

Empowering a Profession: Seeing Ourselves as More than Subsidiary

Ivan Scheier, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION: REGISTERING SOME CLAIMS

Volunteerism. I remember the dreams of a larger role in the betterment of society. But a funny thing happened on our way to changing the world; the world got to us first. It got to us by casting us (or encouraging us to cast ourselves) in subsidiary roles vis-à-vis current structures and concepts, rather than as change agents confronting the need for new structures and concepts.

Today, we seem to have our hands full just defending ourselves as a profession, never mind changing the world. As the first article in this series proposed: "For volunteer administration today, the number one challenge is to empower the profession (Scheier, 1988)." Essentially, empowerment is understood here as enhanced status for career leadership of volunteers and more generous resource allocation in support of volunteer programs and groups.

This first article looked at labels for what people who call themselves "Volunteer Administrators" actually do. In many cases, we found justification for broader, more inclusive, and hence more impressive titles such as "Community Resource Development," "Community Relations Coordinator," "Human Resource Development," "Community-Based Support Systems" and the like. In part, our disempowerment may result from allowing ourselves to be seen as too narrow in what we do, hence more expendable. Or so it was argued.

This second article pursues a parallel track in the importance of self-perception as a starting point for empowerment. Here, however, the polarity changes from "narrow-broad," to "subsidiary-autonom-

ous." The argument, in a nutshell, is this: insofar as volunteer administration continues to see itself as derivative, passive and dependent, others naturally tend to see us that way, too. Beginning to define ourselves as powerful, active, and autonomous is the first step in becoming more so. Almost any victim of prejudice will tell you this and almost everyone can instance the phenomenon in her/his own experiences.

Thus, as many have remarked, John Kennedy convincing us that we *were* going there was the first step on the road to the moon. This is far more than a simplistic "wishing will make it so." It is instead a respectful variation on the poet Robert Burns in which we see ourselves as we would *like* others to see us. Nor is this a trick. Indeed, the special promise in re-perceiving volunteer administration as more powerful and independent is that the factual basis for redefinition is already there. The old dependent perception is the one which most lacks reality reference and blocks seeing ourselves as we really are, or could be.

Thus far, I have only tried to be clear about what is being claimed. We now begin to examine the basis for the claim of disempowering self-perceptions in the field of volunteer administration. I'll also suggest some possible remedies in each case of alleged self-disempowerment.

NARROW VS. PART OF A LARGER WHOLE

As noted, the first article in this series (Scheier, 1988) explored a narrow-broad polarity in the self-labelling of people who work with volunteers; this proves to overlap our present somewhat broader concern with subsidiary-autonomous. The first article concluded that:

Over the past twenty-five years, *Ivan Scheier* has been a volunteer, a volunteer coordinator, director of a volunteer center, researcher, author, publisher and—both in North America and overseas—a trainer and consultant in the volunteer leadership field. He is currently Director of the National Center for Creative Community in Santa Fe, New Mexico and President of Yellowfire Press, Boulder, Colorado.

... it is all too easy for the uneducated (on volunteers) executive to downplay a person labelled as "only" responsible for volunteers. But this same executive might think twice, or even thrice, before trivializing the work of a person who, as part of a seamless package, was bringing in, not only volunteers, but also materials, equipment, money, information, community support!

The article presented evidence that many people who call themselves volunteer administrators/directors/coordinators in fact do some of these other things. To see ourselves, accordingly, as part of a more pervasive and synergic function of community resource development or some such title, is also to see ourselves as more powerful, so went the argument. And some former volunteer administrators have enlarged their titles in just this way.

Here's an analogy. One person is good at finding gold; another person is good at finding gold *and* silver *and* several other precious metals. You *should* value both. But which one will you *actually* value most?

PASSIVE-ACTIVE: CAUSE-EFFECT

Typically, we in the volunteer world see ourselves as acted upon, rather than acting on; as a resultant of other forces rather than a basic cause. This is true of every study I've participated in or know of, on the future of volunteerism. Studies like the National Forum on Volunteerism (1982), for example, did their best to predict how environmental factors such as inflation or increasing numbers of women in the workplace will impact volunteerism. To my knowledge, such studies rarely or never attempt to predict how volunteerism might impact inflation or the number of women in the workplace, etc.

A similar assumption of passivity occurs when we discuss demographics. There the question is far more likely to be of the type: "What impact will an aging population have on volunteerism?" Yet, recent studies show that volunteerism also impacts right back on the aging process (DOVIA Exchange, 1987), an opposite direction of expected causal flow at least equally worthy of study.

Mainly, I think, a deeply ingrained as-

sumption of dependence keeps us from asking the kind of questions which cast volunteerism as active cause rather than passive result. Thus, the Center for Creative Community has a project to determine the impact of volunteerism (as cause) on the economic well-being of communities, rather than the usual *vice versa*. So far, we've come up with eighteen ways (Center for Creative Community, 1985) and at least one economist reviewer says they make sense. We needed only to break through our habitual self-perception of passivity.

May I recommend that whenever we catch ourselves considering a statement of this type—how does X effect volunteerism—we turn it around to how does volunteerism affect X, and see what happens. And when we have turned it around, let us pursue the implications relentlessly. Thus, to our credit, the relation between corporations and volunteerism has indeed been studied in both directions—how volunteerism impacts corporations as well as how corporate involvement impacts volunteerism. But have we gone the whole way? Thus, has anyone asked if an employee's fulfilling experiences and recognitions as a volunteer might make her more likely to demand more of the same in the corporate workplace?

Sometimes it seems as though we position entire programs under the assumption that we volunteers deal with symptoms, not causes. Recently, I heard an excellent presentation of a fine program in which volunteers work with latchkey children. In an accompanying video, the father of one such child expressed his regret—the pain was visible—that circumstances forced his wife and him to leave their child alone for certain times. They had no choice, he said; both had to work full-time to maintain their standard of living. Wait a minute, I thought. Where are the volunteer programs to challenge the materialistic assumptions that make parents place their children at latchkey risk in the first place? Such programs would probably be educational, would likely be issue-oriented, and almost certainly would be unpopular and controversial in a society which increasingly requires incessant consuming.

Is this a fair assessment of organized volunteerism, or merely another unsupported version of the old band-aid accusation? I do not know. I only ask that we pay more attention to whether our programs deal sufficiently with the causes of social problems, not just their results. And I hope, too, that we do not avoid as too controversial the kind of issue-oriented volunteering which does tend to deal with causes (in *both* senses in which that word is used).

THE RULES WE PLAY BY

Psychologists tend to do very well on intelligence tests; I suspect this is at least partly because intelligence tests were developed by psychologists in the first place. Assuming garbage collectors ever saw the point of constructing intelligence tests, psychologists would not do nearly as well.* To paraphrase an old adage: "The hand that sets the standards, rules the world."

The clearest possible admission of second-rate status is to allow yourself to be judged by principles and standards fundamentally different from your own ideals. If the price of upward mobility for a woman is just to play the man's game, including some of its worst parts, who has really won? Not women, I should think, nor men either, for that matter, in the long run.

How does modern volunteerism stand in that regard? Not very well, I believe. Thus, one of our basic assertions—basic miracle, if you will—is that millions and millions of people *will* do valuable work, *without being paid for it*. This means, among other things, that *money is not the sole measure of the value of work*, maybe not even the most important one.

Some of us then proceed immediately to justify our volunteer programs in terms of their *dollar value*! In so doing, the presumed price of program survival is accommodating to the principle: *money is the*

main measure of the value of work. Thus, we allow ourselves to be judged by standards that are not just *different* from ours; they are *opposite* to ours. No clearer acknowledgment of inferiority could be imagined.**

Nonetheless, I predict we will continue to reduce to materialistic terms the work people do for reasons that are precious, precisely because people are more than materialistic. At any rate, I am not holding my breath until volunteer administrators eliminate the practice. Nor do I even necessarily recommend it—we do have to be practical, after all.

What I do recommend is that while we allow ourselves to be justified in their terms (*e.g.*, dollars), we begin reciprocally to suggest, as gently as may be, ways those using dollar-value standards can judge themselves by *our* standards (I wouldn't put it quite that bluntly, of course, but that is the intent).

For example, why don't we develop an index of work satisfaction or work fulfillment to reflect all the *non-dollar* sources of satisfaction a person has? Then, as we regularly dance to the tune with dollar value of volunteer time, let others begin to hear our music, too: the satisfaction value of work, for staff as well as volunteers. That's our specialty and we're in a stronger, more respected position as it becomes visible, accepted. Pseudo-dollars are *not* our specialty.

There may also be other ways we can begin to encourage a better balanced reciprocity in standards between "us" and "them." We might, for example, publicly examine questions such as: "Can you really pay people to be nice? *Genuinely* nice?" or "How good or bad is the correlation between compensation and caring about one's work?" I suggest the ensuing dialogue would raise general awareness of the value of what volunteer administrators know, and what they do.

A DECLARATION OF INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE

In the field of volunteerism, the great teachers have been the great translators. They have brought us the best from other fields to adapt to our needs, *e.g.*, personnel, psychology, communication, business or other public administration, edu-

*I say this, not as a matter of strict proof, but as a former psychologist with some experience constructing intelligence tests *and* collecting garbage.

**Or a greater threat to a budget-anxious staff.

cation, office and financial management, economics, public relations, evaluation, ethics, sociology, and so on. The list is long, and it can be confirmed by scanning any textbook in volunteer administration, any conference program, any list of certification competencies.

So be it. I respect us for our willingness to learn from others. Still, there comes a time when you have to ask: is there *anything* we can call our own? Do we have anything original and authentic to say, or are we totally derivative intellectually? I suspect most disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, do have some special basic insight or viewpoint, and this uniqueness is one basis of power because you have to come to them to get it.

And where is our specialty? Who has ever marked out the primary intellectual ground we hold? What do we offer that is original rather than derived? I don't hear that kind of primary declaration from us. All I hear, as noted, is the need to copy and adapt from other fields. But I believe volunteerism will never fully achieve its own power base until it achieves its own intellectual base; that is, until it defines itself as something more than a mish-mash of other fields. I believe it is now time to reach down deeply inside ourselves and identify the authentically original we have to offer the world. Surely there is something very special in our archetypical situation: people working without pay in a society whose mainline assumption is that people work for money; and people choosing work of their own free will in a world where work is so often chosen for us by others or mandated by chronic indebtedness.

Therefore, I would like to see more concentration on identifying, articulating, and proclaiming what is special and original in the volunteer situation, what cannot be derived from anywhere else. This specialness, in turn, defines what we know better than anyone else, hence, the areas in which we can be teachers as well as students, and in all these ways, more powerful.

Just as a rough "for instance" beginning, such statements might look something like this:

- People *do* work for more than the money; work and money are not al-

ways inseparable.

- Intangible rewards and recognitions are at least as important as tangible.
- In the long run, it may be more effective to build work around people than to force people to fit pre-cast molds of what they should do and how they should do it.
- Money and/or politics are not the only way people can affect the way things are. You can "vote" with your volunteer service every day.
- Many people need more than one career, not just serially, but also concurrently.

What these statements have in common is a marking out of a special intellectual territory in which we have special, even unique knowledge by virtue of our profession, and from which special bodies of knowledge might be developed. The people approach system, so-called (Scheier, 1981) is one of the few attempts thus far to develop a special body of knowledge based on a "unique" volunteer principle (the opportunity to build work around people).

Another example would be leading works on the value of recognition-other-than-money (Vineyard, 1981). Here, however, I would like to see us emphasize more that our special expertise in intangible recognition is desperately needed by most paid employees, too. Indeed, a tremendous opportunity for empowerment and employment awaits us in the "volunteerizing" of *all* work, both paid and unpaid. I have in fact facilitated trainings on work satisfaction for paid employees, which lead off with this prescription: "Pay your employees a decent salary, then forget you are paying them and treat them as if they were volunteers. And here's how we treat volunteers . . ."

Perhaps such a development is a bit premature, until we have a better grip on exactly what the primary intellectual territory of volunteerism is. Think tanks are an excellent way of identifying and refining such statements—like the five preliminary examples presented earlier. The Center for Creative Community therefore has been facilitating a CHALLENGE series of think tanks at various locations in North America. Concurrently, we have been developing a strategy and methodology for

the conduct of think tanks—a kind of how to go beyond the how-tos (Cole, in preparation).

ONE DOWN TO THE HUMAN SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

Somehow, some 30-40 years ago, organized volunteerism cast its fate primarily with the human service delivery system. It was never altogether a marriage made in heaven, witness that staff and agency resistance to volunteers has characteristically been the number one problem for volunteer programs ever since. But the main point here is that, accepted or not, a volunteer program in an agency is almost inevitably cast in a subsidiary role. Usually—not always—where there are any paid staff at all, they are the supervisors and resource people, and much of the methodology of volunteer administration can be seen as a way of being sure volunteers are properly controlled by the agency, even though the usual control mechanisms for employees are lacking; that is, you can't withhold their pay, and you can't usually say, "do it, or else." Volunteer screening; job descriptions; volunteer orientation and training; supervision and evaluation of volunteers; even special recognition of "good" volunteers, are ways of making sure service volunteers stay reasonably tame to the purposes and procedures established for them by the agency.

Organized volunteerism will remain essentially subsidiary as long as it is auxiliary in this way—far more influenced by, than influencing its agency hosts.

I am nevertheless convinced that far more good than harm happens because volunteers are in the human service delivery system—particularly in the enhancement of services to clients. Therefore, I hope and expect we will keep our foothold even at the cost of reinforcing the perception of us as subsidiary.

What we *can* do, however, is give more attention to settings in which volunteers and their leaders are *not* so subsidiary.

One such setting is the group composed mainly or entirely of volunteers. Some types of all- or mainly-volunteer groups include neighborhood organizations; networks; service clubs; many church or synagogue groups; educational

organizations; self-help groups; recreational or cultural groups; club groups of all kinds; advocacy or issue-oriented groups; many professional associations (especially local chapters); co-ops; boards, committees and task forces (as lacking in staff support); most fraternal organizations; many newly created service programs or facilities, before funding; etc. There must be millions of such all-volunteer groups; probably this is where most people do most of their volunteering, and where much of the cutting edge of social progress occurs. Yet, most of the training and publication *re* organized volunteerism assumes there will be paid staff working with volunteers, supervising and supporting their work, providing continuity, etc. Only recently has a visible literature begun to develop focusing especially on all-volunteer groups (Yellowfire, 1985 a and b); much of this body of knowledge is still in the future, as a major project of the Center for Creative Community.

For now, however, the point is that, by definition, volunteers are subsidiary to no one else in an all-volunteer group; hence there could be more opportunity for autonomy for professional leadership involved with them. But how could a volunteer administrator make a living working with an all-volunteer group? That is a legitimate practical question (though, on the other hand, it is an exquisite irony to have defined the field of *volunteer* administration largely in terms of what people can be *paid* to do).

A future I find quite plausible here, once the body of all-volunteer group knowledge is solidified, is one in which a volunteer administrator acts as an independent consultant to a set of all-volunteer groups. No one of these groups could afford such full-time services by itself. But a pooling of all their retainer fees should make a decent total revenue for the volunteer administrator, whose title as well as role would probably evolve to something more like "volunteer group resource consultant." And, I believe, the role and the profession would show a net gain in autonomy here.

For those who remain as volunteer administrators in agencies, all-volunteer groups may still serve as leverage for em-

powerment. First, the all-volunteer group consultant role will compete importantly for the services of volunteer administrators which could lead to greater value placed on getting and keeping good people in agencies. Secondly, as agency volunteer administrators begin to recruit as resources volunteer *groups* along with volunteer individuals, agencies should begin to understand better the autonomy of volunteerism, since that will usually be more clearly evidenced in dealing with a group of volunteers, rather than an individual volunteer.

But not always. Another neglected setting for volunteerism is the freelance volunteer who works largely independent of organizations. Related descriptions are "mover and shaker," "social entrepreneur," "gadfly" and occasionally less printable names. These people are enormously important; while they do not work for organizations, they often end up *creating* them. As Eileen Brown says on the basis of her preliminary research (Brown, 1987): "Free-lance volunteers represent a precious heritage in the history of helping. They are intensely individual, active, not-for-profit workers, by choice not affiliated with an organization. The freelance volunteers can be *issue-oriented*, mobile and flexible in target areas or more *service-oriented* helpers of individuals not as mobile, usually working within a fixed area/neighborhood." Brown goes on to note that "all of our communities have and need these individuals."

Here then is the very model of autonomous volunteering. From it, we can draw inspiration and self-confidence, and even, under certain conditions, valuable help for our organization. Brown, for one, feels that we are not utilizing freelancers fully enough. While they will never belong to us as among "our" volunteers, they can certainly help our causes when they happen to be going our way. Their genius for cutting (or ignoring) red tape and their attitude of "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" can move things when otherwise the bureaucracy of helping might leave us dead in the water. And more relevant to the theme of this article, freelancers model volunteers as kings and queens, rather than pawns for our agency managers. Finally, Brown's results

thus far indicate that while freelancers are not interested in belonging to a formal program, they *are* willing to accept help and support for their work, *on their own terms*. Perhaps somewhere here, there is a future role variation for volunteer administrators, more as supporter than as supervisor, more as network facilitator than director.

READINGS

- Battle, Richard V. *The Volunteer Handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Successful Organization*. Austin, TX: Volunteer Concepts. 1988.
- Brown, E. *Freelance Volunteers*. Preliminary Report Series of The Center for Creative Community. 1987.
- Center for Creative Community. *How Volunteers Help Create a Strong Economy*. Preliminary Report Series. 1985.
- Cole, N. Paper in Preparation.
- DOVIA Exchange. *Not Volunteering is Hazardous to Your Health. Part II*. The DOVIA Exchange: Santa Fe, NM. The Center for Creative Community, Vol. III, No. 2. September 1987.
- National Forum on Volunteerism. *Shaping the Future: A Report on the National Forum on Volunteerism*. Appleton, WI: Aid Association for Lutherans. 1982.
- Scheier, I. *THE NEW PEOPLE APPROACH HANDBOOK*. Boulder, Colorado: Yellowfire Press. 1981.
- Scheier, I. Empowering a Profession: What's in Our Name? *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, VI, 4., Summer 1988.
- Vineyard, S. *Beyond Banquets, Plaques and Pins*. Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts. 1981.
- Yellowfire Press: a) *Setting Achievable Goals in All-Volunteer Groups*; b) *Divide the Job, Delegate the Work: Here's How*. Boulder, Colorado. 1985.