Inequality in Volunteering: Building a New Research Front

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Abstract Volunteering research focuses predominantly on predicting participation in volunteering, proceeding from the quasi-hegemonic foundation of resource theory and dominant-status theory. Empirical research in this tradition has provided extremely robust evidence that dominant groups in society are more likely to volunteer. At the same time, it has reinforced the status quo in the production of knowledge on volunteering, thereby neglecting the clear problematic of “inequality in volunteering.” Compared to the guiding question of “participation,” the concept of “inequality” can generate a more variegated, critical, and change-oriented research agenda. With this special issue, we aim to build a “new research front” in the field of volunteering. In this introduction, we advance a novel research agenda structured around a multidimensional understanding of inequality, concomitantly delineating four central research programs focusing on (a) resources, (b) interactions, (c) governmentalities, and (d) epistemologies. We discuss the focus of these lines of research in greater detail with respect to inequality in volunteering, their main critique of dominant research on participation in volunteering, and key elements of the new research agenda.

Keywords Volunteering · Social theory · Inequality in volunteering · Resource inequality · Interaction-based

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Introduction

In a recent examination of knowledge production within the field of nonprofit and philanthropic studies over the past century, Ma and Konrath (2018) identify the study of volunteering as a “unique core” within the field. The central cluster of “theories of volunteering” focuses predominantly on “the preconditions, motivations, and consequences of volunteering” (Ma & Konrath, 2018, p. 1148). Their systematic mapping confirms the predominant reliance of theoretical work on volunteering based on an input/output-model predicting participation in volunteering and various desirable, positive outcomes of volunteering (see also Wilson, 2000, 2012). The predominant focus on participation in volunteering has nevertheless caused scholars to neglect a question that we claim should be central for volunteering scholars: inequality in volunteering. In this introduction, and throughout this issue, we demonstrate the importance of this question and highlight the relevance of the rich social-scientific literature on inequality to the field of volunteering research. With this new thematic focus and robust theoretical basis, we aim to lay the foundation for a new “research front” in the scholarly community of volunteering and third sector research (Ma & Konrath, 2018).

The dominant explanatory theories focusing on participation in volunteering are dominant-status theory (Smith, 1994) and resource theory (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Taken together, these theories posit that dominant groups within a society are most likely to volunteer, for two reasons. First, they possess the economic, social, and cultural

resources needed to engage in volunteering. Second, these resources are associated with dominant status positions, which render high-status volunteers more desirable to volunteer organizations. Empirical research in this tradition has provided extremely robust evidence across countries and time periods, thus partly explaining the quasi-hegemonic status of these theories. We nevertheless argue that the pre-occupation with “predicting participation in volunteering” and, more specifically, with identifying individual determinants of volunteering in order to build a “social profile” of “the volunteer” (Musick & Wilson, 2008) has maintained the status quo in the production of knowledge on volunteering. Despite the explanatory power of the resource-theory model, research in this tradition continuously reconfirms the relationship between individual resources and volunteering as an empirical regularity (Son & Wilson, 2012). Only very recent work has begun to advance a more refined analysis of the mechanisms, factors, and rationalizations underlying the decision to volunteer (Qvist, 2018; Son & Wilson, 2012, 2015).

More fundamentally, three tacit, yet core features of this dominant body of research are contributing to the relative stagnation in research on volunteering. *First*, the dominant theories contain an implicit normative thrust: volunteering is by definition a desirable, positive activity, due to the multiple benefits that it generates for volunteers, beneficiaries, and society at large. The high societal relevance of volunteering is a key driver of studies aimed at the accurate, scientific prediction of who will volunteer and why. Recent findings demonstrate that volunteering and volunteer-involving organizations are reproductive forces of social inequality, largely in service of dominant groups within society. Nevertheless, few scholars have ventured to question these normative assumptions (Eliasoph, 2011; Hustinx et al., 2010; Shachar et al., 2019). It has further been argued that resource theory fails to capture the specific reality of vulnerable groups, and that it excessive emphasizes what low-income volunteers “lack,” thus applying a “deficit model” concerning individuals and groups who do not engage in volunteering (Benenson & Stagg, 2016). Moreover, dominant-status and resource theories implicitly prioritize formal volunteering in organizations, thereby undervaluing informal or direct volunteering (Benenson, 2017; Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Lough, 2021).

Second, the resource model focuses primarily on access to volunteering (yes/no), thereby neglecting significant processes, mechanisms, and dynamics occurring within the “black box of volunteering” (Shachar et al., 2019), as with those resulting from the complex interplay of multilevel organizational factors (Studer & Schnurbein, 2013; Wicker & Hallman, 2013). Current research has indeed reified volunteering, treating it as a stable, homogeneous activity

for which resources function in a standard way in terms of both access and experience (Hustinx et al., 2010). The dominant theories of volunteering thus neglect the variety of volunteering dynamics that may characterize specific sectors and forms of volunteering (as indicated by Meyer & Rameder, 2021—this issue; Overgaard et al., 2018; Skirstad & Handstad, 2013). They also provide little insight into either *inter-organizational* hierarchies or *intra-organizational* status differences and power dynamics between volunteers, professionals, and beneficiaries (e.g., Grubb & Henriksen, 2019; Hustinx & De Waele, 2015; Krinsky & Simonet, 2017; Overbeeke et al., 2021—this issue; Ostrower, 2002; Rogers, 2015). Third, these approaches adopt a stance of methodological individualism, grounding the decision to volunteer on a rational-choice framework, constructing individuals as rational, utilitarian actors who decide to volunteer based on the expectation of some benefit (Handy et al., 2000; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Qvist, 2018). As revealed by a quick glance over research conducted in recent decades, the preferred unit of analysis tends to be individual volunteers, and most studies are based on responses accumulated from individual volunteers, as collected through surveys or interview studies. This methodological focus implicitly relies on a liberal positioning of the individual as the main carrier of civic participation (Honohan, 2017), as well as on a more recent neoliberal “responsibilization” of the individual (Schinkel & van Houdt, 2010). This implicit grounding has led to policy efforts that focus on individual citizens as the intended carriers of volunteer effort and societal needs.

To overcome these three blind spots in dominant volunteering research, this issue aims to crystallize a distinct, systematic research agenda around which scholars of volunteering can join forces. It aims to demonstrate that, compared to the notion of “resources,” the concept of “inequality” can generate a more variegated, critical research agenda: first, by introducing a more complex body of theoretical work that goes beyond the current “covering-laws approach” (Hustinx et al., 2010); second, by considering mechanisms and dynamics of inequality across a more comprehensive “volunteer process model” in terms of antecedents, processes, and consequences (Wilson, 2012); and third, by conceiving of volunteering as a heterogeneous phenomenon in terms of activities, relationships, and positions. In addition to examining inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms at the gate to volunteer organizations, the study of inequality in volunteering expands the focus of research to include generative processes of social inequalities in organizational practice, as well as among various types of volunteering (e.g., regular/episodic, voluntary/mandated), sectors (e.g., sports, politics, social services, religion, culture) and actors (volunteers, staff members, beneficiaries), thereby addressing

potential negative outcomes of volunteer participation. The new research agenda is firmly anchored within a long-standing and constantly developing scholarly terrain of inequality research, which examines how heterogeneities between individuals are transformed into social inequalities (Diewald & Faist, 2011; Lamont & Pierson, 2019; Lamont et al., 2014; Therborn, 2006). We highlight the importance of sociological perspectives that consider interactionist dynamics, cultural processes, discursive governmentalities, and epistemological hierarchies. These approaches advance a shift from the individual as the main unit of analysis to the intersubjective, collective, discursive, and epistemic levels.

To structure the research agenda concerning inequality in volunteering, we outline an analytical roadmap for future research (see Table 1). The framework is structured around a multidimensional understanding of inequality, concomitantly delineating four central research programs focusing on (a) resources, (b) interactions, (c) governmentalities, and (d) epistemologies. In the remainder of this introduction, we discuss these different lines of research in more detail, explaining their focus with respect to the problematic of inequality in volunteering, their main critique of dominant theories and research on participation in volunteering, and key elements of the new research agenda.

The Resource-Based Approach to Studying Inequalities in Volunteering

Resource-based approaches to inequality focus on processes or mechanisms that result in the unequal distribution of both material and non-material (or symbolic) resources (Lamont et al., 2014). Following Goldthorpe (2012), we argue the need to emphasize inequality in a relational sense, rather than in a purely attributional sense. While attributional approaches treat inequality mainly in terms of “attributes of individuals, of which they have more or less” (Goldthorpe, 2012, p. 204) (e.g., income, wealth, and educational attainment), relational approaches consider “social relationships within which individuals are more or less advantaged or disadvantaged” (p. 204). Individual attributes are linked to various social positions according to which individuals and groups are unequally valued and treated. They are thus linked to status hierarchies that “are formed and maintained in social relationships of superiority, equality and inferiority that reflect prevailing evaluations of social honor or worth” (p. 205). In this case, therefore, inequality “entails symbolic domination and is determined by access to non-material resources such as cultural and social capital” (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 6). Social processes that produce and maintain these forms of inequality include domination, exploitation, opportunity hoarding, social closure, distinction, and symbolic

violence, with key agents acting as the dominant parties (Diewald & Faist, 2011; Lamont et al., 2014). A further aim of this strand of research is the explanation of inequality (Lamont et al., 2014).

The dominant focus on predicting participation in volunteering according to resource theory and dominant-status theory fits neatly within this more general resource-based approach to the study of inequality. Resource theory postulates that volunteering is a productive activity that requires certain resources, of which individuals in higher social positions have accumulated more and which volunteer-involving organizations actively seek (Wilson & Musick, 1997). As already indicated, this theory is corroborated by a robust body of empirical evidence. More specifically, economic, social, and cultural resources strongly determine “who volunteers”—especially in terms of “antecedents” or “access” to volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2012). In contrast, dominant-status theory (Smith, 1994) examines the relational status order/hierarchy that differentiates “resource-rich” from “resource-poor” individuals. It also provides an appropriate lens for investigating exclusionary mechanisms of exclusion at the gate to volunteering. High-status individuals are highly attractive to voluntary organizations in terms of symbolic capital, given their potential to enhance organizational prestige.

Both resource theory and dominant-status theory provide angles for explaining the division of tasks and positions in voluntary organizations. From the perspective of resource theory, different volunteer positions involve different levels of competence and resources. In contrast, dominant-status theory focuses on symbolic power struggles inside volunteer organizations, with high-status and more powerful individuals occupying the most prestigious positions. The most obvious (and most studied) example is segregation in volunteering based on gender/sex. For example, results from a study of volunteering for sporting events indicate that “men dominated the sport group, and women the support groups [...] which shows a very stereotyped gender situation” (Skirstad & Hanstad, 2013, p. 323; see also Rotolo & Wilson, 2007). Volunteering in board positions is particularly likely to be associated with conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1959[1899]), conferring mutual benefits for both the organization and the volunteer: “For those institutions symbolic of cultural capital—such as universities, museums, orchestras, large foundations and nonprofits—status enhancing prestige is a highly sought after by-product of volunteering. Unlike donations, which anyone can make, board seats are extremely limited, thereby creating an aura of selectivity” (Handy & Mook, 2011, p. 414).

The resource model is also mirrored in prevailing volunteer-management approaches that regard volunteers as a

Table 1 Inequality in volunteering: toward a new research agenda

Approaches—Key focus	Participation in volunteering—Main critique on dominant research	Inequality in volunteering—Key elements of a new research agenda
<p>Resources</p> <p>Unequal distribution and accumulation of material, cultural, social, and symbolic resources</p> <p>Impact on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to volunteering • Allocation of volunteer tasks/functions • Resource accumulation through volunteering 	<p>Volunteering treated as a homogeneous and stable entity</p> <p>Predominant focus on antecedents/access to volunteering</p> <p>Methodological individualism: individual volunteer as preferred unit of analysis</p> <p>Exclusionary nature of resource-based, instrumental volunteer management</p> <p>Normative bias:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-sided focus on benefits of volunteering • Deficit model toward disadvantaged groups (“lacking resources”) 	<p>Differentiated understanding of types of volunteering and volunteering fields and organizations</p> <p>Focus on how resource inequalities unfold along a volunteer-process model: antecedents (unequal access), experiences (job segregation, status hierarchies), and consequences (negative externalities)</p> <p>Clarification of causality: whether volunteering reproduces, reinforces, or mitigates the negative effects of inequalities</p> <p>Move beyond volunteer-centered focus to a more systematic study of organizational/ institutional factors influencing resource mobilization and accumulation in/through volunteer settings</p> <p>Further develop value-based volunteer-management approaches and practices aimed at inclusion, social justice, and sustainability in deploying volunteers as an organizational resource</p>
<p>Interactions</p> <p>Intersubjective and interactional production of inequality</p> <p>Intra-organizational everyday practices and sense-making</p> <p>Dialectics between symbolic valuations and boundary-drawing at the micro-interaction level and macro-level processes</p>	<p>Deterministic/static understanding of inequality in volunteering</p> <p>Inequality as outcome of fixed socioeconomic resource differences and intentional practices by dominant actors</p> <p>Research entity: the individual (volunteer)/ individual attributes</p> <p>Lack of contextual factors</p>	<p>A dynamic, process view on inequality</p> <p>Inequality as the outcome of socioeconomic differences or local valuation schemes manifest through interpersonal interaction and affecting the positioning of interactants in nonlinear ways</p> <p>Research entity: interpersonal and group-based interaction and sense-making</p> <p>Appreciation of the setting and socio-material context enabling or impeding the reproduction of inequality in interaction</p>
<p>Governmentalities</p> <p>“Volunteering” as a relational and changing field</p> <p>Volunteering shaped through alignments of institutional actors (nonprofit, governmental and corporate)</p> <p>Dominant actors in the field shape its meanings/boundaries and govern activity within it</p> <p>Social hierarchies are often produced/ reproduced through shaping and governing the field</p>	<p>Focus on processes within the field of volunteering; neglecting how, why, and by whom the boundaries of the field are shaped</p> <p>Predominant focus on third-sector organizations</p>	<p>Attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differential positions of organizational and individual actors within the field of “volunteering” • Differential ability of actors to shape the field boundaries and influence strategies for promoting and managing volunteering • Social characteristics of the actors within the field <p>Following how field-shaping and discursive techniques affect volunteering practices</p> <p>Analysis of how privileged groups reproduce their status by shaping the meaning of volunteering, while underprivileged groups are governed through volunteering</p>

Table 1 continued

Approaches—Key focus	Participation in volunteering—Main critique on dominant research	Inequality in volunteering—Key elements of a new research agenda
Epistemologies Epistemic inequality: knowledge hierarchies in scholarship on volunteering Normative research agenda, aimed at inclusion and social justice in theory and research on volunteering	Power/knowledge rooted in Western modernity: acclaimed universalistic Western-based knowledge production on volunteering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileged understanding of volunteering as an individual, formal, productive, and unpaid activity dominant in the Global North • Marginalization of alternative understandings and experiences of volunteering in the Global South • Unequal attribution of agency, civicness and altruism to volunteers from the Global North and Global South Methodological nationalism	Reposition theorization of volunteering from a global perspective (“provincialize” Western knowledge production on volunteering) Disrupt geopolitical hierarchies in definitions of volunteering Use constructivist and performative ontologies of volunteering to recognize that the “reality” of volunteering is an outcome of, and not an antecedent to scholarly practice “Situated standpoints”: recognize the influence of the positionality of volunteering scholars on their research Adopt a normative stance favoring suppressed voices and alternative values of volunteering Inclusive theorizing (e.g., asset-based approach, livelihoods framework, post-humanist theorizing) Methodological innovation: “Flattened topographies” and assemblage thinking

part of the nonprofit workforce. As an unpaid labor resource, volunteers should be managed instrumentally and efficiently, according to standard procedures borrowed from HRM in paid-work contexts (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). From this perspective, volunteer-recruitment practices target individuals with high “participation potential” in terms of resources and status (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p. 290), with subsequent support and retention efforts focusing on the highly selective group of individuals admitted to the organization in the first place. From an instrumental point of view, however, successful management calls for the effective placement and retention of the most suitable volunteers. Volunteer coordinators tend to be socialized within this instrumental paradigm, with little awareness of how such processes of selecting and matching volunteers can systematically exclude potential volunteers with antecedents that tend to predict non-volunteering. (Overbeeke et al., 2021 in this issue).

Although the resource-based study of inequality in volunteering is a quintessential part of the research agenda outlined here, and despite the current availability of powerful explanatory models, further refinement and complexity is needed. As stated above, and as the basic argument underlying this special issue, research in this tradition has stagnated, continuously reconfirming the relationship between resources and volunteering as an empirical regularity (Son & Wilson, 2012). We propose three key analytical tools for the further advancement of a resource-based research program. *First*, a differentiated understanding of volunteering fields and organizations and

especially distinct, context-specific types of volunteering is needed, in terms of both theory and research. The mobilization of resources and dominant statuses does not function in the same way in every type or field of volunteering. For example, this was demonstrated by Overgaard et al. (2018) within the context of care volunteering, which entails lower-status care jobs, such that people with resources are likely to opt out of participation. Within the increasingly popular context of online volunteering, Ackermann and Manatschal (2018) conclude that, while combinations of online and offline volunteering tend to reinforce existing patterns of inequality, “pure” online volunteering mobilizes new social groups.

Second, resource-based approaches to inequality in volunteering should address the complete “volunteer process.” More specifically, it is important to transcend the prevailing focus on “antecedents” to untangle resource-based inequality in both the “experience” and the “consequences” of volunteering. One challenge relating to the experience (or practice) of volunteering is to develop additional insight into differences in structural positions (i.e., “stratification” or “job segregation”) that volunteers occupy within organizations (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Such research endeavors are hindered by a general lack of survey data on volunteer task allocation, which would allow a more detailed analysis of participatory inequality in volunteering beyond the general prediction of whether individuals will or will not volunteer. According to the limited available research, however, privileged citizens also occupy the most important positions within

associations (Meyer & Rameder, 2021—this issue; Qvist, 2018), while volunteers from disadvantaged groups confront exclusionary organizational mechanisms that aggravate their already precarious positions (Hustinx & De Waele, 2015; Krinsky & Simonet, 2017). Factors specific to sectors or fields are also at play (Meyer & Rameder, 2021—this issue).

Critical volunteer-management studies could further deepen our understanding of intra-organizational and broader field dynamics. As noted above, volunteer coordinators should be regarded as dominant parties in the production (and reproduction) of material and symbolic inequalities within volunteer-involving organizations. These actors function as organizational gatekeepers through their recruitment and placement practices, which inevitably reflect inclusionary and exclusionary practices, given their excessive focus on individuals with “positive volunteering antecedents” (Overbeeke et al., 2021—this issue; see also Bonnesen, 2019). Among volunteer-management scholars, critical awareness is growing about such disadvantages of a purely instrumental, HRM-based approach to volunteer management, and they are beginning to emphasize attitudinal aspects of volunteer coordination instead (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). The conceptualization of volunteering as a distinct value-based activity is generating more differentiated, process-oriented, and social constructivist views on volunteer management, based on a completely different set of organizational principles: inclusion, social justice, empowerment, emotional well-being, sustainability, and stewardship (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Brudney & Meijs, 2009; Brudney et al., 2019; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Overbeeke et al., 2021—this issue; Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013).

Regarding the “consequences” of volunteering, existing studies focus largely on documenting positive outcomes (i.e., “benefits”) of volunteering (cf. the normative thrust of this research tradition). There is a pressing need for a more explicit concern with “negative externalities” produced by volunteering, with a more systematic focus on how volunteering affects social inequalities. Such an approach should also entail a more differentiated understanding of how specific resources accrue in specific social profiles of volunteers (e.g., Qvist & Munk, 2018; Wallrodt & Thieme, 2019). A vast body of research addresses the effects of volunteering on various dimensions of inequality, including social capital (van Ingen & Kalmijn, 2010), health inequalities and well-being (Seddighi & Salmani, 2018), employability (Qvist & Munk, 2018; Strauß, 2008), socioeconomic factors, and income (Benenson, 2017; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2009). These consequences are highly relevant to the study of inequality in volunteering, as are gains in terms of reputation (i.e., the signaling function of volunteering), experience, and ability. “Why,” “how,” and

“to what extent” the various types and fields of volunteering reproduce, reinforce, or mitigate existing inequalities (Griep et al., 2015) remain unclear. Future research should also be sensitized according to a more systematic focus on how resource inequalities unfold along a volunteer-process model, in order to document change in the relationship of socioeconomic resources, gender, race, and volunteering over time (Chambré, 2020; Frederiksen et al., 2014; Gaby, 2017; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Van Ingen & Dekker, 2011). The intergenerational transmission of resources is relevant as well, given that “the transmission of volunteering is a by-product of the transmission of religion, social status and personality characteristics” (Bekkers, 2007, p. 111).

A *third* analytical feature of a comprehensive resource-based research agenda involves moving beyond a central focus on the individual accumulation of resources among volunteers. In addition to examining individual resources, many studies analyze how economic inequalities (e.g., Gini coefficient) at the aggregate level (e.g., state, region) affect/relate to access to and segregation in volunteering (e.g., Godfrey & Cherng, 2016; Veal & Nichols, 2017). In a review of 70 articles on how socioeconomic inequality affects individual civic engagement, Schröder and Neumayr (2019) conclude “that higher inequality is most often negatively related to civic engagement, and that this effect is moderated by individual factors, for example income and education” (p. 1). Aggregate trust also appears to be a crucial factor: “more inequality leads to less trust and less caring for people who are different from oneself” (Uslaner & Brown, 2008, p. 888). Psychosocial (e.g., status anxiety, trust), resource-based (governmental social spending, time availability), and cultural aspects (regime type, religious tradition) are common theoretical explanations for observed, sector-specific (Veal & Nichols, 2017, p. 384), and partly age/generation-specific (Godfrey & Cherng, 2016, p. 2226) relationships between economic inequality and volunteering. In addition to the economic dimension, studies have investigated topics including the impact of state-level gender equality on participation and gender segregation within volunteering (Wemlinger & Berlan, 2016), the relationship between social heterogeneity and volunteering (Rotolo & Wilson, 2014), and the impact of home ownership (as a proxy for tenure status and residential mobility) on the number of hours spent volunteering (Rotolo et al., 2010).

Interaction and Inequality in Volunteering: Inequality Resulting from Interpersonal Interaction, Group Dynamics, and Intersubjective Sense-Making

As demonstrated above, an impressive body of work addresses how the distribution of material and symbolic

resources produces inequality in volunteering. At the same time, however, the manner in which such inequalities are reflected, reproduced, or resisted in micro-level interactions remains underexplored. Moreover, the preferred focus on the individual volunteer as a unit of analysis has led to the neglect of many topics and questions relating to inequality among the wider gallery of actors engaged in volunteering. To explore these relatively uncharted territories, we consider two related theoretical perspectives. The first—the cultural-process perspective—suggests that social inequality is manifested and reproduced in processes of categorization and rationalization occurring in everyday routines and meaning-making among organizational actors (Lamont et al., 2014). With regard to inequality in volunteering, this perspective helps to connect the reproduction of exclusive social boundaries at the intra-organizational level to symbolic valuations and boundaries at the macro-level. Adjacent to this approach is the interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969), which sensitizes scholars to how micro-interactions, collective meaning-making, identification, and role-taking engender local hierarchies and unequal positions. After presenting these complementary theoretical lenses, we highlight several topics in critical need of more attention from scholars of volunteering.

The cultural-process perspective attempts to connect micro-level social boundaries that include or exclude actors at the interpersonal level to the ongoing societal construction of symbolic boundaries at the macro-level. Prevailing sociological explanations of inequality already focus on interactions between micro-level individual positions and macro-level patterns of material and symbolic distribution of resources. According to Lamont et al. (2014), however, such analyses often remain deterministic, as the location of individuals within the material or symbolic field determine their individual characteristics, and vice versa. Moreover, these influential approaches tend to treat inequality largely as the relatively intentional acts of dominant actors over subordinate ones (Lamont et al., 2014). Much of the research reviewed in the previous section has been informed by this sociological paradigm. According to Lamont et al., this paradigm lacks a theory that approaches inequality as both intentional and non-intentional processes that are enacted, produced, and reproduced by both dominant and subordinate actors doing things together in everyday life. In other words, the intersubjective production and reproduction of social boundaries are largely tacit processes that are an integral part of the routine meaning-making, categorization, and evaluation occurring between volunteers and other organizational actors. With regard to the new research agenda on inequality in volunteering, this perspective may direct attention to ways in which evaluations and categorizations of (good/deserving) beneficiaries, or (good/legitimate)

volunteers reproduce symbolic boundaries, which eventually solidify as actors distribute material and symbolic resources (including recognition) along these lines (Lamont & Pierson, 2019; Lamont et al., 2014).

Related to the cultural-process perspective is the interactionist perspective, which suggests that actors make sense of cultural concepts and scripts in everyday group-based interaction (Blumer, 1969). Through the interactionist lens, intra-organizational inequalities are dynamic phenomena, produced or resisted as volunteers, beneficiaries, and other actors practice and coordinate mundane tasks (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014). Ethnographic studies of such everyday interactions reveal that ideals of inclusion, egalitarian interaction, and civic empowerment typically associated with volunteer-involving organizations are difficult to practice and easily overruled by more pragmatic, strategic organizational concerns (Eliasoph, 2011; Grubb & Henriksen, 2019; Hustinx & De Waele, 2015). Although social inequalities inevitably emerge among groups of socially diverse actors, they may not be addressed explicitly, given the prevailing cultural script on volunteering. The pursuit of egalitarian inclusiveness thus inadvertently shifts the problem to other parts of the organization, causing new paradoxes and types of inequality (Eliasoph, 2011; Hustinx & De Waele, 2015). The unintended production of “inequality in interaction” (Carlsen et al., 2021—this issue) between interactants engaged in volunteering is a key theme warranting further exploration.

Another thematic domain revealed by an interactionist lens is the production of interpersonal and intra-organizational hierarchies that do not strictly reflect socioeconomic differences but that relate to forms of sociality and group formation. One such interpersonal hierarchy results from differences in personality types among volunteers and users. Studies indicate that unstructured sociality, which is often a central part of voluntary work, attracts and privileges socially confident volunteers (and users), while inadvertently excluding those with less extroverted personalities (Bekkers, 2007; Eliasoph, 2011; Handy & Cnaan, 2007; Villadsen, 2008). Conversely, a recent study indicates that highly structured and activity-centered volunteering enables a discrete, bounded form of sociality that appeals to more introverted volunteers (Grubb, 2021). While studies on volunteer recruitment and retention have long addressed social contacts and group formation (Englert et al., 2020; Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009), a more systematic focus on potential disadvantages of such processes in terms of inequality and exclusion (e.g., social closure) is needed.

A few studies have begun to bridge this gap. In a survey of people who had discontinued their volunteering, Hustinx (2010a) highlights the dark side of sociality by

documenting how dysfunctional sociality (e.g., hierarchies and intrigues) was among the main reasons for quitting. Several studies have also documented how the implicit expectations of volunteers to receive social engagement and sentimental rewards from beneficiaries in return for their altruistic services may construct interpersonal hierarchies that favor those beneficiaries who are most capable of showing emotional gratitude, engaging in intimate sociality, and displaying extroverted behavior (Conran, 2011; Eliasoph, 2011; Lichterman, 2006; Villadsen, 2008). The interactionist perspective can inspire the further investigation of how intra-organizational and interpersonal dynamics can enable the production and reproduction of hierarchies of sociality and sociability, which do not necessarily reflect socioeconomic resources and positions.

Illuminating the dark side of sociality in volunteering and developing an understanding of how the organizational context may increase or impede group-level hierarchies could contribute important knowledge to the academic field, as well as to practitioners of volunteer management and coordination (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013). Concerning volunteer retention, Kristiansen et al. identify social integration and collective-identity formation among volunteers as keys to long-term volunteering (Kristiansen et al., 2015). Whereas current literature privileges the individual volunteer as a *unit of investigation* (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013, pp. 427–428), there is a critical need for insight into social relations and interpersonal hierarchies among multiple actors, including paid staff, beneficiaries, and external stakeholders. Additional knowledge on the cultivation of inclusive communities for different personality types and social-background profiles could potentially generate more deliberate strategies that could promote the recruitment and retention of a more diverse group of volunteers (see also Overbeeke et al., 2021—this issue).

Finally, the interactionist perspective is suitable for examining the interconnection between the organizational framing of volunteering and interpersonal inequality. This perspective emphasizes questions including how certain ways of framing and organizing volunteer work enable different roles and positions for a multitude of actors through the application of formal rules, artifacts, spatial constellations, and various technologies. While organizational scholars have demonstrated how formal and material-organizational structures affect the roles and interpersonal positions available to actors in physical or digital organizational settings (Barley, 1996; Orlikowski & Scott, 2016), scholars of volunteering have showed only modest interest in such interconnections, including with regard to inequality. Consequently, little is known about how different organizational goals, management techniques, technologies, and material structures enable or

impede inequality between actors in volunteering (but see Grubb, 2021—this issue).

Governmentalities of Inequality: How Delineating and Governing the Field of Volunteering Produce and Reproduce Inequality

Whereas the aforementioned perspectives focus on how processes occurring within the field of volunteering are shaped by and, in turn, shape broader social inequalities, this section presents perspectives focusing on how the delineation of the external boundaries of the field can produce and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities. Attention is directed to discursive and/or structural processes that demarcate what is considered “volunteering” and what is not, and to the ways in which particular constructions of “volunteering” are promoted, using diverse sources of theoretical inspiration (e.g., Marxist/neo-Marxist or Foucauldian) and considering the influence of a wide range of actors that are not necessarily identified with the voluntary or third sector. Perceiving “volunteering” as a relational, changing field of discourse and practice, embedded within social, political, and historical contexts, and characterized by the participation of various actors in changing positions has implications for the production and reproduction of inequality within and through this field. This section highlights the analytical potential of this approach by defining three interrelated analytical axes: (a) discerning the myriad of actors, alignments, and hierarchical relations that delineate, and promote “volunteering”; (b) examining how shaping the external boundaries of “volunteering” can produce and reproduce social privilege and domination, and how these processes are reflected in everyday volunteering settings; (c) examining how the hegemonic shaping of volunteering produces and reproduces the underprivileged position of certain social groups by assigning them to particular positions within the field of volunteering and rendering them governable through volunteering policies and managerial techniques. First, it should be noted that the definition, shaping, and implementation of volunteering in both theory and practice is not exclusive to volunteer-involving or civic organizations. While more classical, “neo-Tocquevillian” perceptions locate volunteering within the realm of independent associations and community groups (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014), recent research demonstrates how “third parties” (e.g., business and governmental actors) are intensively involved in the efforts to promote “volunteering” (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). Analyzing volunteering as a field makes it possible to understand its constitution and governance as occurring through changing alignments and the involvement of governmental, corporate, and nonprofit institutions and actors, which develop and implement

various discursive technologies, knowledge-production techniques, and material infrastructures (cf. Foucault, 1998[1976]; Foucault, 2007; Olds & Thrift, 2005; these aspects are addressed further in the section on “epistemic inequality”). Governmental actors at various levels, ranging from local actors (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019; Rose, 2000) to regional (Pick et al., 2011; Muehlebach, 2012), nationwide (Hu, 2020; Ogawa, 2009), and international institutions (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2019) are increasingly using a shifting variety of legislation, policy measures, and discursive techniques to define “volunteering” and to govern how citizens engage in it (Rozakou, 2016). In addition to the increasing state involvement in the promotion of volunteering, market actors (e.g., national/multinational corporations, corporate foundations) are increasingly involved in promoting volunteering, whether through corporate-volunteering programs (Barkay, 2012; Shachar & Hustinx, 2019) or through funding non-governmental organizations that promote and govern volunteering (Shachar, 2014). Certain types of third-sector organizations play a more significant role than others do in shaping the field of volunteering. In particular, volunteer-infrastructure organizations (Van den Bos, 2013), brokerage and mediating organizations (Dean, 2016; Shachar, 2014), and national organizations that recruit large numbers of volunteers (Chaisinthop, 2014) are able to shape the meaning of volunteering through the ways in which it is promoted and managed. At the transnational level, Baillie Smith et al. (2021—this issue) demonstrate how introducing various means of reimbursement for volunteer work by semi-governmental and non-governmental development agencies from the Global North can alter the meaning of volunteering and affect how volunteering is experienced in the Global South.

Based on such detailed investigations of how institutional actors (e.g., corporations, state agencies, powerful NGOs) define and design the management of “volunteering,” research has the potential to reveal how social groups that hold privileged positions within these institutions are able to reproduce their privilege throughout the field of volunteering by shaping and managing it to conform to their own life worlds, ideological views, and practical habits. Some studies have begun to unravel how the reproduction of social privilege occurs in various contexts of volunteering promotion. For example, in Israel, privileged social groups have aligned with the new financial elite to create and shape volunteering-infrastructure organizations, using them to construct volunteering as a central avenue for civic participation, thereby ensuring that the political energy of citizens remains within a nationalist and neoliberal consensus by channeling it into apolitical forms of volunteering (Shachar, 2014). In India, the dominance of the middle class in the NGO sector has enabled individuals

belonging to this class to conceptualize volunteering such that they can distinguish themselves from the seemingly corrupt, inefficient, and popular mechanisms of politics (Jakimow, 2010). In Thailand, during the 1980s and 1990s, “volunteering” became identified as a project led by groups with higher levels of economic and cultural capital. It was shaped as a moral, apolitical activity, with urban, middle-class students and citizens most commonly recognized as volunteers, while poorer and rural citizens were generally regarded as “recipients” (Chaisinthop, 2014). A final example from the UK shows how the neoliberal state’s quest to recruit growing numbers of volunteers (Dean, 2015) led volunteering recruiters and managers in mediating organizations to focus on middle-class youth, who tend to be more responsive to their recruitment efforts, while devoting less attention and assigning less value to working-class youth (Dean, 2016).

The consideration of such hegemonic control of how the field of volunteering is shaped can help scholars to explain why and how privilege is reproduced in everyday volunteering settings (e.g., Kawecka Nenga, 2011; Gamzu & Motzafi-Haller, 2016). As demonstrated by Simonet (2005), the ability to designate particular types of labor as “volunteering” is distributed differentially based on class and racial privileges. Studies have also begun to reveal how and why non-privileged groups are easily portrayed as requiring special attention in order to be “included” as volunteers, without addressing the hegemonic foundations of the field. In policy-oriented discourses, unemployed youth from working-class backgrounds and racialized communities (Simonet, 2005), unemployed adults (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019; Kampen et al., 2019; Muehlebach, 2012), single mothers (Fuller et al., 2008), recent immigrants (Bauder, 2003; Slootjes & Kampen, 2017), and refugees (Tomlinson, 2010; Yap et al., 2011) are often described as requiring assistance in order to volunteer. In this issue, van der Veer (2021) demonstrates that, when individuals from these groups challenge the roles designated to them as “volunteers” by attempting to participate in the shaping and management of volunteering initiatives, they are met with hegemonic resistance aimed at keeping them in the status of “volunteers.” This ensures that they remain governable and manageable by the actors who define what volunteering should be, in ways that are often embedded in colonial legacies and class hierarchies.

In some contexts, the special attention directed toward less-privileged groups leads to governmental measures that create a continuum between attempts to encourage and facilitate volunteering to the conflation of volunteering with punitive measures. Ranging from “welfare to work” (or “workfare”) programs (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019; Kampen et al., 2019; Krinsky, 2007), to pre-incarceration preventive options (Simonet, 2005) and compulsory

correctional, alternative punishments (Caputo, 1999), such governmental uses of volunteering have come to join other techniques in forming an increasingly dominant complex of punitive measures against people living in poverty (Wacquant, 2009), with the requirement to “volunteer” becoming more punitive than emancipatory. At the same time, such measures tend to portray those who are compelled to volunteer in order to secure welfare payments or avoid sanctions as “impure” volunteers (Shachar et al., 2019), thereby reinforcing the “purification” of volunteering of elements related to labor and remuneration (Krinsky & Simonet, 2017; Taylor, 2004), thus associating volunteering with class and racial privileges (Kaplan-Daniels, 1988; Muehlebach, 2012). As described by Vrsti, “the unevenness and differentiation that neoliberal government introduces into subject formation” (Vrsti, 2013, p. 128) and into the development of “political subjectivity” (Vrsti, 2013, p. 130) exacerbates the distinction between the mobile elite “voluntourists” and the immobile “communities” to which their “beneficiaries” belong. Within domestic contexts, volunteers are regarded as the epitome of contemporary citizenship, relegating less-privileged groups to the position of “recipients” (Chaisinthop, 2014) or subjects in need of “empowerment” (Eliasoph, 2011), rather than as equal citizens with full political subjectivity.

Epistemic Inequality: The Politics of Knowledge Production

Most fundamentally, the problematic of inequality in volunteering should be examined at the epistemic level: the level of scientific knowledge production itself. “Epistemic inequality” can be defined as “the question of knowledge hierarchies; of how certain standpoints get marginalized as inferior, unworthy, and lesser while other standpoints get valorized as superior” (Go, 2017, p. 194). Epistemic inequality and marginalization in the production of scientific knowledge is a central issue in the sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies. It connects to a diverse terrain of critical social theorizing in fields including post-colonial/de-colonial theory, post-development theory, gender/queer theory, critical race theory, and post-humanist theory.

At its core, the epistemic critique focuses on claims of universalism that are deeply ingrained in Western knowledge and the historical narrative of “enlightened modernity” (Bhambra, 2007; Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000, 2007). It problematizes typical analytical divisions with which we have come to understand and order the world (e.g., “Oriental/Occidental,” “traditional/modern,” “civilized/primitive,” “irrational/rational”). This dominant system of representation erases the intertwined histories and interdependencies inherent in the European

colonization of other parts of the world, and it naturalizes Western domination over the “other.” Such colonial relations have articulated “the logical structure of power/knowledge relations that emerged with the formation and expansion of Europe as a civilized/civilizational complex from the fifteenth century to the present” (Alcoff, 2007, quoted in Baker, 2012, p. 5). The epistemic critique also entails the problematization of methodological nationalism, which presumes that “social relations of power neatly overlap with the boundaries and territory of the nation-state and which therefore compel us to separate societies into distinct unconnected units” (Go, 2017, p. 198). This also obscures transnational power relations and the associated experiences of subjugated populations in various parts of the world (Go, 2017). As summarized by Quijano (2000, p. 544), “In this sense, the Eurocentric pretension to be the exclusive producer and protagonist of modernity—because of which all modernization of non-European populations, is, therefore, a Europeanization—is an ethnocentric pretension and, in the long run, provincial.”

The field of volunteering research also includes a growing body of scholarship addressing epistemic inequality. These works expose a geopolitics of knowledge production that has universalized viewpoints and experiences from the Global North (Baillie Smith et al., 2019, 2021; Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Lough, 2021). As observed by Lough (2021), despite the recent publication of important works considering how hierarchies of class, race, and power influence knowledge production on volunteering (Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Cheung Judge, 2017; Lopez Franco & Shahrokh, 2015; Shachar, 2014; Shachar et al., 2019), “much more effort is needed to engage and include the voices of people ‘most outside the system’ in the legitimate construction and application of knowledge about volunteering” (Lough, 2021, p.4).

A key research agenda should thus aim to reposition theorization on volunteering from a global perspective and “unsettle” dominant North–South imaginaries in research on volunteering (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018), while challenging the “homogenizing figure of the ‘privileged volunteer’” (Cheung Judge, 2017, cited in Baillie Smith et al., 2019, p. 3). In other words, a primary task is to “provincialize” the dominant, acclaimed universalistic Western-based knowledge production on volunteering. According to these scholars, a primary starting point will involve disrupting existing hierarchies in definitions of volunteering. The second (and highly interconnected) task involves fully embracing constructivist and performative ontological approaches to volunteering. As argued in the previous sections, the reality of volunteering has no stable, universal character. It is open and contestable, as it can be constructed and performed differently in different practical

settings. Note that this insight also pertains to the scientific practice of research on volunteering: the phenomenon of volunteering is an outcome of, and not an antecedent to scholarly practice (compare Latour, 2005; Mol, 1999). The epistemic critique thus calls for exploring new theoretical and methodological toolboxes that will allow us to capture the full “volunteering multiple” (paraphrasing Mol, 1999). Third, we must recognize the positionality of volunteering scholars, and hence their situated standpoints. As claimed by Lough (2021, p. 3), “A reflexive recognition of the higher positionality, power, and representation of knowledge production from the North accentuates the value of incorporating critical interpretations of scholarship on volunteering.” In this regard, the epistemic critique also calls for a more explicit normative stance in volunteering research favoring suppressed voices and alternative values of volunteering. The use of different frameworks and theorizing from different standpoints and locations allows us to ask different questions and highlight broader sets of values for volunteering (Baillie Smith et al., 2021—this issue; Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Lough, 2021), thus highlighting the inclusionary potential of our new research agenda.

Regarding the definition of volunteering, Lough (2021) problematizes the geopolitical division between the dominant scholarly understanding of volunteering based on Northern volunteering traditions, which overlooks or devalues volunteering traditions in the Global South. More specifically, Lough addresses the emphasis placed on “formal” volunteering in organizations, which has been advanced as a chief ideal type in key reference works (Cnaan et al., 1996). Related cross-national research based on net-cost theory (Handy et al., 2000; Meijs et al., 2003) empirically confirms that, in public perceptions, “volunteering in more reputable organizations is perceived as purer based on interpretations that it takes more time, restricts volunteers’ freedom and flexibility, or is otherwise more costly to volunteers” (Lough, 2021, p.5). We further note that resource theory and dominant-status theory are largely built on the assumption of volunteering as a formal, productive activity in organizations, with volunteers occupying formal, status-related social positions. Baillie Smith et al. (this issue; see also Compion & Cliggett, 2018) also focus on deconstructing “established Euro-American definitions of volunteering,” emphasizing the criterion of “non-remuneration” as opposed to “payment” or “salary.” Examining volunteering within the context of development and the growing financialization of volunteering that is shaping volunteering economies in the Global South, the authors critically remark that “payment does not fit well with global norms of volunteering”: it is perceived as a “deviation” from established norms, and thus not “proper volunteering.” From the standpoint of unsustainable

livelihood systems, however, volunteer remuneration constitutes an essential community asset. More inclusive theorizations of volunteering thus warrant building an alternative account of volunteer remuneration.

More generally, critical emphasis is needed on how dominant definitions and theorizing in volunteering is interwoven within the colonial power-knowledge matrix. Lough (2021) argues that preferences for studying volunteering within organizational settings are rooted in the paradigm of modernity, as reflected in the Euro-American historical account of voluntary organizations emerging alongside modern industrialization, technological expansion, and the growth of paid labor in competitive markets. This necessitated a means of understanding and utilizing unpaid labor within organizations, including by interest groups within the emerging organizational landscape (Clemens, 2006). The birth of the “modern volunteer” is also closely related to the institutionalization of European welfare states and the collective identities along which “modern” societies were organized (Hustinx & Lammer-tyn, 2003; Hustinx, 2010b). As Lough (2021, p.3) critically concludes, “This reasoning suggests that modern forces drive a high demand for knowledge about the interdependence between volunteers and organizations such as non-profits and non-governmental organizations, with less need to understand direct expressions of volunteering.”

In short, instead of being neutral heuristic tools, definitions and ideal types are normative inscriptions that join other governmental techniques (see Section C above) in prioritizing formal and unpaid volunteering over informal and remunerated volunteering, in addition to ascribing more “agency,” “civicness,” and “altruism” to volunteers from the Global North. This clearly has social or political consequences. Because less knowledge has been produced on informal or financialized volunteering, also it has had less impact in communities who could benefit from it (Baillie Smith et al., 2021;—this issue Lough, 2021).

To break through the epistemic status quo, our research program also calls for theoretical and methodological innovation in the study of volunteering. For example, scholars studying the participatory exclusion of disadvantaged groups from volunteering have criticized resource theory for explaining non-participation as resulting from an individual “lack” of resources, thus ignoring their capabilities and lived experiences of structural exclusion. Asset-based and livelihood frameworks offer a radically alternative and emancipatory model of theorizing in this area (Baillie Smith et al., 2019, 2021—this issue, Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Benenson, 2017; De Waele & Hustinx, 2019).

Theoretical innovation is also sorely needed with regard to the highly anthropocentric nature of dominant theorizing, in order to strengthen the connection between volunteering research and the recent surge of post-humanist

theory. The role of material, natural, and technological agents in reproducing or mitigating inequality has been ignored, for example, as argued by Grubb concerning the technological infrastructure that is increasingly mediating online (and other forms of) volunteering (Grubb, 2021—this issue; Bang Carlsen et al., 2021; Halford & Savage, 2010). This strand of research also addresses more holistic world views in indigenous communities, including ancestral traces, affective, and bio-material dimensions (Baillie Smith et al., 2019). It can also consider the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on inequalities in volunteering (Bang Carlsen et al., 2021; Hustinx, 2021). From a methodological viewpoint, epistemic inequality should be addressed by striving for more “flattened topographies” (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2018), approaching “volunteering” more ethnographically as an “assemblage” that “highlight[s] how all volunteering is intrinsically constituted through assemblages of bodies, ideas, languages, histories, and power relations that may emerge through and across national borders” (Baillie Smith et al., 2019, p. 4).

Overview of the Contributions to the Special Issue

The contributions presented in this special issue of *Voluntas* represent diverse ways of engaging with the analytical approaches outlined above. It thus constitutes an important first step in advancing a new research front on inequality in volunteering.

A first group of contributions advances the resource-based perspective by providing more detailed accounts of differentiated dynamics across fields of volunteering, more detailed understandings of the role of dominant actors within volunteer organizations and third parties in the strategic mobilization of material and symbolic resources offered by potential volunteers.

In “Who is in charge? Social inequality in different fields of volunteering,” Meyer and Rameder (2021) explore the extent to which social inequality spills over to volunteering within various thematic sub-fields of volunteering: politics, social services, religion, and sports. Based on the Austrian micro-census, their analysis reveals significant relations between status (gender, occupation, education) and hierarchical positions in CSOs, although they differ according to field-specific characteristics. Occupational status plays a major role in sports and politics, while educational status is more important in religion and social services. The authors explain these differences through organizational and individual characteristics of these social fields.

In “You shall (not) pass: The role of third-party gatekeepers in volunteer inclusion strategy,” Overbeeke et al. (2021) adopt a management perspective to challenge the notion of volunteer organizations as realms of inclusivity and equality. They argue that volunteer coordinators are crucial organizational gatekeepers, who play a key role in

the reproduction of social inequality through volunteering. Relying on instrumental recruitment strategies, volunteer coordinators routinely target individuals with positive volunteering antecedents with the intention of finding the best-suited volunteer for the job. Shifting to a value-based management approach centering on diversity and inclusion raises new challenges relating to the recruitment and inclusion of volunteers from less-privileged backgrounds. Based on qualitative interviews with gatekeepers from third-party organizations (e.g., corporations, schools) charged with “sending” potential volunteers to “receiving” volunteer organizations, the authors identify three strategies for increasing volunteer inclusion (“encouraging,” “enabling,” and “enforcing”), which could promote more proactive thinking about managing diversity in the new volunteer workforce.

In “Hierarchization, Boundary Making and Inequality: Exploring the Structural Changes of Chinese Grassroots NGOs in a Transition Era,” Pan and Xu (2022) explore how increasing professionalization and the demand for efficiency from the institutional environment of NGOs in China inadvertently sustain the production of hierarchies and boundaries between volunteers within organizations. Based on document analysis and interviews with volunteers and leaders engaged in 15 “service-oriented grassroots NGOs,” Pan and Xu demonstrate how grassroots NGOs are entering state-civil society partnerships, thereby shifting from egalitarian to hierarchical structures, aiming to enhance efficiency, and thus legitimacy and attractiveness to potential partners.

Another group of contributions adopt an interactionist perspective to explore processes of inequality production in interaction. In “Inequality in interaction: Equalizing the helper–recipient relationship in the refugee solidarity movement,” Carlsen et al. (2021) examine attempts at avoiding the reproduction of structural inequality in the interaction between helpers and recipients engaged in refugee-welcoming projects in Denmark. Mobilizing the concepts of “scene style” from Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) to analyze data from multiple case studies, the authors identify two scene styles aimed at impeding interpersonal inequality: “friendliness” and “collectivity/democratic.” Both styles ultimately produce/reproduce inequality, albeit unintentionally. In the friendliness style, volunteers maintain framing rights, censoring politicized, “unfriendly” posts by refugees on the group’s social media (Facebook) pages, thereby inadvertently reproducing inequality, despite intentions to the contrary. With the collectivity/democratic style, volunteers and managers ultimately dominate the planning of collective action between volunteers and refugees, thereby re-installing hierarchy in interaction.

In “Avoiding intimacy: An ethnographic study of beneficent boundaries in virtual voluntary social work,” Grubb (2021) examines intra-organizational inequality between well-resourced volunteers and socially disadvantaged beneficiaries. Based on an in-depth qualitative case study of a voluntary virtual-tutoring program, Grubb identifies three ways in which the formal and material aspects of the organizational context mitigate inequality in interaction. First, reliance on ICT and managerial logics sustains a bounded form of problem-focused interaction, with limited access to personal background information. Second, the organizational design suspends sociability as a criterion for the differential treatment of users. Third, anonymously mediated interaction enables temporal and audio-visual asymmetry, allowing users to perform “digitally sustained impression management.”

Several contributions in this special issue address how inequalities are interrelated with delineations of the field of volunteering at various levels, ranging from global (Baillie Smith et al., 2021) to local (van der Veer, 2021). In “Treacherous elasticity, callous boundaries: Aspiring volunteer initiatives in the field of refugee support in Rotterdam,” Veer examines practices of volunteering within the context of refugee support, as embedded in the broader active citizenship agenda of municipalities in the Netherlands. Through an ethnographic study, the author details ways in which some volunteers and forms of volunteering are not recognized, supported, or celebrated. Former refugees volunteering in response to governmental appeals to become active citizens and reclaim their voice through self-organization encountered a glass ceiling when subsequently aspiring to move beyond the volunteer role to become social entrepreneurs: a position they considered more credible and professional.

In “Volunteering hierarchies in the Global South: Remuneration and livelihoods,” Baillie Smith, Fadel, O’Loughlen, and Hazeldine explore volunteering and inequalities by analyzing volunteer remuneration in the Global South and its relationship to livelihoods. They observe that the project and sectoral objectives of aid and development donors are increasingly financializing volunteering. Based on a large-scale qualitative study conducted within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the authors examine how the introduction of remuneration to the field of volunteering in the Global South inadvertently creates hierarchies between volunteers. Policy measures determined in global centers, which include material and discursive components, shape the ways in which volunteering is unfolded in local communities. The authors further address epistemic inequality in established definitions of volunteering, specifically with regard to remuneration. They question the Euro-American understanding of pure volunteering as unremunerated work, which is not

suitable for investigating remuneration practices in the Global South. They advance a new framework based on livelihoods and capabilities to explain and recognize volunteer-payment practices within the context of livelihood struggles in local communities.

Conclusion

This introduction provides a roadmap to inspire scholars of volunteering and, more broadly, social scientists to deepen their studies of inequality in volunteering and to explore the production/reproduction of inequality through volunteering. We have outlined four main approaches to studying inequalities in volunteering: resources, interactions, governmentalities, and epistemologies. Relying on recent developments in social theory, these approaches offer new ways of overcoming the limitations of the dominant models used to examine “participation in volunteering.”

We hope that future studies will advance our understanding of the volunteering process in its entirety, including all of its aspects and varieties, including individual and collective resources brought into and produced by the volunteering process; interactions and symbolic exchanges occurring within this process; discursive structures and governmentality techniques shaping the field of volunteering as a whole; and epistemological inequalities shaping practical and scholarly understandings of volunteering and the production of new knowledge in the field. As suggested by the approaches developed in this introduction, volunteering scholars also participate in the volunteering process by producing knowledge that shapes the process, the field within which it takes place, and the types of inequality it produces/reproduces. Researchers should therefore attend to the positions they occupy within the fields of academic knowledge production and volunteering; how their identities and unequal social statuses affect these positions and the knowledge produced through them; and what this implies for their epistemological assumptions, methodological approaches, and techniques, as well as for the analytical processes that together produce knowledge on volunteering and inequalities. We hope that scholars will be inspired to develop alternative epistemological, methodological, and analytical tools to challenge both the inequalities that characterize the field of volunteering and also those that characterize the production of knowledge on volunteering. Addressing the conditions within which volunteering research is produced could also reveal the roles of actors other than researchers within this process. The ideas and actions of funders and policymakers in academic research, social services, and nonprofit administration, along with various types of research participants all

play a role in determining the direction of future research. We hope that this special issue will inspire them as well.

We should bear in mind that, in addition to its implications for research, the study of inequality and volunteering is of more general societal and political value. Studying inequalities within the potentially equalizing terrain of volunteering can therefore suggest ways to “improve” the organization of volunteering, while also promoting the reconsideration of what is entailed in the equalizing aspirations of volunteering. It could also contribute to the reconsideration of existing social categorizations and visions.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare to have no conflict of interest.

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