



You Thought That This Would Be Easy? Seeking an Understanding of Episodic Volunteering

Ram A. Cnaan^{1,2} · Lucas Meijs³ · Jeffrey L. Brudney⁴ · Sophie Hersberger-Langloh⁵ · Aya Okada⁶ · Samir Abu-Rumman⁷

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Abstract This article is intended as the leading article in a Special Issue of *Voluntas* devoted to episodic volunteering from a cross-cultural perspective. This article focuses on summarizing and distilling knowledge about episodic volunteering. Based on a thorough literature review, the authors present state-of-the-art knowledge about episodic volunteering divided into key subsections that include: (1) is episodic volunteering a new area or a new era in volunteering? (2) Defining the concept of episodic volunteering, (3) the singularity of episodic volunteering, (4) assessment of the domains where episodic volunteering is most prevalent, (5) the impact of episodic volunteering on the participating individuals, (6) new parties in volunteer organizations, and (7) managing episodic volunteers. Finally, we present current gaps in our knowledge of episodic volunteers, some of which will be covered in this Special Issue, especially understanding episodic volunteering in non-English-speaking countries.

Keywords Episodic volunteers · Volunteerism · Third-party organizations

Introduction

Many people commit their services for a one-time event or activity and do not expect to be called on again or to assist beyond that event. Relatedly, volunteer managers know that the success of events often depends on recruiting large numbers of willing one-time volunteers. The dynamic is different than relying on “active members” or “ongoing volunteers” of an organization. The short-term volunteering may last an afternoon, a day, a weekend, or even a month, and when it is completed, the volunteers disappear from the organization entirely or for a protracted period. The psychological contract between the volunteer and organization is short term, event specific, and usually task

✉ Ram A. Cnaan
cnaan@upenn.edu

Lucas Meijs
lmeys@rsm.nl

Jeffrey L. Brudney
jbrudney@gmail.com

Sophie Hersberger-Langloh
sophie.hersberger@unibas.ch

Aya Okada
aya.okada.e3@tohoku.ac.jp

Samir Abu-Rumman
samir@gulfopinions.com

² Kyung Hee University, Seoul, South Korea

³ Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Netherlands

⁴ Department of Public and International Affairs, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, USA

⁵ Center for Philanthropy Studies (CEPS), University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

⁶ Graduate School of Information Sciences, Tohoku University (Japan), Sendai, Japan

⁷ Gulf Opinions Center for Polls, Kuwait, Kuwait

¹ School of Social Policy & Practice, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA

specific (Beder and Fast 2008). This form of volunteering features little, if any, long-term commitment. Although an event may galvanize popular interest at least temporarily and raise funds, it lacks the sustainability to change society. Short-term volunteers offer services or voice, but not their (time) commitment.

Episodic volunteering is gaining popularity and recognition. Whether volunteers initiated the trend or organizations anticipated their preferences and conditions for donating time, the fields of volunteer research and management have had to expand and adapt (Fischer et al. 1991; Macduff 1990, 2004). It is widely assumed that ongoing and episodic volunteers are inherently different and should be treated distinctly. Although people can be both ongoing and episodic volunteers, the commitment to the served organization or cause and how to manage the volunteers are substantially different. These two forms of volunteering are likely to coincide for years to come, and each serves different organizational and social needs. Yet, very few studies have aimed to analyze episodic volunteering as a form onto itself. Given the growing frequency and use of episodic volunteering, this article aims to provide a conceptual, theoretical review of the knowledge in this field and serve as a springboard for articles emanating from a cross-national study of event-based episodic volunteering carried out in some 20 countries scattered across five continents.

Hyde et al. (2014) found that episodic volunteering takes place in many countries; however, our knowledge derives mostly from English-speaking countries (USA, UK, Australia, & New Zealand) and Western Europe. As a result, most knowledge about episodic volunteering derives from advanced democracies. Little is known about the rest of the world. Given cross-national differences, other countries likely have different forms and styles of episodic volunteering. This Special Issue is devoted to analyses and comparisons of episodic volunteering in 18 countries. Each article tackles a different aspect of episodic volunteering. To comprehend these articles, one needs to know what episodic volunteering is.

In this article we synthesize the knowledge about episodic volunteering and provide an overview of this subfield of volunteering. We first address whether episodic volunteering is a new phenomenon or one that went undetected for a long time. We then discuss the complexity of definitions of episodic volunteering and raise questions about its boundaries. Next, we discuss the singularity of episodic volunteering. In this section we answer the question, “Is it something done only by episodic volunteers, or are traditional volunteers also performing episodic volunteering as an add-on?” This section is followed by an assessment of the domains where episodic volunteering is most prevalent. We then move to reviewing the limited literature on the

impact of episodic volunteering on the participating individuals. The next section introduces new third parties that are also responsible for offering episodic volunteering opportunities, such as companies and educational institutes and organizations specialized in voluntourism. Finally, we discuss issues pertaining to management of episodic volunteers that are different than managing traditional ongoing volunteers.

A New Area or a New Era in Volunteering?

Nancy MacDuff (1990) is credited with discovery of “episodic volunteering” as an academic and administrative concept. As a consultant in volunteer administration and management, MacDuff observed an increase in people who perform short duration tasks on a one-time only basis, or work on a specific project or task that may or may not recur annually. This discovery caught the attention of the research community—consequently, a new focus was placed on this volunteering phenomenon.

In the contemporary post-modern era, many people are often too busy to provide extensive and ongoing support for a worthy cause, and they are not interested in a long commitment to any single organization or cause. People are more likely to change their preferences and avoid making long-term commitments. They may help one organization sponsoring an event and then move on to assist another “more interesting” or “more convenient” cause. This type of limited volunteering is especially attractive among young professionals who care to assist but are unable to commit for sustained long-term help. For example, Hyde et al. (2014) found in their review of the literature that most studies report episodic volunteers to be between 20.4 years and 45.0 years of age. This group typically consists of younger, middle-aged adults, usually with children, who are in the process of building their careers.

Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) proposed that this switch from long-term—“collectivist”—to episodic—“reflexive”—volunteering may be a by-product of modernity. They suggested several factors that influence this change: women joining the labor force, low employer loyalty or support coupled with companies relinquishing responsibility for their employees and their communities, the “me” culture being accepted and celebrated, the norm of short-term commitments, mass media and culture becoming international, and the ease of accessing information through the internet. These factors continue to influence large numbers of people to seek and engage in short-term experiences that help fulfill their immediate needs, and upon completion, allow them to move on to other fulfilling experiences. In the same vein, Inglehart (2003, 2018) and

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) argue that a generational shift has occurred, and individualistic and self-oriented values and norms among people born after 1950 have become more prevalent. They also suggested that the increasing array of demands placed upon people's attention and time make long-term commitment more difficult.

The trend of episodic volunteering reflects a society in which volunteering, as an extension of oneself and an expected source of fulfillment and satisfaction, competes with a multiplicity of personal demands and preferences. Most people face time constraints that limit their ability to participate in traditional forms of volunteering: In the language of Meijs et al. (2006) they have "low volunteerability." Episodic volunteering helps them to fulfill their general willingness to volunteer (Safrit and Merrill 2002) by offering low pressures on time availability and almost no adaptation needed in their capability to volunteer.

It is possible, though more research is needed, that episodic volunteering has intensified because of new forms of demand. While the explanations offered above for the growth or recognition of episodic volunteering are supply related, it may also be the case that leaders of many organizations have realized that for large-scale one-off events or routine activities, episodic volunteering is better suited and easier, let alone cheaper, to stage and manage.

A study by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) (2006), assessing trends in volunteering between 1974 and 2005, found that the number of people serving 99 or fewer volunteer hours in a year has increased since 1989. The authors noted that "the critical role that time constraints have on the potential for people to volunteer may help to explain the reason why episodic volunteering became more common between 1989 and 2005" (CNCS 2006, p. 8). The Corporation for National and Community Service defined these people as episodic volunteers. As we will discuss later in this article, this definition is incomplete and problematic.

It should be noted that others contend that episodic volunteering has always existed, and what has changed is our focus on this type of volunteering that previously went unnoticed. MacDuff (1990) did not argue that she had discovered a new form of volunteering. She only pointed our attention to what she saw in the field. Chambre (2020) documents that episodic volunteering is not new, but that volunteer managers are more consciously building and supporting it than was perhaps the case in the past. Rochester (2018, p. 36) argued that historically many volunteer projects were run by a core of "highly committed serious leisure volunteers who formed the 'inner group of willing people'" who managed the project, who were assisted by a host of episodic volunteers, even if they were not called by this term. Regardless, from an academic point

of view, episodic volunteering is a newly studied phenomenon that requires much elaboration and understanding. Given these trends, volunteer managers should develop skills to work efficiently with episodic volunteers.

Defining Episodic Volunteering

On a superficial level, episodic volunteering is intended to be a one-off experience. The volunteer comes for one event or activity, helps for a few hours, leaves, and that is the end of the story. However, episodic volunteering is a growing form of prosocial behavior that has many facets, and its boundaries are unclear (Hyde et al. 2014). The term "episodic volunteer" (EV) can be defined as an individual who engages in one-time or short-term volunteer opportunities (Cnaan and Handy 2005). Similarly, Weber (2002) defined episodic volunteers as people who contribute their time sporadically, only during special times of the year, or at a one-time event.

Episodic volunteering is nestled between micro-volunteering and ongoing volunteering. Micro-volunteering is assumed to be an easy task that can be performed in less than 30 min, often online and from home or even on the go, without any further commitment on the part of the volunteer. Little to no formal recruitment usually takes place, nor orientation or agreement needed before a volunteer can get started, and no expectation exists that the volunteer will return (Cnaan et al. 1996; Rochester, 2018). By contrast, ongoing volunteering is a commitment to help the organization or a cause for a significant period (usually more than six months) that requires skill and features the volunteer providing service on a regular basis. Indeed, traditional forms of volunteering that are based on periodic service, such as weekly mentoring, providing ongoing support for organizations, serving on boards, and many others, are not suitable to be labeled episodic volunteering.

Macduff (2005), who is credited with first observing this volunteer phenomenon, struggled with how to define it. She settled by distinguishing three types of episodic volunteers: (1) temporary (volunteering over a short period of hours or days); (2) interim (regular volunteering over a short period ≤ 6 months); and (3) occasional (recurring on a consistent basis such as annually to volunteer for a short period of hours or days). As noted above, the Corporation for National and Community Service (2006) defines episodic volunteers as people who provide less than 99 h of service per year. Because this measure includes people who give two hours a week throughout the year, it can only provide a rough indication of episodic volunteering is. If one serves two hours a week every week except for holidays, this person, although volunteering less than 99 h a year, is a traditional ongoing volunteer, not an episodic volunteer.

However, if one serves these 99 h in one long holiday weekend, that individual may indeed be an episodic volunteer.

Although widely acknowledged as a critical and growing phenomenon, empirical investigations of episodic volunteering are scarce (Hyde et al. 2014; Wilson 2012). Hyde et al. (2014) attempted a systematic review (N = 41) of the literature. They concluded that episodic volunteering is related to three dimensions: short duration, infrequency, and simple tasks.

Episodic volunteers may repeat their involvement in future events by the same or other agencies (Bryen and Madden 2006). Handy et al. (2006) categorized EVs as one-time volunteers (i.e., novices), repeat EVs, or regular volunteers who also do episodic volunteering. A similar distinction of EVs was used by Low et al. (2007). The first group is composed of novices: people who have not previously volunteered with this short volunteer experience as their only volunteer experience, at least in the past year. However, the second group consisted of repeat episodic volunteers. With respect to annual events that occur once a year such as annual races or annual cultural festivals, some people volunteer year in and year out. They may not have any other volunteer commitments, but they come again and may be asked to serve as team-leaders or captains given their accumulated experience. Studying volunteers in the Mandela Day of service in South Africa, Compion, Bok, Cnaan, and Meijs (in press) found occasional episodic volunteers who have volunteered sporadically over the past 2–4 years but did not serve as ongoing volunteers. The question of repeated/occasional volunteers being episodic volunteers or an entirely different category of volunteers is unsettled. Fairley et al. (2007) reported a group of people who volunteered to the Sydney Olympics Games and four years later traveled to Athens to volunteer in the next Olympic Games. As such, repeat volunteering can be years apart and include globetrotting.

If we do not look at the volunteer but rather the activity, confusion still remains. Some activities that are longer term but are a single event (such as a two-week trip to Africa to dig a well, building a house for poor people, or helping plant trees in the Amazon) can also be defined as episodic volunteering (Holmes et al. 2010; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Tomazos and Butler 2009). Similarly, Steffen and Fothergill (2009) suggested that “disaster volunteering” was initially spontaneous or episodic but led to a more continuous engagement in volunteering activities. Yet, in many post-hurricane rescue and assistance operations, people arrive with their own essential equipment and help for a short time and then disappear. While well digging requires pre-planning and coordination, disaster relief volunteers can be pre-trained, but no one can pre-plan

where/when a disaster will strike (Drabek and McEntire 2003).

It is often argued that episodic volunteers do not have a psychological contract with the organization or the cause they serve (Nichols 2013; Vantilborgh et al. 2011). While regular volunteers develop expectations and dyadic relationships with the host organization, episodic volunteers come to perform a task and then disappear, not to be seen again, unless they are occasional episodic volunteers (Macduff 1990). Exceptions may occur, for example, when the task is close to the volunteer’s heart, but on average, people who come one time to volunteer with little to no training and orientation are performing a chore that is not expected to be part of who they are and, as such, resemble foreign visitors who come and see but are not impacted.

One important distinction is between informal and episodic volunteering. A few authors, especially gerontologists (c.f., Martinez et al. 2011), treat the two as the same. From our vantage point, episodic volunteering may be informal (such as helping a stranded stranger) or formal such as volunteering under the auspices of a large organization (Einolf et al. 2017). What may be even more important is that informal volunteering can be, at times, long-term and still informal, such as caregiving to a sick relative. At other times, informal volunteering can be carried out as episodic volunteering, such as in helping another person move, watering someone’s plants, or feeding someone’s pets when they are on vacation.

The two terms may overlap, but they are inherently distinct. Similarly, community service within schools or universities can at times overlap with episodic volunteering, but educational community service is often continuous (Bowen et al. 2009).

What emerges from this review of the literature is that regardless of the definitional inconsistencies, in its ideal form episodic volunteering is a one-time (usually a few hours) assignment to perform a non-complicated task that does not require elaborate training or, alternatively, a very specialized and specific task, such as in pro bono volunteering utilizing skills already possessed by the volunteer (for example, legal or accounting). Meijs and Brudney (2007) refer to these categories as “Sweat” versus “Specialist” volunteers, respectively. Upon performing this task, the volunteer has no commitment to the organization, even if the organization would like this same volunteer to return or to become further involved.

Yet, the definition of episodic volunteering may still be elusive. Exceptions can arise in definition above that make the volunteer experience episodic, even if one aspect of it is not purely episodic. For example, the scope of episodic activities may be extended to a longer period as in weekend events or a month-long international mission. Furthermore, some episodic volunteering assignments such as writing an

encyclopedia entry may require enhanced skills. In all its forms, episodic volunteering is extending a hand but not a sustained commitment. It does not involve leadership or policy-making responsibilities. The central idea seems to be that episodic volunteers are not the core ongoing sustainers or leaders of the organization; they fulfill a role—sometimes an important one, but it is often more of a task than a mission. In the ongoing story of the nonprofit organization, they partake in an episode.

Is Episodic Volunteering Performed Only by Episodic Volunteers?

Although much attention is focused on the new breed of volunteering, it is not clear if episodic volunteers are really a separate breed. What is at stake is: how singular is episodic volunteering? Is it performed mostly by people who come once, never to be seen again, or are these additional tasks for people who are serving as ongoing volunteers in the same or in another organization?

Cnaan and Handy (2005) surveyed 1320 North American adults and asked if in the past 12 months they had volunteered on a regular basis, episodically, both, or “none at all.” A little over a quarter (27.2%) reported not to have volunteered at all. A fifth of the sample (20.1%) reported to be involved only in episodic volunteering. The largest group, almost half the sample (47.9%) reported performing both ongoing and episodic volunteering. Finally, a very small percentage (4.8%) reported volunteering only on an ongoing basis.

Among all those who reported volunteering episodically, exclusively, or in conjunction with ongoing volunteering, about 60% reported volunteering six or fewer times a year, while 40% volunteered seven or more times. Only about a fourth of the volunteers (23%) were steady volunteers who donated about the same amount of time each month. Similarly, based on a three-year study of participants in a day of volunteering event in the Netherlands with over 4000 respondents, Van Baren et al. (2014) found that only 23.1% volunteered episodically, while the rest added this one day to regular volunteering. In England, it was found that one-third of current volunteers volunteered frequently (more than once a month) in the past 12 months, and 7% of this category had only taken part in a one-time activity (Low et al. 2007). However, national studies of volunteering tend to overlook episodic volunteers as many do not define their one-day service as volunteering. Holmes (2014, p. 443) reported in a study of Australian episodic volunteers that “the interviews also identify that episodic volunteers are regular volunteers at other organizations and vice versa.” Hustinx et al. (2012) found in a research project on student volunteering that in Belgium and the

Netherlands students participate in many kinds of episodic and ongoing volunteering opportunities. Based on the above results, it seems that a significant portion of the episodic volunteers are also repeat volunteers or traditional ongoing volunteers who also undertake episodic tasks.

Cnaan et al. (2017) found that 78% of volunteers at Pope Francis’ visit to Philadelphia stated that, in addition to the mega-event, they also volunteer regularly in the community, with most having volunteered for more than ten years. Hyde et al. (2016) studied repeat EVs with the same organization (Relay For Life) and identified three categories of episodic volunteers: novice (23.5%), transition (46.2%), and sustained (30.3%). However, all three groups were in relation to episodic volunteering: those who come for the first time, those who participated 2–4 times before, and those who volunteered 5–6 times to the event. They concluded that people who volunteer episodically for the same organization can move from one level to the next and become more strongly affiliated with the organization.

The picture emerging is that episodic volunteering is defined by what and how tasks are done and less so by who is doing them. In some cases, mostly mega-events, the organizers want people for a one-time specific event and are not concerned with people’s other volunteer engagements. Similarly, in places that rotate groups of episodic volunteers daily or weekly, such as soup kitchens, often organized groups (from churches, classes, businesses, corporations, service organizations, etc.) bring their own groups. Some members of these groups likely volunteer beyond the event, while for others the event is their sole volunteer commitment. In organizations that involve episodic volunteers alongside traditional volunteers, often the goal is to transform the one-off people to become regular volunteers. In fact, in many countries where organized volunteering for NPOs is considered too low, it is assumed that bringing people, usually in groups, to a one-day episodic volunteering event may enhance these people’s likelihood to become ongoing organizational volunteers (Compion et al. in press; Krasnopolskaya et al. 2016; Maas et al. in press).

It seems that, for some people, episodic volunteering may be an entry point into volunteering; it is a means to test or try volunteering. Some may never come back, while others move to repeat episodic volunteering or even become ongoing volunteers. However, such transitions are not necessarily a linear progression. People may perform traditional ongoing volunteering and simultaneously participate in a one-off event; they may limit themselves to a few episodic volunteering settings and cease ongoing volunteering. Then, they may even change again. Anyone can undertake an episodic volunteer task regardless of their previous or current volunteer experience. Most people who participate in an episodic volunteering activity are not

novices. As such, episodic volunteering is both an entry point for non-volunteers and a task to be performed for people who are or were active volunteers.

Where are Episodic Volunteers Utilized?

Irrespective of whether or not episodic volunteering is a new phenomenon or an underreported long-existing one, it is important to know where it is utilized. A review of the literature suggests that episodic volunteering is quite common in sporting events (Filo et al. 2008a, b; Hamm et al. 2008; Wilks 2006; Neufeind et al. 2013) and fundraising events (Beder and Fast 2008); Filo et al. 2011; Wood et al. 2010). Hyde et al. (2014) reported that indeed a majority of reported episodic volunteering focuses on these two activities. They also found that relatively little episodic volunteering takes place in health and social services. A review of the literature on “national days of service” around the world shows that this type is rather terra incognita, although many national examples can be found (Maas, Meijs, and Brudney, in press).

Our review of the literature suggests three key domains in which episodic volunteering takes place; however, each one is multifaceted and may even overlap with others. These domains are: mega-events; daily (or periodic) volunteering by rotating groups; and stand-alone, limited scope (episodic) volunteering.

The first domain of episodic volunteering consists of mega-events. They are usually one-time events of very large scale staged by a designated organization or authority that attracts volumes of visitors as well as mass media attention. They often affect the local economy due to the influx of tourism and as such require large numbers of episodic volunteers. Most notable among these are the Olympic Games and other sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup, Rugby World Cup, World Alpine Ski Championships, and the American Super Bowl (Bladen 2008; Cashman 2003; Fairly et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2019; Kodama et al. 2013; Pate and Shonk 2014; Koutrou and Pappous 2016; Sand et al. 2017; Vetitnev et al. 2018). Because most of these studies are published in sport and leisure journals and are not directed to nonprofit journals, they may escape the notice of researchers in the field.

Mega-events are not limited to sporting events. A growing body of the literature treats religious mega-events such as large-scale pilgrimage, papal visits, and Awakening Revival events (Cnaan et al. 2017; Floristán et al. 2013; Gallarza et al. 2009). Some mega-events are culture-related, such as wide-appeal charity concerts or theater festivals (Love et al. 2012).

A subset of mega-events is a national day of volunteering (Maas, Meijs, & Brudney, in press). These events

are created to attract volunteers of all kinds to assist non-profit organizations and other civic causes. National days of service such as the USA’s Martin Luther King Day (Gray, 2009), the Israeli “Good Deeds Day,” the Dutch *NL Doet*, and the South African Nelson Mandela Day attract thousands of volunteers. Unlike mega-events such as sports tournaments, volunteers on a national day of service are not gathered into one limited area but are dispersed all over the participating region, and each group may be engaged in a significantly different task.

The second domain of episodic volunteering takes place in organizations that rely on a group of volunteers to carry out routine or basic tasks on a regular basis. The need of the organization may be daily or weekly, and the people who assist are usually not the same people but different ones in every shift/date. For example, Hustinx et al. (2008) examined the Ronald McDonald House that hosts families of children who are hospitalized long-term. The families pay a nominal fee for their room, and volunteers come daily to prepare dinners for the families (parents, guardians, and non-hospitalized children). Every evening, a different group of volunteers comes with the food products and prepares the dinner. Some may volunteer again, and others will not. The organization relies on a stream of groups composed of episodic volunteers. Similarly, the Habitat for Humanity ReStore system is composed of hundreds of retail stores that sell a wide variety of new or hardly used furniture or building materials donated by individuals or corporations. The proceeds are used to buy building materials to build houses for poor people (Gresock et al. 2006). Each store relies on a stream of volunteer groups who come to help clean, price, and move furniture so that buyers will have a good shopping experience. Jarige Job in the Netherlands is another example of an organization that uses groups of episodic volunteers on an ongoing basis. This nonprofit collects products and assembles birthday packages for poor children throughout the Netherlands, an effort requiring many helping hands; group after group comes, packs, and leaves. Some come again with the same people, some come again with different people, and some never come again (Meijs et al. 2019). These are only a few examples that depict the second domain of episodic volunteering: organizations that continuously rely on the supply of a group of people willing to volunteer episodically.

The third domain is of people who volunteer in a one-off event or activity or at most once a year. These include volunteers who help with community festivals (Handy et al. 2006); taking calls in fundraising campaigns; tourist activities (Devereux 2008; Holmes and Smith 2009); helping people filing their annual taxes (Madison et al. 2008); helping local races by handing water or directing runners; and, in Australia, adults traveling around the

country in mobile homes and staying a few days/weeks in declining towns (Leonard et al. 2007). Saxton (2005) reported, “Habitat for Humanity in western New York, for example, has teamed up with local Starbucks stores to offer one-day volunteering opportunities involving both customers and employees” (p. 38). As noted above, informal volunteering can also be carried out episodically. As such, helping a stranger or a neighbor to perform a single task or solve a specific problem may also be considered episodic volunteering.

In this domain we can also include disaster volunteers, though many of them may be repeat volunteers. However, in every disaster some individuals leave home behind and move to help, especially if the disaster area is within reach (Lockwood et al. 2016; McLennan et al. 2016; Whittaker et al. 2015). This process also occurs when the disaster is not natural but humanitarian, as was the case of the mass migration from the Middle East to Europe around 2015–2018 (Guribye and Mydland 2018; Simsa, 2017; Simsa et al. 2019). Guribye and Mydland, for example, reported that “thousands of citizens from all over Europe temporarily abandoned their day jobs to be of some sort of assistance for the refugees as they arrived on the beaches of Lesbos” (p. 343).

Our three-domain typology is only a first step in trying to systematize research and policy regarding episodic volunteering. It does not focus on the volunteer but on the needs of the benefiting organization or the beneficiaries of the volunteering. Yet even this proposed typology missed the case of member-based volunteering that is quite different from the structured episodic variety (Brudney et al. 2019a, b). Members have an abiding interest in the cause or the group/organization, rather than in the event or required task, which motivates their involvement.

Impact of Episodic Volunteering on the Volunteers

Although people volunteer to help others in need, causes, and/or organizations, it is reasonable to assume that they receive positive outcomes from volunteering (for example, Clary et al. 1998). However, it is difficult to assess the impact of one-off volunteering on the volunteer. One can ask if episodic volunteering leaves any impact on the volunteer. Furthermore, the many forms of episodic volunteering and the many people who carry it out make generalization difficult. As in volunteering more generally, people go through a process of learning about an event, considering it, accepting the invitation to help, possibly attending a short or online orientation, and then performing the task. Even though the volunteering act is episodic, it is usually unique and outside a person’s daily life. As such, it is possible that episodic volunteering may impact the

participants. In this section we review a few emerging trends that are worth noting, though this side of episodic volunteering is understudied.

Nearly every study of episodic volunteers reports a willingness to continue volunteering as an indication (or measure) of impact. Most episodic volunteers report high levels of satisfaction with their short-term volunteer activity that is associated with a willingness to participate in another episodic volunteering event (within the same organization or in general) and possibly even move from episodic to traditional, ongoing volunteering (Bang et al. 2009; Bryen and Madden 2006; Cnaan et al. 2017; Hallmann and Harms 2012; Hyde et al. 2014; Neufeind et al. 2013; Smith and Lockstone 2009; Maas et al. in press). Yet, relying exclusively on willingness to repeat volunteering with an organization as an indicator of impact excludes our ability to understand the impact of episodic volunteering that is informal or outside the boundaries of an existing organization. The field should be equally concerned with other forms of impact that may be derived from episodic volunteering.

Haski-Leventhal et al. (2011) compared the benefits episodic volunteers and ongoing volunteers derive from the same program. They found no significant differences between the groups. Both types of volunteers rated a sense of being acknowledged and appreciated by staff and clients as top benefits. This ranking was replicated in other venues involving episodic volunteers (Cnaan et al. 2017). Often in an episodic volunteering task, people leave with a sense of accomplishment and the knowledge that someone appreciated their effort. Güntert et al. (2015) found that episodic volunteers are uniquely motivated to exemplify good citizenship and to experience a sense of excitement. Indeed, for people who want to be involved in exciting activities such as sports, religious or cultural mega-events and be in close proximity to celebrities, episodic volunteering leaves them satisfied and with stories to share with friends and family members.

Handy et al. (2010) demonstrated that for young adults, volunteering is often a means to résumé building. When applying for higher education and potential employment, reported volunteering is a signal of maturity, willingness to work in a team, and going beyond the call of duty. Episodic volunteering may be viewed by outsiders as less worthy of appreciation, compared to traditional ongoing volunteering. Yet, even episodic volunteering can develop skills for advancing professionally (Bassett and Lomax 2014; Hustinx et al. 2008).

Hahn et al. (2015) carried out an exploratory study designed to understand the impact of episodic volunteering, participating in a day of service, on civic outcomes, for example, civic-mindedness, intentions to volunteer in the future, and intentions to donate money in the future. They

studied 562 college students who participated in the 2014 MLK Day of Service. Their findings suggested that student participation—even in one-off volunteering events—contributed to civic-mindedness and intentions to volunteer and donate money to a community organization in the future. Similarly, Hendriks and Peelen (2013) reported that in sport event, episodic volunteers tend to also donate money.

Although we have ample knowledge on the impact of ongoing volunteering, the same cannot be said with respect to episodic volunteering. We assume that the benefits of ongoing volunteering that allow affinity with the served organization, its staff, its clients, and the peer-volunteers would not carry over to episodic volunteering. More nuanced research is needed to understand more fully the impact of episodic volunteering on the participants in addition to their willingness to volunteer again in the future.

Creating Episodic Volunteering Opportunities

In addition to individuals potentially wanting to volunteer episodically in a here-and-now time-constrained mode with traditional volunteer-involving organizations, the last 20 years have also shown the rise of new parties to organize and host episodic volunteering. Haski-Leventhal et al. (2010) presented the third-party model in volunteering where events are supported by new volunteer-involving organizations like companies (corporate volunteering), educational institutes (community service/service learning) and social benefit organizations (welfare benefit volunteering). A central element in the approach of Haski-Leventhal et al. (2010) is the idea that these third parties enlarge the “recruitability” of the sector by offering “their” students, employees, etc., access to, in many cases, incidents of episodic volunteering, either individually or in groups. This trend supports Rochester’s (2018) suggestion that “Much employer-supported volunteering is episodic; a common activity takes the form of a team-building exercise involving such tasks as painting a community building; clearing environmental eyesores, or tidying the overgrown gardens of older people” (p. 30). Indeed, many of these activities are a one-off not to be repeated, which is reflected in the framing of corporate volunteering by nonprofit organizations in Belgium and the Netherlands (Roza et al., 2017). Similarly, Bowen et al. (2009) claim that student engagement is one of the largest drivers of episodic volunteering. Service-learning courses can be such a driver, as the institution may offer courses lasting only a few weeks or months. As the activities in service-learning courses are not necessarily skill based (Bringle and Hatcher 1996) but rather designed to learn new skills, the volunteering

experience enlarges the students’ recruitability. Hustinx (2010) shows that episodic volunteering is one of the results of processes that restructure volunteering on a societal and organizational level. As volunteer coordinators recognize the growing demand for short and minimally committed volunteer experiences, they offer programs and recruitment strategies to fit this interest while serving their organizational needs. This realization supports the emergence of the third parties that recruit episodic volunteers for the benefit of operating organizations.

Following Hyde et al. (2014), episodic volunteering activities organized by third parties are related to the dimension of short duration, as they are infrequent and involve simple tasks. But the third-party perspective might broaden this engagement a bit because when a company sends a team to volunteer at the same nonprofit every two weeks, the individual employee still volunteers infrequently, but the company offers ongoing involvement. Likewise, in service-learning and corporate volunteering, the tasks episodic volunteers perform might be skill based, but relatively simple for the volunteer “professional” (for example, an accountant preparing the financial records for a small charity).

Another platform for creating opportunities for episodic volunteering is through information and communication technology (ICT) or online media. Using websites such as Flickr, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and many others allow organizers who need episodic volunteers to reach a multitude of potential volunteers in real time. While some would argue that the people who marched in the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the USA in Summer 2020 were not volunteers, the success of mobilizing so many people to come and march at such a short notice indicates the power and importance of ICT in creating episodic volunteering opportunities.

In some organizations the use of episodic volunteers is daily (as in soup kitchens), in others it is annual (as in cultural festivals), and in still others it is one-and-done (as in the Pope’s visit to Philadelphia). These instances share the need to recruit episodic volunteers and utilize their efforts wisely. In this field especially third-party organizations can be helpful. From student organizations to chat groups and from churches to corporations, these third-party organizations link one-off events and tasks with potential episodic volunteers.

Managing Episodic Volunteering

Hyde et al. (2014) noted that “Problematically, episodic volunteering (EV) reduces volunteer availability and increases turnover and costs for NPOs, many of whom do not have established programs or capacity to support

episodic volunteers.” Indeed, when an activity is based on a large number of one-off volunteers, either thousands at one time (as in a mega-event) or routinely (as in different group of one-time volunteers coming to help a soup kitchen or volunteer thrift store), retaining and managing them is a challenge (Maas et al. in press; McCurley and Lynch 2005). From the growing literature, a few managerial themes emerged that will require further observation and testing.

In many cases episodic volunteers come on their own volition to perform a task and do not wish to be bound by traditional bureaucratic rules. Unlike ongoing traditional volunteers who accept the rules and boundaries of the NPOs they help, episodic volunteers are more independent. Karr and Meijs (2006) discussed two styles of volunteer management: the informal, democratic, collective and less hierarchical home-grown style of management vs. the hierarchical professional style of management. Episodic volunteers—especially where they are the first on the scene or left with minimal training and supervision—tend to make their own rules and rely on their own judgment. The online or in-person orientation leaves room for improvisation and street-level decision making that may be contrary to the NPO’s policies or way of doing business. From the vantage point of the host organization, investing in managing episodic volunteers may seem counterproductive. In the great majority of cases, they are expected to do a routine, unskilled task, and as such enhanced management is expensive and inefficient. Yet, if the organization wishes to keep using episodic volunteers, it must improve its volunteer management practices and make them applicable to episodic volunteers rather than to ongoing volunteers.

Cnaan et al. (2017) reported that for episodic volunteers at the Papal visit to Philadelphia, the key satisfier or dissatisfier hinged on being thanked. The respondents noted that they wanted to be appreciated. They took time off to do online training and then went to carry out tasks that at times seemed irrelevant. They were satisfied with their assignments, but they wanted to be appreciated. Some reported that the sense of appreciation came from the people they assisted or from a nearby professional such as a police officer or a nurse. Fewer received a good word or “thank you” from the volunteer captain. They all received a thank you email message, but it was not considered sufficiently personal. The theme that emerged was that even for a four-hour shift of telling people where to find the facilities, volunteers desired to be appreciated personally. They wanted one positive sentence to let them know that their service, as small as it was, was respected and appreciated. Similar findings were reported by Haski-Leventhal et al. (2011) and by Holmes (2014). These findings suggest that successful management of episodic volunteers ought to

include an element of acknowledging and appreciating episodic volunteers if they are expected to help in the future.

Managing episodic volunteers is also an important part of what Brudney et al. (2019a, b) called “shared models” of volunteer management. In these shared models the process of volunteer involvement is separated into a home (sending) organization and a host (receiving) organization. Examples in the field of episodic volunteering entail (team challenge based) corporate volunteering and voluntourism. Brudney et al. (2019a, b) showed that the process of volunteer management is different in these sending/home organizations, as it involves more reaching out to other organizations in the community and, unsurprisingly, “Organizing, staffing, or promoting volunteering events in your community, such as days of service.” This task is a major preoccupation in, for example, volunteer centers (van den Bos 2014) and in the corporate volunteering offices of companies (Roza 2016).

Although it is agreed that managing episodic and ongoing volunteers is markedly different, consensus has yet to be reached on how to manage episodic volunteers. Studies show that volunteers want to be appreciated and be well utilized. This finding provides a solid foundation that requires further research that will be nuanced to the specific environment in which episodic volunteering is exercised.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the early years of the twenty-first century the world of volunteer management and volunteer research is acutely aware of the phenomenon of episodic volunteering. New – or perhaps newly discovered – this type of volunteering is widely practiced, yet the current research leaves many questions unanswered. In this article that serves as the introduction to a Special Issue of *Voluntas* on episodic volunteering, we aimed to systematize the knowledge and provide an analytic snapshot of what we know. Given the novelty of the topic, it should come as no surprise that the majority of the articles cited in our review date only from the past decade. Indeed, the field of studying episodic volunteering is new and evolving, although one could argue that Sills (1957/1980) had already presented a depiction of episodic volunteering as he described the March of Dimes about 60 years ago.

In this Special Issue of *Voluntas* we show that all around the globe episodic volunteering has become a trend. The trend seems rooted in differences: different areas of involvement (sport, culture, religion, environment), different motivating factors (modernization, service learning, corporate involvement), and different participants (traditional volunteers doing more, people who only volunteer

episodically, etc.). What unifies the trend is not the industry, motivations, or participants, but rather the manner of volunteering. Episodic volunteering consists of volunteering one time (usually for a very short period) with no commitment or expectation on the part of the volunteer to return or continue. Although the organization may prefer that the volunteer service persist, and the volunteer may extend the time commitment (or not), the typical participation is a one-off.

In many countries as well as in the academic literature, traditional ongoing volunteering has been the accepted modality. From this perspective episodic volunteering might be seen as an (unwelcome) abbreviation of the traditional norm. This Introduction and the articles in the Special Issue belie this vantage point. They show that episodic volunteering is much more a new form that is added to the menu of volunteering than a replacement of the traditional form. Whereas Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) made the point of a switch or replacement, it seems to be much more of a movement into broadening the possibilities for volunteering (Hustinx et al. 2012). In other countries with less of a tradition of ongoing volunteering, episodic volunteering seems to be the form that introduces the concept of organizational volunteering.

As compared to ongoing volunteering, episodic volunteering may be a form of volunteering that is less privilege based. A host of studies show that people of higher income and higher education are more likely to be ongoing volunteers (Musick and Wilson 2008; Putnam 2015). Indeed, in order to volunteer regularly in a nonprofit organization, one needs to have extra time and resources as well as necessary skills that are attractive to the organization. However, episodic volunteering may “level the playing field” of entry into volunteering. Episodic volunteering usually calls for a group of people to come and perform a simple task for a short duration. People of all walks of life can come one morning and peel potatoes in a soup kitchen or guide traffic in a mega-event without the need to compromise their income or spare time. This topic, however, has not yet been tested empirically.

Management of episodic volunteering is sorely in need of greater attention. Brudney et al. (2019a, b) introduced the Volunteer Stewardship Framework to assist volunteer management practice and research. They recognize an emergent category of shared volunteer stewardship or management in which a home organization, such as a corporation or school, works with a host organization(s) in the community to deploy the volunteers—much of which is episodic volunteering. This arrangement means that both organizations need to work out the form and substance of the episodic volunteering. Thus, a third party exists to the (home) organization and the volunteer: a third-party organization that hosts the episodic volunteering. Brudney et al.

(2019a, b) provide guidelines for the shared volunteer management models that can offer a start to designing and managing episodic volunteer engagements effectively.

We also draw attention to a change of perspectives with regard to episodic volunteering that may prove useful. The conventional depiction of this form is nonprofit organizations’ need and use of “warm bodies” to perform simple tasks, which Meijs and Brudney (2007) label “sweat” volunteers. However, these authors point out that another kind of highly specialized volunteers engage episodically: corporate and pro bono volunteers can bring greatly prized assets, such as legal, accounting, risk management, and project management, to the episodic volunteering workplace. We suggest that, rather than conceive of episodic volunteering exclusively as the province of the sweats, we enlarge the vision to incorporate “free lancers” who bring specialized skills to nonprofit organizations. Or, we might even look more expansively at nonprofit organizations as the fortunate recipients of all manner of assets through episodic volunteering that they must meld with other inputs into desirable and beneficial outputs and impacts for the clients they serve.

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