Journal of Youth Development

Volume 17 | Issue 4 Article 5

12-2022

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## Recommended Citation

Mölkänen, Jenni and Honkatukia, Päivi (2022) "Ambiguous, Affective, and Arduous: Volunteers' Invisible Work With Young Adults," *Journal of Youth Development*: Vol. 17: Iss. 4, Article 5.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2022.1198
Available at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd/vol17/iss4/5

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JYD JOURNAL of YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

http://jyd.pitt.edu/ | Vol. 17 Issue 4 DOI 10.5195/jyd.2022.1198 | ISSN 2325-4017 (online)

# Ambiguous, Affective, and Arduous: Volunteers' Invisible Work With Young Adults

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## Abstract

*Mentoring has been regarded as a promising way to reach at-risk youth and to strengthen the protective factors. This article focuses on emotions, reflections, and challenges that adult volunteers face in trying to establish and maintain a friend relationship with young adults in a multicomponent mentor setting in Finland. Based on our participatory observations in volunteering, a focus group discussion with volunteers and facilitators of volunteering, and interviews with young adults we analyze the nature of volunteers' actions as invisible work as characterized by Devault (1999). We argue that invisible work should be recognized as a significant part of volunteering in a multi-component mentoring setting. The main findings in this particular case are the following: (a) There are limitations in short-term and project-based work in establishing meaningful relationships between young people and the volunteers/staff. (b) The volunteers are not always equipped to address the material and mental health support needs of the young people. (c) The organizational focus aiming to improve the volunteers' experience does not solve all the problems related to volunteers' interaction with young adults, such as fragmented and short-term youth services created by neoliberal policies that the young adults struggle with.*

Key words: volunteer work, young adults, invisible work, needs for support, Finland

## Introduction

"I am not sure what she was expecting from me" sighed a middle-aged female volunteer when she described her relationship with a young adult with whom she had been developing a friendship-like relationship for a couple of months. She voiced this utterance in a workshop with four volunteers who were gathered to talk about their experiences in being friends with young

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adults. The session was organized by us researchers and the staff of one of the largest civic organizations in Finland. The organization's youth shelters provide short-term accommodation for young adults (up to 25 years of age) and support young people to solve problems, for example, in their social and family relations; in acquiring accommodation; or dealing with issues related to their subsistence, education, or work. The aim of the session was to collectively discuss the volunteers' experiences and learn from each other.

This episode is a part of the empirical material of this article which delves into volunteers' experiences in supporting young adults in their transitions to adulthood. While the previous research has focused on volunteers' motivations (e.g., Yeung, 2004) and benefits of volunteering (e.g., Grant et al., 2020) and mentoring as a promising way to reach at-risk youth and to strengthen the protective factors in multicomponent programs (Higginbotham et al., 2007), we pay attention to affective and reflexive work that often remains invisible in the context of voluntary work. Ideally, for young adults, the volunteers offer a trustworthy relationship with emotional and practical support. In this article, we argue that volunteering contains invisible work as it is defined by De Vault (1999, p. 57). It refers to unpaid, overlooked and often undervalued, gendered, and racialized work; for example, household work frequently done by women. It involves emotional labor, that is, efforts to shape, evoke, or suppress feelings but that aim to make or maintain social relations or communal living, like service work in which the worker seeks to create a pleasant environment for the client or a spouse's attempts at home to restrain his or her anger or agony in order to maintain a nice atmosphere or to avoid burdening others. Skills gained through emotional work might be even more important than the actual outcome, which may or may not be successful (Daniels 1987, pp. 409–412; Hochschild, 1979, p. 561; see also Watt, 2017). In our case invisible work appears in a multicomponent volunteer program setting when volunteers seek to establish meaningful relationship with young people and fulfill their role as a friend.

We first conceptualize volunteering as unpaid work based on the altruistic will to support and help others (Rochester et al., 2010). This definition emphasizes individual motivation to learn necessary skills needed in this kind of activity and simultaneously to improve one's skills in work life. At the same time, we highlight that volunteer work, like any other kind of work, should be understood in relation to its social and societal context. Indeed, we discuss volunteering in the context of neoliberal austerity policies where civic organizations are increasingly required to organize their work as short-term projects, the funding of which requires efficiency and constant demonstration of the success of the measures initiated and carried out (Anttonen & Karsio, 2017).

Moreover, in Finland and elsewhere, a great amount of volunteer work is organized and conducted by civic associations and non-governmental organizations through peer-to-peer and self-help or activism (Duguid et al., 2013; Nylund, 2000), emphasizing a will to take care of joint social matters, not only as helpers but as socially active collaborators (Sipola, 2019, p. 1). Recently, the European Union and non-governmental organizations have strongly promoted volunteering as a way to raise civic consciousness and to contribute to intergenerational solidarity (Cammaerts et al., 2016., p. 116; Red Cross, 2021).

Empirically, we focus on voluntary work that provides longer term support for young adults in a context of a friendship-like relationship. The study is based on collective reflections between volunteers and the civic association staff in which we researchers took part in a double role: as researchers and volunteers ourselves. In addition, we make use of young adults' interview accounts concerning their needs for support. By analyzing the research materials, we document diverse dimensions of invisible work of the volunteers when encountering young adults and in reflecting their own conduct; we also make sense of how young adults relate to these kinds of efforts. We end the article by discussing the volunteers' needs for support identified by both the volunteers and young adults. All the names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.

### *Volunteering is More Than Motivation and Benefits*

Recent discussions on mentoring have called for more research about factors that may affect the quality of supervision and support provided to mentors (Keller, 2007; Spencer et al., 2020). In formal mentoring settings, the employed staff often provides support and supervision to volunteers by means monitoring the progress of the mentoring relationship and offering guidance and encouragement (Keller et al. 2020, 415). However, the implementation of specific program practices may significantly influence the nature of the volunteer mentor experience (see Herrera et al., 2013; Kupersmidt et al., 2017) and also influence how a sustaining and effective volunteer engagement gets established (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Malinen & Harju, 2017). Many mentoring programs devote considerable effort to recruiting volunteers, but actually retaining those volunteers is critical for mentoring relationships to last long enough to have positive effects in working with young people (Grossman et al., 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Stukas et al., 2014), such as strengthening the supported young people's capabilities (Grant et al., 2020, p. 38; Worker et al., 2020). In youth work-related fields and in multicomponent program settings, volunteers wish to have training that would help to increase their content knowledge on youth and youth development skills (Hensley et al. 2020; Kok et al., 2020; Plourde et al., 2021). However, in order for the volunteering to be meaningful, there

should be enough resources for the paid staff to support volunteers in their roles (Restler & Glant, 2020). Often those young people who have been recipients of volunteering are themselves apt to "pay it forward" and engage in voluntary work (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2011; Honkatukia et al. 2020, p. 30). In this article we discuss invisible work of the volunteers that is actually a significant part of their volunteering. By noticing uncertainties, emotions, and challenges that the volunteers experience and observe, we highlight the less-discussed aspects of volunteering that should be taken into consideration to acknowledge and value volunteers' work appropriately.

The voluntary work studied here is organized by a civic association and is part of the organization's multiple support activities which augment the municipal youth services in Finland. This aid is designed to be temporary and encompasses a broad range of voluntary and free-of-charge services, including short-term accommodation and personal and family meetings. Historically these activities were designed to direct young people away from the streets of Helsinki, Finland's capital, where increased numbers of young people had started to live in the 1990s (Lähde & Mölkänen, 2021). In the early 1990s Finland experienced a severe recession resulting in over-indebtedness, unemployment, and increasing socioeconomic differences between households (Kiander, 2001). This influenced an increase in youth homelessness (Juurus, 1992).

The voluntary work we focus on here aims to establish a friendship-like relationship between a young person and a volunteer for a certain period of time, usually 6 months or a year. The idea is to do something different than the work of officials and experts who concentrate, for example, on questions and problems related to education, employment, or health. Meetings between a volunteer and a young adult can include leisure activities or taking care of practical matters, depending on the wishes of the parties involved. A young person and a volunteer can use 40€ per month for their expenses for activities such as going to movies, eating or having coffee, or taking part in some cultural events or exhibitions. A volunteer and a young person meet about once a month, but the frequency of their meetings can vary depending on their agreement and wishes.

The organization of volunteering in this study is similar to most formal youth mentoring programs: In the two-tiered structure, program staff supervise and support the volunteer mentors who interact directly with the youth mentees (Garringer et al., 2017). This structure reflects a service delivery or workplace model of volunteer involvement in which volunteers are recruited, trained, and supervised for their specific role by paid staff members (Rochester,

1999). This type of traditional, hierarchical structure favors established roles and responsibilities and the application of standards and best practices in the management of volunteers (Macduff et al., 2009; see also Keller et al. 2020 146). In our research, the volunteers expressed ambiguities and concerns related to their specific friend role.

At the moment, this kind of committed voluntary work seems to be becoming less common—especially for younger generations. It has been claimed that volunteer work has become more of a short-term or plug-in voluntarism, and the interest in longer-term commitment to voluntary work tends to increase with the age (Cammaerts et al., 2016, p. 115-117). What this attraction to short-term volunteering means for organizations is that they can expect less "loyalty" and continuity from volunteers (Rochester et al., 2010, p. 129). These are important observations on the structural developments for our study because this development risks bypassing the need for longer-term dedication and processing (Eliasoph 2013, p. 117; Macduff 2005; see also Marjovuo 2014, p. 22–23).

Researchers have pinpointed some troublesome features in the role of civic associations and hence also voluntary work in contemporary social policies. Notions from the United Kingdom, for example, show that in youth policy contexts volunteering has increasingly been treated as a means to guide young people towards a desired adulthood at the time of austerity and the role of the third sector has shifted towards being a partner of the state and the private sector (Davies 2019, p. 263). In Finland also, the third sector organizations are increasingly expected to work like companies producing services (Saari & Pessi 2011, p. 22), hence downplaying their nature as civil society associations (Moilanen 2015, p. 418). Their promise of empowerment is often compromised by the short-term projects, constant fundraising, and the need to meet the requirements of detailed documentation and reporting of their successes (see Eliasoph 2013, x). In Finland, for children, youth, and their families the service sector that is constituted by municipal, private, and the third sector appears to be fragmented and confusing with constantly changing personnel (Honkatukia et al., 2020, p. 48-9; Moilanen 2015, p. 418).

## Data and Methods

The empirical part of the article is based on three sets of materials and field work: a focus group discussion with volunteers; authors' autoethnographic reflections and observations regarding their own voluntary work; and interviews of young adults, 18 to 24 years old, who have been involved with the association's youth shelters and encountered volunteers (*N* = 17).

The focus group discussion involved four volunteers, two association employees, and two researchers (the authors of this article) who participated in the discussion and shared their experiences regarding voluntary work. The volunteers in the focus group discussion were volunteers at the organization's youth shelters, students of social services, or retired persons. Some had been involved in volunteer work for over 10 years while others were just starting their volunteering career. Therefore, focus group data includes reflection on real life experiences of active volunteers and *anticipated* experiences and imagined challenges of yet-to-be-placed volunteers. In the focus group discussion, we did not ask about the volunteers' background (e.g., race, gender, or socioeconomic status) that might be relevant in terms of invisible work. We wanted the participants in the focus group discussion to be able to decide for themselves what kind of personal information they want to share. However, when the volunteers introduced themselves, they told their names. In Finland the personal naming system is gendered and based on the volunteers' names and their appearance; all eight could be gendered as White women.

Before the focus group discussion, we researchers had acted as volunteers for some months. We prepared themes for the group discussion as based on this experience, and we wanted additionally to know what motivated people to become volunteers, what kinds of advantages and challenges they associated with volunteer work, what kinds of relationships they had developed with young adults, what kind of support they had received for their volunteer work, and what expectations they had for volunteering. We encouraged the participants to share ideas and experiences, comment, and talk about matters they found important. Even if we recorded the focus group discussion so that both researchers could concentrate on the ongoing discussion, the researcher who asked the questions made brief notes, for example, about what people said, how they talked, where people sat, and how the atmosphere felt.

Group discussions are often characterized as empowering in exploring and enabling group members' social agency and knowledge production while at the same time diminishing the unequal power relations between the research partners. However, in every group there are particular dynamics, interactions and power relations that influence what people in the group speak about and what is possibly kept in silence (Hyams 2004). Despite asking preplanned questions, we researchers did not differ from other volunteers too much. Yet, differences between the participants became apparent in the discussion, and those with more practical experience of volunteering were able to discuss more about their encounters. In her staff role, the association's volunteer work coordinator advised and informed the volunteers in response to

their questions and concerns and emphasized the importance of the volunteer work that the organization depends on.

This article is informed by ethnographic methods, especially participant observation, as we researchers engaged with volunteer work with young adults. Participant observation allows researchers to take part in the everyday lives of the people observed; become engaged with events, situations, emotions, and surprises people experience (e.g., Stoller 1989); and reflect them. In addition, participation in volunteering allows one to gain knowledge that is not necessarily spoken out (Howell 2018).

We informed the young adults with whom we did volunteer work about our double role as researchers and as volunteers. We highlighted that their participation in the study was voluntary and if the volunteer relationship would end, it would not affect their possibilities to be in contact with the civic association's staff members or any other services. If these roles would conflict, we would have preferred the volunteer relationship. We highlighted our availability to discuss any aspect of the focus group afterwards.

Through our own experiences we, the researchers, were already aware about uncertainties related to volunteer work. However, what we did not know is that other volunteers too had similar experiences (Bryant 2006, pp. 116-117). The combination of our own experiences and shared information and experiences of the volunteers in the focus group discussion resulted in our highlighting the meaning of "invisible work" in this article. To sort out invisible work we examined how the volunteers defined and talked about their relationships, actions, and experiences with young people in the transcribed recording. Furthermore, we grouped the data under key words, such as being a friend, uncertainties of volunteering, and needs for support.

The third type of data used in this article are the interviews with young customers of youth shelters aged 18-24 years. These individual thematic interviews included a life course perspective and we have analyzed thematic parallels between young people's life situations and histories, needs for support, and the role of voluntary-based services in supporting young people's well-being in transition to adulthood (Honkatukia et al. 2020; Lähde and Mölkänen 2021). Ethical approval for the whole study was obtained from the Tampere University Research Ethics Committee.

### *More Than Being an Adult Friend*

"What is better than become friends?" highlighted Varpu, the volunteer coordinator in the civic association's volunteer training session when she notified the best parts of being a volunteer for young adults. Likewise, the volunteers highlighted in the focus group discussion that a successful volunteer–young person relationship was to last, and at its best, become a genuine friend relation. It is this particular perception of the friend-like relationship—that was supposed to be a meaningful, trustful, and fun relationship—that shaped the experiences of these volunteers in profound ways.

A friend relationship characterizes a state of enduring affection, esteem, intimacy, and trust between (often) two people (Britannica, n.d.). However, an important and meaningful friendship can involve the same kind of intimacy as those between family members. Jerome, one of our young interviewees who had moved to Finland alone when he was underage, described that "I had that one friend who was always there, in good and in bad and I have told him that he belongs to the family." Indeed, a friendship involves a kind of reproductive and care work similar to a relationship with relatives (Carsten 1995).

Hannele, a middle-aged volunteer and a mother of two children, described her volunteer relationship as a godparent relationship:

> *I did not think this when I started as a volunteer but actually it is similar to as I had been asked to be a godmother of a small baby. As long as it is good for the young adult and me, it will exist.*

Hannele compared the volunteer relationship with a godmother relationship that is usually based on a voluntary contact between a child or a young person and usually, an older godparent. The difference between godparent and the volunteer relationship was that the latter emerged and was practiced in a specific multicomponent institutional setting. Hannele highlighted:

> *After I understood [my role], I think we started to find our . . . I still do not know what it is but I have been thinking that if he talks about his girl problems to me, I have an important place in his life.*

Varpu supported Hannele: "That is an important person." Hannele continued: "If I think backwards, what we have been doing during our meetings, we have gone for coffee or eating, and we just discussed for 3 hours. That, according to my own opinion, tells that things work out very well."

The above notions highlight that a sense that people are getting along is needed in this kind of support relationship. Hannele was aware that human relationships do not necessarily last and there might be times when people do not bond or keep in contact: "In the same way as a godparent, one can become a friend, or one can have years in between without contact. There is the same kind of 'a human relationship risk.'" Indeed, a successful volunteer relationship between a volunteer and a young person is not self-evident. Volunteers highlighted in the group discussion that if the volunteer relationship ended, it would be a disappointment. Riitta, volunteering in retirement, mentioned:

> *I had the first volunteer relationship [with a young person]. That relationship has ended but we still see each other and go and eat together. Then there was another [young person] and she left right away. The person told that she did not get too much from the relationship. . . . It was really important that the second relation was not the first one. If the first one had ended, I would have been thinking that did I something wrong.*

Jaana commented that she had had a similar experience; her first volunteer relationship ended before it really started. She contended that in a short time period the relationship lasted she did not get to know the young person and what she was looking for:

> *We met three or four times and then some things occurred in the young adult's life that I am not even sure of . . . and then she moved away from the shelter service to some other service. I think she felt that this volunteer relationship did not help her that much because we could have continued the volunteer relation if things would have worked out between us.*

Hannele, whose relationship with the person she supported had developed into a trustful direction felt that "If this [the relationship] had drained after third or fourth time we met, I think there would have been a threshold with the next one [young person]." Volunteers were aware that, as any human relationship, volunteer relations have their rewards, uncertainties, and challenges.

### *"I am something else": Vagueness and Reflections About the Friend Role*

When the volunteer and the young adult first meet, they are strangers to one another. Hence, the relationship has to be created from scratch. The volunteer coordinator Varpu explained how the relation was supposed to start: "I just tell first names and you [a volunteer and a young person] will tell what you want and then it starts from nothing. You yourself define the relationship, how you want it to be."

From the civic association's point of view, the two people involved can create a kind of relationship they wanted with the support of the association. However, people are involved with their personal and social experiences and histories that tend to guide people's interactions with others (Honkatukia et al., 2020, p. 24). The volunteers reflected the nature of their relationship and how it was supposed to be and evolve, like Hannele described in the following:

> *I am not his employment adviser or social worker; I am something else and what that else is in different situations. . . . .In the beginning I was wondering for what he needs me. I exercised with Anne [project worker] these questions and got answers that he has a social worker and he has a contact in an employment office. I am not the one who worries about those things. I am something else.*

As a student of social work with experience volunteering with children in a homework club, Hannele struggled to define what the volunteer relationship was about. She drew lines between professional occupations and something else and thought that this something else was her part. Importantly, Hannele resolved her role through discussion with the association worker Anne. As recognized in mentoring literature, the support and engagement received from the organization is essential for the volunteers' experience of satisfaction and meaning of their work (Keller et al. 2020, 146). In this particular setting, the volunteers could contact the civic association workers any time. It seemed, however, that the nature and frequency of discussions depended very much on the activity of the volunteers. While the association attempted not to burden the volunteers too much with reporting and meetings with the staff, the volunteers did not always use the support available. We suggest that more systematic research information is needed about different volunteer settings whether volunteers are so used to doing invisible work that they do not ask for support from their organizations.

Sanna, who had been involved with youth shelters and volunteer work a short while ago as a student, described her unsure feelings and questions related with her volunteer position:

> *I always somehow wonder why she wants to meet me. It is always fine for her that we meet and so. . . . And then there are not many things that come from her, like what she wants and then I invent all kinds of things and I sometimes feel that I am really stupid. . . . She had just received a new apartment and there was no furniture there and she was all alone, and I was very worried that I should get the furniture and help. I felt that she needs so much and what I can do here.*

Sanna's and Hannele's notions highlight the affective, arduous, and strenuous nature and tensions in volunteer relationships. Moreover, these accounts show that young adults and volunteers were not always able to communicate directly what they wanted and what they were looking for. However, the volunteers were very aware that one could not know these kinds of things before people get to know each other and that trustful human relations do not evolve right away but require time and practical and emotional actions.

Volunteers pointed out that they had to challenge themselves in a friendship relationship in many ways. Riitta, who had been a volunteer friend for three different young people, reflected, "If one is only with one's friends, one develops an understanding that this is the way it goes. However, in volunteer relationship one has to challenge herself." Hannele talked about "exceeding oneself in a positive sense" referring to the same kind of self-challenging that Riitta was talking about. Without mentioning it directly, she also compared herself with social workers doing customer work: "My background is more theoretical and sometimes I wonder whether I am able to go outside of it and meet these people appropriately." Jaana contemplated whether people studying social work would be better equipped to handle different kinds of unexpected situations. These reflections make visible glimpses of the volunteers' profound feeling of responsibility of fulfilling their friend role that they are not entirely sure of. This is typical invisible work can also reemphasize the role of gender in service provision (see Lavee & Kaplan, 2022).

In reflecting a friendship relation, the volunteers notified complexities related to cultural differences. Hannele talked about her experiences of a volunteer relationship with a young man whose was from an Arab country, and she herself being a middle-aged Finnish woman with two children. In a cafeteria, the young man had felt uneasy because Hannele had offered to pay for their coffees. He had explained that in his culture, it would have been his responsibility to treat a woman. Hannele, on the other hand, was conscious of what other people might think of when seeing them together. While the young man had been worried about how the café personnel had looked at him because he did not take care of his responsibilities, Hannele had thought of that the person at the cash desk sexualized their relationship.

The uncomfortable sensations and thoughts described by Hannele is just one example of how the volunteers identified diverse cultural differences, and often they had to figure out ways to deal with them. Leena who was about to meet "her young adult" for the first time, pointed out that one needs some frames: "I will meet this person that I know very little about. One needs some framing; how do I greet him". Varpu, the volunteer coordinator, encouraged her to talk

directly to the young person: "You can ask him how he wants that you greet him." Leena responded: "I will study the culture of his country before I meet him."

Based on the empirical material of this study, volunteering involves diverse kinds of labor ranging from preparing and planning to actual encountering and maintaining the relationship. Hence, the volunteer work is not only about meeting once or twice in a month but involves engagement and thinking also outside these meeting hours, like at home. As Hannele described: "It [the volunteer work] is not easy. I study this field and I am a mother too, so I have seen all kinds of things at home. I think the consciousness of it [that it is challenging] is the most important."

The volunteers' feelings of uncertainty, worry or unease as well as the volunteers' efforts of trying to solve these difficult emotions are often invisible work, the importance of which easily risks getting bypassed by volunteers as well as those who organize and supervise volunteering work. We suggest that when volunteers, volunteer organizations, and funders better acknowledge and value the work that tends to remain invisible it is possible to not only track down the needs for support but also acknowledge what kinds of social and political economic structures and policies invisible work might support.

### *Needs for Support*

At the time of our fieldwork, the civic association had identified how to support their volunteers and developed measures to meet them. It organized a guiding session twice a year in which volunteers had a possibility to discuss confidentially matters that concerned them and get peer support. The volunteers could also contact the responsible staff of the civic association and discuss challenging matters any day during working hours. Moreover, the association paid attention to the matching of a volunteer and a young adult by asking about and discussing their preferences beforehand.

Based on the interviews with young adults, we learned that not only volunteers required support but so did young adults. In general, young adults appreciated long-term holistic support that is available also outside of the official working hours. In the youth shelters they valued the possibility of talking freely and not only concentrating on problem solving (Honkatukia et al. 2020, p. 48-57; Lähde and Mölkänen 2021, p. 185). However, if things did not work out between a volunteer and a young adult or if a young person had questions concerning the volunteer relationship, the civic association worker contemplated how to deal with the situation and discussed this with the parties.

The downside of mentoring within the context of all other services—many different experts, administrators, and project workers—is that a volunteer relationship can be just one relationship among others for a young person. Young people reported that it can be tiresome to start meeting a new person. Anni (22), who, according to her own words, had gotten a significant support from the youth shelters, described:

> *I have been in youth psychiatric clinics and my contact person has changed several times. When one has always to get to know a new person and tell the same things all and over again about one's past, present and the future and the service contacts, it started to be fucking tiring.*

Similar to Anni, other young adults brought out their views about the support system and were exhausted by the constant changes in personnel that the project-like society produced. Viivi (24), for one, who had been a customer of a civic organization's youth shelters noted:

> *In that outreach youth work, in both cases, my counselor had to quit in the middle of things because the project funding ended. And then they told me that this came as a surprise also for them. This is the bad side that there are no stable jobs but just some project funding. I think that those are so good services that they should be made into safer workplaces for people who do that kind of work.*

Here Viivi pointed out not only her own perspective about the need for longer-term and sustainable support relationships, but she also commented on the way work is organized in present-day Finnish society. From her perspective, the project-like work life and fragmented social services have led to ending a well-functioning service relation, but she was also concerned about the workers' working conditions.

Moreover, the young adults engaged with invisible work. The young adults' reflections demonstrated empathy for personnel employed by service agencies and deep understanding of the limitations of the social safety net. In addition, they expressed patience with new volunteers despite rapid volunteer turnover and frustration with the need to share personal details repeatedly with new people in order to obtain the benefits of the program. Their critical notions focused on structural issues within the civic organization sector rather than on the volunteers or the volunteer program itself.

The general advice of the volunteer sector has been that "it is enough that a volunteer is him/herself" (see also Marjovuo 2014, p. 72), as if a volunteer can be placed in an any

relationship as a component without being influenced by the social relations that she/he will engage. In contrast, the volunteers were aware of young people's possibly vulnerable positions in the fragmented service sector context and reported arduous emotions of uncertainty and responsibility on how their friendship will evolve. Moreover, as a friendship is a particular kind of *relationship*, ways of communication, sociality, and context always influence the way it is enacted.

We highlight that although organizations are pressured to show results and have enough volunteers in order to secure their activities and funding, it is important to present volunteer work as realistically as possible for those interested in it. This involves being aware of the hidden, emotional, and reflexive work it entails as well as uncertainties related to it. It has been pointed out that organizations working with young people should devote enough time and resources to an iterative process of recruiting, training, facilitating, and evaluating their volunteer corps based on specific competencies needed to achieve the organization's intended outcomes (Homan et al. 2020, p. 79). However, as organizations struggle with short project cycles, high staff turnover, and fundraising, these tasks can be challenging.

Finally, some volunteers involved in this study contemplated the fact that volunteers do not have accurate expertise and skills to deal with mental health issues. Jaana, for example, explained: "I did not know what kind of support she would have needed. It is difficult to act when one does not know what is going on." The civic association did not expect that volunteers would engage with health issues that were left for professionals. However, as individual life histories cannot be cut away from their social relations, some volunteers felt that health issues were constantly present in volunteer relationships and asked for more knowledge related to them. Yet here organizations confront issues of individual privacy of health issues that are involved with legal frameworks determined by different social actors.

## Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Work

In this article, we have focused on volunteering experiences in the context of a large civic association in Finland. The volunteers in this case have been friends for young adults who have sought help from the youth shelters of the civic association in question. Although the rewarding end of volunteering was constructed as a friendship in the discussions between volunteers and professionals, the volunteers highlighted several uncertainties, hardships, and insufficiencies involved with volunteer work and their specific friend role. The volunteers were sometimes not sure how to create and maintain trustful relationship with a young person and determine the young adult's needs and expectations. The volunteers' notions revealed several activities, such

as thinking, reflecting, planning, studying, and sensing, that we have grouped under the term invisible work. Within these engagements the volunteers prepared and maintained their friend relations with young adults, and hence showed incredible commitment in volunteering which was not talked about openly much. Paying attention to invisible work helps to note what kind of actions tend to be unrecognized and *undervalued* in volunteer work in a multicomponent setting and in larger socio-political frameworks. Our study, for example, reveals that being a friend involves, at least from the standpoint of volunteers, a deep responsibility and dedication that volunteers do not practice only once or twice a month as volunteer work guidelines suggest.

By reflecting on our engagement with volunteer work and discussions, we have also considered the question on how to support volunteers in the kind of a context we have studied. As the civic association had already identified, staff members support, for example, discussing and paying attention to a volunteer and young adult matching. However, the support offered to the volunteers does not provide skills and tools to help volunteers deal with and influence structural issues of fragmented and neoliberal social services that young adults clearly struggle with. The structural issues work also in paradoxical ways: Experiences of short-term, fragmented social services can discourage young people from wanting to engage with the volunteer friend relation as they can expect that it is just one more relationship that will not last. On the other hand, in the middle of short-term services young adults found a good and trustful long-term support relation important and rewarding as they were treated not only as problems to be solved. For future research about invisible work in volunteering, we suggest that systemic and situational power dynamics of volunteering should be addressed.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the Finnish civic association and their staff and volunteers. We are also more than grateful to all the young people who participated in our study. We are thankful for the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their insightful comments. The research was funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland, project ALL-YOUTH with decision no 312689.

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