consistent with the business and regulatory environments (McDonald and Mutch 2000; McDonald and Warburton 2003). The challenges generated by the need to manage change were illustrated by the comments of service co-ordinators. One comment highlighted the problems associated with 'getting our ladies who have been making sandwiches for 50 years to wear latex gloves' (Warburton and Mutch 2000), and another emphasised the difficulty of ensuring that volunteers meet professional standards to avoid 'the organisation [having] its socks sued off' (McDonald and Warburton 2003: 387).

The study reported here builds upon an earlier study of change in a sample of non-profit welfare organisations in Brisbane, Australia (McDonald and Mutch 2000). One large international multi-service organisation that typified the context suited to the research was selected from this initial sample as appropriate for more intensive examination. This large organisation had a budget in Australia in 2008 that approached \$A500,000, and delivered approximately 60 local programmes and services. About 30,000 volunteers work with the organisation – they not only deliver services but also raise funds for Australian and overseas projects. Volunteers have played a significant role in this organisation since it was established at the beginning of the First World War. The old order has been operating since the organisation's foundation, and is most clearly manifest in the regional branch structure across the state of Queensland. The large volunteer group representing this institutional order are mostly older women, with many aged in the seventies and eighties. By contrast, 'new' volunteers are mostly younger, in paid work, and more likely to be committed to a particular client group or social problem through a number of services offered by the organisation. The new order was identified as being promoted by the organisational executive, central office and professional staff (McDonald and Mutch 2000).

In this paper, we report an analysis of the observational data collected over six months during 2002–03 from 12 of the organisation's sites at which volunteers were active. These sites were chosen to represent the range of provided services. Those representing the traditional order included six regional branch meetings (three urban and three rural) and a multi-branch conference. More recent services and sites of the new order included a hospital play-scheme for children, central-office-run volunteer

information sessions including placement interviews, and an after-school volunteer programme for refugee children. Also included in the study were two other services at the same location but at different times of day and that exhibited different institutional orders: a day café (traditional institutional order) that we have described as ‘stepping back in time to the social order of the 1950s’ (McDonald and Warburton 2003: 391); and a night café for homeless young people, representing the ‘new’ order. In total, three observers undertook 26 blocks of observation, amounting in aggregate to 39 hours. During and immediately after these observations, field notes were taken, with each observer recording extemporarily what they witnessed at each site. Each site was visited by at least two observers, with the field notes always taken separately.

Prior to the fieldwork, we developed a structured analytical framework to guide the observation and note taking. This involved three observers undertaking independently planned, sequential observations of an independent site (the Departmental tea-room) over a whole day. From this, we discussed our three sets of observations and collectively generated analytical codes to use as a template to observe the organisational setting. These comprised: (1) the *observational space*, which included aspects such as how the room was set up, the physical layout, the colour scheme, and signs and symbols within the setting; (2) the *conversational order*, management of conversation topics, relations with each other and social hierarchies; (3) *the content of talk* or what was said within the observed spaces; and (4) *resistance*, talk which illustrated ambivalence or negativity about the organisation. The field notes collected by each of the three observers were initially subjected to an iterative and reflective process session to ensure inter-rater reliability in the coding. The final codes therefore represented a consensus across the three researchers. This iterative process, together with the use of ‘thick description’ to describe the data, aimed to maximise the rigour and trustworthiness of data collection and analysis (Krefting 1991; Lincoln and Guba 2002).¹ The findings are presented below under the four dimensions of the template, and using examples from the ethnographic data to illustrate the points made.

Results

The observational spaces

Data collected from observations conducted at each of the 12 sites clearly reflected the two different organisational orders, one based on older, traditional sources of volunteers and the other on the new context which is more likely to draw on professional, more skilled volunteers. One of

the more traditional volunteer settings was a daytime café that has been in operation from the Brisbane City Hall for over five decades. Its original purpose was to provide a safe haven for those visiting the city from rural areas. The setting is old fashioned and reflects the ‘country town’ that Brisbane was in the 1950s. Here, volunteers engage in traditional ‘female’ activities of food preparation and serving, in what could be termed amateur, unskilled work. The café has tables covered with red cloth, lacy drapes and plastic sheets, reflecting an earlier era. On the wall is a formal picture of a very youthful Queen Elizabeth II, as well as several framed, black-and-white wartime photos of young women who were members of the organisation. The volunteers are all older people, mostly women, dressed well, conservatively and with blue aprons, and identified by a prominent organisation badge. By contrast, volunteers in other settings operated in quite different institutional spaces. An immediate contrast is that at night the same room becomes a café for homeless young people, with deliberate and marked changes to the ambience and layout. The traditional pictures are replaced or covered up, and the walls are covered with hand-drawn, brightly coloured pictures, or posters about violence, safe drug use and other health issues. The volunteers also operate quite differently and appear more like professional youth workers, dressed in black trousers and polo shirts with a very small institutional logo.

Symbols are important representations of the two institutional orders in the organisation. They are particularly important in two of the traditional settings – the daytime café and the branch meetings. In these contexts, various membership symbols are worn by the volunteers – scarves or ties and jackets in the organisation’s colours at branch meetings, and the organisation’s flag is draped over the meeting table. These symbols represent longevity and history, with length-of-service badges given as rewards for service. These symbols are clearly very important to the volunteers in these settings. Heated debates were observed at two branch meetings about the recognition of longevity for an award. In the more contemporary settings, these symbols had little significance. Clothing was much more informal and organisational symbols were subdued or absent. At the refugee homework programme, for example, there were no visible symbols of the organisation. Instead, volunteering in the ‘new’ order is often located in a secondary space, such as a school (refugee homework programme) or a hospital (hospital play-scheme). The volunteers in these spaces also have to obey the rules and regulations of these highly regulated environments.

In all the traditional settings, volunteers tended to be old, with many appearing well over aged 70 years, and were more likely to be female. The differences in the institutional orders present challenges for traditional or

charity-model volunteers. This can be clearly demonstrated by the decline in the number of volunteers and their increasing average age, which has caused many branches to close and threatens their sustainability. Concerns were expressed at a number of branches that, because the average age of the volunteers was rising and many had withdrawn, they were losing the 'heart and soul' of the organisation and were failing to attract new volunteers. People simply did not have time to attend meetings. Reactions to our presence at branch meetings underscored the point that they did not attract many new faces.

The conversational order

Attention to the conversational order in the two different institutional environments demonstrated different social relations and ways of interacting. At the traditional sites, the volunteers appeared very comfortable in their role; they understood the organisation and had a long-term commitment both to the organisation, as well as to other volunteers and clients. At the daytime café, for example, volunteers were welcomed warmly by other volunteers as they came on duty, and they socialised with each other and sat at tables together for lunch. The volunteers knew the routine and what was expected of them. When they arrived at the daytime café, for example, they picked up their aprons and began work. By contrast, volunteers at the 'new' institutional settings were expected to be flexible and adaptable. For example, on a visit to the refugee homework programme, the volunteers were playing games with the children, because, as they explained, the children had taken exams that day. At the night café, the volunteers who worked with homeless young people had to be alert to potential problems. They took their duties very seriously, regularly checking the toilets for drug usage; and they were prepared for violence or visits by the police.

Volunteers in the 'old' institutional order demonstrated a strong attachment to the organisation, as represented by the length of service and the time they devoted to the role. The volunteers at the day café had long-term and stable attachments. One volunteer, for example, had served for 13 years, coming four days a week. We were told that it was not uncommon for volunteers in the branches to have 40 or 50 years' service. By contrast, at the night-time café and the refugee homework programme, many volunteers were new recruits and the institutional order was professionalised, more distant and formal – a clear contrast with the social, relationship-based conversational order of the traditional environment. In the hospital play-scheme, for example, the co-ordinator stressed the rules and regulations surrounding interactions with clients. Sick children

can be cuddled, but the person's hands need to be visible at all times. All volunteers need to submit to police checks, and to obtain departmental clearance (a 'blue card') to work with children. This is clearly important in the 'new' institutional order, where clients – children, refugees or people who are homeless – are deemed vulnerable and merit protection.

At the information sessions for new recruits, different values and professional motives were promoted, such as skill building or gaining experience. For example, social work students were encouraged to gain experience by volunteering in the night café; and childcare students to volunteer for the hospital play-scheme. Volunteer roles were promoted as instrumental, in contrast with the more affective motives of the 'old' order, where social interactions and relationships were prominent.

Content of talk

Differences between the two institutional orders were also apparent in the content of the volunteers' talk. The talk represented two distinct discourses, one relationship-based and one dominated by managerialist rules and regulations, and revealed the primacy of the new institutional order. The volunteers' roles within the two environments differed. In the traditional environments, the roles often involved unskilled, charity-type work, such as producing items for fundraising events, running raffles or working in the organisation's shop, with food and hospitality important components. This approach contrasted with the more professional approach in the 'new' environment, as demonstrated by the night-time café volunteers, or in the teaching aspects of the refugee homework programme. It was also evident at the hospital play-scheme, as the following note about an induction session conveys:

[The co-ordinator] makes the job sound very professional. She talks about how other states have play-therapists in hospitals. She stresses the importance of play and learning through play. She says strongly, 'I consider all volunteers here to be staff'. 'This is a real job' is the message, and you should treat it as such. She talks about 'best practice' and how important it is to be as professional as possible.

The professionalisation of the volunteer environment was reflected in the discourse of the 'new' environment, which was essentially managerialist. For example, at the play-scheme, volunteers had 'a job description'; volunteering was described as a 'shift' with 'rosters'. In another example, the old institutional order confronted the new, when speakers from the central [head] office also used the discourse of managerialism. They stressed that the organisation was overcommitted – 'delivering too many services' – and that these needed to be 'rationalised' and services

‘rebadged’. This is the language of business and social enterprise, and provided clear evidence of a new, dominant institutional order.

Resistance

The management rhetoric recognised the value of volunteers to the organisation. As the paid co-ordinator for the hospital play-scheme observed, ‘we value volunteers and would like to see them stay as long as possible’. Further, at the information session, one of the new managers emphasised the importance of volunteers as ‘the lifeblood of our organisation’. He also said, ‘there is a home for each of you in this organisation’, and stressed ‘the smorgasbord of opportunities’ available to potential recruits. The observational evidence suggested, however, some conflict between this rhetoric and people’s openness to different ways of working. In particular, it was clear that many of those operating within the traditional institutional order were aware of the challenges and that there was some resistance to change.

For those entering the organisation and expecting traditional ways of operation, being introduced to volunteering in the new institutional order led to visible confusion. This was illustrated by an interview at head office, which treated volunteer recruitment like a job interview. One older woman, expecting to use motherhood skills as the basis for working in the hospital play-scheme, was visibly confused with all the professional and organisational issues – the professional language of play therapy, the associated rules and regulations, as well as the need for rigorous checks into her background. There were other examples of confusion when those who had been part of the traditional institutional order for many years were faced with both external and internal demands to change. The branch members were generally well aware that, from the central office perspective, their function was to raise funds for the organisation’s services. Some modes of fundraising are very traditional, however, such as selling craftwork and cakes and holding social evenings. In general, the branches appear to resist attempts to become more professional and efficient in fundraising. At one branch, for example, the use of telemarketing (phone-based marketing) was discussed through involvement of the local high school. Although it was briefly implemented, it was soon discarded and traditional modes of fundraising re-introduced.

At times, volunteers in the traditional institutional order expressed quite strong resistance towards the new modes of operation. Members at several branches described clashes with central office, some of which spilt over into open resentment and even conflict. This centred on financial management and control, where the branch members saw central office

impinging on their normal mode of working. The following observational note of a rural branch meeting captures the reactions:

They felt that central office was trying to dictate how they operate. For example, they had been told that at the meeting they should arrange themselves in a horseshoe shape and not as they had today (with the committee at the front facing the members). ... The result was a great deal of resentment.

Members felt that central office simply did not understand the work being done on the ground, and was trying to exert control over the local branches. In turn, the branches resisted these attempts to change, sometimes even confronting central office. Coupled with the decline in numbers and the ageing of branch committee members, there was also recognition that the branches would eventually close.

Discussion

In the organisation that we studied there was clear evidence of two institutional orders – a traditional way of operating consistent with a ‘charity’ model, and a ‘new’, social enterprise mode (McDonald and Mutch 2000; Zappala 2001). It should be recognised that not all older volunteers operate within the traditional or charitable mode, but our observations indicated that volunteers in traditional settings – such as the branches – were predominantly older people. Further, the data suggested that many of these volunteers experienced confusion and tensions, particularly in facing the managerial processes espoused by the central office and that were being diffused through the new service areas. Recruitment had become centralised and formal. The new tasks are challenging, many involving vulnerable client groups and necessitating a suite of protective and risk management processes. Length-of-service was not particularly valued, instead the emphasis was on skills development and usefulness. Valued volunteers now need to be flexible and to adapt to efficient and well organised processes that are implemented by the new professional breed of service managers.

Our observations suggest that volunteers operating in traditional settings experience external pressures to change. This pressure presents challenges for those operating in this declining institutional order, as well as for those attempting to gain entry into the new institutional order. Despite some spirited resistance to these processes, there is also acceptance that these efforts are doomed to fail. These findings exemplify the effects of organisational change in the non-profit sector (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). In particular, the study identified the risk that traditional, older

volunteers will be excluded from the new institutional environment and be unable to make the transition to new, social enterprise styles of volunteering. As Lie and Baines (2007: 235) suggested, there may be ‘a misfit between the volunteering role and the essential nature of what volunteering mean[s] to older people’.

Older people bring particular advantages to organisations, and thus merit recruitment and retention as volunteers. They bring lifelong experience and skills to their roles. They are also more likely to be highly committed and to remain for a comparatively long period (Lyons and Hocking 2000; van Willigen 2000). This contrasts with the rapid turnover of many new, social enterprise volunteers (Zappala 2001). Certainly, the rhetoric observed in the case study organisation stressed both the enormous value that volunteers bring to the organisation, and the need for diverse volunteers. This suggests that volunteering should be open to everyone, regardless of age, background or experience, and demonstrates the need for transparent volunteer processes. Further, there was evidence of recognition of the cost effectiveness of older, more traditional volunteers, who bring a strong commitment to the organisation. Despite this rhetoric, however, their strengths were little recognised in practice. It is clear that organisations need to be more proactive if they are to utilise effectively the contributions and capabilities of older volunteers.

The findings of this study have important implications for organisations that seek to retain volunteers in a declining institutional order and to recruit older volunteers into new institutional orders. How should organisations respond? First, it needs to be recognised that it is both unethical and ageist if potential volunteers do not feel wanted simply on the basis of their age (Minichiello, Browne and Kendig 2000). Our study certainly found evidence of pervasive ageism, echoing Narushima’s findings from a Canadian study of the potential transformative mechanisms of volunteering amongst older people. Here, too, the organisational rhetoric valued volunteers but ‘organisational indifference suggest[ed] lingering institutionalised ageism’ (Narushima 2005: 580).

Concerns about ageism are raised by the evidence that within the studied organisation, traditional volunteers were relatively invisible in comparison with the ‘new’ volunteers who dominated a particular space, such as the night café, or occupy a secondary organisational space, such as a hospital. This does not mean that older or traditional volunteers are not important or valued. There is a danger, however, that older people perceive age-related barriers to volunteering and are under-valued (Warburton, Paynter and Petriwiskyj 2007). As a result, older people may be discouraged from volunteering in the new regulated institutional environment, and others may give up. Evidence of confusion and resistance

displayed in the findings from this study are very concerning for non-profit organisations reliant on volunteers.

As noted earlier, however, it should be recognised that many older people operate successfully in the new institutional order. The 'new' order does not comprise solely younger volunteers, simply those who are able to adjust to the new rules and regulations, some of whom are older people. For example, at the highly-regulated hospital play-scheme, some of the regular volunteers were older people. They had a clear role, as in many of the 'new' services, had adapted to the new institutional rules, and were valuable assets to the organisation. It is important that older people remain open to this possibility, but it is even more important that volunteer managers accept older people as volunteers, and use capacity and interest as a measure rather than simply age.

Secondly, resistance to change on the part of traditional volunteers may result from top-down organisational processes being imposed on relatively autonomous volunteers, rather than objections to change *per se*. It might be that a more collaborative and consultative process of change would ensure that others can make the transition to the new order (e.g. Gilroy 2003). In particular, the data suggest that there is a need to address proactively the confusing and confronting processes experienced by new recruits. For example, simple explanations and rationales for new and supportive recruitment and induction processes should be provided to all prospective volunteers. If they are not, then the result may well be that the pool of potential volunteers will shrink and people, particularly those experienced in the old order, will simply turn away from volunteering.

Thirdly, the findings also suggest that training needs to be provided to help older people make the transition to the new institutional environment. In a recent study of the incentives and barriers to volunteering by seniors, training was rated very highly as an incentive to volunteering (Warburton, Paynter and Petriwiskyj 2007). Training and skill development is essential if older volunteers are to become more self-reliant and to be able to undertake new, more challenging volunteer roles (Narushima 2005). Initial generic training is often provided, both around generic issues such as risk management but also specific to the task. To ensure that older volunteers have a place within a dynamic organisation, however, structured training and skills development are required. The existence of such training will also help older people develop their confidence and facilitate the recruitment of more volunteers (see Narushima 2005 for more on transformative learning for older volunteers).

Finally, it should be remembered that volunteering is potentially a valuable activity for older people, as well as beneficial for societies that

are adjusting to population ageing (Davis Smith and Gay 2005; Warburton 2006). Volunteering is associated with positive social and health outcomes for older people (Greenfield and Marks 2004; Lum and Lightfoot 2005). It can lead to good psychological health, and the social aspects offer a pathway out of loneliness and social isolation (Freedman 1997; Wilson and Musick 1999). If western countries are to benefit from such healthy and productive ageing scenarios, then positive attention is required for recruiting and retaining older people as volunteers (Narushima 2005).

Conclusions

The intention of the present study was to contribute to the literature on change in the non-profit sector (*e.g.* Lyons 2001; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004), to provide an in-depth account of the experience of traditional, older, volunteers in the new institutional environment, and to consider the implications for non-profit practice. The case study utilised neo-institutional theory to demonstrate the changing role of volunteers in one large non-profit Australian organisation, and to explicate the challenges faced by older volunteers in the new institutional order.

To focus on only one, albeit large, non-profit organisation raises questions about the generalisability of the findings. The main strength of the study, however, is that it was theoretically driven and has examined processes of change in the non-profit sector in some depth. By conceiving change as institutional change and volunteers as institutional agents, we are able to think about the constitutive role of volunteers that moves beyond mere description. Further, given the similar organisational changes in other western countries, it is likely that the scenario described here is relevant in other countries. This allows for some predictive comments about the future for older volunteers in the changing institutional framework. The findings from this study suggest that there are many challenges and barriers to overcome if older volunteers are to have developing and effective roles in the new non-profit context. Older people bring strengths to organisations which need to be recognised and nurtured. It is clear that organisations need to respond proactively if they are to operate both ethically and efficiently in the contemporary environment.

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NOTE

- 1 Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Queensland for the study, with gatekeeper approval from the Chief Executive Officer of the organisation to conduct the observations and to talk informally to the volunteers.

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