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# **Volunteering, paying it forward, and rural community: A study of Bridgetown, Western Australia**

## **Abstract**

Academic studies have highlighted the importance of volunteering for different communities, as a foundation of their cultural life or as an instrument to develop tourism. However, various knowledge gaps are still acknowledged, both from a practical and theoretical perspective. Using the case of Bridgetown, Western Australia, and incorporating the theory of volunteer work, this study seeks to contribute to the extant body of research in these two areas, studying the importance, ways, and management of volunteering. Data were collected among local residents via face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Various elements of the theory, including productive activity, collective action, and the relation between various types of volunteering were confirmed. **Importantly, paying it forward, an element instilled in the local community, which refers to giving without any expectations of returns or rewards, emerged as a significant finding.** The implications of the findings for community development are discussed, and future research directions suggested.

**Keywords:** **Perceptions; residents; rural Western Australia; theory of volunteer work; volunteering**

## **Introduction**

Volunteering, among the most significant pro-social undertakings (Meier & Stutzer, 2008), has been a topic of considerable interest among researchers. Volunteering has been studied in the context of civic engagement (McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006), productive and healthy aging (Warburton & Stirling, 2007), and non-governmental organizations (Mufune, Mwansa, & Siamwiza, 1996). Wilson (2000) defines volunteering as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (p. 215). Mason and

Fredericksen (2011) explain that volunteering is a characteristic of civil engagement in communities, as well as a component of bridging social capital, a term that refers to social networks bringing people from different backgrounds together (Putnam & Goss, 2000). In turn, engagement acts “as the binding agent... and captures the means by which people’s needs are assured” (Mason & Fredericksen, 2011, p. 12).

Despite the large number of existing contributions, numerous knowledge gaps are yet to be addressed and research avenues considered. Holmes (2009) posits that most research on volunteering has been quantitative, with researchers choosing “statistical generalizability over in-depth investigation” (p. 1). As a result, the voices of volunteers have “been lost amongst the statistical tests” (p. 1), suggesting a lack of qualitative research on this area. Warburton and Stirling (2007) notice scant research “of large scale Australian studies of volunteering among older adults” (p. 23). Similarly, Mackaway (2008) acknowledges limited research on volunteering in the (Australian) culture and arts sector. In the field of tourism, Duarte Alonso and Liu (2013) concluded by encouraging future research to consider the insights of community stakeholders, including local residents.

The present study is partly in response to the calls made by Holmes (2009) and Duarte Alonso and Liu (2013). Therefore, using a qualitative approach based on face-to-face interviews and focus groups, the study seeks to extend and complement previous research by examining volunteering from the perspective of residents in a Western Australian rural area. The town of Bridgetown is the selected environment to investigate and address the following overarching research questions (RQs):

RQ1) To what extent is volunteering important to the local rural community?

RQ2) In what way(s) is volunteering important?

RQ3) How is volunteering managed by the community?

As opposed to much of contemporary research, which predominantly focuses on such aspects as motivations for becoming involved in **volunteering, this study** is mainly concerned with a) the importance of volunteering, b) ways in which it is important, and c) how it is managed by the local community. Given this emphasis, the TVW is **considered the more** appropriate framework for the present research, and it is therefore adopted. Second, findings that identify ways in which volunteering is important could also lead to benefits for the studied community or for other communities. For instance, given the increasing importance of tourism in the studied community, whereby involvement of the local community is vital (Duarte Alonso & Liu, 2013), the findings could illuminate this community and others of the significance of nurturing and/or strengthening a volunteering culture. From a theoretical perspective, the study makes a further contribution, incorporating and testing the theory of volunteer work (Wilson & Musick, 1997a) in the context of **findings**.

### **Literature review**

As opposed to much of contemporary research, which predominantly focuses on such aspects as motivations for becoming involved in **volunteering, this study** is mainly concerned with a) the importance of volunteering, b) ways in which it is important, and c) how it is managed by the local community. Given this emphasis, the TVW is **considered the more** appropriate framework for the present research, and it is therefore adopted.

The theory of volunteer work (TVW)

**The study of volunteering through the lens of various theoretical frameworks can help identify associations between this activity and community development. Hustinx, Cnaan, and Handy (2010) argue that “no theory [of volunteerism] has emerged” (p. 410). However, earlier research by Wilson and Musick (1997a) sought to make a theoretical contribution in this domain, proposing the TVW. Essentially, the TVW emphasises both informal, as well as formal volunteer work, and is based on the following four fundamental propositions:**

1) Much like other forms of paid or unpaid work, volunteering is a productive activity, whereby performance in or admission to volunteering can be dependent on people's qualifications (Wilson & Musick, 1997a). For example, in discussing Baby Boomer volunteers, Culp (2009) posits that many individuals from this group typically possess a set of skills and higher levels of education; as a result, these individuals can make important practical contributions.

2) To some degree, volunteering requires collective action. In particular, collective action is more appropriate in formal volunteering, where work may be performed "on behalf of a collective good" (Wilson & Musick, 1997a, p. 695), for instance, clearing litter from public places. In contrast, informal volunteering is more based on helping (Wilson & Musick, 1997a). Both forms of volunteering were identified by Duarte Alonso and Liu (2013). Indeed, the authors noticed that many local volunteers formally worked at the local visitor centres, and informally helping organise and host local events.

3) Volunteer-recipient relationships are ethical, with volunteers giving or investing their time to serve or support other individuals. A demonstration of this relationship includes volunteers involved in the welfare of vulnerable social groups, such as senior citizens, and even training 'rookies' to prepare them for future volunteer work (Cloke, Johnsen, & May, 2007).

4) Different forms of volunteer work are related to one another (Wilson & Musick, 1997a). The above illustrations demonstrate this notion, particularly Duarte Alonso and Liu's (2013) discussion of volunteers in the Blackwood River region who were involved in a variety of activities with the overall aim of developing regional tourism.

From these four propositions, Wilson and Musick (1997a) conclude that an integrated theory of both informal and formal volunteer work is based on the following succinct summarizations:

- 1) Productive work, which entails human capital,
- 2) Collective behavior, which involves social capital, and
- 3) Ethically guided work, which requires 'cultural capital', and can transpire through religious activities (pray, attend church), or appreciation for helping others.

While Wilson and Musick's (1997a) contribution has been recognized and cited by many authors (e.g. Choi & Chou, 2010; Choi & Kim, 2011; Parboteeah, Cullen, & Lim, 2004), Hustinx et al. (2010) discuss several challenges in the development of a theory of volunteering. First, volunteering is yet to be clearly defined; moreover, it spans across organisations, activities, and sectors (Hustinx et al., 2010). Second, and similarly, the interest of volunteering among academics has resulted in research conducted in multiple disciplines, including social work, management science, sociology, and economics. Third, Hustinx et al. (2010) suggest an existing subjective perception of volunteering as a field lacking theoretical rigour, arguing that it has been "treated as a unidimensional category devoid of any complexity" (p. 411).

Despite the challenges recognised by Hustinx et al. (2010), Einolf and Chambré (2011) note that today, numerous theories of volunteering exist, classifying the emerging theories into three categories:

- 1) Social theories that address context, networks, and roles. In this category, there is a notion that volunteers mobilize to respond to relevant social issues and emergencies. In turn, these volunteers can be affected by the neighborhoods where they operate, and by existing cultures of generosity (Einolf & Chambré, 2011).
- 2) Individual characteristic theories, emphasizing motivations, values, and traits, or characteristics influencing people to volunteer, and
- 3) Resource theories, highlighting free time and skills. People who possess more resources are more likely to be recruited or become volunteers (Einolf & Chambré, 2011).

While valid in their contribution to a more modern theory of **volunteering**, much of the emphasis of the three theories above is based on earlier research conducted by the authors. For instance, the discussion of social role significantly rests on the work of Ross (1954), Staines (1980), Caro and Bass (1997), Choi, Burr, Mutchler, and Caro (2007), Rotolo (2000), or Wilson and Musick (1997b). Concerning individual characteristics theories, these are presented in earlier research by Andreoni (1989), Clary et al. (1998), Wiehe and Isenhour (1977), McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992), Rossi (2001), or more recently, Perry, Brudney, Coursey, and Littlepage (2008).

Finally, with regard to resource theories, the original theoretical work of Wilson and Musick (1997a) and Musick and Wilson (2008) is part of Einolf and Chambré's (2011) discussion, together with Freeman (1997), Chambré (1984, 1987), and Sundeen, Raskoff, and Garcia (2007). Even the recent investigation of Lim and Laurence (2015) discusses the supply side theory of volunteering referring to the work of Freeman (1997) and Musick and Wilson (2008), clearly illustrating the relevance of earlier research, including research on the TVW (Wilson & Musick, 1997a) in providing a solid theoretical framework to investigate volunteering.

#### Proposed framework

As was the case in choosing the TVW, the work of Wilson and Musick (1997a) is considered in designing the proposed framework (Figure 1), especially given the associations between the TVW and the themes under examination. Fundamentally, existing and/or developing relationships among the residents of the studied community, which constitute the main stakeholder group and main source of volunteers, are suggested as being closely related to their motives to volunteer. Moreover, in becoming involved in and strengthening those relationships, it is proposed that local residents may perceive volunteering as a natural and acceptable form of being part of their community. According to the academic literature, the

motives for volunteering are varied; they can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Finkelstien, 2009), and may include (bridging) social capital and civic engagement (Mason & Fredericksen, 2011; Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Goss, 2000), sense of security, camaraderie, and pride (Campbell, 2009), or the need or rationale to reinforce the community's social fabric (Duarte Alonso & Liu, 2013).

In turn, residents' motives are suggested as being closely linked to the perceived importance they place on volunteering (RQ1) and to specific ways in which volunteering is important (RQ2). Furthermore, the two dimensions represented by RQ1 and RQ2 cascade down into the third, namely, ways in which volunteering is managed by the community (RQ3). This last dimension also overlaps with productive activities, collective action, or informal volunteering, and ethical guided work (Wilson & Musick (1997a). As suggested (Figure 1), the impact of these dimensions may result in critical implications for the local community and its residents.

Figure 1 Here

The geographic context of the study

The southwest town of Bridgetown, the chosen location of this study, has 4,643 residents (South West Development Commission, SWDC, 2015) and is located 260 kilometers, or nearly 162 miles, from the city of Perth (Government of Western Australia, 2015). According to the Blackwood River Valley Marketing Association (BRVMA, 2015), an organization established in 1984 and based in the town of Bridgetown, this town is part of the Blackwood River Valley region, which also comprises the towns of Balingup, Boyup Brook, Darkan, Greenbushes, and Nannup. The Blackwood River, which flows through Bridgetown, is 270 kilometers long (approximately 168 miles) and connects the inland agricultural area, known as the "wheat belt," to the town of Augusta, near the Indian and Southern Ocean (BRVMA, 2015).



Bridgetown's agricultural/rural background is very strong. In the late 1850s, pastoral properties were established near the Blackwood River and were complemented in 1862 by apple growing (Tonts & Greive, 2002). The emergence of the timber industry further helped the formation of the town's agriculture (Tonts & Greive, 2002). However, global competition in wool, dairy, orchard, and beef production in the 1960s and 1970s led to a decline; as in other rural areas, in subsequent years employment in agriculture fell, in the case of Bridgetown from 427 jobs in 1971 to 292 in 1996 (Tonts & Greive, 2002).

According to Tonts and Greive (2002), the collapse in land and real estate prices gave rise to a migration looking for a rural lifestyle, which also triggered the popularity of the south-west region as a tourist destination. In subsequent decades, several fundamental changes, including changes in the local industries, and those of lifestyle demands from outside residents contributed to a growth of the shire's population (Tonts & Greive, 2002). Indeed, as Tonts and Greive (2002) state, "Bridgetown as a place to farm is being superseded by Bridgetown as a place to live, recreate and consume by a growing ex-urban middle class" (p. 66).

While different definitions for the term rural exist (McManus & Pritchard, 2000), Connell and McManus (2011) and McManus et al. (2012) refer to Lowe and Ward's (2009) research, in which these authors identify eight types of rural in the context of England. The type deep rural area appears to be the closest in the case of Bridgetown. Deep rural areas are strongly related to "popular perceptions of 'traditional' countryside" (Lowe & Ward, 2009, p. 1324), with conventional livestock farming and rural tourism being prominent industries. Also, deep rural areas are physically remote, do not experience significant population changes, and do not have sufficient symbolic resources to attract certain socioeconomic groups that may fit the commuter category (Lowe & Ward, 2009).

Bridgetown is still surrounded by a farming landscape (Tonts & Greive, 2002), and while mining and tourism are two prominent industries contributing to the shire of Bridgetown's economy, farming, horticulture, and viticulture are also important (SWDC, 2015). In fact, 46,009 hectares of land holdings are dedicated to agriculture, with 186 existing farms and an approximate \$18 million in agricultural production value (SWDC, 2015). Further, the main employing industries are health care, with 203 jobs, mining (169), agriculture, forestry, and fishing (161), and retail (161) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

A number of events are organized in Bridgetown throughout the year, including a blues festival and Taste of the Blackwood, a culinary event held every August featuring local/regional wineries, honey, cheese, olive oil, and other food producers.

### **Methods and data collection**

This study is part of a broader project investigating contemporary issues, including tourism development in rural areas of Western Australia. A visit to Taste of the Blackwood (2014 edition) allowed the research team to establish networks with various Bridgetown residents, some of whom were exhibiting and selling their food products at the event. These initial interactions created a rapport, which developed over the course of the next months through telephone and email communication. During the initial contacts with local key informants at the 2014 Taste of the Blackwood, several key observations were made during interactions with local residents. These observations revealed the importance and level of volunteering within the community of Bridgetown, as well as residents' vibrancy and keenness in showcasing their town through many events. Importantly, most or all of these events are fully dependent on local residents' volunteering. Given the existing contacts with various community key informants and the researchers' knowledge of the rural area where Bridgetown is located, this town was selected as a case for the project.

Thus, the study is fundamentally based on a case study methodology. Yin (1981) defines a case study as a research strategy whereby one distinguishing characteristic is the examination of “a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context” (p. 59). More specifically, the research is classified as an instrumental case study, which emphasizes some contexts of the research that are of particular importance (Stake, 1995). Moreover, when conducting an instrumental case study, researchers seek to gain an understanding beyond what appears to be obvious (Tellis, 1997). The research also uses qualitative evidence (Yin, 1981), which includes focus groups, also referred to as group interviews (Morgan, 1997).

As previously indicated, the study is concerned with identifying the perceived importance of volunteering, ways in which it is important for the local community, and ways in which it is managed. Consequently, several studies addressing volunteering in various contexts (e.g. Benson & Seibert, 2009; Gooch, 2003), including in rural communities (e.g. Duarte Alonso & Liu, 2013; Kilpatrick, Stirling, & Orpin, 2010; Liu & Besser, 2003; Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003), were consulted as the knowledge foundation of the research and in the process of designing the research questions.

Between August and November of 2014, the research group and the key informants organized an event to meet with local residents to discuss aspects related to the community, including volunteering. During these months, local residents were invited to participate in the study. The involvement of key informants was critical in this process, as they disseminated information about the study among their peers, neighbors, and local businesses via email and local media. Twenty-six local residents in addition to the four key informants accepted the invitation, for a total of 30 individuals.

In late November, the research group travelled to Bridgetown. Over a two-day period, two meetings with as many focus groups were conducted. One focus group was composed of five people, and the second included eight individuals. The focus group discussions lasted

approximately 90 minutes. In addition, face-to-face interviews with 17 individuals were carried out; each of these interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes.

The focus group discussions and interviews were digitally recorded with participants' agreement. Research group members subsequently transcribed the data obtained. The software NVivo (version 10) was used to manage the various comments that emerged in the research project, including in the present study. Content analysis was used, which is a method that allows for the interpretation of text data and includes a systematic process of identifying and coding patterns or themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In the following sections, participants are labeled as follows: participant 1= P1, participant 2= P2, and so forth.

#### Demographic characteristics of participants

Three age groups were identified; of these, the largest (12, 40%) was aged 66 years of age and above, followed by the group aged between 46 and 65 years old (10, 33%), and then by that aged between 22 and 45 years (8, 27%). Female respondents outnumbered their male counterparts (17 or 56.7% versus 13 or 43.3%). The majority of participants (18, 60%) had lived in Bridgetown for 11 or more years, followed by seven (23%) who lived between 6 to 10 years, and five (17%) who lived in the town for less than 5 years.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### RQ1: Importance of volunteering

To illustrate the level of volunteering within Bridgetown's community, one of the participants (P1) who works closely with the local shire explained that more than 30% of the town's population is involved in one or more forms of volunteering. Overall, the findings of the present study clearly point to the intrinsic and extrinsic importance of volunteering. Indeed, volunteering was perceived by participants in a very fundamental, even organic, manner: it was a way of life. For example, the largest event taking place in Bridgetown each year, the blues festival, more than doubled the size of the town's population for an entire

weekend. Not surprisingly given the town's size and resources, the running of the event almost exclusively relied on local volunteers (P2): "The blues festival would not operate without the volunteers. A lot of the events are run by the volunteers... Volunteerism has a very strong culture here." This first comment is aligned to the TVW (Wilson and Musick, 1997a), in that it underlines the significance of human capital, collective behaviour, and volunteering in contributing to the collective good of the community. Together, these elements are suggested to be part of the theory's foundation.

Importantly, paying it forward emerged as a key finding, with P3 confirming a large supply within Bridgetown's community: "There is a lot of it [paying it forward] here... I do it for you and then you do it for somebody else..." The following comments further underline - both directly as well as indirectly - the importance of paying it forward in various scenarios of rural community life:

P4: The payback for that [volunteering] is this sense of community where if something happens everyone knows everyone else, and you step in to help..."

P5: We have a lot of [older residents] that have lost their partners, there is a lot of people cooking for them, bringing over food for them, and there is a lot of people staying with them, so that they are not alone, so there's lots of people that are concerned about people within their community, that they can help, and I see it every single day."

Gray, Ward, and Norton (2014) refer to paying it forward as "a heart-warming notion" (p. 247), and as "paying kindness forward - or generalized reciprocity" (p. 247). The operationalization of the latter is simple (Gray et al., 2014). For instance, person A is kind to person B; person B, in turn, pays person A's kindness forward to person C, rather than back to person A, thus, "creating a chain of good will" (Gray et al., 2014, p. 247). Therefore,

individuals may be prepared to help another person “on the condition that they received help previously” (Rankin & Taborsky, 2009, p. 1913).

RQ2: Ways in which volunteering is important

Apart from the principle of paying it forward previously discussed, many comments identified specific ways in which volunteering is important for Bridgetown’s residents.

Importantly, there was a perception that without volunteering, the local community would not survive; in this regard, P6 noted: “Bridgetown would close down without volunteers...A lot of the work at the community center is done by volunteers; the schools, library, or information center rely on volunteers.” Moreover, some tragic events occurring in the town in recent times had required the mobilization of the local population.

P7: There was a little boy last year ... who had a brain tumor ... there were so many fundraisers ... so that his family could go and live in Perth to support him ... they virtually had to move their family ... and [name] is well now.

P8: Just recently a young man with two kids died suddenly without warning ... and people just donated time and expertise, and food, and there was a fund set up in one of the banks ...

Once again, participants’ comments align with some of the tenets of the TVW, highlighting the importance of collective action, ethically guided work, and social capital (Wilson and Musick, 1997a). Important perceived ways of volunteering also included intrinsic elements, such as a feeling of trust and a stronger sense of attachment to local residents and the community. In this context, Gooch (2003) posits that volunteers who identify with the physical location with which they interact tend to perceive a stronger sense of place, which in turn may help “foster active volunteer groups” (p. 23). Together, the elements identified above may contribute to the strengthening of the community’s social fabric.

Other comments further illustrated the extent to which volunteering is deeply ingrained in Bridgetown's community, with various implications for the community's social capital and social fabric:

P9: ... just a general feel that people look out for each other.

P10: It [volunteering] is certainly the lifeblood of a small community, certainly with bushfires and such services.

P11: [Volunteering] gives people a sense of purpose, enables new people to integrate by volunteering with various groups.

Earlier research identifies the importance that volunteering has for those individuals who frequently engage in this activity. For instance, in examining the experiences of volunteering tourists to a wildlife rehabilitation project, Broad (2003) highlights the intrinsic benefits for volunteers, namely, in terms of learning about local cultures and ways of life, and overall personal growth. In another study conducted among volunteers of ambulance services, Hankinson and Rochester (2005) noticed that for these individuals "volunteering became a way of life involving organised social events ..." (p. 98). Furthermore, volunteering was perceived to be of intrinsic worth, providing opportunities to bring about social changes, and as a vehicle for making a contribution to the local community (Hankinson & Rochester, 2005).

Another important finding is that, given the limited existing resources, for instance, to attract, pay, and retain professionals to fulfill specific tasks (e.g. battling forest fires, manning events, etc.), there is a much stronger demand for local participation and engagement in volunteering. As P12 stated: "... in a small town this [volunteering] is important because the [support] groups are not big enough by themselves to make a lot of difference, but if everybody is together, and each group has a specific talent ..."

RQ3: Managing volunteering in Bridgetown

Simpson et al. (2003) suggest that, increasingly, governments are trying to respond to socioeconomic challenges affecting rural areas, emphasising the value of capacity building, and community empowerment. However, in this process, governments also face challenges, and need to act very carefully in order to avoid placing too much pressure on rural community residents (Simpson et al., 2003).

The high percentage of volunteering and the many comments emphasising a strong involvement and a strong culture of volunteering appear to be in line with Simpson et al.'s (2003) study regarding community empowerment. As P13 underlined, empowerment seems to be a common feature within Bridgetown's community: "The Shire is also a strong supporter of the community, the shire [people] get behind everyone and everything, and they will go out of their way to make sure things are right for you so ... and I think that builds a strong community ...". Such support was subsequently reflected in local residents' operationalization of community involvement, including volunteering, with different groups focusing on various areas. P14 stated: "For the support brigade, there are about 10-15 people that keep it going, but we have about 90 volunteers. So, if there is an incident, you will not have a problem ...". This comment, as well as many others, is associated with several propositions of the TVW (Wilson and Musick, 1997a) in the context of volunteering management. For example, the proposition different forms of volunteering became obvious through activities that then escalated into increased volunteering:

P15: When you move to Bridgetown, people will come and ask you ... so, what are you good at? What do you want to get involved in? Some people take a little time to get into the swing of things, and others hit the ground running.

P16: Once you become known as a volunteer, you get propositions from pretty much every direction all the time.



P17: Everybody has a mental list of telephone numbers of possible volunteers in their brain, and he just goes through that list, and people know people who might be able to help ...

The productive activity proposition (Wilson & Musick, 1997a) also became evident. For example, several respondents alluded to the fact that new residents settling in Bridgetown were equipped with various skills. As a result, these individuals were capable of performing different volunteering activities and adapting to demands in their newly adopted environment. Others already possessed such skills and were eager to utilize them for the common good:

P18: It is amazing the way we all carve our own niches in the volunteer spectrum ... I tend to specialize in areas I am strong in ...

P19: ... so many people here ... are very creative, lots of artists, lots of musicians, lots of people doing natural therapies ... and it is not uncommon to hear people say ...

P20: Certainly, the[re is] diversity of skills in the community and the volunteering, but also the fostering of creativity, and the welcoming of creativity in the community in terms of new projects, and new ideas ...

Another illustration of volunteering management became evident in a further comment, which underlined the importance of volunteers at the local visitor center, an aspect also mentioned by Duarte Alonso and Liu (2013). P21 indicated: "... at the visitor center we have 12 volunteers ... disseminating knowledge is particularly important because visitors become advocates of Bridgetown, which spreads the word." The comment above is aligned with research by Leader-Elliot, Smiles, and Vanzo (2011). These authors explain that numerous community organizations across regional Australia that help sustain the local cultural life are mostly run by volunteers. Finally, to manage volunteering more effectively, P22 reflected:

“... people are realistic also with what they can offer, because there is no point offering more than you can give, because you will only disappoint people and yourself.”

## **Conclusions**

Volunteering is a key element in different social environments; it can be rewarding (Smith, 1981) and conducive to a variety of personal (intrinsic) benefits, including a stronger sense of life satisfaction, happiness, and control over life, or physical health (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Despite a large body of literature devoted to the topic of volunteering, knowledge gaps have been recognized (e.g. Mackaway, 2008; Warburton & Stirling, 2007), and calls for more qualitative research have been made (Holmes, 2009). The present study responded to these calls, investigating the case of Bridgetown, a Western Australian rural community. Focus groups and face-to-face interviews were conducted among the local residents to investigate their perceived importance of volunteering, ways in which volunteering is important, and ways in which volunteering is managed within the community.

Many participants confirm the vital importance of volunteering for the rural community in a number of ways. Moreover, the fact that almost one-third of Bridgetown's population actively engages in volunteering underlines the strong volunteering culture. One key finding which became apparent within the community was the aspect of paying it forward, with clear positive implications for the community's social capital and its social fabric. Volunteering was evident in participation in many events throughout the year, including the blues festival, which attracts thousands of outside visitors each year. Regarding volunteering management, participants' comments suggest that the shire of Bridgetown seeks to empower the community. Not surprisingly, numerous residents are involved in various volunteering activities and groups. The operationalization of residents' skills in volunteering is also evident in many of the comments.

Various links between the TVW (Wilson & Musick, 1997a) and the findings pertaining to the three areas investigated **were revealed**. First, volunteering as a productive activity emerged in the form of the different qualifications or skills residents possess, which allows them to be **involved in the development and execution of events**, providing information at the tourism office, or combating fires. This aspect of skills and qualifications also overlaps with a second proposition, different forms of volunteering, which is related to the former. Third, collective action, focusing on the community's collective good through formal volunteering, either at the blues festival, other events, or during fires was also confirmed. Fourth, and also associated with the previous propositions, while during the interviews and discussions it was noticed that volunteering is genuine and natural, clearly there is a very strong ethical element, particularly in helping people in difficult situations, or even in assisting outsiders with queries and other needs.

### **Implications**

While arguably the overall findings may not be operationalizable in communities around the world, the case of Bridgetown clearly illustrates that volunteerism is a key element helping bring the community together and contributing to its social capital. When participants were queried about the importance of volunteering, their extended comments hinted at the links between volunteering and their apparent strong community spirit and social capital (P23):

“[Volunteering] gives people a sense of purpose, enables new people to integrate by volunteering with various groups ...” Further, despite community residents' heavy involvement in volunteering activities throughout the year, in the main participants appeared to assume that volunteering was part of their lives, with **multiple positive outcomes (P24):**

**“...when people ask what's the community like ... I say you can get into it or you can get out of it ... you can be a hermit and no one will think any different ... or you can be involved in anything ...”**

The emerging implications of the findings point to many intrinsic as well as extrinsic benefits that can be achieved from building, strengthening, or maintaining a strong culture of volunteering. As the case of Bridgetown illustrates, making sacrifices in terms of time and effort could have a positive trade off in building trust and stronger networks, in counting on other community members, and overall, in enhancing a community's social fabric. Implications can also be drawn for local governments in instilling, helping build, or further strengthening a sense of cooperation and volunteering in their communities, including those which fit the category of deep rural (Lowe & Ward, 2009). **In this context,** Judd et al. (2006) highlight the significant economic and social changes, including population decline and loss of employment, affecting Australian rural towns of less than 4,000 residents in the last three decades.

Theoretical implications can also be identified from the findings. Indeed, while the usefulness of the TVW became apparent, the aspect of paying it forward could potentially be considered as yet another proposition of the theory, or in conjunction with the proposition volunteer-recipient relationships are ethical. Paying it forward could be both interpreted in formal as well as informal volunteering situations; in the case of Bridgetown's participants, it appears to be an essential component of not only volunteering, but of everyday life.

### **Limitations and future research**

The study has several limitations preventing the generalizability of the findings. The first limitation is the low number of participants in the study. The second limitation is the convenience sample-like approach used in the study, with various prospective participants identified through previous meetings. **Additional limitations of the study include studying one small rural town, and conducting the study at one particular time, as opposed to investigating various towns, and using a longitudinal approach, respectively.**

The study's findings provide opportunities for further research. For instance, researchers may consider gathering the perceptions of residents of other communities, which would allow for making comparisons concerning residents' involvement and perceptions of benefits and challenges of volunteering. Future research could also consider comparing the perceptions regarding these areas between rural and semi-rural and urban community residents. Such comparisons could elicit important insights, informing community stakeholders on opportunities available for residents to become involved and contribute to their towns and communities. Similarly, future research could further test the TVW in rural, semi-rural, and urban environments, considering the addition of paying it forward or other elements related to social capital. In doing so, researchers could contribute to the further development of the theory, which could help facilitate further understanding of volunteering related areas.

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