



Blacks and Voluntary Action: A Review of the Literature

The following article is an adaptation of the first research report of the *Minority Volunteerism Task Force of the Alliance for Volunteerism*. The work of each author cited is contained in the bibliography on p. 21—a partial listing of some 1,500 references to literature on Black volunteerism compiled by Dr. Davis in cooperation with David Horton Smith and Linda Clark for the *Minority Involvement Task Force*.

By King E. Davis, Ph.D.

Voluntary action, as defined by David Horton Smith, represents a significant source of supplementary skill and manpower for a multiplicity of human service organizations whose fiscal, programmatic, and managerial objectives place priority on community participation. Smith suggests that for a specific behavior to be properly categorized as voluntary action, an analysis of that behavior should reveal that it is primarily stimulated by a need for and expectation of psychic gratification. Furthermore, the behavior must be discretionary in nature, not precipitated or perpetuated by coercive or monetary forces.

Although there is considerable polemics relating to this and other definitions of voluntary action, statistical surveys directed at the number and frequency of indirect fiscal benefits, but devoid of research hypotheses or applicable theoretical frameworks, are produced annually. An example of this orientation towards the description of frequencies is found in *Giving USA 1976*, which estimated (with a reasonable

Dr. Davis, a professor of social work and chairman of the school's Human Behavior Sequence at Norfolk State College, is the research coordinator for the Alliance for Volunteerism's Task Force on Minority Involvement.

degree of accuracy) that in excess of 39 million Americans participated in some form of voluntary action. A similar study, conducted by the U. S. Bureau of the Census for the ACTION agency, found that more than 24 percent of the adult populace in America gave a proportion of their time to voluntary action through various human service organizations. The study noted that an average of nine hours per week was contributed to these voluntary projects and that in terms of manpower, this voluntary action was the equivalent of 3.5 million persons "working full time for one year." Fiscally, voluntary action in 1975 represented over \$26 billion

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worth of contributed time and skills. Theoretically, this increases agency capacity while reducing per unit cost of service delivery as well as the total costs and proportion of the budget designated for administrative operations.

In addition to a plethora of descriptive studies, surveys and reports con-

cerning frequency and cost considerations of voluntary action, considerable research has been concentrated on other independent variables believed to have some influence on voluntary behavior and which seem consonant, to some extent, with Smith's definition. While the findings of these studies are preliminary at best, the key motivational factors for voluntary behavior are described as a need to help others, a desire to assist a specific organizational entity, or a need to make some personal semitangible contribution to the community. W. Glasser, for instance, proposed a complex mixture of 10 factors (social, economic, and psychological) as the explanation for voluntary action. One heavily weighted factor is what he terms "the tradition of mutual helpfulness" that ostensibly had its origins in, or was perhaps noted most frequently, during the preindustrialized days of the country.

Five socio-economic, demographic and personal characteristics that appear to interact with voluntary activity—age, sex, education, marital status and race—have been researched and have yielded a number of basic questions that can and should be investigated. The Department of Labor study on volunteers in 1965 concluded that there was a correlation between age and the frequency of voluntary behavior. Individuals between the ages of 25 and 44 were found to be the major providers of voluntary services. In addition, this study found a higher frequency of participation in voluntary action by females than males. However, the fact that the majority of female volunteers was not in the labor force suggests an inverse relationship between sex and the frequency of volunteer behavior. Marital status and education were also found to be significantly related to rates of voluntary action.

Race was the fifth variable believed to influence the rate and frequency of voluntary participation, although its

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specific influence is not completely understood. The variable of race has received considerable attention in the literature within the period 1961 to 1976, but its actual correlation to voluntary action or its value as a predictor of the frequency of voluntary action is unclear. A part of the difficulty is the absence of generalized agreement regarding the definition of voluntary action. Overall, the literature is divided over the rate and frequency of voluntary action by Blacks—whether they exceed or are less than that of Whites. Basic to these polemical positions and the eventual acceptance or rejection of their findings, however, is the need for greater empirical explication of the concept of voluntary action in general and specifically as it is observed in Black communities as well as outside the community as provided by Black people.

This conceptual dilemma raises pertinent questions:

- What is voluntary action or behavior as it occurs in the Black community?

- Is the definition of voluntary action as it occurs in Black communities consistent with Smith’s generalized definition of voluntary action and its components?

- Is there a difference in the qualitative, definitional characteristics of voluntary action between Black and White Americans?

- What factors or theories are useful in explaining the process, frequency or models of voluntary action as they occur in Black communities?

Assuming the reconciliation of these conceptual dilemmas, it seems logical and feasible, as well as statistically appropriate, to compare and contrast the frequency of voluntary action as it occurs in Black and White communities and note the differences in frequencies given similar conceptual definitions.

A comprehensive review of the major literature regarding various forms of Black voluntary participation is useful in highlighting this conceptual problem, as well as in providing some clarification of the basis for the contradictory findings of some of the current research. A review of the literature also precipitates a number of basic research questions useful in developing relevant hypotheses which when tested may yield some quantitative clues to resolve questions of frequency, theory, models and motivation.

The treatment and research inquiry of voluntary participation of Black Americans show some historically interesting trends, themes and focuses which can be meaningfully juxtaposed with the socio-political treatment of Blacks at a particular point in history. Generally, the level of scientific inquiry relative to Black participation as reflected in the number of published studies seems to be correlated to the perceived level of conflict that exists between Blacks and Whites over issues of political, economic and social parity. During periods of intense and overt conflict—when Blacks overtly resist oppressive circumstances or utilize aggression to alter their circumstances—their stock, as subjects of scientific inquiry, increases rapidly and geometrically.

1890-1910

Some of the initial investigation of volunteer participation of Blacks was stimulated in the period between 1890 and 1910. The seminal work of this epoch was by W. E. B. DuBois who utilized a survey/observational approach to

gather categorical data regarding the overall structural organization and conditions in one of the highly populated Black wards of Philadelphia. DuBois’ study focused on the social structures and related social pathologies that characterized the ward. His investigation of volunteer participation and volunteer organizations within the Black community was a minor area of concern in relation to his overall analysis of the Black church and its roles, functions and structure.

DuBois suggests that the Black church, with its historical amalgamation of traditional African tribal heritage and familial functions, provided the Black community with a normative, institutionalized structural arrangement for volunteer participation. In addition, it provided a combined religious, political and economic philosophy that had the effect of stimulating ongoing participation for social, psychological and civic betterment. The individual and collective benefits of voluntary participation for Black people also served the functions of reinforcing and organizing the constituency into the achievement of its primary financial obligations necessary to maintain the institution. Secondary analysis of DuBois’ findings indicate a high rate of participation by

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Blacks, at every socio-economic level, in voluntary activities affiliated with or stimulated by the Black church. Assuming a generally high level of accuracy, these figures suggest that approximately 71 percent of the Black population exhibited some form of volunteer partici-

pation in direct religious activity, or in activities directly or indirectly stimulated by the church.

The Black church, as the central and most viable institution within the Black community, generated a variety of voluntary organizations designed for social betterment, self-support, benevolence

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and socialization. The motivation for DuBois’ historic examination and attention to voluntary action was, according to DuBois, precipitated not by a genuine societal concern for the socio-economic problems of Black Americans, but rather by “one of its (Philadelphia’s governing structure and classes) spasms of reform,” which sought support of the theory that the cause of Black social problems was within the structure of the Black community itself.

In somewhat of a postscript to DuBois’ monumental work, Richard Robert Wright, in 1909, developed and published a handbook listing the various volunteer, political, economic, religious, educational and social organizations that flourished in the Black community of Philadelphia.

1910-1936

Within the period 1910 to 1936, the relatively small number of articles, magazines, books and studies indicates only the slightest interest in empirical study of Black participation in voluntary activities. A number of the writings of this

period were supported by the Works Projects Administration. They tended to be historically oriented and descriptive papers only secondarily related to documentation of rates of Black participation as part of the overall data gathering for broader topics.

1936-1950

The reemergence of research and scholarly interest in voluntary Black community organizations was stimulated by the availability of financial support during the Works Project Administration and continued in the years following termination of the project. In 1945 St. Claire Drake examined voluntary associations in Chicago, providing some of the initial statistical documentation of the differences in frequency of participation between various socio-economic strata within the Black community. According to Drake, lower income Blacks had a lower than average frequency of participation, while higher income Blacks had a higher than average rate of participation in a variety of volunteer activities.

Gunnar Myrdal’s classic treatise on Black community life, *An American Dilemma*, was one of the first studies to postulate some theoretical positions on the frequency of Black volunteer participation, although there was and continues to be considerable debate as to the accuracy of his interpretative analysis. Myrdal noted that in general there was a plethora of voluntary organizations in America, but there were more of such organizations in Black communities than in White communities. Blacks, according to Myrdal, joined volunteer organizations at a rate far in excess of what was expected and significantly more than Whites at every socio-economic level. He characterized the unexpected frequency of volunteer participation by Blacks as “exaggerated” and “pathological,” stimulated by rejection and inaccessibility to the voluntary associations of Whites. This view of Black participation as pathological and reactionary was based on what Myrdal saw as minimal accomplishments of Black voluntary organizations, the noticeable lag between the adoption of these voluntary forms by Blacks and their abandonment by Whites, and their emphasis on expressive (social) functions as opposed to political and other functions, which Myrdal saw as being more appropriate. Myrdal confirmed Drake’s findings that there was a direct correla-

tion between high rates of participation in the Black community and higher levels of income.

1950’s

In 1959 Gerhard Lenski postulated that Black participation in voluntary associations was significantly less than the level and frequency of participation by Whites. The exception was in religious organizations where Black volunteer participation exceeded that of Whites. Robert Lane utilized an “ethnic community” theoretical orientation to explain the frequency and rationale for Black volunteer participation, particularly in political activities. He suggests that racial and ethnic group members tend to participate in voluntary activities because of social pressures exerted by the community and because of the influence of significant others whose association acts as a stimulant for those who are lesser involved in voluntary action.

Lenski’s findings were reasonably consistent with those of Charles Wright and Herbert Hyman who determined that Blacks were less predisposed to affiliate with volunteer organizations than Whites at the same socio-economic level. Angus Campbell also concluded that Black political participation was less frequent than that of Whites. Julian Woodward and Elmo Roper found that

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while 38 percent of the adult population in general was politically uninvolved, over 60 percent of the Black adult population was uninvolved in political activities.

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frequently than Whites when measured by the variable of voting. These studies seemingly explain the lower frequency of Black participation as indicative of internalized feelings of “political impotency” among Blacks which subsequently lead to isolation and a lower frequency of voting behavior.

Researchers in the 1950's apparently did not utilize the earlier works of DuBois or Myrdal. For example, DuBois pointed out that the Black church was the most viable and comprehensive institution within the Black community, and was either directly or indirectly the stimulant and center of almost all community activities from philanthropic to purely recreational. Thus, it might be predicted that in relation to voluntary activities, Black participation would be greatest within the church and only minimal outside of this major structural vehicle. Further, the political and racial

climate for Blacks throughout their history in this country, even in those instances where their motivation to participate was extremely high, delimited their participation as equals not only in public institutions but in private organizations of which the volunteer sector of the dominant community was a part.

Myrdal's analysis suggests that the level of rejection of Blacks within the society was such that it produced an excessive internalization of volunteer activities resulting in an exaggerated participation frequency rate exceeding that of Whites. Given the findings of Myrdal and DuBois and the racial climate within the United States towards Blacks and such behaviors as voting, it is not at all surprising that the frequency of Black participation, as measured on this variable, would be significantly less than Whites who did not encounter this social opposition.

1961-1976

In the period 1961 to 1976, there has been an intensive exploration and production of studies on the frequency, models, motivation and outcome of Black participation in voluntary associations of a wide variety. This renewal of academic research interest in this aspect of Black community life seems related, if only temporarily, to the overt expression of conflict between Blacks and White social institutions and policies during and following the Watts revolts. Numerous studies followed to determine the cause and prescribe ways of preventing violent voluntary action.

The thesis that Black participation in voluntary activities exceeded that of Whites at various socio-economic levels, as initially proposed by Myrdal, has been supported by Nicholas Babchuck and Ralph Thompson, A. M. Orum, Marvin Olsen, and J. A. Williams with Babchuck and D. R. Johnson. The most recent studies, unlike those carried out in the 1950's, were controlled for socio-economic status, and concluded that Blacks have a distinct tendency to be proportionately more involved in volunteer activities than Whites of similar socio-economic status. The differences between Black and White levels of participation included political as well as religious areas, thus contradicting and bringing into question the conclusions reached by Lenski and Hyman in the late '50's. While the studies of Olsen and Orum support the conclusions reached by Myrdal, they tend to utilize

Lane's theoretical position as opposed to the pathology-compensation-over-compensation position proposed by Myrdal. Furthermore, the Olsen and Orum studies made efforts to control such intervening variables as age, income and class differentials, which had heretofore been cited as evidence of a higher frequency of participation by Whites.

Governmentally-controlled studies on participation rates by Blacks and Whites, such as the Department of Labor's study and the ACTION survey, tend to support the earlier findings of Lenski and Hyman that Black participation is significantly lower than that of Whites. The Department of Labor found the Black participation rate to be around 9.4 percent, while the rate for Whites was approximately 16.9 percent, or 45 percent greater. In ACTION's follow-up study in 1974, the differences were again confirmed by a questionnaire schedule similar to the one utilized in 1965. In addition, this study concluded that the identifying characteristics of volunteers had not significantly changed between 1965 and 1974. The most frequent volunteer continued to be described as a “married white woman between the ages of 25 and 44, who holds a college degree and was in the upper bracket.” These two governmental studies were based on nationally drawn samples of 9,800 in 1965 and 23,731 in 1974 with slightly more than 10 percent Black representation in each. More re-

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cent studies are currently underway, but these too are not focusing on Black volunteer participation as the dependent variable. Instead they tend to include a small but representative sampling of Blacks and measure their responses on schedules that do not determine the qualitative aspects of voluntary participation by the Black population.

Conclusion

Without question the research to date on Black participation in voluntary activities appears to be inconclusive, contradictory, limited methodologically, and is not based on clear conceptual definition of theoretical frameworks. As such, pertinent questions about Black volunteer participation, the factors that motivate and sustain it, its impact on Black life, and its value for the broader matrix of society remain unanswered.

One basic conclusion can be reached: The utilization of volunteers in Black communities—the models, forms, processes, benefits or outcome—is not adequately understood and has not been the subject of a sufficient amount of controlled empirical study aimed not only at a comparison of frequencies but at a clearer definition of the concept of Black voluntary action.

New Research Efforts

Under the aegis of the Alliance for Volunteerism, two predominantly Black organizations—the National Black United Fund and the National Council of Negro Women—working in conjunction with a number of universities and other organizations, such as the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS), have designed research to answer some of the questions about Black voluntary action. One phase of this effort will be a secondary analysis on a number of those studies completed in the past decade, such as Orum's and Olsen's, the ACTION survey. Another phase of the research plan will involve a national sampling of Blacks to gather primary empirical data relative to the extent, forms and type of their voluntary participation. Finally, in conjunction with AVAS, an effort will be made to examine the organizations in which Blacks volunteer.

These combined efforts should add to our knowledge of what volunteer participation in Black communities is, what factors appear to motivate it, with what frequency it occurs, and how the level of such participation can be increased.

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