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David F. Gillespie
Washington University, St. Louis

Anthony E. O. King I
University of Missouri, St. Louis

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DEMOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING OF VOLUNTEERISM*

David F. Gillespie, Ph.D.
Washington University, St. Louis

Anthony E. O. King I, Ph.D.
University of Missouri, St. Louis

ABSTRACT

A large sample of volunteers from a midwestern city chapter of the American Red Cross were studied to identify demographic correlates of the reasons given for volunteering. The findings suggest that the reasons people give for doing volunteer work are conditioned by their age, sex, and marital status. Implications for volunteer programs and future research are discussed.

Studies of volunteers have explored a wide range of social background characteristics, role characteristics, health, and personality variables in predicting voluntary participation (Anderson and Moore, 1974:120; Smith, Macaulay et al., 1980; Smith, 1975; Smith, Reddy, and Baldwin, 1972). These studies have been helpful in describing how certain variables affect the incidence of volunteerism (Anderson and Moore, 1974; Zakour et al., 1985) but they do not shed much light on the motives of individuals who volunteer. Traditional studies of volunteers have primarily distinguished between volunteers and non-volunteers while ignoring individual reasons for volunteering.

Research has uncovered many reasons for volunteering—"to serve one's community," "to help others," "to make friends," "to obtain job training and skills," to name just a few (Action, 1969; 1974; Independent Sector, 1981; Gallup Polls, 1983, King and Gillespie; 1981, Sills, 1957). Few researchers,

however, have analyzed these reasons and their correlates (Anderson and Moore, 1974). To ignore the reasons individuals give for volunteering places too little weight on an individual's conscious motives for doing something. This opinion is not offered to diminish the importance of other variables which enter into the decision-making process. Nevertheless, if you want to know why people engage in an activity or behave in a certain manner, the first and most direct step is to ask them (Gillespie, 1977). Their response can be then used as a baseline from which one can measure individual actions (Sills, 1957).

The practical implications from this line of reasoning are important in the case of volunteer participation. When an organization knows the particular reasons people give for joining that organization, it can see to it that those reasons are in some way satisfied through the volunteers' experiences. This type of understanding is crucial to the survival and effectiveness of voluntary associations and other organizations which depend a great deal on volunteers. This study, therefore, describes a sample of volunteers to the American Red Cross with respect to the reasons they gave for volunteering, and it analyses those reasons relative to several key demographic characteristics of the respondents.

METHOD

Sample

The respondents were drawn from a mail survey of American Red Cross volunteers living in a major midwestern city. Questionnaires were mailed to current and former volunteers of the Red Cross chapter. Out of 5,000 questionnaires distributed 1,346 (26.9 percent) completed and usable questionnaires were returned. The return rate was surprisingly low, suggesting some problems with the file of volunteer addresses. Surveys of the general population typically report return rates of 35 to 50 percent in the absence of any follow-up procedures, as was the case in the present study. No doubt the return rate could have been bolstered through the use of some follow-up procedures, but this by itself is insufficient to account for the discrepancy between what one might normally expect in returns and what in fact were returned. A reasonable interpretation of this outcome is that the 1,346 questionnaires that were returned represent 35 to 50 percent of the Red Cross volunteers, and that the mailing list is an inaccurate sampling frame for the

Red Cross volunteer population. This interpretation is supported with the observation that the average American changes their address every four years, thus suggesting that at least 1,000 of the questionnaires mailed were non-deliverable.

One way of increasing confidence in the usefulness of these findings is to compare key demographic characteristics of respondents to this survey with those of other surveys of volunteers. The differences between this survey and several national surveys on three demographic variables—sex, age, and marital status—were compared and found to be negligible in each case except sex (U.S. Department of Labor, Manpower Administration, 1969; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981; Independent Sector, 1981; VISTA, Action Annual Report, 1974; VISTA, Action Annual Report, 1979.; Babchuck and Booth, 1969). The proportion of women to men was about 10% greater (80% to 20%) than what has been found in national surveys (70% to 30%), but the direction of difference remained consistent. We believe that the sample of volunteers used in this study are essentially comparable to volunteers in general.

Data Collection

The reasons people gave for volunteering were measured by asking respondents: "What finally made you decide to volunteer for the American Red Cross?" Twelve fixed-choice response categories and one open-ended ("other") category were provided. After checking any number of the reasons for volunteering with the Red Cross, respondents were asked to choose the single most important reason for volunteering. The reasons given for volunteering were studied comparatively across three personal characteristics—age, sex, and marital status—which were elicited through standard questionnaire formats.

FINDINGS

Reasons for Volunteering

We were interested in the reasons given for the decision to volunteer with the Red Cross. Table 1 presents the response categories, along with the relative percent and number of respondents characterized by each category. The categories have been rank-ordered from high to low according to the percentage of respondents checking each reason for volunteering.

Table 1
The Reasons Given in Rank-Order of Times Noted by 1,346 People
for Volunteering with the American Red Cross

Rank Order	Reasons for Volunteering	Percent*	N
1	To help others	70.0	944
2	To contribute to the community	57.5	776
3	To obtain training and skills	40.1	541
4	Enrich personal life	38.6	521
5	Had some time available	34.5	466
6	To be needed	32.5	438
7	To make new friends	17.6	237
8	Reputation of the Red Cross	17.2	232
9	Career exploitation	14.6	197
10	To be around others	14.5	195
11	To help school **	8.0	108
12	Repay for services received by Red Cross	6.6	89
13	Drawn in during a crisis	5.9	79
14	Drafted by church group **	1.4	19
15	Had to in order to volunteer for another organization **	1.0	14
16	Like children **	0.7	10
18	To carry first aid training to scouting organization **	0.1	2
18	Newspaper ad **	0.1	1
18	Psychiatrist suggested **	0.1	1

* Percents total more than 100 because most respondents checked more than one category.

** These are additional reasons for volunteering with the Red Cross as indicated by the respondents in the other category.

It is interesting to note from Table 1 that the two most frequently checked categories—"to help others," and "to contribute to the community"—represent long established traditional values in volunteerism (Laski, 1948; Thursz, 1960; Action, 1969; Action, 1974; Independent Sector, 1981). The third most frequently cited reason for volunteering—"to obtain training and skills"—is a more recent addition to the reasons for volunteerism (Anderson and Moore, 1978; Adams, 1980; King and Gillespie, 1981). This skills acquisition orientation to volunteering could be emerging as a result of

the increased number of women entering or returning to the work force (Loesser, 1978). If this is true, it would seem to carry some important implications for agencies such as the Red Cross that benefit from extensive volunteer staffs.

One of the implications from a skill acquisition orientation is that people who become trained or skilled as a result of their volunteer experience are likely to move on to paid employment and a regular career path (Zakour, 1985). A second implication is that the turnover among volunteers is likely to be increased in proportion to those who have volunteered their time for the purpose of gaining training and skills. If the 40 percent who indicated interest in skill acquisition in the present survey is confirmed in subsequent studies, then the impact with regard to agency operations is likely to be quite substantial.

On the other hand, a substantial number of the respondents indicated personal reasons or simply having the time available (ranks 4, 5, 6) as motivation for volunteering with the Red Cross. People indicating reasons such as these are likely to be more enduring in their affiliation with the agency. Of course, given the opportunity for respondents to check more than one category, there is a need to examine the extent to which the people checking training and skills as their reasons for volunteering are distinct from those checking personal reasons or simply having the time available. This was done in the present study and no significant differences were observed.

Respondents were asked to choose the single most important reason for volunteering. Table 2 presents the response categories with the percent and number of respondents in each category. Again the categories are rank-ordered from high to low according to the percentage of respondents checking each reason for volunteering. Table 2 shows findings very similar to those reported in Table 1, except that "training and skills" was more frequently cited as the single most important item than was "contribute to the community." Given the directions for respondents to indicate the single most important reason for volunteering, these findings are more easy to interpret than those in Table 2. Yet they are also more restrictive since there is a certain amount of arbitrariness attached to the extraction of a single most important reason. Nevertheless, the findings do suggest

that a significant number of people—somewhere between 177 and 541—do volunteer with a skills acquisition orientation rather than on simply an altruistic basis.

Table 2
A Rank-Order of the Single Most Important Reason
for Volunteering as Indicated by 977 Red Cross Volunteers

Rank Order	Reason for Volunteering*	Percent	N**
1	To help others	35.3	392
2	To obtain training and skills	15.9	177
3	To contribute to the community	15.0	167
4	Enrich personal life	6.8	76
5	To be needed	4.1	46
6	Had some time available	3.1	34
7	Career exploitation	2.8	31
8	Drawn in during a crisis	1.6	18
9	Repay for services received by Red Cross	1.4	15
10	To be around others	0.9	10
11	Reputation of the Red Cross	0.5	6
12	To make new friends	0.5	5

* The "other category was excluded from analysis because none of the additional reasons for volunteering received sufficient frequency to justify their being reported.

** The 133 cases listing "other" reasons have been excluded as have the 239 missing data (nonresponse) cases, thus accounting for the reduction of sample size.

We should also point out that a substantial number of respondents gave personal reasons ("to enrich my personal life," "to be needed," and "to make new friends") for volunteering, which supports the notion that individuals who volunteer do so in part to satisfy psychosocial needs. The motivations underlying decisions to volunteer are complex and represent a host of basic human needs along with the current state of peoples personal and social lives (Schindler-Rainman and Lippitt, 1971). A closer inspection of the data through bivariate analyses revealed several interesting findings that shed additional light on the apparent

motivational trends of these Red Cross volunteers.

Age and Reasons for Volunteering

Several differences are evident when the age of the respondents and their reasons are cross-tabulated. Table 3 presents the reasons for each of the age categories and the percentage of respondents in each category. Compared to their younger counterparts proportionately more respondents age 38 and older indicated that they volunteered "to help others." A similar finding emerges when one compares these two age groupings on their interest in contributing to the community. Proportionately more respondents age 38 and older gave the reason "to contribute to the community" than did their younger counterparts.

Table 3
Percentages for Reasons for Volunteering
by Age

Reasons	Age					
	18-25	25-32	32-38	38-54	54-65	65+
To help others	33.0%	31.0%	31.7%	32.8%	49.6%	55.2%
To obtain job training and skills	30.9%	26.2%	16.2%	17.2%	7.6%	1.3%
Contribute to the community	12.9%	15.0%	16.2%	20.2%	19.8%	11.2%
Career exploration	7.7%	4.8%	2.4%	1.9%	0.8%	0.0%
Had some time available	1.5%	0.0%	2.4%	3.1%	3.9%	9.7%
To be needed	1.5%	2.4%	2.4%	3.8%	5.3%	11.7%
Reputation of the Red Cross	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	1.5%	1.3%
To make friends	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.4%	0.8%	1.3%
To be around others	0.0%	0.8%	1.8%	0.8%	0.8%	1.9%

These findings may lead one to believe that older individuals are more altruistic in their motives for volunteering than younger people. This conclusion, although plausible, obscures the complexity of volunteer motivation.

The motives for engaging in volunteer work are not only based on one's unique capacity to feel compassion for fellow human beings but also on other equally important social and personal needs. The younger individuals (age 38 and younger) appear to be more concerned than their older counterparts with using volunteer work as a means for obtaining job training and skills or exploration. The findings in Table 3 suggest that the younger the respondent the larger the percentage of individuals who gave these employment related motives for volunteering. One might explain this finding by arguing that younger volunteers are more likely to be concerned with employment and career advances than older volunteers (Frisch and Gerrard, 1981). On the other hand, middle-age volunteers probably have reached a point in their work careers where the skills and job training opportunities available through volunteering are of little value. In other words, for most individuals age 38 to 54, the skills and career options found in most volunteer settings might be either unrelated to their career interests or so basic that they would not help an experienced career person.

A similar difference surfaces when the response patterns of older and younger Red Cross volunteers are compared across three interpersonal reasons—"to be needed," "to make friends," and "to be around others." Proportionately more individuals age 38 and older gave these reasons for volunteering than younger individuals. Perhaps older volunteers' social or interpersonal circumstances do not provide as many opportunities to satisfy these needs. Younger volunteers, on the other hand, are probably more socially active, and thus more likely to encounter situations where these needs may be satisfied.

Senior citizens who volunteer may be even more socially isolated than either their middle-age or younger counterparts. Proportionately more older Red Cross volunteers are widowed and divorced than younger volunteers. As we advance in age, especially beyond our middle years, we tend not to be as socially active. Moreover, there is an increased likelihood that long-term friends and associates will either move away or die. Senior citizens find themselves more isolated. Add to these events the death of a spouse and it becomes obvious, if not painfully clear, why so many senior citizens might work as a volunteer.

All of these circumstances leave the senior citizen with a lot more time on their hands than their younger counterparts. Again, Table 3 provides some evidence to support this interpretation. Proportionately more Red Cross volunteers age 38 and older indicated that they volunteered because they had time available than did respondents age 38 and below. Almost 10 percent of the individuals age 65 and older gave this reason compared to an average of 3 percent of the volunteers age 38 and younger.

Sex and Reasons for Volunteering

The only meaningful difference in reasons observed between male and female respondents occurred across one category—"to obtain job training and skills." Table 4 presents the reasons given for volunteering by males and females and the percentage of respondents characterized by each category. More than twice the percentage of men gave this reason for volunteering than did women. It is clear that the men in this sample were more interested than the women in using volunteering to acquire employment-related experience and skills.

Table 4
Percentages for Reasons for Volunteering
by Sex

Reasons	Sex	
	Male	Female
To help others	34.2%	39.2%
To obtain job training skills	30.1%	14.0%
Contribute to the community	15.3%	15.7%
Career exploration	3.6%	2.9%
Had some time available	1.5%	3.7%
To be needed	3.1%	4.8%
Reputation of the Red Cross	0.5%	0.6%
To make friends	1.0%	0.4%
To be around others	0.5%	1.1%

Cross-tabulation analysis provided additional data to help explain the above finding as well as support the conclusion that these male volunteers were more interested than their female counterparts in deriving some employment-related benefits from their volunteer experience. There was a slight relationship between the occupation of these Red Cross volunteers and sex (Cramer's $V = .22$, $P = .001$): 59.4 percent of the men were professionals compared to only 35.1 percent of the women. Since proportionately more men than women were working along some professional career path, it seems understandable that they would express a greater desire to use volunteering as a vehicle for improving their job skills or for acquiring new ones. Also, as Anderson and Moore (1979) point out, men are more likely to be currently employed in any type of job than are women.

Marital Status and Reasons for Volunteering

Several interesting findings are shown in Table 5 pertaining to the relationship between the marital status of these volunteers and their reasons for volunteering. First, proportionately more respondents in the single/widowed category volunteered "to help others" than did respondents from any other group. What may be seen here is an effect of the relationships between these respondents' age and their motivation to volunteer. Most of the single/widowed respondents are older (90 percent of the widowed/ widowers were 55 or older) and probably have fewer activities competing with their desire to engage in humanitarian tasks. In other words, the senior citizens that comprise a significant portion of the individuals in the single/widowed category have more time than their younger counterparts to draw upon their altruistic motives, and they also have fewer family obligations and roles. The younger respondents are more likely to have both family and career responsibilities. They may feel the need to use whatever time they can afford trying to improve their employment skills, especially since it is these skills that will determine how far they advance in their careers. Or, they may feel a need to engage in activities related to their young children, such as volunteer activities focused on school events. It could be argued, therefore, that the apparent relationship between these volunteers' motives and their marital status represents a difference in social and economic circumstances rather than

a difference in their desire to help others.

Table 5
Percentages for Reasons for Volunteering
by Marital Status

Reasons	Marital Status			
	Married	Divorced	Single/ Never Married	Widowed
To help others	36.5%	35.1%	33.1%	55.7%
To obtain job training skills	15.8%	5.4%	33.7%	2.7%
Contribute to the community	17.6%	10.8%	11.6%	13.5%
Career exploration	2.2%	8.1%	7.0%	0.0%
Had some time available	3.5%	2.7%	2.3%	3.6%
To be needed	3.5%	2.7%	2.3%	3.6%
Reputation of the Red Cross	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%
To make friends	0.4%	2.7%	0.0%	0.9%
To be around others	0.9%	0.0%	0.6%	1.8%

A significantly larger proportion of single/never-married respondents volunteered to obtain job training and skills than did any other marital category. Again, we may be observing an effect of age on the reasons for volunteering. Of the respondents aged 18 to 32, 90 percent were single and had never married; of this 90 percent, 71 percent were between the ages of 18 and 25. At this stage of life several things may be occurring to explain this particular finding. For example, they are either attending college, working in their first full-time job, or in the process of obtaining employment. If the respondent is in college or unemployed, he/she might decide to volunteer in order to acquire new skills or crystalize skills recently acquired in a classroom setting. In other words, both groups of individuals might be searching for an inexpensive way of acquiring and refining marketable job skills, as well as a way of gaining valuable practical experience. If an individual between the ages of 18

and 25 is employed, he/she is probably in an entry-level position at the lower end of the career ladder. In order to progress up that career ladder, the individual must acquire more knowledge, experience and advanced skills. Volunteering represents one way to satisfy these constraints (Zakour, 1985).

The reason most closely associated with "to obtain job training and skills" was "career exploration" ($r = .34$). The two categories (single/never married and divorced) with the largest proportion of respondents giving "career exploration" as a reason for volunteering are the two groups that we would intuitively expect to have more job-related concerns. It is to be expected that the single/never married respondents are concerned with the process of career exploration because they are typically young, relatively inexperienced, and not quite sure what profession or area of work they would like to pursue. Further analysis of these data indicated that 80.9 percent of the single/never married respondents were 32 years old or younger; 67.8 percent were 25 years old or younger. These findings suggest that age may serve as an intervening variable for any relationship observed between the marital status of an individual volunteer and their reason for volunteering.

Divorced respondents also gave this reason ("career exploration") proportionately more frequently than married and single/widowed respondents. These individuals gave this reason for volunteering proportionately more often than any other marital category, including single/never married volunteers. Most of the divorced respondents (58.4 percent) are between the ages of 32 and 65, with 21 percent being 65 years old and older. Thus, age doesn't appear to be as important a factor in this case since a very broad spectrum of age is represented in the divorced category of volunteers. One variable that might help explain this finding is sex. When women experience a divorce, they often are faced with a partial or complete loss of income. As a result, they are forced to seek employment or training for employment. Since their financial resources may be limited, volunteering may be viewed as an economical way of investigating the job or career opportunities available. Although the data from this study precludes an empirical testing of this explanation, it should be pointed out that over 91 percent of the divorced respondents were females.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the reasons a sample of volunteers gave for engaging in volunteer work. The reason most frequently given for volunteering—"to help others"—is the reason given most often by many volunteers when asked by researchers (Action, 1969; Action, 1974; and Independent Sector, 1981). The second and third most frequently given reasons, as stated by these respondents—"to help the community," and "to obtain job training and skills"—were different from what researchers have found in the past when studying national samples of volunteers. "Interest in the activity" (Independent Sector, 1981), and "enjoy doing volunteer work" (Action, 1969; Action 1974; and Gallup Poll, 1983) have in the past been found to be the second and third most widely stated reasons for volunteering.

In addition, this study analyzed the manner in which various reasons were distributed across the categories of age, sex, and marital status. These findings indicated that individuals who differ by age, sex, and marital status tend to give the same reasons for volunteering but at widely disparate rates. The age of the volunteer seems to be an important independent variable when one is trying to explain why individuals volunteer. It has been empirically demonstrated that older respondents volunteered for different reasons than younger people and vice versa. Moreover, the findings suggest that age also indirectly affected the relationship between the marital status of the respondents and the reasons they gave for volunteering. All of these findings underscore the potential explanatory power that age might possess when trying to understand why individuals volunteer.

There is little theoretical knowledge to guide an inquiry into the relationship between the reasons individuals give for volunteering and demographic characteristics such as age. The Sequential Specificity Model (SSM) for explaining individual voluntary action (Smith, 1966) lists three broad types of independent variables that help explain, predict, and understand individual voluntary activity. The three types of variables are: Contextual factors, personal factors, and situational factors. The third type of variables, situational factors, are described as specific situational stimuli,

perceptions relevant to individual action, including time, age in the life cycle, and temporal goals. These are the same factors or variables that appear to have influenced the responses in the present study. Although strong arguments have been made for the importance of these variables to help understand volunteer motivation, situational variables have been identified as the least studied and least understood of all those in the SSM model (Smith, 1972: 328). A more recent discussion on the subject by Smith, Macaulay et al. (1980) makes the same point.

The potential importance of age and situational factors rests upon the assumption that, at any given point in time, personal and social circumstances are conditioned by age. As people age their personal and social circumstances, as well as goals change. This study, as well as others, indicates that certain goals are being satisfied when people volunteer (Sills, 1957; Berke, 1980; Gidron, 1979; Lindeman, 1949; Moore, 1961; King and Gillespie, 1981). The specific goals sought seem to depend upon where people are in the life cycle, as well as the immediate situational factors. Older people volunteer for different reasons than younger people and, apparently, as individuals age personal goals change accordingly. Thus, individual motives for volunteering may vary as their priorities in life change.

Closely related to age levels are the characteristics of social and personal life. Whether one is married, has children, or is currently seeking employment depends to some extent upon where that person is in the life cycle. These social situations, in turn, help determine life goals as well as how they are prioritized. Although two groups of individuals may express concern for helping others, one may give that reason proportionately more often than the other because current personal and social circumstances provide the opportunity to place more emphasis on helping others rather than, say, seeking new friends or job opportunities.

There are a few studies that have analyzed the reasons individuals give for engaging in volunteer work (Anderson and Moore, 1978; Adams, 1980; Smith and Berns, 1980; Sills, 1957). Adams' study of an American Red Cross chapter found a pattern of reasons very similar to those reported in the present study. In their study of Canadian volunteers, Anderson and Moore found similar reasons for volunteering,

but less emphasis on work related responses; "To obtain job training and skills" was given as a reason for volunteering more frequently by the American Red Cross respondents than by the Canadian volunteers. Perhaps the Red Cross provides more opportunities for individuals to gain job training experience than other volunteer organizations. The Red Cross does have many health related training programs that provide volunteers with marketable skills.

The Anderson and Moore study was a national survey in contrast to the local nature of the present study and the one done by Adams (1980). Although the similarities among these studies is encouraging, each of them might not be as reliable as necessary given the low return rates reported. Sill's (1957) study of the National Infantile Paralysis Foundation is the only other study to have elicited stated reasons for volunteering. Sills, however, did not analyze the reasons given by various demographic characteristics. The limited amount of comparable data on this topic suggests the need for more research in this area.

In the past, most studies of volunteer motivation have focused upon isolating a single general motive or reason for volunteering. These attempts have usually focused on trying to identify the social or psychological characteristics (attitudes, personality attributes, etc.) that are responsible for certain individual involvement in volunteer work (Downing, 1957; Freeman, Novak and Reeder, 1957; Nelson, 1970; Smith, 1966; Johnson, 1973; Reissman, 1965). Alternatively, there have been attempts to explain why people volunteer by inferring motivation from the socio-economic background of those most likely to do volunteer work (Anderson, 1943; Eitzen, 1970; Hanks and Eckland, 1978). Both approaches have failed to increase our level of understanding as to why people actually decide to volunteer at a specific point in time because they are descriptive, they largely ignore current social contexts, and they exclude any consideration of the consciously stated reasons individuals give for volunteering.

While researchers have long recognized the need to explore the usefulness of situational variables for explaining volunteer behavior, little research in this area has actually been carried out. Moreover, most studies also fail to incorporate the role individuals' current personal and social

circumstances play in this process, especially as they relate to the individuals' position in the life cycle. Kornhauser and Lazarsfeld (1955) have argued that one cannot explain human behavior by focusing solely on either psychological processes such as internal motivation or situational environmental factors. Future research efforts searching for empirically based explanations of volunteer behavior should include individual, environmental and situational variables, as well as the consciously stated reasons individuals give for volunteering. In addition, more longitudinal studies will be necessary if the effects of specific social and personal circumstances on the decision to volunteer are to be known.

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