

Women and Volunteering: Perceptions, Motivations and Effects

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Introduction. In this paper we review research on women's volunteer roles, motivations, rewards, satisfactions, and other volunteer outcomes; and, we consider societal forces, particularly the feminist movement, that support women's returning to the marketplace and to institutions of higher education, forces which can be seen as antagonistic to traditional concepts of women's volunteering. The literature raises two questions concerning women's current attitudes towards volunteering and also concerning a number of conceptual and methodological issues, which we attempt to address in a survey reported in this paper.

Background literature. Research and stereotype describe women as the mainstay of the volunteer movement. According to the 1974 study, Americans Volunteer, one woman in four has done some volunteer work while only one man in five has done so. When Anderson and Moore (1974) sampled volunteers, they found that 79 percent of their sample were women and only 21 percent were men.

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The United States Department of Agriculture (1977) reported that 67 percent of the volunteers in the 4-H youth program were women. According to Americans Volunteer 58 percent of all the women surveyed had done some volunteer work between the ages of 28 and 55. While these findings consistently support the notion that women volunteer more often than men, they also reveal inconsistencies and issues concerning just how much more often and how to appropriately measure how much more volunteering. These methodological issues are discussed below in the context of our own empirical work.

Women assume a variety of roles as volunteers which may vary according to life stage (Coppack, 1977). According to Eberly (1977) young people volunteer as part time activity contributing an average of eight hours per week (for 14 to 17 year olds) and eleven hours weekly for 18 to 24 year olds. Women from 25 to 44 years of age accounted for 30 percent of respondents doing volunteer work according to the Americans Volunteer.

While data from the 1974 study indicate an overall decrease in volunteering during retirement, a 1976 evaluation study of 70 Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) projects indicated that 76 percent of all RSVP volunteer are women. There of course could be many reasons for this finding. Generally, however, when volunteering is

viewed from a life cycle perspective, there are associations between the number of hours of volunteering activity and the type of activity and the life cycle stage, relations which may not be of the simple linear variety.

In considering the impact of women's volunteer experience, one must examine the volunteer activities themselves as well as the volunteer roles. There are several different approaches to the definition of these concepts. D.H. Smith (1972) has identified five major classes of voluntary activity: (1) service-oriented voluntarism; (2) issue or cause-oriented voluntarism; (3) self-expressive voluntarism; (4) occupational or economic self-interest volunteering and (5) philanthropic voluntarism. Coppack (1977) describes leadership roles, support roles, and expressive roles. Anderson and Moore (1974) identify administrative service tasks including a tremendous range of activities from leadership to typing and direct care or client service. Ekstrom (1977) has categorized volunteer functions such as administrator/manager; financial or personnel manager; researcher; fund raiser, etc. The Volunteer Career Development Program of the Association of Junior Leagues (1978) has related volunteer roles to career interests in terms of these categories: Business; education; industry; service repair trades; science; health care; art; design and performing; social/public service and communications.

A volunteer function identified by Eva Schindler-Reiman (1975) is that of "Diagnostic Fact Finding," an accountability or evaluation function. The League of Women Voters has pioneered in this area, for example, through their work in determining compliance with citizen participation mandated by General Revenue Sharing (VanMeter, 1975). Another example is the concern of

the National Council of Jewish Women with "due process" in court proceedings. Attempts to classify volunteer roles appear to confound motivations and interests of the volunteer, the level of responsibility associated with the activities, the prestige of the volunteer position, and outcomes resulting from the volunteer activities.

Regardless of which category system we use, we cannot help but observe that activities associated with women's volunteering have not been accorded the status, prestige, or power of those associated with men's experience.

Loeser and Falson (1977) have documented that women are grossly underrepresented on the governing boards of not-for-profit organizations despite the heavy reliance of these organizations on women's volunteering. A recent survey of non-profit organizations in Boston found that women constituted only 23 percent of all board members. Forty-five of the 100 organizations surveyed had no women officers and nine had no women members of the board at all. Given the lack of prestige associated with women's volunteering, it could be seen as somewhat surprising that women are generally satisfied with their volunteer experiences. Coppack (1977) found that there was a "consistently strong sense of agreement that the work being done constituted an important accomplishment." A recent study by Conroy (1978) indicated volunteers' "willingness to give more that was required in terms of hours" thus implying satisfaction with the volunteer activity. Smith explains this apparent disparity between status and satisfaction: "one specific type of reward which may be sought in volunteer work is enriched self identity for wife/mothers." Smith, however does not make it clear whether women who

work (the large majority of women eligible to do volunteer work) also seek enriched self-identity, or whether his explanation is relevant only to presently nonworking women, an ephemeral category since most women are gainfully employed at some point in the life cycle.

D.H. Smith (1973) found that the greatest impact of volunteer experience was on individuals who were in programs of "total involvement" and gave a full time commitment to volunteering. There is evidence to support this theory. The career potential of the returning Peace Corps Volunteer was studied by DeCarlo (1976). Peace Corps Volunteers described their Peace Corps experiences as having enhanced their career potential and as having contributed to their individual maturity. These findings are supported by Eberly's (1977) research on the Program for Local Service. In light of these findings concerning the status accorded to volunteers and the satisfaction experienced by volunteers, it seems appropriate to underscore the distinction between the two sets of variables related to the volunteer experience: first and ascribed or earned status accorded to the volunteer or to the volunteer role (regardless of who assumes it) and second the feelings of the volunteer concerning the experience, which might include a number of variables from satisfaction with the volunteer experience to reports of accomplishments and skills acquired.

Political Perspectives. The views of the National Organization for Women on voluntarism appear to have implications for both the prestige associated with volunteer roles and the attitudinal outcomes of the volunteers.

In 1971, the National Organization for Women addressed the lack of prestige associated with women's

volunteering and the exploitation of women in the non-profit sector. NOW described two types of voluntary action: Change directed and service directed, advocating from former and discouraging the latter. Concerning change-directed volunteerism, NOW criticized service-oriented volunteerism: "This seeks to complement insufficiently funded social services with nonpaid labor in order to alleviate social ills. In addition, it blunts the pressure for a more equal distribution of the nation's wealth." A national debate regarding volunteering ensued. Much of the defense of service oriented volunteering had to do with the relation of volunteer experience to career development: according to a 1977 issue of Council Women voluntarism is the smoothest stepping stone to paid employment a woman can find if that is what she is seeking.

"Hard" data that support the hypothesis that women have made a transition to paid employment via their volunteer experience are difficult to obtain. The most relevant studies were completed by Mueller (1976) and Hybels (1977). According to Mueller

It is hard to imagine a social institution which provides more cheaply in terms of start-up costs equivalent opportunities for making a variety of useful contacts and for testing aptitudes and interests. An analysis of a survey of 295 women ten years after they had attended graduate school found that both the skill level of the volunteer job and the desire on the part of the worker to return to the market work significantly increased the number of hours of volunteer work done by these women.

Hybels found that skill development was given as a motive for volunteer work by a sizeable number of women in all education groups.

The work of Hybels and others is more directly relevant to the motives of volunteers concerning potential career development than to the actual correlation between volunteer experience and later vocational experience.

The recent phenomenon of women's self help career groups suggests that the relation between volunteer acquired skills and employability may be indirect rather than direct. The link according to some may have to do with the important translation of volunteer skills into attractive, salable resumes, or into academically creditable knowledge. However, relevance of the volunteer experience to professional and academic status continues to be the responsibility of the individual. Publications by Ekstrom (1977) and DeCarlo (1978) document the recent growth of resources to help the volunteer bridge the gap between activities in the volunteer sector and careers and continuing education.

Our review of literature raises a number of important questions and issues. One concerns an appropriate method by which to estimate the frequency of men's and women's volunteering. The studies yield inconsistent estimates of rates of volunteering. Our explanation of these inconsistencies is that both the population sampled and the way the question is asked make a difference in the responses and therefore should be reported and discussed in research program. A second issue has to do with the need to carefully conceptualize, rather than confound, a number of variables including to motivations of the volunteer, the responsibility and prestige associated with the volunteer position and ascribed to the volunteer in that position; and the products, results or outcomes of the volunteer experience including the satisfaction of the volunteer. In concep-

tualizing volunteering it is possible to view the same variables at different times in the volunteer process, in terms of inputs inputs (including role definition and role prestige, volunteer motivations, for example), activities (including volunteer and organizational functions), and outcomes (for example skills, individual and institutional change). Viewing volunteering from this process model, the issue of the relation between volunteer experience and career, for one example, can be seen as addressed at all steps of the process, by input motivations, by relevant activities, such as meeting the right person on a day to day basis, and outcomes such as specific skills.

The empirical study

We attempted to address some of these issues and to keep all of them in mind in our small scale empirical study the goal of which is to explore women's (and a contrasting group of men's) definitions and experiences of volunteering. The focus in our study is on the perceptions of the volunteers, their definitions of terms, their input motives, their activities, and their experienced outcomes. We did not attempt to study from organizational or societal perspectives. The latter are obviously areas needing further inquiry.

For our study we interviewed a total of 42 persons, 23 women and 19 men, whose households were randomly selected from an urban neighborhood diverse in ethnicity, economic status, educational background, and age. From this small sample, we intended to raise hypotheses, to explore methodological issues, and to question and critique extant research finding. We did not intend to generalize beyond the sample findings to larger populations of volunteers or urban

neighborhoods. In earlier pretest work we had experimented among different approaches to asking whether persons had ever volunteered. In pretest discussions, when we started by asking the question of who had done volunteer work providing a terse general definition, typically about 50 percent of respondents reported that they had volunteer experience. When we started by inviting members of the group to discuss their volunteer experiences, after hearing several such examples, about 70 percent of the persons realized that their experiences could be considered voluntary action. Thus, we felt at the outset, that we would not have to sample volunteers to discuss volunteer experience, that we could merely draw a sample of households and expect to discuss volunteer experiences with respondents a large proportion of the time. We felt too that it would be preferable to maximize the respondent's ability to discuss their own experiences in terms of voluntary action, that they might be inclined to adopt too narrow a definition of voluntary action at the outset, and we were interested in hearing views about a variety of volunteer experience. Therefore we adopted procedures which can be seen as correcting persons' tendencies to think narrowly or incompletely about their volunteer experiences. In our questionnaire, we therefore followed a grounded approach to questionnaire construction, anchoring the respondents in their own experiences at the outset by asking them to give a few examples of volunteering, then asking them to judge whether they felt that several more examples which we provided, representing an intentionally diverse group of activities, were volunteering, and then finally asking the respondents for their own definitions. In this way, we felt that we could elicit a thoughtful definition of voluntary action from respondents thus exten-

ding our own research perspectives rather than simply confirming them, and also providing a "reality" check on the way researchers and theoreticians have conceptualized the field of voluntarism.

Definitions of voluntary action

Conceptually, one can view volunteering as having to do with activities that are free from formal organizations (something that is different from work); or one can see volunteering as different from individual helpful behavior and therefore more formal than simply helping out. Women and men in our sample used different reference points to describe volunteering.

In response to the question: "what does it mean to volunteer?" men responded in terms of a contrast to paid work. Sixty eight percent of the men reported that volunteering meant doing work or activities for no pay in contrast to 23 percent of the women.

In response to whether specific activities "were volunteering," however, women and men appeared to use the underlying definitional continuum differently. In response to eight different examples of activities, in seven out of eight, women saw the activities that represented institutionalized instances of voluntary activity as more representative of voluntary action than did men. Although many of these differences are quite slight, the consistency of these differences in seven of eight cases as indicated on Table I is quite apparent.

Table I. Perceptions of Activities as Volunteering by Men vs. Women

Do you consider the activity below volunteering?	Percent of respondents who say <u>YES</u> , this activity is volunteering?		
	Women	Men	
1. Teach Sunday School?	87%	84%	(Institutional)
2. Help a neighbor?	61%	74%	(Noninstitutional)
3. Little League coaching?	91%	84%	(Institutional)
4. Donate to charity?	65%	63%	(Institutional)
5. Participate in a community association?	83%	79%	(Institutional)
6. Shovel snow with a neighbor?	64%	58%	(Noninstitutional)
7. Solicit funds for United Way?	91%	68%	(Institutional)
8. Lend your car to someone for an emergency?	70%	79%	(Noninstitutional)

Men appear to ground the meaning of voluntary action in contrast to the most formalized organizational situations and women appear to ground voluntary meanings in contrast to the informal activity. It would be interesting to explore the relation between individuals' occupational categories and attitudes and the ways in which they define volunteering. Such relations may

obtain across sex--or may not. When we asked the general question, why do people volunteer, women more than men mentioned motives of helping others, career related reasons, meeting people, and self fulfillment. Men more than women mentioned serving the community keeping busy, and doing something for a good cause. Results are shown on Table II.

Table II. Responses to "Why Do People Volunteer?" by Women vs Men

	Percent giving this response	
	Women	Men
1. To help others	41%	32%
2. To serve the community	5%	11%
3. To keep busy	18%	21%
4. Career related reasons	5%	0
5. For a worthwhile cause	0	16%
6. To meet people	5%	0
7. Self fulfilling reasons	27%	21%

When the question of motive was asked more specifically: "why did you volunteer?" more men than women reported that they had volunteered in order to help or to give to others (46 percent of the men as opposed to 35 percent of the women) whereas women more often than men said that their voluntary action was in response to a request; 41 percent of the women said they had volunteered because they were asked. Does this finding mean the women volunteer because they are asked more frequently than men to volunteer, because they cannot refuse a request, or both of these and other reasons? These questions might be a good starting point for future research. The present results show that different motives are mentioned depending upon whether the question is asked generally or specifically, and differentially so for men versus women. When asked about general motives for volunteering, only women mentioned career motives as possibilities and only a small

number did so. When describing their own reasons for volunteering, small numbers of both women and men report having done so because of career reasons (9 percent of the men and 6 percent of the women). Thus the general attitudes of women and men, particularly men, do not link voluntary action and career development. Specific motives to volunteer show a slight link between volunteering and career development for both men and women. The relevance of volunteer experience and derived skills to career development gives a picture different from the lack of association between motives to volunteer and career development.

Experience of voluntary action

A large portion of persons in our sample report that they had volunteered. Overall, 79 percent of our sample report they have volunteered and equivalent numbers of women and men report this experience. Eighty-three percent

of the women reporting having volunteered versus 74 percent of the men. We asked specifically whether respondents had done particular kinds of volunteer activity to follow up our general question of

whether they had volunteered. Responses to the follow up questions show different patterns of volunteer activities for women versus men.

Table III. Type of Volunteer Activity by Women vs. Men

Type of Activity	Percentage of Persons Who Have Done This	
	Women	Men
Political canvassing?	45%	61%
Coaching, tutoring, teaching?	70%	72%
Community, church	90%	78%

More men than women report having done political volunteering (canvassing or campaigning in an election for example); more women than men report being involved in church and community related activities; and about equal numbers of men and women report involvement in teaching, coaching, and tutoring.

Our data show that women are more involved in more activities in the volunteer sector than are men. Of the women who volunteered, 94 percent have been involved in four or more activities where only 64 percent of the men were involved in four or more, and 84 percent of the women volunteers have been doing volunteer work for seven or more

years, whereas 56 percent of the men have been involved this long.

When we asked persons about the benefits of having volunteered women, consistently more often than men report that gains have been helpful. (See Table IV). For a range of outcomes (professional skills, people skills, management, personal growth, and others) women say the results of volunteering as extremely helpful, more so than did men. These differences are consistent across six items, and substantial in the case of three areas: skills in working with people, professional skills, and management/administrative skills.

Table IV. Skills Acquired from Volunteering for Women vs. Men

Type of Skill	Percentage of Persons Who See Volunteer Experience as "Extremely Helpful" for This Skill	
	Women	Men
• Skills in working with people	63%	43%
• Professional skills	42%	25%
• Skills in administration and management	37%	21%
• Skills in working with objects	16%	13%
• Personal growth	42%	40%
• Skills in working with abstract systems	21%	20%

Viewed from the perspective of the outcomes or benefits of the volunteer experience, women do associate volunteering and career development. However, when respondents view volunteering from the perspective of motives (inputs to the process) there is only meager association between volunteering and career development. One possible explanation for these differences is that the initial stereotype of voluntary action as a leisure time activity prevails at the input stage of the process; but the social change/professional growth view is closer to describing the attitudes at the outcome end of the process.

In light of women's tendencies to volunteer in response to a request and to disassociate career development from motives to volunteer, but to see career development as a benefit of specific

volunteering, some action implications are clear to women's advocacy groups. These and other implications are discussed next.

Conclusions and Research Needs

Our research and the extant findings in the field barely scratch the surface of documenting and evaluating the impact of volunteering on women. The research question is a challenging one that requires descriptive approaches as well as quasi experimental. Given the importance of voluntary action in a democratic society, and the frequency of volunteer activities in people's lives, it seems important for us to rise to the challenge and do a better job of describing the entire volunteer process--inputs, activities and outcomes. And more research is needed on the patterns of volunteering as a part of life stages.

Most women do not volunteer with the intent of developing transferable skills. However, when women are specifically asked about their volunteer experiences and the impact on career development, they admit that it has been relevant or helpful to educational and occupational mobility.

The development of a "career plan" in light of personal/professional goals and objectives may provide a rational framework for individuals to plan volunteer activities. There is a great need to help women of all ages to take the initiative to develop a plan to program voluntary activity into their life stages and to do it in a way that enhances their own goals career and otherwise. According to Hybels, women in well planned programs of voluntary social action can be in positions of significant leadership within two years. Such rapid progress may not be possible for women in the occupational realm where direct rapid progress career ladders are not widely available to them. More thought and research are needed on the most effective ways to transfer volunteer skills and volunteer prestige to non-volunteer sectors.

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