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What's the Mystery about Motivation?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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As often happens, a graduate student called me last week in the process of doing research. While I always try to be helpful to anyone attempting to study volunteerism, I am near to saturation with always hearing some variation on the theme of *what motivates people to volunteer?* There is a disproportional number of scholarly articles on why people volunteer--very few of them offering new insight. In fact, just last month I was asked to blind review a submission to a university-based journal that presented the results of a study and concluded that *practitioners would be well advised to consider volunteer motivations in matching applicants to assignments.* Wow! Why didn't any of us ever think of that?

I have tried to analyze why I react so strongly to this fascination with motivation in academe. Maybe it's that I am suspicious of the motivation of the researchers! So many of the research studies in volunteerism and volunteer management don't reflect the needs of the practitioners in the field. Rather the studies reflect the researchers' inexperience with real-life volunteers and an inability to frame more complex questions deserving of study.

Here are some of my other concerns as well as some suggestions for worthwhile research:

1. In too many cases, studies are done without a thorough literature search that acknowledges previous studies. So we get repetitive, superficial articles.
2. I question the relevance of the question *why do people volunteer?*; when asked generically. Too many studies (not only those on motivation, I might add) approach volunteers as if they are indistinguishable from one another and are interchangeable parts of some monolith. After all, do we think it's interesting to ask, *why do people take paying jobs?* On the other hand, I think the question of "why" has meaning when asked specifically about one organization, cause or assignment. Therefore, it may be helpful, as a volunteer recruiter, to understand what type of person might be attracted to certain positions. This is part of target marketing.

3. I also think that these motivational studies examine the wrong side of the coin. By questioning volunteer motivation, the emphasis is placed on understanding something inside people that either makes them agree or refuse to volunteer. It is my belief that we ought to focus on what organizations are asking people to do--and how they ask. Maybe prospective volunteers are right to stay away! It may not be an issue of motivation at all.

4. Over time I have become more interested in the question of why volunteers remain committed than why they joined in the first place. This has become even more important as we grapple with *who's a volunteer?*; and work with such new sources of help as students required to do community service or welfare-reform participants. Since there are external *motivators* that compel these workers to seek out projects, it is fascinating to watch those who remain with the organization past their required time period. What transforms a mandated worker into a genuine volunteer? And what can we learn from this to improve the way we deal with all volunteers?

Having stated what research I don't find useful, you might want to read what I identified as [needing study](#) in the *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* back in 1985. The majority of topics I proposed then remain untouched.

So the questions of the month are: What research questions would you like to see studied? If you could communicate with academics, what would you want them to know that would be helpful to you? Have you read any studies that you were able to apply to your work?

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Here's a site-- <http://www.LINKResearch.org>--that allows nonprofits to post research questions and link with academics who might want to do them

Posted December 1998

Submitted by Jennifer Williams, Volunteer services coordinator, Hospice of Watauga County, Boone, NC

We deal with death - plain and simple. It takes a strong person to go into a house and provide respite care, possibly become part of the patient's life and then receive a call from me after a patient death. Why they stay is a mystery. Not everyone can handle this - the attrition rate is clear. I'm happy when they complete all of the state required training sessions AND are available for patient care. Questions of our mortality, our beliefs and values in dealing with chronically and terminally ill people - it all comes into play here. Maybe the volunteers find this an emotional and spiritual challenge. Perhaps what we offer volunteers cannot be measured with empirical studies and statistical data analysis. Faith and compassion should never be placed against a ruler when it comes to determining a volunteer's desire to serve.

Submitted by Tammy Herron, Director of Volunteers, American Red Cross, TN USA

I would like to respond to the question of motivation of volunteers. I am new to my job, but I was a volunteer before I was a paid staff member. For any person to make an assumption drawn from whatever study they like, it all boils down to one thing- motivation is different for each and every person and to throw a "blanket" of reasons may or may not apply in any given situation.

I volunteered because I felt good about what I was doing, I was learning, and I enjoyed those with whom I worked. My volunteerism really never hit home more until one day (as a paid staff member) when I accompanied a volunteer to assist a family who had just had a house fire. They lost everything they had and we were on the scene before the fire had even been extinguished. To see that family's horror and sorrow to lose everything they owned before Christmas and to be there to help them with basic necessities of life made everything come together. It was a good feeling to lend a hand. As for youth volunteerism, the American Red Cross National Headquarters has done some wonderful writing about youth. It is particularly good because it was written by youth. The manual is called "The Next Generation" and after a review, I think it is very helpful to anyone wanting to improve youth work or start a new youth program. I welcome any comments or questions about it. Email: therron@intermediatn.net

Submitted by Robert W. Hazel, CAE, CFRE, Executive Vice President, American Association of Orthodontists Foundation, St. Louis, MO

Two Responses: This subject brings to mind the words of George Smiley, the protagonist in so many of the John LeCarre' novels who once mused on a completely different subject, "There's never a single motive." While in the Peace Corps in Korea, in a TB Control program operated through the county health departments, I attended a provincial workshop, the main topic of which was how to better distribute medications to persons in isolated rural areas and how best to encourage them to take their medications on a regular basis. The workshop lasted all day. The only word written on the board was also the only word uttered that entire day in any language other than Korean: Motivation. Those of us who worked in this program with the rural county workers, at least some of us, came upon a phrase which seemed useful. Translated into English, it goes like this, "If you take your medicine on a daily basis without fail, not skipping a day whenever you want to, everything will work out all right. But if you don't, you'll probably climb up the mountain." Climbing up the mountain was a colloquialism for dying. How's that for motivation.

Submitted by Anne-marie Greathead, Community events Co-ordinator Volunteering NSW, NSW, Australia

At present we are researching how young people particularly students are involved in decision making processes of the organisations they volunteer with. We are also interested in their experiences of volunteering and whether their input has been valued by the organisation they work with. I would be interested in hearing from anyone who has undertaken research about the involvement of young people(15-25 years old) in volunteering.

Submitted by David Wall, Coordinator of Volunteer Services - Brimbank City Council, Melbourne, Australia

I agree with Susan's thesis that the area of volunteer motivation is an over-worked field. That's not to say that it's not an important issue, merely that it does often seem to be the ONLY issue that receives academic attention. I think that issues such as change management within volunteer-based organisations, planning within such organisations (how it is done in organisations that do it well - or are most people in such organisations so busy getting through today that there's no time, energy, etc to worry too much about tomorrow, let alone think about the year after next), and the use volunteers make of their volunteer role in moving into the next stage of life (e.g. moving into the workforce from school, or into retirement after work, returning to the workforce or study after early child rearing, etc) could be very valuable areas of study.

Submitted by Rick Devich, Director, Senior Resources Community Development, Minneapolis, MN

Dynamics involving human motivation are complex and change over time, both for individuals and groups at all formal and informal levels. It is a phenomenological conundrum that defies reductionist, clockwork universe approaches. Additionally, it changes over time. To empirically validate a thesis of any sort remains sketchy at best, given this temporal dimension coupled with the well documented complexity of human attitudes and values. I remain doubtful that academic approaches will yield a cure for volunteer apathy. Increasingly I become convinced that it is less about what has motivated people (a look backwards) and more about creating values and expectations and means that prompt changes in behavior (a look forward).

In this case, the end result is someone who volunteers. In a society whose primary ethos is economic Darwinism and traditionally masculine myths, altruism is often diminished aside from its benefit as guilt relief. We need to create service values and citizenship expectations on par with the values of "getting ahead". We need to increase understanding of our interdependence and the impact that volunteers, and often only volunteers, can have on critical societal needs. In addition to the beneficial outcomes from volunteer activity experienced by what I call the "volunteers," increasingly we see the benefits for the volunteer resulting in measurable increased health status. Therein may lie the most fruitful avenue for academia regarding volunteering. If it can be conclusively demonstrated that altruistic activity can produce meaningful results for all concerned, that will aid immeasurably in engaging more of our citizenry. On a lighter note regarding research and volunteer motivations, it is often stated that 9 out of 10 people would volunteer if they were asked. I want to know where in the hell these people are! They certainly don't live in Minnesota. And I bet you they don't live in your community, either. I would also like to publicly thank Susan Ellis for her book, "[From the Top: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success](#)"

Submitted by Julie Gillis, Assistant Director Community Relations, Austin State Hospital, Texas

I agree that volunteers all have individual reasons for why they volunteer, but I'd like to discuss what might motivate people to volunteer with "underserved" clients. I think they might have a "altruism gene" that drives them to help others, while allowing them to live with ambiguity. Volunteering can mean meeting new people, trying new things, and sometimes challenging your comfort zone. I think that there are people who really like having that zone challenged in one way or another. Why volunteer at a jail, a shelter or a nursing home unless you want to explore things that might make you grow personally or feel uncomfortable.

You give back, certainly, but you also receive a broader picture of the world that you live in and sometimes that picture is not so pretty but you keep with it, because the work helps you expand your compassion. I wonder if some people don't volunteer there because they are a little scared of seeing those different pictures. One way we can support those volunteers is to make sure we provide process points for them to talk about what they see, what they feel and praise them for their own personal growth and their proactivity for not avoiding that which most of our society willfully ignores. Paradoxically, we also must allow them to sit with discomfort because that internal anxiety helps the heart to grow and helps the mind make decisions about change.

Submitted by Loretta Bacon, Volunteer Coordinator, City of Phoenix Human Services Department, Phoenix AZ

I've sat through lots of presentations and workshops in my day that have endlessly pondered this subject by personality, needs, etc. etc. I find that I'm less and less interested in WHY people come to me. I don't care too much what brought them in the door - what I'm really interested in is what will keep them. I find it more effective to focus on making their experience a good one. We've all had experience with doing a comprehensive screening to find their motivation and then try to place them into the perfect position, only to find out that they quit. Sometimes I think that many people don't really know their own motivations. They are spurred to volunteer because they were asked (#1 reason in some poll somewhere), a friend dragged them along because it was enjoyable, or they have a vague feeling that they should do something. Of course, some volunteer just to get the t-shirt (which is another whole discourse on the effect big budget sports teams are having.) If we had a magic tool to predict the longevity of a volunteer's stay THEN we'd have a priceless tool. No matter how hard we work to effectively recruit, screen, place and recognize, we still get those mystery people that don't stay.

I don't think digging into people's psyche will answer the big "why?" Perhaps it's our own pride that keeps us wondering why they get away, why we "failed." I've long given up on the perfect placement. I work very hard to do an appropriate placement where the volunteer is comfortable and the staff is comfortable. People seem less freaked out when the volunteer must quit or asks to move into another area. It's weird, but the less invested in the personal stuff, the less personal pride is invested on both sides. I focus on their ability to do the WORK and we are all more loose about the whole

thing. If things don't work, then none of us - me, staff or the volunteer - have a sense of failure. This may sound very haphazard and zen-like, but it works, even in my very bureaucratic municipal setting.

Submitted by Debbie Milam, Director, Volunteers in Public Schools, Little Rock, Arkansas, USA

Research and stats on how employee volunteerism benefits businesses would be helpful. I need to show CEOs how corporate volunteerism has benefited other corporations.

Submitted by Irene Van Dusen, Volunteer Coordinator, Oregon Coast Aquarium, Oregon, USA

I agree we should focus on what attracts a person to our individual organization if we want successful recruitment. The common answer when asked about motivation is "... a desire to give back ..." but they can give back by being involved in any number of organizations—why mine? I have to tell them that my organization has a lot to offer to volunteers. If they are going to give back they are more apt to do it where they know they will get lots of support, have fun, make friends and learn more about the organization's purpose. The opportunity to learn is a great attraction. Once a volunteer is recruited, knowing how to tap into their motivations can be an asset in placing them and keeping them, however.

Submitted by Emily Shultz, Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin, USA

I am a first-year graduate student in arts administration just beginning my exploration of thesis topics. I used to work as a volunteer coordinator and I am very interested in the topic of volunteerism. I would like to express my gratitude to Susan Ellis for her opinions expressed in this article. Hopefully, I will have an opportunity to research topics on volunteering that have not been exhausted.

Submitted by Sabrina Burke, Youth Involvement Network, Oregon

Another interesting spin is asking people why they do not volunteer---and why they think other people do not volunteer. Recently we asked a group of 60 young people their opinion on this question and found that of those young people who do not volunteer they listed reasons such as "working" "do not know where to go" but when asked why they think other youth don't volunteer they overwhelmingly answered "don't care" or "not important to them". Finding the root of this and other perceptual twists would make for a useful research topic to help understand motivation and the messages people have about volunteering.

Submitted by Anonymous (We encourage people to give their name and title when posting to this area, even when they disagree with Susan! Susan likes to be challenged and welcomes dialogue. This exchange of opinions is essential to the growth of the field.)

I don't think it is so peculiar to ask what motivates people to volunteer. As a matter of fact, I think it is a pretty relevant question and as managers of volunteer programs should consider this question more. I know of a volunteer who works many hours at her day job, sitting at her computer all day. She then leaves her job and drives to a questionable neighborhood to do data entry at a food bank until late hours of the night. Her weekends are always dedicated to volunteering and rarely does she say "no" when I ask her for something. I would like to know what motivates her, as well as how she remains motivated. I would love to clone her, actually. Maybe we shouldn't be so defensive when people ask us about volunteer motivation. I often wonder what motivates people to become doctors, defense attorneys, and other professions. It's not always so black and white.

Submitted by Virginia Miller, Volunteer Coordinator, Coconino County Cooperative Extension, Flagstaff, AZ

The key word in your motivation mystery can be found in the word research! Most have heard about the "protective environment" of the University setting, the "pressure" of academic life to "publish", and so forth. As part of Cooperative Extension network which is strongly tied to land grant universities, I have seen these two stereotypes in operation even though our Extension programs are not campus based. I have frequently thought that some how, some way the "research environment" has neglected to include the REAL world, particularly regarding the people element. It's as though many faculty and staff have little actual face to face experience of working with the "client, customer, or man on the street!" Much of the research has become an intellectual exercise rather than a means of practical application of new knowledge.

Certainly it is important to have an understanding of what motivates people to do what they do. Simplistically, it comes down to one basic reason: because doing so satisfies some need they have. Your comments, Sue, are not only thought provoking, (and correct in my opinion) but are applicable to any of us who work with people and want to gain understanding of how to do so in our organizations, how we can more effective. One last comment: I do know one thing about my role as Volunteer Coordinator in a university environment: often I bring another, more reality based viewpoint to the discussion table; that often I become the "advocate" for what the motivations of John Q. Public are, or might be.

Submitted by Anne Honer, VP-Development, Daniel R. Barry & Associates, NC, USA

I don't think anyone has improved on theories put forth by McClelland & Atkinson or the time-honored "needs" pyramid we study in basic psychology. Nothing new that works better since then. I'd love to hear from organizations that have involved volunteers for a long time (i.e., hospitals,

museums) to see how they have changed their practices to adapt to volunteers' changing life styles. Are there really shortages of volunteers? or are organizations' needs different? Are they marketing in new places and ways? What changes most? Is the volunteer pool really different? Retention is key, and I don't think we put enough emphasis on that.

Submitted by Femida Handy, Assistant Professor, York University, Ontario, Canada

Susan makes a good point in speaking of the various topics on volunteerism that are not being studied. As an academic interested in the voluntary sector, I am particularly interested in what needs to be done, in terms of research that would be useful to practitioners. At York University, we are planning a workshop on research on volunteers in the year 2000. We will be commissioning research papers for this workshop from academics. I would like to urge you to submit topics to us which would be of interest to practitioners. (Email your ideas to me at fhandy@yorku.ca) I have with colleagues worked on the question of "Who is a Volunteer?" in (Canaan, Handy and Wadsworth in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 25 (3) 1996) and presently finished a cross cultural examination of the same question.

Submitted by Tammy Tucker, Volunteer Coordinator

Researchers are trying to objectivie what is subjective. Each volunteer has an individual motivation, and a hidden agenda--we all do: If indeed they want to help us (not just a paycheck or a grade) they should ask "What WOULD motivate you to volunteer?"

Submitted by Deirdre Araujo, Manager Volunteer Services at the Exploratorium, San Francisco, CA USA

A quick thought as I race out the door... In some journals, such as the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* and the *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, I've seen that they devote a short paragraph to the details of the writers' credentials and academic interests; in others, such as *Voluntas* and *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, personal information has been reduced to a footnote no more than a sentence long. I've often wondered how many of the researchers have volunteered in their own lives, and how that might affect the questions they ask in their own research, or what they look for when reviewing others' work.

Do you think that perhaps it would be considered unprofessional or frivolous by other academicians if some reference to personal volunteering was included in this blurb? A few years ago, I attended the 25th anniversary conference of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action in Manhattan and thoroughly enjoyed the banter among researchers. On the other hand, it was also a relief to have people like Susan Ellis and Nancy McDuff there, advocating for the voice of "pracademicians" to be heard. I do wish that we could come up with a better formula for

informing the research process, and also disseminating results in ways that would be useful to managers in the field.

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