

## **Episodic Volunteering: Why People Walk/Run for Charity**

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### **Abstract**

*Yearly, millions of citizens give significant amounts of time and energy to volunteering. In the last few decades, a special form of volunteering has emerged – episodic volunteering – in which individuals volunteer for specific events on a sporadic basis and for limited duration. An example of episodic volunteering is the efforts volunteers make participating in charity walks or runs. The research focus in this article was initiated to help understand the motivations of the episodic volunteer who participates in such an activity by walking or running. Using the Volunteer Motivation Inventory, certain motivational factors (domains) and demographic trends were identified. Findings can prove helpful for those who organize such episodic volunteer efforts.*

### **Key words:**

volunteer, episodic, motivation, charity efforts

### **Introduction**

Yearly, millions of citizens will devote substantial amounts of their time and energy to volunteering (Clary, Snyder, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Milne, 1998). In the United States, about 65.4 million people (about 28.8 % of the population) performed some kind of volunteer work at least once during 2004 and 2005. They spent an average of 134 hours on volunteer activities, and at an estimated \$18.04 per hour, these efforts were valued at \$2,417 (Philips, 2006). Social scientists continue to strive to understand why individuals volunteer. Despite the lament by Fischer, Mueller, and Cooper (1991) in the early 1990's that "The truth of the matter is that there is little understanding of why people volunteer" (p. 186), evolving knowledge, through continued research, has begun to enlighten and inform understanding of the motives for volunteering.

Volunteering is any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause. Formal volunteering is defined as volunteer work in or for the community, for a particular organization (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Episodic volunteering, an example of formal volunteering, was defined by Macduff (1990) as volunteer service of short duration, performed on a one time only basis, or work on a specific project or assignment that reoccurs annually. This style of volunteering suggests that volunteers prefer to have short-term volunteering assignments or discrete task-specific volunteering projects rather than traditional, ongoing volunteer opportunities (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003).

### **Episodic Volunteers**

Episodic volunteering has become a recognized standard of volunteering over the

last decade. As a form of volunteer activity, it has been suggested that this type of service has become more prevalent as a result of societal shifts including work and family pressures that take people away from longer-term, repeated volunteer commitments and, more recently, because of the professionalism of the nonprofit workforce (Bryden & Madden, 2006). Macduff (2005) identified three main types of episodic volunteering based on time and duration of service: (1) temporary volunteering: the giving of a short period of time (a day or a few hours); (2) interim volunteering: the giving of time on a regular basis for less than six months; and (3) occasional volunteering: the giving of time at regular intervals for short periods of time. By no means is episodic volunteering replacing traditional volunteering, but it has become more prevalent as individuals make volunteering choices based upon their personal lives. Nevertheless, "...the notion of episodic volunteering as being distinct from traditional volunteering is gaining ground in the literature and in some ways is seen as characterizing the new breed of volunteer today" (Byrden & Madden, p. 15).

There is growing interest among scholars in episodic volunteering regarding motivations for this form of volunteer experience, yet the literature offers relatively few empirical studies of the phenomenon (Bryden & Madden). Harrison (1995) studied motivations of volunteers working in a homeless shelter and concluded that there were four main questions guiding the reasons they volunteered: (1) what do I get out of this effort?; (2) what is the response of others to this effort?; (3) is this the right thing for me to do?; and (4) how likely is it that I can do this effort? These questions emphasize the individualistic, self-oriented nature of episodic volunteering. Dietz (1999) studied an employee population who

participated in a community-based improvement effort, noting that most volunteered on the basis of values (e.g., helping others is the right thing to do), with religious affiliation, fun and employee team building as secondary motivations.

This research identifies motivations and characteristics of people who engage in fund-raising walk/runs, a specific type of episodic volunteering. The question of whether participation as a walker/runner in a charity walk constitutes "volunteering" was clarified by Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth (1996). In an extensive review and content analysis of definitions of volunteering, the authors found that there were four criteria for defining a volunteer, with a broad range of definitions within each criterion. The four criteria were: (1) free will, (2) remuneration, (3) structure, and (4) intended beneficiaries. Under free will, a volunteer is defined as someone who chooses to participate, and while not coerced yet feels an obligation to volunteer. Remuneration ranged from none at all to low pay. Structure of sponsoring organization ranged from informal to formal. And beneficiaries ranged from helping others, even strangers, to benefiting oneself. As such, we argue that individuals who elect to participate in raising funds by walking or running for a cause, qualify as volunteers. The walkers/runner choose to give of their time and physical effort, receive no remuneration, work within a formally organized structure/organization, and may or may not know the intended beneficiaries.

### **Measuring Volunteer Motivation**

The question of what actually motivates a volunteer became the focus of numerous studies beginning in the 1970's (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004). These early studies suffered from methodological flaws such as small sample sizes, reliance on volunteers from a single site, and measures

with unknown reliability and validity (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998). Nevertheless, several models of understanding volunteer motivation have been described and supported in the literature.

The unidimensional model suggests that volunteers act from a combination of motives described as a meaningful whole rather than from a single motive or category of motives (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). In contrast, several researchers contend that individuals volunteer for two reasons: (1) concern for others (altruistic motives such as feeling good about helping others) and (2) concern for themselves (egotistic motives including tangible and intangible rewards). Another emerging motivation as identified by Warburton and Oppenheimer (2000) is that individuals volunteer to learn skills that can be applied in the workplace.

A multifactor model has been described by Clary and Snyder (1991) based on a functional analysis/approach to motivation. "The core propositions of a functional analysis of volunteerism are that acts of volunteerism that are similar on the surface may be supported by different underlying motivations, and that the functions served by volunteerism reveal themselves in the unfolding dynamics of the initiation and maintenance of voluntary helping behavior" (Snyder, Clary, & Stukas, 2000, p. 368). Functional theorists posit that there is a match between the reasons for performing an activity, such as volunteering, and the satisfaction derived from that activity (Clary et al., 1998). Stated another way, motives represent the functions served by actions. The same action can serve different functions that involve the conscious desire of individuals (Allison, Okun, & Dutridge, 2002). Clary and colleagues (1991, 1992) identified a set of six primary motivations which form the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI). These motivations are:

1) Values: allows individuals to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concern for others;

2) Understanding: functions to provide the individual with new learning experiences about different people, places, skills, or oneself, to satisfy an intellectual curiosity about the world in general, the self, and the social world;

3) Career: volunteering as a means to help to further one's career, an attempt to strategically move oneself along in life;

4) Social: provides the individual with opportunities to engage in activities valued by important others; to expand their social circles and join desirable groups;

5) Esteem: allow individuals to enhance their own self-esteem with a focus on personal growth and development;

6) Protective: helps the person reduce guilt about being more fortunate than others and/or to provide the opportunity to address one's personal problems.

The VFI is one of the few measures of volunteer motivation to undergo extensive testing and has become a research tool used in numerous studies (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004), largely because of its high reliability and validity. Concurrent work on further untangling the question of volunteer motivation has been done in Australia with some researchers utilizing a two-factor model (Blanchard, Rostant & Finn, 1995; Warburton, 1997) and others utilizing the multifactor VFI (Lucas & Williams, 2000).

In 2003, Esmond and Dunlop received a grant to undertake research into volunteer motivation. Through their efforts, the Volunteer Motivation Inventory (VMI) was developed, an expanded version of the VFI. Esmond and Dunlop (2004) involved over 2,400 volunteers from 15 different organizations in developing the VMI. As a result, the study "...is one of the most extensive studies undertaken in Western Australia to understand and assess the

underlying motivational drives of volunteers” (p. 48). The VMI builds directly on the work of Clary, Snyder and Ridge (1992). Through their research, Esmond and Dunlop found that there were additional categories of motivation beyond the six domains detailed in Clary et al. (1992). These additional domains are defined as follows:

- **Reciprocity:** What goes around comes around; by doing good the volunteer will bring about good things for him or herself;
- **Recognition:** the volunteer is gratified by recognition of his skills and contributions;
- **Reactivity:** the volunteering is done out of a need to heal and address his or her own past or current issues;
- **Social Interaction:** the volunteer builds social networks and enjoys the social aspect of interacting with others.

Like the VFI, the VMI asks subjects to rate their level of agreement with 42 statements using a five point Likert scale; when the scores of the 11 scales are totaled and averaged, an overall profile of the domains that motivate a volunteer can be discerned (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004). A higher score indicates that a particular domain is of greater importance to the individual and a lower score reflects that the domain is of less importance. Because of its expanded categories, the VMI is the scale used in the research reported in this article (Figure 1).

### **Study Goal and Objectives**

This study was initiated to refine and expand the understanding of motivations of volunteers who participate in walk/run efforts. It was anticipated that much could be learned by studying the motivation to walk or run for charity, information helpful

to those who plan and conduct these type events.

By using the Volunteer Motivation Inventory (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004), it was hoped that specific areas of motivation would emerge which could guide recruitment and retention (i.e., walkers/runners repeating their efforts annually year after year) efforts by organizers of such events. This study was not directly hypothesis driven; it was designed to describe the motivations of the episodic volunteer. However, two specific areas of research were considered: as there were four groups under study, was there a difference in motivation for the first three groups (short distance efforts, less than one day duration) and/or would there be similarities in their motivation as compared to the fourth group which extracted greater physical demands (35 mile, two-day event). A second area of interest was the demographics for the entire sample of episodic volunteers and potential differences from those who do formal volunteering (based on a review of the literature).

Subjects were recruited from lists provided by a running club that sponsors numerous charity walk and run events yearly, as such the sample created was a convenience sample. Three mailing lists were selected which listed those who had signed-up for walks or runs of short distances in the last year: a 5k effort to benefit a police crisis fund (437 participants); a 5k effort to benefit an advocacy group committed to promoting awareness of ovarian cancer, an annual event only for women participants (109 participants); and a 10k effort to raise funds to rehabilitate young amputees, victims of bone cancer and traumatic injury (469 participants). All participants in the above events were asked to pay an entry fee that was donated to the sponsoring organization.

*Figure 1. Volunteer Motivation Inventory (VMI) domains.*

Values - the individual volunteers in order to express or act on firmly held beliefs of the importance for one to help others.

Reciprocity - the individual volunteers in the belief that 'what goes around comes around'. In the process of helping others and 'doing good' their volunteering work will also bring about good things for the volunteer themselves.

Recognition - the individual is motivated to volunteer by being recognized for their skills and contribution and enjoys the recognition volunteering gives them.

Understanding - the individual volunteers to learn more about the world through their volunteering experience or exercise skills that are often unused.

Self-Esteem - the individual volunteers to increase their own feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Reactivity - the individual volunteers out of a need to 'heal' and address his or her own past or current issues.

Social - the individual volunteers and seeks to conform to normative influences of significant others (e.g. friends or family).

Protective - the individual volunteers as a means to reduce negative feelings about themselves, e.g., guilt or to address personal problems.

Interaction - the individual volunteers to build social networks and enjoys the social aspects of interacting with others.

Career Development - the individual volunteers with the prospect of making connections with people and gaining experience and field skills that may eventually be beneficial in assisting them to find employment.

Physical - the individual volunteers for the physical challenge and endurance that the race/walk provides.

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In addition, a fourth group was recruited for the study; participants in a two day breast cancer walk of 35 miles with overnight camping in a local park and the expectation of fund raising a minimum of \$1000 per participant (633 participants). The total sample size was 1,971.

Members of all four groups were mailed a packet that consisted of the Volunteer Motivation Inventory with demographic information requested for purposes of the research effort. A stamped self-addressed envelope was included to be returned to the researcher. One thousand, six hundred forty-eight packets were mailed with 603 returned for a useable return rate of 33.5%. Confidentiality was assured as no names were on the return envelopes or the

surveys; to enable accurate coding for data analysis, each walk/run had its own colored paper. Because of the confidentiality of the respondents, it was not possible to follow-up with non-responders.

### **Findings**

Table 1 lists mean scores by participation domains. The participants in the two-day breast cancer walk scored higher on the values, interaction, and physical subscales. This may have occurred because the event required a greater commitment of time and energy. The group running for young amputees scored higher than the other groups for the self-esteem subscale. The four groups rated similarly on the remaining subscales.

Table 1

*Domain Ranking for Entire Episodic Volunteer Sample (from Highest to Lowest)*

Domain	Mean	Std. Deviation
Values	19.295	4.325
Self-esteem	13.257	3.225
Understanding	12.028	3.215
Reactivity	11.404	3.221
Protective	11.212	3.927
Recognition	11.001	3.348
Social	10.840	3.766
Interaction	9.970	3.662
Reciprocity	6.971	2.139
Career	6.882	2.787
Physical	6.315	2.517

A little over 74% of volunteers were female (447) and a little less than 25% were male (156). In view of the fact that one walk/run was all women (n=109), the percentage of women to men in the remaining sample was females 68% and males 31.6%. This percentage breakdown is roughly consistent with findings in the literature. In North America, for example, females are more likely to volunteer than males (Wilson, 2000) and in 2005 in the United States, according to government statistics, one fourth of men and one third of women did volunteer work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

When domain mean scores were compared by gender (Table 2), females rated higher on the following subscales: values, recognition, reciprocity, reactivity, self-esteem, and understanding. Males rated higher on interaction, and physical. In a further refinement of the data, for the males, the top five motivational domains were: values, self-esteem, protective, understanding and social. The top five motivational domains for the females were: values, self-esteem, understanding, reactivity and protective.

Over 63% of the walk/runner volunteers were between the ages of 40 and 59. This breakdown is roughly consistent with the literature on volunteering: 67% of volunteers in 2005 in the United States were between the ages of 35-55 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.); 67% of those volunteering in a British study were between the ages of 40 and 60 years (Wardell, Lishman, & Whalley, 2000) and Wilson (2000) noted that "...volunteering rises to its peak in middle-age" (p. 226). All age groups rated values and self-esteem as most important as motivational factors. Understanding was rated third by all age groups up to 59 years. It is interesting to note that the mean scores for the values domain decreased over the age span from a mean score of 20.17 for ages 15-19 to a mean score of 15.68 for the 70+ age group.

Table 2  
*Gender Comparison – First Five Domains*

<u>Entire Sample</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
Values	Values	Values
Self-esteem	Self-esteem	Self-esteem
Understanding	Protective	Understanding
Reactivity	Understanding	Reactivity
Protective	Social	Protective

Over 67% of the sample was married. These findings concur with current literature on volunteerism in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.) that found that married persons volunteer at a higher rate (34.1%) than non-married persons (23.1%). The entire sample – married and not married - identified values, self-esteem, and understanding as the first three motivations to volunteer to walk or run. Both groups identified the physical domain as the least determinant for volunteering.

The level of education of respondents was very high: 74% were college graduates, with 35% of the volunteers having Masters degrees or better. According to Wilson (2000), level of education is the most consistent predictor of volunteering; it boosts volunteering because it heightens awareness of problems, increases empathy, and builds self-confidence. At each level of education when comparing mean scores, the motivation domain of values had the highest mean scores, with self-esteem and understanding as the second and third highest scores. In

each grouping, the physical aspect of motivation ranked last except for those with a masters degree or higher who ranked career growth and development as their lowest motivation.

The literature on formal volunteerism is divided on the impact of income on volunteering. Freeman (1997), for example, found a negative correlation between wage income and volunteering, while Menchik and Weisbrod (1987) found volunteering positively related to income and Raskoff and Sundeen (1995) found income positively associated with only health and education related volunteer projects.

Due to the nature of the episodic volunteering under study – a walk or run for a specific effort – the question of cause was posed (i.e., “When you signed up for the walk/run, did you choose it on the basis of the cause?”) to determine whether the volunteers were enticed to volunteer because of the nature of the sponsoring organization. For respondents, 54.8% said yes, that they had volunteered because of the sponsoring organization, and 45.2% said no. The results by organization are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Volunteer Percentage by Cause - Did You Choose the Effort on the Basis of the Cause?*

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Entire Sample	54.8%	45.2%
Police Crisis Fund	26%	74%
Young Amputees	34.5%	65.5%
Ovarian Cancer	55.2%	44.8%
Breast Cancer (2 days)	79.8%	20.2%

About 82 % answered “yes” to the question on exercise (i.e., “Do you exercise on a regular basis?”). When asked about whether the respondent describes him/herself as health conscious, 68.5% (n = 413) said “yes” and 25.4% (n = 156) responded no, with 6.1% indicating no response.

### **Discussion**

The study findings suggest that the episodic volunteer in this study, engaged in a walk/run for charity, is an individual who is highly motivated by wanting to help others (i.e., is altruistically motivated) and who wants to increase his/her feelings of self-worth while engaged in the effort. The findings also suggest that people who choose to volunteer episodically for the organizations in this study saw it as important that the value system of the organization be congruent with their own personal value system. As a key to recruitment, this finding moves a charity organization to highlight the connection between personal goals and holistic mission/goals of the organization, stressing that volunteering is contributing to helping others and makes a difference in the lives of many people (Esmond & Dunlop, 2004).

The motivational domain of self-esteem (i.e., the need to increase feelings of self-worth, to feel better about one’s self and feel needed by others) was second in importance to these episodic volunteers. The importance of this domain would suggest the need to stress the gratification derived from the charity walk/run effort and the good feelings derived from helping others.

The third and fourth domain choices, understanding and reactivity, are related and suggest that the episodic volunteers in this study were looking to broaden their base of self-knowledge while addressing their own personal situations, the altruistic and the

self-referential needs for personal growth. The final domain (protective) uses the volunteer effort to address personal feelings that may include guilt, especially survivor guilt when the effort highlights a health issue, and other related feelings. The five top chosen domains create an interesting blend addressing the need to give to others while gaining personal satisfaction and growth. In this case, the potential for personal growth through episodic participation is strongly connected to the overarching and most powerfully held feelings of the value of giving to others.

Consistent with literature on the formal volunteer, these findings suggest that the episodic volunteer who participates by walking/running in a charity effort is a person who is most often a married, educated female, affluent by societal standards, is in the middle years, who self-defines as being health conscious and a frequent exerciser and who chose the particular walk/run on the basis of the cause.

There were some interesting findings that might challenge assumptions by those involved in volunteer recruitment. For example, the domain of social interaction was not considered as one of the top five by the females in the study while it was the fifth for the males. Perhaps recruitment efforts for men should/could stress this as part of a benefit for volunteering. In making efforts toward having volunteer walkers or runners repeatedly return to the effort, it is important to note that recognition was rated in the top half of the domains. This suggests that organizers of episodic volunteer walk/run efforts be attentive to the recognition and appreciation needs of episodic volunteers. This could be accomplished in numerous ways, such as e-mail thank yous, give aways such as hats, badges or shirts, volunteer appreciation luncheons, etc.



## Limitations

The phenomenon of episodic volunteering, while identified in the last two decades, has received limited attention in the literature on volunteering. In part, this lack relates to factors described earlier as well as the inherent difficulty in tracking a volunteer who participates sporadically and in varied events. What enabled the research reported in this article was the ability to work with a running club that tracked participants in various charity events. As such, the ability to locate episodic volunteers must be seen as a limitation of this study; in addition, the sample was a convenience sample and the findings therefore, can only be inferred to the study participants and not larger groups. A further limitation is that these volunteers were from one geographic area. The format of the questionnaire involved self-reportage and relies on the willingness of the volunteer to participate.

However, even with these limitations, this study can be seen as a snapshot of the episodic volunteer and initiates a beginning understanding of what motivates the volunteer to participate in a charity walk/run. Esmond and Dunlop (2004), the developers of the VMI, described the instrument as "...a profile [that] can only serve to provide a descriptive account of a volunteer's motivation" (p. 57). Clearly, further studies are called for to further refine understanding of this form of volunteer activity.

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