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## **Navigating Theories of Volunteering: A Hybrid Map for a Complex Phenomenon**

### **Abstract**

The study of volunteerism has generated multiple conceptual frameworks yet no integrated theory has emerged. This article identifies three major challenges, or layers of complexity, that a unified theory of volunteering faces. First, volunteering is a complex phenomenon that has permeable boundaries and spans a wide variety of activities, organizations, and sectors. Second, different disciplines attribute different meanings and functions to volunteering. Third, existing theoretical accounts are biased toward covering the 'laws of volunteering' and have a strong empirical surplus. 'Good theory' however is multidimensional so there is a need to include other views on theory. To overcome these challenges, we use a 'hybrid theoretical strategy' that seeks to combine the 'multiple goodness' of current approaches. Our hybrid framework builds on the three layers of complexity identified, and provides an innovative conceptual system of navigation to map, compare, and integrate existing theories more adequately.

**Keywords:** Volunteering – Theory – Definition – Classification

## **Introduction: Challenges for a Theory of Volunteering**

The study of volunteerism has generated multiple theoretical and conceptual models yet no integrated theory has emerged. This multiplicity of approaches reflects a general lack of consensus on exactly what a theory of volunteering should be, differences in conceptual preferences across disciplines, as well as the complexities and contradictions involved in the process of building theory itself (Sutton & Staw, 1995). In a landmark article on volunteering, Wilson (2000) concluded that:

One problem is that the generic term 'volunteering' embraces a vast array of quite disparate activities. It is probably not fruitful to try to explain all activities with the same theory nor to treat all activities as if they were the same with respect to consequences. The taxonomies of volunteering that are used to disaggregate volunteer work are folk categories (e.g., school-related, helping the elderly), and there is little reason to believe these categorizations are sociologically useful (Wilson 2000, pp.233-234).

Underlying Wilson's observations, we identify three major challenges, or layers of complexity, that the development of 'a theory of volunteering' faces. First and foremost, volunteering is a complex phenomenon that is not clearly delineated and spans a wide variety of types of activities, organizations, and sectors. Studies of volunteering typically focus on unique and discrete sub-sets of volunteers who perform diverse tasks ranging from sitting on governance boards to stuffing envelopes. In addition, volunteering continues to be a social construct with multiple definitions; and what is understood as volunteering is a matter of public perception. The boundaries between what definitely constitutes volunteering and what does not are permeable (Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Handy et al., 2000). Furthermore, in various cultures there are no terms such as volunteers. In India the term is social work and in Russia no specific word is used to denote volunteers. Also, historically the term volunteer changed dramatically from considering volunteering as soldiers who join wars without being forced to do so to our current understanding of volunteering as the underpinnings of civil society (Ellis & Noyes, 1990).

Second, volunteering appeals as a meaningful object of study across a broad spectrum of disciplines, ranging from economics and sociology to management science and social work. As a result, little consensus exists about which theoretical perspectives (and associated jargon) are best suited to the study of volunteers. Moreover, different disciplines attribute different meanings and functions to volunteering. In an economic paradigm, volunteering is mainly understood as 'unpaid work' with a calculable economic value, where volunteers undertake activity as an investment in their human capital (Freeman, 1997). Sociologists and political scientists, on the contrary, view volunteering as an expression of core societal principles such as solidarity, social cohesion, and democracy (Putnam, 2000; Wuthnow, 1998).

Third, existing theoretical accounts of volunteering are biased toward what DiMaggio coined as a 'covering-law perspective', reflecting an "image of the world in which variables explain one another" (DiMaggio, 1995, p.391). Wilson's 'folk categories' implicitly alludes to the strong empirical surplus in the concepts and categories of volunteering. Present theories predominantly focus on uncovering the 'laws of volunteering', that is, to explain the occurrence or non-occurrence of the phenomenon. Key predictors of volunteer participation are identified through empirical analysis and subsequently used as theoretical building blocks by means of more generic terms such as 'cultural capital', 'social resources' or 'dominant status'. Although such concepts are indispensable in understanding the underlying dynamics of volunteering, they correspond closely to the empirical observations made. Moreover, volunteering is treated as a unidimensional category devoid of any complexity. In spite of their validity, dominant theories thus represent only one view on theory, and should be complemented with more process-oriented accounts and attempts to 'defamiliarize' and 'enlighten' our knowledge, for example by questioning conventional domain assumptions (DiMaggio, 1995; Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007). In this respect, DiMaggio argued that 'good theory' is multidimensional and that the best theories are hybrids, resulting from combining different approaches to theory (DiMaggio, 1995).

Such a 'hybrid theoretical strategy' may be particularly useful for the conceptualization of volunteering as an intrinsically complex phenomenon. This article, therefore, seeks to combine, in a comprehensive and systematic way, the 'multiple goodness' of current approaches to, and principles of, the theorization of volunteering.

### **A hybrid conceptual framework of volunteering**

We advance a new conceptual framework that takes the complexities and contradictions ingrained in our object of inquiry as a fundamental point of departure. The three layers of complexity identified provide us with the essential building blocks of our hybrid framework. First, the *problem of definition* deals with the essential or constituent elements of volunteering. Second, the *problem of interdisciplinarity* compels us to reflect upon why it is important to study volunteering, that is, to understand why we collectively started an investigative journey. We, therefore, consider the functions and meaning that different disciplines attribute to volunteering. Third, the notion of *good theory being multidimensional* requires broadening our horizon of inquiry beyond the dominant approach to theorizing as producing validated knowledge "with data as our ultimate jury" (Van Maanen et al. 2007, p.1148). We aim to enlighten and enrich our understanding of volunteering by complementing this stream of theorizing with alternative approaches.

Following DiMaggio (1995), we note distinctions between three key theoretical approaches. First, theories that focus on explanation and deal with two core questions: who volunteers (determinants of volunteering) and why do people volunteer (motivations and benefits)? Second, process-oriented or narrative theories that seek to understand how people volunteer, that is, to conceptualize the complex nature of volunteering as well as the way it unfolds as a process over time and in interaction with its environment. Third, theories that aim to enlighten our knowledge by questioning dominant assumptions and look to volunteering through new conceptual lenses.

Table 1 provides an overview of our hybrid framework. It is important to emphasize that we do not consider it as the ultimate theory of volunteering. Rather, we propose it as an innovative

heuristic tool that will allow students of volunteering to navigate more adequately through the existing theoretical landscape. Our aim, therefore, is not to provide a complete overview but rather to set out some key samples of theories and concepts of volunteering on our hybrid conceptual map.

\*\*\*Insert Table 1 about here\*\*\*

### **What? The constituent elements of volunteering**

The quest for defining volunteers and volunteerism is an elusive task that has baffled scholars for years (Carson, 1999; Smith, 1982; Van Til, 1998; Wilson, 2000). Typically, existing definitions focus on detailing what volunteering is *not*. In essence, it is not biologically necessary, it is not paid labor, it is not slavery or forced labor, it is not kinship care, and it is not spontaneous help. There also is a tendency to separate volunteering from activities that promote hate or violence, or violate the law (such as criminal activity). However, volunteers can and do engage in activities that may be considered disreputable and antisocial, such as volunteering for the KKK or engaging in forms of civil disobedience, yet legitimating their actions by claiming to advance the public good. Musick and Wilson (2008) further point to a common demarcation between volunteering and activism: “Volunteerism targets people; activism targets structures [...] The activist changes while the volunteer maintains” (p.18). Indeed, empirical research shows that in the everyday discourse on volunteering there is a tendency to de-politicize volunteer work, and to emphasize its virtuous and compassionate nature (Eliasoph, 1998; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Wuthnow, 1991).

While all these negations limit, in a social constructionist way, the borders of volunteering, it leaves void in our ability to understand what volunteering *is*. Cnaan and Amroffell (1994) and Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) reviewed over 200 definitions of volunteering and performed a content analysis of what is defined as volunteering. Their analysis revealed that all definitions of volunteering discuss the provision of time, labor, and expertise and are centered on four axes: (1) free will; (2) availability and nature of remuneration; (3) the proximity to the beneficiaries; and (4) a formal agency. Further analysis of these four axes revealed that many definitions are inconsistent as

to their level or purity. For example, free will can range from one's internal will to a school requirement and in between are friends' or relatives' persuasion, social or religious norms or employers' expectation. Similarly, the remuneration axis can range from zero fiscal support to reimbursement for expenses or time lost. The final axis differentiates between volunteering for a formal agency and informal volunteering. Informal volunteers are self appointed and self managed, engaging in activities such as helping neighbors, supervising local traffic flow or sending information to politicians. Informal volunteering is more difficult to assess and excluded from many surveys of volunteering such as the US Census. As we will discuss later, informal volunteering is more frequent among lower classes and ethnic minorities.

These four axes drive through what most people understand to be a volunteer act and add to understanding the essence of what volunteering is. Still, as we indicated in the introduction, volunteering encompasses a wide field of activities that are quite distinct from each other. It is difficult to envision the chair of the board of the Metropolitan Opera and the young girl distributing drinks in a community race as both equally volunteering. Yet, the basic construct of volunteering includes them both. This vast variation in volunteering creates another difficulty. People who are doing the same task willingly and for no remuneration may or may not define this activity as a volunteer activity. An example may be a professor who speaks at a community club meeting and receives no remuneration. Some professors will define it as a volunteer activity and some as a public service while others as an extension of what is publicly expected from university professors. Consequently, some will report such activity as volunteering and some will not. Thus, the statistics about volunteering are murky and the knowledge about who volunteers and for what activities is clouded by people's differential understanding of the construct of volunteering.

In an attempt to assess what people generally perceive when they define a certain activity as volunteering, Handy and her colleagues (2000) conducted a cross-national study. They found that the most foundational unit of the construction of the volunteer concept is a cost-benefit analysis: "The

individual incurring higher net cost is likely to be perceived as ‘more’ of a volunteer than someone with a lower net cost” (Handy et al. 2000, p.47-48). Combined with the limits of what is not volunteering and the four axes of volunteering, any labor that falls within these limits has to be perceived as more costly than beneficial to the person performing the volunteer activity (Handy et al., 2000; Meijs et al., 2003).

### **Volunteering as a meaningful object of investigation across disciplines**

Besides the problem of definition, a second layer of complexity involves grasping the multiple meanings and functions attributed to volunteering from different disciplinary perspectives. Even if some fundamental agreement exists about the essential components ingrained in any type of volunteer activity, what these activities eventually mean varies enormously across disciplines (see also Haski-Leventhal, 2009).

Conceptualizing volunteering in its full complexity should involve a systematic reflection on why it is a meaningful object of investigation for scholars in a broad range of disciplines and how each discipline idiosyncratically treats volunteering. Our hybrid framework of volunteering, therefore, accounts for the rich ensemble of conceptual tastes and disciplinary viewpoints that the field of volunteering embraces. We limit ourselves to some key disciplines that have studied volunteering systematically and extensively, namely economics, sociology, psychology, and political science.

#### The economics perspective on volunteering

From an economic point of view, volunteering is a paradox. Given economists’ basic assumption of human behavior to be self interested and rational, volunteers defy this core supposition in that they undertake activities wherein their costs exceed their benefits. There are several micro-economic explanations for this apparently irrational behavior, with volunteers referred to as altruists (Andreoni, 1990; Freeman, 1997; Hackl, Halla, & Pruckner, 2007; Ziemek, 2006). First, ‘private benefits models’ assume that individuals receive private benefits from volunteering. On the



one hand, the 'investment model' focuses on exchange benefits, suggesting that volunteers receive training and acquire skills through volunteering which enhances their human capital. On the other hand, the 'consumption model' emphasizes private benefit such as the joy or 'warm glow' that volunteers receive from the very act of volunteering (Andreoni, 1990; Rose-Ackerman, 1996)

Second, the 'public goods model' assumes that individuals donate their time to increase the provision of public goods and services that they value. However, considering the non-excludable nature of public goods, volunteers work for the benefit of others. This model rests on the assumption of pure altruism, wherein the interests in the well-being of the recipients is desired by the volunteers (Duncan, 1999; Unger, 1991). If the public goods model were to hold, that is, if volunteers only cared about the actual levels of public goods in society then we would expect a 'crowding-out' effect of volunteering if the government's provision of public goods increased. However several studies find just the opposite, namely that high level of government social welfare spending is linked with high levels of volunteering (Day & Devlin, 1999; Duncan, 1999; Salamon & Sokolowski 2003). This suggests that volunteers also care for other benefits that accrue from volunteering such as those suggested by the private benefits model. Most economists indeed embrace the middle road and argue that individuals are 'impure altruists' (Andreoni, 1990) who are interested in both private and public benefits of volunteering. Thus, giving, and by extension volunteering, enters the individual's utility function twice: once as a private good and once as a public good, giving rise to private as well as public benefits.

From an organizational perspective, economists are interested in the supply and demand for volunteers. Much of this literature has focused on the supply side predicting volunteering among the general population using the above models of private and public benefits of volunteering to the volunteer (Freeman, 1997; Menchik & Weisbrod, 1987; Smith, 1994). In all cases of modeling the volunteer labor supply, the implicit assumption is that organizations are willing to use all the volunteer labor that is offered (quantity and quality) for volunteer jobs they establish. In other

words, the assumption is made that demand for (volunteer) labor is infinite when the wage rate of labor is zero. However, although volunteers do not impose direct wage costs, they do impose other costs; hence the equating of a zero wage rate with zero costs is not a realistic assumption (Steinberg, 1990). An organization's non-wage costs of employing volunteers in terms of day-to-day operating costs such as recruitment, screening, training, managing, and providing office space, materials, and so on are significant.

Only two studies empirically estimate the demand for volunteers; these studies ask if organizations that use volunteers are ready to accept all of the volunteer labour offered to them, or whether they make some sort of demand-side decision as to how much volunteer labor to use? Emanuele (1996) estimates a downward sloping demand curve for volunteer labor for nonprofit organizations in the United States that suggests volunteers are not free goods. Handy and Srinivasan (2005), using data from Canadian hospitals, find the determinants for the demand curve for volunteer labor and demonstrate that hospitals are sensitive to the costs of volunteer labor. Together these studies show that organizations using volunteer labor do not accept all volunteer labor that is supplied. In determining the demand for volunteer labor, it is necessary to monetize the value of volunteer labor to the organization. Economists use standard techniques such as the average hourly compensation rate for paid labor, wages the organization may have to pay if volunteers were replaced by paid labor, or opportunity costs derived from the average hourly wage volunteers are willing to accept if they were to be paid (Brown, 1999; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004). Accounting scholars take this one step further and suggest that organizations report their volunteer hours in financial statements, making clear how value is added with the use of volunteers (Mook et al, 2007).

#### The sociology perspective

Sociologists understand volunteering essentially as a social phenomenon that involves patterns of social relationships and interactions among individuals, groups, and

associations/organizations. Sociologists' interest in the systematic study of volunteering can be traced back to the classical question of social order and social solidarity, or the degree of integration of a society (Durkheim, 1893). It refers to the kinds of social ties that bind members of a society to one another. Volunteering, because of its voluntary, unpaid, and collectively oriented nature, represents a unique type of social bonds distinct from ascribed and more formal social ties and networks (kinship or workplace), and abstract systems of enforced solidarity (welfare state). It is considered an essential and exceptional form of social solidarity that binds society together. The act of volunteering stands out as a primary expression of core human values such as altruism, compassion, concern for others, generosity, social responsibility, and community spirit (Wuthnow, 1991). It is a fundamental expression of community belonging and group identity, and contributes to individuals' social integration.

From this perspective, sociologists have been preoccupied with understanding who volunteers, that is, the social profile of volunteers (Musick & Wilson, 2008), and why they do so – issues that will be dealt with in great detail in the following sections. On the one hand, such questions focus on structural questions of social stratification seeking to identify key social-economic determinants of systematic in- or exclusion from volunteer participation (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Sherraden, Tang, Thirupathy, & Nagchoudhuri, 2003; Musick, Wilson, & Bynum 2000; Wilson & Musick, 1997a&b). On the other hand, cultural approaches explore the 'values of volunteering' (Dekker and Halman, 2003) by studying cultural perceptions of the essence and meaning of volunteering (Handy et al., 1996; Meijs et al., 2003; Wuthnow, 1991) and mechanisms of socialization by family, peers, and institutes of education (Bekkers, 2007; Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Wuthnow, 1995). Interestingly, sociologists have primarily dealt with the question of social integration through volunteer participation at the individual level. It is mainly political scientists who have studied collective outcomes under the common notion of social capital (Putnam, 1993).

A second major stream of sociological research understands volunteering as a productive activity that serves certain functions and meets certain needs. While questions of social cohesion tend to emphasize the value-based and collective nature of volunteering, here the focus is on the services provided by volunteers, who are considered an enormous pool of human resources – knowledge, skills, and unpaid labor. The volunteer work is situated in a formal organizational setting and often involves working with clients or for a cause. Here, students of nonprofit organization and management, social policy, and social work join sociologists in studying the ways in which organizational processes and volunteer practices contribute in producing welfare and tackling various social problems. Volunteer work often complements professional service delivery (and is often considered the ‘human face of the professions’), but also can be an important agent of social change, in detecting unmet societal needs, fighting against social injustice, and empowering disadvantaged groups (Ellis & Noyes, 1990). Volunteering often is the prelude to a professional activity such as the case with the “friendly visitors” who became professional social workers or amateur ball players who turned into professional athletes (Lubove, 1965).

#### The psychology perspective

Among social and personality psychologists, there is a long-standing tradition of research on prosocial behavior (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). In the past, the main focus was on a very specific type of helping behavior, namely the unplanned, immediate, and low-cost bystander intervention to a stranger in physical distress. More recently, there has been a growing interest in the study of volunteerism because it provides a distinctive perspective on the nature of helping and prosocial actions (Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Penner, 2002). In contrast to the spontaneous interventions of bystanders in emergency situations, where “the situational demands are often so strong that they may suppress the influence of dispositional variables on helping decisions” (Penner, 2002, p.450), volunteering is a sustained and planned form of prosocial behavior that typically results from

deliberate consideration and choice. Consequently, more enduring dispositional attributes of individuals, especially personality traits, are more likely to manifest themselves.

The psychological study of volunteering is thus concerned with the identification of personality traits that distinguish volunteers from non-volunteers and relate to various aspects of volunteer behavior. While economists assume rational behavior on part of all individuals, and sociologists concentrate on the social determinants of prosocial behavior, psychologists call attention to individual differences in psychological characteristics: “Even when the choice situation involves no material or social incentives, there are still people who seem to have an eye for the ‘other(s)’ in a social dilemma (Bekkers, 2004, p.27). Moreover, these personality traits are stable dispositions to act in a certain way, regardless of the situation, and this is why they are theoretically appealing: “knowing something about an individual’s personality enables us to anticipate how he or she will react to situations, such as being asked to volunteer” (Music & Wilson, 2008, p.39).

Research has demonstrated that personality traits indeed help distinguish between volunteers and non-volunteers. Traits are organized hierarchically, with five common traits, the ‘Big Five’, at the broadest level. Of these higher-order traits, those that are conceptually linked to volunteerism (i.e., agreeableness and extraversion) are more strongly related to volunteerism behavior than less conceptually related traits (i.e., conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience) (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005). Agreeableness is especially important as volunteering is often triggered as a response to requests from significant others (Murk & Stephan, 1991). Lower-order traits, referred to as specific prosocial motives, usually are better predictors of actual behavior and also mediate between the higher-order traits and prosocial behavior (Bekkers, 2004; Carlo et al., 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2008).

Specific traits characteristic of volunteers are social value orientation, empathic concern, perspective taking, self-efficacy, and positive self-esteem (Bekkers, 2004; Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Cohen, Vigoda & Samorly, 2001; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Handy and Cnaan (2007) demonstrated

that those who suffer from moderate to high levels of social anxiety, this is the avoidance of interacting with unknown people and the fear of new environments, will tend to avoid volunteering. More generally, the cluster of traits typical of volunteers was labeled the 'prosocial personality type' with other-oriented empathy and helpfulness as the two core dimensions (Penner, 2002).

A critical question is how much of the variation in volunteering is due to differences in personality or to the social situation (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Psychological differences are hypothesized to have a major impact in 'weak situations', that is, in social contexts that do not involve clear-cut normative expectations on how to behave, and when the behavior costs little time and money (Bekkers, 2004; Lissek, Pine, & Grillon, 2006). In fact, this hypothesis was earlier discovered by Bronfenbrenner (1960), who lamented the "vanishing impact" of the psychological variables when the socio-economic characteristics were entered into the regression. In his words: "What counts most are one's skills, resources, and willingness to serve" (p. 61). More recently, Bekkers (2004), in a study of the Netherlands, also concluded that giving and volunteering are clearly related to social conditions but show limited relations to individual differences in psychological characteristics. Moreover, in contrast to the weak-situation and low-cost hypotheses, personality effects were not stronger when prosocial behavior required lower material costs or when social norms were less clear.

#### The political science perspective

Political science sees volunteerism as a major requirement for active civic society and democracy. People can claim their rights and enrich their community quality of life only when they are allowed to organize and capable of doing so, and form their own volunteer-led organizations. Sufficient volunteer labor is a required commodity needed by civic organizations to sustain their ability to generate bridging social capital, and thus assist communities effectively, and to buffer between citizens and super powers such as governments and corporations. Without active volunteer participation, a society is at risk of being totalitarian and oppressive. Verba, Scholzman and Brady

(1995) found that volunteer activities provide many citizens with opportunities to acquire civic skills and promote political participation. Organized volunteering in churches and local neighborhood associations are a breeding ground for leadership and organizational skills that are transferable to other political arenas – a function also referred to as a ‘school for democracy’. Volunteering is considered a way “to instill civic values, enhance political behavior, and improve democracy and society” (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005, p.230).

Interestingly, both political liberals and conservatives see advantages to volunteerism but from different perspectives. Liberals are likely to view volunteering as a means to bolster or complement action by government and a means to make government stronger and more encompassing. Conservatives, however, are more inclined to argue that volunteerism is meant to substitute for government programs and reduce the scope and power of government (Campbell & Yonish, 2003). Within these two perspectives also lies some of the weaknesses of volunteering from a political science perspective. Strong volunteer activity provides an escape route for governments to diminish their commitment to and responsibility for the welfare of local citizens in need. Additionally, a strong volunteer force can minimize the power of a democratically elected government and give added voice to small groups especially elite-based volunteer groups.

### **Why do people volunteer? Motivations and benefits**

Motivation to volunteer (MTV) is a well-researched topic (Wilson 2000). In many ways the scholarly work in this field is distinct from studying motivation of paid employees. The vocational motivation literature focuses mostly on job retention, reduction in absenteeism, and enhancing effort (Steers & Porter, 1991). In contrast, the preponderance of literature on motivation in volunteering is focused on the decision to join the volunteer force. While no one wonders why someone may assume gainful employment, many ask why one would volunteer. This classical participation paradox, also known as the problem of collective action (Olson, 1965), drives the study

of MTV to focus much more on how volunteers account for their seemingly irrational behavior than on the amount of commitment to the act of volunteering.

There also are differing views of motivation depending upon whether one embraces a symbolic (sociological) or functional (psychological) approach. From a symbolic perspective, motivational accounts are considered part of a larger set of cultural understandings, that is, as an expression of certain values and beliefs (Dekker & Halman, 2003; Wuthnow, 1991). They are embedded in a culture of volunteering that emphasizes selfless and compassionate acts and disapproves of self-oriented or egoistic orientations. This approach reflects the social constructionist nature of motives. Motives, and more specifically talk about motives, are “constitutive of action, part of a discourse giving meaning to and helping to shape behavior” (Wilson, 2000, p.218). Motive talk thus helps to frame and justify our actions by referring to the broader set of cultural understandings. Consequently, the same act can have varying justifications: “the actor chooses whichever motive appears to be the most persuasive *depending on the social situation*. [...] Social *interaction* therefore determines when talk about specific motives is appropriate” (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p.71 – authors’ emphasis).

Second, the functional approach, which is more prevalent in research, treats motives as an expression of pre-existing needs and dispositions, thus preceding the action instead of being constructed through (inter)action. While social psychologists refer to a ‘functional match’ in terms of volunteering serving certain psychological needs and reflecting certain personality traits (Clary et al., 1998), rational-choice theorists argue that volunteers weigh costs and benefits of their participation and will not participate unless they are able to identify selective (material) incentives of the choice situation (cf. Olson, 1965). While research on MTV usually embraces both symbolic and functional reasons for volunteering, the rational choice perspective explicitly focuses on the benefits that volunteers derive in return for their efforts.



Across a great diversity of contexts and populations, scholars have consistently found MTV to be a complex interplay that is both altruistic and self-interested in nature (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Haski-Leventhal, 2009). Most studies conceptually distinguish between various dimensions along the altruism-egoism continuum. The most frequently used instrument for measuring multiple motivational dimensions, the “Volunteer Functions Inventory” (VFI) was developed by Clary and colleagues (Clary et al., 1998; Clary & Snyder, 1999). The VFI identifies six personal and social functions served by volunteering: value (acting upon important personal values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others); understanding (learn or exercise knowledge, skills use skills that may otherwise remain unused); enhancement (psychological development); career (goal of obtaining career-related experience); social (strengthen or create social relationships and deal with concerns over social rewards and punishments); and protective (reduce negative feelings or personal problems). Although the VFI provides a comprehensive map of the functions volunteering generally serves, Clary and Snyder (1999) pointed out that different volunteers pursue different goals and that the same volunteer may, in fact, have more than one important motivation.

Notwithstanding the wide use of categorical divisions in MTV, some authors have critically argued that these are artificial. Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen (1991) for instance stated that “Volunteers do not distinguish between types of motives (...) Volunteers act not from a single motive or a category of motives but from a combination of motives” (p. 281). Yeung (2004) also pointed to the inherently holistic and interlocking nature of different motivational dimensions. She furthermore argued that each motivation is of an intricate multilayered nature as well. For instance, while altruism is identified as a central MTV, we have little insight in what a “desire to help” really means.

While the notion of motivation to volunteer refers to the general question of why people engage in such activities, hereby building on the implicit assumption that there always is an element of service to others, conceptualizations in terms of benefits and rewards focus explicitly on the individual return for the volunteers themselves (Haski-Leventhal, 2009). It is often argued that while

other-regarding reasons may induce people to get involved in volunteering, volunteering must produce significant benefits to enhance and sustain volunteering (cf. the 'personal benefits' model we discussed above). Rational choice theorists hereby approach volunteering as a productive activity devoid of any symbolic meaning. Volunteers materially profit from their participation by enhancing their human capital, but also gain from their involvement in terms of social resources and certain psycho-social benefits. Depending on the form of volunteerism, such benefits may include increased employability, social integration and support, 'warm glow', mental and physical health, life satisfaction, self-efficacy, civic mindedness, collective goods, and trust (Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Ohmer 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1999; Van Willigen, 2000).

### **Who volunteers? The determinants of volunteering**

One of the most agreed upon aspects of volunteer research is that people with higher social and economic status tend to volunteer more (Wilson, 2000). David Horton Smith (1994) conceptualized this phenomenon as the "dominant status model." This mechanism by no means implies that volunteering is exclusively carried out by the rich, educated, and well situated in society. However, those with high socioeconomic statuses have higher rates of volunteering and they also tend to fulfill more prestigious and meaningful tasks in the many formal organizations that employ volunteers.

Varieties of explanations were offered to account for this phenomenon. Wilson and Musick (1997b) advanced a 'resource model' based on three basic premises: volunteer work is (1) productive work that requires human capital, (2) collective behavior that requires social capital, and (3) ethically guided work that requires cultural capital. It is similar to donating money. Those who have financial surplus sufficient to provide for their basic needs and who are secured are more likely to donate than others. Thus, surplus allows people to share both from their financial wealth and from their time and expertise (Loseke, 1997). Alternatively, it is also known that people with higher education and higher social-economic status tend to join groups and organizations. These groups provide connections and

enhance one's status and networks. As such, volunteering is only one of many other aspects of joining common among those of higher SES who also volunteer (Farmer, 2006; Jones, 2006). Besides socio-economic determinants of volunteering, social psychologists assessed the psychological traits of volunteers. As discussed above, however, the relative impact of individual differences in personality in comparison to social conditions and norms is weak (Bekkers, 2004; Musick & Wilson, 2008).

Dominant status not only relates to the supply of volunteers but also to their demand by organizations. Miller and colleagues (2002), for example, found that most agencies that look for volunteers do not take volunteers with disabilities and pose barriers in their way to become volunteers. According to Morrow-Howell et al. (2003), volunteering opportunities are available to people with means, skills, and status. Being recruited depends on three organizational mechanisms: availability (agencies' preference for race, marital status, student status), eligibility (education, age, ethnicity, nationality), and flexibility (parenting, employment).

Similarly, Musick and Wilson (2008) noted that while people who are asked are more likely to volunteer; not everyone is as likely to be asked. In their recruitment strategies, nonprofit organizations tend to target people with high "participation potential" (p.290), which obviously relates back to the above-discussed resource-approach to volunteering. Musick & Wilson (2008, p. 293) note that "One reason, perhaps the only reason, why some factors are associated with volunteering is that they increase the chances of being asked."

### **How do people volunteer? The nature and process of volunteering**

As we have stated in the introduction, theories of who volunteers and why tend to be biased towards a 'covering laws' point of view. These theories essentially concentrate on explaining participation in volunteering, that is, the factors that predict the phenomenon's occurrence or non-occurrence. In spite of being legitimate and indispensable, an important limitation is that they treat volunteering as a uniform category. The complex reality of volunteering is reduced to a

unidimensional measure: one predicts volunteer participation in general (yes or no), as if it were a uniform and robust entity (Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994; Cnaan et al., 1996; Hustinx, 2005). Furthermore, volunteering is considered a stable factor, not taking into account how the nature of involvement may change through the different phases of organizational socialization and over time. Such issues warrant a more process-oriented approach that seeks to deepen our understanding of how people volunteer, that is, the nature and process of their involvement.

First, it should be recognized that volunteering is an inherently multidimensional phenomenon. Existing research has focused on manifold aspects of volunteering: length of service, intensity of involvement, organizational commitment, motivation to volunteer, and so on. Although there is a sense of complexity, few studies have explored the interplay among these separate variables (see also Cnaan & Amroffell, 1994). Pearce (1993) identified a basic distinction between 'core' and 'peripheral' volunteers and described their differential organizational experiences on the basis of a number of structural (e.g., formal office, intensity of involvement) and cultural (e.g., dedication to the organization) features. Although the study tentatively identified systematic interactions among different volunteer dimensions, the plural nature of involvement nevertheless was reduced to what Pearce described as a 'bifurcated volunteer reality'.

A more systematic theoretical account of the multidimensional nature of volunteering was developed by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003). These authors advanced a new analytical framework of 'styles of volunteering' (the SOV Construct) based on three criteria. First, the nature of volunteering is essentially multidimensional (motivations, frequency of volunteering, types of activities, etc.). Second, volunteering is a multilayered phenomenon that requires multiple levels of analysis (structural and cultural, but also the level of the individual volunteer, the organization, and the broader context). Finally, volunteering is a multiform reality. Across the various dimensions, structural and cultural indicators of volunteering intertwine in multiple ways; hence should be analyzed simultaneously so as to understand their complex interactions and reveal distinct styles of

volunteering (see for instance Hustinx 2005). More differentiated volunteer classifications were also developed as a response to the recent rise of more episodic forms of volunteering, seeking to conceptualize the varying ways in which volunteers get involved in short-term and one-off assignments (Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan 2006; MacDuff, 2004).

While these frameworks consider the complex multidimensional and multiform nature of volunteering, other frameworks account for the dynamic nature of the volunteer experience. Omoto and Snyder (2002) were among the first to conceptualize the volunteer process or the 'life cycle of volunteers'. Their model however only distinguished among three broad stages: antecedents, experiences, and consequences; thereby treating the complex stages and transitions involved in the volunteer experience itself as a single category. A more differentiated and complex model of the process of volunteering, the 'volunteer stages and transitions model' (VSTM), was developed by Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (2008). Within the process of organizational socialization, the VSTM identifies five distinct phases (nominee, newcomer, emotional involvement, established volunteering, and retiring), four transitions (entrance, accommodation, affiliation, renewal), and two kinds of turnover (early ejection and exit at the end). The authors explain transitions between the phases and detail the process, experiences, and emotions involved in each phase as they are reflected in different aspects of volunteer work. In an earlier publication, Lois (1999) contended that a fixed, linear progression of volunteering through the various stages and dimensions of organizational socialization may not be universally appropriate. She therefore proposed a layered stage model that builds on the key assumption that volunteers' socialization does not always occur in the same order and that across the various dimensions; volunteers may occupy several stages at one time.

### **The context of volunteering**

Gaining a full understanding of the determinants, nature and process of volunteering requires adding yet another layer of complexity: to theorize the context in which the phenomenon

occurs and unfolds (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Penner, 2002; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). The previous sections have focused on the individual volunteers and their motivations, benefits, personality traits, social-economic characteristics, styles and stages of volunteering. However, it is essential to situate these various aspects in a dynamic interplay with the broader social, structural, and cultural environment. Volunteer activities are embedded in interpersonal relationships with other volunteers, paid staff, and clients, as well as in specific organizational programs and settings, and broader societal structures and dynamics. Consequently, it is important to include in our hybrid framework a 'volunteer ecology' with different 'nested systems' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Various bodies of literature have theorized these nested ecological systems of volunteering and it is not possible to review them in this brief article. An important component of micro-system theories is the notion that volunteering is frequently a group activity (Haski-Leventhal & Cnaan, 2009), and that being embedded in a volunteer group has important effects on the volunteer and the volunteer experience (e.g. Simon, Strumer, & Steffens, 2000). Meso-system accounts situate volunteers and volunteer groups in an organizational context that is characterized by some degree of management and structure. A considerable part of organization studies have dealt with examining to what extent established principles of management of paid employees could be applied to the volunteer context. For many reasons, volunteers require a distinct approach. For example, volunteers cannot be motivated or sanctioned through salary changes, or they work only a few hours a week, and therefore are less influenced by the organization's culture. As a consequence, specialized theories and practices have been developed to understand the particular nature and various stages of volunteer management (Brudney & Meijs, 2009; Cnaan & Cascio, 1998; Liao-Troth, 2008).

The complex question of how the larger socio-cultural context, or the macro-system, impacts individual volunteering has received the least attention among scholars in the field (Hodgkinson, 2003; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2000). Two emerging streams of theorizing can be identified. First are theories of cross-national variation in prevalence of volunteering, second are process-

oriented theories that aims at a more dynamic understanding of volunteering in relation to the macro-context.

The first approach focuses on explaining country differences in the rate and type of volunteering above and beyond individual-level determinants, against the background of historically evolved divergences in the political (stability and level of democracy, welfare state regimes), economic (national economic development), and cultural (values, religion) characteristics of nations (Hodgkinson, 2003; Inglehart, 2003; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2003). One of the most developed approaches in this regard is the ‘social-origins theory’, advanced by Salamon and Anheier (1998), and predicated on Esping-Anderson’s (1990) ‘worlds of welfare capitalism’. According to this theory, some prototypes of nonprofit regimes exist, such as Liberal, Social-Democratic, Corporatist, and Statist, with varying levels of government social welfare spending and nonprofit sector size, as well as amount and type of volunteering (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2003).

In Table 1, we classify theories of cross-national variation in the “theory as explanation” approach. While the institutional path dependency of volunteering is recognized, these theories remain largely static and unidimensional in their account of the dependent variable. The focus is on cross-national explanation of volunteering, based on multilevel modeling of individual-level and country-level determinants. For example, the three types of capital (i.e., human, social, and cultural) that predict volunteering at the individual level are also important resources at the country level (Parboteeah, Cullen, & Lim, 2004).

The second stream of macro-theorizing, in contrast, is process-oriented in nature and describes how volunteering *itself* is undergoing radical change as a consequence of the advanced processes of modernization and individualization of recent decades (Eckstein, 2001; Jakob, 1993; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Lorentzen & Hustinx, 2007; Wollebaek & Selle, 2003; Wuthnow, 1998). A focal point of analysis is on the changing living conditions and biographies of contemporary

individuals, and through this, on the changing availability and willingness to volunteer. Recent macro-structural changes are assumed to result in a shift from former group-based practices and collective monitoring of agents to the autonomous self-monitoring of individual life narratives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In addition, cultural accounts highlight pervasive changes in the basic beliefs and values of people. Inglehart (1997) identified two major dimensions of cultural change: from traditional to secular-rational values, and from survival to self-expression values. Ongoing socio-economic development incites a process of “human development” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) that breeds self-expressive values and broadens individual choice at the expense of traditional authorities and collective frames of reference. Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) coined the notion of “reflexive volunteering” to posit that present-day volunteering is entrenched in the active (re-)design of individualized biographies, identities, and lifestyles. Compared with traditional volunteering as an enduring commitment, firmly embedded in collective habits and organizational routines, the “new volunteerism” is characterized by more episodic volunteer efforts, more self-oriented motivations, and weaker organizational attachments.

In addition to long-term processes of societal change, more sudden fluctuations and events, such as economic recession, natural or security disaster, and political shifts also have huge impacts on levels and fields of volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008). For example, the post-Katrina periods brought tens of thousands of volunteers to Louisiana and Mississippi, first providing basic goods and later helping to rebuild houses. While their massive efforts highlight the positive and potent side of volunteering, we ought to focus attention also on its critical side.

### **Critical perspectives**

Critical issues in the study of volunteering generally relate to the common notion that volunteering is a good and desirable activity. Various critical views however have been expressed against such assumptions.



A major issue relates to questions of social inequality in volunteering. Given that volunteer labor is done by those who have ample resources, and that agencies are looking for members of this dominant status group to join them as volunteers, members of lower socioeconomic groups are further marginalized. They are deprived of opportunities for enhancing their human and social capital. Based on extensive cross-national analysis of trends in Europe and North-America, Musick and Wilson (2008, p.533) conclude that over the past quarter century, “there is no evidence to suggest any change in the class bias of volunteering or in the relative exclusion of racial and ethnic minority groups from volunteer work”. This is all the more striking given increasing policy efforts to enhance social inclusion through volunteer participation. While volunteering is hailed as supporting democratic and participatory principles and as a means to give voice to the more vulnerable segments of society; in reality it acts to perpetuate existing power imbalances.

An alternative viewpoint is that members of lower status groups may be less engaged in formal volunteering but are active in informal volunteering. This perspective is especially strong regarding volunteering among African-Americans (Boddie, 2004; Latting, 1990). Smith, Shue, Vest, and Villarreal (1999) found that “members of ethnic communities often report caretaking activities which in the mainstream society are more likely to be performed by government and nonprofit organizations” (p. 253). This has induced some authors to express critical views of the “participatory cultures of affluent populations” and to recognize a complementary “fourth sector perspective” (Williams, 2002). More frequently, however, it is assumed that members from disadvantaged sub-sections of society actually can greatly benefit from formal volunteer involvement (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2006; Miller, Schleien, & Bedini, 2003; Segal & Weisbrod, 2002) and volunteering is increasingly used as a policy tool by means of which social exclusion and marginalization can be minimized (Miller et al., 2002).

Another point of caution relates to the tendency to merely emphasize positive outcomes of participation in volunteering. Scant attention has been paid to the possibility of maladaptive

responses to volunteering, for example in the experience of burnout (Capner & Caltabiano, 1993; Kulik, 2007). Kulik (2007) explained this lack of interest by the paradoxical association of burnout with activities that are undertaken out of free will; hence it is easily assumed that this phenomenon is irrelevant in the context of volunteering. Studies found that working closely with populations that may not be improved (such as AIDS victims, hospice work, and work with runaway youth) are more prone to burnout (Gabard, 1997; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008).

Additionally, volunteering may not necessarily produce the expected positive outcomes. Eliasoph (1998), for example, contended that the neo-Tocquevillian celebration regarding the positive association between active community volunteering and the formation and strengthening of social ties, bridging social capital, and public conversation is far too optimistic. Eliasoph found that civic engagement by most volunteers is quite 'ordinary' and 'close to home.' Most volunteers avoided political issues and preferred to focus on service tasks. As such, volunteering can claim only a marginal contribution to the buffering effects and the hope for establishing a stratum of active and concerned residents. Eliasoph concluded that, in fact, many people use volunteering to excuse themselves from political responsibility. People can focus on a small circle of concern and thus avoid any concern for or involvement in the big issues and the political process. As such, volunteering can be undemocratic and placating.

Finally, volunteering may allow governments, as part of a neoliberal agenda, to decrease their responsibilities to the welfare of citizens and to privatize public services as volunteers and voluntary organizations are filling the gap. Musick and Wilson (2008) noted that government agencies tend to define volunteering mainly in terms of service work that supports the status quo: "Western governments have, with varying degrees of emphasis, adopted the position that volunteer work, *properly defined and regulated*, should be supported and encouraged. The consequences of this new "partnership" are not yet fully apparent, but it will likely encourage safe, non-controversial, and "non-political" volunteering at the expense of advocacy and social activism" (Musick & Wilson,

2008, p.521 – our emphasis). It thus is important to uncover these hidden ideologies, and reflect upon how they affect the nature and function of volunteerism.

### **Conclusion**

Our aim in this article was to provide an integrated conceptual framework of volunteering that will demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of this phenomenon. As Kilduff has pointedly observed, “The route to good theory leads not through gaps in the literature but through an engagement with problems in the world that you find personally interesting” (Kilduff, 2006, p.252). This idea clearly applies to the study of volunteering, a phenomenon that has intrigued scholars across a broad spectrum of disciplines and backgrounds. From highly diverging points of view, they all share a basic fascination with volunteering as standing out as something unique, atypical and even paradoxical and elusive in many ways. A major part of the theoretical work on volunteering has merely been occupied with trying to come to grips with what it exactly is and how we could even imagine it to exist. These elementary questions have generated a rich body of literature on the definition, meaning, and functions of volunteering, as well as on the motivations to volunteer and the socio-economic and psychological determinants of volunteering.

In this article, we took as our main point of departure the observation that, while volunteering has been granted systematic and wide-ranging scholarly attention, no integrated theory has emerged. We have argued that, in order to go beyond the existing fragmentation in theories and concepts of volunteering, three fundamental challenges had to be addressed. First, the problem of definition, or the difficulty of drawing clear boundaries between what volunteering is and what it is not. Second, the problem of disciplinary heterogeneity, or the different meanings and functions various disciplines attach to the phenomenon. Third, the implicit bias towards covering the ‘laws of volunteering’ in mainstream theories, and the need to complement this approach with alternative streams of theorizing. Based on the observation that good theory is multidimensional, we followed a

‘hybrid theoretical strategy’ that aimed to bring together the ‘multiple goodness’ of current approaches and models (DiMaggio, 1995).

We identified these challenges as three core layers of complexity that implied various theoretical questions and approaches. Besides the questions of definition and multidisciplinary, we categorized existing theories as theories that focus on explaining who volunteers and why, theories of the nature, process and context of volunteering, and theories that enlighten our knowledge beyond conventional assumptions and paradigms.

By means of these differentiations, we were able to advance an innovative heuristic tool that could be used as a system of navigation through the existing theoretical landscape. Rather than a comprehensive summary of existing theories; our hybrid framework is a conceptual instrument to better locate and integrate variant bodies of literature in terms of the substantial questions they address, the basic meanings and functions they attribute to volunteering, and the types of theories they represent. Furthermore, our hybrid theoretical map may help researchers to get ‘off the beaten track’ by locating underexplored issues and discovering unorthodox approaches and insights. As such, we hope to have offered an innovative and potentially unifying frame for a fragmented field of research.

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*Table 1: A hybrid conceptual framework of volunteering*

<b><i>Layers of complexity</i></b>	<b><i>Theoretical building blocks</i></b>	<b><i>Key frameworks and approaches</i></b>
The problem of definition	What do we study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Defining what volunteering is not</li> <li>- Defining what volunteering is</li> <li>- Volunteering as a social construct</li> </ul>
The problem of multidisciplinary	Why do we study it?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economists: impure altruism</li> <li>- Sociologists: social cohesion and social welfare</li> <li>- Psychologists: prosocial personality</li> <li>- Political scientists: citizenship and democracy</li> </ul>
The problem of theory as multidimensional	Theory as explanation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why do people volunteer</li> <li>- Determinants of volunteering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivations and benefits</li> <li>- Dominant status model</li> <li>- Resource model</li> <li>- Theories of cross-national variation in volunteering</li> </ul>
	Theory as a narrative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do people volunteer</li> <li>- The context of volunteering</li> <li>- Volunteering and social change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Styles of volunteering</li> <li>- The volunteer process</li> <li>- The volunteer ecology</li> <li>- Volunteer management</li> <li>- The changing institutional and biographical embedding of volunteering</li> </ul>
	Theory as enlightenment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Critical perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Issues of social inequality</li> <li>- Negative consequences of volunteering</li> <li>- Unmet expectations</li> <li>- Hidden ideologies</li> </ul>