

# **From Compassion to Critical Resilience: Volunteering in the Context of Austerity**

## **Author**

Dr Pierre Monforte  
Associate Professor of Sociology  
School of Media, Communication and Sociology  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester LE1 7RH  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)116 252 2780  
Email: [pm260@le.ac.uk](mailto:pm260@le.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article analyses the political dimension of volunteering in the context of austerity. It explores how the economic recession and the austerity measures taken by governments in the UK in recent years affect how volunteers define their engagement and whether they relate it to more political forms of collective action such as protest. The paper analyses the narratives and life trajectories of volunteers active in five charities in the field poverty alleviation in Leicester. It shows how the context of growing inequalities and austerity leads these actors to define hybrid – ‘in-between’ – forms of engagement in which compassionate action is mixed with social and critical resilience based on collective empowerment processes. Furthermore, it shows that participants’ narratives about their own engagement are also ambivalent: they are based on a criticism of the disempowering consequences of austerity, but they sometimes tend to reproduce dominant discourses that blame the poor for their suffering. It argues that these ambivalences are inherent to narratives based on empowerment processes. The paper concludes by suggesting how the focus on these ‘in-between’ forms of engagement – and their ambivalences – can reveal some of the changing features of collective action in contemporary societies.

## **Introduction**

In a context of growing inequalities, many studies have analysed the consequences of the 2008 economic recession and austerity policies in Britain (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Garthwaite, 2016; Yeates et al., 2011). In 2014, a report published by the New Policy Institute showed that 760,000 persons had moved into poverty since 2012, an unprecedented increase in the last thirty years (McInnes, 2014). Also, several studies revealed that the number of food banks increased significantly over the last years. For instance, the number of food banks run by the Trussell Trust, the main food bank provider in the country, jumped from 30 in 2009 to 419 in 2017 (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017). The Independent Food Aid Network revealed that at least 2,000 foodbanks were

operating in the UK in 2017.<sup>i</sup> These figures have to be added to a long list of evidence showing increasing levels of poverty and inequalities in the UK and across Europe (Dagdeviren et al., 2017).

This paper explores the impact of this context on the individuals who engage in the field of poverty alleviation through volunteering. I adopt a perspective that stresses the relational practice of compassionate action and the socially located subjectivity of volunteers (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003).<sup>ii</sup> I aim to contribute to the broader reflection about “the wider reconsideration of the politics of voluntary service provision in the context of austerity” (Cloke et al., 2016: 2). I analyse this question through 49 in-depth interviews of volunteers and charity representatives in five different charities in Leicester, a city with high levels of deprivation. My overall argument relates to recent studies that underline the social and critical nature of resilience, showing in particular how social groups can sustain and advance their well-being through practices that are alternatives to the established social order (Hall and Lamont, 2013; DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016). I show how volunteers construct a culture of cooperation, inclusion and kindness through which they perform collective empowerment processes that are framed as a reaction against austerity politics (and neo-liberalism more generally). From this perspective, I argue that volunteering is a collective reaction against their own experience of the disempowering consequences of ‘precarity’<sup>iii</sup> under the austerity context (Butler, 2015; Lorey, 2015).

My analysis contributes to the recent literature showing the increasingly politicised – yet ambivalent – nature of volunteering in the austerity context (Evans, 2011; Williams et al. 2016; DeVerteuil, 2016): I show how volunteers frame their engagement as being linked with a broader criticism of governments’ austerity politics, yet sometimes endorse dominant discourses that ‘blame the poor’ for their suffering. From the perspective of the literature on social and critical resilience, I focus on volunteers’ narratives about their own collective empowerment processes. I show that, beyond their criticism of austerity politics, narratives that rely on the collective empowerment framework can endorse some aspects of dominant discourses on poverty as they are

sometimes based on the contrast between volunteers' own empowerment and the perceived lack of agency of users. As I will develop, this ambivalence relates to broader questions about the 'dark side' of resilience and volunteering (Slater, 2014).

In the next section, I will discuss how the notion of social and critical resilience can be related to the analysis of volunteering in the austerity context, and I will show how the focus on the everyday practice of volunteering can highlight its political dimension. I will then present the setting in which this empirical research has been carried out and the methods that have been used. I will present my empirical findings in the last two sections, showing in particular how volunteers define their engagement as a form of collective empowerment and analyzing the implications of this discourse.

### **Social and critical resilience and the political dimension of volunteering**

The literature on volunteering – defined as the collective action of individuals engaged in the daily support of vulnerable groups (Anheier and Scherer, 2017) – shows that acts of compassion are distinct from more clearly politicised forms of engagement such as protest (VanDeth, 2014; Wilson, 2012). Volunteering does not target political institutions and/or policy processes, and it is not necessarily framed through the objective of social or political change (Della Porta, 2010). This leads some authors to exclude volunteering from their definition of political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Other authors define volunteering as a form of political participation (Fox, 2013; Marsh and Akram, 2015; Norris, 2002), but they still distinguish it from types of engagements which have a more visible political dimension. For example, Ekman and Amna (2012) define volunteering as a “latent political participation”, a “pre-political” or “potentially political” engagement that is distinct from “manifest participation” such as protest. Other authors show that volunteers can in fact “avoid politics” in the course of their interactions (Eliasoph, 1998).

These ideas relate to the broader discussion about the limits of charity action. Critical

theories and empirical studies on volunteering and humanitarianism often argue that charities do not fight the causes of the issues they aim to address, and they thus tend to reify inequalities and exonerate the state from its responsibilities (Cloke et al., 2016; Fassin, 2011). As a matter of fact, this type of action deligitimises broader criticisms on systemic injustices as it “represents a privatization of political responsibility” (Williams et al., 2016: 2293): questions related to poverty are addressed through charity support, independently from the welfare state (Poppendiek, 1999; Theodossopoulos, 2016). From this perspective, governments can justify a retreat of the welfare state and shift responsibility to civil society. This is the case in the UK with government discourses on Big Society (Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). Therefore, charities can be a “moral safety valve” (Poppendiek, 1999; Garthwaite, 2017): in contrast with collective actions that demand systemic changes, acts of compassion are presented as a way to make volunteers feel better about themselves and as the only legitimate response to poverty and injustice. More generally, it is also often argued that charity action is linked to discourses that, from a neo-liberal perspective, construct questions of poverty as a matter of individual responsibility: poor people are perceived as being responsible for their situation, and moral judgments by the part of charity actors create distinctions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor (Muehlebach, 2012).

Studies on charity action have analysed how parts of the voluntary sector have been transforming in the austerity context, and how the perceived boundary between charities and social movements can be challenged. For example, studies by Williams et al. (2016), and Cloke et al. (2016) show how food banks in the UK have become increasingly politicized in recent years. It is argued that, in the context of recession and austerity, charities and food banks have become “spaces of political transformations and action” for volunteers (Williams et al., 2016: 2300). Being conceived as “spaces of encounter”, charities enable volunteers to “rework existing, or generate new, political and ethical subjectivities and mobilisations” (Williams et al., 2016: 2292). As illustrated by Theodossopoulos (2016) and Bosi and Zamponi (2015), volunteers mobilizing in the recession context become increasingly critical of apolitical forms of engagement: they underline how local charity initiatives can in fact increase social and political awareness and relate to objectives of social change. Similarly, Baumgartner (2017) shows in her

analysis of Portuguese civil society organisations how the economic crisis brought them to develop a critique of dominant production and consumption paradigms and therefore become closer to social movement organisations (see also Loukakis, 2018; Simiti, 2017). As shown by Ishkanian and Ali (2018), this does not necessarily mean that voluntary organisations become social movements or that they manage to build viable alliances with activists. Rather, it means that forms of actions that traditionally belong to the charity sector are invested by new actors and therefore take a new meaning, which goes beyond the traditional frame of compassion.

As recent studies have stressed, the notion of “social resilience” or “critical resilience” is useful to analyse these ‘in-between’ forms of engagement as well as their ambivalences (DeVerteuil, 2016; DeVerteuil and Golubichikov, 2016; Kousis and Paschou, 2017). The concept of resilience, defined in a general way in social sciences as “the capacity of individuals or subjects to recovery having suffered adversity” (Revilla et al., 2018: 89), has been explored by a vast literature and through different perspectives in recent years (Liebenberg and Ungar, 2009). At its origins, this notion has been used in particular to explore the process through which individuals and families react to life challenges. It has often been connected to the idea of adaptation in the context of a stressful situation (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013). For example, the concept of resilience has been explored by studies on children’s responses to traumatic events, in particular through the use of psychological approaches (Ionescu, 2012). In the context of neo-liberal policies, this idea has also been used by governments to justify cuts in welfare provision and to shift responsibilities to individuals and communities, with the view to sustain or reinforce the status quo (Hall and Lamont, 2013; Slater, 2014). From this perspective, criticisms of the notion of resilience are close to those on volunteering. As developed by MacKinnon and Derickson (2012: 254), resilience can be seen “apolitical” and “conservative” as it “privileges established social structures” and “closes off wider questions of progressive social change”.

Recently, scholars have argued that, although these critiques should be acknowledged, there is scope for resilience to be “redeemed from neo-liberalised connotations” (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016: 144). Beyond its ‘dark side’ resilience is a useful

concept to capture how groups construct “autonomous initiatives” in reaction to challenging circumstances (Katz, 2004; DeVerteuil, 2016). Thus, relying on the notion of “social resilience” (Hall and Lamont, 2013), scholars have paid particular attention to how groups use mutual resources such as social networks, collective learning, and leadership (Berkes and Ross, 2013; Revilla et al., 2018). This perspective has led to highlight the “creative processes” through which “people sustain their well-being in the face of social change” (Hall and Lamont, 2013: 14). These processes are often associated with self-organised collective actions and the collective empowerment processes that they foster (Norris et al., 2008). Also, they can sometimes lead to active resistance with the view to enact and promote social change (Kousis and Paschou, 2017; Katz, 2004). Therefore, resilience can be “critical”: it can “sustain alternative and previous practices that contradict neo-liberalism”, it can be “active and dynamic”, and it can act as “a precursor to more obviously transformative action such as resistance” (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov 2016: 146). These perspectives do not make resilience a synonym for resistance or protest. Rather, they aim to capture the “middle ground” through which critical political subjectivities are constructed (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016).

Building on these ideas, my analysis shows how the austerity context leads many volunteers to present their involvement in charities as a form of social and critical resilience. The volunteers that I interviewed engage in relational practices through which they construct alternative work and social relations, as a reaction against – and alternative to – what Butler (2015) and Lorey (2015) define as the growing “precarisation” under austerity: a mode of governance based on “insecurity” and “hopelessness”. In other words, their engagement is defined not only as a form of compassion, but also as a collective empowerment process. From this perspective, volunteers’ engagement can be analysed as a ‘personalized politics’ (Lichterman, 1996): although they distance themselves from manifest political engagement such as protest, participants relate their lifestyle changes to broad social concerns. They define everyday actions as challenges to dominant cultural codes, with the view to embody social change (Melucci, 1996).

I will show however how the political subjectivity that emerges through volunteers' empowerment processes is ambivalent. Participants (often in the same interviews) oscillate between narratives that emphasize their political subjectivity and narratives that present their engagement as apolitical. Also, many participants construct a distinction between their own empowerment process and the perceived lack of agency of the people they support. In so doing, they tend to individualise the causes of poverty and reproduce unequal power relations. I will argue that these ambivalences are inherent to narratives based on the idea of empowerment (Eliasoph, 2016): as participants show they worthiness through their own agency, they endorse and reproduce symbolic boundaries with those they perceive as dependent on their support.

### **Contexts and methods**

The case of Leicester is significant because of its comparatively high levels of deprivation in the UK. Historically, Leicester has high levels of unemployment, poverty, and low household incomes.<sup>iv</sup> For instance, the city has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country.<sup>v</sup> In the last decade, the city has been severely hit by austerity measures. In 2017, the City Council estimated that its budget will have fallen from £358m in 2010-2011 to £277m in 2019-2020, making it "the most severe period of spending cuts we have ever experienced".<sup>vi</sup> This context has a profound impact in the city. In its 2010-2011 review, Charity Link – the charity that coordinates several food banks in the city – revealed that: "In comparison to 2009-2010 we have witnessed a 17% increase in the number of people and children who have come to us as a result of homelessness and a 40% increase in requests for help due to bankruptcy."<sup>vii</sup> In 2015, it revealed that: "From March 2013 to March 2014 Charity Link has seen a 40% increase in people coming to us for help."<sup>viii</sup> It should also be noted that the austerity context has significant effects on the relation between charities and the City Council. Their collaboration has become increasingly dependent on accountability mechanisms and the growing competition for access to funding. This leads local charities to avoid being openly critical of local authorities, and to present their role as service providers rather than claims-making organisations (Davies and Blanco, 2017).

The five organisations that were selected for this study are representatives of the field of poverty alleviation in Leicester. Charity 1 was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and dedicates to running food banks and donating basic household items. Charity 2 was created in the 1970s; it is a housing aid centre for homeless people and vulnerable groups. It provides legal advice in cases of eviction and guidance to homeless people for access to housing. Charity 3 is a religious organisation that was created in 2006 and that provides basic goods and regular meals to vulnerable groups as well as legal advice. Charity 4 is a secular organization that was created in 2012. It provides food, advice, social activities, and accommodation to homeless people. Charity 5 was created in the middle of the 2010s; it uses surplus food to provide regular meals to the community.

These charities have different trajectories and orientations. Charities 1, 3 and 4 present themselves through a strictly humanitarian framework. For instance, in its mission statement Charity 1 stresses its support to “the most vulnerable within our communities”. Similarly, Charity 3 “exists to make a powerful and lasting difference in the lives of those it serves, where every life is valued and compassion is given to and through people.” Charity 2 describes its activities through the frame of compassion. However, in contrast with Charity 1, 3 and 4, it also refers to broader political claims in the field of housing: it presents housing as a “human right” and it campaigns on this issue at the local and national level. Finally, the main focus of Charity 5 is the environmental field: it relates the question of food poverty to a broader political campaign against food waste.

Between 2015 and 2016, I conducted 42 in-depth interviews of volunteers. The interviews explored three main dimensions: the motivations for getting involved in the charity; the definition of compassionate action and its relation to other forms of engagement such as protest; the ‘concrete’ everyday experience of volunteering. All these dimensions were explored in relation to the life trajectories of participants. These interviews were complemented with seven interviews of key charity representatives and with my participant observation in open sessions and food distribution.<sup>ix</sup> Three types of participants can be distinguished: volunteers who have benefited from the services of these charities in the past and ‘want to give something back’; volunteers



(including retired people) who are motivated by feelings of empathy and value the sense of community that they gain; students and young people who want to gain a job experience and are motivated by values of sharing and community building.<sup>x</sup>

### **'I'm here to help': volunteers' distancing from Politics**

The analysis of participants' narratives about their objectives seems to confirm the view that volunteering is distinct from 'manifest' political participation such as protest (Ekman and Amna, 2012). Despite the context of growing inequalities, the vast majority of participants do not relate their action to the objective of addressing local or national institutions and to demand or promote social change. What motivates their engagement is the idea to "help people" and to "make concrete individual changes" (John, 50, Charity 5). The majority of volunteers stress that their objectives are "modest" and exclusively at the community level. For example, Sara (63, Charity 4) argues that "I'm interested in my own backyard, you know, that's it".

In the interviews, the motivations for being involved in charities are often opposed to those attributed to more politicized actors like social activists. When asked about forms of engagement such as protest, the vast majority of participants responded that they are separate: "this is simply not what we do" (Jane, 72, Charity 1). In particular, it was frequently argued that their engagement is "concrete", while protest is described as "idealistic" and about "more general issues" (Rominder, 46, Charity 2). This is for example the case of a James, a volunteer in Charity 3, who argues that his work contrasts with "political activism", implying in particular that they have different objectives:

I: Do you think the kind of work that you do as a volunteer is different from these activities [protest]?

R: Well it is, maybe that's because I'm so sort of lazy that I can't be bothered to go on big demonstrations, I don't know. I mean I will sign a petition or two but I haven't gone on demonstrations. But I just feel that, I just want to kind of help really, I don't particularly want to raise any banner for anything in particular."

Further analysis shows that participants can “avoid politics” in their narratives (Eliasoph, 1998). For instance, Sara, a volunteer in Charity 4, argues that the objectives of social activists and volunteers are contradictory and she expresses negative views about “political motivations”:

“I don’t wish to campaign or anything like that. I don’t wish to join any organisation that’s politically motivated, which is what I think they are, they’re politically motivated. I very often think that... these sort of things are used for people’s own ends. But I, it doesn’t bother me at all, you know, I’m not there to do that. I think the people here need, not all of them but I would say the majority of them are, you know, they need some help.”

The distinction (and sometimes opposition) between “politically motivated” and more pragmatic forms of engagement is confirmed by how participants present the people they aim to support. Most participants recognise the effects of the recession and austerity context: they state that they see a higher number of people who seek their support, and who are in increasingly difficult situations. However, as we will develop below, the way these groups are presented resonates with an apolitical discourse motivated by feelings of empathy (Vitelonne, 2011). When asked about the factors that lead people into situations of poverty, interviewees pointed mostly at what they perceived as individual causes such as addiction problems or mental health issues. Broader social and political dimensions were rarely mentioned as direct causes of poverty.

These findings seem to confirm the idea that compassionate action and direct political engagements such as protest are motivated by different types of objectives. However, when moving the analysis beyond the focus on participants’ objectives, it becomes apparent that the austerity context has some impact on the way volunteers define their engagement. This is what the more general analysis on their life trajectories and practices of volunteering reveals. These dimensions show how volunteers define critical and oppositional political subjectivities as they construct “practices that contradict neo-

liberalism” (DeVerteuil and Golubchikov, 2016: 146). This leads to underline the more subtle political expressions found in charity volunteering: although volunteers don’t address public authorities to demand social change, they present their engagement as the performance and embodiment of social change ‘here and now’, articulating thus a form of “personalized politics” (Lichterman, 1996) based on social and critical resilience.

### **From compassion to collective empowerment: volunteering as a social and critical resilience**

The sociology of collective action has long recognised that volunteers are motivated by feelings of empathy, but also by personal incentives (Wilson, 2012). To name a few, these incentives can be emotional (Omoto and Snyder, 1993), they can relate to the social recognition of participants (Wuthnow, 1991), or they can be linked with their professional career (Wilson, 2012). In the case of the volunteers that I interviewed, the incentives to engage with compassionate action are linked with recent challenges to their own well-being, in particular in their professional environment. Among the 42 participants, eight had entered volunteering after being made redundant or after having left their job due to a deterioration in their working conditions, five after a period of unemployment (and homelessness for two of them), four after experiencing health problems that affected their professional and social life, three after finishing their University degree and experiencing difficulties finding in the job market, two after entering a new job in a deprived area.

The participants who described these personal challenges made a connection with the context of recession and austerity. For instance, when she described how she lost her job, Nicola (53, Charity 1) argued that she experienced the “consequences of Conservative politics”. More generally, their narratives resonate with recent studies on the effects of recession and austerity on individuals’ work-life balance, as well as on professional and social relations more generally (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Warren, 2014). Participants explain how they have been subject to heightened feelings of anxiety, isolation and insecurity through their experience of “precarisation” (Butler,

2015; Lorey, 2015). For example, Helena, a 46 years old volunteer in Charity 5, described how she experienced the “increased pressure at work” and explained that she felt “isolated” and “unable to deal with unrealistic expectations” as a consequence. Similarly, Denise (62, Charity 4) described how she left her job in Further Education after experiencing the effects of budget cuts in her sector. She explains that the insecurity resulting from these cuts made her and her colleagues feel increasingly disengaged in their professional life:

“Suddenly they were in and it was just like, and everybody moaning, and I thought I don’t wanna be that person, I don’t wanna be, you know, moaning, moaning, moaning, can’t wait to collect my pension”.

As a result of these experiences, many participants presented their commitment to volunteering as a form of resilience: a “different chapter of [their] life”; a way to “move on with [their] life”.

Although these forms of resilience appear as being individual and psychological – they emerge from participants’ motivation to ‘bounce back’ – their collective and critical dimension needs to be stressed. This becomes particularly visible when volunteers underline the culture of kindness, respect and inclusion that they construct through their charity work (what Flores 2014 defines as a “practice of care”), and how it contrasts with the deterioration of social and work relations that they experienced. When describing their daily interactions, participants stress for example the “sense of solidarity”, the “friendly atmosphere”, and the idea that “people respect each other” (James, 34, Charity 5). They explain how they “support each other and find a space in which people from all sorts of backgrounds can meet”, something that they describe as becoming “exceptional in recent times” (John, 40, Charity 5). From this perspective, their daily interactions are presented as a way to embody and perform an ethos and a set of values that challenge the consequences of precarity, and in particular the feelings of isolation and anxiety that result from it. This form of personalized politics (based on critical resilience) is illustrated by Sophie, a 38 years old volunteer in Charity 3 who began volunteering when she started working in a deprived area, and who describes the

collective “emotional relief” of “doing things differently”:

“When I volunteer, it is very important that ethically it relates to my values and beliefs system. And as I don’t do politics, I suppose it’s my way sometimes of going against the system. (...) In this charity we show that we can do things differently. Despite the cuts, the lack of support to vulnerable people, everything, we show that we stick together, that we can make it work. We find these moments of emotional relief together.”

In their narratives, participants also refer to the culture of kindness, inclusion and respect as a way to achieve social change. For instance, some volunteers present it as a way to create a “sense of community” in their area, something they contrast with the observation that people have increasingly “isolated lives” in the current context (Yvonne, 67, Charity 2). Also, some participants argue that they create a sense of belonging around a “common cause”, something they present as an alternative to feelings of disengagement and insecurity. This is for example the case of Michelle (46, Charity 4), who explained earlier in the interview that she had left her job as she felt increasingly insecure and disengaged because of recent cuts in her sector:

“I think the fact that there is a common, there is a common cause and, and a reason, the reason why we’re doing this project and part of this project is very clear. (...) So, it’s almost like well there’s a shared vision going on, you know. And at work you don’t generally get that, you’re working for somebody else, aren’t you?”

As these extracts indicate, it is through their collective practice of volunteering that participants give a critical sense to their resilience and construct alternative subjectivities. More generally, the analysis shows how the emotional and social support that is provided by charities leads ultimately to processes of collective empowerment, a central dimension in the definition of social resilience (Hall and Lamont, 2013: 16-17). The interviews show that charities provide participants with the notion that they can

have an impact on their own life as well as on the life of the people they seek to help. Thus, the idea that “we make a difference” is central in their narratives, and it is often linked with positive emotions about their own sense of agency (see Theodossopoulos, 2016 for a similar argument). The collective dimension of these empowerment processes is particularly visible when participants evoke the learning processes on which they are based. For instance, when asked to describe her charity, Lucy (37, Charity 2) stressed that it “has a broad range of individuals who learn from each other” and that she gained a “sense of confidence” through her exchanges with service users and volunteers. Also, participants underline the collective dimension of their empowerment process when they describe their contribution to their organization. For instance, several participants present their charity as a “project” that they are developing collectively through the pooling of different abilities and resources.

Similarly to their narratives about the culture of kindness, respect, and inclusion, volunteers present their empowerment as a reaction and an alternative to precarisation. They often contrast the expression of positive feelings about their sense of agency with the challenges that affected their well-being as a consequence of austerity, and in particular the feelings of insecurity and disempowerment. For example, Maria, a 63 years old volunteer in Charity 3 explained that “I am now in the position to help people” and that “this work gives you a sense that what you do is important”. Referring to her situation before becoming a volunteer (she decided to quit her job because of deteriorating work-conditions), she then argued that this “made me feel better about myself”, in particular because she found an environment in which “people value each other”. Similarly, a participant described the sense of “control” that she gained through volunteering, mentioning again the idea of an alternative to her previous professional experience:

“(…) cause I always felt there was no real pressure. And if you’re working in a restaurant it’s all about profit and, you know, somebody’s, it’s like working in teaching, there’s all the while people are trying to cut the money, you know, make you use less money, but with voluntary sort of thing there isn’t that pressure (...). You are giving your time so it takes off that pressure, you know,

you're in control." (Sophie, 42, Charity 2)

In this extract, the contrast between the description of work relations in the context of austerity ("people trying to cut the money") and the sense of "control" regained through volunteering shows the critical nature of the resilience in which participants engage. Their empowerment process is presented as the result of a retreat from work relations in the austerity context, and in particular the values of competition and the feelings of insecurity that relate to it. In some cases, these processes can lead to broader objectives of social change such as awareness raising around food poverty and food waste. This is underlined by Anna, a volunteer in Charity 5, who explains that she left her job because she disagreed with the values it represented:

"I: What was it you didn't like about your job?

R: The whole meaningless about it like you know, and especially at the advertising side. People were selling adverts you know online adverts and people would be spending £50,000, and it was making me angry. I just couldn't believe it really when you know what's going on with poverty and stuff at the moment."

She then contrasts this experience with the set of values that she now embodies as a volunteer (living a "simple life") and relates this to the idea of broader structural change:

"There's enough food on this planet to feed everybody so you know we're using all these resources, it's going to run out by the time my child is my age. I want her to have a nice life basically so that's why I put the hours in. And it may not pay money but we get paid in food, you know we get paid in food. We live a simple life so I don't need all that money basically. And I'm a lot, lot happier now than I was when I was getting money actually. So yeah I think a necessity really. We kind of need to wake up to these issues and you know hopefully more people out there that are willing to put themselves in a

position, like voluntary positions and stuff.” (Anna, 29, Charity 5)

As this extract illustrates, volunteering can be a form of ‘personalized politics’ in which individual changes and claims about broader structural changes are perceived as being interdependent. More generally, the findings show how the daily practice of volunteering – presented as an active reaction against the disempowering consequences of precarization - can be understood as a social and critical resilience. Through their culture of inclusion (and the empowerment processes that relate to it), participants aim to embody social change as they claim collectively their sense of agency, against a context in which it is threatened. Following DeVerteuil and Golubchikov (2016: 148), this leads to underline the political dimension of critical resilience: it “is political because it can be actively produced and gives voice to people who are not simply victims of change or top-down technical fixes, but themselves have the agency of (political) actions and transactions.” Against the view of a strictly apolitical engagement, volunteers can thus construct and embody critical political subjectivities. However, it is important to note that this process has a ‘dark side’. Indeed, the analysis shows that volunteers can underline their oppositional political subjectivity and at the same time (in the same interviews) endorse distinctions in terms of ‘deservingness’, which reflect neo-liberal discourses on poverty. In what follows, I will show that this ambivalence is related to the symbolic boundaries produced by narratives based on empowerment: as volunteers underline their own sense of agency, they endorse and reproduce boundaries between ‘deserving’ and ‘underserving’ service users.

### **The ambivalent politics of volunteering: narratives of blaming and deservingness**

In some participants’ narratives, the discussion about the causes of poverty resonates with explanations in terms of “culture of poverty” that tend to “blame the victim” for their suffering (Ryan, 1976). Although this position is not shared by all participants, volunteers with different profiles and in different organisations refer to it. This is for example the case of Sarah (76, Charity 3) who condemns the behavior of some service users:



“Well of course a lot of it is broken marriages. Somebody who drinks, you see, drink, drugs. They lose their home, they lose their wife, their children don’t wanna know, you see. But of course initially they brought it on themselves because nobody makes you be a drunk do they?”

As mentioned above, few participants point to general factors that relate to the context of recession and austerity when they describe the situation of service users. Although this aspect is central when they talk about their own situation, it is rarely presented as a direct cause of poverty for service users. Furthermore, their own position of “being able to help” is often contrasted with that of service users who are presented through the frame of vulnerability and their perceived lack of agency. The idea that “they need help” is repeated many times throughout the interviews, and it is often linked with the notion that – in contrast with their own situation – service users are isolated, in lack of emotional support, and facing addiction issues. This is for example underlined by a Jason (53, Charity 1) who regrets that service users have difficulties to “help themselves”:

“And they’ve got bad ways. Say drinking, say alcoholics and drugs. And they don’t know where to turn to so they come here. Then we help them and they get help themselves. We don’t want to have them when they’re still drinking or have drugs. We’d just like them to help themselves and then we can help them.”

Interestingly, participants refer to individuals with specific profiles when they describe service users. Thus, although they represent a minority of the people who are supported by their charities, people with disabilities or addiction problems are often described as being the ‘typical guests’. Also, when asked to present an example of their work, most participants spontaneously select what they can recall as being the most difficult cases, illustrating thus the tendency to focus on the vulnerability of service users. These narratives resonate with dominant political discourses on charities and ‘active citizenship’ in the austerity context. These discourses contrast the social worthiness of volunteers (presented as examples of active citizens) and the perceived lack of

autonomy of service users (Wells and Caraher, 2014; Lister, 2011). This contrast is often reinforced by the focus on the behavior of certain service users, who are criticized for example for having irresponsible spending habits (Garthwaite, 2017). Participants can sometimes reproduce this discourse when they single out service users who they feel are ‘taking advantage’ of charities. This is for example the case of a participant who makes a distinction between “grateful” and “greedy” or “nasty” service users:

“And a lot of them they’ve had to struggle for everything that they’ve got. And, and I don’t say that it’s always the reason, but it does make some of them very greedy. They’re ready to take whatever they can get, even whether they don’t need it. Some of them want to take it because they can sell it and get some money for it, maybe for things that they need, or maybe, we do have alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes come in, you know, and it may be for their habit. (...) We get so many people that are so grateful for what we do for them, and even just for talking to them, and treating them as a human being. But we also get people who are arrogant, greedy, and sometimes can be a little bit nasty because you’re not giving them what they think that they should get.” (Helen, 64, Charity 2)

As these examples illustrate, participants’ narratives can quickly shift from critical resilience to the reproduction of dominant discourses on poverty and volunteering as a form of active citizenship. The fact that these changes of discourse can happen in the same interviews shows the inclusive/exclusive logic of narratives based on the idea of empowerment (Eliasoph, 2016). Although this idea can be the foundation for the collective construction of oppositional political subjectivities, it is also exclusionary as it disqualifies individuals on the basis of their perceived character or behavior.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of volunteers’ motivations and experience in the field of poverty alleviation shows the impact of the austerity context on the way they reflect upon their engagement. Although most participants indicate that they do not define their

involvement in charities as political (in the sense of demanding broad social changes), the analysis of their trajectories and everyday practice of volunteering shows how their engagement can be linked to critical political subjectivities. As they present their commitment with charities as a form of social and critical resilience, participants relate their practice of volunteering to the construction of alternative work and social relations, which lead to collective empowerment processes. The link that volunteers establish between their involvement in charities and their experience of 'precarity' (Butler, 2015) leads them to present their engagement as a form of 'personalized politics' (Lichterman, 1996), in particular through their culture of cooperation, inclusion, and kindness. These processes point at the transformative dimension of social and critical resilience: the capacity "to create untried beginnings from which to evolve a new way of living" (Walker et al. 2004: 7).

The analysis of 'in-between' forms of engagement based on social and critical resilience sheds light on some of the changing features of collective action in contemporary societies. It shows how alternative social organisations and critical political subjectivities can emerge outside the arena of traditional social movements (Yates, 2015). The "quiet politics" (Askins, 2015) of charity action shows how volunteers define hybrid forms of commitment which, to a certain extent, blur the distinction between compassionate action and more visibly political engagements such as protest. It should however be stressed that the critical resilience of volunteers does not necessarily lead to a complete rupture from dominant discourses on poverty. Narratives about collective empowerment processes give a critical tone to participants' engagement. However, they can also lead volunteers to demonstrate their own social worth through the endorsement of individualised views of poverty, which reproduce stigma on service users (Garthwaite, 2017; Tyler, 2013). Thus, our findings about the critical resilience of volunteers do not invalidate criticisms of charity action as a "moral safety valve" (Poppendiek, 1999). They resonate with recent studies that show how volunteers in the same charity can mix discourses about social justice with conservative moral values and humanitarian arguments that "detract attention from the roots of social inequality" (Theodosopoulos 2016: 181; Williams et al. 2016). The fact that these apparently contradictory positions coexist in the same narratives shows the 'messy middle ground'

in which charity work is situated (May and Cloke, 2014; DeVerteuil, 2016). The analysis of these ambivalences and contradictions are important for the study of charity action more generally. They show that it is necessary to distinguish analytically between the set of inner beliefs and values that participants refer to in order to make sense of their encounters with users and the culture of interaction that they build essentially around themselves (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2013). In our analysis, it is thus apparent that participants' critical resilience emerges principally in and through the latter. Beyond binary views that attribute political or apolitical subjectivities and progressive or conservative views to volunteers, future study is needed to continue exploring these ambivalences, how they emerge, and how actors make sense of seemingly contradictory ethical and political values.

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<sup>i</sup> Independent Food Aid Network: [www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk](http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> I analyse the moral categories and ethics that they use to make sense of their action and to confront problems (Fassin, 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> Following Butler (2015: 5), precarity is defined as "an increasingly individualized sense of anxiety and failure".

<sup>iv</sup>

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157130/report.aspx?town=leicester>

<sup>v</sup> "Compilation of child poverty local indicators", 2018. On the website

<http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/media/182148/budget-report-2017-2018.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> On the website <http://www.charity-link.org>

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> The period of participant observation was of nine months. I participated in the activities of the organisations about twice a month. The data collected through the interviews and observation were coded and analysed systematically. The ways in which participants gave meaning to their engagement were identified inductively, looking in particular at responses to questions on their motivations, their perception of other forms of engagement, and their relations to service-users.

<sup>x</sup> The narratives that I present in this paper could be observed across the charities in which the fieldwork took place, and among volunteers with different profiles and experiences. However, it should be noted that the narratives of collective empowerment were more prominent among the volunteers who directly experienced the consequences of austerity politics.

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