

In Search of the Missing Link:

VOLUNTARISM'S TWO CULTURES

By Sarah Jane Rehnberg

This article marks the initiation of a "Forum for Research Translation", a new section in the journal of Volunteer Administration. Research translation is a term awesome enough to stimulate the interest of the scholar and sufficiently intellectual to discourage the practitioner from venturing any further. And yet it is precisely such a mixed reaction that this Forum hopes to captivate and channel toward a unified outcome. Research translation involves the condensation of the essential and meaningful elements of a scholarly pursuit into language that is straightforward, nontechnical and applicable to the daily functioning of the practitioner. The hope of such an undertaking lies in the desire to open lines of communication between the two equally dedicated but essentially alien worlds; the "ivory tower" world of the scholar, and the "real world" of the practitioner.

In assuming the editorial responsibility of this new section of Volunteer Administration, I am reminded of the classic lecture of the Two Cultures delivered in 1959 by C. P. Snow, eminent British scientist and literary critic. Lord Snow, an extremely talented man with one foot in the world of science and the other in the world of language arts, became acutely aware of the extreme polarization of the two groups. Each of the two worlds assumed a common set of attitudes, assumptions, patterns of behavior,

common approaches and standards that identified them as members of one group and separate them from members of the other group. The similarities of the persons within one group extended beyond their professional role and impinged on their social and emotional lives. The attitudes, religious beliefs, social class and personal lives of scientists were more like other scientists than they were like non-scientists. Without even thinking about it, those who are members of one group respond like other members of the same group. That according to C. P. Snow, "is what a culture means".¹ The dissimilarity between groups is matched only by the extent of similarity within groups. Consequently, the scientists and non-scientists tend not only not to understand members of the opposite culture, but tend to view the other with skepticism, suspicion and a large dose of mistrust. The practical consequences of this dilemma are staggering.

There seems to be no place where the cultures meet. I am not going to waste time saying that this is a pity. It is much worse than that. Soon I shall come to some practical consequences. But at the heart of thought and creation we are letting some of our best chances go by default. The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures - of two galaxies so far as that goes - out to produce creative chances. In the history of mental activity that has been where some of the break-throughs came. The chances are there now. But they are there, as it were, in a vacuum, because those in² the two cultures can't talk to each other.

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Certainly the gulf between the non-scientist (the practitioner), and the scientist (the scholar) is not unique to the field of voluntarism. And while misery has been known to love company, the solace provided does not bring us to the cutting edge of creative interchange between two earnest, dedicated groups.

The division in the field of voluntary action is not without reason, nor is it without hope. In "Research and Community Needs in Voluntary Action", David Horton Smith delineated some of the reasons why voluntary action research has not been relevant to the practitioner. Voluntary action scholars have given inadequate attention to the problems most crucial to the practicing administrator of volunteer services. Dr. Smith notes that on one side of the equation, the scholars have been quick to pursue their own academic concerns with little, if any, regard to the practical relevance (or more frequently, practical irrelevance) of their pursuit. The practitioner balances the equation by quickly dismissing the work of the scholar, while neglecting to pressure the scholar for more meaningful research.³ How often I have personally heard practitioners comment to one another in walking away from a scholarly presentation, "I could have saved you the time and told you that, had you only asked" or "Obviously so and so has never been a volunteer" or "Boy, are you off the track." And yet these disparaging comments are never communicated to the scholar directly and the gulf between the groups widens.

Until the establishment of this "Forum for Research Translation" (an idea conceived and brought to fruition by David Horton Smith), formalized opportunities for exchange were limited to periodic conferences and sporadic publications available to limited audiences. With the adoption of this concept and the joint sponsorship of Volunteer Administration by AVB and AAVS representing the practitioner organizations and AVAS representing the scholar contingent, a significant step has been taken to bridge the "cultural" gap. I strongly urge an active letter writing campaign to the editorial board of Volunteer Administration in response to articles published in this section. Such interchange of ideas should sharpen the focus and help to channel the undertakings of the scholars, to become more responsive to the needs of the practitioner.

In return, the practitioner should make every effort to learn to understand the "language" of the scholar if lines of communication are to remain open and viable. I am

fully aware of the value of knowledge gained at the experiential level, and I can also empathize with the seasoned practitioner who combines creativity with ingenuity and concludes that "In my heart, I know what I am doing is right." In fact such observations gleaned from years of experience often become the sum and substance of creative research endeavors and form the basic premises of future theoretical discussions. But we should be wary lest we overrate the merit of such practice. It is a service to ourselves and to our profession to carefully phrase our "tried and true" assumptions and put them to the test of rigorous study and evaluation lest we propagate half-truths that stagnate our emerging profession. History tends to judge ineptness and failure harshly. As practitioners, we do not want to perpetuate damaging myths that slow our growth. Dr. Smith offers an analogy that helps to clarify this point.

Voluntary action has been getting along pretty well for a long time without any significant inputs from voluntary action research. In doing so, most leaders and staff of voluntary organizations and programs have largely been "flying by the seat of their pants"- depending on intuition, accumulated personal experience, trial-and-error, knowledgeable colleagues, and others to do the best they can. What we are suggesting here is that some kinds of "radar" and other navigational instruments have been discovered, figuratively speaking, that can improve still further the effectiveness of voluntary action. This being the case, the wise "pilot" or voluntary action leader/staff person will at least investigate how accumulated scientific knowledge can be of help in his operations. This knowledge will not be a cure-all, but it may help the careful pilot avoid some of the more troublesome "mountains" (problems) he or she would otherwise have difficulty avoiding or dealing with.⁴

A large and truly exciting task lies before all of us as the progression of voluntarism reaches toward puberty. Volunteer administrators are gradually coming to view themselves as managers of human services; researchers are pioneering through largely uncharted territory; volunteers are gaining a sense of the immense contribution they provide annually and are demanding just treatment and respect. As a profession, we are experiencing the developmental needs that change through the stages of maturation as our body of knowledge and practice accumulates. Malcolm S. Knowles delineated the "six ages of a field of social practice" and identifies the sequential research needs in evolving fields of social practice.⁵

These phases should be viewed as relative markers and not absolute directions as we define and pursue the body of knowledge that belongs uniquely to the voluntary sector.

Phase I: Definition of the Field - *The awareness of a new kind of social practice - voluntarism - that is doing something different from other established fields. Members gain a sense of identification with one another and attempt to define the terminology used to describe themselves and others.*

Descriptive research such as surveys, census studies, and case reports characterize this phase.

Phase II: Differentiation of the Field - *The field gains security in its self-identity and seeks to define and clarify how it differs from other fields of social practice. Concern is directed to establishing the unique needs and special resources it offers.*

Comparative studies exploring boundaries and establishing unique approaches occur at this time.

Phase III: Standard-Setting - *Problems of control become important as the field becomes more clearly defined and differentiated from other fields. Standards of practice, evaluative criteria, certification of practitioners, and training institutions become relevant concerns.*

At this phase there is a need for normative - descriptive research focusing on standards, evaluative research and improved tools and methods of measurement.

Phase IV: Technological Refinement - *As a result of research, areas of weakness in the field surface and unsatisfactory practices are uncovered.*

Experimental research measuring the case studies, and action research all assist with increasing the understanding of the effects of the practices in the field.

Phase V: Respectability and Justification - *A need for status and esteem develops as the field gains stability and insures its survival from the gains made in the earlier phases of development.*

Historical research, and field-evaluative studies demonstrate the fields effectiveness and accumulated knowledge. Biographical studies highlight the achievement of the noted pioneers in the field.

Phase VI: Understanding of the Dynamics of the Field - *The field has become established, is recognized, and held in esteem. Emphasis is placed on the need to understand the internal and external forces affecting its development.*

Institutional studies focus on the functional elements of the field; designs for more effective organization; factors contributing to resistance to change; significant social environmental issues; and new directions for growth characterize the research needs.⁶

As Knowles outlined these phases he cautioned the observer not to expect orderly linear movement. The developmental process is a spiral growth pattern. A field may move through all six phases rather quickly and superficially and then return to repeat the process more methodically.

The Six Phases represent a research theory which I hope will shed light on the process ahead of us as the field of voluntarism develops and will demonstrate the value to be gained from a carefully delineated theory. Knowles speculated on the Six Phases after carefully reviewing his previous intuition, experience and logic gained in the emerging fields of social practice of recreation, social work, and adult education. His theory was outlined so that it may be examined by others, tested empirically and analytically as other new fields of social practice develop.

Voluntarism represents an emerging field of study and of service whose development can be measured along the theoretical lines described by Malcolm Knowles. Perhaps the creative utilization of this research theory will answer those who exclaim that academia, theory and philoso-

phy do not belong in the field of voluntarism because they aren't "reality". I maintain that voluntarism is frequently misunderstood, and its contributions overlooked, in part, due to the insufficient attention given to the thoughtful analysis of the daily practice encountered in the field. We pride ourselves as being practical persons who strive to "get results". We are impatient with theory, with open ended discussions with no immediate concrete applications. Alan Watts explains:

This is why the behavior of Western civilization might be described, in general, as "Much Ado About Nothing". The proper meaning of 'theory' is not idle speculation but vision, and it is rightly said that 'where there is no vision the people perish'.

*But vision in this sense does not mean dreams and ideals for the future. It means understanding of life as it is, of what we are, and what we are doing.*⁷

Our research and our theory must develop concurrently. Theory can point to areas where research might prove to be illuminating and provide a basis for explanation and prediction. Research, on the other hand, can test theory, clarify concepts, suggest new formations or validate and extend old ones. Without this essential link our research will be sterile and meaningless, our theory will be hollow.⁸ Theory has been linked to a net where knots represent terms or concepts and the threads connecting the knots are the definitions and hypotheses of the field.⁹ As practitioners, we must actively identify the relevant knots, suggest the possible connection and offer our findings openly to the scholars. The scholar sincerely interested in the field will need to abandon less relevant pursuits and analyze the more practical hypotheses. The research findings must then be translated to the practitioner and the relevant findings adopted.

Although the task before us is not an easy one, it is of very direct pragmatic importance. David Horton Smith analyzes the problem from the standpoint of competition and evolution:

*...a given voluntary organization or program that does not make the best possible use of available scientific knowledge is likely in the long run to fall by the wayside as competing groups grow and prosper as a result of their increased effectiveness.*¹⁰

As I examine the rapid growth and current strength of the women's movement, I have to wonder if "traditional" voluntarism contributed inadvertently to its own loss of woman-power. Did our own poor management techniques, inept assignments and well intentioned, but misdirected recognition efforts encourage some volunteers to seek positions where reliable attendance and meaningful work are measured by a monthly pay check? Had voluntarism analyzed earlier the factors that motivate persons to participate in activities and applied this knowledge along with sound management practice, in a systematic fashion, it is not altogether unlikely that more of our competent women would still be with us. Marlene Wilson's book, The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs, exemplifies a classic in our effort to apply the best techniques of management to volunteer administration.

We talk about growth through volunteerism and the importance of voluntary activity in helping young persons identify career goals through voluntary activity, and yet with the exception of Virgil Peterson, little has been done to confirm the impact of this assertion on actual student volunteer participation.¹¹ We look with pride and admiration on civic organizations that adopt humanitarian causes as the central focus of the voluntary action of their collective membership, but have we ever stopped to delineate the exact impact of such concerted effort on the cause in question? David Jeffreys examined the work of one service club and found the volunteer ideals did not translate to the client as completely or as efficiently as desired.¹²

We are all inspired when leaders in the field of volunteer services assert "that beyond the practical achievements of each volunteer there seems to be a spiritual growth that transforms competitive individuals into a unifying brotherhood that may well have tremendous importance for the ultimate destiny of mankind."¹³ Our field has too long been characterized by statements such as these that are reinforced by a committed constituency and directorate. The energy of the practitioner and academic investigator should now be challenged to document the existence of "spiritual growth" and operationalize it in such a manner that the strictly chance occurrence of such an outcome is minimized. It might then be possible to apply such a growth process to persons most in need of this opportunity: the mentally ill; the convicted criminal; the adolescent in search of identity. And what of the person

over-extended in the sphere of volunteer involvement? Have we considered the detrimental effects of active membership on too many philanthropic boards and altruistic foundations? It is time we begin the process of careful scrutiny and begin directing the energy of a potentially effective mechanism for social and institutional change. Our growth must incorporate the advances made in other fields of endeavor. Voluntarism has much to gain from the fields of adult education, psychology, management, and sociology to name but a few.

Is voluntarism a nonordinary reality, a term popularized by Carlos Castaneda, as he discussed "the path with heart" or is it actually an undefined reality lost in the mystical trapping of goodness and altruism? I would like to propose that we begin accumulating the data already present and carefully review our findings, and that we disseminate the information currently available and search for new links in the theoretical net. I believe that voluntarism is actually an undefined reality desperately in need of communication between the persons with the expertise to investigate the phenomenon observed by the practitioner, and practitioner. The practitioner must assume the responsibility of critical questioning and careful evaluation if we are to contribute to the development and professionalization of our position. Perhaps the path we are discussing is "the path with heart", but such claims should not be exercised without validation.

As we embark on a problem-oriented approach to translate research and to establish a theory in the field of voluntarism, I would like to present a final note of caution. I believe we would be well advised to heed George Kelly and deal only in "half-truths". I hope that we have the courage to preface any eventual theory with his comments when he says:

*This paper, throughout, deals with half-truths only. Nothing that it contains is, or is intended to be wholly true. The theoretical statements propounded are no more than partially accurate constructions of events which, in turn, are no more than partially perceived. Moreover, what we propose, even in its truer aspects, will eventually be overthrown and displaced by something with more truth in it. Indeed, our theory is frankly designed to contribute effectively to its own eventual overthrow and displacement.*¹⁴

Man's nature and consequently anything that he creates is in constant action. Change and movement are essential aspects of his being. Any theory proposed to explain a function of this constantly changing creature must be broad enough, inclusive enough and strong enough to face and adapt to change. If voluntarism is able to establish a theory capable of guiding it as a field and yet flexible enough to meet a changing social order, we will surface as leaders in the field of social practice. I believe this goal is within our reach, if we as practitioners and scholars reach for it together.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) C. P. Snow, The Two Cultures and A Second Look, p. 10.
- 2) Ibid., p. 16
- 3) David Horton Smith, "Research and Community Needs In Voluntary Action", pp. 4, 5.
- 4) Ibid, p. 6
- 5) Malcolm S. Knowles, "Sequential Research Needs in Evolving Disciplines of Social Practice", Adult Education, 23:4, p. 209.
- 6) Ibid., pp. 299-301
- 7) Alan W. Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity, p. 105
- 8) C. Selltitz, et. al., Research Methods in Social Relations, pp. 498, 499
- 9) Ibid., p. 485.
- 10) Smith, op. cit., p. 6
- 11) Virgil Peterson, "Volunteering and Student Value Development". Synergist, 3:3, pp 44-51.
- 12) David Jeffreys, "Volunteer Power -Idea to Reality", presented at the AAVS/ AVAS Conference, Boston, Mass., Oct. 7, 1976
- 13) Eleanor Wasson, "Developing the New Spirit of Volunteerism", Volunteer Service Administration, 1:1, p. 1
- 14) George A. Kelly, "Man's Construction of His Alternatives", Assessment of Human Motives, p. 33.

Suggested Readings

Jeffreys, David, "Volunteer Power -- Idea to Reality", presented at the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Association for Administration of Volunteer Services and the Third Annual Conference of the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars, Boston, Mass. Oct. 7, 1976.

Kelly, George A., "Man's Construction of His Alternatives", In G. Lindsey (eds.) Assessment of Human Motives, New York: Rinehart and Co., 1958

Knowles, Malcolm S., "Sequential Research Needs in Evolving Disciplines of Social Practice", Adult Education, Summer 1973, 23:4, pp. 298 - 303.

Peterson, Virgil, "Volunteering and Student Value Development", Synergist, Winter 1975, 3:3, pp. 44 - 51

Selltiz, C., Johoda, M., Deutsch, M., and Cook, S.: Research Methods in Social Relations, New York: Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1962, pp. 480 - 499.

Smith, David Horton, "Research and Communication Needs in Voluntary Action", Washington D. C., Center for a Voluntary Society, 1972, pp. 3 - 7.

Snow, C. P., The Two Cultures and A Second Look, Cambridge, The University Press, 1969, pp. 1 - 26.

Wasson, Eleanor, "Developing the New Spirit of Volunteerism", Volunteer Service Administration October 1974, 1:1.

Watts, Alan W., The Wisdom of Insecurity, New York: Vintage Books, 1951, p. 105.