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*This article, based on a review of the literature on volunteer retention, finds many areas of disagreement among researchers about the factors that cause people to remain as volunteers. The section on 'personal factors and life events' suggests that changes in personal circumstances may cause people to leave volunteering and that domestic stability may cause them to stay, but is unable to give a clear answer on the part played by people's demographic profiles or by their personalities, attitudes and religious beliefs. In the same way, the section on 'organisations and contexts' suggests that poor management may cause volunteers to leave organisations and that management which is 'explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative' may encourage them to stay, but is forced to point out that the evidence on the influence of the motivation, commitment and satisfaction of the individual volunteer on retention is as yet inconclusive. One of the main conclusions of the article is that any future research into volunteer retention will need to 'analyse complex situations and multiple factors'.*

## Hold on to what you've got: the volunteer retention literature

Michael Locke, Angela Ellis and Justin Davis Smith

### **Introduction**

What is it that keeps some people volunteering? Or lets others slip away? This article is based on a review of research-based literature, carried out to identify factors that influence an individual's decision to continue volunteering and to look at the aspects of policy and practice that may affect them.

The quantity of guidance on

'volunteer management' is now vast: when we put the topic to the Google search engine, it offered around 20,900 references. We had therefore to decide rapidly where we should look for research on volunteer retention, and we searched websites, databases, libraries, our own resources and academic and professional networks, scanning several

hundred items. We focused down to check approximately 200 abstracts and closely analysed some 80 articles, papers and reports.

We have sought common findings from these many and various studies, but have also recognised the divergences and ambiguities they display. The great majority were small-scale studies of volunteers who were operating within one specific organisation, or were engaged in one kind of service or activity, or represented one specific class of volunteer. We have tried to draw out general points, but the evidence that emerges is not consistent – perhaps less so than ‘common sense’ would have led us to expect. Thus, we must emphasise that the findings we give here should be treated as hypotheses that might be tried tentatively in policy and practice or tested in further research.

This article is organised into two sections, one covering ‘personal factors and life events’ and the other covering ‘organisations and contexts’. Within each section we summarise ‘withdrawal’ and ‘continuation’ factors, and indicate areas of ‘ambiguity’. We conclude by drawing out the underlying

issues, indicating the implications for policy and practice and identifying emerging themes for ‘future research’.

### **Personal factors and life events**

At first sight, the evidence often seems to suggest that the primary factors determining whether people withdraw from volunteering or continue with it are personal and life events (see, for example, Lynn and Davis Smith, 1991) – about which public policies and volunteer-involving agencies can apparently do little or nothing.

#### *Withdrawal factors*

Changes in personal circumstances are related to people withdrawing from volunteering. This is often because they get a job (see, for example, Wardell, Lishman and Whalley, 2000), go into further and higher education, change family commitments (see, for example, Iveson, 1999; Blake and Jefferson, 1992) or move out of the locality (see, for example, Davis Smith, 1998).

In a study of former special constables, Alexander (2000; see also Gaston and Alexander, 2001) found that work or study commitments were the most frequently cited reasons for withdrawal (noted by 22 per cent of

respondents). The second and third most frequently cited reasons were joining the regular police force (19 per cent) and domestic commitments (15 per cent), suggesting that factors external to the organisation were dominant. Merrell's (2000) study of the reasons why volunteers leave well-woman clinics substantiates these findings: the most influential push factors were paid employment (6 out of 18 respondents), changes in family commitments (5) and moving on to further or high education (3).

#### *Continuation factors*

However, rather than causing people to leave volunteering, some personal circumstances were more likely to make them stay. A number of studies have found that *stability or continuity in personal life* – such as being married and already having children – are correlated with continued volunteering.

In Alexander's study of special constables (Alexander, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001), those who were married at the time of joining were less likely to leave, and the majority of specials who were married gave in excess of four years' voluntary service. Similarly, those who had children at the time of joining were more likely to complete longer service. As

Alexander (2000, page 26) notes:

*Individuals who are already 'settled' in their personal lives and thus have fewer 'life choices' still to make are more likely to give a greater length of service as a special constable.*

A study of a home visits programme by Hiatt et al (2000) confirmed that married volunteers stayed longer; while Wilson and Musick's (1999) panel study of volunteers in the US confirmed that having children increased the duration of a person's volunteering.

Other personal factors, such as higher levels of education (Wilson and Musick, 1999) and previous experience of volunteering (Gidron, 1984), are also related to a greater likelihood of remaining in the volunteer labour force. Indeed, in Gidron's longitudinal study of volunteers in community centres, the only personal variable that discriminated between stayers and leavers was previous experience as a volunteer.

#### *Ambiguous factors*

Despite the influence on retention of the personal factors discussed above, other factors remain ambiguous. Even the commonsense expectation that

people who have a more sociable personality or stronger motivation will become longer-serving volunteers is not supported by the research literature.

The findings about people's *personality and attitudes* are contradictory. For example, in Wilson and Musick's (1999) panel survey of volunteers, higher rates of formal and informal social interaction were found to be related to staying in the volunteer labour force. However, a pro-social personality was *not* significant for length of volunteering in Penner and Fingleton's (1998) study of volunteers in HIV organisations.

Similarly, the findings about different kinds of motivation disagree, especially over whether altruism or personal gain are more closely related to longer service as a volunteer. For example, motivation was not found to be significant in Drihem's study of volunteers working in immigration absorption in Israel (1999; see also Hiatt et al, 2000; Nathanson and Eggleton, 1993); we discuss this further below in relation to other ambiguities of satisfaction and commitment to the organisation.

People's *faith* has commonly been cited as a reason for volunteering,

but it has proved difficult or impossible to separate faith from institutional aspects of congregation and membership of faith groups (Lukka and Locke, 2001). While Wilson and Musik (1999), in their panel study comparing two periods of volunteering, found church-related voluntary action to be the best predictor of continued volunteering, this may be related as much to institutional factors or social networks as to faith itself.

*Demographic factors* have not generally been linked to continuation of volunteering, and the research findings have been inconclusive. Some studies have found no relationship between motivations and age and/or gender (see Nathanson and Eggleton, 1993; Omoto and Snyder, 1993; and Hiatt et al, 2000), while others have found a link. Rohs' (1986) study of volunteers in youth clubs, for example, indicated a positive correlation between age and length of volunteering, while Alexander's (2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001) study of special constables found that those who joined younger and women (who also tended to join younger) did not volunteer for as long.

Some studies have found that demography and *background* were

related to length of volunteering. For example, Bebbington and Gatter (1994) suggested that the 'unusual social group' from which volunteers in an HIV social care centre were drawn (i.e. shared social backgrounds, and volunteers who were also service users) was partly responsible for the higher rates of drop-out (than the voluntary sector in general). Mesch et al (1998) found that African Americans were most likely to stay involved in youth clubs, as were those who were involved in their home communities. Similarly, Rohs (1986) found that youth club leaders in Ohio were more likely to continue to volunteer if they had been residents in the community for a longer period of time.

To deepen the confusion, the demographic characteristics associated with starting volunteering are sometimes, but not always, associated with continuing volunteering. Wilson (2000, page 230) comments:

*The same set of variables that predict the decision to volunteer also predict commitment ... For example, highly educated people are not only more likely to volunteer but also less likely to drop out.*

Wilson and Musick's (1999) US

panel study supported the latter point. However, other studies do not find such relationships between starting and continuing (see, for example, Lammers, 1991). As Kovacs and Black (1999, page 30) state:

Factors that influence individuals to volunteer in the first place are not the same factors that influence them to continue to volunteer.

Hence it is clear that, although we can identify certain variables affecting retention, the influence of personal characteristics is complex. The evidence to date does not allow us to predict whether certain 'types' of people are more likely to make long-term volunteers than others.

### **Organisations and contexts**

Beyond the personal characteristics of volunteers, a number of external factors, both organisational and contextual, can be also identified that influence whether a person continues with or withdraws from volunteering.

#### *Withdrawal factors*

*Negative experiences* within organisations are repeatedly cited as reasons why people quit volunteering. In particular, the volunteers who leave have said

that their volunteering was poorly organised or managed, and that they were overburdened and/or undervalued. However, a number of interrelated factors seem to be at work here and a range of analyses has been offered. Several studies point to poor organisation without analysing the specifics (see, for example, Davis Smith, 1998), and more closely focused studies suggest that a complex interaction between individual factors and organisational processes may increase the likelihood of people leaving. However, it is still possible to identify some of these key organisational issues that may increase the likelihood of withdrawal.

Although Alexander's study of special constables found that personal factors were the primary reason for leaving (see above), it also identified organisational factors as important secondary reasons. Poor supervision, a lack of relevant training, the feeling that they were not valued, uninteresting duties and the perception that they were not deployed in a worthwhile manner were all cited by special constables as factors contributing to their decision to stop volunteering (Alexander, 2000; Gaston and Alexander, 2001).

In Bebbington and Gatter's (1994)

study of an HIV social care centre, volunteer drop-out was attributed to the changing relationship between the volunteers and the organisation. Loss of communication between volunteers and staff and managers was a symptom of this, and led to the volunteers feeling undervalued; there were also the pressures caused by the pace of change in such organisations, which had the effect of marginalising the role of volunteers.

In several studies volunteers have quit because they felt *overburdened*, whether by the intensity or the quantity of demands placed upon them (see, for example SCPR, 1990). As Knapp and Davis Smith (1995, page 4) argue, the danger of 'burn-out' arises where 'volunteers leave an agency because of the intense demands placed upon them'.

Another major reason for giving up volunteering identified from the literature was the feeling of being *undervalued*. In a study of community-based AIDS service organisations, Omoto and Snyder (1993) found that the costs of volunteering were too high for the people who quit: it was taking up too much of their time and it made them feel embarrassed, stigmatised or uncomfortable. The quitters rated these costs significantly higher than

the volunteers who continued to serve.

The *public policy context* can also shape an organisation's capacity to manage its volunteers. For example, Russell and Scott (1997) point to a loss of independence in voluntary organisations in relation to the statutory sector and a blurring of boundaries with paid work that have combined to disillusion and demotivate some volunteers. They concluded that:

Some volunteers ... have expressed concern that the flexibility and autonomy which are essential characteristics of volunteering should not be eroded by formalisation and the demands on them. Others have already become demotivated – 15 per cent of chief officers report increased turnover of service volunteers as a result of development of contracts. Similarly, 17 per cent reported the resignation of management committee members (Russell and Scott, 1997; quoted from JRF Findings Social Policy Research 119, page 3).

#### *Continuation factors*

The positive aspects of people's relationships with volunteer-involving organisations are not simply the converse of the factors

that turn them off. However, the available evidence is contradictory, and question marks hang over some of the explanatory terms used – especially concepts such as altruism and motivation. It is therefore impossible (at this stage at least) to be specific about the *organisational factors* that encourage people to continue volunteering. Broadly, however, it seems that continuation is more likely if volunteers are managed in an explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative way – 'symbiotic support', as Farmer and Fedor (1999) call it. Continuation is also related to context, such as the social support and ties that surround volunteers (see, for example, Sokolowski, 1996), their sense of responsibility and the congruence between organisational and individual intentions.

Clearly, though, different factors are involved in effectively managing (and therefore keeping) different types of volunteer (see, for example, Clary, Snyder and Stukas, 1996; Widmer, 1985) in different situations and in different types of organisation, making generalisations difficult. Watts and Edwards' (1983) study of volunteers in human service agencies reported that although different agencies found different

methods to increase retention, it was hard to relate these methods to the characteristics of the agencies. However, volunteer administrators working with entirely female volunteer personnel reported that displaying flexibility and increasing responsibility were considerably more effective than other forms of management. In a study of older volunteers by Forster (1998), whether the volunteers continued was related to how positive their view of the organisation and the tasks was (for example, whether they enjoyed what they were doing and thought it was worthwhile and well organised), even though there were big differences in policy and practice among the organisations that they volunteered for. In another study of older volunteers by Jirovec and Hyduk (1998), volunteer retention was related to contact with young volunteers; while a study by Hustinx and Lammertyn (1999) found that younger volunteers became more committed to an organisation by a process of gradual socialisation.

The research evidence for the importance of being *explicit* in the management of volunteers – for example, by providing job descriptions – is not as extensive as the amount of guidebook advice

to this effect. However, Nathanson and Eggleton's (1993) study of ombudservice volunteers did find that having a signed contract related to length of volunteering, while Knapp and Davis Smith (1995) found that volunteers who received full out-of-pocket expenses were more likely to volunteer regularly and for a longer period of time.

The form of management that the research evidence suggests is helpful can be typified as developmental and supportive, giving space for some personal autonomy rather than being tightly specified (see, for example, Niyazi, 1996; Hustinx and Lammertyn, 1999; Foster and Meinhard, 2000). In a study of female volunteers in a community theatre company, Burden (2000) found that strategies to manage conflict and to plan for the future enabled the women to continue their volunteering, thus highlighting the significance of a developmental perspective and of personal and community self-direction. Similarly, Forster (1998) found that several organisations had strengthened the commitment of older volunteers by giving groups of them considerable autonomy to run their own project. As Gidron (1983, page 32) concluded from his study of service volunteers:

*The practical implications of this study are clear: the findings suggest that in order to be satisfied, a volunteer needs, above all, a task in which self-expression is possible – a task which gives the volunteer the opportunity to develop abilities and skills, a task which is seen as a challenge, a task where achievement can be seen.*

There is widespread anecdotal and professional evidence – in articles and books of guidance – for the importance of *thanking and being appreciative of volunteers*, but again the research evidence is narrower (see, for example, McCudden, 2000). Support and appreciation were linked in two studies. Farmer and Fedor (1999) found that perceived organisational support had an impact on the withdrawal intentions of volunteers in large health advocacy organisations across the USA; they concluded:

*If volunteers felt valued and appreciated and felt the organisation genuinely cared about their efforts and well-being, withdrawal intentions were lower ... (page 360).*

Meanwhile, Drihem's (1999) study of volunteers working in immigrant absorption programmes in Israel

found that the frequency and quantity of volunteering was linked to the organisation's *'investment'* in its volunteers. Investment was characterised by positive evaluation by the volunteer administrator and by letters of gratitude, as well as by frequent supervision and adequate preparation.

A powerful factor in maintaining volunteering is the *social support* derived from the friendships and networks made through volunteering (see, for example, Knapp and Davis Smith, 1995; Dean and Goodlad, 1998). In a study by Harrington, Cuskelly and Auld (2000) of motor sport volunteers defined as 'career volunteers' with reference to Stebbins' (1996) 'serious leisure' model, volunteers were characterised by their ethos and amateur involvement in motor sports and their involvement in the social world of motor sport (Harrington, Cuskelly and Auld, 2000). In addition to knowing that they were needed by their friends and allies, the community leaders in a study by Locke, Sampson and Shepherd (2000) were sustained by the awareness that public officials, such as housing officers, police and politicians, took them seriously

In some studies, a major factor

influencing volunteers to continue is a *sense of responsibility*, or a feeling that nobody else would do the task. As Iveson (1994, page 54) notes, some volunteers 'appeared resigned to a continuation of their role as there was not anybody else available or willing to take over'. However, this sense of responsibility can sometimes be onerous. Locke, Sampson and Shepherd (2000) found that 'being needed' sustained people's community action, but also that there was sometimes a feeling of being 'railroaded' into committee positions to keep projects going and funded (see also Merrell, 2000).

Continuation is also related to the *policy environment* and administrative infrastructure surrounding the volunteering opportunity. An organisation's ability to support its volunteers is affected by the pressures of the policy environment; for example, volunteer-involving organisations have recently been affected by the contract culture (see, for example, Russell and Scott, 1997). Or as Burden (2000, abstract) notes:

*The economic and social infrastructures that enable volunteers to experience their volunteer work as freely chosen, and consequently aligned with leisure, must be acknowledged and tangibly supported by governments if we are*

*to maintain the social connections that build healthy communities and social capital.*

Taken together, these different studies suggest that the most important factor in positive management is a *congruence* between the goals of the organisation and those of the individual. This appears to involve not only the match of volunteers to organisations and to tasks but also issues of identification and reciprocity. Blake and Jefferson (1992) found that a major reason why people withdrew from volunteering in Samaritans and citizens advice bureaux was that they had lost confidence in the organisation's work. They concluded that:

In most instances, resignation marked the logical conclusion of a long breakdown of confidence in the agency's work, and/or its philosophy, but, added to this, personalities and the breakdown of relationships were key factors (page 34).

Conversely, McCudden (2000) found that volunteers continued in Home-Start schemes because they supported their ethos, regarded the work as worthwhile, cared about the families they supported, had pride in the organisation and felt part of a successful enterprise. Similarly, a study by Merrell (2000) of volunteers in well-woman clinics found that a

reciprocal relationship, a balance between giving and taking, was important; and that even if people felt overburdened, some continued their involvement 'because they were willing to trust they would be reciprocated in the long term' (page 37).

Given the significance of congruence, the differences between organisations and the forms of volunteering they offer are crucial, demanding an organisation-by-organisation awareness of the match between their values and tasks and those of the volunteers. Wardell, Lishman and Whalley (2000) found that the informality of relationships was important for volunteers working in unstructured organisations for disabled and older people, and that feelings about supervision and training were ambiguous; while Puffer's (1999) study of career professional volunteers found that the most satisfied volunteers were those who received incentives congruent with their motives, but that less motivated volunteers were more productive when receiving normative incentives.

The concept of congruence as a match between expectation and experience can be elaborated by the concept of a 'psychological contract' between organisation and volunteer, which would include the amount as

well as the nature of the work (see, for example, Farmer and Fedor, 1999).

#### **Ambiguous factors: motivation, commitment and satisfaction**

Studying factors such as levels of motivation, commitment and satisfaction, which one might expect to be correlated with continued volunteering (and even to cause it), produces inconclusive evidence. On the whole, the research suggests that what we might loosely call 'strength of feeling' towards an organisation does not in fact lead to more volunteering. But the precise conclusions vary from one study to another.

In a study by Cuskelly et al (1998), volunteer sports administrators who placed more emphasis on altruism and who felt they were contributing to the welfare and enjoyment of others developed higher levels of *organisational commitment*. However, commitment and length of membership were not strongly related. Similarly, Penner and Finklestein (1998) found that organisational commitment was not significantly associated with length of service among volunteers in AIDS service organisations.

Some studies that have considered *motivation* and retention relate continued volunteering to altruism,

whereas others relate it to personal gain. Mesch et al (1998) found that the level of altruistic motivation among AmeriCorps volunteers did not significantly influence retention; instrumental, career-related factors were more important. Similarly, Omoto and Snyder (1993) found that longer active service by volunteers in community-based AIDS service organisations was related to how high they rated the personal development, understanding and esteem enhancement they experienced. As the authors concluded: '[L]onger-term volunteers ... were distinguished from shorter-term volunteers by their more "selfish" desires for esteem and personal growth (page 170)'. By contrast, Alexander's (2000) study of special constables found that those who joined for altruistic reasons gave a greater length of service than those who joined for personal development. Also, Omoto and Snyder (1993) went on to conclude that it is the interplay between motivations and *experience* that is essential in retaining volunteers (and in identifying, recruiting, training and assigning volunteers).

Another area of ambiguity concerns volunteer *satisfaction*. Penner and Finklestein (1998) found that satisfaction was related to length of service among volunteers in AIDS

organisations. Conversely, Wardell, Lishman and Whalley (2000) found that most volunteers expressed some dissatisfaction with their volunteering, but that this was not considered sufficient reason to leave, principally because of their commitment to the organisation, other volunteers and the service users. Analysis of a panel survey by Wilson and Musick (1999) found that being satisfied with the results and enjoying the role actually *decreased* attachment to volunteering.

As Wilson (2000) notes:

*The peculiar moral economy of volunteering means that the normal predictions about the impact of job satisfaction on commitment do not apply. Level of satisfaction with current volunteering seems to have little to do with commitment ... and people who stop volunteering rarely say they do so because of low job satisfaction.*

Gidron (1983) notes some confusion over what contributes to job satisfaction for volunteers. Volunteers gained satisfaction when their job was challenging and interesting, enabled them to use their skills and allowed for independence, responsibility and progress. They also gained satisfaction when the job was conveniently located, had convenient

working hours and was not hampered by organisational obstacles. However, in contrast to other studies, Gidron found that support from supervisors, contact with peers and recognition did not figure as sources of satisfaction.

The question is further complicated when we start to analyse which factor is cause and which effect. As Penner and Finklestein (1998, page 533) concluded: '[we] cannot say whether organizational satisfaction caused length of service or length of service caused satisfaction'.

### **Underlying issues and emerging implications for policy and practice**

What are the underlying issues here, and what are their implications for policy and practice? First of all, the factors that lead to withdrawal from volunteering are not simply the converse of the factors that encourage people to continue volunteering. People often withdraw for personal reasons that apparently have nothing to do with policy and management, yet when probed further, they reveal some dissatisfaction with the organisation; hence there might be ways of working that could carry some of these people through these life-events. Complaints about being 'poorly organised' or 'over-burdened' cannot simply be addressed by

making the volunteer opportunity 'well organised'; the positive aspects appear to be subtler and less formalised.

Conversely, although it appears that people with settled home lives are likely to volunteer for longer, it does not therefore follow that agencies should only recruit people with stable domestic arrangements. Some of the factors involved in deciding to continue to volunteer are not easily articulated (or revealed by questionnaires), but may relate to the complex issues of motivation, commitment and satisfaction, which we hope will be better understood through future research.

Secondly, we need to remember that retaining volunteers is not invariably beneficial. In many cases, the policy of the volunteer-involving agency is that volunteers should move on to employment or education – or, indeed, to other voluntary activities – and for the individuals concerned this can be desirable. Most people do not stick at one job for life, so there is no reason to stay in one volunteering groove. Although many research studies focus on volunteering in one organisation over one period of time, the reality is often more complex, with many people volunteering for more than one organisation, either concurrently or serially (Wilson,

2000; see also Jirovec and Hyduk, 1998). Also, people's motives for volunteering may change over time (Clary, Snyder and Ridge, 1992; Omoto and Snyder, 1993). And agencies can have problems with volunteers who stick around for too long and resist change.

However, we can say that, in general, continued volunteering is encouraged by management that is explicit, developmental, supportive and appreciative; by congruence between organisational and individual objectives; and by social support, such as friendship and a sense of responsibility. As such, a developmental approach to volunteer management would tend to emphasise the need for volunteers to be given autonomy, self-expression and space for personal development. This, it could be argued, might run counter to the tendency for greater formalisation of volunteer management.

Congruence between the objectives of organisation and individual would involve on the one hand a match of expectations where values and tasks are concerned, and on the other hand identification and reciprocity between volunteer and organisation. In some situations with some volunteers, these requirements may override the developmental aspect – some volunteers do not want to be 'developed'.

Effective management is likely to involve providing space for the development, self-expression and autonomy of volunteers as well as being explicit about expectations. It will also involve support and good personal relations. Above all, it will recognise that the best predictor of continued volunteering is past volunteering – reinforcement is central.

Those who develop policy need to recognise – in a way that the research reviewed here seldom does – that people often volunteer for more than one organisation at a time, and that their volunteering biographies are complex. Likewise, policy-makers need to recognise that people's volunteering starts and stops and starts again, and that in terms of retaining volunteers it may be best to focus on how this capacity is sustained.

The policy environment and the governmental infrastructure need to create a framework for volunteer-involving agencies that helps them to organise their volunteers positively. However, there is evidence that the contract culture has put pressures on agencies that have impaired their management of volunteers. Recognition of the variety of volunteers, their life stages and reasons for volunteering, and of the variety of agencies and tasks has to be central in policy and management.

Policy and organisation need to be sensitive.

**By way of a conclusion: the need for future research**

This article has been clear about one thing: there is no ‘factor X’ that explains why some people continue volunteering and why others withdraw. No single explanation has been found to be sufficient even within one study, and we have reviewed many studies that come to different, if not quite contradictory, conclusions. The meta-analysis suggests, moreover, that different types of organisation, activity and volunteer will have different implications for policy and practice.

The research evidence has shown that even apparently ‘commonsense’ explanations such as a relationship between greater altruism and more volunteering or between incentives and commitment do not hold. The findings are especially confusing over the issues of altruism, commitment, motivation and satisfaction, which might have been thought central to our basic question. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the ambiguity of these terms and the difficulty of capturing data that corresponds to them. There is no obvious connection between cause and effect: for instance, people who have volunteered for longer may report higher levels of attitudinal support because of their psychological need

for consonance or because their experience reinforces such a conclusion, rather than because their positive attitudes produced their commitment. The issue is made even more complex by an asymmetry between the factors for continuation and the factors for withdrawal. As Gidron (1984) states, ‘variables leading to retention are not necessarily the opposite of those leading to turnover’ (page 13). Thus, not only has no factor X been found – it does not appear to be worth looking for one.

Future research will need to analyse complex situations and multiple factors. On the basis of this review, it would be helpful to work in terms of two bands of factors: dispositional and individual; structural and institutional. In these areas, it would be more useful to pose some questions that avoid the ‘commonsensical’ approach: for instance, by exploring the factors that have been influential when people continued to volunteer through life events that usually lead to withdrawal. Historical analysis is also important, not least because of the evidence that one of the strongest relationships with continuing to volunteer is previous experience as a volunteer.

**Notes**

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