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Volunteer workers: a labour economy perspective

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An interesting phenomenon in recent years has been the tremendous growth in the number of people engaged in volunteer work, mostly in extending help to other people or advancing a social cause. While exact numbers are difficult to obtain, according to one source one out of every four Americans over the age of 14 is doing some form of volunteer work.[1] In other countries, too, the number of people engaged in volunteer work is increasing.[2] Not only has the number of volunteers grown significantly, but so has the number of organisations based on volunteer work, and the number of formal agencies requesting the services of volunteers.[3]

The economic benefit of volunteer work to the American society, measured by the "dollar value" of their contribution is estimated to range from $33.9 to $67.8 billion annually.[4]

Volunteer work is no longer limited to middle-class, middle-aged women, as was once the case. Today's volunteers come from all walks of life: high school and college students, adult men and women (whether those working outside their homes or housewives), and a growing number of older adults of both sexes.[5]

It is interesting to note that economists and even social scientists have tended to ignore this contribution and the potential of volunteers in their analysis of the GNP, manpower needs, etc. This article is a beginning attempt to present volunteer work through a labour economy perspective.

The volunteer and the welfare state

Volunteer work in helping the poor, sick, disabled, and needy is a known tradition in all cultures and societies throughout history. Helping the needy and performing charitable deeds as part of the normative behaviour expected of the individual in the community is an important social-religious directive in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Jewish tradition, the Old Testament

explicitly defines the subjects most deserving such help as the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, who are perceived as the weak, needing special attention and care from the community. In the Christian tradition, helping the weak is considered an exemplary step on the way to redemption. Hence, people who help their fellow-men are said to have become more complete members of the community, "better human beings", models of altruistic behaviour.[6]

The help extended to the needy has usually consisted of short-term voluntary activities, i.e. giving money, food, or shelter, sharing a meal and affording accommodation for the night; visiting the sick and the mourning, raising money and collecting other resources from members of the community. These activities were carried out either on behalf of the community religious institutions, or privately,[7] and those who extended the help were usually the stronger in the community. In the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, this behaviour was expected mainly of middle-class and upper-class women: the "lady bountiful" would descend to the lower classes as a "friendly visitor".[8]

The modern welfare state created a new situation in attitudes towards the State's responsibility for the welfare of its citizen. Although the old traditional systems of help have really never stopped operating, they were supplemented and often actually superseded by state or public mechanisms. Dealing with issues such as poverty, disability, sickness and the like was no longer left to the initiative of private institutions. The State assumed central responsibility. Consequently, large human service systems were developed to implement centralised policies.[9] This, in turn, brought about a need for large manpower resources to staff those systems. On the other hand, the very emergence of the welfare state was paralleled by more free time. Shorter working hours both daily and weekly, together with increasing salaries and a higher standard of living, have resulted in larger groups of population with more free time. Earlier retirement coupled with increasing longevity is releasing more people from the stresses of working for their living. Thus, there are more people, from all walks of life, who are potential and willing volunteers. This constantly enlarging volunteer manpower pool is reinforced by the general public's growing awareness of the need for participation in social and community issues. Such an awareness creates pressure on the human service agencies to actively involve volunteers in their work.

Volunteers can be found within a variety of human service agencies ranging from mental health hospitals and clinics, youth clubs, educational settings, to prisons and correctional institutions.[10] All these agencies stress the continuous and reliable working endeavour required in their contexts.

Thus, the outcome of the process seems to be a combination of a growing need for manpower resulting from the increasing services, and the availability of a large potential manpower pool. The above-mentioned pressure to involve volunteers, i.e. unpaid workers, is even further emphasised by the fact that in recent years there have been growing economic constraints leading to cutting down budgets, limiting resources, and aiming at a more efficient utilisation of existing resources.[11]

Whereas on the socio-ideological and the economic levels there can be little argument against the utilisation of volunteer workers, in actual fact this attempt to involve volunteers in systems based on paid work encounters serious problems and working difficulties, which often lead to disappointments for both the volunteer and the paid workers. One of the more frequent problems relates to the prevalent concept of volunteers as unstable workers. This attribute is generally manifested in their high turnover rate which, in turn, influences the types of tasks allotted to the volunteers, and the volunteer's acceptability within the systems.[12]

Who is the volunteer?

The volunteers themselves have undergone what may be described as a functional change. While volunteer work was still done out of the volunteer worker's free will and without economic remuneration, such workers are shifting from working in informal frameworks, performing spontaneous activities which often have not required continuity, to becoming part of a human service bureaucratic system, which requires continuous work and conformity to norms and rules. This functional change has created specific tensions both on the systemic and the personal levels. Among the systemic issues one may include: (1) ensuring the continuity of volunteers' work when there are no monetary incentives to attract and sustain them; (2) the efficiency and effectiveness of using a combination of paid and unpaid staff; (3) the planning and implementation of the division of labour between the paid and volunteer workers, i.e. an appropriate use made of the specific skills and qualifications of each volunteer in accordance with the type of tasks designed for him or her and the nature of his or her envisaged relationship with the relevant paid professional workers; and (4) the need of the agency to invest resources (and this against all popular belief to the contrary) once it has committed itself to involving volunteer workers in its work. The issues raised on the personal level include: (1) the anxiety of the paid worker feeling he might be replaced by "cheaper labour"; (2) volunteer workers may also constitute a threat to the professional worker: the professional's position and status within the agency and generally, based on his superior knowledge, monopoly and control, is being threatened. On both the systemic and the personal levels there is a conflict focused on the rules of accountability, responsibility, authority, and compliance, formally and informally assumed by and assigned to the individual workers by the system.

It would seem fair to attribute the existence of such working tensions to the fact that the volunteer's functional change has not been followed, or accompanied and reinforced by a parallel conceptual change. The volunteer is still perceived, by and large, as a "do-gooder" capable of one-time activities, whereas his actual role, resulting from the functional change, newly defines him as a person doing continuous service work without getting direct economic rewards for it.

This definition fits the two types of tasks assigned to volunteer workers in human services, as presented by Maizels and Holme.[13] Those are tasks (1): complementing the work of the professional paid staff, i.e. tasks forming part of the professional's job but such that do not necessarily have to be performed by a professional. Examples of this type could be the case-aide working with a caseworker in a social work agency, or a "Big Brother" working with a probation officer or at a school. The volunteers may also be assigned tasks (2): supplementing the work of the professional or the agency, i.e. extending their services. Examples of this type could be groups of volunteers operating a gift shop at a hospital or operating a "hot-line" service. These two categories of tasks may be carried out by volunteers functioning at various levels of work, i.e. parallel and equivalent to the paid professional's level or at a lower level, controlled and supervised by the paid professional. The division of tasks also represents a certain differential use of labour.

Yet, the crux of this "new" definition is the view that volunteer work is not a one-time activity but a continuous one, and the volunteer therefore is a *worker* in the system, whose motivation to do so, and satisfaction on the job, ought to be examined.

Whereas there is ample material in the literature *describing* volunteers at their work, the literature *explaining* this phenomenon is scarce. The existing literature on the subject still attempts to explain *voluntary helping* behaviour.[14] The explanation of this helping behaviour is either in terms of (1) the altruistic behaviour of individuals,[15] or (2) the development of voluntary organisations and social movements.[16]

The aforementioned needed conceptual framework, viewing volunteer work as continual work done by individuals within a larger work system, is certainly a different frame of reference from the one implied by altruistic spontaneous acts of individuals and the movement for social causes. It applies to different activities and motivations, and implies a different dynamic process related to the individual volunteer worker.

The necessity of understanding the dynamics of volunteer work is therefore clearly suggested. These dynamics involve the principles underlying the process leading to the individual volunteer worker's decision to sustain his role within a human service system, and the implications of these personal dynamics on the employing system.

Exchange theory and volunteer work

Studies of sustained volunteer work have shown that for the individual, volunteer work involves both giving and receiving. Sills[17] was the first to formulate the contention that volunteers have both other- and self-oriented motivations to their work, and that people volunteer not only to help others but also for a variety of personal reasons such as the search for social interaction with others, gaining status, finding variety in life, learning and self-development, etc. This has since become an accepted thesis. Others[18] devel-

oped the idea and indirectly found that not only does volunteer work entail rewards for the individual but that rewards tend to be expected by the individual volunteer for his work; and furthermore, that these expectations are not uniform and they tend to be different for different people.

Thus, for example, many young volunteers (high-school and university students) tend to view their volunteer work as an opportunity for career testing in the field in which they volunteer, hoping to learn more about it and to test themselves in similar roles. They expect their volunteer job to teach them about the profession they are considering, by getting to watch professionals at work, interacting with them and having opportunities for trying out some aspects of the work. In some volunteer programmes for the young, this becomes an integral part of the job.[19]

Some of the elderly see their volunteer job as an avenue for role continuity. They would like to prove to themselves and to others that they can still contribute to society. They expect others to reinforce this view by acknowledging and recognising their work.[20]

Housewives who have raised a family and plan to go back to work (for pay) after years of being out of touch with the labour market, sometimes see their volunteer job as providing them with the opportunity to get used to the new situation and to do so under no immediate pressure. They expect to receive more responsibilities as work progresses.[21]

It would be therefore accurate to say that the reward system expected by the individual volunteer tends to reflect his particular needs at a specific age or in a certain situation. Volunteer work, therefore, in addition to its providing opportunity to help others, is also an activity which meets concrete needs of the *volunteer*.

Analysing volunteer work in this way suggests that it is an activity very similar to (paid) work, which also entails a variety of rewards for the individual (apart from the pay), rewards which tend to be expected differentially by different people.[22] The specific agency utilising volunteers is able to structure their work in such a way as to provide them with the particular rewards they have been found to expect and thus have a large measure of control over their reward system.

The main question arising from this analysis is: how important are the rewards from volunteer work to the individual volunteer and how do they affect his decision to sustain his work?

From studies on absenteeism and turnover of paid workers, it becomes clear that perceiving the nature of the linkage between expected incentives and rewards (not exclusively monetary) is crucial to understanding the individual's decision to stay on his job or leave it.

Lawler's "expectancy model"[23] which is basically a development of Exchange Theory, and which is commonly used in studies of turnover and absenteeism of paid workers, provides a framework in which rewards, motivations, and expectations are interrelated. In its simple form, the model suggests that a person will be motivated to work (or make an effort at work) if he expects such behaviour to result in rewards which he considers valuable to

him. Turnover or absenteeism are seen in terms of the individual's decision to leave or abstain from work because of a negative discrepancy between the particular rewards he expected to receive and the ones he actually received on the job.[24] That such a discrepancy is the major reason for turnover is the central point made in a review of the literature on the issue:

> The major turnover findings of this review, when taken together, point to the centrality of the concept of met expectations in the withdrawal decision. Under such conceptualisation, each individual is seen as bringing to the employment situation his own unique set of expectations for his job... Whatever the composition of the individual's expectations set, it is important that *those* factors be substantially met if the employee is to feel it is worthwhile to remain with the organisation... In general, then, the decision to participate or withdraw may be looked upon as a process of balancing received or potential rewards with the desired expectations.[25]

The model can be simply illustrated in a graphic form:

Figure 1. The Expectancy Model

Based on: Edward E. Lawler: *Motivation in Work Organizations*, Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole, 1973, p. 105.

This process of "cyclic" balancing expectations with rewards seems to occur continually along the working situation; a worker's decision is not a one-time only decision; it has to be reviewed, reinforced, revised, and so on, as long as he is on the job.

Thus, such a model would conceptualise a person's decision to work regularly and for an extended period on his volunteer job, making it a function of the fact that the particular expected rewards from the job (whatever they are) are received. It focuses on the rewards people expect for doing volunteer work, and on the relationship between these rewards and the volunteer worker's own personal characteristics. Not surprisingly, such a framework has already been used to explain the dynamics of individuals' participation in other forms of voluntary action, namely, participation in voluntary farm organisations,[26] and participation in committees of an urban political party.[27]

Notes on expectations and rewards from volunteer work

A study conducted by this author,[28] focusing on rewards from volunteer work, used the Expectancy Model as its theoretical framework. This research studied the expectations and rewards of service volunteer workers in four health and mental health institutions (N = 317) in Maryland.

The main findings of this study were:

(1) High incidence of expectations of all volunteers for rewards pertaining to learning, self-development, and social interaction with other volunteers.

(2) Age as a factor influencing volunteers' expectations for rewards from their work, thus confirming earlier indirect studies in this area.

(3) The perception of volunteer work as a link to or from paid work, i.e. the tendency of the young to view it as a career-testing opportunity, and of the old as part of their work continuum.

(4) In certain cases the rewards expected by the volunteers differed from those offered by the institutions.

One of the important findings in this context is connected to the volunteer's decision to continue on the job. It was found that the average number of negative discrepancies between expected and received extrinsic rewards per respondent tends to decrease gradually with tenure on the job. This would suggest that the volunteer's decision to retain his job involves a process of balancing his expectations for rewards with the rewards actually available at the agency. Those who stay for the longest periods of time are those who originally expected the rewards available at the agency or have adjusted their expectations to the rewards offered by the agency. The others, whose expectations are not met, apparently drop out after an initial trial period.

The study also showed that those agencies that offered their volunteers specific types of rewards, which were not available at other agencies, were able to attract specific volunteer populations (i.e. young volunteers) for longer periods.

The findings of this study would clearly indicate that sustained volunteer work is an activity which involves an exchange whereby the individual volunteer is exchanging his time and energy for specific rewards which he considers important.

Discussion and implications

Knowledge of the dynamics, variety, and task-scope of volunteer workers is crucial to their appropriate acceptance by the employing agencies. Whereas such knowledge can not solve all the structural problems of utilising and involving volunteer workers in human service agencies, it could, undoubtedly, shatter some misconceptions involved with perceiving them and their work. Volunteer workers are not totally altruistic; they want to do a worthwhile, rewarding job and they will try to make sure that the job they have chosen fulfils some of their needs.

Awareness on behalf of the employing systems of the exchange nature of this enterprise would help clarify and relieve some of the tensions involved in the effective absorption of volunteer workers into human service agencies, and would contribute greatly toward more efficient, constant and stable

working situations. A valuable and instructive conclusion would be that an agency that can control the reward system is able to have better control over the type of volunteers attracted to the agency and their tenure on their jobs, all within a reasonable measure.

Further research into the dynamics and the economy of volunteer work in human service organisations including more specific and extensive study applying evaluative methods such as the Cost Benefit Analysis to volunteer work, seems vital, and would be a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge and a benefit to all parties involved in the working situation.

Volunteering is a phenomenon growing in importance as an economic factor in society. Future research into labour policies can not afford to ignore it.

Notes

[1] Marlene Wilson: *The Effective Management of Volunteer Programs*, Boulder, Colorado, Volunteer Management Associates, 1976, p. 17.

[2] Geraldine M. Aves: *The Voluntary Worker in the Social Services*, London, The Bedford Square Press and George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969; Yohanan Peres and Ruth Liss: *Volunteerism in Israel*, The Center for Voluntary Services, Tel Aviv, 1975 (in Hebrew); John C. Anderson and Larry F. Moore: "Characteristics of Canadian Volunteers in Direct Services", *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 3: 51-60, 1975.

[3] Marlene Wilson, op. cit., pp. 13-23.

[4] Harold Wolozin: "The Value of Volunteer Services in the United States", *ACTION* Pamphlet No. 3530.4, Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

[5] Marlene Wilson, op. cit., p. 20.

[6] See Daniel Thursz: *Volunteer Group Advisors in a National Group Work Agency*, Washington D.C., The Catholic University Press, 1960, pp. 34-36; Alice M. Leppert: "Religious Groups in Voluntarism" in Richard E. Hardy and John G. Cull (eds.): *Applied Volunteerism in Community Development*, Springfield, Ill., Charles C. Thomas, 1973, pp. 91-106; Walter A. Friedlander: *Introduction to Social Welfare*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1968, pp. 9-14; 241-247.

[7] See for example Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux: *Industrial Society and Social Welfare*, New York, The Free Press, 1965, pp. 160-67; Walter A. Friedlander: *Introduction to Social Welfare*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1968, Chs. 3 and 8.

[8] See Thursz, op. cit., pp. 47-52; Mary E. Richmond: *Friendly Visiting Among the Poor*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1903.

[9] Charles I. Schottland: *The Welfare State*, New York, Harper and Row, 1967; Bernice Madison: "The Welfare State: Some Unanswered Questions for the 1970s", *Social Service Review* 44 (4), Dec. 1970, pp. 433-41; David C. Marsh: *The Welfare State*, London, Longman, 1970.

[10] For descriptions of volunteers' tasks see for example: Geraldine M. Aves, op. cit.; Eva Schindler-Rainman and Ronald Lippitt: *The Volunteer Community*, Washington D.C., Center for Voluntary Society, 1971; Herta Loeser: *Women, Work and Volunteering*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1974.

[11] Ken Judge: *Rationing Social Services*, London, Heinemann, 1978. See especially Ch. 5.

[12] Giles Darvill: *Bargain or Barricade: The role of the Social Services Department in meeting social need through involving the community*, The Volunteer Centre, London, 1975; Ian Bruce and Giles Darvill: "Over the defences: the volunteer in the area team", in *Social Work Today*, Vol. 7, No. 9, pp. 294-296, Aug. 1976.

[13] Anathea Holme and Joan Maizels: *Social Workers and Volunteers*, BASW, George Allen & Unwin, England, 1978, pp. 172-176.

[14] Peter Blau: *Power and Exchange in Social Life*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1964; George C. Homans: *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, Revised Edition, New York, Harcourt Brace, Jo Uanovich, 1971.

[15] The most outstanding work in this category is Titmuss's monumental study of blood donation: Richard M. Titmuss: *The Gift Relationship*, New York, Random House, 1972. Another avenue explored by some researchers in the 1960s has been to explain helping behaviour patterns of bystanders upon personal emergency and need for assistance. See Patricia N. Middlebrook: *Social Psychology and Modern Life*, New York, Alfred A. Knoph, Ch. 7, "Altruism", 1974.

[16] In this category one may find discussions of voluntary groups and movements created around a cause, acting as advocates to effect some change in society. See Constance Smith and Anne Freedman: *Voluntary Associations*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1972; Thomas C. Hood and Linda S. Geiss: "Volunteers in America: Current Trends and Possible Interpretations", presented at the meeting of The Mid-South Sociological Society, Jackson, Miss., Nov. 3, 1978.

[17] David L. Sills: *The Volunteers: Means and Ends in a National Organisation*, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1957.

[18] Daniel Thursz, op. cit.; Ethel M. Adams: "A Study of Volunteers in Five Community Agencies", unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1966; Florence S. Schwartz: "Volunteer Activity in Community Centers: Its Nature and Satisfactions", unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1966; Anita L. Trost: "A Survey of Hospital Volunteers: Who Are They and Why Do They Volunteer?", M.A. Thesis, Long Island University, 1973.

[19] Joseph G. Colmen: "Volunteerism: A Constructive Outlet for Youthful Energy", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 27 (May 1965), pp. 171-175; Nancy Goldsmitt: "Volunteer Program Helps Teenagers Find Careers in the Health Field", *Modern Hospitals*, 100 (April 1963), pp. 6-8.

[20] Frances M. Carp: "Differences Among Older Workers, Volunteers and Persons who are Neither", *Journal of Gerontology*, 23 (October 1968), pp. 497-501; Janet S. Sainer: "The Retired Person as a Volunteer" in Richard E. Hardy and John G. Cull (ed.): op. cit., pp. 68-79; Barbara P. Payne: "The Older Volunteer: Social Role Continuity and Development", in *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1977, pp. 355-361.

[21] Herta Loeser, op. cit.

[22] Richard Centers and Daphne E. Bugental: "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Job Motivations Among Different Segments of the Working Population", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 50 (June 1966), pp. 193-97; Shoukry D. Saleh and Jay L. Otis: "Age and the Level of Job Satisfaction", *Personnel Psychology*, 17 (Winter 1964), pp. 425-430; John W. Slocum and Robert H. Strawer: "Racial Differences in Job Attitudes", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 56 (April 1972), pp. 177-178.

[23] Edward E. Lawler: *Motivation in Work Organizations*, Monterey, California, Brooks/Cole, 1973; Hall uses the term "Expectancy Theory" for what is basically the same conceptual framework. See Richard H. Hall: *Occupations and the Social Structure*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1975, pp. 35-39.

[24] Edward E. Lawler, ibid., p. 105.

[25] Lyman W. Porter and Richard M. Steers: "Organizational Work and Personal Factors in Employee Turnover and Absenteeism", *Psychological Bulletin*, 80 (August 1973), pp. 170-171.

[26] Keith W. Warner and William D. Hefferman: "The Benefit-Participation Contingency in Voluntary Farm Organizations", *Rural Sociology*, 32 (June 1967), pp. 139-153.

[27] Peter R. Gluck: "An Exchange Theory of Incentives of Urban Political Party Organizations", *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 4 (Jan.-Apr. 1975), pp. 104-115.

[28] Benjamin Gidron: "Rewards from Sustained Volunteer Work: A Study of Volunteers in Four Health and Mental Health Institutions", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, School of Social Work, 1976. For a summary of this study see "Volunteer Work and Its Rewards", *Volunteer Administration*, XI (Fall 1978), pp. 18-32.

Appendix 1. Extrinsic rewards* for volunteer work

A. Learning and self-development
   1. Training
   2. Professional supervision
   3. Having informal contacts with staff members
   4. Being consulted by professional staff about a patient I work with

B. Social interaction with other volunteers
   5. Having informal contact with other volunteers at work
   6. Annual dinner or luncheon
   7. Lounge for volunteers

C. Symbols for social recognition
   8. Receiving a certificate or a letter of appreciation for my service
   9. Pin
   10. Receiving an award for the organisation to which I belong
   11. Having my picture in the paper

D. Praise
   12. Receiving praise for my work by the volunteer co-ordinator
   13. Receiving praise for my work by the superintendent
   14. Receiving praise for my work by the professional staff (doctors, nurses)

E. Authority
   15. Supervising other volunteers
   16. Uniform

* Rewards over which the employing agency has control.

Appendix 2. Intrinsic rewards* from volunteer work

A. Stressing one's other-orientation
   1. Opportunity to be of service to people less fortunate than me
   2. Opportunity to think less of myself and more of others

B. Self-development, learning and variety in life
   3. Opportunity to do something interesting and unusual which adds variety to m... life
   4. Opportunity to learn how to deal with people
   5. Taking responsibilities
   6. Opportunity to learn new skills

C. Opportunity for social interaction
   7. Opportunity to take part in an assignment in which other volunteers are parti... pating
   8. Opportunity to meet new people
   9. Opportunity to share my ideas, opinions and problems with others
   10. Opportunity to get out of the house

* Rewards pertaining to the subjective meaning of the work to the volunteer.

D. Fulfilling an obligation
   11. Opportunity to fulfil an obligation to the community
   12. Opportunity to do important work
   13. Opportunity to practise my religious beliefs

E. Social recognition
   14. Opportunity to be a part of an important organisation in the community
   15. Opportunity to be appreciated by my family members
   16. Opportunity to be appreciated by friends and neighbours

F. Connection to paid work
   17. Opportunity to be engaged in an activity which is similar to paid work
   18. Testing possibilities of a career in the health field
   19. Testing possibilities of paid employment
   20. Forming contacts that might help my own or my spouse's business or work