The Motivations to Volunteer: Theoretical and Practical Considerations

E. Gil Clary and Mark Snyder[1]

Department of Psychology, College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota (E.G.C.), and Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota (M.S.)

Abstract

Why do significant numbers of people engage in the unpaid helping activities known as volunteerism? Drawing on functional theorizing about the reasons, purposes, and motivations underlying human behavior, we have identified six personal and social functions potentially served by volunteering. In addition to developing an inventory to assess these motivational functions, our program of research has explored the role of motivation in the processes of volunteerism, especially decisions about becoming a volunteer in the first place and decisions about continuing to volunteer.

Keywords

volunteerism; motivations; psychological functions

Consider the following facts and figures. In 1995, 93 million American adults engaged in some kind of volunteer activity, with the combined hours of work totaling 20.3 billion. These 93 million formal and informal volunteers represented 49% of the adult population, and a quarter of them devoted 5 or more hours per week to volunteer service. Volunteers provided tutoring to children and illiterate adults, companionship to the homebound, counseling to the troubled, and health care to the sick, among other activities.

These facts and figures (provided by Independent Sector, 1996) con- vey several of the features that make volunteering an intriguing psychological phenomenon. First, although about half of all American adults were engaged in volunteerism, half reported no involvement at all. Second, among those who did volunteer, a small fraction exhibited high levels of involvement. Moreover, as a form of planned helping, volunteering is marked by several key characteristics: The helper must seek out the opportunity to help, the helper arrives at this decision after a period of deliberation, the helper provides assistance over time, and the helper's decisions about beginning to help and about continuing to help are influenced by whether the particular activity fits with the helper's own needs and goals. The effortful, sustained, and nonremunerative nature of volunteering raises two fundamental questions: Why do people decide, in the first place, to engage in helpful activities as volunteers? And, having decided to volunteer, why do people continue to serve, sometimes for months and even years?

FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO VOLUNTEERISM

To answer these questions, we have adopted a functional approach to understanding the motivations that prompt people to become volunteers and that sustain their efforts over time. Several considerations recommend functionalist theorizing. First, the functional approach is a motivational perspec- tive that directs inquiry into the personal and social processes that initiate, direct, and sustain action (Katz, 1960). Second, a core proposition of functionalist inquiry is that people can and do perform the same actions in the service of different psychological functions (e.g., different people engage in the same volunteer activity but do so to fulfill different motives). Third, the functional approach suggests that important psychological events, such as embarking on a course of volunteer activities and then maintaining those activities over extended periods of time, depend on matching the motivational concerns of individuals with situations that can satisfy those concerns. Finally, research stimulated by motivationally oriented analyses of a wide variety of cognitive, affective, behavioral, and interpersonal processes supports key functionalist themes (Snyder & Cantor, 1998).

With this broad directive provided by functionalist theorizing, we sought to determine the precise motivations that can be fulfilled through participation in volunteer service. On the basis of our analyses of the functions served by volunteering, and findings from diverse empirical investigations of volunteers, we have identified and operationalized six personal and social functions served by volunteering (Clary et al., 1998). These six functions (see Table 1) are consistent with the results of previous studies of people's reasons for volunteering. Thus, the framework of the functional approach systematizes and organizes a literature that was previously largely atheoretical in orientation (Clary & Snyder, 1991).

ASSESSING MOTIVATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERISM

With the conceptual foundation provided by the functional ap-

Table 1. *Functions served by volunteering and their assessment on the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI)*

Function	Conceptual definition	Sample VFI item
Values	The individual volunteers in order to express or act on important values like humanitarianism.	I feel it is important to help others.
Understanding	The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often unused.	Volunteering lets me learn through direct, hands-on experience.
Enhancement	One can grow and develop psychologically through volunteer activities.	Volunteering makes me feel better about myself.
Career	The volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering.	Volunteering can help me to get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work.
Social	Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen his or her social relationships.	People I know share an interest in community service.
Protective	The individual uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems.	Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles.

proach, we created and refined the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), an instrument that assesses each of the six functions potentially served by volunteering (see Table 1). In research with the VFI, we have inquired about the motivations of currently active volunteers involved in a wide variety of activities, of previous volunteers, and even of nonvolunteers. With these diverse samples, we have found that the individual scales of the VFI possess a high degree of internal consistency (i.e., the items of each scale relate to one another) and responses to the scales are consistent over time; factor analyses of responses to the inventory have demonstrated an internal structure that is consistent with our six-motive conceptualization of the functions served by volunteering. Moreover, the same factor structure emerged when representative items from the VFI were included in a national survey about American adults' giving and volunteering (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). Finally, this factor structure was replicated when the VFI was used with volunteers age 50 or older, and was found superior to models that posited either a single motivational dimension or a two-factor solution (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998).

These findings from factor analyses of the VFI are informative about the internal structure of motivations for volunteering. Additionally, the VFI is informative about the motivations themselves and their importance to respondents. Most typically, respondents report that Values, Understanding, and Enhancement are the most important functions, and that Career, Social, and Protective are less important functions; the ordering and absolute importance, however, does vary across groups (e.g., the Career function is more important to younger respondents and less important to older ones). Furthermore, findings concerning the importance of the functions clearly point to the multimotivational nature of volunteering: Different volunteers pursue different goals, and the same volunteer may be pursuing more than one goal. Indeed, roughly two thirds of respondents indicate having two or more important motivations.

The finding that many volunteers have multiple important motives is intriguing as it speaks to the altruism-egoism debate often found in discussions about helping. This debate involves two opposing arguments: the argument that all helpfulness is motivated by a selfish desire to benefit oneself versus the argument that helpfulness is sometimes based on a selfless concern for the other. Although hardly offering the last word on this long-running controversy, our findings do suggest that people's motivations for performing actions as diverse, complex, and sustained as volunteerism are very likely to be multifaceted. It appears that many volunteers' motivations cannot be neatly classified as either altruistic or egoistic, both because some specific motives combine other-interested and self-interested considerations and because many people indicate that they have both kinds of reasons for volunteering.

MOTIVATIONS AND THE VOLUNTEER PROCESS

Guided by the functional approach and the VFI as a measure of motivations for volunteering, we have explored the role of motivations in the processes of volunteerism—the initiation of volunteer service, volunteers' satisfaction with their experiences, and their commitment to sustained service. The guiding functionalist principle here is that these decisions and be-

haviors depend on the match of an individual's motivations to the opportunities afforded by the volunteering environment.

This *matching hypothesis* suggests that persuasive messages can motivate people to initiate volunteer service to the extent that the messages are tailored to the specific motivations important to individual recipients of the messages. With our colleagues, we tested this hypothesis using a series of videotaped advertising messages, each of which differed in its functional content (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994). We randomly assigned participants to either a functionally matched or a functionally mismatched condition using an earlier assessment of the motivational functions of greatest and least importance for them. As predicted, participants who received a message that matched a motivation of great importance to them found the message more persuasive and were more likely to intend to volunteer in the future than participants who received a mismatched message. This finding, along with a replication that used print advertising (Clary et al., 1998), supports the functionalist hypothesis that attempts to recruit volunteers will succeed to the extent that they address the specific motivational functions underlying behavior and attitudes.

The importance of matching an individual's motivations to the volunteering situation does not end with recruitment. As participation is an ongoing and sustained activity, functionalist theorizing suggests that volunteers whose motivational concerns are served by their participation would derive greater satisfaction than those whose concerns are not met. In a field study conducted with our colleagues (Clary et al., 1998), we first identified the functions important and unimportant to indi-

vidual elderly volunteers (the split between important and unimportant functions depended on whether participants' scores were above or below the median for all participants). Several months later, we determined the extent to which the volunteers received function-specific benefits during their service (again, based on median splits), as well as the degree to which they found their volunteerism satisfying and rewarding. Among individuals who considered a function to be important, those who perceived that they had received relatively greater benefits related to that function were more satisfied than those who perceived that they had received fewer benefits relevant to it. In addition, individuals who perceived receiving relatively greater benefits relevant to a function they considered important were more satisfied than volunteers for whom the function was unimportant, regardless of perceived level of benefit.

If volunteers' satisfaction with their volunteer service is associated with receiving functionally relevant benefits, then it follows that their actual intentions to continue serving as volunteers will also be linked to the matching between experiences and motivations. In support of this hypothesis, we found that university students who received functionally relevant benefits from being engaged in a program of community service expressed greater intentions to continue as volunteers, both in the short-term and in the long-term future, than did volunteers who did not receive functionally relevant benefits or who received functionally irrelevant benefits (Clary et al., 1998). Finally, a pair of conceptually related, longitudinal investigations found that fulfilling important motivations predicted actual commitment to volunteering (Clary & Miller, 1986; Omoto & Snyder, 1995).

PROMOTING VOLUNTEERING

In keeping with the fact that helping and other prosocial activities promote smooth social functioning and encourage social harmony, many societies view participation in volunteer activities as highly desirable, and people are encouraged through diverse avenues of socialization to become volunteers. In fact, some American educational institutions are now requiring, as opposed to inspiring, students to participate in community service activities as a part of their curriculum of studies and even as a condition of graduation (Sobus, 1995). Although requiring people, and particularly young people, to engage in community service may have desirable effects (e.g., increasing actual participation in the present), mandating "volunteerism" may prove counterproductive in the long run. There is a body of research that suggests that applying external pressures to perform some action will not necessarily lead to the behavior once the pressures are removed, and may even result in shifting the locus, or origin, of the motivational force or dynamic from the person to the environment (e.g., Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973).

Recently, we explored this process in a "mandatory volunteerism" program in which university students were required to perform 40 hr of community service over the course of a semester (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999). Of particular concern were these students' intentions to volunteer in the future at the conclusion of the program, and the relation of these intentions to students' preservice levels of perceived control over their decision to volunteer and prior volunteering experience (an operationalization of

their initial interest in this activity). As expected, for those students who felt that their participation was under their own control (and thus perceived less external control to volunteer), greater future intentions to volunteer were associated with greater previous volunteer experience. However, for those students who felt external pressure to volunteer, there was a slightly negative relationship between prior experience and future intentions to volunteer. Moreover, these students had lower future intentions to volunteer than students who felt that they had retained personal control.

Thus, volunteerism provides an inviting opportunity to explore the empirical debate over the immediate and long-term impact of compelling people to act. Our study of mandatory volunteering is congruent with other studies on the influence of external constraints, particularly those that take the form of requirements or rewards. Overall, this work suggests that great care should be taken when requiring people to perform the socially desirable activity of volunteering. Certainly, immediate volunteering can be induced by requiring students to serve, but it seems that future choices to volunteer will be less likely if the initial experience is accompanied by perceptions of external control. Our findings suggest that a more promising approach to promoting future involvement in volunteerism would couple a general requirement for students to participate in volunteer activities with a sense that their particular courses of action are under personal control. Future investigations will be needed to explore this possibility.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this program of research, we have sought to uncover the motivational foundations of the sustained, ongoing, and planned helpfulness of volunteerism. Guided by functionalist psychological theorizing, we have identified diverse personal and social motivations served by volunteering, developed an inventory to measure those motivational functions, and explored their role in the volunteer process. A recurring theme in investigations of the motivations in actual volunteering situations is that volunteer behaviors do not depend solely on the person or on the situation, but rather depend on the interaction of person-based dynamics and situational opportunities. Finally, in addition to our following the Lewinian tradition of emphasizing both personal and situational forces, our work continues the Lewinian action-research tradition in its pursuit of both theoretical and practical ends.

Note

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