Why Do People Volunteer on Crisis Hotlines?

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Abstract

The authors conducted a qualitative study to investigate volunteers' motivations for volunteering on a crisis hotline. Typically, crisis hotline volunteers commit to intensive training and a contract to volunteer for a certain length of time. Crisis hotline volunteers handle calls on difficult topics including mental illness and suicide. Crisis hotline staff often struggle to recruit volunteers because of the considerable time commitment and taxing work. Researching crisis hotline volunteers' motivations may lead to improved recruitment and retention efforts. Researchers found that giving back to the community, altruism, finding the work challenging, personal experience with crisis and suicide, and having time to volunteer were major motivations for volunteering at a crisis hotline.

Key Words:
volunteering, crisis, hotline, motivation, recruitment, retention

Introduction

Globally, crisis hotlines provide important relief serving as psychological first aid until long-term services are acquired. Within the U.S., there are approximately 140 crisis hotlines in 48 states (Lifeline News, 2009) staffed by volunteers answering approximately 47,500 calls monthly (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2009). Outside of the U.S., there are 1,200 crisis hotlines in 61 countries with over 100,000 trained volunteers (International Network: Volunteer Emotional Support Helplines, 2009). Recruitment and retention of these volunteers is difficult because it (1) requires an extensive time commitment; (2) requires an intensive initial investment; and (3) is emotionally taxing. Assisting crisis hotline volunteer resource managers in recruitment and retention is important yet minimally discussed in current literature. This study's purpose was to investigate why people volunteer at a crisis hotline.

Background

Crisis hotlines are typically housed in crisis centers. In the 1960's and 1970's, a rush of research emerged on crisis center volunteers who handle the majority of centers' operations (Seely, 1992). However, very little of this research focused on volunteers' motivations (Barz, 2001) and since the 1970's, published studies of crisis hotlines volunteers are sparse.

Crisis hotline volunteers typically commit to at least 50 hours of training and an extensive volunteer commitment

(Lammers, 1991; Stegall, 1998). Their role is to assist with difficult topics, including sexual assault/abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and suicide; this is emotionally taxing volunteer work often resulting in burnout (Cyr & Dowrick, 1991). Of concern to volunteer resource managers is return on investment of costly training (Graff, 2006) especially because episodic volunteering is the emerging trend (Hustinx, Haski-Leventhal, & Handy, 2008; Meijs & Brudney, 2007; Swinson, 2006). Volunteer retention is problematic due to the high rate of burnout (Cyr & Dowrick;).

To assist a particular crisis center's hotline with recruitment, the authors studied the hotline's volunteers to investigate their motivations for volunteering at a crisis hotline instead of other volunteer opportunities. The study was funded by The University of Texas-Arlington Office of Graduate Studies and is based on methodology developed by Praetorius and Machtmes (2005).

Literature Review

Volunteer motivation has been studied extensively (Yoshioka, Brown, & Ashcraft, 2007) but only minimally related to crisis hotlines. The characteristics of crisis hotline volunteers are consistent with altruism (Barz, 2001; Clary & Orenstein, 1991; Engs & Kirk, 1974; Stegall, 1998; Tapp & Spanier, 1973) and egoism (Barz; Clary & Orenstein; Stegall). Altruism and egoism are identified as motivators in other volunteer roles as well regardless of volunteer characteristics (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Yoshioka, Brown, & Ashcroft). As Safrit and Merill (2000) noted, altruism and egoism are often concurrent motivators: "Volunteering focuses on the common good. Although reasons for volunteering may be individualized and perhaps even self-serving, the outcomes of volunteering are focused beyond the individual towards a larger, common good" (¶ 12).

The published literature suggests that altruism is an important motivational factor for a number of reasons. For example, older volunteers who are altruistically motivated are more satisfied (Finkelstein, 2007). Satisfaction often results in extended tenure (Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003; Finkelstein). Additionally, altruism may be related to having personal history with the agency or presenting issue (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007) as it was among crisis hotline volunteers (Stegall, 1998). Stürmer, Snyder, Kropp and Siem (2006) suggested that volunteering may be an unconscious attempt to help oneself, exemplifying the intermingling of altruism and egoism.

Solely egoistic motives are of concern, though. For example, egoistic motives do not contribute to satisfaction among older volunteers (Finkelstein, 2007). Volunteers' egoism may stem from efforts to fulfill human needs. Maslow (1943) conceptualized these in a hierarchy: physiological, safety, social (i.e., love, belongingness), esteem (i.e., self-esteem and esteem of others), and self-actualization needs (i.e., fulfilling one's purpose). Applying this to volunteers, one sees that they attempt to fulfill social and esteem needs.

Social relationships are created or strengthened during volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999); they found that "volunteer behaviors do not depend solely on the person or on the situation, but rather depend on the interaction of person-based dynamics and situational opportunities" (p. 159). Switzer, Switzer, Stukas, and Baker (1999) found this social need was the highest ranked function among male (but not female) volunteers. The community context of volunteering fulfills the social need for belongingness (Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

This context is not geographical or demographical (e.g., minority, gender) but rather "an inclusive sense of community and involves cognitive, affective, and behavioral components" (Omoto & Snyder, p. 863). Barlow and Hainsworth (2001) identified two motivations related to belongingness among older volunteers: "to feel a useful member of society by helping others, and to find a peer group" (p. 213).

Volunteers also seek to satisfy esteem needs. Clary and Snyder (1999) identified esteem enhancement and protection as functions of volunteering. Switzer, Switzer, Stukas, and Baker (1999) found esteem enhancement to be one of the more important motivators among females. It is also important among retired older volunteers (Barlow & Hainsworth, 2001). Esteem protection, i.e., using "volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems," (Clary & Snyder, p. 157) is closely related to the idea that volunteers choose organizations helping those with a shared experience.

Methodology

As a service-learning project for a doctoral social work qualitative research seminar, an exploratory, phenomenological study of crisis hotline volunteers' motivations was conducted, because phenomenology focuses on the *lived experience*. The interview began with: "What motivated you to volunteer on the crisis hotline?" Typical of heuristic phenomenology, this question guided the inquiry; subsequent questions emerged depending on participants' responses.

The crisis center's volunteer resource manager contacted approximately 80 crisis hotline volunteers via email regarding the study. Those interested received an invitation letter and consent form to review. Seminar students interviewed 15 crisis hotline volunteers (an adequate size for a qualitative study; Sandelowski, 1995), used an audio recorder to facilitate data collection and recording, and transcribed the interviews for data analysis. They used source, analyst, and theory triangulation to enhance the credibility of analysis (Patton, 2002). Denzin (1978) explained: "No single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. This is termed triangulation" (p. 28). Source triangulation is defined as "checking out the consistency of different data sources within the same method" (Patton, p. 556). The students interviewed 15 volunteers to provide multiple data sources. Then, they identified themes in their individual interviews. Next was analyst triangulation, i.e. "using multiple analysts to review findings" (Patton, p. 556). First, students met in groups to discuss each interview, providing one level of analyst triangulation. After these discussions, the students and the article authors convened and finalized themes, providing a second level. Finally, theory triangulation is defined as "using multiple perspectives or theories to interpret the data" (Patton, p. 556); this involved the faculty and students reviewing existing theories related to emergent themes. Theory triangulation, as it related to the findings, is presented in the results.

Results

Over 75% of the crisis hotline volunteers were female. They were between the ages of 24 and 66+ with the median tied between the categories of 60 to 65 (n = 3) and over 66 (n = 3). The median volunteer tenure was tied between 1 to 5 years (n = 4) and 11 to 15 years (n = 4) with the majority (n = 9) having volunteered over five years with the crisis hotline. Education attainment ranged from some college to advanced degrees. The majority of the volunteers'

occupations were in social and public service; five were retirees. Twelve of the 15 noted they had a history of volunteering prior to their crisis hotline volunteer tenure.

The interviews provided insight into motivations to volunteer on the crisis hotline as opposed to other volunteer opportunities. These motivators included: (1) giving back to the community; (2) altruism; (3) finding the work challenging; (4) experience with crisis and suicide and (5) free time.

Giving Back to the Community

Eight of 15 participants described motivations in terms of giving back to their community. For them, the construct of giving back is an ongoing, active process of contributing to the community. Phrases that emerged: "knowing that you make a difference"; "made an impact;" "take part in the life of the community."

Altruism

The construct of altruistic motivation emerged in relation to the concurrence of altruism and egoism (Safrit & Merrill, 2000). Eleven of 15 identified helping someone in need as a motivator. Two volunteers' statements illustrate this clearly: "I think it is nice to hear someone say 'thank you, you saved my life.' When you help others, you are really helping yourself too;" and

> It's very rewarding whenever you do get on the phone and you'd notice that change from when the person calls you they are all frantic, but by the end of the call, they are calmer and you can, you can hear it in their voice.

Finding Work Challenging

Volunteering proves to be advantageous for both recipient and volunteer, specifically in its challenging nature (Barlow & Hainsworth, 2001;

Stegall, 1998). Similarly, five of 15 participants described their volunteer experience as challenging, e.g., "the work is very interesting and it challenges me" and "it does take up energy … it actually takes a lot of work to listen and to, to be empathetic."

Experience with Crisis and Suicide

Another motivation was personal experience with crisis and suicide. Having previous experiences with the agency or presenting issue has been noted as a motivator in crisis hotline volunteer and motivation literature (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007; Stegall, 1998; Strümer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). Nine of 15 volunteers reported motivation stemming from experience with crisis and suicide. As one volunteer illustrated: "I had a drug problem and without some people that very much cared about me and helped me through that time in my life, I wouldn't be here today." Another shared: "and it just happens that I have a family member with a history of suicide attempts." And perhaps most clearly: "My volunteering for the suicide crisis center is because of the loss of my partner, to death by suicide."

Free Time

There was one motivator that emerged from this study that was not identified in previous studies of crisis hotline volunteer: having spare time. One volunteer stated: "I have plenty of time available and I really do believe that uh, uh, structure is very important in people's lives, for retirees especially." Another noted: "I had free time to do some volunteer work where in the past I really hadn't had any time" A third said: "my schedule can be very flexible so that I can volunteer to answer the volunteer crisis line" These volunteers desired to initiate or maintain

community ties through volunteerism because of a change in their daily schedule. Previous studies found that while some are willing to volunteer, reasons they do not include lack of time (Yoshioka, Brown, & Ashcraft, 2007).

Conclusions and Implications

This exploratory qualitative study sought to identify volunteers' motivation to volunteer on a crisis hotline. As has been found in the literature on crisis hotline volunteers and volunteer motivation across organizations, the motivation of these 15 volunteers is multifaceted (Winniford, Carpenter, & Grider, 1997). Specific motivations were: (1) giving back to the community; (2) helping someone in need; (3) finding the work challenging; (4) having experience with crisis and suicide; and (5) free time.

The findings of this study are both confirmatory and surprising. Confirmatory findings are that motivations of these volunteers are closely related to altruism and egoism as has been found in the paucity of research on motivations of crisis hotline volunteers. Surprisingly, social relationships and the need for belongingness did not emerge as in previous research on volunteer motivations in other capacities (Barlow & Hainsworth, 2001; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Switzer, Switzer, Stukas, & baker, 1999). This may be due to the nature of this particular volunteering experience. Some volunteers may build relationships during the extensive training period. However, once volunteering begins at the 24-hour hotline, shifts are staffed by one or two volunteers who are quite focused on answering crisis calls and completing related documentation. Time for building relationships is thusly limited. Another somewhat surprising finding was that free time was a motivator not previously identified in the research on crisis hotlines

though it does seem to be salient for older volunteers in other roles (Nagchoudhuri, McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007). This motivator is surprising given that episodic volunteering is the emerging norm (Hustinx, Haski-Leventhal, & Handy, 2008; Meijs & Brudney, 2007; Swinson, 2006) but not surprising since the demands of answering crisis calls require a more traditional, long-term volunteer.

Since the motivations of volunteers are multifaceted, it is imperative for volunteer resource managers to understand and utilize those for recruitment and retention (Kovacs & Black, 1999). While it is not possible to generalize this study's findings to other crisis hotline volunteers or other volunteers in general, it is possible for extrapolation to be useful for volunteer resource managers of both crisis hotline volunteers and other types of volunteers. Patton (2002) defined extrapolation as:. . . modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations . . . [that are] logical, thoughtful, case derived, and problem oriented rather than statistical and probabilistic. Extrapolations can be particularly useful when based on information-rich samples and designs, that is, studies that produce relevant information carefully targeted to specific concerns about both the present and the future. (p. 584)

For example, many of the volunteers in this study had previous experience with suicide and crisis. Volunteer resource managers of various types of volunteer roles may find that former clients are excellent sources for volunteers. Another useful source may be local universities. Specific to crisis hotline resource managers, considering that suicide is the third leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 24 (McIntosh, 2009), many of these students may have personal experience with crisis and suicide. Not only was this identified as a motivator for volunteering on a crisis hotline

but also the current generation of college students is volunteering more than previous generations. However, volunteer resource managers are cautioned that different university cultures yield different motivations and attitudes toward volunteering (Burns et al., 2007). Also, college students may be more episodic, i.e., not willing or able to commit to a long contract. Finally, as baby boomers retire, volunteer resource managers needing a more traditional, long-term volunteer may turn to them since they may have the free time motivation noted in this study. Among this group, the best form of recruitment seems to be informal methods, such as word of mouth from existing agency clients and volunteers (Nagchoudhuri McBride, Thirupathy, Morrow-Howell, & Tang, 2007). Additionally, these retirees may perceive the organization, staff, and fellow volunteers as sources of peer support and develop new, valuable skills (Kovacs & Black, 1999).

In developing recruitment and retention procedures, volunteer resource managers of both crisis centers and other volunteer-utilizing organizations may use the identified motivators of these 15 volunteers to ensure that volunteers' motivations are beneficial to their mission. With regards to recruitment, although volunteers may perceive their efforts as contributing positively to the community, certain aspects require discernment and self-awareness. For example, volunteers motivated by altruism, such as those identified in this study, may approach volunteering with a preconceived notion about the caller or situation, possibly leading to an inflated sense of self. The volunteer may become a "superperson" believing that s/he is of a higher caliber or character than the caller. The "motivation of the superperson is suspect since the question arises again about whose needs are being met, those of the superperson volunteer, or

those of the caller" (Seeley, 1995, p. 15). Indicators of this "superperson" motivation present risk for the volunteer, client, and agency.

Similarly, those who are motivated by a history with crisis and suicide may be a risk. It should be cautioned that due to the sensitive nature of services received, not all with this history would be suitable volunteers. During recruitment efforts, prescreening questions should be designed and asked in a manner that seeks information regarding the emotional and mental stability of the potential volunteer.

Retention practices might incorporate such steps as: (1) regular and ongoing training focused upon different aspects of the various roles of the volunteer; (2) the development of a progression for volunteers to have increasing levels of responsibilities to give the volunteers challenges and goals to strive toward; (3) the invitation for and implementation of feasible suggestions from volunteers for improvement of services; and (4) development of a system for rewarding the volunteers in the form of monthly social events, which would engender the sense of belonging and relationship-building.

In summary, it is important for agencies to be aware of why the volunteers are willing to contribute time to their agency's mission. This study shows that it is important for volunteer resource managers to ask potential volunteers to discuss: (1) why they chose the agency; (2) why they want to help these particular clients; (3) what they would find challenging; (4) related experiences; and (5) availability. Posing these questions to potential volunteers will help determine their motivations and help volunteer resource managers in the screening process to improve an agency's return on investment by increasing volunteer tenure.

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