Workshop Presentation
Topic: Social Capital and Volunteering

Determinants of Sustained Volunteerism

Ms. Joanna CHEUNG
Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Haking Wong)
jchc@vtc.edu.hk

Abstract
Volunteers are a central element in most communities. They play an important role in delivering services across a diverse range of areas from social welfare to sports and recreation. Without volunteers many programs and services would be severely affected in terms of quantity and quality. Although there is an abundant level of research on volunteers, many studies have tended to be atheoretical and descriptive in nature. Furthermore, irrespective of any service settings in which volunteers operate, few studies have attempted to examine the extent to which the dispositional attributes of volunteers vary within different organizational settings.

The purpose of this study is to gain more knowledge about volunteers within the context of the organization they serve and determine if there are differences between volunteers in different service settings. The present study adopted the conceptual model of sustained volunteerism (Penner, 2002), which incorporates both dispositional and organizational factors that influence sustained volunteer behaviour.

Preliminary results from a pilot study indicate volunteers from different organizational contexts vary on dispositional variables such as motivations and altruism. Their perceptions of organizational fairness and commitment, job satisfaction, and the likelihood of continuing to volunteer are also different.

This study contributes to the knowledge of effective volunteer management by suggesting that different types of service organizations may need to adopt different strategies to volunteer recruitment and management.

Introduction

Volunteering covers a wide spectrum of activities in which it is generally considered that volunteers’ time is given to benefit another person, group or cause (Wilson, 2000). It is potent, dynamic and unifying social force for the society at large (Cordingley, 2004). Volunteer energy has become an indispensable resource of many third sector organizations. Without volunteers, many activities and services offered by these organizations simply could not operate. This is especially true for the sports and leisure sector. For example, the staging of the Olympics Games would not be possible if without a well-stocked pool of volunteers who brought in their enthusiasm and energy to fill various positions during the Games period. Furthermore, volunteers help to satisfy various social and community needs, contribute to build social capital
and improve the quality of life of the people (Dekker and Halman, 2003). In order to recognize the important contribution made by volunteers to the social and economic well being of any given society, the United Nations declared 2001 as the International Year of the Volunteer.

Partly due to the effectiveness of the third sector organizations, governments internationally have gradually pulled back from the direct delivery of services in a number of social and welfare areas, subsequently relying more on third sector organizations, in particular, volunteers, to deal with a range of community issues. However, many third sector organizations have been traditionally vexed by the problems of recruiting and retaining their volunteers.

Although there is a plethora of studies about volunteers, little empirical research has examined how the dispositional attributes of volunteers (i.e. personal values and beliefs, prosocial personality, and motivation) and organizational variables (i.e. organizational fairness, commitment and job satisfaction) may interact to influence sustained volunteer behaviour. Each of these two categories of variables tends to be studied in isolation thereby providing a less integrated analysis of sustained volunteerism.

Theoretical Model of Sustained Volunteerism

Penner discussed his conceptual model of sustained volunteerism (see Figure 1) by first examining the dispositional profiles of volunteers followed by the organizational variables. According to Penner (2002), volunteerism has four salient attributes namely longevity, planfulness, nonobligatory helping and, an organizational context. His research on factors affecting sustained volunteerism was guided by these attributes. The model of sustained volunteerism proposes three stages and begins with decision to volunteer, the point at which the person makes a commitment to become a volunteer. The decision is influenced by demographic variables (e.g. age, income, education, etc.), three dispositional variables (e.g. personal beliefs and values, prosocial personality and motivation) and organizational attributes and practices. Social pressures offer some direct and indirect influence in decision to volunteer. Studies have found that before people decide to volunteer they are exposed to both explicit and implicit kinds of social pressures such as how their significant others feel about them becoming a volunteer and their motivation to comply with these feelings (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Penner, 2002). Situational factors, on the other hand are less influential to decision to volunteer. The occurrence of certain events or emergencies (i.e. the SARS outbreak) may create conditions that make volunteering a more likely behaviour in which to engage (Penner, 2004).

Once the decision to volunteer has made, the next stage is initial volunteerism, which is the amount of time and effort a person expends during the early stage of his/her tenure as a volunteer. Penner indicates that relationship with the organization and positive job attitudes (i.e. organizational commitment and job satisfaction) play a great part in initial volunteerism. The next stage in the model is from initial volunteerism to volunteer role identity where a person identifies with and internalizes the role of becoming a volunteer (Grube and Piliavin, 2000). Penner posits that a person’s experiences during the initial volunteerism stage would shape his/her
volunteer role identity, which is the direct cause of sustained volunteerism (Piliavin & Callero, 1991).

Dispositional Variables and Volunteerism

Dispositional variables are the enduring attributes of individuals that include personal beliefs and values, prosocial personality and motives. Dispositional variables are relatively stable over time and difficult to change and are likely to manifest themselves in enduring behaviours than in bystander interventions (Bierhoff, 2002, Penner, 2002). Volunteering can reflect a person’s personality where individuals who volunteer demonstrate a sincere interest in their community. Their involvement generates a sense of social responsibility whereby they commit their time and efforts to help those in need without obligations and remunerations. Understanding the personality characteristic that forms the core of “prosocial personality” can contribute to learning more about sustained volunteerism.

Prosocial personality is a very specific personality trait. It plays an important role especially in long-term and planned helping. There are two dimensions namely: Other-oriented Empathy (i.e. measures feelings of empathy and responsibility towards the needs of others) and Helpfulness (i.e. measures one’s present and previous experiences or history with helping others). The Prosocial Personality Battery (PSB) is an instrument used to measure the prosocial personality. Penner (2004) found that the two dimensions of the prosocial personality are related to various aspects of volunteer behaviour.

It is suggested that engaging voluntary work depends on values and that altruism and religious belief are connected with voluntary work (Bierhoff, 2002). Personal values and religious belief play an equally important role in volunteers’ decision to volunteer. Religions are likely to encourage altruistic values and behaviour that tend to foster a sense of social cohesion and responsibility for others in the community (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1989; Fischer and Schaffer, 1993). Personal values are considered deeply rooted dispositions that guide people to act and behave in a certain way (Dekker and Halman, 2003).

Demographic Characteristics of Volunteers

A demographic characteristic is a person’s background or personal attributes that relates to that person’s physical or social status. Previous studies have shown that people with more formal education, higher income, higher occupational status, and better health are more likely to volunteer. Fischer and Schaffer (1993) summarized 73 studies in regards to demographic characteristics such as education, income, occupational status, gender, marital status, employment status, and religion. The most salient finding was that people with higher incomes, with more education, and with professional types of occupations are more likely to volunteer.

Education provides the opportunity for volunteers to exercise and practice knowledge and skills that otherwise could not be used (Clary and Synder, 1999). Income is an indicator of a person’s social status. It is often found a positive correlation between
income and volunteering (Clary and Snyder, 1999; Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1992; Pearce, 1993; Smith 1994).

Motivation to Volunteer

The role of motivation in the process of volunteerism is crucial especially in the decisions of becoming a volunteer in the first place and subsequent decisions about continuing to volunteer (Clary and Snyder, 1999). A widely adopted instrument known as Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) is used to study the motivations underlying volunteerism.

The following table summarized the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI); an instrument that assesses each of the six functions served by volunteering.

Table 1: Volunteer Function Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Conceptual Definition</th>
<th>Sample VFI Item</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>The individual volunteers in order to express or act on important values like humanitarianism.</td>
<td>I feel it is important to help others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world or exercise skills that are often unused.</td>
<td>Volunteering lets me learn through direct, hands-on experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Volunteering allows an individual to strengthen his or her social relationships.</td>
<td>People I know share an interest in community service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective</td>
<td>The individual uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems.</td>
<td>Volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement</td>
<td>One can grow and develop psychologically through volunteer activities.</td>
<td>Volunteering makes me feel better about myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>The volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering.</td>
<td>Volunteering can help me to get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Clary and Snyder (1999)

Role Identity

Role identity theory describes how patterns of social behaviour are developed and maintained (Callero, 1985). This perspective is relevant to the study of volunteering as it highlights the interaction between the volunteers and the organizations they serve. The role of volunteer is therefore a role that becomes a part of the volunteers’ self-concept, with an associated salience and level of commitment. Simply put, the role identity theory explains that as people continue to volunteer, their commitment toward the organizations they serve will increase. Commitment in turns increases and increased commitment and continued volunteer activities will foster volunteer’s self-concept and the volunteer role will become part of his or her personal identity.
(Stryker, 1980). It is also suggested that role identity and organizational commitment predict intent to continue as a volunteer (Grube and Piliavin, 2000; Penner and Finkelstein, 1998). Grube and Piliavin (2000) also pointed out that role identity is an important element of understanding volunteers’ participation and retention in organizational settings.

Organizational Variables and Volunteerism

Once a person has made a decision to volunteer, volunteerism usually occurs in an organizational context. (Penner, 2002) There are two kinds of organizational variables influencing sustained volunteerism:

- The feelings and perceptions of volunteers about the ways they are treated by the organization they serve
- The organization’s reputation and personnel practices

Organizational Justice

There are studies available on organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) but none on volunteerism and organizational justice. Both volunteerism and OCB share important attributes (i.e. altruism and prosocial personality) that it is reasonable to apply what is known about one phenomenon to the other (Penner, Midili and Kegelmeyer, 1997).

Organizational justice refers to volunteers’ perceptions of fairness of treatment received from organizations (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 1997). Volunteers’ perceptions about organizational justice, and specifically, about distributive and procedural justice, can create negative responses such as turnover intentions and affective responses such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Distributive justice is the perceived fairness of the outcomes that a volunteer receives from the voluntary organizations (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) whereas procedural justice is the perceived fairness of the policies and procedures used to make decisions.

The study of organizational justice on volunteerism will help third sector organizations better understand how to reduce volunteer turnover, increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and make informed decisions about outcomes and procedures for their volunteers.

Job Attitudes

Positive job attitudes (i.e. job satisfaction and organizational commitment) would enhance volunteers’ retention rates, which can have a significant effect on the execution of programs and services.

Job satisfaction is a state of pleasure gained from applying one’s values to a job (Locke, 1983). Matching jobs with individual’s motives for volunteering can increase job satisfaction. The primary reason of studying job satisfaction is to understand work behaviour and to help organization function more effectively. Job satisfaction
is one of the major issues in relation to volunteers’ commitment and longevity of service. Not only will it be a key factor in the retention of volunteer but also in the ultimate success and stability of the organization. Obtaining measures of volunteer job satisfaction can give the organization a sense of whether or not the needs of their volunteers are being met. Taking time to understand why people are volunteering can help placing them in specific and appropriate positions thereby improving volunteer retention.

Organizational commitment involves an active association between the volunteers and the organization such that they are willing to give something of their own in order to contribute to the organization’s well-being (Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974). Simply put, organizational commitment is a psychological state in which volunteers’ value their involvement and desire to remain involved in an organization (Mowday et al, 1982).

Allen and Meyer (1996) suggested those volunteers’ experiences in an organization; together with his/her dispositions are the strongest determinants of his/her affective and continuance commitment to the organization they serve. Research on sustained volunteerism proposes that organizational commitment is related to volunteers’ levels of satisfaction in organizational justice and thus is important to the retention of volunteers. To retain volunteers in their present position not only will save money, but will also foster volunteers’ commitment toward the organization they serve.

Pilot Study

Data were collected by means of self-administered questionnaire distributed to a sample of volunteers in a range of third sector organizations in Hong Kong including the Chinese YMCA, Aberdeen Kaifong Welfare Association, the YWCA, to name just a few. The response rate was 63% with 325 people completing the questionnaires. The mean age of the respondents was 30.1 years with the age ranged from 13 to 68. The respondents were predominantly female (65.3%), single (68.8%), attained at least upper secondary school educated (25.5%), and with no religion affiliation (64.6%).

A high level of volunteer activities was found among the respondents. The total time spent as volunteer was 4 years 11 months, total year spent with the voluntary organization currently serving was 3 years 4 months and the average time spent volunteering per week was 2 hours per week.

The reliability test indicated an adequate to high level of internal consistency reliability of all measures used in the questionnaires: organizational fairness (.95), motivation (.93), job satisfaction (.92), prosocial personality (.74) and organizational commitment (.67).

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between groups on variables including: motivation, altruism, organizational fairness, satisfaction, commitment and the likelihood of continuing to volunteer (all p<.001). Positive but weak correlations were found between the likelihood of continuing to volunteer and commitment (r=.14, p<.05), organizational fairness (r=.13, p<.05), satisfaction (r=.17, p<.001). The findings from the pilot study provide preliminary support for a previously empirically untested theoretical model of sustained volunteerism.
Conclusion

This study makes a substantial contribution to the knowledge of volunteer behaviour, which will help third sector organizations devise effective volunteer recruitment strategies. This is particularly timely given the 2008 Olympics and Paralympics Equestrian Events will be staged in Hong Kong.

The findings also suggest that different types of third sector organizations may need to adopt different approaches to the recruitment and retention of their volunteers based on the dispositional attributes of volunteers together with the context specific organizational parameters. Consequently this may lead to improved volunteer retention rates as organizations utilize more focused, customised and sector relevant volunteer management strategies.

References


Figure 1: The Conceptual Model of Sustained Volunteerism (Penner, 2002)