

Chapter 1

Volunteering and Values

An Introduction

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VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering has gained widespread public and political interest in recent years. Policy debates have taken place in many countries focusing on how to preserve and encourage volunteering, and various parliamentary and government commissions have studied ways to stimulate voluntary activities among diverse groups such as the young and the elderly, working parents and immigrants. 2001 was the United Nations Year of Volunteers, and this gave rise to all kinds of national and local manifestations, discussions and policy initiatives, often with a lot of media exposure. In the burgeoning social sciences literature on the (assumed) decline of civic community, the crumbling of civil society, and the erosion of social capital, volunteering is an indicator of the negative trends as well as a possible instrument for recovery. Volunteering is not just an expression of individual engagement and a spontaneous result of community life; it is often consciously organized and managed and it can be made an object of policymaking. This mixture of voluntariness and organization in the establishment of prosocial behavior makes volunteering a very interesting phenomenon.

But what exactly is volunteering? If we look at definitions of volunteering or of voluntary work around the world, we find three or four common elements: it is non-obligatory; it is carried out (among other things) for the benefit of others: society as a whole or a specific organization; it is unpaid; and, somewhat less common, it takes place in an organized context (cf. Dingle, 2001: 9; Govaart, van Daal, Münz, & Keesom, 2001: 16). Some definitions are more restricted as regards the beneficiaries and formulate the requirement that a “public good” is produced—thus excluding volunteers working for their own organization or their own group (Wilson,

2000: 216). Sometimes, there are other requirements, such as unconnectedness of the voluntary activities with the volunteer's paid work. The criterion of being non-obligatory is essential, but often not evident. There are situations requiring voluntary work that a rational person can hardly refuse, such as community service as an alternative for imprisonment or military service; voluntary work to enable students to obtain credits for their study or to gain the necessary experiences to find a job; or voluntary work to help reintegrate the long-term unemployed on the labor market, possibly with the added "incentive" of financial sanctions if they refuse. The transition from volunteering as "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 1996) to less and less voluntary activities in the occupational setting or perspective is a smooth one, and in general it is difficult to draw a line showing where coercive elements of an economic nature are so strong that activities are no longer voluntary. And what about voluntary activities performed to avoid social exclusion and isolation? Or feelings of moral or religious obligation? People we call volunteers sometimes refer to these feelings to reject the appellation: "It is not voluntary, I have no choice, I feel that I have to do this." Can we make a distinction here between a freely chosen sense of duty and a lack of freedom to resist subordination? State-ordered unpaid work is a much simpler case of coercion and is a reason to exclude it from volunteering. In the former communist countries where "obligatory voluntary work" existed, the voluntary element is now particularly emphasized (Govaart et al., 2001: 261), but the historical loading of the term still has a negative affect on willingness to get involved (see Chapters 8 and 9).

The criterion of being unpaid is also not entirely straightforward. From indisputable reimbursements of expenses and generally accepted small material tributes of appreciation, it is only a small step to the acceptance of payments below the market value and a reformulation of the criterion of the work being unpaid, to the work not being undertaken primarily for financial gain. The requirement of an organizational setting or link, finally, is probably the most controversial criterion. Many definitions do not include such a norm, and "unorganized" informal volunteering is sometimes explicitly acknowledged.

The terminology and connotations of volunteering differ between countries. The traditional German perspective of volunteering as "honorary work" (*Ehrenamt*), for instance, still lives on in the writings of a German parliamentary commission about "civic engagement." According to the Enquete-Kommission (2002: 99), voluntary activities are necessary for the political community, and this community is a precondition for involvement in associations, self-help groups, churches, enterprises and public facilities. This may sound strange for Anglo-Saxons who consider voluntary work primarily as unpaid work in the sphere of charity and services for the community, and see politics and advocacy as somewhat exceptional cases.

Countries also differ with regard to what people see as typical voluntary work (see Chapter 2) and what the main areas of activity are (see Chapters 3–5).

National research often mirrors the national traditions: in some countries people are asked about (economic) sectors, such as social services, health care and education, in which one might do unpaid work; in other countries people are presented with a list of membership organizations, and possibly some forms of political involvement, and are asked to state whether they are active as volunteers in any of those organizations. Cross-national comparative research is carried out in these different perspectives—cf. the “European” active membership questions in the European and World Values Studies (Chapters 4, 5, and 11) and the “American” unpaid work questions in the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Chapter 5)—or incorporates lengthy explanations designed to focus the respondents of the surveys on the same broad set of activities (cf. Gaskin & Davis Smith, 1995; Lyons, Wijkström, & Glary, 1998).

BACKGROUND

Why do people volunteer? One explanation could be that volunteering reflects a person's personality: some people are by nature helpful, active and generous, and some people are less so. These are more or less stable differences, whether they are in people's genes or come from their upbringing or from some self-reinforcing experiences. We probably all know those people who always do something extra, are always willing to help, ready to take the initiative, whether in the workplace, in the neighborhood or at home. And we also know the other kind of people who remain passive most of the time, always have something else to do, are too tired, etc.¹

An alternative explanation for prosocial behavior emphasizes the circumstances. The basic idea is that “people tend to do things because of where they are, not who they are.” In subtly different circumstance people might behave in radically different ways.

You stop on the highway to help someone . . . and then the help you try to give doesn't prove to be enough, so you give the person a ride, and then you end up lending them money or letting them to stay in your house. It wasn't because that was the person in the world you cared about the most, it was just one thing led to another. Step by step. (Ross, quoted by Parker, 2000: 122–123)

Both explanations can be right and we often jump from one way of reasoning to the other to explain prosocial behavior. In daily life, we—victims of what cognitive psychologists call an “attribution fallacy”—are probably inclined to tell

¹ The personal readiness to engage in voluntary involvement is acknowledged in social science in various concepts, for instance in Bale's (1996) “volunteerism-activism attitude,” a combination of feelings of efficacy with moral beliefs about voluntary work as a duty, altruism and a “feel good” factor.

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