Working Paper Series

Working Paper Number 6

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CASIC, Keele University, January 2018
Library Catalogue Reference: CWPS0006
Published by: Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC)
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KNEADING VOLUNTEERS: REFLECTIONS OF A BAKER/ETHNOGRAPHER IN A COMMUNITY FOOD ENTERPRISE

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Abstract

As part of a growing interest in community-based and community-led research, ethnographers have increasingly sought to explore both the organizations hosting volunteers and their volunteers' motivations for donating their time and effort. To access the most naturalistic information about such spaces, many ethnographers find themselves carrying out a volunteer role at the same time as doing their ethnographic research. This is to be celebrated, particularly as a means to bridge the apparent divide between social science theory and the lived experiences of everyday community members like volunteers. Yet despite the benefits of the ethnographer blending in as 'one of the team' by sharing a common purpose with his/her respondents, the volunteer/ethnographer dual role may sometimes create an intense identity crisis which compromises the ease with which data can be gathered and reflected upon. In this article, I explore this identity/methodological dilemma from first-hand perspective. I unpack the difficulties created by acting as a volunteer/ ethnographer in a community bakery where attempting to turn my volunteering into research left me struggling to craft my research design, conduct fieldwork, and maintain my standing as a 'good' volunteer. This article describes the benefits of – and limits to – the volunteer/ethnographer duality in ethnographic research. The article concludes by speculating on some of the possible obstacles to successful research conducted from within a volunteering role.

Keywords: Bread and baking; Ethnographic methods; Volunteering; Identity; Research Ethics

Introduction

The year 2018 is an interesting time for bread. More and more people appear to be obsessed with artisan bread such as sourdough and rye. Yet at just over 400g each, a typical loaf of artisan bread can cost around £3 to £4 (Tandoh, 2017) which puts it in the category of an aspirational purchase rather than a daily essential for many consumers. The potential exclusion of those on poor incomes from the artisan bread market adds a further dimension to the food anxiety that pervades contemporary Western society. On the one hand, factory and supermarket bread loaves are criticised for having too many additives and lacking nutritional value (Whitley, 2009) with campaigns like the 'Real Bread Campaign' calling for better and 'real' food (Pigott, 2015). On the other hand, cheaper bread products are more easily accessed by those who are currently unable to purchase artisan products with their high end price-tickets in costly farm and deli-style shops.

This article takes a close-up view of a community project that seeks to overcome the marketplace exclusion in the artisan bread industry. It is focused on an ethnography conducted in a community-based bakery project that makes 'real' bread – Common Bread (anonymised). This bakery project is run by Beaver Arts, an arts company and charity located in a disadvantaged post-industrial city in the English Midlands. The project was set up to pursue the company's collective passion for baking, buying, eating, and most importantly, enjoying better bread. Common Bread currently opens every Thursday for bread-making and pre-order picking-ups. Alongside the regular bake days, Common Bread also offers baking courses and catering. However, due to the size and charitable status of Beaver Arts, the bakery project relies heavily on volunteers. Beaver Arts has been working towards becoming a full-time bakery for six years but cannot yet afford to pay the labour costs that would accrue to such an enterprise. In this article, I explore this charitable organisation through the lens of ethnography and speculate not only on the motivations of those who volunteer there but on my own positioning as researcher/baker.

Common Bread

The mostly-volunteer bread-making team at Common Bread usually consists of the project supervisor – who acts as baking master and quality controller (and is a paid staff member) – and four to seven volunteers. The limited numbers of not-always-reliable volunteers further

prevents the bakery from becoming a viable business, according to the project supervisor. Nonetheless, the reliance upon volunteering is important at Common Bread and is central to their intention to overcome marketplace exclusion. While such volunteering work does not fit among the usual 'grand causes' that typically attract volunteers: the welfare of children, the disabled, the elderly and charitable fund raising, the organisation states that good quality bread baking and consumption is a basic social right. From the volunteer's point of view, while their labours may not enhance their CV or promise a potential paid job, baking offers experience of making all kinds of delicious baked goods in a convivial environment. I found this volunteering work particularly intriguing and enjoyable.

As a researcher I have previously conducted a project with Beaver Arts and I volunteer at Beaver Arts on different projects and events, including Common Bread. After I attended several bake days, I started wondering why other people were motivated to volunteer as bakers in the first place, especially after experiencing a couple of bake days where we had to work from 8am to 1pm with no time to have a break due to the limited number of volunteers. This intense experience prompted me to develop a key research question: *how the bakery could get more regular volunteers to commit to the project*. It was this central concern that prompted me to carry out an ethnography of Common Bread and my aim was to better understand the current volunteering situation and help offer practical insights that would enable the organization to recruit and retain volunteers.

Volunteering as a Social Benefit

Volunteering, an act where time is donated freely to benefit another person, group or cause (Wilson, 2000), involves an extremely diverse group of people in a wide variety of contexts (Bussell and Forbes, 2002). There are many different types of volunteering work, from community volunteer work to virtual volunteering through the internet, from volunteering in an emergency to environmental volunteering (Cravens and Ellis, 2014; Measham and Barnett, 2008; Moran and Britton, 1994; Winfield, 2013). Researchers have studied volunteerism with many different approaches (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Clary et al., 1998; Hammonds, 2010; McKee and McKee, 2012; Musick and Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2000) and many studies highlight the benefit and satisfaction of volunteering for those involved (Clary et al., 1998; Clary and

Snyder, 1999; Farrell, Johnston and Twynam, 1998; Finkelstein, Penner and Brannick, 2005; Measham and Barnett, 2008).

The benefits drawn from volunteering by volunteers are the focus of the function approach (Clary et al. 1998). This approach has generated a growing body of literature describing how volunteers benefit from volunteering work, especially in relation to improving social well-being, depression, community building and discrimination (Baert and Vujić, 2016; Musick and Wilson, 2003; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Van Willigen, 2000). Whilst some motivations, benefits and functions of volunteering appear to be universal, each specific volunteering situation is unique in terms of the volunteers it seeks to recruit and how those volunteers may benefit (Bussell and Forbes, 2002). For example, volunteering at a music festival would be very different to a forest conservation project in terms of the required skill-set, work environment and possible benefits (Barron and Rihova, 2011; Measham and Barnett, 2008).

The range of volunteering work drives varied research on recruitment and retention of volunteers and techniques for marketing volunteer positions (Bussell and Forbes, 2002). Studies have identified characteristics such as education, gender, age, family background, and employment status as key to targeting marketing campaigns to recruit volunteers (Marriott Senior Living Services, 1991; McPherson and Rotolo, 1996; Rohs, 1986; Smith, 1999; Tschirhart, 1998). In the UK, there has always been a high level of volunteering. In 2000, half the UK population was estimated to volunteer in community activities (Palmer, 2000). According to the Community Life survey (Cabinet Office, 2016), the overall volunteering level (2014-2016) is 47%. Competition for the limited number volunteers is intense and the volunteer market has limited resources with which to recruit them (Bussell and Forbes, 2002). Many valued organisations can only deliver cost-efficient and cost-effective services to the public by working in coordination with the volunteering sector (Jones, 1992).

Bussell and Forbes (2002) argue that organizations must understand their target group to successfully attract and maintain volunteers. In terms of widening and retaining the volunteer pool of Common Bread, it is essential to understand the bakery's target group and this informed my decision to take a qualitative research approach (specifically ethnography) that would offer an in-depth understanding of the bakery's current volunteers, as well as the bakery itself and its volunteering culture, in order to describe and profile the ideal 'target

volunteer.' With rich and detailed data on current volunteers for Common Bread, my aim was to help design a more effective recruiting campaign that would provide a more sustainable model for the organization's human resources.

Why Ethnography?

Initially, I considered employing in-depth interviews as the main research method, but I changed my mind after witnessing a video production that included interviews in the bakery. In January, a group of media students from a local university came to make a video of the bakery for an assignment. Apart from taking pictures and videos, they also wanted to include one-to-one interviews with the volunteers. However, out of nine volunteers plus the supervisor of the project that day, only three agreed to participate in an interview. Through conversations with the volunteers that did not participate in the interviews, it appeared that they were not very comfortable with being filmed or formally interviewed. It was this experience in the field that prompted me to consider that participant observation would be preferable because it would feel less confronting and exposing for the volunteer respondents.

Moreover, I did not only want to investigate the volunteers and their reasons for volunteering, but also understand the volunteering culture of Common Bread (Van Vianen, Nijstad and Voskuijl, 2008). Culture involves exploring staffing, decision-making, timing, spatial organisation and structures that shape interpersonal interactions in the volunteering space and much of this cannot be accessed through one-on-one interviews alone. Getting inside the local culture, observing and joining in with the rituals and routines of everyday life is core to ethnography's embodied approach to fieldwork, a further reason why I selected this as my method.

As I was to study volunteers in a setting where all people were volunteers (apart from the supervisor), it was only natural for me to keep my identity as a volunteer. Many successful ethnographic studies have documented volunteers and volunteering (Bloom and Kilgore, 2003; Guinea-Martin, 2014; Lois, 2001; MacPhail, Kirk and Eley, 2003; Wharton, 1991); with some reporting ethnographers acting as volunteers in the field (Garthwaite, 2016; Tinney, 2008). As Adler (1993) argues, if a researcher is already a member of the community under study, the insider point of view enables the researcher to participate in and understand the local culture. The adaptation of the 'volunteer ethnographer' role (Garthwaite, 2016) can be

extremely insightful in understanding the target group of volunteers and was particularly useful at Common Bread. While I agree with Garthwaite on the benefits of writing ethnography from a volunteering perspective, I prefer to describe my role as volunteer/ethnographer to capture the duality I experienced. I am not volunteering to do ethnography, I am volunteering to bake and, in the process, turning my observations and interactions into ethnographic research.

On the bakery floor, however, I am expected to be primarily a volunteer baker. The pre-existing relationship between me and Beaver Arts/Common Bread made the 'getting in' part of the project rather easy. Most of the bakery volunteers already knew me from my previous project – a sustainability audit research project at Beaver Arts as well as through my volunteer baking. It was this familiarity, however, that meant that I had to live with a subtle balancing act – the juxtaposition of two identities alongside each other. This was what created the occasional sense of unease in the field. How, practically, could I take notes, record data, interact with other bakers and carry out the demanding and frequently messy tasks of the bakery?

Entering the field

My fieldwork began in February 2017. For this project, with the help of the supervisor of Common Bread, I notified research participants of my research by posting an information sheet to the volunteer email list as well as pinning it on the bakery noticeboard throughout the period of the project. The information sheet provided a description of the research, information on me as a volunteer/ethnographer, as well as my contact information. I volunteered and conducted participant observation and informal interviews every Thursday, ending on the last Thursday of April 2017. My role at Common Bread did not change much compared to when I was 'just' a volunteer, though I became more skilled in complicated baking techniques each week. My fellow volunteers expressed interest in my role as a researcher and were happy to talk about their experiences volunteering at the bakery – and elsewhere. While it may appear that my approach to the field was unproblematic, however, there were occasions when I experienced difficulties. In the following section, I reflect on some of these problems and speculate upon what this implied for my methods and findings.

Problem one: capturing fieldnotes

My fieldnotes are my main data source. These were drawn from observations, conversations, informal interviews, and reflexive experiences of my own (Lofland, 2005). I planned to take fieldnotes before, during, and after the volunteering sessions. However, it turned out that taking field notes during the volunteering was rather difficult. I tried, at the start of the project, to take notes whenever I observed or was told something that was noteworthy. But my hands were always covered with all kinds of foodstuff –oil, flour, dough, seeds, jam, or a mixture of all of these. After three rounds of leaving whatever I was doing, washing my hands, taking notes, washing my hands again, then going back to whatever I was doing, I gave up. The physical contact with bread-making materials made this aspect of the ethnographic process almost impossible.

Furthermore, note-taking seriously compromised my role as a volunteer and disrupted my contributions to others' work. Working collaboratively, this became a problem – it singled me out as 'special' because other volunteers had no justification to just walk off for a notepad while shaping a teacake. Also, there were times I was in the middle of doing things that are time sensitive – for example, frying and flipping muffins – and I just could not leave and walk away without ruining the product. Moreover, it was always busy in the bakery, and I never had the chance to talk to one person for more than ten minutes without one of us needing to move on to another task. Most observations, conversations and informal interviews happened whilst I had a short window talking to someone, or when I was on the move. Since I decided I was not able to take notes whilst being a good volunteer, I used every tea break, toilet break, and supermarket run task to take notes on my field diary, sometimes on my phone. Even so, the majority of my fieldnotes were written after the volunteering sessions, on the bus, in the library, or at home.

The constant juggling between writing and listening paralleled a struggle between my two identities; baker and researcher. Even after I stopped taking notes during tasks, I found myself doing things that did not live up to the name of a 'good' volunteer. I caught myself taking a break ten minutes earlier than I usually would to document a great conversation that just had happened, choosing smaller tasks to enable myself to maximise my contact with different volunteers, concentrating so much on others' conversations that I messed up the bread mix

and burned donuts and leading conversations towards a direction that would help my research. As an experienced baker who was trusted by the volunteering team, I felt that I sometimes disappointed my fellow colleges, wasted ingredients, ruined food, and that I might even have been somewhat manipulative. However, as an ethnographer, I could not help but think I was not doing enough for my research. Not being able to take fieldnotes as often as I would like, I had a constant fear of not getting and missing out the 'good stuff'.

Problem two: Noise

One possible solution was to make recordings of the bakery sessions yet the bakery was situated in a big space with poor acoustics. This meant for me to make recordings of good quality, I would need to move my recorder constantly to catch all the conversations. Even if I wore a portable version, I would have to run from one working table to another and risk the recorder of becoming clogged with all the foodstuff. Each baking session lasted five hours or longer, so if I had been able to record a full session, I would have had an enormous task of transcription, most of which would have been small talk, people catching up, or repeated phrases such as, 'Take this to the proving room?' 'Turn off the timer and check the temperature of the bread please?' 'Can you put these on the cooling rack?' and so on.

It would also have been impractical to turn a recorder on and off, especially whilst maintaining the strict hygiene protocol required for the public health license. The subsequent lack of audio data meant that I missed out on some data because I was not always ready to take notes. But what notes I did make were better than nothing, and making notes was the only way I could record data – that was what I told myself anyway. It might sound somewhat dramatic, however, being both a volunteer and ethnographer was very stressful for me. The stress mostly came from trying to thrive at both roles, which at times seemed impossible.

Problem three: documenting myself in the research

The stress of the experience prompted me to reflect further on its causes. To do so I examined the scribbled fieldnotes that I was taking down each week. There, I attempted to record the 'observations' of my own volunteering in the traditional ethnographic way. I started off giving myself a pseudonym, writing down my feelings and experiences in a third person narrative as if they were the product of observation, conversations, and informal interviews. However, it

felt inauthentic and so I shifted to keeping notes on my own experiences and reflections separately from the rest of my fieldnotes and wrote a less-structured autoethnography. As autoethnography offers me the chance to explore and give voice to my own experiences and reflections in a genuine and qualitative way (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2010; Wall, 2008) it was a way of adding an extra layer to my fieldnotes and helped me further understand my reasons for volunteering as if seeing myself as a participant.

My recorded feelings and reflections became a guide to structure the questions that I asked the other volunteers during informal interviews. My autoethnographic fieldnotes thus became my primary data when writing up the project although I was always mindful that it was difficult to put my subjective tales and recollections together with those of the other volunteers. Once again, this proved a difficult balance to strike: on the one hand I was researcher and on the other a participant/volunteer. Understanding how to manage – if not solve - that dual identity formed an important methodological puzzle for me.

Reflecting on being a baker ethnographer

Despite the difficult practicalities of this fieldsite, over a long period of time I collected a rich, in-depth dataset by remaining honest about the voices I was listening to; be they the volunteers at the bakery or my own comments. I drew on traditional field methods but also supplemented them with autoethnographic notes. Hence, what began as a taxing volunteering experience in which I was juggling data recording with participation, gradually turned into a large set of data from observation, conversations, and informal interviews and observations that combined generated data in great depth. I was able to capture useful insights from all the other volunteers, including those who were not thrilled to be interviewed on camera earlier in the year. Because of the intensity of the field experience, I felt that three months was sufficient time to identify, test, and adjust ideas and theories.

Most of my fellow volunteers were female, including freelance artists, university students, retirees or non-working women. I learned their reasons for volunteering, what they did as work, what they complained about, who they found most difficult to handle, and why they sometimes took a ‘break’ of a few sessions before returning. They were motivated by the passion for real bread and building peer friendships with similarly-minded people first, then by skills acquisition. The major benefit they experienced at Common Bread was from the

sessions themselves. They considered helping out at Common Bread as a half-day-get-away session from their daily lives – a chance to bake delicious food with their friends and get bread supplies for the coming week. Another benefit they experienced was a feeling that they were making the bakery possible at a very reasonable price; that they are giving back to the community. That is a benefit that motivated my own volunteering, too.

The volunteers considered their and each others' commitment to the project. It was quite surprising that the volunteers did not judge each other by the attendance. It is the passion, initiatives, and willingness to learn/practice that contribute to the peer evaluation of 'commitment' among the volunteers. The volunteers all understood that everybody had a life beyond the bakery, and that some volunteers like myself were not always available due to our other roles – in my case, a student and researcher. Like me, everyone who volunteered had competing identities that were sometimes in tension.

However, in terms of retaining volunteers, Common Bread experienced a problem of 'one-time' volunteers who came only once or twice and then – for particular reasons – never returned. For instance, sometimes the bakery takes in people who 'need' to do volunteering works. There were a couple of 'one-time' volunteers that were volunteering for compulsory course requirements stipulating community experience. They came, did their hours, and never returned. During the time when they were at the bakery, I could not help but notice that they did not fit into the bakery – they lacked the passion and initiative in baking, even after being there for several times.

Such individuals seemed to be excluded by the space itself and were isolating themselves by acting in ways I perceived as aloof and uncomfortable. I talked to one of them and asked if he would come back during the last volunteer session he needed to complete. He told me he enjoyed baking and would definitely come back. That was four months ago and nobody has seen him return to the bakery. I did not take his contact information, so was unable to follow up but I could imagine one or two reasons why he did not return. He did reveal that, like me, he was a university student with heavy coursework, and that he had to walk for 15 minutes to get a bus or take a taxi to get to the bakery for sessions that started at 8 am. This may explain that why the majority regular volunteers were retirees and freelance artists who lived in the area near the bakery.

My ethnography of Common Bread describes a unique setting. My pre-existing relationship with the bakery project and Beaver Arts established and secured the field for me in a rather easy way. Then, my volunteer/ethnographer role enabled me to access information and data that would otherwise be very difficult to obtain in such depth and detail. My dual role minimised the disruption to the baking, allowed me to continuously contribute as a volunteer, and prevented me from getting in the way or contaminating the bakery products, rendering them unsaleable. However, the volunteer/ethnographer dual role was hard to manage at times. I faced practical and identity problems in the field. In this paper, I have highlighted several of these difficulties as well as contributing some new insights into the world of voluntary food production.

To conclude, the volunteer/ethnographer role required negotiation of relationships and emotions – negotiation between me and myself as simultaneously a passionate volunteer and an objective researcher, being both reflective and objective. I was both an insider and an outsider and sought to manage these roles throughout my experience in the field. But despite this occasionally demanding dual role, my volunteer/ethnographer role approach allowed me to understand the culture of volunteering and the target group of volunteers for Common Bread and identify how the pool of volunteers could be sustained and expanded in terms of what 'commitment' means and how it can be expressed. This substantial project will form the basis of my future research and publishing work. By sharing this experience of my fieldwork, in the meantime, I hope to add to our understanding of the dual role of volunteer/ethnographer in ethnographic research and to share some experiences of demanding fieldwork. I hope that this prompts other scholars, volunteers and organisers to share their own experiences so that we, as researchers, may benefit from a broader discussion on the lived experience of field methods, ethnographic or otherwise, and the insights and knowledge that is valued by community enterprises.

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