Quality of Work Life of Volunteers

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ABSTRACT

Despite a wealth of studies that examine the quality of work life for paid employees, little is written about quality of work life for volunteers. This is surprising as issues such as training, retention, and well-being of volunteers have costly implications for the individual, managers of volunteers, trainers, and of course the community. This paper reviews the quality of volunteer work life literature and explores some of the contemporary issues currently being experienced, debated and discussed in the volunteer sector that threaten quality of volunteer work life. An important implication from the analysis is the urgent need for research that establishes a data base inclusive of indicators of quality of work that arise from the volunteer job (e.g. job satisfaction, psychological well-being, intention to leave).

Volunteers are involved in wide ranging activities in the community, including fundraising, management and committee work, administration, preparing and serving food, political lobbying, protecting the environment and conducting/guiding tours. These activities occur generally in the fields of social welfare work, sporting activities, and community organisations (Jamrozik, 1996). Data from the 1995 national survey of voluntary work conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1996) reveal a participation rate of over 2 million Australian people working formally in organisations (21% females, and 17% males). Actual numbers of volunteers are expected to be much larger than indicated as these statistics do not include 'informal work' which takes place among friends and neighbours (Jamrozik, 1996).

Many government and community services (e.g. welfare, sport, recreation, heritage, arts, education, correctional services, and environment) rely heavily on volunteer involvement. With the growth in economic rationalism in government services and policies, the demand for services provided by voluntary welfare organisations is expected to increase (du Boulay, 1996). This is expected to occur because of the reduction in government funding in human service resources, putting increasing pressure on the community to fill the gap (Jamrozik, 1996). The true economic value of volunteers in Australia has been difficult to calibrate, but estimates range from $5.6 billion dollars, based on a labour rate of $13 an hour (Debelle, 1996) to $236 billion (Felmingham, 1996). Increased demands for this vast resource are expected to continue as economic imperatives take hold in our society.

Another outcome of economic rationalism is that there are increased demands on paid workers, effected by heavy redundancies through outsourcing and downsizing, and longer working hours. Since many volunteers are also paid workers, increasing demands mean less potential for paid workers to contribute to voluntary activities. Finally, economic rationalism could lead to more formalisation (e.g. management and training) of volunteering in an effort to convert voluntary services into high quality cost saving services. Jamrozik (1996) interpreted the 1995 ABS survey to indicate a trend toward formalisation of volunteering.

Volunteers are important contributors to the social fabric of our society. As the demands for the services of volunteers increase, threats to the nature of their work and their well-being could also increase, and have serious flow-on implications for social capital and the experience of community. Within organisations and within the community, economic rationalism, driven by competition, has a negative impact on social capital, i.e. social support, trust (Cox, 1995 Boyer Lectures). According to Eva Cox, the antithesis of strong economic growth is a negative, downward spiralling effect: the quality of community life deteriorates, because individualism and cost effectiveness are rewarded and social support and trust are eroded.

Despite a wealth of studies that examine the quality of work life (involvement, social support, autonomy, job satisfaction) for paid employees, little is written about quality of work life for volunteers. This is surprising as issues such as training and retention, and well-being of volunteers have costly implications for the individual volunteer (e.g. emotional and cognitive distress, job dissatisfaction, physical ill-health symptoms), for managers of volunteers and trainers – and of course, the community. In the context of changing demands for volunteers it is timely to consider quality of work life issues for volunteers. The aim of this paper is to explore some of the contemporary issues and needs currently being experienced, debated, and discussed in the volunteer sector, and to review research that has examined quality of voluntary work life, with a particular emphasis on occupational stress. Specifically, issues related to the following themes will be raised: Does government recognise the value of volunteer involvement in the community? Has the impact of economic rationalism on the human services sector created increased stress in front line volunteer jobs? Is stress an indicator of the appropriateness of the role the volunteer is asked to perform? Does volunteering contribute to the quality of one's lifestyle? How can a consistent volunteer workforce be maintained? How can influence be brought to bear on the formulation and implementation of government policy relating to volunteering?

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES FOR VOLUNTEER WELL-BEING

Several issues that currently affect or may affect volunteers in the future are raised in this section.

Does government recognise the value of volunteer involvement in the community?

The *economic* value of an unpaid healthy volunteer workforce is clear to the government but how does it regard the *human* value of volunteer involvement in the community? Currently there is very little funding, acknowledgment or support given to the volunteer sector; they are a silent workforce. A clear picture of volunteers is needed, including information on number and type of volunteer programs, services provided, and a profile of clients who receive these services. Consequences of services ceasing to exist (for the government and for the client) need to be explicated. The human value of volunteer involvement in the community, in addition to the dollar value, needs to be estimated. There is also a need for the government to support and nourish the volunteer sector in order to maximise the utilisation of volunteer expertise and knowledge.

The work of volunteers needs to be made much more visible in order to continue to operate and add value to the community. Government and community organisations

involving volunteers need to incorporate the volunteer program into their strategic and financial planning so that it is acknowledged and treated as part of the business of the organisation and hence receive appropriate training, relevant counselling, staff development opportunities, policy and procedure coverage, workplace satisfaction, and workplace involvement.

Has the impact of economic rationalism on the human services sector created increased stress in front line volunteer jobs?

It is likely that some of the key issues in paid work that have emerged as risk factors for work stress, will have some parallels in organised volunteer work as economic rationalism tightens its grip. Specifically, hierarchical structures that decrease worker participation and control in the functions of the organisation, increased demands, and decreased support from co-workers and supervisors are likely outcomes. These outcomes of modern management practices espoused by F.W. Taylor (1923) have been shown in numerous studies of paid workers to be linked to increased levels of work stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1991). Volunteers may experience stress in an organisation by pressures to work longer hours, or by being removed from decision making processes. Reducing economic support for volunteer management could increase stress within the workplace because managers and volunteers alike feel less support.

Another issue for volunteers is that they may need to become apologists for their organisation or government policy. That is, they may be required to withhold services, food vouchers or emergency relief and so on from their client group. Does the offering of decreased services create stress in those front line volunteer jobs? Does economic rationalism lead to decreasing intrinsic motivation of volunteers (Metzer, 1996)? Do organisations and the government consider that volunteers are there only to provide the most cost effective services? When an organisation is restructuring because of funding or other crises, is the impact on the volunteer program factored in?

Is stress an indicator of the appropriateness of the role the volunteer is asked to perform?

In the (paid) occupational stress literature, work role ambiguity and work role conflict are two important sources of work stress. For volunteers, stress arising from these domains is highly likely with the push for economic rationalism. Are volunteers being asked to do work that is too difficult given their level of skills and/or training? Are volunteers being asked to work for longer hours than they can reasonably offer?

Some tasks performed by unpaid volunteers and paid staff in social work agencies subsidised by government, are often the same (or that in one organisation volunteers are expected to carry out the same tasks as paid staff undertake in another organisation) (Baldock, 1996). Du Boulay (1996 p.12) argues that 'in most instances volunteer workers are similar to paid workers. Both are internally motivated by the work itself, providing they are respected and valued as individuals. Both can be externally motivated by factors such as, position, power, friendship, and recognition. The major difference between the unpaid and paid workers is the motivator, 'money'.

Noble (1997 p.18) agrees when she says 'No clear-cut similarities and differences between paid and voluntary workers will hold true in every setting at any particular time'. Further studies are required to examine parallels between paid work and voluntarism as it relates to the well-being of workers. Are similar jobs within (or outside of) the organisation, paid positions? Are volunteers given the same supports as paid staff e.g. counselling, debriefing, professional indemnity?

Other questions of concern are: Is stress more or less likely to occur in jobs without clear boundaries? Does stress occur when volunteers are unclear about their role, their authority and what they are really responsible for? Does stress occur more in jobs that extend volunteers or underextend volunteers? That is, does stress occur if volunteers are unable to use their skills because of constraints imposed by the organisation or is the reverse the case?

Does volunteering contribute to the quality of one's lifestyle?

In many cases, volunteering is an active choice in order to enhance lifestyle and well-being. If volunteering is a lifestyle choice and part of one's self image, is stress more or less likely to have an impact? Is stress more likely to occur in the type of volunteering that determines its own direction and degree of commitment? That is, is it stressful to have to demonstrate one's commitment through amount of work achieved, time donated or actions taken? For instance, the more committed one is, the harder one will work with longer hours and more output (e.g. environmental groups, social groups or even self-help groups).

How can a consistent volunteer workforce be maintained?

Managers and organisations generally have identified retention as a major problem, that is how to 'hold on' to volunteers for the consistency and stability of a program. Issues and factors that may contribute to high turnover of volunteers could include: dissatisfaction with their volunteer role; need for job descriptions to clearly delineate roles and expectations the organisation has of volunteers; stress levels of volunteers; a lack of acknowledgment of volunteers; inadequate policies in place to take care of volunteers in the workplace e.g. harassment, grievance procedures, equal opportunity, occupational health and safety; lack of effective management practices of volunteers in the organisation in relation to information and knowledge of the organisation or the programs, and decision making.

How can influence be brought to bear on the formulation and implementation of government policy relating to volunteering?

It needs to be established whether a lack of infrastructure support contributes to underutilisation of volunteers' expertise, and stress levels of volunteers, dissatisfaction, etc. Once evidence is established, social policy can be influenced to take account of these and other factors. This issue and those outlined under the previous issue (retention) have recently arisen at network meetings of managers of volunteer programs across the Adelaide metropolitan area.

QUALITY OF WORK LIFE RESEARCH

Among paid workers in Australia, the cost of organisational/occupational stress was estimated recently by the Federal Assistant Minister for Industrial Relations to be around $30 million (The Australian 17 June, 1994). These statistics do not reflect the impact of work stress on *unpaid* workers. Despite a vast amount of research on psychosocial aspects of the paid work environment that gives rise to work stress, surprisingly little is documented about volunteer work. This is ironic because the concept of burnout was first used to characterise the psychological state of volunteers who worked in alternative health care institutions (Freudenberger, 1974). With expected new demands made on volunteers, it is timely to contemplate the possible effects of these demands on volunteers.

Since Freudenberger's study on volunteers, most research has focused on burnout in paid human service workers. Burnout is thought to result from chronic emotional strain from working with troubled people. Burnout is characterised by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation ('negative cynical attitudes and feelings about one's client'), and reduced personal accomplishment ('the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly in relation to one's work with clients') (Maslach & Jackson 1981:99).

Although burnout studies initially focused on professionals who worked with recipients or clients in some capacity, this may have been because the concept was most visible in the human services. The empirical research on burnout has generally shown that job factors (the situation or context) are more strongly related to burnout than are biographical or personal factors (Maslach & Schaufeli 1993). Similarly, Burisch (1993) argued that the burnout process begins inevitably with some frustration or loss of autonomy with which the individual failed to cope in an adequate way.

A number of different theories have evolved to explain and describe burnout. For example, Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek (1993) consider that burnout is a result of a discrepancy between investment and outcomes, both on an individual level (with recipients) and on the level of the organisation. According to Pines (1993) the root cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful. 'When people try to find meaning in their life through work and feel that they have failed, the result is burnout' (p.33), and 'Burnout characterises people who start out believing that the work they do is important, caring deeply about the people they chose to help, and hoping to have a significant effect on their lives . . . They burn out when they feel they have failed' (p.39). There is no reason to suspect that burnout in volunteers would not arise for the same reasons as it does in paid workers, but urgent research is required to clarify this supposition.

Maslach & Jackson (1982) argued that burnout results not from bad apples but from the bad kegs the apples are in. They noted that

> Although personality variables are certainly important in burnout, research has led us to the conclusion that the problem is best understood (and modified) in terms of the social and situational sources of job-related stress. The prevalence of the phenomenon and the range of seemingly disparate professionals who are affected by it suggest that the search for causes is better directed away from the unending cycle of

identifying the 'bad people' and toward uncovering the operational and structural characteristics of the 'bad situations' where many good people function (p.235).

This is not to suggest that personal and social resources are not important in quality of work life. Innes & Slack (1990) noted the importance of examining the link and that 'in the area of stress within emergency personnel, and with volunteers, such a call [for more research] must be particularly stenorian as so far only the most vague of pictures of susceptibility or resistance to stress has been developed' (p.393).

A number of studies on burnout in volunteers, apart from Freudenberger's, can be found in the literature. Most of these studies relate to care providers working with people with AIDS (Bennett, Ross, & Sunderland, 1996; Maslanka, 1996). These studies have focused on the relationship between social support, recognition, rewards and burnout. One study identified that lack of training, relating to the organisation and its insufficient preparation of volunteers which caused stress, was most highly correlated with emotional exhaustion (Bennett et al., 1996). Personal effectiveness was also important. Further, the absence of rewards in the form of gratitude from clients and recognition and support from management negatively influenced the organisational climate.

These results suggested that strategies aimed at helping volunteers with their work, rather than their personal needs, may be more effective in reducing attrition and supporting volunteers in their role (Bennett et al, 1996). It is ironic that, in a recent study of burnout in crisisline volunteers, it was found that turnover of other volunteers was the factor contributing most frequently to burnout (Cyr & Dowrick, 1991). Maslanka's study of AIDS volunteers suggested that social support may not be as effective as training organisations to intervene earlier to diminish problems before they occur and training volunteers to recognise the signs of burnout. More studies of this nature need to be carried out across a broader range of voluntary work domains, to fully appreciate the possible factors affecting the quality of volunteer work life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The foregoing has highlighted a range of issues in volunteering that require urgent attention. The paper has outlined a number of worrying points for volunteers, their managers, and the community. Additionally, a dearth of research on voluntarism and links with quality of work life was noted. Although large data bases on voluntary work exist (e.g. ABS surveys) they do not assess in detail quality of work life issues. Further research is required to assess the impact of current government policies on voluntarism. Of special interest would be a cost-benefit analysis of the impact of new demands on the psychological well-being of volunteers.

Investigations of the work of volunteers need be undertaken to ascertain any factors that are linked with well-being which, if identified, could be alleviated and/or enhanced to improve the work life of the volunteer, and by implication the community. A study by the authors, which is in the initial stages of planning, will attempt to examine the influences on quality of work life for volunteers at a number of levels (e.g. individual, social, organisational, government). Empirical measures often used in paid work stress studies will be examined for their relevance and modified accordingly.

Research findings will be used to provide a voice for the volunteer and to influence government policy.

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