

## Chapter 2

# *All in the Eyes of the Beholder?*

### Perceptions of Volunteering Across Eight Countries

LUCAS C. P. M. MEIJS, FEMIDA HANDY, RAM A. CNAAN,  
JEFFREY L. BRUDNEY, UGO ASCOLI, SHREE RANADE,  
LESLEY HUSTINX, SUZANNE WEBER, AND IDIT WEISS

#### INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are the cornerstone of the voluntary sector. While we are accustomed to this assumption, too little systematic work has been carried out to define the term “volunteer.” Often too many different activities and situations are aggregated into this concept (Lyons, Wijkstrom, & Clary, 1998; Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Scheier, 1980; Smith, 1995; Tremper, Seidman & Tufts, 1994; Vineyard, 1993). People presented with seemingly similar examples of volunteering perceive them differently as volunteering, for unknown reasons. The same people may perceive volunteer activities differently depending on their own context or reference. Especially for international comparative studies, a better understanding of the definition and even more important perception of volunteering is needed.

Cnaan and his colleagues (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1995; Cnaan et al., 1996; Handy et al., 2000) have advanced the study of volunteering by documenting the scope and variability of the concept. Based on a comprehensive literature review, these authors showed that most definitions of volunteers are based on four key dimensions: free will, the availability of tangible rewards (remuneration), formal organization, and proximity to the beneficiaries. Furthermore, their conceptual and empirical analysis suggests that the public perception of the term volunteer is the

outcome of people's conception of the net-cost of any given volunteer situation, which they define as total costs minus total benefits to the volunteer.

In this chapter we analyze cross-cultural differences in public perception of volunteering. Cultural and local attitudes toward volunteering likely differ across regions. Salamon and Sokolowski (see Chapter 5) analyze volunteering in a cross-national study in 24 countries. They make it clear that the amount of volunteering and the (organizational) context of volunteering is different between countries based upon the social origin of the nonprofit sector. This can lead to a different perception of who is a volunteer. Dekker (2002) describes a difference on the level of language and words. Dekker asserts that volunteering in the USA and UK context refers to mostly unpaid labor while "ideellt arbete" in Sweden means doing something extra for your association. The German "Ehrenamt" relates mostly to being a board member or being involved in the legal system. According to Dekker this leads to different kinds of volunteering style in the context of unpaid work or active membership.

To examine cross-cultural differences in the perception of volunteering, we use a questionnaire with 50 items depicting situations of unpaid work. This questionnaire was developed by Handy et al. (2000) to test the notion of net-cost as an explanation of the public perception of volunteering. The questionnaire now has been used in eight countries. Although the cross-cultural soundness of the questions may be challenged, the findings are interesting enough to recommend further research.

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE

To test the variations in public perception of who is a volunteer, Handy et al. (2000) both adapted and extended the 23-item instrument used by Cnaan et al. (1996). The original 23-item survey was expanded with 27 new items deliberately and specifically developed to test a net-cost hypothesis regarding perceptions of volunteering (see Handy et al., 2000). The net-cost hypothesis means that the public perception of volunteering will be based primarily on the perception of the net-cost incurred by the individual—broadly defined as all costs minus all benefits associated with the volunteering activity. The individual incurring higher net-cost is likely to be perceived as "more" of a volunteer than someone with a lower net-cost. Handy et al. (2000) show that the higher the net-cost to the activity, the higher the individually perceived contribution, and consequently the higher the publicly perceived valuation of the volunteer.

Each item in the questionnaire uses a five-category Likert-type scale ranging from (1) not a volunteer to (5) definitely a volunteer. The questionnaires were self-administered and took 12–15 minutes to complete. To make the tables easier to read, the 1 to 5 scale has been transformed into a 0–100 scale.

In each region the questionnaire was transliterated to meet language requirements and social conventions for relevance to the volunteering scenarios presented. For example, in India the notion of volunteering “to impress a date” did not fit the cultural norms and was substituted with “to make personal connections.” Another example that required attention was the notion of corporate volunteering, which was unknown in the Netherlands, Belgium, India, and Italy. Despite careful considerations of cultural nuances, we are not certain that the items developed are identical across countries. It should be acknowledged that the questionnaire was not developed specifically for cross-cultural comparison.

Our samples in each of the regions were samples of convenience. We attempt to compensate for the lack of randomness by having a large, heterogeneous sample (see Handy et al. 2000 regarding details of the data collection for the USA, Canada, India, and the Netherlands). Data for the USA (the two USA samples from Philadelphia and Georgia are merged in this chapter), Canada, India, the Netherlands, and India were collected in 1998. These data were used for testing the net-cost concept of volunteering. Additional data for Germany, Israel, and Belgium were collected in 1999 and 2000. These data are included in the present cross-cultural analysis.

## A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

In this chapter we analyze the data from eight countries in three steps. In the first step, we test the concept of volunteering as it is understood in the different regions by comparing the overall means. The second step is a more in-depth analysis of the rank order of the 50 items with respect to the perception of volunteering. We examine similarities and differences in the top and bottom ranks, corresponding to who is definitely perceived as a volunteer and who is not. The third step focuses on the largest differences between some regions in mean scores on items, an analysis that yields provocative differences by regions.

First we present the scores for the entire sample and the rank orderings for the different countries (Table 2.1). In this table the top five situations for every region appear in boldface, and the bottom five situations are in italics.

### The Concept of Volunteering in the Regions

The first analysis simply looks at the overall mean of all of the volunteer scenarios (items) for each region (see the last row in Table 2.1). We present the mean for each of the fifty items in each region—an overall “volunteering perception score”—which provides a clue to the concept in these countries. The mean for the entire 50-item list hovers around 50 for all countries. The difference between the means across countries is not significant (0.05 level), except for the USA versus Italy. The means for the different items (the second column in Table 2.1) show



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-47737-9>

The Values of Volunteering  
Cross-Cultural Perspectives  
Dekker, P.; Halman, L. (Eds.)  
2003, XIV, 226 p., Hardcover  
ISBN: 978-0-306-47737-9