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PARTICIPATION IN VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS: HOW MEMBERSHIP IN A FORMAL ORGANIZATION CHANGES THE REWARDS OF PARTICIPATION

Jone L. Pearce
University of California at Irvine

When an individual decides to volunteer he or she does so for some reason, or reasons; the reasons are personal and, no doubt, vary from the altruistic to the venal. When voluntary associations recruit volunteers they appeal to what they assume to be their members' reasons for volunteering. Yet, it is argued here that participation in formal organizations, itself, changes the reasons why volunteers participate. The rewards individuals expected from volunteering are often not the rewards most salient to them once they have become volunteers. Further, this shift in the rewards of volunteering, if not anticipated and managed, can result in the rapid departure of many new volunteers.

There is a large body of research linking personal characteristics--examples include socio-economic status, sex, age, length of residence in the community--to participation in voluntary associations; Smith and Freedman (1972) provide a comprehensive review of this work. Unfortunately, these studies provide little information about the reasons why individuals decide to volunteer. Volunteers join organizations because they expect their participation to fulfill their personal needs or goals. Knowing that members of a particular social class, or of a certain age, are more likely to volunteer tells us little about what influences an individual's decision to volunteer.

There are fewer studies suggesting specific needs or goals that volunteering can fulfill. Babchuk and Gordon (1962) argue that membership in voluntary associations provides avenues for the upward mobility of the poor. Bushee (1945) states that volunteering helps to fulfill desires for self-improvement, recognition, social interaction, and community improvement. Little (1965) suggests that voluntary associations serve adaptive functions--helping rural West Africans adjust to new urban communities. He states that individuals join these groups because they offer social interaction and support, a sense of identity, and help the migrant to learn new mores. Treudly (1949) and Lopata (1964) draw similar conclusions from their research on ethnic immigrants to the United States.

Finally, Ross (1958) found that volunteering served as a "career" for many women--providing a major outlet for their energies.

There has been some tendency for scholars to dichotomize motives for volunteering. Allport (1945) speculates that individuals participate either for "ego-defense"--seeking safety, security, or a feeling of superiority--or for "ego-extension"--expecting membership to contribute to personal growth. Similarly, Jacoby (1966) argues that some individuals join voluntary associations because they seek satisfaction in the social relationships provided by membership, but others participate because they wish to forward the association's goals. Both Allport (1945) and Jacoby (1966) view volunteering as motivated either by a more narrow interest in the immediate organizational experience or a broader interest in organizational goals.

Together, these studies provide a foundation for understanding what leads individuals to participate in voluntary associations. These groups serve a broad variety of motives--motives that have been dichotomized into personal needs fulfilled by the organizational processes themselves, and a longer range interest in one's personal development or the furthering of the goals of the association. However, there has been no examination of how participation in the organization itself might influence volunteers' reasons for participation. Yet, volunteers probably do change once they are participating members; two studies of non-voluntary organizations support this view. Corwin (1961) found that nursing students reported "idealistic" service reasons for choosing their profession. Once working, the nurses began to value the more immediate and tangible rewards of task accomplishment and social interaction. In addition, Wanous (1976) found that graduate business school students expected their future jobs to offer challenge and opportunities for a significant influence on the organization's direction and functioning. After working, however, they lowered these expectations, but expectations for the more immediate rewards of high salary and fringe benefits did not decline.

Individuals hold certain expectations about organizational participation before they join, and these expectations are likely to change once they have more experience as a member. In the present research I examine whether or not these expectations, in this case expectations of fulfillment through organizational rewards, change in systematic ways for members of voluntary associations. If volunteers' motives do shift, understanding this shift can be vital for these associations. For example, it may be a contributing factor in the high turnover among new members found so frequently in these organizations.

In this research a list of nine rewards of voluntary participation were generated. Volunteers were asked to rate each reward's importance to them, both in their decision to join the organization and in their ongoing decisions to remain a member of the organization. Five of the rewards are concerned with the immediate experience of participation, and four represent the broader goals of personal growth and community service. Based on the work of Corwin (1961) and Wanous (1976); it was hypothesized that the more immediate rewards of participation itself would increase in importance, and the longer-range development and service rewards would decrease in importance to volunteers once they became members of the organization.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure. The sample is composed of volunteers from three human service organizations. The first organization is a rural volunteer fire department. It has two companies and provides emergency medical, fire fighting, and fire prevention services to its community. The department is entirely voluntary; it obtains all funding through its own fund raising drives. Complete data are available from five members of this department. The second group of volunteers are the school volunteers, or teacher's aides, working for the unified school district of a medium-sized city. The aides' duties vary--they might assist in the library or tutor students, but are usually assigned to a teacher to assist during classroom hours. The school volunteer program has a compensated director. Complete data are available from 27 school volunteers. Volunteers in the final organization will be called "the visitors." These volunteers are each assigned an elderly individual; the visitor calls the elderly person each day and occasionally visits with him or her. The program helps to insure that the elderly, who are living alone, are not hurt and left for days without assistance. In practice, this rarely occurs and the visitors and their elderly companions develop a personal friendship that lasts for years. The visitors are part of a larger voluntary association, with a small paid staff, that provides a variety of services for the elderly. Complete data are available from 15 voluntary visitors. All these organizations are located in the northeastern United States.

As can be seen in Table 1 there are few differences between the three groups of volunteers. The firefighters work more hours in a week, have longer seniority in their organization, and have had less formal education, on the average, than the school volunteers or the visitors. There are no significant differences between these organizations in membership age, yearly income, or reported satisfaction with their voluntary jobs. These organizations represent a cross-section of the kinds of social service work done by volunteers.

Similar data collection procedures were followed in the three sampled organizations. The researcher approached the volunteer coordinator or fire chief about the participation of his or her group in this study. With the leader's permission the questionnaires were distributed (personally to the firefighters, but mailed to the school volunteers and visitors, since these volunteers did not congregate in a central location). The response rate was 33 percent of the firefighters, 45 percent of the school volunteers, and 63 percent of the visitors receiving questionnaires.

Measures. The data reported here are from a larger study of volunteer motivation. Scales were taken from a questionnaire.

Respondents were given a list of nine rewards and asked to, first, rank the rewards in the order of their importance to them in their decision to volunteer, and then distribute the rewards along an interval ranging from "reward is most important" to "reward is not important." On the following questionnaire page the respondents were asked to repeat this process, but now rate the relative importance of the nine rewards in their continuing decisions to remain a volunteer in their organization. Only the respondent-controlled interval data are used in this report.² Therefore there is a rating, by each respondent, of the importance of each reward in the decision to join the organization, and a rating of the importance of each reward in the decision to remain a volunteer. These ratings range from 1.0 = not at all important to 9.9 = extremely important.

Table 1. Mean Characteristics of the Sampled Voluntary Associations

Characteristics	Means			F(2,44)
	Fire Department	School Volunteers	Visitor Program	
Hours per Week	17.50	4.39	2.31	5.80**
Membership Seniority (years)	4.47	1.25	1.50	3.59*
Membership Age (years)	35.00	27.63	34.77	.90 n.s.
Family Income ^a	2.60	2.74	3.00	.19 n.s.
Education ^b	3.80	4.19	5.60	3.94**
Job Satisfaction ^c	5.90	5.73	6.18	.62 n.s.
n	5	27	15	

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$

^a 1 = 0 - \$5,000, 2 = \$5,000 - \$12,000, 3 = \$12,000 - \$25,000, 4 = \$25,000 - above (yearly)

^b 1 = some high school, through 7 = graduate degree

^c 1 = strongly dissatisfied, through 7 = strongly satisfied

The nine rewards are grouped into the two categories described above--the rewards of the immediate work experience, and the more distant rewards of personal development and service to others. Rewards representing the immediate work experience are working because the volunteer needs experience, to learn new skills, to enjoy the company of friends and co-workers, to meet people, and to do interesting work. Rewards that are more long term include working for personal growth, to help others, to support the organization's goals, and to make a contribution. An examination of the intercorrelations among the nine rewards indicates that these nine rewards are distinct enough to be retained in their original form, rather than combined into overall immediate work experience, and long-range development and service scales. More complete information about the research sample, procedure, and measures can be obtained from the author.

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that the rewards of the immediate work experience would increase in importance, and the longer range rewards would decrease in importance, to volunteers once they were participating in the organization. As can be seen in Table 2 this hypothesis received substantial support. For those rewards representing the immediate work experience the importance of the rewards of working with friends and co-workers and to meet people significantly increased in importance. There is a trend for the reward of working for experience to increase after the volunteer has become a member of the organization. Working to learn new skills and because the work itself is interesting did not significantly change in their importance in the decisions to join and remain a volunteer. For those rewards representing long-range development and service, working to support the organization's goals and to make a contribution showed significant decreases in their importance in the decision to remain a volunteer. In addition, working for personal growth and working to help others tend to decrease in their importance to volunteers once they are participating in the organization.

Even when the flaws of retrospective reports³ are considered, these data do indicate that volunteers tend to place less emphasis on the long-range development and service rewards that attracted them to the organization once they are actually participating. Apparently this decrease in the importance of the long-range rewards is partly offset by the increased importance of the rewards of social interaction. The long-range development and service rewards are still rated as relatively more important, as a group, than the rewards of the immediate work experience; yet undeniably, these volunteers report a significant decrease in the importance of these rewards. It could be argued that the decrease in these rewards and the increase in the rewards of the immediate work experience might be more pronounced than the changes actually reported by volunteers. After all, these rewards are value-laden, and, in general, it is considered far more appropriate to volunteer for altruistic reasons than to volunteer for personal gain--experience and skills--or because the people and work are themselves enjoyable.

DISCUSSION

These data confirm that the rewards of social interaction increase in importance and the long-range rewards of development and service decrease in their importance

Table 2. Mean Differences in the Importance of Organizational Rewards

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Rewards	Means		F(1,45)
	Join	Remain	
Immediate Work Experience			
Need Experience	5.30	5.88	1.85*
Learn New Skills	4.86	5.27	1.04 n.s.
Friends and Co-workers	1.32	3.81	22.56***
Meet People	3.54	4.36	4.00**
Interesting Work	6.36	6.18	1.39 n.s.
Long-Range Development and Service			
Personal Growth	7.26	6.63	3.21*
Help Others	9.25	9.00	2.07*
Support Organization's Goals	6.22	5.20	4.49**
Make a Contribution	8.76	8.20	5.52**

N = 47

* $p \leq .10$ ** $p \leq .05$ *** $p \leq .001$

to volunteers once they become members of formal organizations. Following Corwin (1961) and Wanous (1976), the social interaction rewards probably increase in importance because they are a more tangible aspect of participation than the long-range rewards. Members may look to their immediate environments for the rewards that sustain them on a daily basis. In addition, this increase is probably influenced by the fact that once volunteers are working, they have developed friendships and a social role in a group. In themselves, the increase in the importance of the rewards of the immediate work experience present no real problems for the functioning of associations.

However, the drop in the importance of the long-range development and service rewards is more troublesome. It is possible that these rewards drop in importance because in many organizations volunteers have little opportunity to feel that they are making a direct contribution to the organization's goals. It could be that they spend much of their time on organizational routine--such tasks as meetings, correspondence, typing newsletters, etc. Alternatively, it may be because the problem addressed by the organization is so large that few individual volunteers can perceive that their own circumscribed duties affect the organization's, or their own, long-range goals.

This drop in the importance of long-range development and service rewards could have pronounced consequences for the retention of volunteers. Although this change in the importance of immediate and long-range goals is probably characteristic of both paid and unpaid members in formal organizations, it is more important for those organizations using volunteers. Volunteers, especially new recruits, are less dependent on the organization than are employees; it is much easier for them to leave if they aren't finding the rewards they expected. Many voluntary organizations find that their greatest turnover occurs among new volunteers. Perhaps these are the volunteers who place the greatest emphasis on the long-range rewards, or perhaps they have difficulty making the transition to valuing the rewards offered by the immediate work experience.

It may help organizations that are troubled by substantial new-volunteer turnover to consider whether or not it is this decrement in the importance of long-range development and service rewards that is contributing to their problem. If so, these organizational leaders would have two choices--either prevent the decrement, or manage the decrement. To prevent it they might help volunteers to maintain more immediate contact with the organization's goals--through greater client contact or participation in policy planning, for example. The organization might help volunteers reach their personal goals through entry-level counseling and careful placement. Many groups have found placement counseling to be a particularly successful strategy. Alternatively, the organizational leaders could view the decrease in volunteers' emphasis on the rewards of development and service as a natural reaction to the requirements of formal organizational membership; they may decide to manage this change. By managing the decrement, I mean any procedure designed to help new volunteers develop accurate expectations before they join, or procedures that help the new volunteer obtain the rewards of the immediate work experience. These could include training programs or orientation sessions.

Knowing that membership in a formal organization itself probably changes the rewards of volunteering may help voluntary organizations be more receptive to their volunteers' needs, and therefore more likely to be free of debilitating turnover problems.

Notes

1. Supported in part by the Organizational Effectiveness Research Program, Office of Naval Research, under contract N00014-75C-0269, NR 17-744 to Yale University; J. Richard Hackman, principal investigator.
2. The rankings were employed primarily to reduce "halo error." That is, it was found that volunteers are likely to rate all rewards as important to them. Pretesting indicated that respondents make better discriminations between these rewards if they are first asked to rank order them.
3. A major methodological constraint on the interpretation of these findings is the fact that respondents were asked to retrospectively report the importance of rewards in their initial decisions to join the organization. Retrospective reports are influenced by the respondent's current opinions, and even the ability to accurately remember what was important. However, it can be conservatively concluded that, although we may not know what these volunteers "really" valued when they joined, they are telling us that the relative importance of certain rewards has changed. If their "true" values are not being measured, at least their beliefs about their own values are being tapped.

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