



WHO GETS INVOLVED AND WHY? THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VOLUNTEERISM

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Introduction

Every year, millions of people all over the world volunteer and devote substantial amounts of their time and energy to helping others, e.g. providing companionship to the elderly, tutoring to the illiterate, counselling to the troubled, or providing health care to the sick. In fact, in the United States, in the year 2000 alone, 83.9 million American adults, or 44% of the adult population, engaged in some form of volunteerism each year, doing so for an average of 3.6 hours per week, contributing a total of 15.6 billion hours of volunteer services with a monetary value in excess of 239.2 billion dollars (Independent Sector, 2001). These legions of adult volunteers are joined by substantial numbers of young volunteers (in fact, high school volunteering in the United States recently reached its highest levels in the past 50 years; Independent Sector, 2001) and elderly volunteers. Whereas the United States has long been marked by relatively high rates of volunteerism, voluntary action can be found in countries throughout the world (Curtis, Grabb, & Baer, 1992).

Volunteerism is one of the many and varied ways in which people try to do good for others, their communities, and society at large. There are important ways in which volunteerism stands apart from these other forms of doing good works. Volunteerism can be distinguished from charitable giving and philanthropy, in that participants in volunteer efforts provide valuable time, resources, and energy to causes and recipients of service rather than necessarily donating money or goods. Whereas philanthropic efforts are crucial to the success of many organisations and service programmes, our research focus is on volunteer behaviour itself.

It is also important here to distinguish between “forced” and freely chosen volunteer efforts. That is, many schools, businesses, and other institutions provide volunteer opportunities that are mandatory for students or employees or are perceived as all but required (e.g. service learning programmes, some corporate-community partnerships). And, although some of the outcomes of these programmes may be similar (cf., Clary, Snyder, & Stukas,



1998; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999), our interests have been focused on the instances and organisations in which individuals provide assistance to other people and causes, without receiving compensation or having been obviously coerced. In short, for us, volunteerism is a form of pro-social action in which people actively and freely seek out opportunities to provide non-monetary assistance to others in need.

Volunteerism benefits the recipients of service and the broader community as well; as such, volunteer service is one way that people can help others and, simultaneously, help alleviate some of the society's problems. Volunteer service also intrinsically rewards volunteers by promoting community spirit, offering evidence of people's kindness and commitment to others, by increasing feelings of helpfulness and self-worth, by providing opportunities to develop and exercise one's skills, and by actually improving physical health (Andrews, 1990). Volunteer service, to put it simply, provides opportunities to, at one and the same time, do good for other people, for society, and for oneself.

In addition to these practical considerations of volunteerism and leading volunteer organisations, studying volunteerism provides a distinct perspective on the nature of helping and pro-social action. In psychology, helping has long been studied in terms of brief, low cost, generally spontaneous assistance provided by strangers (i.e. bystander intervention) or, more recently, in terms of care provided to chronically sick or severely debilitated members of one's own family (Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995; Wilson, 2000). However, a careful consideration of features of volunteerism makes it clear that it is a distinctive form of pro-social action that, as a hybrid, incorporates aspects of both of these forms of helping that have received research attention (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Snyder, Clary, & Stukas, 2000). Specifically, volunteerism typically involves people choosing to help others in need. Moreover, their acts of helping are often ones that have been actively sought out by the volunteers themselves and that may be sustained over extended periods of time and considerable efforts.



And, since volunteers typically help people with whom they have no prior association, it is a form of helping that occurs without any bonds of prior obligation or commitment to the recipients of volunteer services.

Because of its defining and characteristic features, volunteerism is something of a curious phenomenon. For a variety of reasons, it simply should not occur. Unlike the helping that occurs in response to emergencies, there is no press of circumstances. Unlike the helping that occurs in families and in existing relationships, there are no bonds of obligations. Volunteerism is effortful, time consuming, and presents opportunity costs to volunteers. For example, people may forego other activities and social relations to make time for their volunteer activities, which in turn, may introduce additional social costs and possible rejection. Yet, people do seek out opportunities to volunteer, and they do sustain their volunteer efforts over extended periods of time. The question then, is “Why?” Why do some people get involved in helping others as volunteers? What is it that moves people to seek out opportunities to help, that guides them toward some helping opportunities and away from others, and that sustains their efforts over time and through adversity? In our research, we seek to answer such questions.

Overview of the Processes of Volunteerism

Our research on volunteerism is guided by a conceptual model of the volunteer process that takes account of the defining and characteristic features of volunteerism as a form of sustained helping without obligation. The model conceptualises volunteerism as a process that unfolds over time (Omoto & Snyder, 1995, 2002; Snyder & Omoto, 2007). Specifically, it specifies interrelated psychological and behavioural features associated with each of three sequential and interactive stages. At the antecedents stage, it identifies personality, motivational, and circumstantial characteristics of people that predict who becomes involved as volunteers and, if they do, who will be most effective and satisfied in their volunteer service. At the experiences stage, the model



explores psychological and behavioural aspects of the interpersonal relationships that develop between volunteers and recipients of their services, paying particular attention to the behavioural patterns and relationship dynamics that facilitate the continued service of volunteers and positive benefits to the recipients of their services. Finally, at the consequences stage, the Volunteer Process Model (VPM) focuses on the impact of volunteer service on the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour of volunteers, the recipients of their services, and the members of their social networks. Taken together, then, the stages of the VPM speak to the initiation and to the maintenance of volunteer service and its effectiveness.

Moreover, the VPM seeks to characterise volunteerism as a phenomenon that is situated at, and builds bridges between, many levels of analysis, and that unfolds over time. At the level of the individual, the model calls attention to the activities and psychological processes of individual volunteers and recipients of volunteer services. For example, volunteers make decisions to get involved as volunteers, seek out service opportunities, engage in volunteer work for some period of time, and eventually cease their efforts. At the interpersonal level, the model expands this focus further and incorporates the dynamics of the helping relationships between volunteers and recipients of service. At an organisational or agency level, the model focuses on the goals associated with recruiting, managing, and retaining an unpaid work force as well as associated concerns about work performance, compensation, and evaluation. That is, many volunteer efforts take place through or in cooperation with community-based organisations or other institutions. Accordingly, we have incorporated aspects of organisational structure, roles, and operations into the VPM. Finally, at a broader societal level, the model considers the linkages between individuals and the social structures of their societies as well as collective and cultural dynamics.

Thus, the VPM conceptualises volunteerism as a process that unfolds over time and that involves multiple levels of analyses. (For further discussion on the VPM, see Omoto, Snyder, & Berghuis,



1993; Omoto & Snyder, 1990, 1995, 2002; Snyder & Omoto, 1992a, b). Although we believe that our conceptual model and the issues of interest are applicable to many, if not most forms of volunteerism, much of our empirical research on the volunteer process has focused on volunteer service programmes that have emerged in the United States in response to the epidemic of HIV and AIDS. HIV disease, including AIDS, has had and continues to have major medical, economic, social, and societal impact throughout the world. A critical component of the societal response to the HIV epidemic in the United States has been community-based organisations of volunteers involved in caring for people living with HIV or AIDS (Person with AIDS [PWAs]) and in educating the public about HIV and PWAs. Some volunteers provide emotional and social support as “buddies” to PWAs, others help PWAs with tangible household chores or transportation, and still others staff information and referral hotlines, make educational presentations, or engage in advocacy. Although the importance and prevalence of some of the specific roles that volunteers play have shifted over the course of the epidemic and with changes in medical treatments and government support, volunteer efforts continue to be important in shaping HIV services and education. They remain at the heart of community-based responses to HIV and other societal problems.

Like volunteers for other causes, AIDS volunteers seek out opportunities to help, make substantial commitments to their work, and provide assistance to people who initially are strangers to them. As well, many AIDS volunteers provide care and assistance in potentially trying and stressful situations (i.e. spending time with seriously ill PWAs) and at some personal and emotional cost. For these reasons, we see AIDS volunteerism as paradigmatic of volunteerism, more generally. In our research, we have examined the processes of volunteerism as they occur in the real world, focusing on “real” individuals involved in “real” acts of volunteerism in “real” world settings. In so doing, we have entered into a naturally occurring laboratory in order to investigate a phenomenon of significance for individual and collective action. Moreover, we



have supplemented our field studies with focused laboratory experiments that have permitted us to more carefully identify causal mechanisms and processes of volunteerism. And finally, our research has employed both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs and has drawn data from diverse populations of volunteers and non-volunteers.

The Three Stages of the Volunteer Process Model

Antecedents of Volunteerism

Among the questions at the antecedents stage of the volunteer process that we have sought to answer in our empirical work is: What motivates some people to become AIDS volunteers? We attempted to identify personality, motivational, and circumstantial characteristics of AIDS volunteers that predict who becomes an effective and satisfied volunteer, and ultimately to build on this knowledge to develop effective strategies for recruiting and retaining volunteers.

The special concerns in research at this stage have been the motivations of AIDS volunteers. In this regard, our work has been informed by a functional approach to personality, motivation, and social behaviour, one in which the purposive and agentic nature of human action is emphasised (Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Consistent with functional theorising (Clary & Snyder, 1991; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956; Snyder & Omoto, 2000, 2001; Snyder et al., 2000), we have found that different people volunteer in the service of different goals, functions, or motivations. Specifically, we utilised exploratory and confirmatory factor analytic techniques in multiple samples to identify five primary motivations for AIDS volunteerism (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; for related measures of volunteer motivations, see Clary et al., 1998; Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000; Ouellette, Cassel, Maslanka, & Wong, 1995; Schondel, Shields, & Orel, 1992; Simon, Stürmer, & Steffens, 2000).



Investigations of the motivations behind volunteerism indicated that some people volunteer to express their personal values or to satisfy felt humanitarian obligations to help others, whereas another relatively other-focused motivation expressed by volunteers is that of community concern. In terms of AIDS volunteerism (in the United States), this has meant volunteering out of concern for people affected by HIV disease and the communities most affected by it. The remaining motivations are more self-focused: some people volunteer in search of greater understanding of AIDS and how people live with HIV disease; some for reasons related to personal development such as to challenge themselves or enlarge their social networks, and some to fulfil esteem enhancement needs (e.g. to feel better about themselves or escape from other pressures).

Of the motivations that we have identified, values motivation tends to be endorsed most and esteem enhancement least among the AIDS volunteers that we have studied, with the other three motivations falling in between (Omoto & Snyder, 1993, 1995), a pattern that is typical of volunteers in many other domains (Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). Moreover, volunteers typically score higher on these motivations than non-volunteers (Clary et al., 1996). In addition, volunteers can be motivated by more than one motive. In fact, in one study of AIDS volunteers, we observed that fully 62.9% had multiple motives for volunteering; however, multiple motivations can constitute “too much of a good thing” as volunteers with many important motives also reported greater stress and less satisfaction with their volunteer service than volunteers with only a clear and single motive for volunteering (Kiviniemi, Snyder, & Omoto, 2002).

In short however, it is clear that the same acts of volunteerism can be motivated by quite different considerations and that volunteers often have many motives for volunteering. Moreover, the functional theoretical perspective guiding our research on volunteer motivations, and the motivations that we have identified in our research, serve as reminders that volunteers act both on behalf of others (e.g. volunteering to alleviate the problems of homelessness, poverty, etc.) and on behalf of themselves (e.g. volunteering in order



to make friends, to acquire new skills, to boost one's self-esteem, and/or to affirm personal values). That is, many of the motivations for volunteer service are ones that bring together a mutual concern for benefiting others and a concern for benefiting oneself. At the same time, as volunteers are motivated to do good for others, they may also be motivated to volunteer as a way of doing good for themselves.

An appreciation of the strength and variety of different motivations that lead people to volunteer as well as the interweaving of motivations to do good for others and to do good for oneself, have implications for designing effective methods of attracting people to involve themselves in volunteer activities and associations. Indeed, research on persuasive messages for recruiting volunteers has focused on appeals to prospective volunteers' motivations for volunteering. A recurring theme in these investigations is the importance of the matching of messages to motivation. That is, building on research indicating a diversity of potential motivations for volunteering (Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995), these studies have demonstrated that the persuasive impact of a message is greater when it directly addresses the recipient's primary motivations than when it does not (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994; Clary et al., 1998; Smith, Omoto, & Snyder, 2001; Snyder, Omoto, & Smith, in press).

For example, to examine the use of motivation matching in a field setting, Smith et al., (2001) created three newspaper-type advertisements encouraging AIDS volunteerism. One ad contained a self-focused motivational appeal (e.g. "volunteer to feel better about yourself"); one contained an other-focused motivational appeal (e.g. "volunteer to help people in need"), and one ad contained no appeal to any specific motivation. When volunteers at an AIDS service organisation evaluated these ads, the results revealed a clear matching pattern. First, the ads that emphasised a motivation or reason for volunteering were generally preferred to the control ad. Further, preference for the other-focused ad over the control ad was strongly predicted by volunteers' reported other-focused motivation



for their own current volunteer work, but not by their reported self-focused motivation. When preference for the self-focused motivation ad over the control ad was examined, the converse pattern was obtained: volunteer self-focused motivation predicted this preference, but their other-focused motivation did not.

We extended this research by next placing these ads in university newspapers to see how effective they would be in recruiting young people to volunteer. The different ads ran in campus newspapers at two large U.S. universities. We were able to track which ads people responded to by listing a telephone number to call but by changing the name of the contact person mentioned in the different ads. The results of this study revealed that more people responded to the motivational ads than to the control ad, with the other-focused ad attracting the most respondents. In addition, the other-focused motivational ad was more successful than the control ad in attracting callers who followed through with their intent to pursue the advertised volunteer opportunity. Callers later completed questionnaire measures that assessed their motivations for volunteering and, of particular relevance to the matching effect, we found that participants who responded to the other-focused ad were higher in other-focused motivation than participants who responded to the other two ads, although a strong matching pattern was not observed for the self-focused ad. These findings provide evidence supporting the use of specific motivationally based appeals to recruit volunteers, with these appeals also especially likely to attract motivationally matched prospective volunteers.

Experiences of Volunteerism

The second stage of the volunteer process concerns the experiences of volunteers over the course of their service. At this stage, we explored the interpersonal relationships that develop between volunteers and recipients of their services (especially PWAs in buddy programmes), the extent to which volunteers feel their service has met their expectations and fulfilled their needs, and volunteers'



perceptions of their work, their service organisation, and their perceptions of other people's reactions to their work.

Illustrating with findings at this stage, we found that volunteers have relatively high expectations for the quality of the relationships they will develop with client PWAs and those actual volunteer-PWA relationships generally fall short of these expectations (Omoto, Gunn, & Crain, 1998). Volunteer satisfaction also falls short of expectations and volunteers report some stress from these relationships, with this stress related to relationship closeness and client health. Specifically, volunteer stress increases with relationship closeness early on, and working with a relatively healthy client is related to less stress.

Moreover, the extent to which volunteers' experiences match the motivations that drew them into volunteer service and the expectations that they formed early on about volunteering, they are likely to be satisfied with their service as volunteers. As part of a longitudinal study of the volunteer process, Crain, Omoto, and Snyder (1998) examined the role that the matching between volunteers' motivations, expectations, and experiences played in determining volunteers' satisfaction and their burnout. In this study, AIDS volunteers completed four questionnaires at different points in time in which they reported the importance of each set of functional motivations for volunteering: Time 1, prior to their training to serve as volunteers, the extent to which they expected that volunteering would fulfil their motivations; Time 2, immediately following training, the extent that their experiences met these expectations; Time 3, after volunteering for three months, and their feelings of satisfaction and burnout; Time 4, after having volunteered for six months. Overall matching between motivations, expectations, and experiences was predictive of greater satisfaction and less burnout, suggesting that a stronger match is associated with more positive consequences of volunteerism. Similar evidence of the importance of matching volunteers' experiences to their motivations in predicting satisfaction is provided by Clary et al., (1998) and Davis, Hall, and Meyer (2003).



Moreover, the matching of volunteers' experiences to their motivations may have implications for their commitment to their volunteer service and their intentions to continue in service as volunteers. For example, in a longitudinal field study of AIDS volunteers, commitment to sustained service was greater among volunteers whose experiences were congruent with, or matched, their motivations for volunteering as espoused 6-months earlier (O'Brien, Crain, Omoto, & Snyder, 2000; Crain et al., 1998). Moreover, in a pair of laboratory experiments in which college students were induced to participate in activities conceptually related to volunteer service, attitudes and intentions facilitative of continuing service were increased by interventions designed to encourage them to frame their volunteer service in ways that were congruent with their own motivations (O'Brien et al., 2000; Williamson, Snyder, & Omoto, 2000).

It is important to recognise that volunteers' experiences may include both positive and negative feelings. On the positive side, volunteers experience empathy, and/or liking for their clients, with empathy being particularly important in predicting helping behaviour and intentions to continue helping when the volunteer and client share a common identity of membership in a social group (i.e. "the in-group"), and liking being particularly important when the client is a member of a different social group (i.e. "the out-group"; Stuermer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005; Stuermer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). The volunteer experience may also include some negative downsides. In research on AIDS volunteerism, findings show that some volunteers reported feelings of stigmatisation and discomfort resulting from their work as AIDS volunteers. In fact, many reported that the reactions of members of their own social networks have caused them to feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, and stigmatised because of their volunteerism (Snyder, Omoto, & Crain, 1999).



Consequences of Volunteerism

Our research questions at the consequences stage of the VPM focused on changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour among volunteers as a result of their service, as well as their ultimate longevity of service and their perceived and judged effectiveness as volunteers. In longitudinal research with repeated measurements over time, we found that volunteers are indeed changed by their experiences, for example, increases in knowledge about safer sex practices, less stereotyped beliefs about PWAs, and significantly greater comfort with AIDS and AIDS-related issues (Omoto, Snyder, Chang, & Lee, 2001). In their self-reports, moreover, volunteers revealed that their experiences have powerfully affected and changed them directly (Omoto & Snyder, 1995).

In exploring longevity of service, we also found that the duration of service of one group of AIDS volunteers was related to their satisfaction with their work, the amount of support they perceived from their social support network, and the motivations they reported for becoming AIDS volunteers (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). Specifically, volunteers served longer to the extent that they were more satisfied with their work, had less social support, and reported stronger, and particularly self-focused, motivations for volunteering. The fact that greater social support was actually related to shorter length of service time is consistent with previously discussed findings about the stigmatisation of AIDS volunteers. To the extent that being a volunteer disrupts harmonious relations with members of one's social network, and to the extent that these social network members responded negatively to this disruption and to the AIDS volunteerism that has occasioned this disruption, volunteers may be likely to quit sooner than if their work is supported by others.

The findings with respect to volunteers' motivations, although initially surprising, are understandable, in retrospect. Engaging in volunteerism for self-focused reasons such as to gain understanding, personal development, or esteem enhancement all predicted longer durations of service, whereas ratings of other-focused motivations



such as values and community concern were unrelated to longevity of service. Thus, volunteers who can and did get something back from their work were likely to stay involved longer. Volunteering for relatively more other-focused reasons however, may not sustain people in the face of the stress and stigmatisation they are likely to encounter as volunteers. Said another way, volunteering for personal reasons, and not just out of relatively selfless desire to serve others, not only is common, but is likely to lead to longer service as a volunteer.

As well, research on the consequences of volunteerism has examined the impact of volunteers on the clients who are served. Such research addresses the key question — Do volunteers make a difference? In a study of the helping relationships between AIDS volunteers and their clients, clients with volunteers (relative to those without) had higher psychological functioning, with this effect seeming to be linked to greater active coping, which was in turn, promoted by the quality of the relationship between the volunteer and client (Crain, Snyder, & Omoto, 2000). And further, what makes for a high quality, effective and productive volunteer-client helping relationship? A critical ingredient seems to be a psychological sense of community — to the extent that volunteers are connected with their communities, they are effective as volunteers and, to the extent that clients feel a psychological connection to their communities, they benefit most from the services provided to them by volunteers (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). In short, both volunteers and clients benefit from heightened community connections.

Moreover, research on volunteerism has yielded recurring indications that connections to community can draw people into volunteerism and sustain their involvement over time. In reciprocal fashion, moreover, involvement in volunteerism seems to strengthen and build connections to community. Specifically, community concern and the influences of other community members figure prominently in the motivations of new volunteers (Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Stuermer & Kampmeier, 2003). Moreover, over the course of their service, volunteers become increasingly connected with their



surrounding communities, including the communities defined by the volunteers, staff, and clients associated with their volunteer service organisations (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). In this way, volunteering also appears to build and foster a sense of community. For example, in research in which changes in the social networks of volunteers over the course of their service was investigated, we found that volunteers were increasingly surrounded by a community of people who are somehow connected to their volunteer service, including people they had recruited to be volunteers (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Moreover, as connections to a community of shared concerns increase, participation in the community, including in forms of social action other than volunteerism (such as giving to charitable causes, attending fund-raising events, and engaging in social activism), also increases (Omoto & Malsch, 2005; Omoto & Snyder, 2002).

The Psychology of Volunteerism in Context

The dynamics of volunteerism that we have observed in our studies of AIDS volunteers have also been observed in related studies of other populations of volunteers. For example, it has been possible to develop measures of volunteer motivations for use in diverse samples of actual volunteers and prospective volunteers (e.g. Clary et al., 1998), to demonstrate that persuasive messages, whether in videotape or brochure form, designed to motivate people to volunteer are persuasive to the extent that they target the motivations of individual prospective volunteers (Clary et al., 1994; Clary et al., 1998), to demonstrate that the satisfaction experienced by diverse groups of volunteers is predicted by the match between their motivations and the benefits that they derive from volunteering (Clary et al., 1998; Crain et al., 1998), and that volunteers' intentions to continue volunteering both in the immediate and longer terms is predicted by the match between their motivations and the benefits that they perceive to accrue as volunteers (Clary et al., 1998).



Further, research on volunteerism has revealed important differences in the ways in which this form of helping manifests itself across the life course. Rates of volunteerism in the United States tend to increase as individuals move from adolescence to young adulthood to middle age, and then decline as people move toward old age. For those under 25, less than 50% reported having volunteered in the previous year; for those aged 25–34, it's 53%; for those 35–44, it's 61%; for those 45–54, it's 56%; and, for those over 55, it drops below 50% (Clary et al., 1996). Some motivations for volunteering are accorded equal importance across age groups. For example, values are always highly rated, in fact as highly rated for 18–24 year olds, as for those over the age of 65. However, some motivations are quite different by age; for example, motivations revolving around career development and acquiring new skills and knowledge through volunteering seem to be more important to younger than to older people (Clary et al., 1996).

Moreover, volunteering in adults appears to have its roots in youth volunteerism, according to survey research conducted by Independent Sector (2001). Key findings from this research are that, among adults who volunteer, two-thirds began volunteering when they were young. Moreover, adults who began volunteering as youth are twice as likely to volunteer as those who did not volunteer when they were younger. And, in every income and age group, those who volunteered as youth, gave and volunteered more than those who did not. Finally, those who volunteered as youth and whose parents volunteered became the most generous adults in giving their time as volunteers.

Where, then, does this important pattern of youth volunteering come from? In studies of volunteering during high school years, it appears that certain critical events in the early years of high school foreshadow volunteering that occurs in the later high school years. Thus, in one study of high school students in Minnesota, those with higher educational plans and higher intrinsic motivation toward school work (as measured in their first year in high school), were also more likely to become involved in volunteer activities.



In turn, their volunteering strengthened their work values and the importance they attached to involvement in their communities (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Lo & Au, 2004; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

In later stages of the life course, volunteering is prevalent among the elderly. However, the motivations for volunteering do show important shifts in emphasis over the life course. Whereas, among younger and middle aged adults, motivations revolving around relationship concerns are particularly pronounced, among elderly volunteers, motivations related to concerns with service to society and community obligation seem to be particularly prominent (Omoto et al., 2000). Moreover, among the elderly, volunteerism and other forms of social participation seem to be associated with higher psychological functioning, better physical health, and increased longevity (House, 2001; House, Robbins, & Metzner, 1982).

Just as volunteerism may vary across stages of life, so too does there seem to be meaningful variation across cultures and countries in the meanings and manifestations of volunteerism and other forms of citizen participation and civic engagement (Curtis et al., 1992; Levine, Norenzayan, & Philbrick, 2001). Much of this variation tracks the disparity in individualism and collectivism across cultures and regions of the world, with cultural orientations influencing whether getting involved in solving societal problems is seen as a matter of personal choice and individual responsibility (i.e. an individualistic orientation) or whether it is construed as one of normative obligation and collective concern (i.e. a collectivistic orientation). For example, Miller (1994) proposed that the moral foundations of caring and helping may vary across cultures, especially with respect to the extent that caring and helping reflect personal and individual considerations (which might be especially pronounced in individualistic cultures), versus the extent to which these pro-social actions reflect interpersonal and social obligations (an orientation that might be particularly characteristic of collectivistic cultures). In addition, there appear to be associations between individualism/collectivism and various indicators of civic



engagement and citizen participation. Thus, in the United States, the states with the greatest amounts of charitable giving and volunteerism also tend to be the most individualistic (Kemmelmeyer, Jambor, & Letner, 2006). Similarly, there is a positive association between individualism and social capital across different countries (Allik & Realo, 2004). These associations may suggest that the apparent liberation from social bonds that may come with individualistic cultural views may also make people dependent on being or staying involved with society (as suggested over a century ago by Durkheim, 1893/1984).

Conclusion

Clearly, the emergence of volunteer service organisations in the United States in response to the challenges of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has provided us with considerable opportunities to explore the unique dynamics of volunteerism as a form of pro-social action and as a case example of people mobilising themselves to respond to a pressing social problem. Moreover, the lessons learned from our studies of AIDS volunteers have been generally corroborated by studies of volunteers working for other causes and engaging in other forms of social action (Snyder & Omoto, 2007). Taken together, such research has been informative about the nature of helping and pro-social action, especially those forms of helping and pro-social action that are planned, sustained, and that occur in the absence of bonds of obligation.

In addition to the theoretical benefits of the study of volunteerism for understanding the nature of pro-social action, we believe that an understanding of the psychology of volunteerism offers practical messages as well. Among the practical implications of our research are the lessons that suggest the practice of volunteerism itself, specifically about the ways that the recruitment, placement, and retention of volunteers can be enhanced. Systematic attention to the experiences and motivations of individual volunteers



may go a long way in making more effective the efforts of grass roots and volunteer organisations. Specifically, to the extent that organisations dependent on the services of volunteers can identify the motivations of prospective volunteers, including motivations that vary reliably with one's stage of life, they can systematically tailor their recruitment efforts to the actual motivations of potential volunteers. And, to the extent that these organisations can and do attend to the motivations of their actual volunteers, they may be able to channel them toward volunteer assignments that provide opportunities to best serve their particular motivations, and thereby enhance their effectiveness, satisfaction, and longevity of service.

From the perspective of the concerns of society, studying volunteerism is likely to yield valuable information of societal significance, including how to understand and expand the roles of volunteers and volunteer organisations in confronting and surmounting many of the problems that challenge societies. Quite conceivably, a focus on the motivations of volunteers could be an important foundation for large-scale campaigns to promote awareness of and interest in volunteerism and other forms of civic involvement. If successful, these campaigns would increase the involvement of individuals in the affairs of their societies, and thereby contribute to an active citizenry and a fully engaged civil society. The implications of this work for youth who choose or do not choose to volunteer to benefit themselves and society, as a whole are profound all over the world.



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