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Understanding sustained volunteer behavior: Values, prestige and perceived support

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Organizational and individual variables were combined to understand sustained volunteer behavior. Data were collected from community volunteers, where roughly one-half served for two years or less, and the remainder served over two years. A discriminant function analysis was conducted to determine which variables contributed to group differences in the length of time volunteered. Organizational variables included prestige and organizational support. A measure of individual values was also included. Results suggest that volunteers who served more than 2 years endorsed organizational support and values more than individuals volunteering less than 2 years. Implications for understanding sustained volunteer behavior are discussed.

Keywords: sustained volunteerism, prosocial behavior

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According to *Independent Sector* (2001), an estimated 83.9 million Americans (44% of the adult population, age 21 and older) volunteer and donate an estimated \$239 billion worth of time. Volunteering can be a long-term activity, and thus the processes relating to the maintenance of the activity need to be considered. The more we know and understand, the better informed we can be about developing and improving structures that encourage or support volunteers in the future.

Based on what is known about organizational behavior and attitudes in general, and the relationship between job satisfaction, commitment and perceived organizational support in particular, organizations can reasonably expect increases in prosocial behavior when employees are satisfied with their job, committed to the organization and believe the organization is concerned with their well being. This should be true, then, whether the organization's primary focus is for profit and employees are paid or if the organization is a nonprofit agency and "employees" are volunteers.

There are two major theoretical models of what factors sustain volunteering over an extended period of time: the volunteer process model (Omoto & Snyder, 1995, 2002), and the role identity model (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Piliavin, Grube & Callero, 2002). The models agree on many points (e.g., inclusion of organizational variables) and are not necessarily competitors for the best explanation of sustained volunteer activities, but they diverge somewhat in both focus and emphasis. Penner (2002) combined aspects of functional analysis from the volunteer process model and role identity theory into a single conceptual model and others have recently expanded that for use in studies with informal

volunteering (cf. Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007). Before presenting these models and implications for the current study, a brief statement on volunteerism is provided to clarify how the concept is operationalized for the purposes of the current study.

Volunteerism

Wilson and Musick (1997) use the term “formal volunteering” to refer to volunteer work in or for the community, where time and effort are given for the betterment of the community in general or for specified subsets of community members such as elderly adults who may have special needs. Belonging to religious or secular organizations and attending services or meetings, although clearly voluntary acts, are not sufficient to indicate volunteer work or service. This statement highlights an important distinction between voluntary membership and volunteer work or service, where work and service may be used interchangeably. The definition of volunteerism used in the current study excludes informal helping activities such as care giving for family or friends and isolated altruistic acts such as intervening in emergencies.

Volunteer Process Model

Interpersonal variables, specifically motives, are the primary focus of the volunteer process model. This model views volunteerism as being primarily determined by the extent to which there is a match between the motives or needs that originally lead a person to volunteer and that person’s actual experiences as a volunteer. This model also suggests that prosocial tendencies, social support for the volunteer’s activities, satisfaction with the volunteer experience and integration with the organization play important roles in sustained volunteering. Consistent with this framework, personal motives, social and organizational support, and satisfaction with the volunteer experience

are critical factors in sustaining volunteer activity (Kiviniemi, Snyder and Omoto, 2002; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998).

Drawing on functional theorizing about reasons, purposes and motivation underlying behavior, Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Miene, (1998) identified six personal and social functions served by volunteers (e.g., values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement). Clary et al. (1998) developed an inventory for assessing these motivational assumptions to contribute to ongoing research to explore the role of motivation in processes of volunteerism – especially decisions about becoming a volunteer and continuing to volunteer. The core propositions of a functional analysis of volunteerism are that acts of volunteerism that appear to be quite similar on the surface may reflect markedly different underlying motivational processes. Moreover, the functions served by volunteerism manifest themselves in the unfolding dynamics of this type of helping behavior, influencing critical events associated with the initiation and maintenance of voluntary prosocial action. In general, then, the focus of the functional analysis perspective is on individual motives for helping (i.e., volunteering serves different functions for different people, and perhaps may serve multiple functions for the same person at different times). Findings concerning the importance of the functions that volunteering serves for individuals clearly point to the multi-motivational nature of volunteering. That is, different volunteers pursue different goals and the same volunteer may be pursuing more than one goal.

Role-Identity Model

Social identity theory suggests that people's connections to organizations are motivated by their desire to obtain information relevant to the development and maintenance of the self (e.g., Callero, Howard, & Piliavin, 1987; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Piliavin, Grube, & Callero, 2002). Specifically, people use membership in organizations to help construct their social selves. The desire to have a favorable social identity is an important motive for following the rules (i.e., cooperating), helping the organization and remaining an organizational member. In particular, social identity theory suggests that concerns with social identity shapes an individual's motivation to voluntarily engage in cooperative behavior. Therefore, an important key to understanding how to develop and maintain voluntary cooperative behavior is to understand how identities are created, shaped and maintained within organizations (Tyler, 1999).

Integrated Framework

Penner (2002) combined aspects of functional analysis and role identity theory into a single conceptual model and others have recently expanded that model for use in studies with informal volunteering (cf. Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007). A similar model of the causes and consequences of sustained prosocial behaviors among paid employees has also been proposed (Penner, Midili, & Kegelmeyer, 1997). Finkelstein, Penner and Brannick (2005) also combined constructs from functional analysis and role identity models of volunteerism (volunteer motives, role identity, volunteer satisfaction and perceived expectations), but they did not include relevant organizational variables that Penner (2002) suggested as reasonable to include (i.e., prestige and perceived organizational support).

Finkelstein et al. (2005) asserted that the volunteer dynamic may best be understood when organizational and individual characteristics are considered. This study does that by including dispositional variables (values) and organizational variables (prestige and organizational support) as recommended by Penner (2002). In doing so, the objective was to determine which variables contributed to the length of service between volunteers who served two years or less, and those who served more than two years.

Method

Sample

The sample for this study included 1,791 active volunteers within a community service volunteer agency in the Southwestern United States. Members of this organization are on-call to respond in the event of disaster, either natural or man-made. Although training is required for all volunteers, the anticipated time commitment associated with volunteering is essentially unknown until a disaster warrants action. Unlike traditional voluntary participation with an organization or agency, there is no predictable schedule or formal organization of tasks. However, volunteer membership, and thus a measure of active volunteer commitment, can be assessed based on the number of months a person has served as an on-call volunteer.

Procedures

All members of the sample ($n = 1,791$) received a postcard in the mail inviting them to participate. The postcard served two purposes, to inform the volunteers of the study and of the collaboration between the agency and the university.

An internet-based survey was administered electronically to all volunteers who were identified as having Internet access and valid email accounts ($N = 1,358$).

Volunteers without access to a known or valid email account (n = 433) received a paper copy of the survey through the United States Postal Service along with a postage-paid return envelope. Individual responses from volunteers were not accessible to anyone within the community service volunteer agency. That is, only the research team had access to the raw data.

The survey was designed to be completed in 30 minutes or less. Follow-up reminders were sent via email only to participants responding electronically. Non-respondents received up to 4 follow-up requests to complete the survey. The on-line survey was accessible to the volunteers for a period of 4 weeks. A total of 200 completed surveys were returned electronically. Thirty individuals returned paper versions of the survey. Thus, the combined response rate was 12.84% (n = 230).

Measures

Data collected for this study were part of a larger survey that consisted of 63 items taken from previously published measures. Constructs pertaining to this study include perceived organizational support (3 items), values (5 items), and prestige (1 item). Other constructs included in the survey were role-identity, affective commitment, intent to leave, personal development, perceived expectations, and, volunteerism/family conflict.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was measured using a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with the 3 item version of POS used in Eisenberger, Singlhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, (2002). The POS was developed by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa (1986) as a way to measure global beliefs that employees develop concerning the extent to which the organization

values their contributions and cares about their well-being The internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) for the 3-item measure was reported as $\alpha = 0.75$ (Eisenberger, et al., 2002). For the sample in this study, coefficient alpha for the 3-item measure was 0.89.

Values is a five item measure developed by Omoto & Snyder (1995) as part of their inventory of motivations to volunteer. Specifically, respondents used a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) in completing the measure. An example of an item from the values measure includes, “I volunteer because of my humanitarian obligation to others.” For the sample in this study, coefficient alpha for the 5-item measure was 0.89.

Prestige is a reward that individuals gain indirectly from their association with the agency through volunteering, and facilitates the development of volunteer role identity, which is a precursor of sustained volunteering (e.g., increased commitment and intent to remain). Prestige was measured by having respondents complete a single item taken from Grube and Piliavin (2000) using a 7-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The single item read, “relative to other volunteer organizations, [name the agency] enjoys a great deal of prestige in the community.”

Finally, sustained volunteer behavior was measured by having respondents report the number of years and months they have volunteered for the agency. The number of years reported was transformed into months, and this variable was used as a dichotomous grouping variable for volunteers who had served with the agency for two years or less, and more than two years.

Results

Two-hundred and thirty volunteers from a community volunteer agency focused on disaster relief participated in this study. Subjects included 66 volunteers who have provided less than 2 years of service with the organization (27 males, 38 females, 1 no response) and 69 who have volunteered more than 2 years of service (30 males, 39 females). The remaining participants ($n=95$) failed to respond to years of service and could not be included in the analysis.

Consistent with recommendations from Penner (2002), participants were assessed on both organizational (POS and Prestige) variables and an individual variable (Values). Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for each group on these variables. Precautions were taken to ensure that the necessary assumptions were met for discriminant analysis. First, the Mahalanobis distances and paired chi-square values were plotted on a scatter plot. These plots were determined to form a straight diagonal line, providing evidence for meeting the multivariate normality assumption. Box's $M[F(6, 106000) = .84, p = .54]$ was nonsignificant offering confirmation of the equality of the variance/covariance matrices assumption. Thus, the covariance matrices could be pooled for analysis.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations on POS, Prestige, and Values for Two Groups

Variable	Volunteer for 2 years or less		Greater than 2 years of volunteering	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
POS	12.80	3.87	14.10	3.17
Values	24.73	5.93	23.34	5.67
Prestige	3.85	1.45	4.60	1.36

The canonical discriminant function was statistically significant at $p < .05$ (Wilks' $\Lambda = .92$; $p = .02$). The canonical correlation was .28 with an effect size of $R^2_c = .08$. Standardized discriminant function coefficients and structure coefficients were examined to determine which variables contributed to group differences. Table 2 displays both coefficients. For the discriminant function, POS and Values were primarily responsible for group differences, with Prestige being negatively related to POS and Values. The group centroids for the 0-2 years and 2+ years were -0.29 and 0.29, respectively. Thus, volunteers who have volunteered more than 2 years endorsed POS and Values more than those volunteering less than 2 years of time.

Table 2
Standardized Discriminant Function and Structure Coefficients for Two Groups

Scale	Coefficient	r_s	r_s^2
POS	0.269	0.921	84.82%
Values	-0.349	0.628	39.44%
Prestige	0.859	-0.113	1.28%

Discussion

Based on an integrated model of sustained volunteer behavior (Penner, 2002), the purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which organizational and dispositional variables contributed to the length of service between volunteers who served two years or less, and those who served more than two years. Results suggest that perceived organizational support and individual values are useful predictors of length of service with the volunteer agency. The perceived organizational prestige was not as strong. Based on social exchange theory, one plausible explanation might be that prestige is a reward that individuals gain indirectly from their association with the agency through

volunteering. Given that this particular group of volunteers has only limited contact or association with the agency, that is until a disaster or traumatic event occurs within the community, organizational prestige in this context may function less to facilitate the development of volunteer role identity. Grube and Piliavin (2000) reported that the perceived prestige of an organization was positively associated with the number of hours worked and negatively related with intent to leave. Thus, prestige remains a viable consideration as a precursor of sustained volunteering. The relationship between organizational prestige and sustained volunteerism might be different among volunteers with agencies that have frequent and routine activities that foster the development of a more salient identity among the individuals who volunteer with the agency.

These results must be understood in the context of some limitations of the current study. In terms of evaluating the generalizability of these findings, consider that responses from volunteers in this study are from only one organization representing a homogeneous population of volunteers. Specifically, the sample of volunteers included in this study consisted of individuals volunteering to serve in the event of a large scale disaster or traumatic event that impacts the local community. Therefore, until an event occurs the activity associated with volunteering is limited to attending training sessions that are sponsored by the agency.

Although nonrandom, the convenient sampling technique allow for the data to be generalized back to volunteers within the agency, but not necessarily to volunteers within other agencies, agencies in different geographical locations, or volunteers who have a more traditional time commitments.

Results reported here are also limited by the variables included in the analysis. Given known relationships between satisfaction, affective commitment and intent to remain in organizational settings with paid employees, a reasonable argument would be to include those organizational variables in studies of sustained volunteerism.

This analysis supports the notion that sustained volunteerism is a process in which both organizational and individual factors combine to produce volunteer behavior. However, continued investigation of factors associated with sustained volunteerism is warranted. In addition to other organizational and individual variables that might contribute to sustained volunteerism, other correlates of organizational citizenship behaviors may also be useful in studying this type of helping behavior.

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