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One Good Turn: Tackling Poverty through the Circulation of Goods in Kirklees

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Introduction

When the Coalition Government came to power in the UK in 2010, David Cameron announced the Big Society initiative claiming it to be a “serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians and give it to people” (cited in Slocock, 2013: 6). An independent audit conducted in 2013 found that the Big Society was “failing to live up to its own rhetoric in key areas”, but that it is nonetheless inspiring: “not only has it spawned many new initiatives with real impact on the ground, many people...are also continuing to turn to civil society as a positive force for social change” (2013: 6). One example of such a civil society initiative is a local community group called *One Good Turn*, which set up in Huddersfield during 2010. The group initially operated through a number of Facebook sites, where members listed the things they no longer required and those in need put their names forward to receive the items on a first-come-first-served basis. Sophia Crawshaw took over the running of the sites in the summer of 2011, and in an article published in the local newspaper six months later, she explained that the group was set up “as everyone is struggling right now during the recession and even charity shops are becoming expensive.” The Facebook sites have a varied membership from teenagers to pensioners; “lots of young mums and first home buyers” and Sophia enthused that “it’s so lovely to see people giving things away to help others – it’s seeing the best side of human nature and kindness...” (Huddersfield Examiner, 2012). Within a short period of time under the stewardship and kind-heartedness of Sophia, *One Good Turn* became a registered charity, which now liaises “closely with other Kirklees Council Agencies and several other local charities to help as many people as possible” who are in need within Huddersfield and its surrounds (www.onegoodturncharity.org.uk).

Focus of the Study

The proposed research adopts an ethnographic research methodology (Pink, 2009) to examine the launch, the development and the sustainability of the local charity *One Good Turn*. In particular, the study seeks to understand:

- (1) How the charity sees itself in relation to the Coalition Government’s notion of the Big Society and to investigate what this relationship means in practice in a local context;
- (2) How the charity has succeeded in securing ‘gifts’ in the form of mainly unwanted items, but also time and monetary donations in a climate where charitable giving is purportedly in decline (see Slocock, 2013 below);
- (3) How notions of ‘community’ underpin the activities of the charity, and the practices of both giving and receiving charitable donations of consumer durables (e.g. furniture, white goods, clothes, etc).

The next section provides a preliminary literature review to flesh out the context and underpin the research questions with the final section outlining the contributions of the study.

Literature Review

Rising Poverty

The UK is the only country in the G7 to have recorded rising inequality during the 21st Century (Stierli, *et al.*, 2014), even more so since the economic crisis of 2007 and the ensuing recession. Indeed, Day’s research confirms that the recession is affecting vulnerable people and those already on low incomes and that it is “far from the middle-class recession that was predicted” (2009: 3). At the poorer end of the scale, there are now 13 million people living in poverty in the UK when measured against the average income in 2012/13 (MacInnes, *et al.*,

2014). Of course, this figure would be nearer to 16 million people if measured against incomes in 2007/08 since the average income fell by 9% over this period. While the number of pensioners in poverty is currently at a 10 year low, poverty among working-age adults has risen considerably. MacInnes, *et al.* (2014) assert that half of all people living in poverty in the UK live in a working family. Other research indicates that the poorest 20% of UK households earn significantly less than the poorest 20% of households in France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark (Melville, 2014).

The Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees is situated in West Yorkshire. According to the 2011 Census there are currently 423,000 people living in Kirklees, making this the 11th largest local authority in England and Wales. Comparing the scale of poverty experienced by people in Kirklees to that of the UK as a whole; the most recent figures available indicate that in 2012, 1 in 5 children and 1 in 4 people over the age of 65 were living in poverty in Kirklees, reflecting the picture nationally (Kirklees Council, 2012). However, 16% of working-age people in Kirklees were living in poverty compared to 10% nationally, with this figure rising to 19% and 21% in the more disadvantaged areas within the borough.

The Big Society

As a political idea, the Big Society formed a central part of the Conservative party's 2010 General Election manifesto. When the Coalition Government came into power in May 2010, David Cameron and Nick Clegg launched the Big Society to a mixed reception. There are three main strands through which the Big Society is to be delivered: (1) community empowerment, i.e. enabling local people to shape their local area; (2) opening up public service provision to the voluntary sector, charities and other organisations, and (3) increasing levels of local 'social action' such as volunteering. To date, two audits of the Big Society have been undertaken by an organisation called Civil Exchange, a 'think tank' that undertakes independent cross sector research in order to facilitate better working relationships between the government and the voluntary sector in the UK (www.civilexchange.org.uk). A third audit is due to be published soon, but the most recent audit, supported by both the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Barrow Cadbury Trust, is summarised in a report produced by Slocock (2013), the main findings of which are as follows:

In terms of 'community empowerment', the audit indicates a relatively mixed picture in which "strong communities remain a broadly positive feature of British life" (2013: 7), albeit that there is a great deal of variation between affluent and disadvantaged communities as well as between urban and rural communities. Whilst the voluntary sector appears resilient, no positive changes are identified in terms of the strength and influence of the sector. This is due to the fact that a significant proportion of voluntary sector organisations "are experiencing financial difficulty due to rising demand and falling income" (2013: 7).

Regarding 'opening up public service provision', the audit shows a broadly negative picture in which the outsourcing of public services is dominated by large private sector companies and the voluntary sector has been hit by state funding cuts. Indeed, the report indicates that "dramatic cuts are estimated over the next 4 years, with many [voluntary sector] organisations working with vulnerable people, often in disadvantaged areas, under serious threat" (2013: 7).

Finally, 'social action' is broadly positive with levels of volunteering having increased, although only to the levels seen in 2007/08 before the recession and more young people engaging in volunteering. The numbers of people involved in community organising has also increased, however the audit identifies "a dramatic fall in giving, perhaps linked to the wider economy" (2013: 8).

Charitable Giving and a Sense of Community

There is a fairly substantial body of literature focusing on identifying demographic characteristics and psychological traits of donors in order to categorise the types of people who are more or less likely to give to different charitable concerns, their underlying motivations and decision-making approaches. Some studies suggest that in all income categories women give more money to charity than men (e.g. Mesch, 2012), while other studies have suggested that women give to more charities than men, but that they give in lesser amounts (see Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007). Donors from wealthier backgrounds “tend to avoid causes involving the overtly poor” (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007: 284), being much more likely to support the arts or education. This may explain the fact that while most people say that charities exist to help the needy, in reality “only a small percentage of charitable benefit is in fact directed to the poor and needy” (Breeze, 2010: 13). It is therefore of particular interest to the present ethnographic study of the charity *One Good Turn*, that donors from poorer backgrounds are considerably more likely to give to the poor and to give to local charities (Bennett, 2012; Center on Philanthropy, 2009).

With specific regard to poorer donors giving to the poor, Bennett’s comprehensive quantitative analysis suggests that in being members of deprived communities themselves, donors from lower-income groups appear to give to the poor as a “consequence of their sense of solidarity with other low income people, their belief that the poor need to “stick together”, their feelings of resentment at the discrimination they perceive to be experienced by the poor, and their observations of low-income people being treated disrespectfully by the better-off” (2012: 885). As far as donors giving to local charities, albeit that the focus was not on poorer donors *per se*, Breeze’s (2010) in-depth qualitative analysis indicates that geographical connections can be a spur to giving, partially due to donors being able to “relate more locally” as well as to the fact that they “...know what goes on locally so we know how efficient it is, whereas a lot of these other [charities] who send you things through the post, we haven’t a clue what they’re up to...” (2010: 27).

Sargeant and Woodliffe have mentioned previously that relevant literatures within both psychology and sociology indicate that “the concept of ‘we-ness’ is seen as a spur to caring” (2007: 289). The consumer research literature suggests ‘we-ness’ is a central tenet of ‘communities of consumption’ (Hughes, 2009; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Together with the findings from Bennett (2012) and Breeze (2010) outlined briefly above, this lends support to the contention that a sense of community is a discernible aspect of charitable giving (and receiving), particularly in the context of the current study.

Contributions to Knowledge

This research addresses McKenzie and Pharoah’s call to develop “a better understanding of local cultures and traditions of giving” (2010: 7) against the backdrop of rising poverty levels among working-age people in the UK and mixed views on the real outcomes of the Big Society. It aims to shed light and share insights on how a local charity is succeeding in facilitating a sense of commitment to enhancing the lives of those living in relative poverty within its community through providing access to consumer goods that would otherwise be discarded or forgotten. And, finally it seeks to contribute to the literature on charitable giving by (1) drawing on ethnographic research methods and adopting a sociological perspective in which not only will donors be seen as “social beings who live in social contexts that affect their overall charitable outlook and their specific charitable donations” (Breeze, 2010: 14) but with a similar frame being applied to recipients too; and (2) bringing insights derived from the donation of objects into a literature which focuses primarily on financial gifts and, as Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007) suggest, on the recruitment of donors rather than on retaining and developing them over time.

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