AVM BiteSize: BAME volunteering research

Introduction

In this episode of AVM BiteSize, AVM Director Annabel Smith, interviews Dr Helen Timbrell,an independent researcher, consultant and coach working in people and organisational development, and Hadji Singh, a volunteer with the Witness Service at Citizens Advice. Annabel, Helen and Hadjo discuss recently published research comparing the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and White volunteers in four organisations .

Transcript

Annabel Smith (AS), AVM Director: Hello and welcome to this webcast hosted by the Association of Volunteer Managers. I'm Annabel Smith, a director of AVM, and today I'm joined by Dr. Helen Timbrell, who is an independent researcher, consultant and coach working in people and organisational development, and Hadjj Singh, who is a volunteer with the Witness Service at Citizens Advice. Hello, Helen and Hadji, how are you both doing today?

Dr Helen Timbrell (HT): Hey Annabel, all good. Yes, looking forward to this.

AS: Hi, Hadji.

Hadji Singh: I'm fine, thank you very much.

AS: Good. So Helen has recently completed some research exploring and comparing the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic volunteers, and white volunteers, in four organisations. And one of these organisations was Citizens Advice, the Witness Service, where Hadji is a volunteer, and so we're delighted that he's joining us today. The research has been written up into a really clear report, which you can get your hands on by emailing Helen, and details will be on the AVM website. Today we're going to be exploring some aspects of this research, which we feel are

particularly relevant to volunteer managers. So we're delighted to spend this time with you, Helen and Hadji, thank you so much for joining us. So first of all, Helen, before we dive into the content of the report, can you tell us why you were driven to carry out this specific piece of research?

HT: Okay, so I think it probably goes back to summer 2018 where I did a really light touch, and you might even say quick and dirty, piece of research with Heads of Volunteering in 10 volunteer-involving organisations, where I was just having conversations and exploring with them the levels of confidence they had in their current volunteer cohort, the levels of confidence they had in those volunteers to welcome a more diverse volunteer team, if they were successful in their work to recruit the more diverse volunteer base. And that came from noticing increasingly organisations wanting to diversify their volunteering, talking about wanting to attract a more diverse volunteer cohort. And being curious, having worked in volunteering organisations, being curious about if we got beyond to the point of being successful at recruitment, what would happen? So lots of the conversations I observe around diversity and inclusion in volunteering are about how to attract a more diverse volunteer base. And I was curious about what might happen once you've done that. And so what came out of those conversations with Heads of Volunteering was relatively low levels of confidence from those Heads of volunteers, that current volunteers either understood or supported work on equality, diversity and inclusion as a priority, or and/ or they lacked confidence that those current volunteers would welcome more diverse volunteers. So I wanted to do some work around that. I worked with Will Watt, who's done the work at Jump Projects looking at quantitative data, about the the differences between levels of volunteering between white and BAME audiences, and wanting to build on that and fill some of the kind of qualitative gap in research. I really wanted to look at some research that explored whether Heads of Volunteering were right to lack confidence in their current volunteers, and to do research in a way that enabled us to really hear the voices of white and BAME volunteers, talking in the first person about the experiences they were having in organisations. So that really led to - long winded answer - but led to working on a proposal for some research, which was then shared with a number of organisations, and the four who chose to fund it, so the research was funded by Citizens Advice, English Heritage, Team London, and Macmillan Cancer Support. Those were the four organisations that we worked with.

AS: Brilliant, thank you for that context setting. And I guess the really important thing here is about, is the actual experiences of volunteers in that setting rather than the, perhaps the focus from other research or other areas, which has been about how do you attract volunteers, more diverse volunteers in the first place? So, it's that's a really important thing about that actual experience of what happens.

HT: What happens when you've done that?

AS: Yeah, yeah. And so there's lots of important insight in the research, in the report, which is explored in some detail. Today, I'd like to explore a few areas which we think AVM will be particularly of interest to volunteer managers. So first up, and this is about that experience is, the research showed that both black, Asian and minority ethnic, and white volunteers recalled in your research, an equally warm welcome into their respective organisations. However, after that period of time, their experiences differed. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

HT: And yeah, do you want me to go first?

AS: Yes, please.

HT: Yeah, okay. Err, so I guess a few things, and at a really simple, basic level, the BAME volunteers who were interviewed. And so we should say that the, this is quantitative research, so interview-based, and it's small scale, so it's only four organisations, and we interviewed six volunteers in each organisation, three who were white and three who were BAME. So I guess the key thing that sits behind anything else that we found was that if you are a BAME volunteer, you are very aware of your ethnicity while you are volunteering. Though that wasn't the case for all BAME volunteers, but for a significant proportion the experience that you have as a volunteer is shaped by your ethnicity, in a way that if you are a white volunteer, it's simply not part of your frame of reference. So some of the white volunteers really struggled to literally understand questions about, you know, "tell me a little bit about the extent to which or if your ethnicity impacts on the way that you have a volunteering experience". It just wasn't conceivable for the white volunteers that their ethnicity would have any impact. Which is really different from lots of experiences of the BAME volunteers for whom it was, for whom it was a key part of how their volunteering experience played out. One of the ways in which that happens is in some of the BMA volunteers talking about this sense of needing to prove themselves, a sense of needing to be better than their white peers, in order to be fully accepted as a volunteer. So to do even better at whatever the volunteer task is, to work even harder to, to justify to a certain extent, the position or the in, some of them talked about the kind of the space that they take up, feeling very aware of the need to justify that in a way that there is no equivalent for in the white volunteer experience.

AS: Thank you. And Hadji, what's your experience of, of this, if you feel that you're able to talk about this, or talk more generally, what would you add to that?

HS: Helen's covered it quite well there. I think, from my own perspective, I think my, my particular background was, I was a national manager in charge of 1600 people, up and down the country, and they were from a different background. And one of the things that I found was that when I actually joined the Witness Service, the first thing that hits you is the environment that you come into,

because it's predominantly white, middle class women. And the fact that, um, joining Bradford Crown Court, where predominantly Bradford itself is a very diverse city, and then the first thing that hits me is there that I was the only male Asian volunteer there. So straight away, you know, you thinking, you're coming into an environment that perhaps I may well have seen 20 years ago, you know, while individuals do welcome, welcome you in, I think there is an element where you want to prove yourself, you know, you know. And I'm fortunate where I'm thick skinned, and very little things do actually impact me. And, and, so you sort of work through that. And then, but it is there. And I think there is an element whereby the volunteer section that we actually have in Bradford, doesn't actually represent the people of Bradford. So the people that are actually coming in through the door, that you're there to help and support through the witness journey. You know, 50% could be, you know, from the BAME community. And then, and then when they're coming into this environment, which is predominantly white, they find it very difficult in terms of it, it seems, it sort of puts them off, in a way. So, so that's, so that's the first thing that hits you. And I think I, I think - I know I've got a tendency of talking - and I think, I think

AS: It's good, it's good.

HS: I think there's also a tendency whereby I think, within a short period of time, I'm one of these people where I'll get on with everyone. So in a way, when you come into this environment, you then feel you're part of it, you know, I don't do anything in particular, but that's, but that's the way that I am but I can, I can see it from other, you know, Asian people coming in where they would perhaps not be able to sort of fit in, you know. I've got years of experience that helps me, but if you then talk about a younger individual coming in, they would find it really difficult and, and very intimidating.

AS: Yeah, yeah, of course. It's so interesting, isn't it? And I think what listening to you both, what you've, to kind of sum up, feels like that initial induction that warm welcome is a bit of a gloss isn't it is, and then once you get into the actual volunteering experience, that's when it exposes the kind of systemic issues there might be within the organisation, and are reflected in society, or the other way around. Helen, you're looking thoughtful.

HT: Yeah, yeah, no, I was just going to build on that a wee bit. So there's a couple of things in my mind when you're saying that. So I guess the really obvious thing that I didn't say in response to your "what happens after the welcome" is that in all of the organisation's there was at least one example of a volunteer that I interviewed, describing an experience of racism. So either a, an experience where another volunteer had done or said something racist, or a member of the public, when they were on duty had done or said something racist, or a member of staff. So you know, the really, the really, and it's really important to just say that as part of the answer to the question about what "what happens, that's different". Yes. Well, that happens. BAME volunteers experience racism from within the

organisation as well as from members of the public. That feels like a really big difference. The other thing that's in my head to say is, this is small scale research, right? It's four organisations, it's 24 interviews, we're very mindful of that. As well as honouring the real lived experience of the 24 people that we spoke to, um, we shouldn't lose sight of, and we say a little bit about this in the research report itself at the beginning, about the overwhelmingly positive experience all of the volunteers who were interviewed had, every single one of the volunteers, including the ones who had experienced racism, wanted to continue volunteering in their organisation. Yeah. That doesn't make it OK. I'm not saying, "oh, so we've got nothing to worry about". But I think it is helpful just to keep that balance in, in mind. And, you know, we might talk a bit more in a while about how much resilience that then takes from some of those BAME volunteers who have experienced racism, to still want to carry on and volunteer in that organisation.

AS: Yeah, sure. And, excuse me, that's a cough, so I went on mute. But, um, yeah, and, and actually really brave of these organisations to take part in this research. I think it can be quite, you know, I know I "Please, you know, come and do some research and observe us and see what's happening to help us to learn and grow." It's quite a vulnerable position to be in, isn't it? So it's, it's really important to acknowledge that as well.

HT: Yeah. And I think you know, there were degrees of vulnerability felt from, often, so often it was sort of Heads of Volunteering or Directors of Volunteering who were approving the project, you know, choosing to potentially step into a place of vulnerability for their organisation or for them personally. The local volunteer managers who then helped recruit the volunteers certainly felt vulnerable in, in doing that. And obviously the individual volunteers who really openly shared their experiences. So, um, it it was a, it it was a, so being the person who did all those interviews, just have a really strong sense of gratitude for that I think about not just the time but the, the honesty and vulnerability that, kind of, as you say, take on in the spirit of learning, not just for their organisations but the broader sector.

AS: Yeah, yeah. Thank you. So Hadji, I'm going to come to you now. And you have already I think, touched on this a little bit. But the research found that the role of older white women could be particularly important in the experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic volunteers. And can you tell us a little bit more about that, please?

HS: Yes, I think, I think when you enter that sort of environment, I think it's fairly evident. As an outsider, you're going in, you can, you can, you can see that um, the probably white middle class, the backgrounds that they've come from are perhaps, you know, white collar individuals, were professionals and managers, teachers, etc, and whatever. And perhaps, um in that particular role, perhaps they haven't actually had as much dealings with, you know, black, Asians and the modalities.

So, so you can actually see that, when you, when you first actually meet them. But this, this is where in terms of myself, you know, talking about my own experience, one of the things is that how I manage that is to tell them that, you know, in terms of my background, where I've come from, what I've done. And in a way, what you're actually doing is you're, you're, it's like showing your CV to these individuals so that they will allow you into this group of professional, you know, professional people.

AS: Yes

HS: It's, it is very difficult to, to, to describe, but just a couple of weeks ago, I'd been to Huddersfield and there was a young Asian lad, 18 years old, and he just started volunteering, and one of the things he was, you were speaking to me about was the fact that he found it difficult in terms of the language that we're using. He was speaking English, but there's a difference between proper English the professionals speak like, for example, barristers and solicitors and, and the sort of language or how, how English is spoken within Asian background. No. And, and one of the things I was saying saying to him, "Look, it's all experience for you don't, you know, don't let that put you off in come in here and not volunteering."

AS: I love the way you've articulated that, around feeling like you have to show your CV, kind of prove your experience in a way that white volunteers wouldn't, just don't need to do or have, feel like they have to do it. It doesn't have to be done at all. Helen, are we going to come in there, then?

HT: Well, I guess I would add it's where the title of the research comes from. So that, you know the quote that's on the front of the research "What the bloody hell are you doing here?" is a quote from one of the participants, when he described how he feels when he's around older white women. So one of the black male volunteers that was interviewed in one of the organisations used that to describe what it feels like. And he'd he also used the language of there being an edge. So he talks about there's just an edge in terms of how people deal with you, and particularly that edge comes from older white women. And again, he would use the same language that Hadji used actually, that sense of it is difficult to describe. So you know, when you go back to the interview transcript you, you see people working really hard to try and explain what that feels like. Because it's it's sometimes it's not, so no one literally said to that person "What the bloody hell are you doing here?" But he felt it, he felt it, and, and in the interview transcript, he tries to articulate what it is that creates that feeling. And it's a whole kind of patchwork or tapestry of lots of small things, which are about things that often are not said, about not being included in lunchtime conversations or break conversations, um, or just eye contact, or body language. It's a, it's a number of small things that ladder up to that edge, which leaves him feeling "what the bloody hell are you doing here?", taking up a space where you, the perception is that the view is you don't belong here. You're not like us and you don't belong here.

AS: Yes, cool. OK. Yeah, let's, let's move. I want to develop that a little bit because we know, the research talks more about this, doesn't it about how black, Asian and minority ethnic volunteers are disproportionately overburdened on account of ethnicity? So you've got examples of volunteers feeling obliged to take on a representative role for all black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, or ignoring racism, to prevent white colleagues from feeling icky about it, and discomfort, and other tactics that just don't, that require emotional labour and resilience that are not required of white volunteers. So this is, this webcast is for the Association of Volunteer Managers, and the members of our organisation. And so what role can volunteer managers play here to reduce this burden? I'm going to come to Helen first for that one, please.

HT: Um, I guess there's a there's a really simple thing that emerged from the research, and for all of us involved in, in the project, and which was around the reluctance to talk about these things. And that reluctance often came from, so it was a reluctance that white volunteers described having, and it was a reluctance that BAME volunteers noticed happening, which was there was this discomfort of talking about issues of race and ethnicity, and more broadly, um equality, diversity and inclusion, but particularly race and ethnicity. And that was often because there was a fear of getting it wrong. So some of the white volunteers talked about being really worried about using the wrong words and the wrong language. And there's a lovely, you can sort of put the two quotes together in the research, where white volunteers talk about being really nervous about that. And a really lovely quote from one of the BAME women we interviewed who says, "You can tell the difference, you can tell the difference when someone is racist, or whether they just got their words in a muddle". And that, you know, the intention difference is clear. So part of what volunteer managers can do is help create the space for conversations to happen. And my sense is there's a step before that, which is volunteer managers needing to build their own confidence to be able to host or facilitate those conversations. And there's probably a step before that, which is, in order to build your confidence to do that, as a volunteer manager, you probably just need to educate yourself. Yeah, and I and I don't mean that in a patronising way. I've been hugely educated by doing this research, that. You know, you, it is very easy to tell yourself a good story if you work in the charity sector, that you're terribly well intentioned and, and values led, and and you're all over this topic, and you understand this. And actually, just the process of doing the research has been incredibly educational for me. Lots of the volunteers we interviewed, the white volunteers, talked about the process of being interviewed and having a conversation. Yeah, raising their awareness. So there's a sort of educate yourself piece. Because if you educate yourself and, and realise that, that's a constant process, a core part of your professional development as a volunteer manager should be to grow your confidence to lead and host conversations about equality, diversity and inclusion, and particularly about race and ethnicity. Then you're able to start hosting those conversations, and be able to provide kind of proactive support in terms of creating a culture where conversations can be had, but also really, really, really well

equipped to provide reactive support if things do go wrong, and a volunteer does need to make a complaint about racism, for example.

AS: Yeah, thank you really helpful, and Hadji, what would you add to that? What can volunteer managers do to help this?

HS: I think, I think to be fair, I think Helen's covered that, I think, from my perspective, I think, at a high level, you know, you've got all the best intentions there. You know, you know, we want to talk about diversity, we want to talk about ethnicity, we want to talk about all these things. But I think the way that that's cascaded down to individual middle management, yeah. If anything else, they may well have been on the course, and they've, and they've ticked the box, but to have them conversations, they are really difficult. And I think, in this day and age, people are so conscious of what they have to say, is it right, isn't it right? In my experience, I generally bring the conversation up. And when, and when the conversation does start, the response that I've had in the past is, "well, that's okay for you to say""Well, that's fine. But the thing is, if you don't have these conversations, you know you aren't you aren't going to develop yourself. You're aren't going to develop the actual process of trying to get more individuals in". Um, I tend to have conversations with other volunteers on a one to one basis. And I'll bring subjects up about what happens within a particular culture. And why is it so different? And to be fair, the feedback that I get back was "oh, that's ", you know, and it, it shows it from a different perspective, and it gets people thinking, just like, just about this survey that Helen's done. What it's done is, it's allowed me to, it's one of them things where, in this day and age, it's there, it's there all the time, but you, but you become so blase about it, it's in the back of your head. So then you just get on with life as it is, and isn't until you have these conversations, that you then start handpicking it, and then you actually realise, well, yes, is there, but what can we do as a whole? Because there isn't just one answer. You know, it's, I think what whatever we do for Citizens Advice, I think it's going to be the same for all the other charity organisations that we have actually got there.

AS: For sure, and how it fits within a wider process or wider campaign, if you like looking at policies and processes and culture and training and everything, and to help to build up that culture. Helen.

HT: I was just gonna just, I was just thinking Hadji about the conversation you and I have had, Hadji is one of the volunteers who's helped. We've shared this research in workshop sessions at recent conferences. So we've worked together before. So one of the conversations we had had and reflected on is the finding in the research about the frustration some of the BAME volunteers have of having given volunteer managers advice about what to do.

AS: And they haven't done anything with it.

HT: And that is particularly in, in the context of advice and guidance about how to be successful in recruiting a more diverse range of volunteers, but it's also about things like the recruitment and selection processes that are used post, you know, once you've generated applications. But there's a sort of broader principle, which is volunteer managers have been known to ask BAME volunteers in their organisation, "how do we become more inclusive in our recruitment practice?" Or "how do we become more relevant?" And BAME volunteers have taken the time to offer advice, and then seen that advice just apparently ignored for whatever reason. And that is often, um Hadji, you and I have talked about this, I know just that often advice about investing the time and effort to go out and understand the local communities that you're trying to attract. So that, just, it just still feels like that's a real block to genuinely invest the time and energy in doing that. Yeah, and partner appropriately. There is still this sort of, and it might be about lack of results rather than complacency, but I was gonna say it, what it, how it appears, is a sort of organisational complacency, um that we've done enough and people will come to us. Yeah, and that's frustration of BAME volunteers been asked for their expertise, people like Hadji offering up his expertise. Yeah. And then seeing that ignored, is almost, I think there was almost a sense that that's worse than not being asked in the first place.

AS: Yeah, yeah.

HS: Absolutely. I mean, I mean, one of the things I can add add to that was the fact that I was asked, "How can we recruit more people from the Asian background?" And one of the things I said was, "well, you know, there's plenty of temples in Bradford, you can go there. And you know, each temple have got, they've got their own trustees". And, but the response I got back was, "here's a, here's a leaflet, can you stick, can you go and stick that up in the...?" You know, and to be fair, I've got the leaflet. I didn't take any further because I thought, well, this isn't what I was.

AS: Yeah. Yeah.

HT: And I guess my, my nervousness in this is that it becomes, and we talked about this when we presented at the conference, didn't we Hadji? But my nervousness in this is it becomes a reason to criticise volunteer managers, because that, that just handing of a leaflet, rather than taking the time to go out and build relationships could be for a number of reasons. Right? Yeah, it could be about a lack of resource. It could be about lack of confidence. It could be about not being given permission, literally or kind of metaphorically to do that work. There could be lots of reasons that would prevent a local frontline volunteer manager feeling able or, being able to do that. But the end result is, is it's happening.

AS: But it has to, it has to be purposeful, intentional, doesn't it? It has to be within the organisational purpose or proposition or whatever, their reason for being, in terms of when that wider structure rather than a frontline volunteer manager feeling they have to do this all on their own. That's not how, that's not how it should be.

HS: I, I agree with you there. I think, I think, I think there's a tendency that individuals, they need the tools in terms for them to go out there and to actually take it further. Because at the moment, like I said earlier on, you know, the hierarchy have got all the, all the action funds, but it needs to be able to be filtered through to the managers, and they need to be confident in terms of what they see. And they've got the tools to go out there and do it. Because if they hadn't, and go off on their own back, and they've done something, then all of a sudden, you know, they could be in trouble. So, yeah, I think there is an eagerness for individuals to actually address this. But it's, it's for you to create that environment where people feel they can talk about this stuff, without being labelled a racist.

AS: Yeah, yeah. It's a really good point. Thank you. So, um, the last question for you then is about data collection. So one of the recommendations in the report is to improve our data collection and management, and focus on the quality of volunteer experiences as well as the number of diverse volunteers. So Helen to finish us off today. Why is this focus so important?

HT: I really like that you've made that distinction because my observation and my experience in organisations is that not having the data can often be used - consciously or unconsciously - as a reason not to do anything else. "But we will get some baseline data. And when we've got some baseline data, then we'll develop a strategy." And that's all perfectly logical and reasonable. But actually getting data, quant data on the numbers, the diversity of your volunteer base is pretty tricky in lots of organisations. And it need not, and should not be a barrier to just cracking on and doing some stuff anyway. And what all that data often does is tell you how many of each category you've got. And it's just, for me, I think what this research has really illuminated, I hope, is the value of understanding the quality of the experience, the nature of the experience volunteers are having. And, and being open to comparing or using race or ethnicity as a lens through which to think about the quality of the experience that someone has. And that could be as simple as thinking about data collection as a small number of focus groups, or a couple of conversations, or some small scale interviews, or some really short online pulse check surveys, and worrying less about whether it's statistically representative, and recognising the power that can come from capturing and genuinely hearing firsthand experiences. So of course, big quantitative data sets, and rigorous tracking over time of the breakdown or the proportion of different communities in your volunteer base is useful, but it's not the only thing. My worry is it becomes a barrier to doing anything, if it's seen as the only place to start. But it's a good place to start, but it's not the only place to start.

AS: Brilliant, thank you. So that comes the end of our fascinating chat with you both. Thank you so much, Helen and Hadji for spending the time with us and talking about this important research. So referring to the foreword in the research by Natasha Broomfield-Reid of Diverse Matters. And she says that this research might not be a surprise for some. And I think that will be the case of many volunteer managers, actually, as we have first hand experience of many of the issues outlined in your reports. What we haven't had, however, is the independent indepth research available to validate these experiences, and make the changes required. And I totally hear you, taking that completely on board about, OK, now we've got this, we've got this evidence, now we need to make it count. And we need to think in AVM about the role we can play in bringing this, bringing people together to be able to host these conversations and start to create this environment, and the support for volunteer managers who I know want to do these changes. How can we support them? So thank you so much for your time. I want to thank the four organisations who participated in this research, in enabling us to, um to really make the start and have the evidence in place to, to get cracking on this work. So thank you. That's it from us. Until next time, goodbye.

HT: Thank you.

HS: Thank you.

(Transcribed by https://otter.ai)