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## The Impact of Volunteer Experience on Adolescent Social Development: Evidence of Program Effects

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### Abstract

The Social and Personal Responsibility Scale was employed in a study of the Youth Volunteers program, involving 44 adolescents in 12 projects, equally divided between child care and community service. Participants showed statistically significant gains on the Social Responsibility subscale. Girls gained more than boys and volunteers in community improvement projects gained more than those in child care. However, as in previous studies, gains were quite modest. Testimony from adolescents and adult participants was more strongly positive, volunteers citing improvement in their knowledge of themselves and others and the acquisition of new skills, adults seeing greater willingness to make decisions. Child care volunteers and their adult advisers said they gained competence in working with young children. The generalized impact of volunteer experience on enduring attitudes appears to be positive but small. Future studies should attend as well to differences in the nature of the experiences adolescent volunteers have and to effects that vary among participants.

A German proverb says, "What Johnny doesn't learn, John will never learn." Although research in adult development has established that John (and Jane) can and do continue to learn throughout their lives, there is an undeniable efficiency to teaching young people the kind of behavior we value in adults: they are likely to learn it more quickly and they will demonstrate it longer. Many social psychologists have concluded that the most reliable way to induce desirable attitudes is to engage people in desirable behavior; their attitudes then tend toward consistency with their behavior. (See, for example, Breer & Locke, 1965.) For both of these reasons, and more besides, educators, social scientists, and social commentators agree with parents and other citizens that adolescents should be encouraged to volunteer to serve their communities. Communities benefit immediately from the energy and

talents of young people. Society benefits in the long run from the predisposition to socially responsible behavior fostered by such activity.

Moreover, voluntary activity in the community promotes adolescent development more broadly. Working with adults and peers to meet real needs helps adolescents master their developmental tasks. Lipsitz (1984) suggests that early adolescents require assistance in dealing with the developmental challenges of forming a sense of identity, becoming committed to group ideals, developing personal autonomy, and becoming involved in increasingly more intimate relationships, all of which might be promoted by participation in community service.

The National Commission on Resources for Youth (1981) has called for more “youth participation” programs for early adolescents as a particularly valuable vehicle for helping them meet these important developmental tasks. According to the National Commission, youth participation programs, including community volunteer work, provide the greatest benefits for young people when they feature work that meets a real community need while offering a chance to share in planning and decision making, opportunities to work collaboratively with peers and adults, and time for reflection.

While scholars and professionals affirm the value of adolescents engaging in responsible activities in their communities, evaluators have often found it difficult to document the developmental benefits of participation in community service or other forms of experiential learning. The most extensive study of experiential learning programs, which included ten community service programs, was conducted by Conrad and Hedin (1981a). They reported psychological, social, and intellectual growth in participants that was not found in control groups. Newmann and Rutter (1983) used some of the same measures to examine a narrower range of programs—only community service programs—and of outcomes—only social development. With their more sophisticated design and methods, Newmann and Rutter found that students gained a sense of greater social competence and of greater responsibility to the community outside of school. However, they emphasized the modesty of these effects—movement of approximately 1.5 percent on a five-point scale—and called attention to the comparably small size of the changes found by Conrad and Hedin.

These two studies provide the firmest empirical confirmation of community service's contribution to adolescents' social development. Both had relatively large samples of community service program participants: 300 in the Conrad and Hedin (1981a) study; 150 in Newmann and Rutter's (1983). The finding of positive but small effects in both warns other investigators against expecting adolescent participants in community service projects to demonstrate dramatic changes in social responsibility. When sample sizes are small, any effects observed are even less likely to be statistically significant. Large sample sizes in these two studies may have had the opposite effect, yielding statistically significant differences with little practical significance.

There are many plausible explanations for the difficulty encountered in attempting to verify empirically the predictions of theory and common sense (Hamilton, 1980, 1981). Four are particularly pertinent to the present study. First, the experiences young people have in the community vary enormously. There is no good reason to expect that a 12 year old who helps locate and place a bid on a building to house a community library will be affected in the same way as a 15 year old aide in an after-school care center. Second, even among age-mates in the same program, one participant may focus on a particular part of the experience and gain from it something that another participant neither needed nor wished. One child care aide might concentrate on organizing the reading corner while another spends his or her time learning how to encourage a shy child to be more assertive. In both these comparisons, real and important benefits from participation vary so much from one participant to another that any measure that averages gains across the entire group misses what happened to different individuals.

Third, if one grants that important but idiosyncratic effects cannot be assessed by measures of specific gains and looks instead for more general changes, the phenomena of interest (e.g., self-esteem and social responsibility) are not likely to change easily or quickly precisely because they are so general. Programs of brief duration that involve relatively few hours of participation may be quite valuable but not in ways that measurably affect enduring personal characteristics.

Fourth, using broad measures of socially desirable characteristics to assess the effects of a voluntary program creates a double-bind for the interpreter of the results. If, as is likely, volunteers begin with high scores on the characteristic, then there is a risk of ceiling effects. There is no room for upward movement and, if anything, a likelihood of downward regression to the mean. On the other hand, any finding of gains is open to challenge by skeptics on the ground that such results apply only to a special, self-selected, highly motivated group, set apart by the act of volunteering. Although one can logically argue that it is pointless to ask about the effects of a voluntary program on people who do not volunteer, many are concerned about whether a program's effects are broadly generalizable and are not impressed by its effects on a self-selected sample.

A methodological issue in examining the effects of community service on adolescents is embedded in the foregoing problems. It is often the case that the results of more "objective" measures, especially standardized paper-and-pencil instruments fail to confirm the judgments of both adult and adolescent participants and those of outside observers. (See Hamilton and Stewart, 1980, for an example. Newmann and Rutter, 1983, discuss the same discrepancy.) Even allowing for the natural bias toward viewing something in which one has invested time as worthwhile, there is reason to question whether formal measurement is missing something when judicious observers see effects on participants that are not reflected in test scores.

## DESIGN and METHODS

These considerations guided the evaluation design for a set of youth volunteer projects whose results are reported here. A paper-and-pencil measure of social responsibility was employed, but participants were also asked to report their own perceptions of the programs' influences on them, and volunteer adult advisers were asked how they thought the programs affected youth participants. Moreover, many components of the evaluation addressed questions of program improvement and implementation rather than outcomes. Although investigation of those issues informed revisions in the program, they will not be reported here because they are of interest to a narrower audience.

The researchers were not disinterested evaluators. Both authors participated in designing the program as well as evaluating it. The program was titled, "Youth Volunteers." Supported by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to the National 4-H Council, the purpose of the program was to involve 12–15-year-olds in responsible volunteer roles in their communities. Program development entailed preparing manuals and other materials for use by adult advisers working with small groups of youth volunteers. These materials and related volunteer activities were then pilot tested in six New York State counties with 4-H sponsorship.

## Hypotheses

The initial hypothesis was:

H1. Adolescents who participate in voluntary activities will demonstrate gains in personally and socially responsible attitudes from pretest to posttest.

In view of the cautions stated above about expecting measurable results from studies of this kind, three more specific hypotheses were also investigated.

H2. Middle adolescents (ages 15–17 years) will demonstrate greater gains in responsible attitudes and will be more likely to seek additional volunteer opportunities than will early adolescents (ages 14 years and younger).

Previous studies of service programs' benefits to youth have concentrated on high school-aged youth, neglecting early adolescents. The present project sought to emphasize the recruitment of youth in the 12-to-15 age range although both younger and older volunteers were involved. Conrad and Hedin (1981a) found that older youth involved in experiential education programs demonstrated somewhat greater gains than younger ones, especially with respect to social development.

H3. Girls will demonstrate greater improvement in attitudes toward social and personal responsibility and seek more additional volunteer work than boys as a result of the experience.

Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) found that adolescent girls are more emotionally autonomous than boys and more autonomous from peer influence. If this were true of both early and middle adolescents, one would expect girls to benefit more from opportunities to engage in activities that demand autonomous behaviors, such as decision making and planning. The present study explored this comparison, which has not been examined previously.

Volunteers worked in two types of projects: community improvement and child care. Although both types of programs were designed to provide decision-making opportunities and meet real community needs, community improvement projects would be expected to give adolescents greater responsibility and autonomy than child care projects. Young people were responsible for all aspects of community improvement projects; adults served only to help them carry out the plans they made. The 4-H clubs and after-school child care programs in which adolescents served as aides, in contrast, were set up and operated by adults. Youth volunteers in those settings were helpers who could make decisions about what to do moment-to-moment, but not about the program as a whole. The fourth hypothesis, therefore was:

- H4. Participants in community improvement projects will show greater gains in attitudes toward social and personal responsibility and be more likely to volunteer in the future than child care volunteers.

This hypothesis too opens for analysis a potential source of variation that previous studies have not reported, namely, the nature of the community service activity.

In addition to investigating these four hypotheses, the study investigated the idiosyncratic ways in which volunteers learn about themselves and others and gain a variety of skills. These effects were inferred from interview data involving selected youth and their adult supervisors. This part of the study was exploratory and did not test hypotheses.

### Subjects

Eighty-four adolescents, ranging in age from 11 to 17 years, participated in 12 different Youth Volunteers projects in six New York State counties. Sixty-six (79%) of the participants completed their respective projects. Females outnumbered males with respect to both starters (56 to 28) and finishers (47 to 19). Among program completers, early adolescent participants (14 years of age and younger) outnumbered middle adolescents (15 to 17 years of age) 37 to 29. The mean ages of early and middle adolescent volunteers were 12.8 and 15.8 years, respectively. Data were collected from 66 youth volunteers and 11 adult advisers. However, because some volunteers did not participate in an end-of-project meeting, 18 youth failed to complete the questionnaire during one or both administrations. An additional four subjects failed to answer one or both questionnaires fully or correctly. Thus fully usable pre and post questionnaire data are available from 44 subjects, or 67 percent of program completers. The following descriptions of the sample and the analyses presented in a later section reflect the information available for 66 program finishers except in the analyses of changes in attitudes toward social and personal responsibility, where only the 44 subjects who provided complete data are included.

Independent-samples *t*-test analyses (SPSS-X, 1986) revealed no differences in pretest scores between program finishers and dropouts on measures of social or personal responsibility. Additional analyses of program effects were conducted with

35 youth who were interviewed at the end of the program, including 22 early adolescents (6 boys and 16 girls) and 13 middle adolescents (2 boys and 11 girls). Participants were selected for the interviews by volunteer adult advisers to represent a range of program participation in terms of gender, age, and degree of involvement and commitment. No differences in pretest scores on personal or social responsibility were found between participants who were and were not interviewed.

### Projects

*Community Improvement.* Community improvement projects varied considerably with respect to the kinds of tasks undertaken. One large group of volunteers sought to work with the local housing authority to gut the inside of a house in preparation for its rehabilitation as low-income housing, but were prevented by problems with liability insurance from doing so. The group then decided to do construction and maintenance work on a building at the county 4-H fair site, a change that led five of the original participants to drop out of the program.

A second group constructed and raffled off a large Victorian-style gingerbread house and used the proceeds to purchase food, which they delivered to needy families at Thanksgiving time. Another group made and delivered Christmas centerpieces to elderly residents of the same community and decorated the local church for Christmas. Four separate projects took place in a third community. Volunteers sought a building for the local library and attempted to arrange for its purchase, assisted the town historian with organizational and filing tasks, cared for animals at a local shelter, and prepared a unique program for the annual 4-H Dairy and Livestock Banquet.

*Child Care.* As 4-H club assistant leaders, volunteers taught younger children how to conduct a 4-H demonstration or to make crafts. Some volunteers accompanied young club members to nursing homes to make presentations. Two groups of volunteers worked as assistants in 4-H summer day camps. One of these groups took its members from a group home for youth with severe problem behavior. They helped children with craft projects, supervised play periods, and taught educational units. Another group was recruited from a high school class and worked in an after-school care facility for elementary school children.

### Materials and Procedures

#### Written Instruments

*Social and Personal Responsibility Scale (SPRS).* All participants were asked to complete a slightly modified version of Conrad and Hedin's (1981b) Social and Personal Responsibility Scale both at the beginning and at the end of a project. The scale measures the extent to which respondents express responsible attitudes toward social welfare and personal duty, a sense of competence to take responsibility, a sense of efficacy regarding their ability to fulfill social responsibilities, and the perception that they do perform responsible tasks as volunteers. The instrument contains 21 questions with each item rated on a 4-point scale providing a potential

range of full scale scores of 21 to 84. The items assessed the extent to which the subjects regarded a particular facet of personal or social responsibility as characteristic of themselves.

Two subscales were chosen for inclusion in the analysis on the basis of their relevance to the adolescents' experiences as volunteers. The first one, the Social Responsibility subscale, assessed attitudes toward society's obligation to meet the needs of others. The second assessed respondents' perceptions of their personal responsibility, competence, efficacy, and performance ability toward others in need (Personal Responsibility subscale).

The full SPRS demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.73$ ) as did the two subscales for attitudes toward social responsibility at the societal level ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ) and the personal level ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ).

*Additional Written Measures.* Volunteers indicated on the posttest questionnaire the extent to which they had enjoyed their work, felt useful and challenged by it, and made a difference to the project. Subjects were also asked to assess the likelihood that they would volunteer again for a similar project in the future (4-point scale, 5 items,  $\alpha = 0.69$ ).

## Interviews

Personal interviews were held with a sample of participants at the conclusion of a project. In all, 18 child care and 17 community improvement volunteers were interviewed. (Three of the latter interviews were conducted by phone; all the others were conducted face-to-face and tape recorded.) Interviews assessed volunteers' perceptions of the amount of responsibility and opportunity for decision making they had had, as well as whether they viewed the experience as enjoyable and challenging, and the extent to which they had felt useful to the project. The impact of the adult adviser on the individual volunteer and the group was also queried as was each volunteer's assessment of the skills and personal insights learned as a result of the program. In addition, the volunteers' assessment of the carryover value of the experience and their recommendations for program improvements were also obtained.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

Table 1 shows the results of Paired-Samples *t*-tests (SPSS, Inc., 1986) comparing pre and posttest scores on the full SPRS as well as the Social Responsibility and Personal Responsibility subscales. The hypothesis that participants as a group would demonstrate gains in personally and socially responsible attitudes was partially supported by the SPRS scores. Participants showed a statistically significant gain on the Social Responsibility subscale ( $p = .037$ ) but not on the full scale or the Personal Responsibility subscale.



TABLE 1  
 Youth Volunteers' Pretest and Posttest Scores on Attitudes  
 Toward Social and Personal Responsibility ( $N = 44$ ).

| Attitude Subscale        | Pretest<br>Score ( <i>SD</i> )* | Posttest<br>Score ( <i>SD</i> ) | Significance Level<br>( <i>p</i> ) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Total Scale:             | 67.3 (6.9)                      | 67.8 (6.3)                      | —                                  |
| Social Responsibility:   | 30.7 (3.4)                      | 31.5 (3.4)                      | .037                               |
| Personal Responsibility: | 36.6 (4.6)                      | 36.3 (4.1)                      | —                                  |

\*Standard Deviation

To test the remaining three hypotheses, analyses of covariance were used to determine the extent of change in the Social and Personal Responsibility subscales as well as the total SPRS, using posttest scores as dependent variables and pretest scores as covariates. Program effects were compared for early and middle adolescent volunteers, males and females, and participants in the two types of projects, community improvement or child care.

#### Hypothesis 2

No statistically significant differences were found between early and middle adolescents on the full SPRS or on the two subscales. Neither were middle adolescents more likely to expect to seek additional volunteer opportunities than early adolescents. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed.

#### Hypothesis 3

Consistent with the third hypothesis, girls' total SPRS scores improved more than did boys' ( $F(1, 35) = 4.678, p = .037$ ). The same was true for the Social Responsibility subscale on which girls gained more than boys ( $F(1, 35) = 7.720, p = .009$ ). However, girls did not indicate a greater interest in seeking additional volunteer work than boys. For the most part, as is often the case in research on adolescents, gender makes the greatest difference.

#### Hypothesis 4

The hypothesis that community improvement projects would have a greater effect on volunteers' attitudes was borne out for the Social Responsibility subscale. For that subscale, community improvement volunteers gained more than child care volunteers ( $F(1, 35) = 4.532, p = .040$ ). Community improvement volunteers were also more likely to say they would volunteer again in the near future than those in the child care programs ( $F(1, 34) = 8.334, p = .007$ ). This latter difference cannot be attributed to greater program satisfaction for community improvement participants; they did not evaluate their programs as being more

challenging or enjoyable or themselves as being more useful or carrying greater responsibility than did child care volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, volunteers as a whole tended to demonstrate gains in their attitudes toward society's responsibility to help those in need but no significant gains in their own sense of personal duty to help meet these needs. Girls and volunteers in community improvement projects saw society as more responsible to help those in need by the end of their projects than did boys and child care volunteers. The differences between males and females and between the two types of projects suggest that the effect of participating in service activities varies by gender and type of activity, a useful finding for both researchers and practitioners. With respect to the effects of volunteer work on future plans to participate in similar endeavors, over 90 percent of participants indicated they were likely to volunteer in the future. Community improvement participation had a greater influence on these future plans than did child care work.

Another useful finding, which may also help explain the relatively modest impact of the programs, was that participants who reported at least some previous volunteer work scored significantly higher on the pre-project SPRS than did those without previous volunteer experience ( $t(38) = 2.22, p = .026$ ). This was true for both boys and girls as well as for younger and older adolescents. There is evidently a positive association between willingness to perform voluntary service and SPRS scores. However, it is impossible to infer causation from these data; one can say only that those with higher scores were more likely to have volunteered in the past. Whether their more developed sense of social responsibility led them to volunteer or their volunteer experience made them more responsible cannot be determined with certainty. In all likelihood, causal influence flows in both directions simultaneously.<sup>2</sup>

Results reported to this point used the SPRS to address four hypotheses. The following results are less clear-cut and may be less persuasive to some, being drawn from questionnaires and interviews and derived from exploratory rather than hypothesis-testing procedures. They deserve attention nonetheless because of what they add to the results that have already been reported and because of the implications that can be drawn for future research.

### Knowledge and Skills Growth

Volunteers' perceptions of the knowledge and skills they had gained were assessed by means of interviews with a sample of youth volunteers, and summaries written by adult advisers of individual volunteers' progress they observed.

*Knowledge about children.* Eighty-four percent of the volunteers in child care

<sup>1</sup>Because of the sensitivity of Analysis of Covariance to homogeneity of slope, Regression was also used to test Hypotheses 3 and 4 with nearly identical results.

<sup>2</sup>Note that this initial difference was controlled by treating pretest scores as covariates.

programs said that they had learned something about children. The more common kinds of new knowledge claimed dealt with how best to discipline (by explaining to a child or having the child take a time-out rather than yelling or hitting) and discovering that young children are generally quite responsive and more attentive than many thought. A 17-year-old volunteer in an after-school care program, summarized what she learned about children this way:

I learned how to discipline children a lot better. I learned that I didn't have to yell all the time at the kids, that if you just sit down and talk to them then they understand better.

*Knowledge about self.* Approximately 77 percent of volunteers interviewed reported having learned something about themselves. Comments from child care aides indicated that they learned they were more patient than they thought and that they were able to take responsibility for a project and carry it through. A 17-year-old said:

I learned I could be more involved and not as intimidated by kids. Before I started the program kids used to intimidate me a little.

Another volunteer, in contrast, said she had learned she was less patient with young children than she had expected to be.

Community improvement volunteers also reported learning that they could be patient and that they could follow through on a project. In addition, they reported learning that they had talents of which they were previously unaware. Reflecting on her public speaking experience, one volunteer said:

I found that I can keep a group of people interested in what I am saying. I had my doubts about my ability to stand up in front of a group of people [before the project began].

*Knowledge about others.* Several of the community improvement projects provided opportunities for gaining knowledge about some of the functions and needs of individuals and groups in the community. A 12-year-old boy in the gingerbread house project commented:

Being a volunteer in the project helped me understand that more people than you think need to be remembered and need something to eat.

Two of the youth who worked with a town historian said they had gained new information about some of their ancestors and about "interesting things about [their] town." Volunteers who sought to purchase property for a library expansion learned about the functions of a realtor and an attorney with respect to property transactions and about "the legal parts" of a contract of sale.

*Skill Development.* Some projects provided more opportunities for skill development than others. Many of the volunteers who renovated the 4-H fair building

reported learning about and developing construction skills, including planning, drawing, measuring, cutting, hammering, assembling a wood frame, fitting sheet-rock, spackling, and painting. Other skills learned in some of the projects, some which have been alluded to already, include disciplining and keeping the interest of small children, public speaking, crafts, and doing comparative shopping at a grocery store.

### Satisfaction

Most of the youth who were interviewed reported enjoying their work (94%) as well as feeling useful (91%) and challenged (79%). What made the projects enjoyable for the youth was “being with someone else” or with a group and knowing that they were doing something for other people. Usefulness was expressed by the youth in terms of providing fresh ideas to adult 4-H leaders, teaching useful skills to children, conducting 4-H club meetings, providing “an extra pair of hands” in an after-school program or summer camp, and being able to help one’s town. Leading activities in 4-H clubs or after-school programs which would keep kids interested, and handling discipline problems were considered challenging.

A construction volunteer appreciated the opportunity to be able to take the initiative rather than having someone else tell her what to do. As she put it, “The main benefit was having to figure it out for myself.”

The potential carryover effect of the volunteer work was evidenced in the interviews as well. Many middle adolescent child care aides recognized the potential benefits of their work for future employment and family responsibilities. One girl saw her experience as a “practice job.” Early adolescents, who are less likely to be exploring career possibilities (see Marcia, 1980), usually did not see a connection between their experiences and future jobs or responsibilities.

Most volunteers saw some real life application for the knowledge and skills they learned in child care, construction, public speaking, comparison shopping, organizing files, and organizing their own lives to fulfill the goals of their projects. One young volunteer reported the following carryover effect:

I’ve been more responsible in school. I’ve done more extra work that isn’t assigned.

### Adult Testimony

In their written assessments of changes they observed in youth volunteers, adult advisers claimed that most participants benefited from their projects. For example, one adviser said that volunteering to make Christmas decorations for elderly people and for the community’s church enabled a young girl to gain confidence in herself and an early adolescent boy to develop a positive attitude toward helping, which differed markedly from his reputed problem behavior both in and out of school. The adviser to a group of five 4-H club assistant leaders said all the girls gained in confidence, capabilities in working with kids, maturity, and/or friendliness.

Another adult adviser wrote the following about one of the two child care volunteers she supervised:

At first Sandra was shy and did not offer anything, but then she began to enjoy the association with the younger children. As time went on she extended herself more and gained greatly in confidence.

Seven volunteer adult advisers and three 4-H agents were interviewed or individually tape recorded their responses to written questions about the youth volunteers and their projects. Some questions asked about their perceptions of participation's impact on youth volunteers.

*Making Decisions.* Four adults said one of the hardest things for youth to do, especially in the community improvement project, was to choose for themselves what to do. One adviser said that those he worked with became more confident of their abilities to make decisions as the project unfolded and they discovered they could do it. In contrast, the adviser of a group of girls serving as child care aides said that only one had really taken initiative and planned activities for the children as the director wanted them to do. The others seemed content to play with the children and read to them.

*Learning to Work with Children.* Comments from child care advisers echoed the youth volunteers' statements. Adolescent volunteers given responsibility for younger children in group settings found their knowledge and abilities stretched, especially regarding discipline.

*Diverse Impact.* The diversity of youth and of their responses to the program was a theme in many adults' statements, confirming the point made in the introduction. The adviser to a community improvement project said that getting to know the youth and seeing the differences among them was the best part of the experience for her.

It was good to get to now the different kids. It was challenging because of the age span. There's a difference between 11 year olds and 16 year olds and between boys and girls. They all came with different "packages"—different levels of experience and ways of working with others. The younger ones didn't always have the attention span. You had to manage them differently. Those young boys were just young. They were not as resourceful as the young girls. They need more guidance . . . . Some [kids] were accustomed to working as a team. Some were motivated to work by themselves. They all got different things out of the project.

It should be mentioned that this adult's view of early adolescent boys as not resourceful was not shared by other advisers. For the most part, involved adults viewed both younger and older boys as helpful, resourceful, and committed.

## DISCUSSION

Two issues call for additional attention. One is the comparison between the SPRS results reported here and those reported by Conrad and Hedin (1981a) and by Newmann and Rutter (1983). The second is the discrepancy between those results and participants' testimony.

### Social and Personal Responsibility

The modest impact revealed by participants' scores on the SPRS, limited to the Social Responsibility subscale, can be attributed to the factors discussed in the introduction that militate against findings of strong uniform effects from experiential learning programs. Most youth participated for only eight weeks, too short a period of time in which to experience profound attitude changes. Approximately 85 percent of all volunteers had previous volunteer experience, largely through 4-H. They demonstrated high levels of commitment to helping others before the program actually began. Though this variance was statistically controlled, there may have been a ceiling effect.

Statistically significant differences favoring girls and community improvement projects, though consistent with the hypotheses, were also of modest size and practical significance. While these analyses present a more differentiated picture of the impact of community service than previous studies have painted, they are of the same order of magnitude as Conrad and Hedin's (1981a) and Newmann and Rutter's (1983) results.

Newmann and Rutter (1983) found substantial variation in impact among the eight school-sponsored community service programs they studied that could not be explained by their program quality criteria. It may be that gender, which they did not use as an independent variable in their analyses, and type of activity would account for some of the variation they found.

Taken together, results from the three studies suggest that something good happens to adolescents who volunteer or take on other active roles in their communities. They also suggest that what happens is rather small in scale compared to all the other influences that converge within individual human beings. Other forms of assessment may reveal it more fully.

### Participant Testimony

Testimony from participants suggests that open-ended questions may elicit more data on the impact of volunteer experience than standardized paper-and-pencil instruments. Volunteers said they learned about themselves, about how to work with others, and about how to carry out their particular responsibilities, whether they involved child care, building a wall, or speaking in front of a large group. These benefits should not be overlooked; they are essential to full participation in society and they are not always taught effectively in schools. Perhaps the most dramatic

impact reported by volunteers in interviews was learning how to discipline younger children "without hitting or yelling." Given the appalling prevalence of child abuse, simply providing future parents with alternative approaches to controlling children's behavior must be counted a major accomplishment. The fact that youth placed in a group home because of their misbehavior were among those reporting this kind of learning makes it even more impressive.

Adults involved in the program observed a number of benefits accrued by youth that could not be documented by the SPRS or similar instruments. They saw adolescents becoming more confident of their abilities, learning to make decisions and work with children, and gaining in other ways that varied according to participants' individual needs and experiences.

One weakness of open-ended interview questions is that participants may give more positive than negative comments when asked to evaluate a program, both to avoid offending program staff and to convince themselves that they have not wasted their time. However, it seems unwise to attribute so little objectivity and self-knowledge to participants as to dismiss their assessments entirely in favor of pencil-and-paper measures.

Two observations about the benefits reported by advisers and volunteers help to explain what otherwise appears to be a discrepancy between two sources of data, one "objective," the other "subjective." First, their testimony is not limited to personal and social responsibility. The benefits they imputed to volunteering are broader than that. Second, the benefits are not universal. Volunteers said what they saw in themselves, advisers talked about what happened to individual youth. Diversity in impact was one of the themes noted in the advisers' testimony. Thus, the strongly positive tone of participant testimony is not necessarily in conflict with the modest changes found in SPRS scores. The two modes of assessment did not address identical effects.

## CONCLUSIONS

The magnitude of volunteer service's impact on adolescents' attitudes toward personal and social responsibility detected in this study and in others is insufficient in itself to justify such programs. However, they can be justified without regard to their impact on participants' attitudes if they are constructive activities that are challenging and satisfying and that benefit others. Moreover, these results are reassuring because they suggest that experience in community service has some positive effects, limited though they may be.

Future studies of community service programs should, in addition to trying to replicate and improve the assessment of personal and social responsibility and similar constructs, attempt to refine an approach suggested by participants' testimony, namely, an evaluation that recognizes each program's special qualities and each participant's diverse needs and experiences. Rather than relying solely on a standard instrument to assess universal impacts, such an evaluation would begin

with a thoughtful prediction of the most likely impacts of a particular program on different participants. From the perspective of program staff, this would entail setting specific objectives for each youth. Program staff and evaluators together would then identify indicators for each objective, following conventional procedures for establishing behavioral objectives. The program's impact could then be assessed in terms of the number of youth who achieved stated objectives rather than by scores on a uniform measure, or in addition to such scores. Post hoc individualized impacts, such as those we have reported, are less convincing, though they could be made more convincing by systematically incorporating behavioral indicators.

This procedure entails numerous challenges. The validity and reliability of indicators is an obvious one. Another is that a tendency to establish more difficult objectives for one program than for another would distort any comparisons between the two. Detailed explication of objectives and the indicators associated with each would help to reveal such distortion. One strategy would be to constitute a panel of reviewers to examine the objectives and associated indicators. Published evaluation studies seldom employ such panels, but they are widely used in accreditation and assessment of educational institutions.

Whatever methods might be employed, the principle is a compelling one: to change the unit of analysis from the program as a whole to the individual participant, or, more accurately, the participant in the program. It is the way in which the particular program interacts with the needs and experiences of each participant that determines the program's impact. Uniform measures, which may be appropriate in assessing the learning of pupils exposed to the same instructional treatment in a classroom, have demonstrated only limited utility in assessing the psychosocial impact of participation in community service projects, which are diverse from one to another and among participants in the same project, as this study revealed. (See Hamilton, 1981.)

The data reported here indicate that participation as a youth volunteer had some positive effects on adolescents' prosocial attitudes, upon their developing sense of themselves, and upon the knowledge and skills they exercise in their activities as volunteers. The benefits accrued to both boys and girls and early as well as middle adolescents though not always in equal measure. Girls more than boys and community improvement workers more than child care volunteers demonstrated gains in socially responsible attitudes as measured by the SPRS and were somewhat more likely to expect to volunteer again. Quantitative and qualitative data together support the expectation that volunteer work can provide personal and social benefits to early adolescents as well as middle or older adolescents. The early adolescents involved in the Youth Volunteers program felt challenged, needed, and important and reported high rates of interest in continuing with future volunteer activity. Younger adolescents demonstrated improved attitudes toward personal and social responsibility equal to those of middle adolescents.

SPRS scores, like those reported by Conrad and Hedin (1981a) and by Newmann and Rutter (1983) showed small gains. Future studies of such programs should



not expect to find larger effects unless they employ more sensitive measures or unless the programs are specifically designed to have a more powerful effect. Statistically significant differences found in the present study between males and females and according to types of community service projects suggest that the impact of the experience depends in part on the nature of the activity and that it interacts with gender, as is so often the case with adolescents.

Ultimately, however, any measures, regardless of how psychometrically valid and convincing they might be, are no more than indicators of long-range consequences, the most important of which are behavioral rather than attitudinal. A study such as this cannot prove unequivocally that a program is beneficial or that its benefits justify the costs, especially in view of the difficulties inherent in documenting program effects. However, it can provide indicators of probable effectiveness and suggestions about sources of variation to be investigated in future studies, which is what this study has done.

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