



Briefing paper no. 4 – Why participate? Understanding what motivates people to get involved

Introduction

The Pathways through Participation project aims to explore how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. It seeks to increase knowledge of people’s pathways into and through participation, and to improve understanding of the factors that shape their participation over time.

The project team has completed a literature review bringing together different bodies of literature on participation which have previously been viewed in isolation. The review focuses predominantly on community development, volunteering and public participation¹ but we also refer to literature on social movements, everyday politics, and ethical consumption.

This briefing is the fourth in a series of summaries highlighting some of the key points to come out of the review. It explores the reasons people participate and looks more specifically at the motivations, triggers and barriers that shape people’s participation.

A complex picture

The reasons people become active are complex, diverse and vary according to personal, cultural, environmental and structural circumstances. A considerable body of literature seeks to understand what motivates and encourages people

to participate, and what prevents them

¹ The project defines ‘public participation’ as the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy. See [briefing paper no.1](#) for more information on definitions.

from getting involved, particularly in the field of volunteering.

In the Helping Out Survey², volunteers reported a wide range of reasons for starting to volunteer:

| Reason | % |
|--|----|
| I wanted to improve things, help people | 53 |
| The cause was important to me | 41 |
| I had spare time | 41 |
| I wanted to meet people, make friends | 30 |
| Connected to my friends/family's interests | 29 |
| There was a need in the community | 29 |
| Using existing skills | 27 |
| Part of my life philosophy | 23 |
| Friends/family did it | 21 |
| Learn new skills | 19 |
| Part of religious beliefs | 17 |
| No one else to do it | 13 |
| Help get on in my career | 7 |
| Had received voluntary help myself | 4 |
| Get a recognised qualification | 2 |
| Already involved in organisation | 2 |
| Connected with my interests/hobbies | 2 |
| Give something back | 1 |
| Other | 3 |

The literature on public participation highlights a number of factors that affect individuals’ propensity to participate politically, including: personal interest; an aspiration to change things and have a voice; background influences such as upbringing and faith; life experiences; an emerging threat, and exposure to the community and voluntary sector. Many of these factors are similar to the motivating factors for getting involved in less formal and structured

² Low, N. et al (2007) Helping Out: A national study of volunteering and charitable giving, Cabinet Office:.

participation, for example in social movements and community activities.

Understanding why people participate requires a consideration of both psychological and sociological factors:

| |
|--|
| <p>Psychological motivations For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altruism • Recognition • Identity • Personal development |
| <p>Social and personal background For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Levels of education • Family and friends • Age and life stages • Life experiences • Faith |
| <p>Wider environmental context For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural heritage • Perceptions of community and the public good • Social relationships • Local power dynamics • State of the voluntary and community sector • National or local events and issues |

Psychological motivations

One of the tools for exploring motivations for volunteering is the Volunteer Motivations Inventory³ built on the influential work of Clary and Snyder. The tool is based on the idea that people engage in volunteering to satisfy personal needs and goals and are likely to be motivated by more than one need or goal. It distinguishes ten key motivational categories:

- **Values:** volunteering to express

³ McEwin, M. and Jacobsen-D'Arcy, L. (1992) Developing a scale to understand and assess the underlying motivational drives of volunteers in Western Australia.

values or act on values to help others.

- **Understanding:** volunteering to acquire new skills and learning.
- **Career:** volunteering to gain career related experience.
- **Social:** volunteering to conform to behaviours of peer group.
- **Enhancement:** volunteering to enhance self-esteem.
- **Protective:** volunteering to reduce negative feelings about oneself.
- **Reciprocity:** volunteering in the belief that 'what goes around comes around'.
- **Reactivity:** volunteering to eradicate personal problems.
- **Social interaction:** volunteering to build social networks and interact with others.
- **Recognition:** volunteering to gain recognition from others.

With regards to community involvement, a study by Batson et al⁴ suggests that individuals are driven by four motives:

- **Egoism:** where the intention is to increase one's welfare.
- **Altruism:** where the intention is to increase the welfare of one or more individuals.
- **Collectivism:** where the intention is to increase the welfare of a group or collective.
- **Principlism:** where the intention is to uphold some moral principle.

And according to research by Klandermans⁵, people's motives for joining social movements are:

- **Instrumentality:** a desire to change circumstances.

⁴ Batson, C., N. Ahmad and J. Tsang (2002) Four Motives for Community Involvement, Journal of Social Issues 58(3) pp.429-445.

⁵ Klandermans, B. (2004) 'Why Social Movements Come Into Being and Why People Join Them' in J. R. Blau (ed) The Blackwell Companion to Sociology.

- **Identity:** a desire to belong to a group.
- **Meaning:** a desire to give meaning to one's life.

Despite apparent differences in motivations across these different types of activities, there are some commonalities. In the three 'typologies' above, motivations can be self-interested, altruistic, instrumental and expressive. They can relate to:

- the **individuals** themselves: what they want to achieve through their involvement at a personal level and what they want to express; their values and sense of identity and belonging;
- other **people:** what the individuals participating want to achieve collectively as a group and/or for others;
- the **wider world:** what individuals participating want to achieve for society, the environment and the natural world.

Triggers for involvement

Individuals may have similar motivations, values and circumstances, yet some act on these and get involved and some do not. So, what triggers people's involvement? The main triggers identified in the literature are: 'being asked'; encounters and events; access to a voluntary organisation or a community group; spare time and having a specific need (whether social or individual). Some of these triggers are related to social ties: research has shown that people with further education, higher incomes and wider social networks are more likely to hear about opportunities for participation and be asked⁶.

Barriers to participation

While some factors encourage and enable participation, a range of barriers

prevent people from getting involved and exclude some groups from participation or contribute to their under-representation in certain participatory activities or arenas:

| |
|---|
| <p>Institutional/organisational</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complexity and formality of governance structures and processes Complexity of organisational structures Bureaucracy of recruitment processes Gatekeepers controlling access |
| <p>Lack of resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education Disposable income (e.g. costs of travel and childcare) Time Health |
| <p>Practical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access and location of meetings Timing of events Transport Language |
| <p>Psychological</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor self-confidence Lack of trust Perceptions of the stereotypical participant |
| <p>Social/cultural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigma faced by minorities Experiences of discrimination Perceptions of community |

Sustaining participation

Just as there is no single answer as to what motivates people to get involved,

⁶ See [briefing paper no.3](#) on who participates.

there are a multitude of reasons why people continue - or decide to stop - being involved. While the literature on people's initial motivation to participate is abundant, there is relatively little on why people stay involved once they have started.

The literature suggests that institutional and organisational factors that prevent or encourage sustained participation are more easily identifiable than the personal factors, for which the evidence base seems at times contradictory. Organisational factors such as poor management and supervision, lack of training and the undervaluing and overburdening of participants all contribute to withdrawal according to the literature. The literature also suggests that participation is more likely to be created and maintained when people are supported by a local infrastructure of civic networks, community groups and voluntary organisations.

A number of personal withdrawal factors have been identified by researchers, for example moving to another area, changing employment or illness. Whether

being married and having children contributes to maintaining participation or not appears to depend on the type of activity: while this may be true of volunteering, it is not the case for social movements. Even though there is little consensus on personal factors, the literature identifies a number of key areas that are worth exploring when looking at how people engage over time, namely:

- the link between involvement and **life course**: people's motivations are not static and may change according to life stages;
- the **emotional attachment** that individuals have with what they do: the connections to the cause or the activity and to the people they participate with may influence people's decision to continue their involvement or not; and
- the importance of **enjoyment** and a sense that one's participation is having an **impact**: both positive and negative experiences of participation may affect how people participate in the future.

Further information

To download the literature review (which includes a detailed reference list) and to comment, go to <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/2010/01/understandingparticipation-a-literature-review/>

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/> Alternatively you can email pathwaysthroughparticipation@ncvo-vol.org.uk

