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research article

The role of small voluntary sector organisations in tackling complex social challenges: lessons from a charity serving asylum seekers and refugees

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There is a growing body of research on small Voluntary Sector Organisations' (VSOs) contribution to tackling complex social challenges. It focuses on *how* small VSOs work to address these challenges, as opposed to *what* the measurable impact of that work is. This article adds to that body of work by providing a new analytical account of how a small VSO works; in this case what shapes that work is the extent to which it is collaborative, responsive and collective, and voluntarily driven in nature. This article also takes the research to a new setting; that of small VSOs working to better the welfare of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ASRs).

Keywords voluntary sector organisations • asylum seekers and refugees • leadership • leadership-as-practice

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Introduction

There is a growing body of research on the contribution that small Voluntary Sector Organisations (VSOs) make to tackling complex social challenges (Milbourne, 2013; Rochester, 2013; McGovern, 2017; Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021; Dayson et al, 2022). Literature on small VSOs suggests their work is shaped by their local embeddedness and care-based cultures as well as the high levels of stakeholder ambiguity and voluntary action which are common in these organisations (Billis and Glennerster, 1998; Dayson et al, 2022). What this research shares is a focus on *how* small VSOs work to address complex social challenges, as opposed to *what* the measurable impact of that work is. This article adds to that body of work by providing a new analytical account of how a small VSO works. In this case, the findings suggest that what shapes the work is the extent to which it is collaborative, responsive and collective and voluntarily driven in nature. This article also moves the research on how small VSOs work forwards in two ways.

First, it takes the research to a new setting; that of small VSOs working to better the welfare of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (ASRs) in the UK. In this article small VSOs are taken to be those with incomes below £100,000 (NCVO, 2020). There is very little existing literature on these organisations specifically, in contrast to larger national bodies such as the Refugee Council (McGhee et al, 2016; Garkisch et al, 2017; Tonkiss, 2018). However, migration literature suggests ASR needs are complex and extreme, and that they need multiple sources of support to have them met (Allsopp et al, 2014; Phillimore et al, 2019). The policy of dispersing asylum seekers to live in different parts of the country, alongside the fragmentation of services for them, leaves these often-traumatised people in difficult living situations with complex, often unmet needs. Research has shown that the numbers of small VSOs working with ASRs have proliferated in dispersal areas, but studies into the nature of how they work to address their clients' needs are largely absent from the literature (Findlay et al, 2007). This article helps to fill that gap by exploring how one small VSO works to improve the welfare of the ASRs it serves.

Secondly, this article uses a still developing theoretical perspective, which comes from the leadership studies literature rather than voluntary sector studies, but which is particularly well suited to understanding the nature of practice as it unfolds day-to-day in informal organisations: that being Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P) (Raelin, 2016). This article makes the case that the L-A-P theoretical perspective, which is starting to be adopted in the growing field of voluntary sector leadership research (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021), is particularly useful in studies which seek to understand *how* an organisation works as opposed to *what* it does. This is due to its flexibility and focus on patterns in practice that emerge from relational interactions.

The research which this article draws on is a single case study that was carried out in 2020–2021 and was framed by the following research question: *how is leadership practiced at a small asylum seeker and refugee (ASR) charity?* The case study is referred to in this article by the pseudonym 'Poppy'. A single case study was chosen because it provided the opportunity to gather a greater amount and variety of data than would be possible covering multiple cases with a lighter touch, in order to shed light on what is an open research question. The study also took place through the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions in the UK which, while it constrained some elements of fieldwork, also provided an opportunity to research an organisation in depth throughout these extraordinary circumstances. Although a single study does limit the generalisability of the findings, many of the insights resonate with earlier research on small VSOs, thereby enabling this article to build on the analytical understanding of how these organisations contribute to tackling complex social challenges. It also starts to fill the gap in published literature that currently exists on small ASR VSOs. This article will take the following structure; first, an introduction to the literature on how small VSOs work, on the dynamics surrounding ASR VSOs and leadership in the voluntary sector; second, a summary of the context of the study; third, an outline of the methodology and theoretical perspective used for the case study; fourth, a summary of findings; and fifth, a discussion about these findings, the limitations of the study and ideas for future research.

Literature review

Understanding the role small VSOs have in tackling complex social problems goes to the heart of fundamental questions about the existence and purpose of the voluntary

sector. These questions have exercised scholars of the sector over the last half century as it has developed into an academic field (Kendall and Knap, 1995; Harris, 2016). A central argument in the literature is that small VSOs have a comparative advantage over organisations from the state and for-profit sectors (Billis and Glennerster, 1998). This concept rests on the idea that because there is a high level of stakeholder ambiguity at VSOs, they are better able to understand and serve their users. Stakeholder ambiguity refers to the idea that people involved in running VSOs often have some lived experience or understanding of the disadvantage being addressed, and therefore wear multiple hats in their work (Billis and Glennerster, 1998). Dayson et al develop this argument further, suggesting that when stakeholder ambiguity is taken alongside a care-based culture and local embeddedness, which are also common features of small VSOs, their role becomes clear (Dayson et al, 2022).

There is a small and broadly optimistic literature looking at small VSOs which is drawn from practitioner-based research and which builds further understanding of their role in tackling complex social problems (Milbourne, 2013; Rochester, 2013; McGovern, 2017). McGovern argues that smaller VSOs can help build a counter-narrative to that focused on the necessity to grow and professionalise to survive (McGovern, 2017). This can be achieved, she argues, by focusing on social mission as the driving force of VSOs (McGovern, 2013; 2017). Meanwhile, Rochester suggests that in the mainstream literature, there are two common but erroneous assumptions about VSOs; one being that they are hierarchical organisations led by paid managers, and the other being that volunteering is a gift of time which is analogous to a gift of money (Rochester, 2013). His argument is that in small VSOs voluntary action plays a larger and more complex role than allowed for in most of the discourse on the sector, including as a source of self-help and mutuality (Rochester, 2013). These authors set a precedent for promoting practice-based research, which helps to flesh out the picture of how small VSOs work to tackle complex social challenges. This study builds on that approach, in this case looking at a small VSO focused on ASR needs in the UK.

Research on small ASR VSOs in the UK is mostly absent in the literature (Garkisch et al, 2017). However, existing migration research does help to sketch out what we might expect to see in terms of what is needed from these organisations. The case has been made that since 2000 state support for ASRs has steadily shrunk, with some academics arguing this has reached the point of intentionally impoverishing those without settled status (Allsopp et al, 2014; Darling, 2016; Coddington et al, 2020). Successive governments have been explicit about their hostility to illegal migration (Wilcock, 2019). Refugees who arrive through unofficial routes have been caught in the crossfire of this policy approach and the broader divisions in society around migration and race which peaked during the 2016 EU referendum campaigns (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017). Phillimore's extensive research on refugees' ways of coping tells us that this situation causes them to construct complex bricolages of support to meet their basic needs (Phillimore, 2019). Meanwhile, other studies show VSO services to be a crucial part of this patchwork (Wren, 2007), and the need for their work has grown and spread to new parts of the country since 2000. With a few exceptions (MacKenzie et al, 2012) there is little in the literature that explores how small VSOs support ASRs, a gap this article seeks to address.

The final literature that informs this article is that on leadership in the UK voluntary sector, which is proving to be fertile ground for developing rich accounts of how small VSOs deliver on their role in tackling complex social problems. Research into

leadership in the UK voluntary sector has been described as ‘embryonic’ (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012: 5). The work of a small number of scholars to build that research base is beginning to feed through into the published literature (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021; Mumbi and Obembe, 2022; Walsh and Johnston, 2022). Rather than taking the dominant approach to leadership research, which focuses on individual leaders and to what extent they match up to heroic prototypes, as has been used in some studies of the sector (Paton and Brewster, 2008; Howieson and Hodges, 2014), these authors have taken a more practice-based approach to understanding leadership, viewing it as a relational and collective endeavour (Terry et al, 2020).

In their work on grassroots associations, Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees (2021) adopt a Leadership-as-Practice perspective, which focuses on relational interactions rather than hierarchical structures, and also takes account of the influence of context on the practice of leadership (Raelin, 2017). The authors argue that this is suitable to studying small VSOs because of the relatively un-hierarchical, cooperative and localised nature of their work (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021). In L-A-P, leadership is understood as an emergent process which determines the direction of a group or organisation’s work (Crevani and Endrissat, 2016). Leadership practice is defined as an assemblage of interwoven human and non-human elements that interact to create meaning, and these meaningful interactions make up a bricolage of activity which constitutes the process of leadership (Sergi, 2016; Simpson, 2016). It does not focus on leadership as the actions of individual leaders or on outcomes. L-A-P research in voluntary-sector studies is still rare, however that which exists draws on the broader collective approach to leadership (Ospina et al, 2020) which has been used to explore voluntary work and social movements in the US (Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Quick, 2017).

Context

In the UK, the UN definition of a refugee, which focuses on a person being outside of their country of origin and unable to return due to fear of persecution, is legally enshrined (Migration Observatory, 2020). Asylum seekers are a legally distinct group who do not have the right to remain in the country until their case for refugee status has been heard (Sales, 2002). Since 2000 the UK has had a policy of dispersal, which sends asylum seekers to live in cluster areas around the country while their application is considered (Home Office, 1998). State-led services for ASRs are partial and fragmented (Sales, 2002; Allsopp et al, 2014; Coddington et al, 2020), and since 2000 the asylum system has developed in the context of erratic but overall increasing numbers of people claiming asylum (Migration Observatory, 2020).¹

The voluntary sector has a historical role in supporting ASRs in Britain (Wren, 2007), and since 2000 a newer generation of local ASR-focused VSOs has emerged (Findlay et al, 2007). These organisations, of which Poppy is one, are often small and localised (Garkisch et al, 2017). Poppy is based in a post-industrial, relatively poor city in the North-East of England which is a dispersal centre. Hostility to ASRs is an issue and the response of the city council to the needs of ASRs in recent years can be described as minimalist (Darling, 2016; Bowler and Razak, 2020). Poppy is a registered charity, which started in 2002 as a weekly volunteer run drop-in for ASRs and which remained an entirely volunteer-run organisation until 2016, when it took on the sole employee who is now the manager. As the profile of ASRs in the city has evolved, so have Poppy’s services. In particular, it has expanded to provide social

and welfare activities for women and families. During the study the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the way Poppy operated, and included temporary closure of the drop-in to be replaced by telephone referral services and doorstep visits for practical and emotional support. Poppy has a dual focus on improving life for asylum seekers and helping them to integrate into the local community, both before and after their refugee status is decided. Poppy's annual income is in the region of £50,000–£100,000 which comes primarily from trusts and foundations.

Methodology

The overarching research question for the study which this article draws on was: *how is leadership practiced at a small asylum seeker and refugee charity?* This section outlines the methodology and theoretical perspective used to answer that question. The aspiration behind the research was to better understand the realities of how small VSOs function day-to-day, and the influences and practices that enable and constrain these organisations in trying to achieve their charitable missions, in order to build on our understanding of the role they play. It was therefore appropriate to adopt a fairly open research question, methodological approach and theoretical perspective. I settled on a single case-study approach because it enabled me to spend significant time with Poppy and dig deep into practice, gathering more, as well as a greater variety of data than would have been possible across multiple cases in the 14-month period (Yin, 2017). This allowed for the kind of rich inductive learning associated with ethnography, while also encouraging data collection from a wide set of sources to allow triangulation and lend weight to my findings (Saunders et al, 2019). It is also in keeping with the L-A-P perspective, which is often adopted in studies that use observation and immersive fieldwork alongside interviews to enable insights that might not be generated with more streamlined interview-based studies. Taking the L-A-P perspective helped to clarify and define my strategic approach while retaining a high degree of flexibility (Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees, 2021). It defined what I should be looking at, that being every-day interactions. It also guided me as to how to understand what I was looking at, as a complex web of interactions between people, place, and thing. Finally, it also helped me to evaluate what I was looking at by considering whether particular interactions and customs were driving the overall direction of Poppy's work.

Poppy was identified via a scoping study in 2019 exploring nine VSOs through desk research and semi-structured interviews. The sampling for these organisations was purposive in that I was seeking VSOs that included the characteristics of being small, focused on ASR needs, and based in dispersal areas. These VSOs were identified using a snowballing technique (Parker et al, 2019). Poppy was selected as the sole case study and I conducted 14 months of fieldwork and collected the data which is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 demonstrates that the amount and variety of data was substantial. It covers as exhaustive and varied a set of data on Poppy's activities as I could gather, given the time and resources available. I identified interviewees based on their relationship to Poppy, and was guided by the principle of trying to interview as many people as possible covering a broad set of relationships. This was successful, interviewees included all trustees and staff as well as volunteers and representatives of the key service-delivery partners which included other VSOs, the local authority and private-sector

Table 1: Data collected

Quantity	Breakdown	Notes
Semi-structured interviews		
28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 with trustees • 1 employee • 5 volunteers • 1 local authority senior manager • 1 funder • 4 voluntary sector workers • 1 private sector provider 	Interviews lasted on average 47 minutes. Seven were conducted face to face and 21 using skype due to COVID-19 restrictions. Three trustees and the manager took part in multiple interviews.
Document review		
Internally produced for internal audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager's reports 2016–2021 • Trustee minutes 2013–2021 • Emails between trustees • WhatsApp conversations between volunteers and clients 	These documents provided me with an understanding of the range and frequency of the charity's current and past activity. They also provided insight into the tone of communications and trustee and manager's views of external collaborators.
Internally produced for external audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters from 2011–2018 (newsletters have not been produced since then) • Annual reports and accounts from 2013–2019 • Online presence (website, Facebook page) 	These documents gave me a historic record of the charity's activity and financial situation. The newsletters provided rich detail on the charity's activities and the emphasis and pride placed on elements of the work to a supportive audience.
Externally produced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press reports on asylum issues and related far right activity in the locality • Sub-sector newsletters and updates during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 • Correspondence between a volunteer and local councillors on asylum seeker issues 	These documents gave me insight into the collaborative activity going on in the city, local contextual information on the ASR experience and charity's operating environment.
Observations		
37 face-to-face 31 zoom observation visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office based work, weekly drop in and weekly women's group sessions (physical and online) • Trustee meetings (physical and online) • Annual planning day meeting (physical) • Refugee week planning meeting and refugee events (online) • Multi agency meetings and a local women's network group (physical) • Voluntary sector response to asylum seeker needs co-ordination meetings (online) 	With these visits I aimed to observe as wide a range of the charity's activities as possible. During COVID-19 I was unable to take part in doorstep support due to restrictions on travel. I was able to observe the full range of the charity's activities other than this.
1 field journal	60 pages/35,618 words	This documents my observations as well as my reflections and emotions while carrying out fieldwork.

providers. These were semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview schedule with a set of questions about daily practice and leadership, the intention being to draw out different perspectives on how Poppy's work was delivered. I also conducted a series of interviews with two trustees and the manager who became, of necessity, the core team during the COVID-19 pandemic, capturing their reflections as those

extraordinary circumstances developed. These interviews were also semi-structured and based around general questions about how they were feeling, how they felt Poppy was coping and changing in response to COVID-19, and concerns for the future. The insights from these interviews helped to build the picture of practice as it emerged, and to solidify or adapt themes. My field journal and document review notes were also very helpful because they brought to life day-to-day interactions alongside the perspectives and experiences shared in interviews. Comparing the different types of data helped me to triangulate findings and lend weight to the importance of different patterns and types of interaction in Poppy's work.

In order to arrive at my findings, I followed a process of thematic analysis (TA) using Braun and Clarke's stages of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). My data analysis took place iteratively over the 14 months of fieldwork and in the two months following it. During this time, I moved back and forth between data collection and analysis, using NVivo as a tool to support my analysis, in which all data (see Table 1 for full breakdown) was coded and organised into themes. I did this alongside activities including free writing and discussion with participants, to stimulate what Gabriel calls our 'inquiring imagination' (Gabriel, 2015: 334), in order to establish which data were most relevant to the research question. Through this iterative process I first created more than ten themes, which I gradually reduced to four focused themes by combining earlier versions and discarding some. Those which were discarded, for example, one focusing on fundraising, felt illuminating in terms of Poppy's practice but did not materially further our understanding of how small VSOs tackle complex challenges. I also developed vignettes iteratively alongside the thematic analysis. These were drawn from experiences in the field, informal conversations and my field notes, and the drafting process helped me crystallise the themes. The vignettes were then revised for use in this article, with the aim of helping to evoke multilayered and complex practice for the reader in a way that might not be achieved by quotes alone.

My position as a researcher was one of participant observer, by which I mean that, as well as observing the work of Poppy, I became an active member of the group I was studying. My participation took the form of practical work such as helping to set up and clear away the drop-in. During the course of the fieldwork, I avoided participating in such a way that may significantly alter practice at Poppy. For example, I was a silent observer at trustee meetings. The intention of taking on this active but not influential role was to alter practice as little as possible during fieldwork and therefore focus on understanding rather than influencing change.² Throughout the fieldwork I found that to achieve good reflexive practice I needed to both take breaks from fieldwork and try to cultivate a state of mind in which I was conscious of my own feelings and value-based reactions to situations I found myself in. Doing this helped me to come out with a thick description (Geertz, 1973) that reflects perspectives in all their richness, rather than simply reading the data through my own values (Simons, 2009).

Findings

The findings of the study are organised into four themes which, when taken collectively, paint a holistic picture of Poppy's work. The themes presented here don't cover everything Poppy does, rather they illuminate the aspects of the work which are most directly relevant to tackling the challenges their clients face. Each summary is accompanied by quotes from interviews and a vignette, which is an evocative description to illustrate the theme. These

vignettes are not data as such but have been developed using the data gathered to provide the reader with insights into the theme. The findings are then crystallised into a conceptual statement which draws together the distinctive elements of practice. The wording of this statement intentionally draws on the concepts used in the theme summaries.

Theme one: collaborative practice

Collaborative activities and relationships are at the heart of Poppy's work. The metaphor of a safety net, that Poppy's manager and volunteers weave with partners across the city, can be used to evoke how they ensure that, despite the fragmentation and diminution of asylum services, ASRs are able to access support when they need it. As one housing manager put it: 'I cannot fault Poppy, they made my job 50x easier, because I knew I had a central point where I could direct the families or the single females and males and I knew they would be helped 100%' (Interview 24, housing manager). And as a refugee and former trustee put it:

Poppy is really doing a crucial role for asylum seeker and refugees, not only because they provide a social place, it's because there are different agencies coming to that place and solicitors as well, that's really important for asylum seekers because as I've told you before the Home Office they just drop you to a city then go. (Interview 4, ASR and former trustee)

A central example of collaborative leadership practice is Poppy's drop-in, where service providers gather to assist ASRs, and ASRs gather to socialise and access the support they need. This is evoked in Vignette one. Another example is the set of specific relationships Poppy's manager and trustees have with local housing providers and the local authority which, when they are working well, can deliver better welfare for ASR clients. This collaborative work is set against the backdrop of social power structures that threaten and inhibit ASR welfare. These include both the Home Office's decision-making power about whether an ASR can remain in the country, and local hostility and racism. Poppy is shown to counter this hostility by shifting how the local narrative around ASRs is framed. It does this in a quiet and collaborative way with educational and service-providing bodies, which is characteristic of leadership practice at Poppy.

Vignette one: the drop-in

At one end of the church hall is the front door, welcome desk and pool table. At the other end is a kitchen and serving hatch where hot food is distributed fortnightly. In the central space tables and chairs are set out surgery-style where representatives of different services meet clients. The room feels cold and cavernous on first entry until it begins to fill up. Quickly, the pool table comes to life with squabbling young African men who revert to the teenage boys they so recently were. In front of the kitchen is a large table for food distribution which takes on the feel of a market stall with the trustee in charge promoting the wares in four languages. In the central space a hubbub of humanity has taken over with people in situations representing the full

spectrum of human experience. The man who heard of the death of two relatives that morning sits quietly in a corner, a newly-registered client wants to know who he can talk to about the lack of a shaving mirror in his bathroom, a man on parole is about to be made homeless and is seeking help and an elderly lady has just received her refugee status and is handing out chocolates in celebration.

Poppy's table acts as a kind of triage for the wider drop-in while also registering new clients and handing out gym-and-swim vouchers to the many regular takers. A representative of the housing provider is here and is in demand because the helpline for housing issues currently keeps people waiting up to two hours. The legal aid solicitor is here taking general queries, having completed his appointments for the morning at Poppy's office across the road. A representative of the MP's office is here and the other charities that provide for ASRs in the city occupy a desk each. Clients can be seen zigzagging from one desk to another seeking to resolve a series of problems and questions they have built up since the last drop-in. Those with no obvious solution bounce back to Poppy. The soon-to-be-homeless man has been turned away by the local authority, so a trustee phones around and a bed is found at the YMCA. The man who has lost family members decides he will accompany the trustee and fellow ASRs going to the football match that weekend, drawing on the society of friends that Poppy enables. The elderly lady who is now officially a refugee enjoys the hugs and congratulations of Poppy's volunteers who have been alongside her on this leg of her journey.

Theme two: client-driven practice

A major element of Poppy's work is responding directly to ASR needs. Poppy's manager and volunteers fill the gaps left by other service providers directly, and with a level of compassion and responsiveness that they see as lacking in the wider environment ASRs find themselves living in. As one trustee put it: 'you know we have a great principle of being kind, with our organisation I always think if you can be anything be kind, and that's our principle' (Interview 27, trustee); and another said: 'I think we are rightly or wrongly primarily responsive... but there's so much to be responsive to' (Interview 2, chair of trustees).

This approach in turn sets the direction for the organisation, both at the mundane day-to-day level and in terms of its overall mission, because practice is often driven by a commitment to reactive, in-the-moment, support from the manager and trustees. This practice helps meet immediate needs, but the chaotic build-up of 'stuff' (literally resources for distribution to ASRs) it generates is a source of stress and tension. This is evoked in Vignette two. It provides a clear direction for mission delivery, but also gives a sense of how the needs of clients crowd in on Poppy's manager and trustees in both a physical and emotional sense. Overall, in studying how clients interacted with Poppy, the picture that emerged is one in which support is delivered in such a way as to let the things that matter to ASRs define how the mission is delivered.

Vignette two: stuff

The awareness of ‘stuff’ begins the moment you walk through the door. Poppy occupies two floors of an office building, the first of which is a large open-plan office-cum-meeting-room with a small, closed corner office for meetings requiring privacy. The second-floor space has the same footprint and is nominally assigned to the storage of donated items and a bike repair workshop. However, goods including clothes, baby equipment and dried foods flow down the stairs and are stacked in every corner of the available space. It is not possible to get through the door and see the manager at her desk without first dodging around Moses baskets and baby car seats piled in the space between the two.

Theme three: collective practice

Poppy can be understood as a partnership between settled residents of the city and ASRs. The trustees felt from the start that in order to effectively serve ASRs, the board needs to properly understand their needs, and so it is made up of both ASRs and long-term residents. As one ASR trustee put it: ‘The major thing the charity does is to support asylum seekers so how do you support someone when you don’t know what they’re thinking or how they’re feeling?’ (Interview 13, ASR trustee and client). In recounting his experiences, another former trustee (Interview 4, former ASR trustee and client) shared the following:

I was told about Poppy, somebody took me there and I met the manager who was very happy to meet me as well because I speak English and there were many people from my country, so I was there to get help, but it didn’t really take me very long before I start helping others.... I was happy to start working and I became a member of Poppy trustees.

Data that feeds into this theme shows that, in order to make this approach work, flexibility and sacrifice are required by all parties. In this case, the non-ASR trustees are expected to take on a larger share of the practical work of the charity, while ASR trustees whose lives are complex and demanding are valued for their lived experience more than the hours they can offer as volunteers. This theme also explores how duties are structurally shared between trustees and the manager and how this is required to flex, such as during COVID-19 when a more streamlined decision-making structure was required and the manager, the chair and the treasurer were given the authority to effectively run Poppy on behalf of the wider board. This is evoked in Vignette three, which describes the moment when this change happened. The effectiveness of a collective leadership approach is seen in this adaptability, but also the necessity of being open to an ongoing relational dance as authority and action shifts between players.

Vignette three: formation of ‘the three’

Monday 16 March 2020: the effects of COVID-19 have been creeping in over the past couple of weeks. My journal notes on 6 March that the women’s group

decided to cancel the bring-a-dish element of their international women's day celebration. On 11 March I arrived at the office to bulk orders of hand sanitiser and disposable hand towels and the manager had cancelled fresh food deliveries for that week's drop-in. Over the weekend, via email, it has felt like things are coming to a head with some of the trustees increasingly concerned about the safety of the drop-in and starting to suggest they won't be able to attend.

Now on Monday morning I am in the office tidying the remnants of a display the manager had been working on for the women's group. She is at home with swollen glands. The chair and the treasurer arrive, one with a carload of donated clothes for us to sort through. When that is done a meeting is called, we sit around the now clear square of tables, newly conscious of how close it is ok to sit. There was no plan other than to gather here and discuss arrangements so I suggest putting my phone on speaker and calling the manager so the other two can talk with her. This is done, and in a few minutes the key decisions are made; the drop-in must close, Facebook, the website and WhatsApp groups must be updated so the clients know. Working out how to keep clients informed and how to support them in the absence of clear guidance from the government will have to be ongoing.

It is proposed and agreed that the three on the call become a core decision-making group, able to bypass the collective of the trustee board as needed for the duration of the pandemic, whatever that may be. Later that day this is agreed via email by the wider group of trustees. And just like that it's done, the charity has taken on a new configuration; one that will hopefully see it through the turbulent months ahead.

Theme four: voluntary practice

This theme illuminates how voluntary action is central to how things get done at Poppy. As one stakeholder who had a long history of working with refugees and had recently arrived in the city put it:

We're in an atmosphere of chronic injustices that some of our refugee community have to live through, and I think there are people who say that's not how the city should be and in the absence of a council doing very much people have come together. It's been really encouraging to see... it's just good people, you know, Poppy people, doing good stuff for refugees because it needs doing. (Interview 11, voluntary sector partner)

Voluntary action forms the bulk of the work delivered, and it has been a positive choice to work in this way as opposed to employing more people, with the trustees believing that the act of volunteering has an inherent value. The manager frames it as follows: 'I think that is fundamentally part of the philosophy of Poppy (volunteering) because it's grown from people who are motivated to be volunteers not to be workers' (Interview 25, manager).

This has meant that Poppy benefits from people who may not otherwise be able to contribute, for example, ASRs who are not allowed to work but have some of the most essential skills required, including translation. As so many of the clients of Poppy also volunteer and those who govern it (trustees) also tend to do hands-on volunteering, there is a great deal of stakeholder ambiguity. This is evoked in Vignette four. This has real benefits for Poppy's work as in the case of ASR volunteers who can translate for, meaningfully empathise with, and advise newer arrivals. A downside is that it can be hard for people to draw boundaries around their role, and it can lead to overstretch and burnout, as was seen with some individuals during this study. Through this it benefits from all the energy people are willing to give. As a small VSO it is relatively resource-poor, but it is rich in its pool of willing volunteers.

Vignette four: Abel

The first time I meet Abel is at the volunteer induction. He is there to be inducted himself as a bike volunteer and to translate for a fellow volunteer.

The second time I meet Abel is at the drop-in where he is taking requests for bike repairs in between chatting with his friends. I learn he has been trained as a bike mechanic and now has the skills to do simple repairs alone.

The third time I meet Abel is when he knocks on the door interrupting a trustee meeting. He is distraught and calls the manager out of the meeting asking for help. It turns out his solicitor has called to say the letter containing the outcome of his asylum claim has been sent to his former address. He can see the post through a window but can't get into the building or contact anyone who might be able to help. The manager makes a series of phone calls, and a plan is formed to get a new copy of the letter and funding for the journey to meet his solicitor. Abel goes away calmer and having received both practical and emotional support.

The fourth time I hear about Abel is from the chair who says he's been invaluable distributing food and support packages to people in his shared residence and neighbourhood through the first COVID-19 lockdown. He knows who lives where (information the charity only has partial access to due to data protection regulations) and he can translate for those in need of support.

Conceptual summary of the findings

The findings suggest that Poppy's work is driven by collective agency which includes both the beneficiaries of the work as well as those that deliver it. This practice is embedded in relational interactions, and the fluid, flexible nature of the work allows practices, people and the environment to recursively shape each other over time. The day-to-day work is also shaped by relationships with external stakeholder agencies.

The manager and trustees work collaboratively with these agencies to enhance the welfare of ASRs. The contextual factors of local hostility, and the local repercussions of immigration policy, are seen as powerful external forces that impact on how effective Poppy can be in improving ASR welfare. These forces also limit Poppy's public-facing activities, but help drive its people to channel time and resource into responsive and collaborative work that helps to build a safety net capable of supporting ASRs through the hardest of times.

Discussion and conclusion

This purpose of this article is to build on the analytical account being developed in the literature of how small VSOs contribute to tackling complex social challenges, and fill the gap that exists in that literature on the work of small ASR VSOs. It has a particular focus on the role and contribution of leadership, using the holistic framing provided by the L-A-P perspective, which enables us to understand what the dynamics are that make things happen at small VSOs. The findings presented here provide a snapshot of the rich and evocative insights gained through fieldwork at Poppy in 2021–2022. In doing this they bring the analytical work into a new space; that of ASR VSOs. What the findings demonstrate is that practice at Poppy is collaborative, responsive and collective, and voluntarily driven in nature. The findings of this research do not attempt to evaluate the value or impact of Poppy's work, but nonetheless they do bring out examples where working in this way plays a meaningful role in tackling the complex social challenges ASRs face.

In Theme one we see how Poppy becomes the backstop for ASR needs that fall between the gaps of other service providers, and in Theme four we see the multifaceted way in which Abel both gives and receives support from Poppy. The findings demonstrate some of the more challenging repercussions of working in this way, including the stress and tension that can develop as a result of being so responsive to client needs, as explored in Theme two. The findings also demonstrate that how Poppy works is also inextricably interlinked with the ASR context it works in. Collaborative working is essential in a welfare system that is fragmented, partial and at times actively hostile. Responsiveness and a focus on relationships is necessary to reach a client base which has been through extreme trauma, and a reliance on voluntary action is as necessary as it is desirable in a resource-poor context. As part of this collaborative approach, Poppy works closely with larger charities. For example, its drop-in accommodates desks for the Red Cross and other national ASR charities. However, it is Poppy, as the small local charity invested in its particular place, that provides the convening and coordinating role for these other services to reach those that need them.

The analytical account of how Poppy tackles the complex social challenges facing ASRs resonates with and complicates arguments in some of the existing literature on the contribution of small VSOs. These accounts have highlighted the localised nature of many small VSOs (Dayson et al, 2022), as is the case with Poppy which is focused on one city. They also highlight the care-based, social mission-driven nature of a small VSO's work, in contrast to what McGovern calls the measurement-driven neoliberal framework for understanding VSOs which larger organisations and their funders more commonly adhere to (McGovern, 2017; Dayson et al, 2022). We see this characteristic in Theme one through the drop-in and wider collaborative safety

net which has been Poppy's main activity since it was founded. In this theme we see how client needs drive Poppy's strategy and way of delivering support. This kind, consistent practice, delivered mainly by volunteers, chimes with McGovern's call to understand the value of what small VSOs do, by focusing on the altruistic motives that often define them (McGovern, 2017).

The extent to which Poppy's work is delivered through voluntary action also builds on previous work on the nature of how small VSOs work. All the people carrying out Poppy's work as described in the findings are volunteers, with the exception of the paid manager. This stands in contrast to larger VSOs where there is a greater reliance on paid professional staff, and chimes with Rochester's argument that voluntary action should be valued above and beyond its monetary value (Rochester, 2013). Linked to the role of volunteers, Billis and Glennerster's (1998) concept of comparative advantage which stems from stakeholder ambiguity also resonates with the findings, an example of which is given in Vignette four. However, in the case of Poppy, the damage that can be caused by blurred boundaries is also highlighted in examples of overstretch and the risk of burnout in Themes two and three. This demonstrates that, while the approach of small VSOs is worthy of greater recognition it is also problematic in some ways, and I would argue that research has a role to play in unpacking these challenges as much as the positive dynamics.

The L-A-P perspective taken in this study encourages the researcher to consider leadership in the round through all sources, and the themes in the findings were organically derived from this holistic conceptual approach. This is in contrast to traditional leadership theories which focus on individual leaders or formal governance structures and processes. This study serves to strengthen the case made by Jacklin-Jarvis and Rees (2021) that there is value in adopting an L-A-P perspective when seeking to give analytical insight into how small VSOs deliver their work day-to-day. These organisations are typically local, specialised in focus, dependent on volunteers with permeable boundaries and ambiguous stakeholders. This study strengthens the idea that the practice associated with these characteristics can be illuminated through the L-A-P perspective, and using it benefitted the study by providing many different routes to understanding leadership practice as it happens. The findings show leadership as emerging through a range of different people and relationships, including the contextual influences or 'whole worlds' of leadership practice Poppy operates through (Carroll, 2016: 96). The L-A-P approach gifts the researcher freedom to observe and analyse interaction that feels material to the practice of leadership, as Raelin puts it, 'wherever and however it appears' (Raelin, 2017: 216).

Finally, the findings of this study also shed particular light on the role of small localised VSOs in the difficult lives of ASRs in the UK. The existing research suggests that huge gaps in support are left by the state and life is made harder still by hostility towards ASRs' very presence in the UK (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017; Wilcock, 2019). This study helps to confirm that small VSOs do work to fill those gaps and build practice that counters that hostility. Themes one and two give tangible examples of the gap-filling services offered, making Poppy central to the process of bricolage that Phillimore has demonstrated is necessary to enable ASRs to navigate life (Phillimore et al, 2019). Themes one, three and four shed light on how Poppy works to reduce hostility by breaking down barriers and influencing local authorities. This brings to light a mitigating role small VSOs play that is not generally acknowledged in the literature on how difficult life for ASRs in the UK can be (Sales, 2002; Allsopp et al,

2014; Coddington et al, 2020). Overall, the findings give insight into the particular methods and ethos of Poppy, and help to fill in the picture of how ASRs are supported to cope and begin to rebuild their lives through the work of small VSOs. This insight has largely been lacking in research on migration and ASR VSOs until now.

Limitations

The context of COVID-19 needs to be acknowledged as a limitation to this study, in that it made some of the planned face-to-face elements of the fieldwork impossible due to government restrictions on movement. It also gave me as a researcher the challenge of balancing research with caring and homeschooling duties, necessitating some breaks in fieldwork. However, this context also offered an opportunity to view closely how a small VSO reacted to and dealt with the uncertainty and constantly evolving challenges the pandemic presented. It also meant that as a researcher my methods matched the new realities of service delivery, from zoom meetings to socially-distanced outdoor activities with clients, which ultimately enriched the data and insights that could be drawn from them.

Another limitation is the extent to which the findings of this single study can be extrapolated to claim they provide insight into the role of small VSOs in tackling complex social problems more widely. Therefore, rather than make a claim to generalisability, this article has drawn out resonances between this study and research that is already published in the literature. Finally, this research is explicitly embedded in the UK context which has its own specific political, social and sectoral dynamics. However, some ideas at the heart of the findings, including the relevance of lived experience to tackling complex social problems and the way in which relational interactions lie at the heart of how small VSOs work, are more universal in nature and provide useful insights that could help inform similar research in different geographies.

In conclusion, this study has added to our understanding of the role small VSOs play in tackling complex social problems. Specifically, it has provided an overview of a deep dive into practice at a small VSO operating in the context of the UK asylum system. This helps to fill the gap that exists on the work of small asylum seeker and refugee VSOs in the current literature. It has also demonstrated the value in taking a practice perspective to leadership research in the voluntary sector. Future studies taking a similar approach would be helpful to further develop our understanding of the role and value of small VSOs.

Notes

¹ The UK policy context on ASRs is rapidly changing at the time of writing; the context outlined in this article covers what the context was at the time of the study in 2020–2022.

² Since the end of the project, I have become a trustee of Poppy.

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