

## **Correlates of Satisfaction in Older Volunteers: A Motivational Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*The author used motivational analysis to examine the role of satisfaction with volunteerism in a sample of older volunteers. The motivational approach proposes that volunteering serves specific needs or motives. The more the experience fulfills them, the more satisfied the individual and the greater the commitment to continue volunteering. The aim of the study was to clarify the relationship between volunteer satisfaction and motive strength, motive fulfillment, time spent volunteering, and length of service, respectively. The results supported the motivational perspective. Motive strength and fulfillment correlated with satisfaction which, in turn, predicted time spent volunteering. Less satisfied volunteers devoted fewer hours but nonetheless often remained long-term volunteers. The findings suggest that to best utilize and maintain volunteers, motivations for helping should be determined early in the process and periodically re-assessed.*

### **Key Words:**

volunteers, satisfaction, motivation

Volunteers represent an integral part of this country's workforce. In the United States, 44% of adults volunteer, providing the equivalent of more than 9 million full-time employees at a value of \$239 billion (Independent Sector, 2001). Many organizations, particularly in the nonprofit sector, could not operate effectively without this assistance.

The present study offered a theoretical approach known as motivational analysis to understanding factors that initiate and maintain volunteerism (Finkelstein & Penner, 2004; Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005; Finkelstein, 2006; Finkelstein & Brannick, in press). For this purpose, we defined volunteerism as unpaid,

long-term, planned, and discretionary prosocial behavior that benefits strangers and occurs within an organizational context (Penner, 2002). The deliberate and sustained nature of volunteering distinguishes it from the spontaneous acts of helping (e.g., bystander intervention) that were the object of early research into prosocial actions.

Motivational analysis derives from the principle that human behavior is motivated by certain goals and needs. Understanding why individuals volunteer requires identifying the functions that volunteering serves (e.g., Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Different people may provide the same services for very different

reasons, and one's motivations may change over time.

Clary et al. (1998) identified six potential motives for volunteering: Values (expressing altruistic and humanitarian values); Understanding (acquiring learning experiences and/or exercising unused skills); Social (strengthening social relationships); Career (gaining career-related benefits); Protective (reducing negative feelings about oneself or addressing personal problems); and Enhancement (growing psychologically).

According to the motivational approach, whether volunteering persists depends on the extent to which the experience fulfills relevant motives (e.g., Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994; Clary et al., 1998; Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003; Van Dyne & Farmer, 2004). The theory's logical assumption is that those whose motives are met will be more satisfied, and therefore more active, volunteers. Indeed, many organizations regularly assess volunteer satisfaction with the idea that more satisfied individuals will be more involved.

However, prior examinations of the role of satisfaction in volunteerism have produced mixed results. Clary et al. (1998) found that when the volunteer experience matched their motives for helping, individuals reported greater satisfaction and stronger intentions to continue than when their motives remained unmet or when unimportant motivations were fulfilled. Monitoring volunteers throughout their first year of service, Davis et al. (2003), too, found that motive fulfillment predicted satisfaction. Surprisingly, satisfaction was only modestly related to time spent volunteering and was uncorrelated with longevity of service. Working with hospice volunteers, Finkelstein and McIntyre (2005) showed that satisfaction correlated positively with time spent volunteering but was unrelated to length of service.

Our aim was to clarify, by examining in a single study, the relationship between satisfaction and antecedents of volunteering (motives), aspects of the volunteer experience (motive fulfillment), and outcomes (time spent volunteering, length of service), respectively. The study is thus limited to examining properties of the individual rather than the organization. Of course, a complete understanding of volunteering also requires understanding the organization's attributes and practices (Penner, 2002) and the interaction between the individual and the organization.

We also focused on participants age 45 and older. Middle-aged and older volunteers show greater organizational commitment than younger volunteers, donating more hours and serving for longer periods (e.g., Nelson, Hooker, DeHart, Edwards, & Lanning, 2004). A recent AARP study (2003) found that volunteers 45 and older average fifteen hours of service per month. Those who are not employed devote somewhat more time than those with jobs (nineteen hours vs. twelve hours per month, respectively). However, neither group is more likely to volunteer or to have regular volunteer commitments.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), 32.7% of adults between 45 to 54 volunteer, making them second only to those ages 35 to 44. Volunteering does decline (to 24.8%) in those 65 and older even though those of retirement age often have more available time. Given the increasing needs of many organizations for unpaid help, learning what motivates and sustains somewhat older volunteers may provide insights into strategies for recruiting and retaining them.

The participants in this study volunteered at a nonprofit hospice that provides palliative care to individuals in the last 12 months of a life-limiting illness. The hospice relies heavily on its volunteers who

contributed an aggregated 66,000 hours to the organization in 2004.

### **Hypotheses Tested in the Study**

*Hypothesis 1a.* Volunteer satisfaction will be positively associated with motive strength for all but Career motives. Career-related rewards were previously found to be unimportant in motivating a sample of predominantly older hospice volunteers (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2005).

*Hypothesis 1b.* Satisfaction and Career motives will be uncorrelated.

*Hypothesis 2a.* Satisfaction with volunteer work will correlate positively with the fulfillment of all motives except Career.

*Hypothesis 2b.* Satisfaction will be unrelated to fulfillment of Career motives.

*Hypothesis 3.* Satisfaction will be positively related to time spent volunteering. Because of conflicting results (cf. Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Davis et al., 2003), no predictions about the association between satisfaction and length of service are offered.

### **Methodology**

#### Participants

The data collection instrument was distributed to the hospice's 466 active volunteers, those with assignments at the time of the study. The survey was mailed to volunteers who worked with patients and their families and hand-delivered to thrift store, grief center, and office volunteers. Completed surveys were returned by 194 recipients (42%), and analyses were carried out for respondents age 45 and older ( $n = 159$ ). Because the hospice does not ordinarily ask volunteers their age, we do not know what percentage of older volunteers this number represents. Nonetheless, within this subset, the mean age of participants was 70 years. Average length of service was four years, and most ( $n = 86$  or 54%) volunteered about one day per week.

#### Measures

Participants indicated their age, gender, length of service, and current activity level and completed the Volunteer Function Inventory (Clary et al., 1998). The inventory measures the importance of the six motives for volunteering (30 items), the extent to which volunteering has fulfilled those motives (twelve items), and satisfaction with the volunteer experience (five items).

Examples for each motive subscale include: "I am concerned about those less fortunate than myself" (Values); "I can learn more about the cause for which I am working" (Understanding); "My friends volunteer" (Social); "Volunteering can help me get my foot in the door at a place where I'd like to work" (Career); "No matter how bad I've been feeling, volunteering helps me to forget about it" (Protective); and "Volunteering makes me feel important" (Enhancement). Items assessing satisfaction included, "My volunteer experience has been personally fulfilling" and "This experience of volunteering with this organization has been a worthwhile one."

A Likert-type response format was used. For the motives subscale, the alternatives ranged from 1 or *Not at all accurate/important for you* to 5 or *Extremely important/accurate for you*. In the fulfillment subscale, the range was 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

#### **Findings**

Table 1 shows the correlations between volunteer satisfaction and both the strength and extent of fulfillment of the six motives for volunteering. Also included is the relationship between satisfaction and the two measures of volunteer activity: time spent volunteering, length of service.

Partially supporting hypotheses 1 and 2, satisfaction was positively associated with all motives except Career and Protective and with the fulfillment of all motives (except

Career and Protective). Significant satisfaction-motive correlations: Values,  $r = .41$ ; Understanding,  $r = .20$ ; Social,  $r = .17$ ; Enhancement,  $r = .21$ . Significant satisfaction-motive fulfillment correlations: Values,  $r = .35$ ; Understanding,  $r = .26$ ; Social,  $r = .21$ ; Enhancement,  $r = .30$ .

**Table I**  
**Correlates of Volunteer Satisfaction**

| Variables         | Satisfaction |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Values (V)        | .41***       |
| Understanding (U) | .20*         |
| Social (S)        | .17*         |
| Career (C)        | .04          |
| Protective (P)    | .16          |
| Enhancement (E)   | .21**        |
| V Fulfillment     | .35***       |
| U Fulfillment     | .26***       |
| S Fulfillment     | .21**        |
| C Fulfillment     | .01          |
| P Fulfillment     | .12          |
| E Fulfillment     | .30***       |
| Time              | .17*         |
| Length of service | .05          |

Note  $n = 148-156$

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

\*\*\* $p < .00$

Satisfaction correlated positively with amount of time devoted to volunteering ( $r = .17$ ) but was unrelated to longevity as a hospice volunteer ( $r = .05$ ).

The strength of each statistically significant motive and the degree to which it was fulfilled were highly intercorrelated. Partial correlations were calculated to determine the unique contribution to satisfaction of each motive and its fulfillment. With motive strength partialled out, motive fulfillment remained positively correlated with satisfaction. The partial correlations were: Values fulfillment,  $r = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Social fulfillment,  $r = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Understanding

fulfillment,  $r = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and Enhancement fulfillment,  $r = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ . In contrast, controlling for motive fulfillment markedly reduced the relationship between satisfaction and motive strength. Only the Values motive showed a significant correlation ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

The findings suggest that more satisfied volunteers were motivated by altruistic values and the desire to put their skills to use in the service of others. The two motives that did not contribute to satisfaction, Career and Protective, embody self-focused tangible and psychological goals, respectively. These did not contribute measurably to satisfaction with the volunteer experience. This other-oriented perspective has been found to apply predominantly to older volunteers. Omoto, Snyder, and Martino (2000) found that hospice volunteers age 55 and above were motivated chiefly by the desire to be of service, while interpersonal relationships were more important to younger volunteers.

We hypothesized that career-enhancing objectives would be immaterial because of the age of the sample and previous findings (e.g., Nelson et al., 2004). If not yet retired, participants likely were well established in their jobs. That Protective motivations, too, were unimportant indicates that resolving personal issues also was largely irrelevant in determining satisfaction. One cannot determine from the present data whether this latter finding is attributable to the nature of the individual or the volunteer work.

The importance of altruistic reasons for helping is not limited to hospice workers. Davis et al. (2003) found a strong relationship between altruistic motivations and persistence in a study of first-year volunteers from an array of organizations. In its study of volunteers 45 and older, AARP (2003) found that those surveyed were motivated

primarily by a sense of personal responsibility to help others. While volunteering took many forms for these individuals, a common thread was the desire to help the communities in which they live. Many felt drawn to volunteerism since the events of September 11, 2001.

Whatever the motivations for helping, satisfaction depended on the volunteer experience fulfilling those goals. Furthermore, with satisfaction came a greater time investment in the organization. Interestingly, those who were less satisfied with the experience tended to devote fewer hours to hospice but remained volunteers in good standing for years.

The present cross-sectional data leave unanswered questions about causal connections among variables. For example, do satisfied volunteers spend more time helping, or does investing more time in the organization lead to satisfaction? Both, of course, could be true. We are in the midst of a longitudinal investigation that follows volunteers throughout their first year of service to the hospice. The study will allow conclusions about causal relationships among the variables that underlie sustained volunteering.

### **Implications for the Profession**

To best ensure active, satisfied volunteers, prospective volunteers' motivations for helping should be determined early in the orientation and training process. Individuals can then be matched with tasks they likely will find the most rewarding. Personal interests do play a substantial role in older volunteers' decisions to serve and their choice of volunteer outlets (AARP 2003). Note that one's reasons for helping may change over time as, for example, volunteers approach retirement. Therefore, the organization should periodically re-assess volunteers' motives and, if they are not being fulfilled, offer new opportunities

for helping. Hospice provides myriad volunteer options ranging from those requiring extensive patient contact (e.g., nursing home visitation) to those involving very little (e.g., office support).

Taking an interest in volunteers' reasons for helping may also increase retention by fostering a volunteer role identity (e.g., Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999). According to role identity theory, the more others identify one with a particular role, the more the individual internalizes the role and incorporates it into the self-concept. Carrying out the role of volunteer drives future behavior as the individual strives to behave consistently with his or her volunteer role identity. The strength of a person's role identity correlates with amount of time devoted to service in many different types of service organizations (see also Finkelstein & Penner, 2004; Finkelstein et al., 2005). Revisiting motivations for helping may be particularly important during the first year of service before a strong identity specific to the organization has been formed. Meeting motives in the early stages will help in the establishment of a volunteer role identity. This in turn can sustain the volunteer during periods when the experience is not meeting an individual's specific goals.

The present findings indicate that while somewhat less motivated or satisfied individuals may offer less time to the hospice, they nonetheless tend to remain volunteers in good standing. Such volunteers could be tapped to help with special projects and annual events that require only periodic assistance (e.g., golf tournament). Thus a theoretical perspective such as motivational analysis can prove a useful tool in efforts to optimize the fit between organizations and volunteers.

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Marcia A. Finkelstein, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychology at the University of South Florida where she has served on the faculty since 1981. She received her B.A. from Yale University and Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia University. Her current research examines the factors that initiate and sustain prosocial activities such as volunteerism and organizational citizenship behavior. She also publishes in the field of engaged scholarship, the effort to bring faculty researchers and community partners together to tackle problems of mutual concern.