

# Top entry page

## Is Volunteering Altruistic?

# Introduction

To most people, a "volunteer" is someone who contributes time to helping others with no expectation of pay or other material benefit to herself. However, this does not mean that volunteer work doesn't have rewards. Indeed, it is widely believed that helping others is as beneficial for the donor as it is for the recipient. So we wonder, what motivate people to do volunteering? People choose to volunteer for a variety of reasons but, are all of them really altruistic? Virtually all studies on the effects of volunteering on well-being find that people who engage in unpaid work to help others benefit in some way (Meier and Stutzer 2008). And these results lead us to wonder other question: Why are there such large differences in volunteering rates when it is known that volunteering is beneficial for well-being? In 2012-13 44% of adults volunteered formally (giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation) at least once a year and 29% did so at least once a month in the UK. This represents an increase from 2010-11 when the figures were 39% and 25% respectively (2012-13 *Community Life Survey, August 2012 - April 2013 report*).

In the following lines we will try to answer and clarify as possible the questions proposed before and explain different aspects of volunteering.

## Key References

- Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(1), 215-240.
- This is a very comprehensive review of the current theories surrounding volunteering, the motivations behind it, benefits, and much more. If you were only to read one thing, this would probably be it.
- Burns, D. J., Reid, J. S., Toncar, M., Fawcett, J., & Anderson, C. (2006). Motivations to volunteer: the role of altruism. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 3(2), 79-91.
- This study focuses on the common Motivations behind volunteering and whether these are altruistic



## Volunteering History

The noun 'volunteer' was first recorded c.1600 and referred to "one who offers himself for military service". The noun is derived from the Middle French word 'voluntaire', which itself is derived from the Latin word 'voluntarius' meaning "voluntary, of one's free will". Approximately three decades after the first record of the noun 'volunteer', it acquired the non-military sense it still retains today. The verb 'volunteer' was first recorded in 1755, and again referred to the initial military sense of the noun, whereby men enlisting in the army of their own volition as opposed to being conscripted were said to volunteer.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attention began to orient towards the less fortunate members of society and organised efforts to alleviate their struggles came in the form of the foundation of the first YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in 1844 in London. This organisation aimed to assist those living in terrible conditions during the Industrial Revolution (YMCA England; 2013)

The Salvation Army was founded in 1865, and despite being a charity organisation set up to care for society's most impoverished; it has been instrumental in organising volunteer programmes since its foundation. The Salvation Army is notable because prior to its inception few formal charitable bodies existed to help those in need, and it thus represents a cultural shift in providing for others without any expectation of repayment (The Salvation Army; 2012).

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a reaction to the extreme poverty of The Great Depression in the USA, one of the first large-scale and concerted efforts to coordinate volunteering in modern history occurred. Furthermore, during World War II thousands of volunteers assisted

the military on the home front in many ways including caring for the injured and collecting supplies.

In a contemporary light, Holdsworth & Brewis (2014) note that university student volunteering in the UK has never been more popular, or arguably, visible. Whilst students have a strong tradition of contributing to the communities where they study, for the most part of the previous century this has been not been seen as central to the student experience in comparison to teaching activities, for example (Brewis, 2010). Volunteering initiatives range from student-led activities to volunteering bureaux run by the university itself (Darwen & Rannard, 2011). Support for student volunteering from educational institutions is diverse and indicative of differing historical conceptualisations of student volunteering, with the current push toward directional engagement serving as a contrast to the student-led community action of the 1960s and 1970s (Brewis, 2010).

## Motivations for Volunteering

There has been a growing amount of research focusing on why people choose to volunteer. Although there are many different motivations and reasons for it, altruism has always been closely examined among them. This section will go over some of the motivations that the research has found, and whether or not these are truly altruistic. Clary et al were one of the first researchers who established six different motivations that people are most often driven by for any kind of volunteer work using the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (1998). These motivations are as follows: 1. Developing and enhancing one's own career (Career), 2: Enhancing and Enriching personal development (Esteem), 3: Conforming to the norms of Society (Social), 4: Escaping from negative feelings (Protection), 5: Learning new skills and practicing abilities otherwise unused (Understanding) and 6: Acting on and expressing values related to altruistic beliefs (Value). Apart from the motivation of values, none of these motivations are truly altruistic in and of themselves, which already suggests something about why people volunteer. It is important to note, however, that Clary et al have established these from a very functional approach of what drives people not only to volunteer initially, but what keeps motivating them over a sustained period of time (1998).

Now that we know some of the motivations behind people volunteering, there still is the question of whether or not it is altruistic? Many of these motivations seem self-serving in one way or another. A study which distributed questionnaires to 408 different students across five different universities argues that the answer is somewhere in the middle: they examined the correlations between their participant's level of altruism and their motivations, in keeping with Clary's six motivations (Burns et al., 2006). Burns et al found in their study that altruism was significantly related to each of the motivations to volunteer, but the strongest correlations between altruism and motivations were between value, understanding, social and protective (2006). This shows that there seems to be a correlation between being altruistic and your motivation to volunteer, but it does not in itself show that volunteer work is truly altruistic. Especially when considering that these are mere correlations.

Another study by Carpenter and Myers examined relationship between motivations and altruism scores of 129 volunteer firefighters across America (2010). The study also focused on 6 motivations for volunteering, but split them up as follows: Altruism, image, career, making friends, risk, and compliance with religious beliefs. Carpenter and Myers found positive correlations with all of their motivating factors and the decision to join the volunteer firefighters, albeit relatively weak correlations. This further supports the idea of a middle ground, in which people volunteer for both altruistic reasons, as well as personal, perhaps selfish reasons. As with many things in life, there are always multiple factors that contribute to the end result, and the decision to volunteer is no different.



## Benefits (... and costs) of Volunteering

## Relationship Between Psychological Health and

# Volunteering

The evidence regarding the benefits of volunteering demonstrates that for the most part volunteering enhances psychological health, as well as protecting against the symptoms of mental illness, such as depression. However, the majority of research regarding depression has reported beneficial effects only for subgroups of the population, namely the elderly and women.

Hong & Morrow-Howell (2010) found that members of the Experience Corps (a high-commitment volunteer programme that brings older adults into schools to improve academic achievements of students in the USA) reported fewer depressive symptoms and functional limitations after two years of participation in the programme than a control group. Furthermore, the authors reported a trend toward the Experience Corps group reporting a smoother decline in self-rated health.

Wilson & Musick (1999) analysed data from the Americans' Changing Lives (ACL) study, a nationally representative sample of adults aged 25 and over living in the USA. The authors reported a significant relationship between levels of volunteering and lower levels of depression for individuals aged 65 and over.

Similarly, Kim & Pai (2010) used data from three waves of the ACL study and found that volunteering positively affects the decline of depression for individuals above the age of 65. The authors found no effect of volunteering on trajectories of depression for younger or middle-aged adults.

Li (2007) investigated how widowhood influences subsequent volunteering participation, as well as the moderating effect volunteering may have in coping with the death of a spouse. Data was taken from three waves of data from the ACL study, specifically investigating widows aged 50 years or above at baseline. The author reported that compared with their continually married counterparts, widows reported greater likelihood of pursuing volunteering roles. Furthermore, engaging in volunteering protected against depressive symptoms following spousal loss and a positive relationship was observed between the amount of hours spent volunteering and self-efficacy, highlighting the compensatory function of volunteer participation that helps to offset the negative impact of widowhood on well-being in later life

Parkinson, Warburton, Sibbritt, & Byles (2010) conducted longitudinal research exploring the relationship between volunteering and psychosocial and health factors for a cohort of older Australian women. Data for this study were from the oldest cohort of Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health, a 20-year longitudinal survey of Australian women aged 70-75 years in 1996. The authors reported that elderly women who had volunteered continuously over a 9-year period were in better mental health than more sporadic volunteers.

Importantly, volunteering does not always have mental health benefits. As discussed above, research directed at uncovering the relationship between volunteering and psychological well-being has typically reported higher levels of well-being amongst older adult volunteers relative to non-volunteers. However, nonlinear associations between the frequency of volunteer activity and well-being have been for the most part neglected. Windsor, Anstey, & Rodgers (2008) addressed this gap in the literature by examining nonlinear associations between hours spent volunteering and psychological well-being, controlling for employment status, partner status, physical health, and education in a sample of 2136 older Australian adults aged between 64 and 68. The authors found a curvilinear relationship, whereby individuals volunteering at high levels had lower well-being scores relative to those volunteering at moderate levels, indicating an optimal frequency of engagement in volunteering for psychological well-being.

Additionally, Ironson (2007) found that voluntary activity can undermine the mental health of the volunteer in the context of care-giving to HIV positive individuals. Thormar et al. (2010) also report negative effects on mental health for volunteers in disaster settings such as earthquakes or terrorist bombings. However, these modes of volunteering are obviously more ad-hoc in nature and Hoffman (2008) suggests that scenarios such as these represent a more general situation where the volunteer suffers from empathic over-arousal.

## The Relationship between both Physical & Psychological Health and Volunteering

Piliavin (2007) investigated the positive effects of volunteering on psychological well-being and self-report measures of health using all four waves of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. The authors reported a positive relationship between volunteering activity and both outcome variables; and further posited that the diversity of voluntary participation, as well as the consistency of volunteering over time, has a significant effect on both psychological well-being and physical health.

Lum & Lightfoot (2005) used longitudinal data from the 1993 and 2000 panels of the Assets and Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old study in the USA. They looked at physical health and mental health outcomes of people over the age of 70 who had volunteered at least 100 hours in 1993. The authors report that these individuals had a slower decline in self-reported health than individuals who had not volunteered, as well as an ameliorative effect on age-related increases in depression.

## The Relationship Physical Health and Volunteering

Specifically investigating physical health, Kumar et al. (2012) conducted a cross cultural study that included data from 139 countries and reported that partaking in voluntary activity was associated with higher levels of self-reported physical health. Importantly, the authors found this relationship to be consistent across countries. Furthermore, the relationship was unrelated to both personal and national wealth.

Burr, Tavares, and Mutchler (2011) investigated the relationship between volunteering and hypertension. Employing data from the Health and Retirement Study, they reported that individuals who volunteered had lower hypertension risk and lower blood pressure than individuals who did not volunteer. They further noted a threshold effect whereby a modest amount of time spent volunteering, as opposed to a high

amount, was associated with lower risk of hypertension. Interestingly, the authors found no support for psychosocial or health behaviours mediating the effect, nor did they find a moderating effect of volunteering for the relationships among health behaviours and hypertension.



## Chronic Health Conditions and Volunteering

Furthermore, Okun et al. (2011) investigated whether the relationship between volunteering and positive affect, negative affect, and resilience were modified by the number of chronic health conditions an individual had. Using cross-sectional data from the Arizona Health Survey (2008) they reported that as the number of chronic health conditions increased, the relationship between volunteering and positive affect and resilience scores also increased.

Tang (2009) examined longitudinal panel data from three waves of the Americans' Changing Lives survey, specifically investigating the association between volunteering and self-rated physical health, functional dependency and chronic conditions in individuals aged 60 or over; after controlling for health variables from previous waves. Tang reported that engagement in volunteering was associated with improved self-ratings of health and decreased functional dependency, but not with the number of chronic health conditions.

## Mortality Rates and Volunteering

There is a considerable body of research examining the relationship between mortality rates and engagement in voluntary activity. The research has generally found positive effects of volunteering on longevity of life.

Sabin et al. (1993) used secondary data from Longitudinal Study of Aging investigating the effects of volunteering in individuals aged 70 or above. Sabin found that if individuals had volunteered they were less likely to have died after a 4 year follow up than those who had not volunteered.

Rogers (1996) also used secondary data from the National Health Interview Survey in 1983 and 1991. Rogers found that 21.5% of individuals still alive in 1991 had reported engagement in volunteering, whereas only 12% of those that had died by 1991 had volunteered.

However, the relationship between longevity of life and volunteering does appear to depend on the motivations for engaging in voluntary activity. Konrath, Fuhrel-Forbis, Lou, & Brown (2011) analysed data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study to examine the effects of motives for volunteering on respondents' mortality risk 4 years later. The authors specifically drew on the Volunteer Functions Inventory for motivations to volunteer measurements. They found that individuals who volunteered were at a lower risk of death 4 years later, and found a positive correlation between decreased mortality risk and frequency of volunteering. However, volunteering was not always beneficially related to mortality risk; those who volunteered for self-orientated reasons had a similar mortality risk to those who did not volunteer. Conversely, individuals who volunteered for other-orientated reasons had a decreased mortality risk.

## Practical/Clinical Research Applications

The act of volunteering is itself already a practical act, in which one may have a direct effect on certain projects and their fulfilment. This section will therefore examine what research is being conducted at the moment that could have practical applications on volunteering.

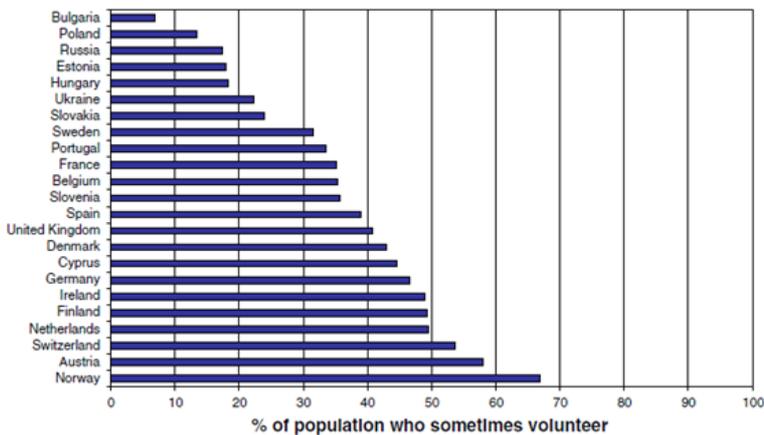
Much of the research that is currently being conducted is done so in the hopes of recruiting more volunteers (Burns et al., 2006). The reason for this is that there are currently many organizations and social programmes that are dependent on the help of volunteers, and would not have the resources to fund their endeavours without them (Wilcox et al., 2004). As there are an ever increasing number of organizations that rely on volunteer work, the number of volunteers is not increasing proportionately to the demand. In order to achieve an increase in their volunteers, organizations are turning to marketing techniques in order to find out what it is their volunteers expect from the experience, and how they can supply this.

This research focuses in large part on the motivations to volunteer, the expectations volunteers have toward the experience, and what they hope to achieve with the experience (Wilcox et al., 2004; Burns et al., 2006 and Carpenter & Myers, 2010). This is where most of the research on volunteering finds practical application, as there are many organizations that are invested in this and have an incentive to see it continue.

Other than in the recruitment of volunteering, there is a suitable amount of research going into the benefits of being a volunteer. This may hold some clinical applications as well, as there is evidence to suggest that volunteering has a number of mental and physical health benefits (Musick & Wilson, 2003). Especially when it comes to issues such as clinical depression, it seems that volunteering may present a viable therapy opportunity to reduce negative thought patterns and moods.

## Cultural Differences

In the last years, several studies are being focused in issues, until now, unexplored about volunteering as, for example, cultural and racial differences. Differences in national rates of volunteering suggest that the determinants and outcomes of voluntary activities might vary across countries (Plagnol & Huppert, 2010). Levels of participation in voluntary organizations vary widely among the European countries. Using data from the latest round of European Social Survey, Plagnol & Huppert carry out a cross-national study about volunteering that try to clarify these differences among 23 countries. It should be noted that it have to distinguish between formal and informal forms of volunteering. On the one hand, formal volunteering is associated with works for voluntary or charitable organizations; on the other hand, informal volunteering is related with help others outside the family, workplace or voluntary organizations. It was demonstrated that formal volunteering shows a variation across Europe. It is lowest in Bulgaria where only seven percent of the population volunteered at least once during the year preceding the survey (2009). Bulgaria is followed by Poland, Russia, Estonia and Hungary—all countries in which less than 20% of the population engage in formal volunteering. At the other end of the spectrum are Switzerland, Austria and Norway; in Switzerland and Austria the level of voluntary participation exceeds 50%, while in Norway it reaches an astounding 67%.



Do people who do not volunteer in formal organizations spend their time on informal activities instead? Do the factors leading people to participate in voluntary activities differ between nations? Or do people in some countries benefit more from volunteering than people in other countries? The investigation found that the results for informal volunteering are quite similar to those for formal volunteering. Informal volunteering does not appear to replace formal activities, indeed informal and formal forms of volunteering are positively correlated. Furthermore, volunteering has been found to be associated with a range of socio-demographic variables including age, gender, race, income, work status and church attendance (Musick et al. 2000; Wilson 2000). And it is exactly these determinants of volunteering who may explain the observed differences across countries (Plagnol & Huppert, 2010). Finally, it should be noted that, in general, countries with high rates of volunteering also show high levels of well-being. This might lead to higher volunteer motivation in these countries. Moreover, informal volunteering is associated with increases in happiness. (Plagnol & Huppert, 2010).

As we mentioned in the beginning of the section, the other type of unknown research about volunteering is racial differences. The research on racial and ethnic difference in volunteering is very limited, and the findings are controversial (Hinterlong, 2006; Sundeen et al., 2009). For example, some data show that white people have substantially higher rates of volunteering than other ethnic groups, whereas others find no difference or even the reverse of the trend (Tang et al. 2012). But black people, once engaged, they devoted a greater amount time. These findings suggest that when older black people are involved in volunteering to organizations, they do so with intensity and commitment.

Be involved in volunteer activities may be linked with life quality indicators that make volunteering possible (for example, education and income). Despite recent gains in educational and occupational achievements, black people still have disadvantages over the life course, including racial discrimination, and have created unequal access to volunteer roles for black people and white people (Dannefer, 2003), which may explain why black people are less likely to volunteer. In older population racial differences is even more apparent in volunteering rates, probably because older black people have historically experienced more socioeconomic and political marginalization and have restricted access to certain type of volunteer organization (Miner & Tolnay, 1998).

However, volunteering is viewed as an empowerment process whereby older adults are actively engaged in the community and, regardless of their race, improve their psychosocial and physical well-being (Cheung & Kwan, 2006). Even though, older black and older white volunteer differentially perceived the benefits of volunteering. Tang and colleagues (2012) found that race matter in perceived health change, with a significantly higher proportion of black people than white people reporting better health since they started a volunteering program. Perceptions of psychosocial benefits also varied by race, with black volunteers again seeing themselves as obtaining more benefits from volunteering.

Regardless, we think that more efforts are still needed to remove institutional barriers to volunteering, extend volunteer opportunities to members of ethnic groups, and make volunteering an empowerment process to all participants.

## Individual Differences

Individual differences exist in all fields and, not unsurprisingly, also appear in volunteering. We have a large biography that develops this

issue.

It was demonstrated by Plagnol & Huppert (2010) that people who are healthy, better educated, religious, older, married, living in a larger household, or have higher incomes volunteer more frequently than others.

It is essential to examine gender differences associated with volunteer behavior. According with Manning (2010), women tend to partake in roles that promote caring and relational interaction, whereas men partake in ones that promote individual rights and actions. Presumably, these behaviors are evidenced in the types of work performed within a volunteer role. Research in this area specifies that women engage more heavily in caring behavior characterized as self-sacrificial, empathetic, and socially reasoned (Wilson, 2000) than their male counterparts, and are highly attuned to the care and well-being of others (Mesch et al., 2006). According with these gender differences and focus on gender ideologies in which men and women are socialized, Wilson (2000) explains that men are more likely to engage in volunteer behavior that is complementary to their real work, whereas there is a greater deal of heterogeneity in the types of volunteer behavior in which women engage. Women are more likely to volunteer in groups in a manner that supports and complements their social and personal relationships, whereas men are more individualistic in the manner in which they volunteer. In regards to older adults, women are more likely to volunteer with their friends, compared to men who volunteer to make friends.

Other research suggests gender differences also in the task chosen. Women were more likely to engage in work more closely associated with “women’s work” (e.g., the preparing of food, dealings with material clothing, and caring for children and older adults), whereas men were more likely to be involved with leadership roles (e.g., coaching, and committee work with the realm of their volunteer efforts) (Rotolo & Wilson, 2007).

Age differences are also very common around volunteering. A large part of the research is focused in older people in volunteering. The volunteering rates for adults ages 65 and over showed an upward trend in the past three decades, rising from 14.3% in 1974 to 24.6% in 2008 (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). And this information could be explained by the fact that older people seem to benefit more from volunteering than younger people (Van Willigen 2000). One possible explanation for this observation could be that older people, for whom there is typically a reduction in major role identity (i.e., being employed, or a partner), experience an increased sense of purpose in life through volunteering (Greenfield and Marks 2004). Another possibility concerns the social benefits of volunteering. In a recent study, many volunteers indicated that they were seeking to make friends by joining voluntary associations (Prouteau and Wolff 2008). The social benefits of volunteering probably apply across age groups, but they may be particularly important for older adults who commonly report feeling lonely (Pinquart and So’rensen 2001).

## Getting Involved as a Volunteer

There are two main things required of anybody who wishes to be a volunteer: time and effort. There are a large number of different organizations to choose from, as volunteers are in high demand (Burns et al, 2006). The first step of becoming a volunteer is choosing a cause or organization that you want to volunteer for, and there is much to choose. Ask yourself, what is motivating you to become a volunteer? Based on what that is, it will be easier to find an organization for you.

As there is such an array of options, the simplest way may be to get in contact with a volunteer organization which supports multiple causes. These usually offer a variety of opportunities, as well as professional support from the organization, and the handling of logistics such as transportation and accommodation. As your own personal safety should be a priority, it is important to find a volunteer organization that takes its work seriously. Many of the more reputable organizations will require you to pay a fee, which is usually intended to cover your own living cost and/or accommodation. Organizations such as the International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA) offer a variety of different well organized projects, but will ask a \$200 application fee. Here is an example of a application form from the IVPA:

(<http://www.volunteerinternational.org/images/MembershipApplication.pdf>)  
(<http://www.volunteerinternational.org/images/MembershipApplication.pdf>)

There are many different organizations that offer this and that would very much appreciate any help from volunteers, it’s just a matter of preference! An example of a smaller organization would be Original Volunteers. While smaller and therefore possibly lacking some of the resources of a larger organization, the volunteer fees are reduced and it may lead to a more personal volunteering experience. Signing up here is also as easy as an online application on their website : <http://www.originalvolunteers.co.uk/> (<http://www.originalvolunteers.co.uk/>)

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