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Volunteering: Continuing Expansion of the Definition and A Practical Application of Altruistic Motivation

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Abstract

Whenever we think about volunteering, we do so mostly from only one perspective, that of the volunteer. There are at least two others to consider: the perspective of the recipient of the voluntary act and the perspective of the society in which the voluntary action takes place. To limit ourselves only to the perspective of the volunteer will limit research into voluntary action. Altruism as a motivator of voluntary action is explored from several perspectives and suggestions on how to make this information operational are presented.

(Editor-generated) Key Words:

volunteer, altruism, motivation

Rashomon and Volunteering

The library at Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota protected books in inclement weather by providing plastic bags imprinted in large capital letters with "The Limits of My Vocabulary are the Limits of My World." Today's definition of volunteering could be a limiting factor. We should be aware that the definition continues to be expanded and, as such, promotes additional research into volunteering. The concept of perspective should be considered when observing and describing a voluntary act.

Japanese author Akutagawa's character, Rashomon, in a 1915 story by the same name, tells of an incident involving a samurai, his wife; and a bandit. Before a court of inquiry, each describes the incident. Three different versions are heard before the court, the differences being perspectives driven by individual needs. The reader is left with the responsibility of deciding what actually happened. There is a parallel in

the act of volunteering.

The Independent Sector Update (April 1986) defines the act of volunteering as persons offering themselves for a service without obligation to do so, willingly, and without pay. This definition is limiting as it tends to focus primarily on the act of volunteering from the perspective of the volunteer. There are at least three components to each voluntary act: the volunteer (act initiator); the recipient of the act; and society, as defined by Durkheim (1973), an observer of the act, or anyone having knowledge of it. Every voluntary act may be viewed differently by each of these participants or components.

Community Service Orders (CSO) offer an operating example of differing component views of the same act. In the Chicago area there are presently over 500 persons convicted in federal courts of "white collar" crimes who, in addition to incarceration and/or paying a fine, are required to perform from two

hundred to several thousand hours of community service as part of their overall sentence (Foster, 1988). Their crimes are viewed as being out of their normal characters and they are not considered a threat to society. This is a form of limited discretionary volunteering (LDV). The Justice Department refers to these persons as "volunteers" consistent with current definitions. Let us look at the experience of one such "volunteer," Tony.

Tony was sentenced to ninety days in prison for failure to declare all of his income on his tax forms, paid a ten thousand dollar fine, and was expected to perform 1500 hours of community service. He is an excellent swimmer and now works with age ten and under minority, inner-city boys, teaching them how to swim. He must pick up the children at their housing project and drive them to and from the pool. For most of these children this is the only opportunity they will have to learn how to swim and, for many, to experience the warmth and caring of an adult male on a consistent, predictable basis. From Tony's perspective, he is paying down his sentence, yet he may feel that he is also making restitution to society for his crime. He feels good about what he is doing for the children but he does not feel that what he does is voluntary nor that he is a volunteer. Others performing community service orders who feel wrongly convicted of a crime they did not commit (as opposed to those, like Tony, who pleaded guilty) are more vocal about not being volunteers in the traditional sense.

Yet, from the perspective of the children being taught to swim, Tony and the others like him are volunteers in the traditional sense. The children receive a service without cost that they would not

normally have. Neither the service provided nor the benefits received are appreciably diminished or enhanced by the motivation of the giver.

Society could argue that both the opportunity to perform a restitutive act as well as having children learn a new skill are positive. Society could also benefit should another adult be motivated to do similar volunteer work after observing Tony and the children interact. Observers at the pool, not knowing Tony's background, would most likely describe what they see as a voluntary act: one act, with several perspectives and interpretations. To better understand a voluntary act, the components of the act need to be identified and the perspective of each understood. Knowing something of the perspectives that are operational leading up to a voluntary act may yield clues to the motivation for the act.

Altruistic Motivation and Volunteering

Everyone is a potential volunteer with singular talents capable of enhancing the lives of others. Some exhibit this facet of themselves early on, others later in life; some never do. The more that is known about volunteers and motivation for volunteering, the more likely it is that this volunteering component may be activated. A universal motivator able to trigger the volunteering component within each of us would be quite a find. Until that time, all likely motivators should be studied in the hope of discovering how each may trigger some of us to volunteer. Altruism is one such motivator, and understanding altruistic motivations may lead to increased volunteering.

Altruism expresses the principle or practice of unselfish concern for, or the

devotion to the welfare of others. Does it exist? Many argue that people act out of nothing more than enlightened self-interest while others would argue that it is natural and normal to foster and act solely out of concern for others. Plato, Helvetius, and Marx would be among the former and Durkheim among the latter (Oliner and Oliner, 1988.) According to Durkheim (1973), altruism exists as an integral part of society and is evidenced when people "abnegate their interests in favor of obedience for the sake of society—altruism is not merely an agreeable ornament to social life but its fundamental basis." There does not appear to be a lack of those who would argue at almost any point in-between. If the definition of volunteering is expanded to include perspective, the views all along the continuum will be useful in research to further understand volunteering motivation.

The literature on altruism appears to have diverged along two not always distinct paths: sociobiology along one path; psychoanalytic theory, cognitive development theory, social learning theory, and social psychological orientation theory along the other. The former attempts to explain altruism as one method of insuring gene propagation, the latter attempt to explain altruism as something learned or acquired in life through experience, reinforcement, modeling, or the interaction between personal, external social or situational factors (Oliner and Oliner, 1988).

Babcock's (1986) summary of altruism attributed to Darwinian concepts introduces three categories of altruism broad enough for parallels to be found in most other theories: kin altruism or inclusive fitness, reciprocal altruism, and induced or obligatory

altruism. *Kin altruism* describes a situation in which a sacrifice is made by one person on behalf of another, both of whom share the same genes. The altruistic act directly benefits the recipient of the act and indirectly benefits the actor as the reproductive success of the genes shared by both has been enhanced. Acts provided to members of one's extended family, accepted as natural and normal, may not be thought of as altruistic acts, while identical acts provided to non-relatives would be considered altruistic. Kin altruism has parallels in other disciplines attempting to explain any altruistic act provided to member of one's extended family.

Reciprocal altruism refers to a service provided or sacrifice made by one organism for another which will be balanced in the future by a service provided or sacrifice made to the original provider. Exchange theory is one parallel theory from another discipline.

Induced altruism is defined as an act that promotes the fitness of another without reciprocal benefit to itself or its genes present in the recipient. An example given by Babcock (1986) is the grouper fish which allows smaller fish, cleaner wrasses, to clean particles of food and debris from between the grouper's teeth and gills. This appears to be an example of reciprocal altruism as each benefits: the grouper's health is promoted as the wrasse finds nourishment at little cost or threat to its safety. There is, however, another small fish that looks similar to the wrasse. The grouper, thinking it is a wrasse, allows the fish to come close, and once close this fish will tear a piece of flesh from within the grouper's mouth. The grouper is not a willing volunteer, yet the act

itself from the perspective of the beneficiary appears to be a voluntary one. This is one example from the literature in which perspective of the actors must be taken into consideration in understanding the act. It has a direct parallel in the concept discussed previously: limited discretionary volunteering, community service orders.

From the perspective of the recipient, any volunteer action resulting from an altruistic motivator directly benefits the recipient. Theories on altruism give insights into what may initiate a voluntary act. With this knowledge we may attract more volunteers. Several theories are presented for illustration and discussion.

Practical Applications

In their study of non-Jewish volunteers aiding in the rescue of Jews during World War II, Oliner and Oliner (1988) found that volunteers and non-volunteers alike were aware of what was happening to Jews, but the volunteers perceived the information in a personal way, precipitating action. These volunteers needed resources: jobs/money, family support, community/church support, and the support of others similarly involved. Volunteers needed a precipitating occasion, often nothing more than being asked to help. The volunteers expressed a closeness to their community and exhibited a strong sense of efficacy. They could affect events and had a responsibility to do so. They were considered extensive personalities described by terms such as involved, committed, caring, and responsible, rather than constrictive personalities described as detached, exclusive, and disassociated. Their parents stressed a universalistic outlook toward equity and

caring. Knowing this, in campaigns for volunteers the need should be stressed in a personal and meaningful way, appealing to their sense of efficacy, their need to be involved, to care, to make commitments and assume responsibility. The universal nature of the need should be stressed. Potential volunteers should be supplied with a list of community support groups available to them as volunteers.

Oliner and Oliner (1988) suggest that persons predisposed to altruistic behavior may require a "catalyst" to turn motivation into action. They suggest three in order of importance: the individual's norms or the norms of his or her reference group, his or her sense of empathy, and the universal principles to which he or she personally subscribes. When attempting to attract specific volunteer types, stress the obligations to their peer group or community norms; appeal to their compassion, sympathy, or pity; and appeal to their universal concepts of justice and caring.

Bar-Tal (1976), in his discussion of altruism and pro-social behavior, reviews the literature of experiments on altruism in non-emergency situations. Not all the experiments were conclusive nor were they all conducted in "real life" settings. Some of the preliminary findings, however, are worth consideration. The following may be very useful when presenting certain needs to perspective volunteers:

1. Needs should be presented in specific and unambiguous terms, as a situation perceived as ambiguous often does not convey the urgency of the need.
2. Persons with a high need for approval, fearing disapproval for poor performance, tend not to volunteer in novel or ambiguous situations.
3. Women, more than men, tend not to

volunteer in situations that are ambiguous or potentially embarrassing.

4. Some volunteer work is perceived as gender based. Gender preference should be made clear or care should be taken not to imply a preference if none exists.
5. Men more than women appear to be more aware of the social status of the recipient, helping those closer in status to themselves.
6. The race of the recipient may influence the race of the volunteer. If race may be an issue, the race of the recipient should be made clear to the prospective volunteer.

There have been experiments showing that people act differently alone than when others are present. With others present the need to act appears to diminish, as if the perceived need will be shouldered by the others. Rushton and Sorrentino (1981) and Bar-Tal (1976) indicate the probability of an individual helping in most situations decreases as the size of the observing group increases. When seeking volunteers, it may be more effective to approach them alone in a one-on-one situation rather than in groups. If that is not practical, the contact should be structured so that it appears directed solely toward each of them, so as to convey that in this specific instance, only they can make a difference.

Moods may affect altruistic behavior. The request for volunteer help should be timed to catch the prospective volunteer at the least stressful time of day, the most appropriate day of the week, or during a festive season. The presentation should be structured toward altering any negative or neutral moods into strongly positive ones before asking for volunteer action. Rushton and Sorrentino (1981) imply that positive moods are linked to increased altruism.

They point out, however, that the opposite is not always true. While feelings of "sadness, failure, or self-concern associated with negative moods may retard helping behavior, negative moods associated with feelings of guilt or shame may actually promote helping behavior."

People appear to be most likely to exhibit altruistic or helping behavior to those who look most like themselves. When the intended recipient of a voluntary act is presented to the potential volunteer, any characteristics they share in common should be highlighted.

Rushton and Sorrentino (1981), Bar-Tal (1976), Oliner and Oliner (1988), and Babcock (1986) all suggest that parental role modeling is important in promoting altruistic behavior. People tend to emulate the actions of their parents or attempt to recreate the warm feelings of reward given them previously by their parents or other significant adults when they behaved in an approved manner. Role modeling has been shown to be an important motivator of Big Brother volunteers. When asked what they expected their little brothers would get from participating in the program, the most frequent response was "someone to look up to/a role model/an authority figure/a steady influence in their lives." When asked what they expected to get from the program as a volunteer, the most frequent response was "satisfaction/gratification—a good feeling from helping someone." The next most frequent response was "a sense of helping a child develop/guide." In this instance the volunteers projected that the child expected an adult role model and they wanted to be that role model (Shure 1988). In attracting volunteers, images should be projected that may recall parental (adult) role modeling or those

special regards received for approved behavior.

Conclusion

Looking at just one potential motivator for volunteering, altruism, has led to several suggestions that in selected circumstances may yield a more comprehensive and successful campaign for volunteers. All such motivators should be studied to see what suggestions they may yield. As the definition of volunteering expands, additional, perhaps non-traditional, motivators of volunteering will be identified and become the subject of future research.

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Suggested Additional Related Readings

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About the Author

Richard S. Shure began his formal volunteer experience as a Big Brother volunteer fifteen years ago and at the time this article was written was a volunteer in a Big Brothers program under the direction of the Cook County Juvenile Court. In addition, he has been a panel member on the United Way of Chicago Health/Disability Needs Assessment Committee, panel member and present chairman of the Steering Committee for Chicago Operation ABLE's "hot line" volunteer component start-up, a referral resource for the Illinois Governor's Office of Voluntary Action, and a Policy Planning Committee member for Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago.

He was a principal in PHAEDRUS INC., a firm working with not-for-profits to identify volunteers, and a member of the adjunct faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago, School of Urban Planning and Policy.