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Negotiating the volunteer role: a qualitative study of older volunteers' experiences in woodland conservation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the exchange relationship between older conservation volunteers (aged over 50 years) and paid group organisers. Using qualitative interview data from seventeen adult volunteers and four organisers recruited from three conservation groups in the North West of England we argue that the psychological contract is important for understanding how organisations can manage and retain volunteers. Our findings highlight the importance of the psychological contract between volunteers and the group organiser, with each party recognising the mutual benefits they bring to the relationship. Participants' accounts revealed that they chose to take on the often physically challenging conservation work because the natural environment was important to them, but also because there was no obligation for them to attend. Thus, being a conservation volunteer allowed them to retain control over their voluntary time commitment and avoid the pressures of responsibility associated with having people depending upon them. At the micro-level, organisers appreciated the expectations and abilities of individual volunteers, managing and adjusting their own practices accordingly to encourage volunteer retention. We consider the implications of our research in terms of both volunteer and psychological contract theory and discuss the potential implications for organisations in terms of managing and retaining older volunteers.

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Introduction

Volunteering is a key resource for many organizations; however, it does not easily fit in to discussions around 'work'. The International Labour Organisation (2011, p. 13) defines a volunteer as someone who carries out 'unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household'. Volunteering is multidimensional and complex spanning a wide range of sectors and organizations, incorporating a number of roles and activities. For many organizations, volunteers are an essential resource to the running and sustainability of their activities (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2013), and may ultimately impact upon the viability of the organization itself. Volunteers play a primary role within organizations by supplementing paid staff and reducing workload by taking on support roles, clerical tasks, public relations and community relationship roles (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004). In the UK, the 'Big Society' policy initiative launched in 2010 by the then coalition UK government aimed to encourage people to engage actively with their communities and thereby increase volunteering for a number of reasons, including cuts in public services and charitable sector government funding and changes in retirement age (Civil Exchange, 2013). For example, around three million volunteers provide unpaid help in health and social care arenas, including more than 100,000 volunteers who help to reduce hospice costs by approximately 23 per cent, and over 33,000 volunteers who staff libraries (Civil Exchange, 2015). Critical services such as the fire and rescue services, hospitals and hospice care, libraries and cultural heritage increasingly rely upon volunteers to deliver and maintain key services (Bryson et al., 2018). However, there can be a tension, especially within the public sector, between volunteers complementing and supporting the roles of paid staff and fulfilling core roles, ultimately replacing paid workers (Unison, 2016). As Unison (2016) point out while volunteers in public libraries have increased since 2010, the number of paid employees decreased by 4% over the same period. However, organisations need to consider that while volunteers play an important role they do not have a contractual obligation to the organisation, and volunteers need to be supported and developed, and their contribution recognised (Warren, 2014). Thus, although what is considered work in society has become more complex, voluntary work tends to be overlooked in favour of discussion around the paid employment and domestic work dichotomy, despite the extent and reliance on volunteering by organisations (Kelemen et al., 2017). In the UK, people over 50 years of age report the greatest number of hours volunteering compared to those under 50 years (Foster, 2013; ONS 2019). Given the key role that older volunteers have

within many organizations, it is important that managers and HR professionals have insight on how to retain such workers and encourage them to give their time. This paper draws on psychological contract (PC) theory which posits an exchange relationship approach between employee and employer. While the PC has increasingly been utilised to explore voluntary work, a recent review highlights that the research into how organisations manage volunteers remains limited, as research concentrates predominantly on volunteers rather than managers (Hoye & Kappelides, 2021). Thus the focus in this study is the relationship between volunteers and the paid organiser of the conservation organisation.

We draw upon qualitative data from our study of volunteers, and the paid organisers, from three woodland conservation groups in the North West of England to explore the ongoing volunteer—organizational exchange relationship and in doing so gain insight into how such workers are retained and managed. We first discuss the role of older volunteers for the UK and the importance of the exchange relationship in relation to volunteers. We provide an overview of woodland conservation work and an outline of the qualitative research methods adopted in the study. The findings from the focus group data are presented by drawing on relevant quotes from respondents to highlight their perceptions and experiences. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of the research in respect to both organizational theory and practice.

Older volunteers and voluntary work

Globally, the number of people aged over 60 years is projected to double from 962 million in 2017 to approximately 2 billion in 2050 (United Nations, 2017). The UK has an ageing population, which is projected to increase to nearly 25% of the overall population by 2045 (ONS, 2017). In the UK there is no longer a forced retirement age, the state pension age has increased for both men and women to 66 years and is set to increase further (DWP, 2017). Thus, older workers are increasingly becoming an important employment resource for organizations, and it is likely that greater effort will be needed to retain older workers beyond their formal retirement age (Egdell et al., 2020).

The conservation sector increasingly depends on volunteers to work alongside paid workers in a wide range of volunteer roles that promote environmental issues and sustainability including biodiversity monitoring, preserving habitats and species, restoring and maintaining natural areas and open spaces (e.g. maintaining and tidying paths, planting trees) and preserving and protecting historic buildings (e.g. Pillemer et al., 2017; Sloane and Probstl-Haider, 2019; Ward and Greene, 2018). Volunteers play a key role in the conservation sector. For example, in a study of

volunteering in Northern England, Armsworth et al. (2013) estimated that volunteers from the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust contributed almost 3,200 days of labour per year across 59 sites, with a conservative estimated monetary value of £156,000. Another UK conservation charity, the National Trust, has 65,000 volunteers who contribute over 4.8 million hours of unpaid work, supplementing the Trust's 9,000 staff members and around 5,000 seasonal workers (National Trust, 2020). Thus, for the conservation sector, volunteers can help to offset management costs (Armsworth et al., 2013). The focus of this project is on woodland conservation which involves the management and conservation of sustainable woodland, as well as rural and urban natural environments.

In the UK, volunteers in the conservation sectors are generally aged 55 years and older (Sloane & Probstl-Haider, 2019), although research suggests that people volunteer well into their 60's and 70's (e.g. Lovell et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2010, Ganzevoort & van den Born, 2020). Volunteering can provide a number of positive health and wellbeing benefits to older volunteers in terms of improved psychosocial and physical health and better cognitive functioning, and as Matthews and Nazroo (2021) suggest can be viewed in the wider context of 'healthy ageing'. Woodland conservation volunteering has the additional benefit of engaging in physical activity within the natural environment, which previous research has shown leads to improved psychological and physical wellbeing (e.g. Bowler et al., 2010; Pillemer et al, 2017). Woodland conservation volunteers are also likely to report an increased sense of social belonging and connectedness through working with others who have a similar interest in conservation work (Christie 2017; Townsend, 2006; Van Den Berg et al., 2009). There are, however, age related differences in terms of the exchange relationship, which organisations need to consider. For example, while older volunteers appear to have fewer expectations and are less affected by contract breach than younger volunteers (Aranda, 2018), they tend to expect voluntary work to meet learning goals (Kragt and Holtrop, 2019). The focus of this paper, therefore, is on older volunteers at a time when organizations are becoming increasingly reliant upon older people.

The psychological contract and voluntary work

The PC incorporates a 'system of beliefs that an individual and his or her employer hold regarding the terms of the exchange relationship' (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004:). The PC has been conceptualised in different ways comprising for example, obligations, trust, beliefs and reciprocity, however, as Grant (1999) points out the concept of expectations lies at the heart of all definitions. Ultimately, expectations can lead to perceived

obligations, whereby individuals in the exchange relationship feel bound to take on certain responsibilities or tasks (Rousseau et al., 2018). The majority of the research into the PC has concentrated upon paid work and suggests employees have similar expectations in terms of content of the exchange relationship, for example around equitable pay, job security, career development, fairness, a safe and pleasant working environment, training and consultation (e.g. Rousseau, 1995; Herriot et al., 1997). As Farmer and Fedor (1999) highlight, the PC appears useful across a variety of contexts and working relationships, including volunteer working relationships.

In addition to the key expectations outlined above, employees also hold expectations which are context specific to their workplace or profession (Purvis & Cropley, 2003). For volunteers, context is also likely to be important as the PC is based upon individual expectations of the volunteering experience (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019). While volunteers may not be employed by the organization with which they are involved, or expect financial gain, they are willing to invest time, expertise and effort to the organization and expect to get something in return. For example, O'Donohue and Nelson (2009) found that hospital volunteers expected to be treated fairly, be recognised for their work effort and provided with interesting and meaningful tasks. Less is known about the organisational side of the exchange relationship, as despite their key role there has been relatively little research in the experiences of the paid supervisors or organisers of volunteers (Sandiford & Green, 2021). However, research suggests that managing volunteers can be emotionally demanding when volunteers are 'affectively committed' to the organisation, and some supervisors may be reluctant to address behaviours deemed difficult or challenging (Ward and Greene, 2018). The reliability of volunteers also appears to be a key part of the exchange relationship for managers, especially in situations where their absence can jeopardise service delivery (Nichols & Ojala, 2009; Vantilborgh & Van Puyvelde, 2018).

Research into PCs has tended to conceptualise the framework as transactional (the contract has specified duration and performance terms, and are based on monetary exchanges) or relational (the relationship and timeframe are open-ended, and may include emotional involvement along with monetary exchanges) (Rousseau, 1995). However, this two-dimensional approach does not fully consider the volunteer experience because it fails to consider that ideological beliefs and values may underlie motivations to volunteer rather than monetary reward (Hager & Renfro, 2020; Hoye & Kappelides, 2021). Volunteering is likely to incorporate an ideological dimension whereby volunteers' expectations are shaped by the perception that their contribution to the organisation is contributing to a higher cause (Scheel & Mohr, 2013; Thompson &

Bunderson, 2003). Thompson and Bunderson (2003, p. 574) define the ideological currency of the PC as 'credible commitments to pursue a valued cause or principle (not limited to self-interest) that are implicitly exchanged at the nexus of the individual-organization relationship'. Volunteers are likely to have a value-driven affiliation with their organisation, choosing to volunteer for interesting or inspiring causes (Hager & Renfro, 2020). Moreover, their volunteering involvement is likely to be sustained when they perceive that their values and beliefs align with the organisation (Kappelides & Jones, 2019). Research suggests the ideological PC is important in terms of shaping the expectations of volunteers and influencing involvement with the organisation (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Vantilborgh et al., 2014, 2011). For example, although underfulfilment of relational PCs resulted in decreased work effort from volunteers, underfulfilment of ideological PCs led to increased effort, suggesting volunteers will try to rectify any organisational shortcomings by working harder (Vantilborgh et al., 2014). Vantilborgh et al. (2014) suggest, however, that volunteers have limits to what they will tolerate and may ultimately leave the organisation or revise their PC if underfulfilment is sustained or becomes too great. This is likely to be important for the conservation sector as Cook and Inman (2012) point out the aims of different groups may lead to conflicts around economic resource or conservational goals, which may lead to underfulfilment of ideological PC which may in turn impact upon the values and ideology of volunteers.

People's underlying motives for volunteering are important as these will influence their expectations of their volunteering role and the organization's behaviour towards them (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). For example, qualitative research by Seaman (2012) explored whether 'early Boomer' women (born between 1946-1954) intended to carry out volunteer work after retirement. The minority who did anticipate volunteering indicated that it would involve a low level of commitment, would be for personal satisfaction and had to meet their 'psychological and spiritual needs' rather than for altruistic reasons (Seaman, 2012, p. 251). This is echoed in research focusing on conservation volunteers which found the key motivations for these volunteers were personal benefits such as being able to work outdoors, enhance their physical and mental wellbeing, to learn new skills, share knowledge, feel connected to the environment, to learn about, and create, ecosystems, and the chance for social interactions within projects that were well-organised (Christie, 2017, Chen et al., 2022; Elton et al., 2023; Van Den Berg et al., 2009). Thus, the exchange relationship for volunteers within the conservation sector is likely to be value-driven around environmental issues (e.g. Chen et al., 2022; Elton et al., 2023). If expectations are not met it is easier for

volunteers to leave an organization than for paid workers. However, turnover still has cost implications to organizations that rely on volunteers (Kim et al., 2009). In contrast, managing a volunteer workforce effectively can give an organization an economic and social advantage (Taylor et al., 2006). As discussed above, this is particularly relevant for charitable organizations such as in the conservation sector, which rely heavily on volunteers to undertake ongoing conservation work.

In summary, in comparison to paid work there has been less extant research on the PCs between volunteers and organizations. A recent review into the PC of volunteers by Hoye and Kappelides (2021) identified just 29 papers; moreover, they found that researchers tended to focus exclusively on volunteers rather than incorporating the views of their managers. The aim of this paper is to explore the dyadic exchange relationship between conservation volunteers and the paid organisers, to provide greater insight into how older volunteers can be managed and retained. This paper therefore contributes to the PC and volunteering literature by exploring what expectations older volunteers have in terms of carrying out unpaid work for a conservation organization in three woodland sites; and what expectations organisers have of their volunteers, and how they manage the expectations of the volunteers.

Research methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, utilising focus groups and interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of the values, reflections and experiences of the exchange relationship between volunteers of a woodland conservation organization and the paid volunteer group organisers. Thus, we took a dyadic approach to explore the PC from the perspective of both the paid organiser and the volunteer (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Following ethical approval from Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee, the research team approached conservation organizations in the North West of England of which three gave permission to recruit participants from their woodland conservation volunteer groups. The four paid volunteer organisers were essential in supporting the recruitment of volunteer participants across the three groups. Each organiser was provided with flyers inviting volunteers to take part in the project, and participant information sheets to circulate to their volunteers along with expression of forms to return to the research team if they wished to take part. Participants were then contacted to confirm their initial approval and consent before site visits to weekday work parties in three woodland conservation sites in North West England were arranged. Informed consent was given by all participants at the start of fieldwork.

Table 1. Volunteers by age, gender and employment status.

Age (years)		Gender		Work status			
Age range	Volunteers	Men	Women	Retired	Employed	Unemployed	Other
20-29	1	1	0				1 student
30-39	2	2	0		2	1	
40-49	1		1		1		
50-59	4	3	1	3	1 (self-employed)		
60-69	15	11	4	13	1	1	
>70	4	3	1	4			
Not stated	2	1	1	2			
Total	29	21	8	22	4	2	1

Half-day site visits were made to each working group and these provided opportunities to meet with 29 volunteers and observe their volunteer activities (Ward, 2018). Data collection during the fieldwork site visits included an initial short questionnaire asking for participants' demographic details, informal interviews and site discussions about the volunteering work, observational field notes and visual recordings. Conservation work in the groups included: tree planting and maintenance (coppicing, sapling care, pruning); path clearance; shrub thinning and management; grassland restoration; and in the two rural sites, dry-stone walling and bracken bashing. Photographs and video recordings were taken during the site visits (with permission from participants) to gain insight into the types of tasks volunteers carried out (Ray & Smith, 2012). One participant requested their image not be recorded. Participants could ask that their recorded images were removed from the dataset.

As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the volunteers in the working groups were aged over 50 years. The oldest volunteer was aged 78 years and the youngest 28 years. In terms of employment status, the majority of volunteers were retired, four were employed (one of these was self-employed), three were unemployed, and the youngest volunteer was a student. One volunteer chose not to share this information. Twenty-five volunteers had other voluntary commitments aside from their respective woodland working groups, 23 indicated that these other commitments directly related to conservation work. Of the 21 retired working group volunteers 13 had previously held managerial/professional roles (e.g. doctor, teacher, university lecturer, auditor, optician, town planner), two administration/clerical roles, four held roles linked to the environment (e.g. landscape architect, conservation worker), One held a service occupation role. One volunteer chose not to share this information.

Following each site visit volunteers were invited to an hour-long focus group. Three focus groups with volunteers (N=17) from each of the conservation groups took place. Participants were all regular attendees of weekday work parties. All participants were aged over 50 years and were retired. Focus groups were used to access the group dynamics of the volunteers from each

conservation organisation and explore the experiences and perceptions of volunteering through the interactions of the participants (Greenbaum, 1999). The focus groups followed a topic guide which included questions around why they work as a volunteer, what it is like to volunteer at the organisation, what volunteers expected to gain personally from being a volunteer, whether their expectations had been met, and the perceived benefits and challenges of working as a volunteer. We showed participants the photographs and video footage from their site visit at the start of the focus group as a stimulus to prompt group discussion and gain richer insights (Bates et al, 2017) into the volunteer experience.

Once the site visit and focus group had been conducted, interviews were carried out with each of the group organisers (two from Site 2) responsible for the volunteers to gain insight into their perspective (Kvale, 1983) of organising volunteers for their conservation groups. This included the tasks they ask volunteers to carry out, their observations of volunteers in different types of space and tasks, how they support volunteers in tasks and the perceived benefits and challenges of organising volunteers.

A thematic analysis was applied to data collected during site visits, focus groups and interviews, and notes from field observations. We drew upon Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested phases of analysis, first familiarising ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Initial data analysis was conducted by the second and third author who coded the data and generated initial themes for each focus group separately, before generating synthesised themes for all the focus group, using the Atlas.ti data management programme. This process was repeated for the individual interviews. The research team convened a data workshop to discuss, develop and review themes, and in doing so we refined and defined themes and reflected upon the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). The original focus of the research was around the benefits of volunteering and intergenerational skills gained and shared across a volunteer conservation workforce. Through the reflective analytic process, over time, the drawing on the concept of PC has informed an interpretation of the exchange relationship between volunteers and organisers. Hence, this paper focuses upon a set of themes that explore the expectations between volunteers and the organization's paid organisers.

The volunteer-organization relationship

This section presents empirical findings relating to the volunteer—organization relationship. The volunteer perspective is explored in terms of their expectations of volunteering and includes themes relating to fairness, the ability to learn and enhance skills and flexibility without

responsibility. We also present the expectations organisers have in return, and how they manage volunteer expectations.

Expectations of volunteers

Fairness

Participants chose to volunteer for woodland conservation groups because the natural environment was important to them, which influenced their expectations of the volunteering experience. Participants expected to be treated fairly. For example, there was an awareness amongst some participants that they could be exploited if organizations perceived them to be a cheap source of labour. Although none of the respondents felt this had happened to them, they were aware that a volunteer workforce enables work to be completed at a low cost and that some organizations may not fully take into account these costs. For example, although the organiser for this conservation group was skilled and knowledgeable, and paid to organise volunteer tasks, and provide materials and training for people to carry out the work, they noted:

> …sometimes local authorities, sometimes other organizations, think that volunteering is a free way of getting things done. They think 'oh, we haven't got the money to do this, we'll get so-and-so to do it with volunteers and it will be free'. (Site 1, Focus Group).

One focus group identified a tension between relying on volunteers to carry out jobs rather than paying people trying to make a living from conservation work. They highlighted that workers in the sector feared for their livelihood because '*volunteers are being used to do what in the past was paid work*' (Site 3, Focus Group). Thus, they were wary of taking on tasks that could take away paid work from skilled people:

> I wouldn't like to do this work [.] if I thought I was depriving some young people from a job. (Site 3, Focus Group).

Thus, there was an expectation of fair treatment in terms of the type of tasks they took on. Volunteers were perceived to be ideal for very labour-intensive, but sociable tasks, which were considered too expensive to employ specialist workers, such as long-term tree maintenance, laying or repairing footpaths or planting trees. For tasks that required high-level skills there was an expectation that the organization would employ a specialist. For example, volunteers were essential for the successful completion of a major conservation management task involving the re-forestation of a woodland area, led by one skilled organiser. Yet, as one participant summed up, '*You don't want to feel that you're being imposed on and forced to do something do you?*' (Site 1, Focus Group).

Learning and enhancing skills

There was an expectation amongst volunteers that they would have the opportunity to gain and enhance their skills relating in conservation work. In this respect knowledge, ideas and expertise were shared informally amongst the conservation group, because many of the skills '*you can only pick up by doing the work with other people*' (Site 3, Focus Group) as and when the situation arose:

> …because they're important craft skills, you know, they're not just any old skills: the skills are there and the motivation is to do a good job, not just to do an okay job. (Site 3, Focus Group).

Organisers and experienced volunteers were both regarded positively in providing a good source of conservation expertise and local knowledge, with one participant explaining:

> We can ask each other. [the organisers] always know, we just ask them, [], 'What kind of tree is this?' [], 'Where does this go?' 'What do you do with this?' [] and you learn how to do it. [] just… by osmosis it just diffuses amongst everybody – and that goes for walling too. [] When I first came it was very relaxed, they let you put a stone in the wall even although it was rubbish, but, you know, somebody told you it was rubbish, which was nice. (Site 3, Focus Group).

Flexibility without responsibility

For older participants it was important that volunteering did not feel like paid work. They expected to carry out voluntary work on their own terms and while they enjoyed carrying out conservation tasks they did not want responsibility. Having retired, many of these older participants were happy to follow the organisers' lead, as one explained:

> I don't want any responsibility. I'm quite happy to switch off my brain and do what I'm told. And […] that's very, very appealing, you know. Sometimes when they're short-staffed, very occasionally, they'll say, 'Oh, could you take over a little bit more? […] You take this group.' […]… the old feeling comes back, 'What? Me? (Site 3, Focus Group).

Even though older participants recognised that the group could potentially complete more work if more volunteers took on supervisory roles, they were still reluctant to take on a leadership role. As one participant said, '*it is nice now to be a minion*' (Site 2, Focus Group).

Participants stressed the importance of flexibility, stating that they did not want to feel pressurised into turning up to a work group. Although volunteer work provided a structure to the week for those who were retired, as one participant explained they wanted: '*some free time to just*

wake up and say I've nothing planned today, so I can do X, Y and Z' (Site 2, Focus Group).

This aspect of not feeling either the pressure or responsibility for the work was seen as part of the appeal of conservation volunteering, as opposed to volunteering in a health or social care role, where other people relied on them to carry out their role, as one participant summed it up:

> I knew somebody who'd worked at the Hospice, and I spoke to them about what they'd been doing, but I knew that I couldn't do volunteering where another person was going to be dependent on me. (Site 1, Focus Group).

However, while volunteers wanted flexibility and to contribute on their own terms, at the same time it was also important to feel that they were needed and perceived as a valuable member of the group:

> I went on a couple of things [with another conservation group]. It was an enormous group of people and I felt, well, […] they can manage without me and […] I didn't sort of feel part of the group as much as with [this one]. (Site 3, Focus Group).

The participant volunteers acknowledged that the attitude of organisers was key in this respect, ensuring that volunteers were welcomed whenever they joined a work party, and recognising that older volunteers may be unable, or unwilling, to commit to working all day:

> [the organisers are] good at basically keeping us happy. It means we come back, of course, because one of the joys of volunteering is, if you don't like it, don't do it. (Site 3, Focus Group).

The majority of participants had one or more volunteer commitments, in addition to their work with the conservation group, so they had to deal with competing demands on their time. In general, other commitments were directly related to conservation work, so the volunteers had a number of opportunities in which to purse their interests. Participants explained that they chose where they would volunteer and how much time to give to each voluntary organization. Thus, it was important for the paid organisers of the conversation groups to take volunteers' expectations into account in order to retain them.

The other side of the exchange relationship: organisers' expectations of volunteers

Orientation to the group

The organisers were paid members of staff in the organisation and had direct contact with the participants. In general, organisers' explained in their interviews, that they had few expectations of volunteers and were careful not to place demands on them. Instead they tended to gauge

what each individual was willing to contribute, often taking into account their motivation to volunteer:

> We make no demands of the volunteers in the sense that, you know, from each according to whatever they want to contribute. And we do have a whole range of […] people who take it very steadily and easily through to other people who perhaps see it as an opportunity…to build their fitness. (Organiser site 1, Interview).

Organisers did not expect volunteers to have conservation skills and assumed that some training or supervision would be needed, especially for health and safety training. As one organiser explained:

> Every volunteer is provided with a [site 3] health and safety leaflet, we do risk assessments for all tasks and have, albeit informal, safety talks, tool talks about safe correct use of tools (Organiser site 3, Interview).

The organisers work closely with the volunteers from the first day in the organization, and getting to know the volunteers during orientation was perceived to be important, as one organiser said:

> [The] initial informal chat is very informative for me as to what abilities these people have and what is their motivation and […] whatever the limitation and restriction, whatever it is, we come to an understanding about their offer of volunteering and […] where we can fit them into our needs. (Organiser site 2, Interview).

At the same time, organiser 2 also discussed his expectations of the volunteers. He noted that he had to ensure they understood the need to conform to the health and safety policies and procedures of the organization, as well as the '*position and what role and expectations, responsibilities, they will assume as a volunteer*' (Organiser site 2, interview).

Managing the expectations of volunteers

As outlined above, potential volunteers had preconceived views of how, and to what extent, they wanted to contribute to the conservation group. The organisers recognised they needed to take individual requirements and abilities into consideration at the point each volunteer joined the group, otherwise not only might the volunteer be potentially at risk physically, but they also would be less likely to stay. This was an important stage, because volunteers came from a wide spectrum of ability, fitness levels and age (most volunteers were predominantly older), and organisers were aware that each volunteer expected different outcomes from their volunteer experience.

It was also important that the organiser recognised that each volunteer had different needs in terms of the amount of time they expected, and were prepared, to give. When arranging work parties the organisers

decided whether to plan a half or full day, and which day's tasks the group would work on according to which volunteers were attending. Organisers stated that they did not want to put pressure on the volunteers to commit to the duration of a work party or to a task, in case volunteers did not feel able to attend. During busy times of the year, often more than one work party was running, which could place large demands on volunteers, when there was:

> …probably five or six work parties on – well, that's more than one a week […] and that's a big ask of people, […] to give up a whole day to come and do something with us. […] We just need to make sure that we're not asking them to do too much. (Organiser site 3, interview).

Fostering a positive volunteer experience

To encourage manageable and enjoyable participation, frequent rests together with opportunities for the volunteers to socialise were incorporated into the work schedule. In addition, work parties were arranged with the caveat that there was no expectation for volunteers to stay for the entire scheduled event, and they could leave at any time. As one organiser explained:

> … I don't put pressure on any volunteers, it's like whatever role they're comfortable in, and they work as a team, and if they need to finish early they finish early, slow down and take it at their pace, and there's no real expectations on any of them other than to join in and try and achieve a task…through collective effort. (Organiser, Site 3 interview).

Organisers also highlighted the importance of ensuring that the volunteers' experience was positive within the conservation group. This process of keeping volunteers motivated was identified as a key challenge for the organisers. Hence, they took great care to ensure tasks were varied and as interesting as possible so people did not become bored or de-motivated. Organisers provided plenty of breaks throughout the day, and set out the start and finish times so volunteers would not feel overstretched, as summed up by one organiser:

> We might have only been working an hour, but we're going to have a break; we're going to have lunch; w e're going to have an afternoon break; we're going to agree when we're going to finish. And I think all those are important in people hopefully not feeling pressured. (Organiser, Site 3 Interview).

Discussion

The majority of research into the PC has focussed upon paid employees' perceptions of the exchange relationship and the extent to which the

organization, through its agents, have met their employees' expectations. Less attention has been paid to older or voluntary workers despite an increasing reliance on such workers by organizations. In this paper, reflecting on the exchange relationship between volunteers and the group organiser of their conservation organization indicates there is a mutual respect between the paid organisers of the conservation groups and the volunteers. Both parties had expectations of each other and the voluntary role, and the volunteer organisers played a key role in managing the expectations of the volunteers.

While participants in this study were committed to this type of voluntary conservation work, they engaged in the often physically challenging work on their own terms. It was noticeable from our findings that conservation work appealed to older volunteers because it allowed them to avoid undue pressures of responsibility and did not resemble paid work. The volunteers valued flexibility and freedom and were reluctant to take on a voluntary role that required time commitment, or where their absence impacted upon service delivery, which echoes Seaman's (2012) findings with older women who were speculating on future volunteering commitment when retired. Our analysis, however, adds further insights, as the majority of participants involved in our research were already making the choice to volunteer in their retirement.

Our findings, moreover, provide a contrast to previous researchers who have highlighted how reliability is a key element in the PC of event organisers, the management of which is often a major task for organisers (Nichols & Ojala, 2009; Vantilborgh & Van Puyvelde, 2018). Volunteers who agree to contribute to a certain task or at a specific time and then fail to show up, can be seen to be behaving unreliably by organisers, and can lead to tensions in the exchange relationship between a volunteer and the organiser (Vantilborgh & Van Puyvelde, 2018). However, in our study older volunteers were not prepared to offer reliability. Indeed, for this cohort an important element of the exchange relationship was that the organiser had an awareness that they needed to balance volunteer expectations, against the needs of getting work done for the conservation organization.

The participants in this study were clear that they made a distinct choice to volunteer for conservation work, thus the exchange relationship included 'ideological currency' (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003) reflecting a values-based dimension, as well as a relational type contract as volunteers contributed to work that was important to them. The participants in this study were aware that the volunteer contribution was essential to the successful management of conservation work, echoing Farmer and Fedor (1999) who emphasise the importance for volunteers to see their work contributing to organizational goals. At the same time,

however, some volunteers were wary of taking on tasks that could take away paid work from skilled people trying to make a living from conservation. This tension resonates with research from the US and Australia highlighting how paid jobs in the conservation sector are becoming scarcer, leading to greater casualisation and employment precarity (Bailey et al., 2022; Sandiford & Green, 2021). Kelemen et al. (2017, p. 1251) highlighted what they called 'a form of silent militantism' amongst volunteers who refused to undertake roles that had previously been carried out by paid staff. The volunteers in this study revealed an awareness of the potential conflict between paid and voluntary conservation work, and while none had felt this had happened in their conservation group, this element appeared to be central to the values-based dimension of their exchange relationship. Cook and Inman (2012, p. 176) suggest there is the potential for volunteers in conservation work to be used to deliver 'environmental management on the cheap' and thus undermine the local labour market by carrying out work that would otherwise be paid for. Indeed, some volunteers in this study were aware that they could be exploited and were content to leave highly skilled or exceptionally heavy tasks to outside paid conservation workers to complete, depending upon funding availability. Seaman (2012) highlighted that potential volunteers felt 'devalued' at the thought of being used to replace social services labour. Our study echoes this finding, as volunteers were willing to undertake more labour-intensive tasks that were less likely to attract funding and therefore would not deny work for local contractors from the paid sector.

As Rousseau (2001) suggests the formulation of PCs is shaped by cognitive schemas, or mental models, which guide an individual's interpretation of the exchange relationship. Sherman and Morley (2015) point out experiences gained in other organizations are likely to influence expectations when joining a new employer. The findings from this study indicate that for this cohort, prior work experiences also influence the PC of subsequent volunteer roles, as these older volunteers chose to move away from the responsibilities and expectations of previous paid work once they became volunteers. Furthermore, the volunteers in this study, especially in the older age groups, appreciated organisers who recognised their capabilities, and supported and managed the different levels of ability and fitness sensitively, as well as each volunteer's capacity to commit time to the conservation group. Hager and Renfro (2020) suggested that a key aspect of successful volunteer management is an alignment of the needs of the organisation and of the volunteer and our findings provide an indication of how this can be achieved in practice. Moreover, Bal and Dorenbosch (2015) suggested that older paid workers benefit from individualised work schedules, and our study highlights that

this can also be applicable to volunteers. A recognition of individual volunteer's needs by organisers benefitted both volunteers and the organizations involved, facilitating some of these older volunteers to take part in conservation work into their late 70s, even a few into their 80s. Thus, our findings support previous research by Leisink and Knies (2011), who highlighted the vital role line managers play in enabling an organization to retain older paid workers through managerial support.

As Gahan et al. (2017) notes, there is a lack of understanding about which micro-level practices and adjustments are needed by organizations in order to recruit and retain older workers. These include the perceptions and practices of employers and older workers that underlie social interactions, (Gahan et al., 2017) such practices may facilitate or hinder voluntary participation. As our study involves participants who were active volunteers, our findings can be viewed in the context of ongoing reciprocation, otherwise it is likely respondents would have stopped volunteering or moved to another voluntary organization. Certainly, no examples of contract breach or violation were raised by either party of the exchange relationship. Thus, our findings highlight some of the micro-level practices that facilitate fulfilment of the exchange relationship between volunteers and voluntary organizations and makes a contribution to knowledge to the PC, human resource, and voluntary literature.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of volunteer orientation and training on organisational outcomes including increased volunteer participation and retention (Einolf, 2018). However, research is limited in terms of what constitutes management best practice (Einolf, 2018) and how organisation and individual volunteer needs are aligned in practice (Hager & Renfro, 2020). Findings from Sandiford and Green (2021) ethnographic study suggest that paid leaders need to be sensitive to volunteers expectations and requirements. However, research is limited in how paid leaders achieve this in practice (Sandiford & Green, 2021). Our analysis provides some insight, indicating the importance of initial conversations. At the micro-level, volunteer organisers ensured they talked with new volunteers about their individual expectations and abilities at the point they joined the group. Participants had a number of opportunities to volunteer, indeed the majority had other commitments with other groups directly related to conservation work. Our findings suggest that it was important that paid organisers adjusted their working group practices accordingly to encourage volunteers to stay with their conservation group. Thus, by making the needs of the volunteer a central part of the orientation process, our analysis indicates that organisers encouraged PC development with the volunteer at an early stage, supporting Kappelides et al. (2019) suggestion that expectations formed at

recruitment form the basis of the PC. Moreover, our findings reveal the importance of an ongoing personal and role-related conversation within the exchange relationship between an organiser and volunteer. This echoes previous research by Guest and Conway (2002) which highlighted the importance of communication when managing the PC of paid workers.

Overall, in this study a key factor in recruiting and retaining voluntary staff was an understanding of volunteer worker capabilities and work preferences by organisers. As O'Donahue and Nelson (2009) have pointed out volunteers tend to have different expectations of the organization; as our results highlight this is likely to be influenced by the type of voluntary role they take on, fitness levels and their stage in life (if for example, they are using voluntary work for career enhancement). For the older respondents in this study voluntary work involved limiting their commitment to times that suited them, and that the work was undertaken for personal satisfaction.

The ongoing exchange relationship in this cohort was perceived as rewarding, in which both sides benefitted, reflecting a shared understanding of reciprocity and mutually rewarding arrangements (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). However, as with Scheel and Mohr (2013), a shared understanding of a values-based dimension also appeared to be important. An example of this aspect was observed during site visits, when volunteers with existing skills felt it important to contribute their knowledge to others in the group; encouraging others to gain new and sometimes highly skilled crafts, such as dry-stone walling. These opportunities to learn and develop new skills were valued by volunteers, and encouraged retention echoing research by Newton et al. (2014). Thus, in the conservation volunteering groups involved in this study, we saw that the PC worked in a mutual accord, and a positive benefit to the volunteering experience. Indeed, we would argue that such a contract was a necessary element to successful conservation volunteering.

Study limitations

This qualitative study drew upon observational data, along with in-depth interviews and focus group accounts from three volunteer conservation groups and provides valuable insights into the exchange relationship between volunteers and paid organizations. The participants in the focus groups were based on self-selection, so the transferability of the findings to other volunteer contexts may be limited. Our cohort lacked diversity in the participant volunteer groups where we recruited, despite attempts to recruit from more diverse urban as well as rural settings. Thus necessarily, our observations and interpretations are specific to these three

sites and with a small, relatively homogenous cohort. However, the in-depth exploration has potential to contribute insights to current debates in voluntary sector research.

Conclusion and future research

The main theoretical contribution of this paper is an exploration of how PCs may be fulfilled between volunteers and paid organisers, which as Hoye and Kappelides (2021) note has been neglected in empirical literature. Our study has provided insights into the ongoing social exchange relationship of participants who were active volunteers, and the paid organisers, and therefore sheds light on how organizations manage volunteers. From a practical perspective, our findings have implications for organizations that rely upon volunteers to provide a service, or help run events, as older individuals may choose to move away from responsible and time demanding work roles as a volunteer. Organizations that rely on volunteers to supplement paid staff and reduce workload by taking on support roles may find that older volunteers do not want to be relied upon but prefer to volunteer at times that suit them. Given the dynamic nature of the exchange relationship, volunteer organisers noted the need to have open conversations at the point of recruitment to ensure that what is expected of each party is mutually understood. The underlying motives of all those who took on voluntary work were found to be important to the exchange relationship in this study, and individual motivation may impact upon the dependability of volunteers. Furthermore, communication needs to be part of an ongoing process as expectations (and capabilities) towards voluntary roles are also likely to change as volunteers get older, and organisers need to take that into account. As this study highlights, older volunteers take on voluntary roles on their own terms, and further research is needed to extend to volunteers from a wider and more diverse population, and across sectors to explore whether this desire to avoid responsibility is a feature of older volunteers.

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analysed during this study are not publically available due to the terms of the ethics approval granted by Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee (reference: Pfact50899).

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