Public Service Motivation from the Volunteer Resource Manager Perspective

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Abstract

Qualitative research on public service motivation (PSM) is rare, and volunteer resource manager perspectives on PSM have not been explored in the research literature, even though volunteer resource managers deal directly with individuals involved in voluntary work that could be expected to be driven by inspiration and motivation. Using data generated from in-person biographical interviews with Birmingham-area volunteer resource managers, the study reported here examined the PSM values of volunteer resource managers and looks at their perspectives on the role of PSM on civic action, recruiting, and maintaining volunteers. The analyses of interview data reveal the critical role of the demand side of volunteering and suggest implications for both researchers and the profession. Increased attention to the quality of engagement for volunteers, and articulating the motivational aspect, may enhance the experiences of volunteers as well as volunteer resource managers, which are both key resources for nonprofit service organizations.

Key Words: Public service motivation, volunteering, volunteer management, non-profits

Introduction

Understanding what motivates individuals to engage in civic and participatory behavior is central to policy making. In the field of public administration, scholars have developed a theory of public service motivation (PSM) to refer to individuals' pro-social predisposition to contribute to society through the delivery of public services in public organizations (Perry & Wise, 1990). Recent work has expanded the concept to include meaningful public, community, and social service, benefiting others in all settings (Brewer & Selden, 1998). With respect to this, the PSM literature has mainly focused on comparisons of public-sector employees to others in terms of: motivations (Lewis & Frank, 2002); work-related outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, or turnover (Pandey & Stazyk, 2008); and participation behaviors such as volunteering (Brewer,

2003; Houston, 2008; Ertas, 2012). Since volunteering is an essential form of civic engagement, scholars in several fields—including non-profit management and leadership, sociology, and economics—have studied several factors that encourage or facilitate volunteerism, including social background characteristics, participation resources, and the contextual factors (Clary et al., 1998; Smith, 1994; Wilson & Musick, 1997). One important contextual factor that has generated a number of recent research studies in this literature is volunteer management capacity and practices in social service organizations. Many charitable organizations depend on volunteers to provide their services—in fact, Hager (2004) estimates that about 80% of nonprofits use volunteers to assist them in service production. Consequently, an increasing number of organizations have been investing in volunteer resource managers (VRMs) to

streamline their volunteer engagement processes. VRMs are typically involved in recruiting, coordinating, and administering volunteers, and may also have the responsibility for overall strategic planning for volunteering.

The scholarly literature on both PSM and VRMs contains critical gaps, and it is these gaps which inform the research questions posed in this study. First, although we know that the way volunteers are involved and managed shapes their experience and motivation, evidence from the perspective of the managers is quite limited (Hager & Brudney, 2004). Second, the relationship between PSM and civic action is not clearly specified and studied (Houston, 2008). Third, most studies rely on quantitative analyses and cross-sectional secondary data that was not collected to measure PSM or its relation to civic action, and this diminishes the contextual realism and relevancy of research findings for practitioners (Wright & Grant, 2010). This article responds to recent calls for more qualitative research to understand whether or how organizations seek to influence PSM (p. 697).

More specifically, this study aims to address some of these gaps, and so contribute to the literature on the behavioral implications of PSM theory and research on volunteer management, by using data generated from in-person biographical interviews with VRMs. This project sought to explore whether there is any substance to the presumed PSM–volunteerism relationship from the volunteer manager perspective, by asking the following research questions: (a) What are the perceptions related to the motivations of volunteers among VRMs? (b) Do VRMs use motivational aspects of volunteering to tailor their management strategies? (c) Do VRMs perceive PSM values to be important in their own career decisions? The results presented

here describe the VRMs' perceptions of these motivations, and the discussion includes the implications for charitable organizations and for future research.

Literature Review

Before providing more detail on the method and discussing the results, the following subsections provide background on research related to volunteer management, volunteerism and public service relationship, and PSM.

Research on Volunteer Management: Practitioners have long discussed the need for better management of volunteer programs (Ellis, 1996). Those who work with volunteers on a day-to-day basis recognize the importance of having systems and expertise in place to support service production in a charitable setting. The experiences of volunteers influence how they feel and thus whether or not they will return to the organization themselves and/or invite others to support the organization. This general wisdom did not, however, translate immediately into systematic research. In 1998, the UPS Foundation commissioned the first national study of volunteer management. The goal was to document volunteer management capacity and the extent of use of best practice in nonprofits. One of the most striking findings of this study concerned the causes of volunteer attrition. About two-fifths of volunteers reported that they had stopped volunteering for an organization because of experiences of poor volunteer management practice (UPS Foundation, 1998).

Motivated by these findings, Hager and Brudney (2004) began collecting data for their 2003 volunteer management capacity study, drawing on the experiences of charities nationwide. They examined the extent of adoption of nine management practices, including regular supervision and communication with volunteers, training for

paid staff in working with volunteers, training and professional development opportunities for volunteers, evaluation of the impacts of volunteers, recognition activities, written policies and job descriptions for volunteer involvement, screening procedures, information monitoring, and use of liability coverage. They showed that the degree of adoption of these practices varies by the size and domain of the charity, as well as the extent to which volunteers are used in direct service roles. Only the practice of regular supervision and communication with volunteers was found to have been adopted by the majority of the charities surveyed. Furthermore, Hager and Brudney (2004) found that many organizations still did not have a professional VRM devoted solely to coordinating volunteers. In sum, the systematic research in the area focused on the adoption of best practice. Routes into volunteer resource manager careers, workplace outcomes, or manager perspectives on other subjects have not been studied.

Volunteerism and Public Service: Public service and volunteerism are both conceptualized as constitutive of pro-social behavior aimed to benefit others. Although there is not much engagement between the volunteerism and public administration literatures, a review of core studies reveal that volunteering and public service are explained by similar theories and values (Clary et al. 1998; Coursey, Brudney, Littlepage, & Perry, 2011; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Studies in the field of public administration found consistently higher rates of volunteering by government and non-profit workers compared to private-sector workers (Brewer, 2003; Houston, 2008; Lee, 2011; Ertas, 2012; 2013) and interpreted this disparity by the higher PSM levels of employees in these careers. PSM was originally defined as "an individual's

predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations" (p. 368). Extant PSM studies have showed that individuals with higher levels of PSM tend to rank intrinsic motivations—such as having a meaningful job, helping others, and being useful to society—higher than extrinsic rewards—such as money, praise, and fame (Lewis & Frank, 2002).

Individual behavior, including career choice or volunteering, is shaped by the individual's motivation to satisfy their needs. In developing the PSM measure, public administration scholars considered motives that would draw individuals to public service, and included four dimensions in the resulting empirical construct for PSM. Each dimension serves one or more distinct categories of rational (based on individual utility maximization), norm-based (based on efforts to conform to norms), and affective (based on emotional responses) motives (Knoke & Wright-Isak, 1982). For example, the dimension of *attraction to public policy making* is conceptualized as a rational motive that represents "an opportunity to participate in the formulation of public policy and increase one's image of self-importance" (Perry, 1996, p. 6). The dimension of *commitment to public interest/civic duty* is a norm-based motive based on altruism and an obligation to support social justice for those who lack resources. The *compassion* dimension is an affective motive that involves the practice of benevolence in serving others and unconditional protection of the rights of others. Finally, the *self-sacrifice* dimension is conceptualized as another affective motive that represents "the willingness to substitute service to others for tangible personal rewards" (Perry, 1996, p. 7). A more recent line of PSM research, which focuses on its behavioral implications, has hypothesized that some of these same PSM

values that attract individuals to public service may also lead them into other pro-social behaviors such as volunteering. In addition to coordination and management, one of the main roles of many VRMs is to inspire people to contribute their time to serving others, match their skills and motives to volunteer roles, and maintain their motivation to serve with limited forms of extrinsic rewards. Following the same logic, it seems plausible to conclude that the same PSM values may also be a factor in choosing a career in volunteer resource management.

Volunteerism studies have often used functional theory to understand the motives behind volunteering, finding that individuals prefer tasks with benefits that match their personally relevant motives (Clary et al., 1998; Houle, Sagarin, and Kaplan, 2005). Functional theory also adopts a motivational perspective to understand the processes that move people to initiate and sustain action. The functional analysis of volunteerism posits that people volunteer to satisfy different underlying motivational processes. Drawing on this theory, Clary et al. (1998) developed the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) classification to sort motivational functions served by volunteerism into six functions: values, understanding, social motives, career motives, protective motives, and enhancement. The first VFI category ('Values') considers volunteerism as "a way to express one's altruistic and humanitarian values" (Clary et al., 1998, pp. 1517–19). This function refers to altruism and contributions to society, which overlap with several dimensions of the PSM construct and were consistently found in research studies to be a distinguishing characteristic of volunteers and volunteer maintenance (Cnaan, Hand, & Wadsworth, 1996; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Subsequent research has refined and tested several propositions of the

functional approach, which emphasize the importance of matching volunteer motivations to the benefits that volunteerism provides. Individuals are found to respond to opportunities that provide a stronger match for their motives, and to feel more satisfied with their experience when they perceive the benefits and motives to be congruent (Houle, Sagarin, & Kaplan, 2005).

Since the characteristics of the volunteer organization and the quality of the volunteering experience affect the satisfaction, retention, and performance of volunteers, it is fitting to examine the extent to which VMRs consider the differing volunteer motives of the individuals they work with.

Data and Methods

This article presents an exploratory study that furthers our understanding of the general relationship between PSM and volunteerism. In order to provide an in-depth discussion of manager perspectives, VRMs from the Greater Birmingham Association of Volunteer Resource Managers (GBAVM) were invited to participate in face-to-face qualitative biographical interviews. GBAVM is a professional voluntary group, a networking organization for individuals who are responsible for the administration of volunteer service programs in several nonprofit organizations in the region. During the discussion of the results in the next section, pseudonyms are used in the place of real names and any details about participants and their organizations that may lead to identification have been removed per IRB requirements. Whenever respondents are directly quoted, pseudonyms are used. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed using elements of an interpretive biographical methodology and thematic analyses. The narratives are rich and multi-

faceted, detailing several aspects of their careers. For this study, the interview transcripts were examined and sorted around the theme of manager perspectives on motivations in general and PSM in particular.

The study can be thought of as a simple qualitative exploration and description, with narrative overtones (Sandelowski, 2000, pp. 334-339). The biographical interview method collects and analyses a portion of a life, usually through in-depth but unstructured interview. This method involves the use of "personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives" (Denzin, 1989, p. 123). The semi-structured interview instrument used in the current work comprised a small number of open-ended questions concerning the respondent's career path to a VRM position, challenges on the job, and their perspectives on volunteer motivations. The intention was to allow the participant to direct the interview around these themes. The managers were asked about their opinions on the motivations of the volunteers, but not about themselves particularly. The aim was to allow for free association in order to observe whether PSM values emerged from their narrative organically. Six unstructured interviews lasting about one-and-a-half hours each were conducted and tape-recorded with consent. The group currently has about 40 members, so this corresponds to about 10% of members. Despite reflecting a diversity of experiences in volunteer management careers in terms of service area and organizational size, this sample is clearly not representative of all managers in the nation or even in the region. Therefore, it is important to note explicitly that the goal of this project is not generalizability in the traditional sense, but rather to generate conclusions amenable to "transferability" to

other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316) and to develop "moderatum generalizations" that can be tested with further work (Payne & Williams, 2005). In qualitative research, and especially in the interpretivist qualitative research tradition, generalizing claims are less explicit (e.g., Denzin, 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). This does not mean that the number of participants or settings in a study is unimportant or that generalizability is not desirable, but simply that here it is not possible to achieve traditional generalizability based on a statistical probability framework. Instead, this study adopted Yin's (2002) case study logic, as suggested by Small (2013) and Baxter and Jack (2008) for in-depth interview-based research, and treats the in-depth interviews as multiple cases rather than units in a small-sample study. Yin differentiates between "statistical generalization" (generalization to some defined population that has been sampled) and "analytic generalization" (generalization to a theory of the phenomenon being studied). In this study, there is no claim to statistical representativeness; instead the idea is that the results contribute to a general theory of the phenomenon. In this work, the goal was not to compare these cases to each other or, for example, to the general population of volunteer managers across the nation. The goal was to provide insight into the phenomenon being studied (whether PSM matters to volunteer managers), and to help refine a theory (in this case, the PSM theory).

As a result, the conclusions resemble 'moderatum generalizations', meaning that they are not attempts to produce "sweeping statements that hold good over long periods of time or across ranges of contexts" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 297), but rather testable propositions subject to further exploration. This current study was in fact conducted to

lay the groundwork for our larger empirical survey project, involving a survey of volunteer administrators in order to examine the relationship between PSM and several work-related outcomes. This project sought to explore whether there is any substance to the presumed PSM–volunteerism relationship from the volunteer manager perspective, by way of justifying the larger project. The interview data provided enough narrative content to enable developing moderatum generalizations (in other words, conclusions that have a hypothetical character).

Results

Although the raw data provides extensive information on several dimensions of volunteer management, the results of the current study were based primarily on those of the VRMs' responses that were relevant to our research questions. The emerging themes are presented under two broad clusters. The section titled "motivations of volunteers" focuses on answers to the first two questions (What are the perceptions related to motivations of volunteers among VRMs? Do VRMs use motivational aspects of volunteering to tailor their management strategies?). The section titled "motivations for VRMs" focuses on answering the question, Do VRMs perceive PSM values to be important in their own career decisions? Participant quotes, identified in italics, are included as supportive illustrations of particular observations.

Motivations of Volunteers: All VRMs were keen to comment on the motivations that compel their volunteers to action. When they were asked directly to comment on some of the main reasons people volunteer, the first few reasons managers cited did not strictly follow the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) classification. The most immediate response was not "helping the community or others".

All the managers mentioned a basic level of self-serving motivation and fulfilling compulsory requirements first, followed by relational drives, and attachment to a cause. Managers cited an opportunity for "relaxation" and doing something they love as a main drive for many of their volunteers. In particular, those VRMs who recruit volunteers to do skill-based tasks mentioned volunteers who were motivated to participate in order to gain relevant skills that would contribute to their careers. VRMs also provided examples of how volunteering provides an opportunity for individuals to meet new people who share similar interests and values.

VRMs incorporated motives into their management strategies in various subtle ways. First, they were constantly involved in 'motivation monitoring', a continuous process that involves gathering information on volunteer motives to provide feedback into their management styles and retention efforts. Secondly, they mentioned instances of structuring their leadership styles or recruitment and retention techniques to highlight certain aspect of opportunities, based on the driving motivators of their volunteers. For example, a few VRMs mentioned arranging recruitment meetings at schools targeted to students in selected fields, where these events highlight the volunteering opportunity as a way to gain knowledge, skills, and abilities, improving career aspects, as well as helping others. Others mentioned emphasizing volunteering as an opportunity to meet new people with similar interests, especially for individuals who are new into the local area. Some VRMs were keeping in touch with some of their regular volunteers outside of the structured volunteer time, for instance by a simple handwritten 'thinking of you' card or an occasional phone call. This was particularly

addressed to their regular volunteers who were invested in the organization.

As the narratives unfolded, it became clear that altruistic and humanitarian concern for others is the all-encompassing theme that infuses the way managers see meaning in their work and how they relate it to their volunteers. In a classroom setting, when the issue of volunteerism is raised for students, helping others is usually the first notion that comes to mind. Yet the managers interviewed are not discussing volunteerism as an academic exercise: for them it is hands-on work, and this practical approach is reflected in their descriptions. The in-depth discussions reveal the layers of motives that they identify, and demonstrate that volunteering is not an either/or choice for any volunteer. Individuals volunteer for a combination of reasons, and feeling better by doing something meaningful—in other words, by helping others—is typically a part of the combination. Sometimes this is not clearly articulated. From the managers' perspective, instilling and cultivating this good feeling appears to be key to retaining volunteers and is what makes people come back.

In sum, the analysis of the personal interview transcripts revealed that the managers have a very sophisticated understanding of the motivational aspects of volunteering and use this information to tailor marketing calls to find volunteers, organize their work, and recognize their contributions. General altruistic and humanitarian concern for others, or several facets of the commitment to public interest and compassion dimensions of PSM, appear as the message embedded in the meaning of the volunteer work, as articulated by VRMs to their volunteers. We end the section with the words of one VRM:

"*I just think they (volunteers) just really want to help out. They've got free time. They feel like they're blessed, so they want to return—I want to say favor. They want to believe it is a good cause too. They would give you as much time as you asked from them as long as you feel like it is a good cause.*" Josh, November 13, 2012.

<u>Motivations for VRMs</u>: It was remarkable that even though the VRMs were not asked to list their motivations specifically, they offered plentiful anecdotes, narratives, and emotions concerning motivational themes. Due to space constraints, I focus here on three observations that appear in multiple narratives.

First is the organic bond which managers detect between themselves and the volunteers they work with as they navigate their motives and develop ways to recruit and maintain their volunteer workforce. VRMs know that keeping volunteers engaged and satisfied is facilitated by understanding their motivations. A major reference point for these professionals was their own experience. All managers reported an appreciation of the innate instinct to help others, and cited examples of life-changing moments as they ventured into the nonprofit sector and their current careers. For some it was a personal incident, while others were driven by specific causes they cared about. In all instances, these narratives evoke strong appreciation of benevolence from others that informed their sense of compassion in serving others.

Second is the direct association between job satisfaction and having a job that affords opportunities to provide self-actualization. According to Maslow's well-known motivation theory, self-actualization is the highest-level need, and refers to reaching one's full potential, where self-actualized people tend to have motivators such as truth, justice, wisdom, and meaning (Maslow, 1948). Public service motivation fits at the top of the Maslow's hierarchy of need, since attaching meaning to serving and

even prioritizing needs of others, possibly at the expense of an imperfect valuation of one's own efforts, may only be possible after lower needs have been met. Despite their tremendous workload and—typically—low pay, VRMs reported feeling motivated, inspired, and respected, and this contentment was supported by their altruism, the opportunity to work towards causes they care about, and the meaningfulness of the work. Managers said that these benefits made their job worthwhile despite the low pay.

The third observation is the use of the term 'building connections' by VRMs. Building connections was not expressed solely in terms of networking and the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or career. As an advantage that their job afforded them, VRMs emphasized remaining connected to their communities, disadvantaged populations, and those in need. The value the managers place on "being connected" emanated from the same self-actualization goals. They articulated this connection as a desirable and worthwhile goal in itself.

In sum, VRMs, themselves exhibit a strong commitment to public service values, specifically helping others—in fact, this was the primary drive that directed these individuals to choose the non-profit sector and the particular role they assumed in their organizations. This theme became most apparent when they reflected on whether they were receiving enough compensation for the work they do. It was clear that their cost–benefit comparison was only balanced because of the high premium they put on the public service opportunities provided by these careers. As one VRM puts it concisely:

"Sometimes when we are looking at peers who are maybe working at corporate and making a lot more money than we do, it can be discouraging. But I think we're all the kind of people who care a lot about the work. So you know we didn't get in this line of work for the material compensation." Cathy, December 13, 2012.

Finally, an unexpected theme that emerged from these narratives was the development of self-reflection by VRMs on motivational aspects of their career. Self-reflection is the process of exercising introspection regarding values, viewpoints, and experiences. It is a common strategy discussed in leadership literature, because self-reflection leads to self-awareness, a common trait of successful leaders (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Most of the VRMs acknowledged the value of the process of thinking about motivations as the interviews progressed. They began identifying further examples to illustrate role of motives, and their explanations of the logic behind their strategies and motivations became clearer and stronger.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the results confirmed the presence of a PSM–volunteerism relationship from the volunteer manager perspective. This study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of public service motivation by examining a distinct perspective, those of VRMs. These individuals have made a career of reaching out to potential volunteers, providing them a worthwhile experience, and making sure their contributions benefit the organization and the communities their organizations serve. Three questions guided the analysis in this paper. What are the perceptions related to motivations of volunteers among VRMs? Do VRMs use motivational aspects of volunteering to tailor their management strategies? and, Do VRMs perceive public service motivation values to be important in their own career decisions? Findings suggest that the answers to last two are both affirmative. Examination of the in-depth narratives reveals that VRMs have

developed a sophisticated understanding of the motivational factors affecting volunteers they work with and use this insight in their work. One sweeping motive that informs their relations with volunteers is the altruistic pro-social nature of volunteering behavior. They have also indicated that the managers have PSM values themselves and that those values influenced their career choices. Their narratives contained elements of commitment to public interest and the compassion dimensions of PSM, but not the same degree of attraction to policy making or self-sacrifice.

These findings have implications for both researchers and the profession. First, further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to clarify the linkages between PSM, pro-social participation behavior, and work-related outcomes, to improve our understanding. As discussed earlier, the conclusions from the study rely on limited qualitative data and, as a result, express moderatum generalizations that need to be supported or refuted with future research.

One line of investigation might look in greater depth at the strategies VRMs, as nonprofit leaders, use to help nurture and meet their volunteers' PSM needs. Another line of investigation could focus on the influence of different dimensions of PSM on VRMs' own behaviors and attitudes regarding work such as satisfaction, productivity, or burnout. Finally, investigation of organizational influences may provide critical knowledge about the role of on-the-job experiences and organizational policies on generating or maintaining the public service motivation of its employees.

In considering practical implications, it is important to note that nonprofit organizational performance is dependent upon effective human resource management. VRMs manage volunteers, where the latter is one integral component of human resources for many non-profit organizations. Previous research has suggested that PSM could be used as a tool to enhance employee and organizational performance (Paarlberg & Hondeghem, 2008). VRMs may adopt similar strategies that incorporate public service values in their efforts to provide an enriching experience for their volunteers. For example, they may provide opportunities for newcomers to learn about organizational values and expectations that reflect public service values (Paarlberg & Hondeghem, 2008), or they may create direct or indirect contact between volunteers and the beneficiaries of their work to highlight the pro-social impact they are making (Grant, 2008). Since VRMs do not have much tangible rewards to offer to their volunteers, adopting motivational tools are especially critical. Although limited in its scope, from a practical perspective the narrative analyses have also suggested that self-reflection could be a powerful vehicle for identifying and developing strategies to motivate pro-social behavior. A systematic effort to articulate the role of motivations and civic action can reap benefits in the short run for leaders and VRMs of nonprofit service organizations.

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