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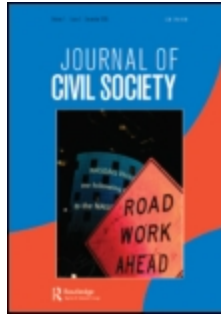
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**Theorising inequalities in volunteering: Structural effects and social organisation in deprived neighbourhoods**

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# Theorising inequalities in volunteering: Structural effects and social organisation in deprived neighbourhoods

## Introduction

This article explores the relationship between volunteering and socio-economic status, suggesting an extension to existing theory in this area that might contribute to explanations of low levels of volunteering in areas exhibiting high levels of deprivation<sup>1</sup>. In particular, it highlights the insights that might be provided by social organisation theory, outlining the theoretical potential of its focus on localised structural conditions in shaping volunteering in deprived areas. The article illustrates value of such an approach by applying it to ethnographic research in a deprived neighbourhood in England, suggesting that by paying close attention to the configurations of social life in such areas we can shed new light on the relationship between deprivation and volunteering. Throughout, the aim is to provide a complementary framework to work alongside existing theories of inequalities in voluntary action, to reach towards an account which elucidates the role of structural factors affecting the likelihood of volunteering in deprived areas.

The contribution of the article, therefore, is to the theory of volunteering. The argument here is presented in two parts. The first outlines the literature on inequalities in volunteering, focusing in particular on dominant status theory (Smith, 1975; 1994; Smith and Wang, 2017), before suggesting that the application of social organisation theory to associational life in deprived

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<sup>1</sup> It is commonplace in the literature to understand inequalities in volunteering on the basis of socio-economic status, itself a multi-faceted concept taking in not only income but the cumulative effects of a range of factors. In this article I use this term deprivation when describing the effects of low socio-economic status, in order to better capture the multiple forms of disadvantage which are concentrated in poor localities. For a further discussion of deprivation, see Lister (2004).

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3 areas can contribute to a theoretical framework capable of addressing some of the questions  
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5 left unanswered in the existing literature. The second part of the paper demonstrates how this  
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7 might work, applying the insights of social organisation theory to empirical findings that  
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9 highlight the importance of neighbourhood-level social-structural conditions in determining  
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11 the opportunities available for volunteering. Throughout, the piece underlines the importance  
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13 of considering the dynamics of volunteering in context, suggesting that even in areas unable to  
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15 maintain strong social infrastructure, there is the potential for a significant level of voluntary  
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17 action.  
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### 24 **Theorising inequalities in volunteering: ‘Why’ but not ‘how’**

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26 Existing research has consistently highlighted the presence of inequalities in participation in  
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28 volunteering in many countries<sup>2</sup>. The likelihood of volunteering has been connected to a wide  
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30 range of different factors, including gender, age and race (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Lee and  
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32 Brudney, 2012), and particularly, socio-economic status (SES) (Wilson, 2000; Hustinx, Cnaan  
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34 and Handy, 2010; Veal and Nichols, 2017). Reviews of the material in this area suggest that,  
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36 regardless of form, purpose and context, volunteering tends to be concentrated amongst the  
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38 most affluent members of society (see Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2000; McCulloch et al, 2012;  
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40 Bennett, 2013; Southby and South, 2016).  
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47 Inequalities like these are normatively troubling, given the individual and social benefits that  
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49 are supposed to accrue through participation in voluntary action. Higher levels of self-efficacy  
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51 (Ohmer, 2007), greater reservoirs of social capital (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991), increased  
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55 <sup>2</sup> There is an extensive literature on the definition of volunteering, noting variations in the level of formality,  
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57 commitment, pay and obligation and which exist in different country contexts (Cnaan, Handy and  
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59 Wandsworth, 1996; Salamon and Anheier, 1992). Frequently, studies explore the importance of SES in  
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determining participation in formal volunteering (see Veal and Nichols, 2017). In this article, as will become  
clear, it is necessary to take a broad approach to understanding volunteering, in order to reflect the wide  
range of activity identified in the empirical work.

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3 labour market participation (Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987), and even health benefits (Musick  
4 and Wilson, 2003; 2008) have all been related to engagement in volunteering. Volunteering is  
5 also an important civic act, and forms a central element of many conceptions of democratic  
6 citizenship, engendering ‘civic values, enhanc[ing] political behaviour, and improv[ing]  
7 democracy and society’ (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005: 230).  
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17 The existing literature has developed a solid theoretical foundation explaining the development  
18 of inequalities in volunteering and there is a well-trodden path to testing, and to extending, the  
19 assumptions at large in the field (Wilson, 2012). The starting point for much of this  
20 work is the identification of the array of resources necessary to facilitate participation in  
21 volunteering activities. David Horton Smith (1975; 1994) has related this to the ‘dominant  
22 status’ theory of volunteering (DST). This suggests that there are individual characteristics  
23 which ‘work as resources for, or facilitators of, volunteering’ (Smith and Wang, 2017: 639).  
24 First identified by Lemon, Palisi and Jacobson (1972), DST has become highly influential and  
25 is widely-used in studies explaining inequalities in volunteering (Hustinx, Cnaan and Handy,  
26 2010). At its simplest, DST suggests that participation in volunteering is more likely amongst  
27 people with a ‘dominant’ social status – that is to say, a status that is valued or preferred within  
28 a given socio-cultural system. These might include socio-economic status, or other, related  
29 factors such as income, higher levels of education, social skill or social connectedness.  
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49 Of course, the connection between social characteristics and volunteering has been long  
50 established in the literature (see review by Smith, 1994). However, DST provides a means of  
51 understanding the relationship between the likelihood of volunteering and the numerous  
52 variables identified by empirical work by articulating an underlying framework that reaches  
53 beyond the identification of a list of factors related to the propensity to volunteer.  
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3 Fundamentally, dominant status theory provides a means of explaining why factors such as  
4 educational attainment or income seem to matter when it comes to engagement in voluntary  
5 action. Looking at volunteering in this way can clarify the determinants of participation  
6 because it focuses on understanding of the distribution of power and resources in society.  
7  
8 Dominant status groups might enjoy a number of advantages based on their knowledge of  
9 volunteering opportunities, social skill, perceived suitability and capacity for particular  
10 volunteering roles or peer attitudes to volunteering (Smith 1975; 1994). But the simple fact that  
11 individuals holding these advantages possess these resources is not sufficient to explain why  
12 they choose to spend them pursuing volunteering, rather than some other activity. Dominant  
13 status theory suggests that there are structural factors, such as the likelihood of higher  
14 educational attainment leading to the ability to take on a wider range of volunteering roles, that  
15 are significant, an insight that has been borne out through subsequent empirical work (Smith  
16 and Wang, 2017).

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36 The idea has gone through a number of revisions since its first development. Most recently,  
37 Smith and Wang (2017) have proposed a revised dominant status theory (RDST), suggesting  
38 that the importance of individual characteristics is contextual, with their value as resources  
39 closely connected to the norms and structure of the particular setting or time in which they are  
40 situated. For instance, some factors which might facilitate the accumulation of power and  
41 resources, and so indicate a dominant social status in some societies (such as political party  
42 membership or religious observance) are less important in others. Equally, features such as  
43 gender or disability, while still significant in many settings, have arguably declined in  
44 importance in contemporary societies. Therefore, dominant status can explain both variations  
45 in the level of volunteering between different social settings, and why some resources which  
46 seem previously to be aligned to dominant status are now less important. Regardless of these  
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3 variations, there is little doubt that socioeconomic status holds a particularly significant  
4 position. As Smith and Wang (2017: 642 [my emphasis]) suggest, ‘in contemporary nations  
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6 *everywhere*, being rich/wealthy in assets and/or income is [...] a key dominant status’.  
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12 However, despite the significant contributions outlined above, far greater theoretical attention  
13 is needed on exactly *how* inequalities work to depress participation. In part, this is a function  
14 of the focus of the existing literature on individual, or family traits; although some  
15 consideration is given to variations in social context, it is usually assumed to be both static and  
16 uniform. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the kinds of complex analytical puzzle faced by  
17 researchers in explaining the relationship between volunteering and socio-economic status.  
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19 Broadly, these fall into two categories: explaining variations in the distribution of the number  
20 and type of voluntary organisations in different localities, and understanding the relationship  
21 between different explanations for the lower levels of volunteering in less affluent areas.  
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35 For instance, research on volunteering has demonstrated that, not only do levels of volunteering  
36 vary but that numbers of voluntary organisations are distributed unevenly throughout different  
37 localities, and that socio-economic status has a potentially significant role in explaining these  
38 findings. Famously, Bell and Force (1956) found that volunteering levels were greater in more  
39 affluent areas of San Francisco. Mohan and Bennett (2019) suggest that the distribution of  
40 voluntary organisations can influence the likelihood of volunteering, suggesting that there is a  
41 positive relationship between the presence of voluntary organisations in a locality and the  
42 density of participation in volunteering, highlighting lower levels in poorer areas. Dacombe  
43 (2018) notes that variations in the numbers of voluntary organisations in deprived areas can be  
44 related to the preferences held by residents over the kinds of social activity they undertake.  
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60 Greve and Rao (2012) highlight the importance of the density of voluntary organisations to a

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3 range of positive social outcomes, including the potential for civic participation. Rotolo and  
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5 Wilson (2012: 454) point out that ‘without a robust not-for-profit sector, fewer volunteers will  
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7 be mobilized’. Regardless, only limited evidence exists concerning the relationship between  
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9 the local-level community infrastructure and the level of volunteering in a locality.  
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15 Beyond problems with explaining the ways in which the distribution of voluntary organisations  
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17 in lower-SES areas might affect participation in volunteering, further problems arise when we  
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19 consider the relationship between the varying explanations in the literature. For instance,  
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21 Smith’s approach to dominant status is not one which views particular individual characteristics  
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23 in isolation but accepts the importance of the interplay of a number of different factors in  
24  
25 shaping the likelihood of volunteering. He identifies five broad categories of influence over  
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27 participation, including context, social background, personality, attitudes and situation (Smith,  
28  
29 1994). Similarly, House (1981) identifies individual characteristics, relationships and  
30  
31 community context as salient factors. Omoto and Snyder (2002: 847) suggest that volunteering  
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33 should be understood ‘as a phenomenon that is situated at, and builds bridges between, many  
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35 levels of analysis and that unfolds over time’. Clearly then, the interplay between these varying  
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37 factors is significant, and raises a number of analytical questions for researchers interested in  
38  
39 this field, including whether an individual can be of affluent socio-economic status but reside  
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41 in a deprived area, and so be hampered by local environment?  
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50 Clearly, this leaves something of a theoretical puzzle, and there is an opportunity to develop  
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52 existing theory to better answer questions like these. Considering the experiences of individuals  
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54 in such circumstances requires a somewhat different starting point to that in the existing  
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56 literature. And yet it need not be in conflict with the theoretical approaches at large in the field:  
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58 as we have seen, DST is a theory that is both sympathetic to context and to changes in social  
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3 dynamics. In the next section, this article outlines the fundamental points of social organisation  
4 theory, suggesting it is one way of extending existing theory to take greater account of local  
5 structural factors.  
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### 10 11 12 **Rethinking inequalities in volunteering: social organisation theory** 13

14 Clearly, there is the potential for theories of participation in volunteering to more closely  
15 connect the effects of socio-economic status with both context and location. This is important:  
16 people of low SES are not randomly distributed throughout society but tend to reside in areas  
17 populated by people suffering from similar levels of deprivation (Wilson, 1987). Equally, it is  
18 important to avoid the assumption that socio-economic status in general is enough to explain  
19 low levels of volunteering, and that the lives of people living in deprived areas are, to a great  
20 extent, much the same. In reality, regardless of their socio-economic status, people do not live  
21 out their lives as atomised individuals. Consequently, researchers should not simply consider  
22 the effects of indicators such as educational attainment or income but account for the lived  
23 experience of volunteers.  
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40 One way of addressing this involves exploring the potential of social organisation theory.  
41 Originally developed in work on neighbourhood poverty, social organisation theory provides a  
42 nuanced means of understanding the dynamics of social life in deprived areas. Its insights draw  
43 on William Julius Wilson's (1987) suggestion that the structural characteristics of life in poor  
44 areas negatively affect the lives of residents, regardless of other factors. This in part because  
45 deprived areas often lack the infrastructure and resources that are commonplace in better-off  
46 areas. These insights are important in providing the foundations of an explanatory framework  
47 for low levels of volunteering which goes some way towards addressing the analytical  
48 problems faced by researchers interested in the connections between volunteering and socio-  
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8 Social organisation theory suggests, in short, that the structural conditions which exist in  
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10 deprived areas result in communities that lack coherent and organised social infrastructure.  
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12 Originally developed to explain variations in the level of crime in poor neighbourhoods (see  
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14 Shaw and McKay, 1942), the starting point for much of the early work in this area was the way  
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16 in which local institutions are able to solve collective problems (such as anti-social behaviour)  
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18 by reinforcing beneficial norms and exercising informal social control over residents. Areas  
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20 that were high in crime were hypothesised to be 'socially disorganised', with deficiencies in  
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22 social institutions caused by residential instability, ethnic heterogeneity and high levels of  
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24 poverty concentrated in the area (Small, 2004). These mechanisms, in turn, reduce the  
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26 opportunities available for participation in volunteering, and therefore opportunities for  
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28 collective action. Social organisation theory is broadly based on three assumptions: that more  
29  
30 affluent areas will maintain larger and denser networks of voluntary organisations than  
31  
32 deprived areas, that deprived areas will be characterised by a lack of local institutions and  
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34 amenities, and that these factors are not static, and changes in economic and social profile of  
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36 an area will affect the likelihood of volunteering (Sampson, 1999; 2018).  
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45 However, empirical work on deprived areas has long thrown up debates over whether they are  
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47 really disorganised in the ways in which theories like this would suggest, or if in fact they  
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49 demonstrate forms of social organisation which, while quite different to those present in more  
50  
51 affluent areas, are nonetheless functional and useful. Many of the early studies of social life in  
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53 poor communities highlighted forms of social structure which seemed sharply at odds with the  
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55 kinds of limited infrastructure which might be expected. William Foot Whyte's classic *Street  
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57 Corner Society* (1943) is an excellent example of this kind of approach. His work in the  
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3 'Cornerville' suburb of Boston's North End includes a detailed description of a wide range of  
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5 voluntary activities, including the (quite illegal) organisation of voting in local elections, and a  
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7 number of political protests, as well as more informal kinds of volunteering, such as a softball  
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9 league and regular dice games. The driving force behind these kinds of organisation caused  
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11 Whyte, and other writers using similar methods, to question the assumptions underpinning the  
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13 social functioning of poor neighbourhoods (see also, Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Small, 2004;  
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15 Sampson, 2018).  
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22 Part of the problem with resolving the disconnection between the theory of social organisation  
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24 and the empirical results of community-level studies is that it is conceptualised and measured  
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26 in vastly different ways. Common approaches to the idea might include examining the number,  
27  
28 size and function of voluntary associations, the level of civic participation, formal volunteering  
29  
30 and informal association, the presence of social facilities or the institutional resources  
31  
32 available. In each case, there is a shared assumption that structural factors prevent the  
33  
34 establishment of effective community controls of the kind needed to resolve communal  
35  
36 problems. A focus on the kinds of infrastructure and facilities available to residents in a  
37  
38 deprived area might therefore shed some light on the extent of volunteering. However, precisely  
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40 which kinds of infrastructure are assumed to be important, and how they are investigated,  
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42 would affect any results.  
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50 Clearly, the density and structure of local voluntary associations, and the rate of local citizen  
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52 participation in them as a particularly important indicator of social (dis)organisation. Local  
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54 associations of this kind are a concrete structural representation of the level of community  
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56 organisation in a particular area. Equally, the absence, or instability, of institutions like these,  
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58 can hinder the likelihood of the development of norms underpinning participation in  
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3 volunteering, and has been the subject of particular attention in the recent literature. Indeed,  
4  
5 the normative benefits of volunteering are stymied if there is a lack of suitable avenues for  
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7 developing civic skills of this kind. This follows Billis and Glennerster's (1998: 92) suggestion  
8  
9 that 'those facing community disadvantage suffer from an absence of the normal institutions of  
10  
11 civil society'. Particularly, these models are associated with limited participation in voluntary  
12  
13 and community associations. The social infrastructure maintained in such areas is seen as thin  
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15 and limited in scope, with the result that the organisation of social life to identify common  
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17 problems and find collective means to address them, is far less extensive than in more affluent  
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19 areas.  
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26 Of course, there might be a wide range of other institutions which fulfil this role. Local  
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28 amenities and communal spaces can be a significant social resource. Here, the literature  
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30 suggests that poor areas suffer from a lack of institutional foundations, with limited investment  
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32 in schools, open spaces, shops and transport (Small, 2004). As numerous authors have noted,  
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34 poor areas often lack the basic resources that might be taken for granted in better-off areas  
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36 (Wilson, 1987; Small and McDermott, 2006). Much like the deficiencies in the numbers of  
37  
38 voluntary organisations, this can have a negative effect on social life in a deprived area.  
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40 Institutions like these can act as important resources to local residents, putting them in touch  
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42 with information about volunteering opportunities, the performance of public officials and  
43  
44 institutions, or different views on the nature of collective problems. Sometimes these ties can  
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46 be formal, with local businesses sponsoring community events and facilities, or more informal  
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48 as in other cases, where local facilities can act as resource brokers, providing networks which  
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50 connect citizens to important sources of information elsewhere.  
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58 Importantly, this state should not be viewed as static. In the literature, these issues are described  
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3 as resulting from processes of deinstitutionalisation which occur when levels of poverty rise in  
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5 a particular area. For Wilson, these processes are inherently linked to the lower rates of  
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7 participation in deprived neighbourhoods. He suggests that 'basic institutions [...] (churches,  
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9 schools, stores, recreational facilities, etc.) would remain viable if much of the base of their  
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11 support comes from the more economically stable and secure families' (Wilson, 1987: 56). The  
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13 economic stability that is found in middle-class areas is a requirement for the maintenance of  
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15 a stable set of institutions, and their absence has a distinct set of implications for the residents  
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17 of deprived areas. For Ludwig, Duncan and Ladd (2003: 156) 'institutional and structural  
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19 features may be the most important factor in determining how people act'. Linking the effects  
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21 of poverty with a decline in local institutions, therefore, might provide important clues to why  
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23 volunteering is reported as markedly lower in such areas. This contrasts with much of the  
24  
25 existing work on volunteering. As Mohan and Bennett (2019: 15) suggest the literature holds  
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27 that the number of voluntary organisations in a locality is stable over time and that it is possible  
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29 to 'regard these distributions as an enduring feature of neighbourhoods'.  
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### 38 **Methodology**

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40 In the remainder of this article, I illustrate the ways in which social organisation theory can  
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42 complement dominant status approaches by applying its insights to empirical work on social  
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44 organisation in the Blackbird Leys area of Oxford, UK<sup>3</sup>. The intention here is to make a  
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46 contribution that is primarily theoretical, highlighting the contribution social organisation  
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48 theory can make through a focus on the ways structural effects play out in the case. The  
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50 argument I make here is that by taking such an approach, it is possible to contribute to a  
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52 theoretical landscape which better explains the mechanisms through which inequalities in  
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54 volunteering exist. Further, by moving away from some of the more abstract assumptions over  
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<sup>3</sup> Ethical approval reference: XXXX

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3 how voluntary life plays out in deprived areas, we can understand the significance of socio-  
4 economic status to volunteering in a far more contextual and nuanced way.  
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10 Blackbird Leys has been previously used a setting to explore issues relating to socio-economic  
11 status (see Morrison, 2003; Koch, 2014). Measuring around 5.9 square miles, with  
12 approximately 6,000 inhabitants, it was founded in 1953 on the site of a disused sewage works.  
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14 It is located on the periphery of Oxford, a university city in the south of England, and originally  
15 served as housing for workers in the industrial area on the eastern edge of the city, as well as a  
16 convenient place to relocate the residents of slums cleared in the middle of the twentieth  
17 century.  
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28 The area is an island of deprivation in a largely affluent city. Unemployment in the  
29 neighbourhood is consistently high: heavy manufacturing in the area declined some time ago,  
30 and more than a third of the area's adult population are out of work. The population exists, for  
31 the most part, on very low incomes, with the area one of the most deprived 10% of the country  
32 by some measures. Educational attainment in the area is low, the population's health is  
33 significantly worse than the rest of Oxford (the obesity rate in Blackbird Leys is almost double  
34 that of the rest of Oxford, and life expectancy nearly 7 years lower). Despite being the attention  
35 of a number of policy interventions, the area has proven stubbornly resistant to significant  
36 social and economic change (Morrison, 2003; Koch, 2014). In short, by most measures, the  
37 area can be characterised as suffering a significant degree of deprivation, and its residents, for  
38 the most part, demonstrate low SES.  
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56 [Insert Fig. X: Deprivation in Blackbird Leys and Oxford]  
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3 Blackbird Leys is a unique case in that it allows the social structure of a community to be  
4 investigated from its very beginning. Conventional research problems related to the origins of  
5 community structure and function can therefore be entirely avoided – we can be reasonably  
6 certain of even the earliest developments in community life, and data on the levels and type of  
7 volunteering are readily available. This also allows connections between the case and the  
8 theoretical assumptions that are prominent in the literature, as well as explorations of variations  
9 in volunteering over time.  
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21 The approach taken to the research was qualitative, with an ethnographic approach providing  
22 the foundation for the empirical work. Such an approach enables a detailed account of the lives  
23 and perspectives of people living in the case study area to be brought to the fore, which, while  
24 presenting limitations to the ability to establish wider generalisations and carry out comparison,  
25 is ideal for establishing the context and nuance necessary to interrogate social organisation, and  
26 so ask questions of existing theory (for a discussion of these issues, see Small, 2009). The  
27 research involved a range of different methods of data collection. Archival work was carried  
28 out, taking in contemporary news media, photographs, records kept by community groups, and  
29 an archive of interviews with local residents throughout the life of the estate. Official statistics  
30 enabled a detailed picture of social life on the estate to be built. In particular, Census data, and  
31 the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) produced by the Department for Communities and  
32 Local Government, allowed a detailed account of the social make-up of the estate, and  
33 comparison with the rest of Oxford, to be carried out. Beyond this, more than 60 interviews  
34 were held over a two year period with representatives from public and voluntary sector  
35 organisations, local activists and politicians as well as local residents, and observational data  
36 was collected at meetings of local community groups. Such a wide-ranging approach was  
37 important in reaching the kind of analysis that would reveal the dynamics of social organisation  
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3 in the area. Consequently it was possible to establish an account of volunteering on the estate  
4 that reached beyond the conventional approaches in the literature, to include the relationship  
5 between citizens and the structural conditions of the estate, which reaches from its founding to  
6 the present day.  
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### 14 **Applying social organisation theory**

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16 This section presents a number of features of social structure in Blackbird Leys that are relevant  
17 to the ways in which social organisation theory might complement existing theoretical  
18 approaches based on dominant status. It begins by sketching an account of the number of formal  
19 and informal voluntary organisations in the area, before providing a discussion of the number  
20 of local institutions and amenities. The section concludes by exploring the way in which social  
21 infrastructure on the estate has changed during its history.  
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#### 33 *The size and scope of voluntary organisation*

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35 The obvious place to begin an exploration of social organisation is the number of voluntary  
36 organisations and at first glance, the available data in Blackbird Leys seems to conform to the  
37 assumptions in the literature; namely that low numbers of voluntary organisations should be  
38 expected in the area. However, a closer inspection of the available data reveals some surprising  
39 features. One useful resource here is the Register of Charities. In England and Wales,  
40 organisations which meet a number of criteria regarding their voluntary status and governance  
41 are able to apply for legal charitable status, which grants them tax exemptions. These  
42 organisations are recorded by the Charities Commission, and data are available on their  
43 location, size and focus of work. Using the Register it is possible to compile a database of all  
44 registered charities in the area between 1961 and January 2015. Of course, this is an imperfect  
45 measure of the amount of voluntary activity occurring in the area: a significant number of  
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3 organisations operate without formally registering as charities, and indeed, it is a poor measure  
4 of informal voluntary activity. Equally, just because an organisation is registered, this does not  
5 mean that it is functioning, and there is nothing to indicate the level of work carried out by the  
6 charities listed on the register. However, when considered alongside other data on the sector, it  
7 can provide a useful introduction to the extent of organised voluntary activity on the estate.  
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17 In Blackbird Leys, there are records of fifteen charities registered on the estate in the period  
18 since 1961, and nine remain active today. In contrast, existing records maintained by local  
19 community organisations indicate that 213 organisations are currently registered as being based  
20 in Blackbird Leys, or having some aspect of their work contribute to associational life on the  
21 estate. This is a surprising revelation given the low numbers of registered charities. However,  
22 the actual number of voluntary organisations is likely to be even higher (these figures do not  
23 include many smaller, ad hoc community organisations, only those properly constituted and  
24 working with some degree of stability). When these less formal organisations are included, it  
25 is possible to trace a hugely active local community life, identifying citizens as creating, and  
26 contributing to, a number of locally focused civic groups.  
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42 The information above raises questions over the preferences held by the residents of the estate  
43 over the form of organisation in which they choose to volunteer. In fact, although many of the  
44 larger voluntary organisations at work on the estate make a significant contribution to both  
45 civic life and service provision, it is the smaller, less formal groups which provide the greatest  
46 opportunities for participation. There are many reasons for this: organisations such as these  
47 tend to be rooted in the needs and interests of Blackbird Leys residents, in contrast to larger  
48 groups whose priorities tend to be aligned, in part at least, to external funders. They are also  
49 able to provide opportunities for citizen involvement which reach beyond those available to  
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3 voluntary organisations whose governance structures are more formal and specialised.  
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5 Understanding the precise forms of voluntary associations which exist on the estate requires  
6  
7 careful consideration of their varying fortunes throughout the history of Blackbird Leys. As we  
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9 shall see, in many ways, abstract counts of the number voluntary organisations present are in  
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11 many ways the least helpful means of understanding volunteering in the estate.  
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### 17 *Local institutions and amenities*

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19 Of perhaps more use in understanding the social organisation of the area is the extent of local  
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21 institutions and amenities, and indeed, the history of voluntary participation in Blackbird Leys  
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23 takes place in the context of frequent battles to secure improvements to the social and  
24  
25 organisational resources available on the estate. Organisational resources can be 'any  
26  
27 establishment that has a physical location and offers services or sells goods basic to day-to-day  
28  
29 living' (Small and McDermott, 2006: 1698). This might include the premises of voluntary  
30  
31 organisations and public amenities such as parks and community centres, as well as local  
32  
33 businesses and leisure facilities. According to social organisation theory, lower levels of  
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35 volunteering in deprived neighbourhoods can in part be explained by the relative scarcity of  
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37 resources like these.  
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45 Voluntary participation in the area has often been part of a struggle to secure the kinds of  
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47 facilities that other areas might take for granted. The provision of basic services, the struggle  
48  
49 for appropriate leisure facilities for young people, even the location of pubs and shops in the  
50  
51 estate, have all been the focus of activism, particularly in the first few years of Blackbird Leys'  
52  
53 existence. This has been a long, and at times, acrimonious battle. Speaking in 1987, activist  
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55 Audrey believed that 'there are a fair amount of facilities but not enough. Right from the  
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57 beginning it [Blackbird Leys] never had enough facilities. I think the estate has fought back on  
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3 this. The estate has come together and [...] it's fought to get facilities'. Each of the victories  
4  
5 (and defeats) over the social infrastructure of the estate have contributed to the sense, on the  
6  
7 part of residents on the estate, that they enjoy lower quality community resources than other  
8  
9 areas of the city. These complaints are long-standing. One resident, interviewed in 1970, did  
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11 not 'think they've [local government] provided enough entertainment or facilities', particularly  
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13 for teenagers.  
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19 Blackbird Leys has long been considered to be worse off than other areas of the city in terms  
20  
21 of the resources available to its residents. As early as 25th January 1966, questions were asked  
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23 in Parliament over the provision of public telephones, highlighting the death of a teenage girl  
24  
25 due to the inability to contact a local doctor (it is worth noting that the response blamed local  
26  
27 residents, suggesting that 'in the aggregate these kiosks have suffered damage on nearly 100  
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29 occasions in the past 12 months') (HC Deb 25 January 1966 vol 723 c54W).  
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35 Some of the facilities maintained on the estate have an obvious social purpose. The Blackbird  
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37 Leys Community Centre is perhaps the most obvious resource of this kind of the estate. During  
38  
39 an interview, one resident recalled the various uses of the centre over the years. 'Years and years  
40  
41 ago that used to be the place where my Grandparents used to go to dance. And then over the  
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43 years the dances fizzled out and then we used to go to the youth club upstairs. And then it was  
44  
45 a bingo hall. So that was the place where everyone used to do a bit of socialising'. The Centre  
46  
47 also has a wide range of other uses, hosting voluntary groups of all kinds, and working as an  
48  
49 important venue for the provision of services. Other resources are of less obvious value as  
50  
51 venues of participation, but are nonetheless felt be residents to be hugely important to social  
52  
53 life on the estate. Wendy, an eighteen year resident, who is active on the Residents' Committee  
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55 of one of the estate 's tower blocks, highlights both the residents' community spirit and the  
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3 facilities (in particular, the leisure facilities) available as part of the benefits of living on the  
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5 estate.  
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10 One institution which played a significant part in the social organisation of the estate from its  
11  
12 early years is the church. Blackbird Leys is served by two churches, the Church of the Holy  
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14 Family, which is an ecumenical institution serving Baptist, Methodist, Anglican and United  
15  
16 Reform Church worshippers, and Sacred Heart, which serves the Roman Catholic community.  
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18 Both institutions are over fifty years old. One local minister remembers a conscious decision  
19  
20 to create a 'highly political' church in Blackbird Leys which was to follow a particular purpose  
21  
22 'to do with creating unity and developing community'. This was aimed at local issues, rather  
23  
24 than national policy, with members of the church providing physical and social resources to  
25  
26 local people by 'getting involved in the community. And that means opening our building to  
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28 people involved in the community. It also means picking up on local issues [...] and that takes  
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30 us into the political arena'.  
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38 When the first residents moved to the area, they were faced with the prospect of worshipping  
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40 in neighbouring estates, although by the early-1960s Sunday Mass was celebrated first in the  
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42 estate's healthcare centre, and then in the community centre, where a temporary altar was  
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44 erected and dismantled each week. From 1966, services for all denominations were held in  
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46 facilities owned by the Anglican church, a large wooden building known locally as 'the hut'  
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48 (one activist involved in the move remembers selecting the design from a catalogue). The  
49  
50 creation of this structure was a community effort. Local residents carried out plumbing, wiring,  
51  
52 painting and numerous other tasks at no cost, in order to establish the facility. Some much-  
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54 needed assets (such as chairs and supplies of paint) were sourced through local residents'  
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56 connections with their employers.  
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6 In 1969, a new hall was built, intended to be used alongside a new church which, due to  
7 financial constraints, was never constructed, leaving the hall with dual use. A large room on  
8 the ground floor provided space for worship, and the smaller upstairs spaces were used for  
9 social functions and meetings. The space is also available for rent to community groups, and is  
10 regularly used by (amongst others) a karate club and a crèche. The 'hut' was demolished around  
11 the same time, with local youths helping (as one resident remembers, 'somewhat aggressively')  
12 with the demolition. Cora, a local resident, is a regular churchgoer and believes it to be an  
13 important community facility. For her, it is 'central to a strong spirit of togetherness and caring'  
14 in the community. She believes that this has contributed to a close-knit community, where 'the  
15 feeling of caring and personal knowledge is much better than the public perception'. Indeed,  
16 the evidence suggests that the organisation of religious life on the estate has provided a stable  
17 form of social infrastructure which has reached into a wide range of areas of community life  
18 on the estate. The use of church facilities by voluntary groups, and its role as an organisational  
19 resource, provides a means of social organisation which has remained consistently important  
20 throughout the history of the estate. The following sections illustrate the ways in which social  
21 structure changes over time, highlighting the effects this has on volunteering. These contrast  
22 two eras with quite different forms of social organisation, the early years of life in Blackbird  
23 Leys, and a period of economic decline during the 1980s.

### 49 *Changes in social structure*

51 Archival evidence reveals that, almost from its inception, Blackbird Leys was populated by  
52 volunteers. One of the first developments in associational life on the estate, before many of the  
53 area's shops and facilities had opened, was the creation of the Blackbird Leys Community  
54 Association – an organisation whose purpose is to represent the interests of residents living in  
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3 the area and to coordinate activism across Blackbird Leys. This was formed in 1960, shortly  
4 after the founding of the estate, and continues to this day. John, a community activist and  
5 lifelong resident of the estate, moved to Blackbird Leys that year, and joined the nascent  
6 association in order to build a community out of the disparate groups of families living in the  
7 area. Something of a fixture in local voluntary action, he immediately became active in  
8 promoting voluntary participation amongst Blackbird Leys residents. Interviewed in 1987, he  
9 believed that the community on the estate needed effort and sustained participation to become  
10 fully established, suggesting that 'community feeling only develops over the years' but noting  
11 the swift establishment of associational life in the area, and the commitment of the people living  
12 in the area during those early years. Other residents interviewed around the same period also  
13 pointed out the numerous voluntary groups on the estate, and the importance of both the  
14 community centre, and church facilities, in providing a physical location for social life in the  
15 area. Molly, interviewed in 2001, revealed a strong commitment to the network of voluntary  
16 organisations which operated on the estate, a feeling so strong she believed that, should she  
17 ever win, she would donate her lottery winnings to local voluntary organisations.  
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40 This sentiment is common amongst the residents of Blackbird Leys, and there is plenty of  
41 evidence that the first decades of the existence of the estate brought with them a number of  
42 residents deeply committed to developing community life. One notable development during  
43 this early period was the establishment of the Blackbird Leys Festival, which first started in  
44 1964 as a mammoth nine day event. The programme included a wide range of community  
45 centred events including gokarting, beauty contests, weightlifting and a children's art  
46 competition. The culmination of the festival was a day-long fête and barbecue which always  
47 drew large crowds. Photographs of the festival during its early years show a family-centred  
48 event, with local children taking part in a range of activities, including a football competition  
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3 which took place over the course of an entire day. The festival was also organisationally-  
4 focused and served as a chance for all of the local community groups to come together and  
5 celebrate their work – including a parade featuring decorated floats representing the many  
6 organisations active on the estate. After a period of popularity, the fortunes of the festival have  
7 waxed and waned over the years. A concerted effort was made at a revival in 1975 and after a  
8 few years of uncertainty today the festival remains a major community event, although it does  
9 not draw crowds quite so large as in its 1970s heyday.  
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### 21 *From activism to disorganisation*

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23 However, the positive sentiments held by the early residents of the estate towards the kinds of  
24 voluntary association sustained on in Blackbird Leys do not sit neatly with conflicting  
25 statements made by other residents in more recent times. One resident felt that the pressures of  
26 combining family and a stressful working life meant that opportunities to engage in voluntary  
27 action were limited, suggesting that 'you can't take on anything which involves any kind of  
28 regularity of participation. You can't, as I tried to, get involved in running a photographic class,  
29 for instance, because two weeks out of four you can't attend'. Similarly, Peter, now retired, feels  
30 that 'even if you do want to become involved it just seems like the commitment is too much,  
31 and the kinds of group that we have aren't the same as years ago'. This latter idea, that the  
32 opportunities available for voluntary participation have declined over recent years, raises  
33 interesting questions over what has happened to the structure, and function, of the voluntary  
34 sector on the estate.  
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54 If there has been a decline in associational life on the estate, then this did not occur until  
55 relatively recently. Social life on the estate has been affected by economic decline, and the  
56 period running from the mid-1980s to the turn of the century was, if the testimony of residents  
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3 living in the estate is accurate, a difficult time for voluntary associations. Molly, who moved to  
4 Blackbird Leys in 1960, highlights the shift in community make-up as one reason why  
5 volunteering became harder to sustain. She notes that at its inception, the population of  
6 Blackbird Leys was relatively homogeneous; residents were almost all young families.  
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8 However, over time, the character of the estate changed, with a greater mix of residents,  
9 including more pensioners and a great number of factory workers.  
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19 At the same time, employment in local industry which supplied jobs to many residents dried  
20 up, and the levels of poverty increased on the estate. Young people who would have previously  
21 found employment found that there were few jobs available. Even for those in employment,  
22 the nature of work in heavy industry caused problems for those residents who wished to spend  
23 their leisure time taking part in community life. One resident felt that the increasingly  
24 unpredictable nature of work had made his life much harder to manage. 'This applies to  
25 anything, even the local darts team'. Previously, these kinds of difficulty had been addressed  
26 on the estate through the actions of local community groups. For instance, during a period of  
27 economic difficulty in the 1960s, a drama group had been organised, which harnessed the  
28 expertise of an academic from Oxford University to help develop a performance which  
29 reflected the menial, insecure nature of work in local industry. In contrast, by the time of the  
30 economic downturn of the 1980s, few such initiatives were reported.  
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49 The contrast between the kinds of association which developed during the first few years of  
50 the estate and those which followed is indicative of these wider changes. The associations  
51 which developed early in the life of Blackbird Leys were organisations whose purpose was to  
52 promote community participation in order to secure local facilities, represent the views of  
53 residents, and mobilise the community to action. Conversely, by the 1980s voluntary  
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3 associations on the estate seemed to be the preserve of a few committed activists, rather than a  
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5 widespread activity. This is perhaps best illustrated by a shift in the coordination of community  
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7 action during the 1980s. Long term members of the Community Association resigned, and  
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9 instead organised a semi-formal 'think tank' comprised of local government officers, social  
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11 workers, healthcare professionals and local activists. The group met at lunchtimes in the  
12  
13 Blackbird Leys Community Centre, and was focused on sharing information, ideas and  
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15 problems between professionals working in the community, to the exclusion of the local  
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17 community who, in any event, seemed reluctant to participate in the coordination of voluntary  
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19 action and community decision-making.  
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### 26 **Discussion: Social organisation as an extension to existing theory**

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28 The brief account above is not intended to provide a detailed empirical account of the history  
29  
30 of social structure in Blackbird Leys. Rather, it is aimed at highlighting a number of features  
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32 of social organisation theory that might benefit existing theoretical explanations of the  
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34 relationship between socio-economic status and volunteering. There is much here that indicates  
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36 such an approach can complement DST. In particular, a focus on the nature of social life in  
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38 individual communities, coupled with an appreciation of the relationship between social  
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40 infrastructure and voluntary participation, can go some way towards providing answers to the  
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42 somewhat perplexing analytical problems faced by researchers working in this area. For sure,  
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44 the depth of the available data demonstrated here is, to be sure, rare. But nonetheless, the  
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46 potential of this kind of insight to contribute to existing literature is considerable: social  
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48 organisation theory deserves a place alongside the existing theoretical tools deployed by  
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50 researchers in the field, and dominant status theory in particular. The account here suggests the  
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52 following contributions:  
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### *Context matters*

DST suggests that social status is contextual, and that changes in environment can have an important effect on determining the ways in which individual characteristics and resources can be related to the likelihood of volunteering. As we have seen here, by considering the ways in which the configurations of social infrastructure in localities affect the experiences of volunteers residing in them, social organisation theory can provide a powerful theoretical tool that complements existing approaches. Through a detailed and focused analysis of the dynamics of community life in specific localities it is possible to provide a far greater level of detail and nuance to accounts of the way in which volunteering is related to socio-economic status than would otherwise be the case, and so contribute to a deeper understanding of the context in which dominant status explanations play out. That the conditions of social life in Blackbird Leys are not generalisable – that they are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere – is precisely the point. There are distinctive sets of structural conditions at work in every area, and these are responsible for variations in volunteering that defy simple categorisations.

### *Dominant status and the formality of volunteering*

The low numbers of formal organisations (such as registered charities) reported in Blackbird Leys is not surprising, given the thrust of the existing literature in this area. However, it is clear that the estate maintains a rich body of less formal, locally-focused groups and that these form the primary focus of volunteering on the estate, a point echoed in other studies of social organisation in deprived communities. While some of the existing literature indicates that the form and focus of volunteering varies across different social groups, it is important to highlight the point that a vibrant, and at times extensive, tradition of voluntary action might be masked through approaches to measurement which are disconnected from the lived experiences of volunteers. This raises a number of very interesting theoretical questions. Is dominant status

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3 more likely to affect participation in formal volunteering? Is there something unique about the  
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5 organisation of areas like Blackbird Leys that explains the propensity for this kind of voluntary  
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7 action? Further work is required to explore the implications of the kinds of volunteering  
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9 preferred here and the ways in which the likelihood of participation in different forms of  
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11 voluntary action is conceptualised.  
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### 17 *Community facilities*

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19 In the account of social organisation in Blackbird Leys, it is not simply the presence of  
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21 voluntary organisations which have a part to play in promoting volunteering. Community  
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23 facilities are also important, not only insofar as they provide spaces for voluntary organisations  
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25 to meet but, according to the residents themselves, in acting as important social infrastructure  
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27 which helps the development of norms of participation, and an orientation towards the  
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29 identification and resolution of collective problems. The residents of Blackbird Leys have  
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31 fought since the estate's founding to secure better facilities, and have even built these  
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33 themselves, not simply as an instrumental means of improving public space but because this is  
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35 an essential part of the fabric of the area. Considering the availability of facilities like these as  
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37 an important contextual factor related to dominant social status (that is to say, an element of  
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39 dominant social status might be access to such facilities) will enhance the ways in which  
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41 existing theory understands the variations in social life in different areas, a point rarely  
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43 addressed in existing theory.  
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### 51 *Social organisation is not static*

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53 One of the major contributions of dominant status theory is its ability to account for changes  
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55 in the kinds of descriptive feature that contribute to an individual's social position. As is clear  
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57 from the account above, the dynamics of participation in Blackbird Leys have varied  
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3 considerably since the estate's founding. The periods included above provides a stark  
4 illustration of the ways in which different factors such as residential instability, economic  
5 change and public policy, have a significant effect on the underlying structural conditions at  
6 play, an issue of increasing significance given the effects of a recent national policy focus on  
7 economic austerity, and the inequalities resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (Harrison,  
8 2021). That these factors had such a profound effect on volunteering on the estate between its  
9 early years and the 1980s is significant both to the ways in which existing theory understands  
10 the variety of pressures on volunteering and also to the underlying assumptions in the literature.  
11 Put simply, not all deprived areas are the same, nor do they remain immune to change.  
12 Dominant status theory acknowledges this, and including social organisation within its scope  
13 will enable it to better acknowledge this point.  
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### 31 **Conclusion**

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33 Theories of volunteering have long been concerned with explaining inequalities in  
34 participation. The development of dominant status theory has allowed a clear and nuanced  
35 account of the ways in which these inequalities come to be. However, as Hustinx, Cnaan and  
36 Handy (2010) point out, research on volunteering has been carried out from a wide range of  
37 starting points. A variety of different theoretical perspectives is demonstrably valuable: we  
38 should not be afraid to look for new avenues of research that can contribute to answering  
39 perennial problems.  
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51 As we have seen here the literature on social organisation has developed a detailed set of  
52 theoretical tools for the analysis of the social dynamics of deprived areas which is pertinent to  
53 existing theory, and dominant status in particular. By recognising the importance of context,  
54 and connecting the ways in which dominant status plays out with local structural conditions,  
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3 social organisation theory provides a potentially useful corrective to the existing work,  
4 recognising that individuals attributes are embedded in communities and structures which  
5 might facilitate or inhibit their use.  
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12 Conversely, theories which do not recognise this are insufficient to explain lower levels of  
13 volunteering in deprived areas. Similarly, explanations which fail to take into account the ways  
14 in which differences in social infrastructure actually affect volunteering in different localities  
15 fall short of a complete explanation of the relationship between the lived experiences of  
16 volunteers and their socio-economic status. By proposing a focus on the idea that the social  
17 infrastructure maintained in areas has a part to play in determining, not only the opportunities  
18 for volunteering but the orientation of residents towards voluntary action, I hope this piece acts  
19 as a primer to further work aimed at addressing one of the major questions left unanswered by  
20 the existing literature on volunteering.  
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