Services Offered by Voluntary Associations: Do Citizens Trust in Them or Not? A Survey in an Italian Sample

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Abstract

Voluntary associations are an example of a relationship based on trust and are indicators of a civil, participative, and democratic society. However, do citizens, as those who make use of voluntary associations, trust in the services provided by volunteers? In an attempt to answer this question we conducted a descriptive research study in Italy involving 120 citizens who had or had not experienced the services offered by voluntary associations: the goal was to describe and analyze the trust in those services and the perception of volunteers' skills and abilities to meet citizens' needs. Suggestions are also provided to voluntary associations regarding strategies for responding to citizens' needs.

Key Words: citizen, trust, volunteerism, association, Italy

Introduction

Over the last decade, the social sciences have questioned the concept of trust with respect to volunteering. This interest has been determined, inter alia, by the analysis of the progressive increase of trust in volunteering and the erosion of trust in others, in institutions, the media, and organizations in general, as highlighted by recent opinion polls in Italy (Eurispes, 2011). The progressive erosion of trust in institutions is a phenomenon that is not exclusive to Italy: in the 1990s, in the US and Britain, mutual trust in government, in the press, and in for-profit organizations was lower than in the previous decade (Pharr & Putnam, 2000). In the EU, distrust in for-profit, political, and government organizations stems not only from their failure to achieve goals or implement methods, but also from the lack of transparency that has characterized their activities. This interesting concept has been the subject of a number of studies. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) investigated the potential presence of a large network of volunteers for helping to describe the determinants of the difference in terms of socioeconomic welfare in Southern and Northern Italy. The volunteer network is, therefore, an infrastructure that helps to develop a civil society (Dekker, 2008) and fosters a sense of trust that supports and contributes to the accomplishment of a nation's socioeconomic objectives. These data were confirmed by a study by Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti (1993) that involved 32,261 volunteers from European countries: volunteers are more trust-oriented than non-volunteers. Belonging to an association seems to determine a propensity for the interpersonal dimension, a propensity that increases if the subject is a member of multiple groups or has experimented with various volunteer activities (Halman, 2001).

Anheier and Kendall (2002) investigated trust in voluntary work, adopting a social approach that considers the volunteer as a resource of social capital. The term social capital refers to a network of

people and organizations in which one of the values is trust. In social capital, contacts and relational networks are not only considered as resources that are useful in the short term, for instance to obtain funding or achieve a goal, but they are also deemed useful from a long-term perspective in order to maintain a status that contributes to the social perception of those groups by others (Coleman, 1993). It is, as proposed by Bourdieu (1979), a sort of competitive strategy: voluntary associations competing in the territory not only economically but also socially. Status is also a fundamental value. Therefore, associations, in order to promote their social status, facilitate connections and they establish cooperation: if the interaction between the volunteers' actions and a positive response by the community increases the association's status, then it generates trust among its members. Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti (1993) argued that associations, by their nature, serve to rebalance the broader social system: if volunteer associations are set up in response to the needs of citizens, of which the State fails to meet, their existence is a statement of duties (mission) and expectations (vision). Furthermore, scholars have noted that the likelihood of solving civil and social issues increases in countries with a larger number of voluntary associations: these forms of association have been cited as an example of the kinds of trust-based relations in civil society (Tonkiss & Passey, 1999). In his investigation, Putnam (1993) noted that the density of association membership is one indicator of regional social capital (composed of networks of civic engagement, reciprocity norms, and trust), and showed this to be linked to several societal outcomes and to the effectiveness of government performance (Stolle, 1998). There are two reasons for this higher probability: voluntary associations build a social network that

provides all citizens with access to services (e.g., social and cultural), and enables volunteers to enter into direct contact with a portion of society and to recognize its needs (Edwards, Foley & Diani, 2001). This contact is – as Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth found (1996) – one of the four dimensions of volunteerism, as the establishment of rules of reciprocity founded on trust between donors and receivers. Authors such as Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti (1993) have emphasized that voluntary associations and volunteerism form a kind of horizontal democracy: rules and principles are the result of a shared social construction based on trust and participation (Musick & Wilson, 2008) and this creates a virtuous circle. Therefore, trusting people are more likely to offer their time as volunteers (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2006).

The findings of the study by Tonkiss and Passey (1999) on trust perception among the beneficiaries of voluntary associations show that 'rather than being positioned in a relation of trust with service providers, users articulate definite claims which may be formally pursued, creating a relation based on confidence in organisational systems' (p. 271). As suggested by Anheier and Kendall (2002), the reasons are linked to a mission or benefits or to a real or perceived goal. Moreover, if a beneficiary perceives that the service offered by a voluntary association provides an appropriate response to his/her needs, the voluntary association confirms its organizational meaning, and that clearly shows the reason as to why the association was established by the founders and is continued by members (Van Vugt & Hart, 2004).

Other research on trust in volunteer services involving beneficiaries has revealed different and contrasting data. For example, Pearce (1993) conducted a survey of seven for-profit organizations and seven voluntary

associations operating in the same sector (educational, cultural, artistic, and so on) in the same geographical setting, and found that people doubt volunteers' skills and prefer paid workers who are required to comply with organizational standards. As suggested by Lawler and Rhode (1976), and later by Snyder, Omoto, and Crain (1999), citizens may perceive a lack of professional behavior control for volunteers. However, for paid workers in for-profit organizations, maintaining higher quality standards is essential for organizational survival. Another obstacle to trust in voluntary associations seems to be job attendance (Smith, 1981): as citizens may have doubts about a service managed by unpaid volunteers with no clear organizational role, the service may be perceived as uncertain and of poorer quality. At the same time, volunteers are credited with relational competence in terms of involvement, enthusiasm, empathy, and intrinsic motivation (Organ, 1988) that also enhances the association's value and is perceived as absent in professional relationships with for-profit organizations and paid workers.

How can such differences be explained? Is trust in services offered by voluntary associations linked to the experience of these services? Could this experience be the cause – as suggested in the literature (Currall & Epstein, 2003) – of the difference in the perception of abilities and skills? Is there a relationship with expectations being met/not met? This study aims to answer these questions by investigating the perceived trust shown by a sample of Italian citizens. According to Newton (2001), trust is defined as 'the actor's belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do him harm, and at best, that they will act in his interests' (p. 202). As suggested by Wilson and Musick (1999), the hypothesis is that there is a difference between citizens who have previous experience with services offered by volunteers (CE) and those who have not (CNE): the perception of efficacy is inevitably vitiated by experience (Stolle, 1998). And, as suggested by Pearce (1993), there is a difference in how services are perceived:

- CE have less trust in volunteers' specific skills and abilities (ad hoc for the service offered) than in those of paid workers, and more trust in volunteers' relational competence.
- CNE have the same trust in the services offered by paid workers and volunteers; trust is linked to other factors such as organizational standards.

Method

The investigation was conducted in several stages. The first consisted of a review of the literature dealing with trust in volunteerism in order to draw up working plans for the investigation and to select the interview questions and data analysis methods. In the second stage, both the group of citizens who had experience with the services offered by voluntary associations (CE) and the group of citizens who had no experience of the services offered by voluntary associations (CNE) were interviewed. In the third stage, the findings were analyzed.

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews that addressed the following topics:

- Type of experience (personal or not) and satisfaction with the services offered by volunteers (CE)
- Volunteers' skills and abilities (CNE-CE)
- Priority area of volunteer activity (CNE-CE).

Content and order of questions were verified in a pre-test phase.

Participants

Each group comprised 60 (CE and CNE) subjects. The inclusion criteria for all the subjects were age (≥18 years) and no previous participation in volunteer work. Previous participation in associations as volunteers could, in fact, vitiate the perception of volunteers' performance and the services offered (Halman, 2001). The average age was 39.83 years (*sd*=5.72), and half of the subjects were male.

Procedure

A total of 120 interviews were conducted in 2010. The interviewers (three) were students trained for the purpose. They applied for and received academic credit for their participation. The same procedure was used for each group of subjects: in outdoor areas (such as public squares and shopping center parking lots), interviewers explained the goal of the investigation to adult citizens and, for those who were interested, they read the privacy statement and anonymity guarantee. The interviewers then asked the subjects if they were volunteers (currently or in the past). Those who said no were included in the study. Each interview (lasting 20 minutes) was taped and subsequently transcribed so that it could be processed, thereby obtaining two text corpuses (CE and CNE).

The Content Analysis methodology was used (Weber, 1990) in order to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, phrases, characters, or sentences within texts or sets of texts and to quantify this presence in an objective manner. Text corpuses were analyzed statistically with the Alceste 4.6 program. This program is used in the social sciences to study the distribution of words and how they are associated in a text (Matteucci & Tomasetto, 2002). It supports content analysis, and makes it possible to identify the most characteristic words in textual units or chunks. It consists in different stages producing different data processing and output, as shown in table 1.

Table 1
Alceste 4.6 stages, stages description, and output

Stages	Description	Output
Descending hierarchical classification	The corpus is subjected to a descending hierarchical classification procedure (Reinert, 1993) that partitions the subjects of the analysis, i.e., the statements or "contextual units" that make up the corpus, into classes that use a characteristic vocabulary. If a specific word is used frequently, this means that a particular importance is assigned to the concept underlying it.	Dendogram of the stable classes
Association between words and classes	The χ^2 test is performed on the association between words and classes. This identifies the typical vocabulary of each cluster, which consists of those words that occur more frequently in it than in the rest of the corpus (Matteucci & Tommasetto, 2002). The program also shows parts of text from which the words were taken.	Vocabulary of each class

As suggested by Mazzara (2002) in order to understand the value of classes and words associated with them, the author and students worked separately to describe and understand the lexical worlds (Reinert, 1993). Notes were then exchanged, read, and collective decisions about classes were made in the course of several thoughtful conversations. This procedure helped to increase the accuracy and consistency of the

analysis. Consistency was, therefore, guaranteed by its reproducibility (or inter-code reliability).

Results

Findings from the CE group

More than a third had experience with the services offered by voluntary associations in health care (33.3%), one-quarter in social work, 21.7% in environmental protection, 8.3% in the services offered during emergency situations (e.g., after flooding), and 11.7% had experience of social and cultural services (e.g., tour guides). Most subjects (56.7%) were moderately satisfied with the services offered, 26.7% were highly satisfied, and 16.6% were not satisfied. Almost half of CE (53.3%) had experienced the services directly.

The interview text corpus showed a total word count of 27,463, of which 1,215 were reduced forms. The average frequency of occurrence was 13. Of the 646 elementary context units or ECUs that were classified, the program analyzed 395, or 61.1%. On the basis of the co-occurrence of forms and context units, the statements making up the corpus were divided by means of a descending hierarchical classification into three classes. Figure 1 shows the dendogram of stable classes that enabled us to determine the homogeneity and diversity of the classes. For each class, the first five words (presented in reduced form) were identified and ranked by χ^2 association and a sample from the interviews were inserted (Table 2).

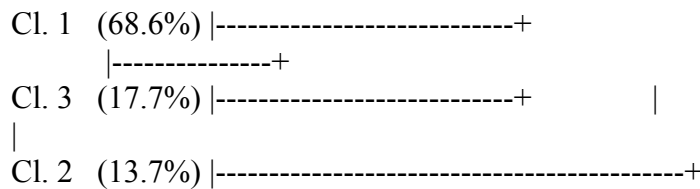Figure 1

CE group - Dendogram of stable classes.

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Cl. 1  (68.6%) |----------------------------+
          |---------------+
Cl. 3  (17.7%) |----------------------------+           |
|
Cl. 2  (13.7%) |---------------------------------------+
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Table 2

CE group - Text corpus analysis.

Class I

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Volunt<	75	79	31.78
Experience	89	99	27.81
Work<	41	41	20.93
Profession+	36	50	18.12
Practice	33	33	16.48

From Interviews:

"Volunteers often have no training and no experience. Some years ago, my family and I were flooded. While civil protection workers were well prepared, the volunteers didn't know what they were supposed to do. In my opinion, paid workers should be the first to intervene in emergencies, while volunteers could step in later, supervised by paid workers." (female, age 23, student).

"In hospitals, paid workers are more professional. I think that volunteers choose that context to socialize, and they don't have any practical grounding in medicine. I prefer a paid worker. It doesn't matter whether or not he or she is kind. I want him or her to take effective action." (female, age 40, entrepreneur).

"I prefer paid workers, 'cause it's their job. I don't trust in the services offered by volunteers. Some friends of mine are volunteers in health services and they are not well trained." (female, age 20, student).

Class II

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Skill+	30	33	182.02
Organiz<	30	39	146.69
Interest<	30	42	132.84
Time	27	53	72.06
Help<	9	9	58.16

From Interviews:

"Volunteers have great sensitivity because they feel other people's problems as they do their own. Certainly this activity requires time and isn't simple to organize, as there are a lot of commitments in a week when you have a job, a family, friends. So I think that they have managerial skills, for themselves and others." (female, age 31, clerical worker).

"Someone who decides to become a volunteer has a lot of free time, and I think that volunteers are people who need to do something, and maybe they are not satisfied with their job. Maybe they would like to change it and volunteerism is an opportunity... It is also a chance to learn something else and to improve a skill for example." (male, age18, student).

Class III

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Support<	29	41	88.17
Cultur<	23	33	66.71
Social<	10	10	47.63
Association+	9	9	42.76
Institution+	9	9	42.76

From Interviews:

"Volunteers should help people, supporting them when they have to cope with institutions. Paid workers can't do everything, such as pay attention to every single problem faced by every single person. With immigrants, for example, volunteers could explain our laws, our rules, our social context, while paid workers have to enforce the laws." (male, age 70, retired)

Figure 1 illustrates how the words that were grouped in classes I and III were more homogeneous than those in class II. Class I refers to trust in the services offered by voluntary associations as experienced by subjects and class III refers to the operative intervention ascribed to volunteers. Class II refers to the skills and abilities perceived as characterizing volunteers' motivation to spend their time in carrying out a project to change society or part of it or to improve a system, for example.

The data that emerged from the interviews (table 2, class I) show the presence of words relating to volunteers' motivation (volunt<, χ^2 31.78), work (χ^2 20.93), training in practical situation (practice χ^2 16.48; experience χ^2 27.81). Sentences associated with them shed light on the differences between the types of service offered: while volunteers were well regarded in social and cultural promotion services, in cooperative projects and in safeguarding human and civil rights, CE preferred paid workers in health care and emergency situations. As described by the interviewees, volunteers' motivations could be unclear and their training could be less thorough than that of paid workers. The impact of this lack of preparation could be dangerous in health care and emergency situations.

From the interviews, it also emerged that 43.3% of CE do not trust the health and emergency services provided by voluntary associations. Interviewees ascribed different motivations. One person in the CE group, when referring to volunteers' personal knowledge, stated that she prefers paid workers (see sample from the interviews).

Interviewees suggested that volunteers and their associations (class III; χ^2 42.76) should work in other contexts, offering cultural (χ^2 66.71) and social (χ^2 47.63) services in order to give relational and emotive support (χ^2 88.17) alongside paid workers (institution+, χ^2 42.76) with other roles, responsibilities, and goals (see part of interviews in table 2, class III).

Class II lists the words used by interviewees to describe the skills (χ^2 182.02) and abilities attributed to volunteers. From the data we gathered, it is noteworthy that the interviewees perceived volunteers as people with organizational abilities (in work and family management; organiz<, χ^2 146.69; time, χ^2 72.06) and an attitude of solidarity (in helping others; help<, χ^2 58.16) who seek to learn and improve themselves (interest<, χ^2 132.84). However, they did not consider these skills and abilities enough in order to trust in the services offered, as emerged from the interviews.

Findings from the CNE group

The text corpus showed a total word count of 25,596, of which 1,547 were reduced forms. The average frequency of occurrence was 17. Of the 636 ECUs that were classified, the program analyzed 538, or 84.6%. Figure 2 shows the dendogram of the three stable classes. For each class, the first five words were identified and ranked by χ^2 association with a sample from the interviews (Table 3).
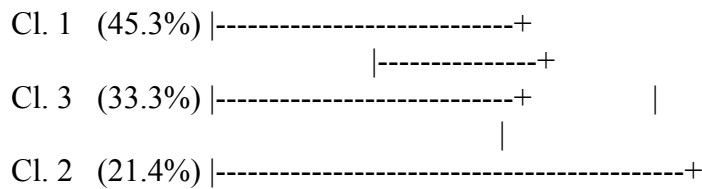
Figure 2.
CNE group - Dendogram of stable classes

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Cl. 1   (45.3%) |----------------------------+
                                |---------------+
Cl. 3   (33.3%) |----------------------------+            |
                                |
Cl. 2   (21.4%) |--------------------------------------------+
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Table 3.
CNE group - Text corpus analysis.

Class I

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Volunt<	64	84	38.19
Work<	22	22	27.64
Pai+	20	20	25.03
Train<	23	25	23.02
Difference	18	18	22.44

From Interviews:

"I think that both paid workers and volunteers have skills and ability. Health care is so important, and people who are a part of that system must have the same training. In addition, volunteers receive no payment, and so they have a lot of motivation." (female, age 54, housewife)

"In my opinion, paid workers and volunteers have the same responsibilities in emergencies. If an institution or a voluntary association does wrong, they face justice and public opinion, and people refuse to utilize their services in all fields." (female, age 24, student)

Class II

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Red Cross	33	34	123.70
Avis	33	36	113.43
Emergency	27	28	99.00
Child+	18	21	53.82
Ill<	16	19	46.27

From Interviews:

"Helping children and the sick is a priority not only in Italy but also worldwide. In some places there is a lot of degradation. Voluntary associations could make the difference, not only with fundraising, but also with their work." (female, age 26, freelance)

Class III

Words	Occurrence inside cluster	Total occurrence	χ^2
Time	40	49	56.79
Free	44	62	44.85
Compet<	24	28	36.59
Do	14	17	19.05
Problem+	9	9	18.36

From Interviews:

"Maybe volunteers are more competent than paid workers. Paid workers don't care about people's problems and whether or not they solve them is all the same to them. They only do their job. Volunteers choose to do something else and they devote their time to caring and really solving problems." (male, age 33, freelance)

As Figure 2 indicates, these words are grouped in classes I and III and are more homogeneous than class II. Class I refers to trust in the services offered by voluntary associations, the perceived difference between volunteers and paid workers, while class III refers to the skills and abilities attributed to volunteers. Class II refers to the priority activities that citizens ascribed to volunteer intervention.

The data that emerged from the interviews (table 3, class I) indicated that there is no difference in trust between the services offered by volunteers and paid workers, as evidenced by the presence of the following words: volunt< (χ^2 38.19), work< (χ^2 27.64), pai+ (χ^2 25.03), difference (χ^2 22.44). Interviewees perceived that the services offered by volunteers – as they are performed gratuitously – contain a sort of guarantee of a high level of attention to people. Organizational recruitment and training (train<, χ^2 23.02) are the mainstays of the trust in services offered by volunteers. If voluntary associations do wrong, they face justice just like other organizations (see sample from the interviews).

As volunteers join a mission of their own free will (to change society or improve the health care system, for instance), interviewees attribute social and relational competences to them that are often not perceived in paid workers (table I, class III; free, χ^2 44.85; problem+, χ^2 18.36; compet<, χ^2 36.59), who 'just' do their job (do, χ^2 19.05). Thus, the skills attributed to volunteers are linked to their ability to care for and support others with their presence.

The words listed in class II refer to priority activities that are ascribed to volunteer work. Interviewees mentioned major national and international associations in which all of them trust. Other priority activities are the need to help the weak, such as children (χ^2 53.82) and the sick (ill<, χ^2 46.27). In these activities, CNE believe that the services offered by voluntary associations could make a difference.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate citizens' trust in the services offered by voluntary associations in relation to their experience or lack of experience with these services.

The data collected showed that CE and CNE have different degrees of trust in the services offered by voluntary associations. CE identify a significant difference in these services, as in how they are linked to their mission: CE do not trust volunteers' skills and abilities in health care and emergency situations, in which they prefer paid workers (table 2 – class I). Consistent with these findings, most of these interviewees had experience with the services offered by voluntary associations in health care and emergency situations, and only 26.7% were highly satisfied with those services. CE perceived volunteers' recruitment and training as less thorough than that of paid workers, and thus prefer volunteers to focus on social and cultural work, alongside and under the supervision of a paid worker (table 2 – class III).

Volunteers are perceived as people who have time to devote to services that are dedicated to others, but with unclear motivations correlated with the ability to organize their time to satisfy personal interests (to better themselves, for example; table 2 – class II), or to meet other people and socialize. At the same time, as regards volunteers' skills, CE do not ascribe relational competences to volunteers or they see these competences as not so important. Above all, these competences are not enough to place equal or more trust in the services offered by voluntary associations than in those offered by institutional organizations. The CE dendogram of stable classes (figure 1) shows that interviewees' words about volunteers' skills and abilities are more consistent with the priority areas of volunteer activity (identified in the social and cultural context, rather than in health care and emergency situations) and less with volunteers' perceived characteristics. The CNE dendogram (figure 2) shows greater consistency between trust in volunteers' services as well as perceived skills and abilities and volunteers' characteristics, as

these are more different from the priority areas of volunteer activity. CNE, in fact, perceived volunteers as having the same capabilities as paid workers because institutions and/or voluntary associations must pay the same attention to screening people, recruiting and training them in order to maintain organizational standards (as suggested in the literature; see Brudney, 2000). Furthermore, volunteers are perceived as more motivated to help and solve problems (table 3 – class I), and to pay more attention to people than paid workers (class III): so CNE perceived that the services offered by voluntary associations could earn the same or more trust than those provided by institutional organizations. The data indicate that CNE are not well informed about the services offered by voluntary associations, since they only mentioned major associations. The operative sectors indicated by CNE are varied and vague, while interviewees' words referred to weakness, children, and illness (table 3 – class II). The risk is that CNE could have expectations that could fail to be met: as suggested by the literature and data, the rejection of expectations determines a variation in the perception of skills and abilities so that trust in the services offered by voluntary associations decreases.

Several suggestions for voluntary associations emerge from these results and an analysis of the literature: citizens are well disposed toward services offered by volunteers – as borne out by the 6.8 million Italians who benefit from their services – but when they are faced with a health problem or an emergency, they perceive paid workers as more competent (Pearce, 1993). At the same time, volunteers are perceived as more motivated (Organ, 1988) and capable of paying attention to relational needs by citizens with no experience of the services offered by voluntary associations. However, citizens are not as familiar with these services as with volunteers' roles in certain circumstances,

such as health care and emergencies. Above all, ensuring trust in the services offered by voluntary associations calls for: a) guaranteeing volunteers' skills and abilities, transparent recruitment and training procedures, and their compliance with organizational and/or association standards and b) promoting the association's presence in the area, the services offered (e.g., mission and goal), and the volunteers' role in relation to the institutional organization.

For the first point, communication (folders and posters, for example) could be used in order to present: how volunteers are recruited and selected, how they are committed, what kinds of roles, functions, and responsibilities they have; how and who provides for their training; the presence (if any) of tools to mark out the information, placement, assignment, and performance; for who and when the volunteers' work evaluation is performed, who controls their work. In order to have more chance of visibility (b), the strategies are the same that are used to recruit new volunteers: folders, article in local newspapers, campaigns, information point, calendars, public events, institutions' meeting (schools and hospitals, for example). For the public, communication could be useful to declare what the goals, projects, and activities are where the association is involved, the institutional network in which the association is placed, and the type of associations' users and to whom it is not directed.

These suggestions could enable voluntary associations to improve their public visibility, increase their contacts in order to improve fundraising, for example, and permit citizens to choose services that are offered by voluntary associations with a fuller knowledge of their limits and potential.

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