

# Understanding Motivations to Volunteer

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*Towards a*  
**National Strategy  
for Volunteering**



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# Understanding Motivations to Volunteer

Dr Arthur Stukas<sup>1</sup> and Sarah Wilson<sup>2</sup>

## Key Insights

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- Identifying and enabling volunteers to fulfil their primary motivations plays a pivotal role in volunteer satisfaction and retention.
- Recruitment messages that appeal to an individual's primary motivations for volunteering are more effective and persuasive.
- Volunteer motivations that are other-oriented may have different consequences than those that are self-oriented, including for retention and possibly for wellbeing.
- Ensuring that volunteers are provided with autonomy-support and opportunities to satisfy needs for competence and respectful relationships with others can boost wellbeing and retention.

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## Introduction

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Why do people volunteer? And why should volunteer involving organisations care? It might seem silly to ask but, at the end of the day, organisations primarily want to ensure there are enough hands to work, that clients and stakeholders are well-served, and organisational outcomes are achieved. This paper summarises the literature on volunteer motivations and argues that volunteer involving organisations *should* care about why people volunteer, including their goals and motives for participating, because understanding motivations to volunteer offers a pathway toward enhancing volunteer recruitment and improving volunteer retention. Moreover, research on different types of motivations may allow insights into whether and how volunteers themselves benefit from volunteering in terms of their health and wellbeing, in addition to more specific goals they hope to achieve.

Before we continue, a brief note. The literature on volunteer motivation has increased dramatically in recent years with studies originating from a variety of disciplines. From our vantage point in psychological science, we focus specifically on the functional approach to volunteering (and later self-determination theory), but we encourage readers to seek out work from other disciplines and studies focused on specific types of volunteers or organisations that may be most relevant to their own contexts.

## Volunteer Motivations

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Researchers have spent many years cataloguing the reasons why volunteers get involved, usually by asking them through surveys.<sup>3</sup> This descriptive approach has resulted in a long list of potential motivations, gathered from volunteers in many different roles and organisations. However, taking a theoretical approach to investigating primary motivations has also paid dividends. For example, in psychological science, *functional* approaches have been used to understand an array of attitudes and behaviours. This approach asks what *function* an attitude or action serves for a person and what personal goals it allows them to meet.<sup>4</sup> Early attitude researchers posited several functions that could be met by holding an opinion, such as expressing important values (value expressive), fitting into social groups (social adjustive), organising and guiding understanding of the world (knowledge), securing rewards and avoiding punishments (instrumental), and protecting the self from negative beliefs (ego defensive). This approach was adapted to volunteering by Clary and Snyder who suggested that community service actions might serve similar functions: acting on important personal

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3 See Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991

4 Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956

values (values), living up to the social expectations of close others (social), understanding the world, other people, and social issues (understanding), boosting self-esteem (enhancement), achieving career goals and related benefits (career), and protecting the self from negative beliefs (protective).<sup>5</sup> Clary et al. later created and validated a self-report measure, the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), to assess these six ‘functions’ or motivations to volunteer.<sup>6</sup> A second set of items based on the VFI asks about motive fulfilment and can be used by organisations to safeguard volunteer retention. The VFI has been used widely, but it is worth noting that it focuses on motivations that are general and held by volunteers across a wide array of activities. Other more specific motivations might be relevant to certain activities or populations and need to be captured with other tools, beyond the VFI.<sup>7</sup>

## The Functional Approach to Volunteering

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Theoretically, the functional approach contains a number of propositions and implications.<sup>8</sup> First, it holds that different volunteers may engage in the same activity for different reasons. Second, any single volunteer may have multiple motivations. Third, persuasive messages that are targeted to a person’s important motivations should be more successful at encouraging them to act than untargeted messages. Fourth, volunteers who find activities that allow them to fulfil their most important motivations should be more satisfied and persist longer in their volunteer service. In total, these propositions suggest that identifying and meeting a volunteer’s primary motivations is the key to both successful recruitment and retention.

In practice, organisations may discover that a majority (or significant subgroups) of their volunteers share similar motivations, making recruitment messaging a little easier. However, research has not yet yielded a clear set of ingredients that allow organisations to identify which tasks and activities enable volunteers to fulfil particular motives. It might make sense that recognition for their contribution would help volunteers with enhancement motives to feel satisfied (and appreciated), for example. Yet, research that has evaluated tasks has thus far found that volunteers see task affordances (the functionally relevant benefits available from them) idiosyncratically – different volunteers see the same task differently and potentially through the lens of their own primary motivations.<sup>9</sup> In the end, what matters for satisfaction and retention may be whether or

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5 Clary and Snyder, 1991

6 Clary et al., 1998a

7 For example, see Petrovic & Stukas, 2021, for a review of approaches to studying motivations for event, sport, and tourism volunteers

8 Snyder et al., 2000

9 For example, Houle et al., 2005

not volunteers *subjectively* feel that they are fulfilling their primary motivations. However, research may yet find that certain task features are linked to certain functional benefits.

Other unanswered questions elicited by the functional approach focus on the question of multiple motivations and on the stability of motivations over time. The functional approach assumes that volunteers may have multiple motivations but typically examines, in separate analyses, whether each important motivation has been fulfilled or not and correspondingly contributes to satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> Where multiple motivations have been examined together, they have either been seen to be in competition, with perceived fulfilment of one motive crowding out perceived fulfilment of another, making it harder for volunteers to feel satisfied,<sup>11</sup> or additive, meaning that a greater number of important motivations simultaneously perceived to be fulfilled leads to greater satisfaction and higher intentions to continue volunteering.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, being able to fulfil at least one key motive should be enough to satisfy and retain a volunteer but undoubtedly there is variability based on the motive, task, and organisation. That is, certain motives may be easier (or more difficult) to fulfil, certain tasks may afford the ability to fulfil more (or fewer) motives, and certain organisations may highlight and enable the fulfilment of some (but not other) motives. The experience of volunteers with multiple motives may then vary depending on the context.

Additionally, environmental factors outside the volunteering activity, such as health, family, or paid work, may impact volunteer satisfaction and retention. Age-related differences may also predict motivations. For example, Okun and Schultz applied the VFI to a large sample of volunteers and found as age increases, career and understanding motivations decrease and social motivations increase. No relationship was found between age and enhancement, protective, or values motivations.<sup>13</sup> The study found that across age groups, values motivation was consistently the most salient motivation for volunteering. This suggests that recruitment campaigns can be further targeted by population group, but all messaging should be underscored by how a volunteering role can help people express their values. Although the VFI specifies humanitarian values in general, organisations may need to think carefully about whether there is congruence between the organisation's values and those of its volunteers.<sup>14</sup>

Although motive fulfilment has been shown to predict intentions to remain a volunteer, it seems possible that fulfilling certain motivations could lead to the end of a volunteer's

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10 For example, Clary et al., 1998a

11 Kiviniemi et al., 2002

12 Stukas et al., 2009

13 Okun and Schultz, 2003

14 Van Schie et al., 2015

tenure.<sup>15</sup> For example, it is plausible that certain motivations could be satiated, particularly understanding and career motives, when volunteers learn all there is to learn from an activity or succeed in obtaining paid work based on the skills and contacts obtained through volunteering. Other motivations, such as values or social, may remain just as important over time with fulfilment desired in an ongoing way, if they are linked to stable features of volunteers, such as their deep-seated values or longstanding social networks. Hypothetically, volunteers should be able to be retained at a particular organisation even if their goals and motivations change, simply by moving them to a new task or role that facilitates the fulfilment of newly important motivations.<sup>16</sup> If that is not possible, it may be the case that it is best for the volunteer to move on to a new opportunity at another organisation.

## Volunteering and Wellbeing

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The functional approach suggests satisfaction and retention can be bolstered by motive fulfilment (any motive), but recent research has begun to discriminate between self-oriented and other-oriented motives for volunteering. This distinction reflects earlier debates about whether helping behaviour is primarily egoistic (motivated by self-benefits) or purely altruistic (motivated by the goal of benefiting others).<sup>17</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, recent research reports that volunteers with self-oriented motivations (e.g., career, protective, and enhancement) persist less and report lower satisfaction than volunteers with other-oriented motivations (values, understanding, and social).<sup>18</sup> This makes sense if self-oriented volunteers are not intrinsically or autonomously motivated to participate but rather seek to meet external demands or satisfy instrumental goals through volunteering.<sup>19</sup> However, other-oriented volunteers also report greater wellbeing than self-oriented volunteers. At present, it is not exactly clear why this might be. Research is needed to confirm this effect and also to understand its potential mechanisms. How and whether volunteering actually contributes to wellbeing at all has been the focus of a growing number of studies.

So, does volunteering improve wellbeing? At present, research results are ambiguous. Cross-sectional surveys that link volunteer engagement (comparing volunteers to non-volunteers or looking at the number of hours or years contributed) with wellbeing are unable to tell us the causal direction of any effect: it could just as easily be that people

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15 For example, Stukas et al., 2005

16 See Stukas et al., 2015

17 For example, Batson et al., 2002

18 Stukas et al., 2016

19 For example, Gagne, 2003

with higher wellbeing are drawn to volunteering<sup>20</sup> as it is that volunteering provides wellbeing boosts.<sup>21</sup> Longitudinal studies have often shown a bi-directional effect (greater wellbeing encourages volunteering and volunteering increases wellbeing)<sup>22</sup> and there are suggestions that benefits only accrue for those who have done ‘enough’ volunteering<sup>23</sup> but perhaps not too much<sup>24</sup> or especially for those who are lacking social integration.<sup>25</sup> Different outcomes have been observed in different studies. Son and Wilson break wellbeing into hedonic (e.g., positive mood), eudemonic (e.g., purpose), and social (e.g., feelings of belonging) varieties, finding an effect of volunteering only on the latter two.<sup>26</sup>

However, as mentioned, recent research has started to point to the volunteer’s primary motivations as a key moderator of health and wellbeing benefits. That is, the mixed results in the literature could be due to benefits only accruing to volunteers with certain motivations. In particular, Konrath et al. found,<sup>27</sup> when reanalysing earlier results from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study,<sup>28</sup> that only elderly volunteers with other-oriented motives lived longer than non-volunteers, and that elderly volunteers with self-oriented motives showed similar mortality rates to non-volunteers.

The benefits of other-oriented motivations also align with earlier findings from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study which found that “mattering” mediates the link between volunteering and wellbeing. Mattering is defined as the perception that we are a significant part of the world around us and consists of both feeling valued and adding value.<sup>29</sup> Volunteering may promote eudemonic wellbeing by making people feel better about themselves (feeling valued) and their contribution to others (adding value), boosting self-esteem and lowering depression. The others to whom we may matter include close relationship partners, organisations, and the wider community. Organisations can foster feelings of mattering by articulating the impact of a volunteer’s contribution in achieving organisational mission (feeling valued), reminding volunteers about the important role they play in society (adding value).

Although many studies do find that volunteers report greater wellbeing, demonstrating a cause-and-effect relationship is more challenging. Experimental studies that have randomly assigned students to engage in community service or not (i.e., to a waiting

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20 For example, Rhoads et al., 2021

21 Yeung et al., 2018

22 Thoits & Hewitt, 2001

23 Kim et al., 2020

24 Windsor et al., 2008

25 Piliavin & Siegl, 2007

26 Son and Wilson, 2012

27 Konrath et al., 2012

28 Piliavin & Siegl, 2007

29 Prilleltensky, 2020

list) have failed to show that volunteering can increase wellbeing.<sup>30</sup> However, assigning students who clearly want to volunteer to either start right away or wait, however true a test of wellbeing benefits that may be, is not the same as assigning people at random to do community service or not – which could show that volunteering also benefits those who are not predisposed to help. However, such studies run the risk of creating a “mandatory volunteerism” condition, which has been shown to reduce intentions to volunteer in the future.<sup>31</sup>

## The Importance of Autonomy Support in Volunteering

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When external pressures are used to encourage or require people to volunteer, this creates extrinsic motivation that may promote engagement, but only for the time when the external pressures or rewards are salient. When the forces encouraging people to volunteer are removed, volunteers may cease participating. For example, pressuring employees to engage in corporate volunteering may backfire.<sup>32</sup> Potentially, wellbeing benefits also dissipate when community service is not freely chosen.<sup>33</sup> This is one premise of self-determination theory (SDT),<sup>34</sup> which has long argued that motivation may be either intrinsic (the behaviour is appealing, in and of itself) or extrinsic (the behaviour is enacted for instrumental reasons to achieve other goals) – and that extrinsic motivations are associated with lower persistence and lower wellbeing.

Fortunately, research also suggests that helpers who are intrinsically and autonomously motivated do report greater wellbeing.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, self-determination theory researchers have recommended that volunteers be provided with autonomy-support in their roles.<sup>36</sup> That is, additional features that provide choice to volunteers and support them to make their own decisions about how their activities should be carried out. This is one way to ensure wellbeing benefits, as SDT proposes that wellbeing arises from the satisfaction of three needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.<sup>37</sup> Organisations would do well to provide volunteers with opportunities to fulfil each of these needs. For example, choice and freedom to contribute to how volunteering activities are carried out, respectful treatment by leaders and paid staff, opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with clients and other volunteers, and the ability to demonstrate and improve skills. It may not be surprising that these needs are somewhat implicitly present in the six

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30 Whillans et al., 2016

31 Stukas et al., 1999

32 See Grant, 2012

33 Gebauer et al., 2008

34 Deci et al., 2017

35 For example, Weinstein & Ryan, 2010

36 Gagne, 2003

37 Deci et al., 2017

motivations identified by the VFI, suggesting that there could be individual variability in the importance granted to each need by different volunteers. Again, the lesson is to know one's volunteers and their needs and motivations.

## Recommendations for Volunteer Involving Organisations

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Returning to the question of health and wellbeing benefits, our recommendation is that organisations do not advertise these as being available to all volunteers, given such benefits may depend on an array of contextual factors, such as features of the task and the individual volunteer, including their motivations. At present, whilst the literature shows that volunteers who hold self-oriented motivations may leave sooner than other-oriented volunteers, the goal of volunteer involvement is not to keep people as long as possible. For many, volunteering is a pathway to employment, education, or other outcomes, and this does not invalidate the importance of their contribution. Instead, as the functional approach recommends, we would suggest that organisations focus on ensuring that volunteers can fulfil their goals through the activities assigned to them, remembering that volunteers may have multiple motives, both self- and other-oriented, and that motives may change over time. One line of thinking argues that attracting volunteers using self-oriented benefits (and even explicit requirements or rewards) may get them in the door for “action” where later they can look back and, upon “reflection”, subsequently develop more intrinsic and other-oriented reasons for volunteering, connecting their service activities to deeper prosocial and humanitarian values.<sup>38</sup> If their service persists further, it may even contribute to a “role-identity” or role-person merger (considering the role of volunteer to be an important part of who they are) that will sustain activities into the future, even from organisation to organisation.<sup>39</sup>

This role-person merger is associated with several outcomes. Once a volunteer assimilates their role into their self-definition and self-evaluation, they tend to devote more time to their volunteering activity, they extend their role-related social ties, and they display role-appropriate behaviour.<sup>40</sup> The role-person merger predicts behavioural intentions and stability, which can be leveraged by organisations to foster performance, satisfaction, and retention. Such an outcome may require careful cultivation of volunteers with specific attention to their primary motivations, the ways in which organisations can help them to be fulfilled, and the respectful acknowledgement of volunteers as important partners in the achievement of organisational goals. And whilst many volunteers will be satisfied by knowing their involvement makes a difference and supports their

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38 Clary et al., 1998b

39 Grube & Piliavin, 2000

40 *ibid*

organisation's mission (as well as their own values), other volunteers may depart prematurely if their role is not matched to their needs. This underscores the importance of organisations needing to keep tabs on their volunteers and understand what they want out of their service.

## Public Policy Implications

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The research on volunteer motivations has several implications for public policy. As evidenced in the literature, volunteers are motivated to contribute for a myriad of reasons, and these motivations can be both self- and other-oriented. Career advancement is an oft-cited self-oriented motivation, and whilst volunteering can be a pathway to employment, public policy initiatives that require participation in volunteering must consider the potentially adverse effects of "mandatory volunteerism". For example, mutual obligation requirements that pressure people into community service might achieve the short-term outcome of funnelling jobseekers into voluntary activities, but could have a negative long-term impact by removing prospective volunteers from the volunteer pool due to the undermining of intrinsic motivation or because of reactance to pressures. Further, as research has not yet clarified the factors that ensure wellbeing benefits will be derived from volunteering, governments and volunteer involving organisations alike should be cautious about over-emphasising wellbeing benefits in recruitment campaigns.

## Gaps in Knowledge and Future Research Possibilities

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This paper outlines what we currently know about individual motivations for volunteering, but there are some key gaps in our understanding. New studies that assess and track motivations, perceptions of motive fulfilment, satisfaction, and future intentions over time and in an organisational context would enhance our understanding of the predictors of volunteer satisfaction and retention. Motive fulfilment as a construct is understudied; research in this area might enable the identification of tasks or roles that provide a 'match' for volunteers with particular motives, or at the very least, ways to highlight how tasks match up with important and/or varied motives, encouraging subjective perceptions of motive fulfilment.

Volunteer effectiveness is another understudied construct, but a deeper understanding of what enables effective volunteering (and how to define effectiveness) would likewise contribute to satisfaction and retention. As SDT argues, demonstrating competence is an essential predictor of wellbeing and effective volunteers very likely perceive themselves as mattering more. Research in these areas may help us to understand whether and what motivational variables predict performance and how this relates to

volunteer satisfaction. For example, it would be good to know whether volunteers with self-oriented vs. other-oriented motivations differ in their effectiveness. Finally, as the VFI was not created to distinguish between self- and other-oriented motivations to volunteer, measures that better capture this distinction are needed.

Further research is also required on the relationship between volunteering and wellbeing. Although we can conclude that volunteering may boost the wellbeing of volunteers, this effect seems to be moderated by several factors that have not yet been clearly explored. In particular, we are yet to understand whether wellbeing effects are homogenous and investigating the diversity of benefits is required to understand which types of volunteers benefit the most from their participation and what types of benefits they receive (if any). Do certain tasks boost wellbeing more than others? Do benefits accrue only for volunteers with certain motivations? Is the impact on wellbeing long-lasting or temporary? More research is needed to clarify effects. At a time when volunteer involving organisations and policy makers are continually espousing the positive mental health benefits of volunteering, it is critical to understand when and for whom volunteering is a predictor of mental wellness. With such knowledge in hand, it will then be crucial to apply our understanding to extend benefits to those experiencing disadvantage for whom participation in volunteering has the possibility to improve their life across several indicators, including economically, socially, and psychologically.

## Conclusion

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Contemporary public policy tends to ignore volunteering entirely or continues to position it as a vehicle to achieve alternate outcomes such as paid employment. This detracts from recognising that volunteering is an end unto itself and undermines the critical role that volunteering plays in creating inclusive and resilient communities. Volunteering is a unique activity because it serves multiple beneficiaries in tandem: governments, volunteers and the organisations that involve them, service users, and the broader community all benefit simultaneously from volunteering. This amplifies the return on investment in social, cultural, and economic terms and provides a salient argument for the importance of investing in sustainable volunteerism.

Given formal volunteering has been declining for decades, public policy must consider the ramifications of positioning volunteering as a factor of production and focusing on the economic contribution (and savings) generated through volunteering. The takeaway message for volunteer involving organisations is that understanding and servicing the motivations of volunteers will likely have a demonstrable effect on volunteer performance, satisfaction, and retention, and is therefore a worthy investment of time.

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