

161. Volunteering

In general terms, volunteering refers to an array of activities by which individuals freely give their time to benefit others (Wilson 2000). Features commonly agreed to characterise volunteering are the deliberate and productive nature of an activity, that it is undertaken of one's own free will, without the expectation of financial gain and performed on behalf of causes, groups, organisations or individuals who desire help or assistance. In general, a distinction can be made between formal and informal volunteering. While formal volunteering takes place in structured organisational contexts such as clubs, associations and non-profit organisations and is characterised by some regularity and a commitment of time and effort, informal volunteering involves activities outside of formally organised structures but also outside one's own household. In addition, different forms of volunteering are distinguished in terms of the domain of the voluntary activity (e.g., sports, welfare, culture), its frequency or intensity (e.g., regular, episodic, or event volunteering) or the way it is performed (offline/face-to-face vs. online/virtual). Since formal volunteering is the type that has been studied most extensively in sociological and political science research, we mainly refer to this form in the following.

Concerning the question of who volunteers and why, there are three key explanatory lines found in the literature. First, individual resources and sociodemographic factors relating to time, money, skills and interests play a role (Ackermann and Manatschal 2018, 4455). The "individual asset" (Wilson 2012, 183) most consistently linked to volunteering is educational achievement. Highly educated individuals possess certain skills and cognitive capabilities conducive to most voluntary work and have more extensive and heterogeneous networks, making them more likely to be asked to volunteer. Further, it is argued that education promotes volunteering by heightening the awareness of social challenges, fostering empathy and building self-confidence (Musick and Wilson 2008). Likewise, higher socio-economic status (SES) in terms of income and occupation is typical of the volunteer profile (e.g., Niebuur et al. 2018; Wilson 2000). The relationship between age and volunteering is assumed to be non-linear in

nature, with a peak in middle age when work and family roles are settled (Wilson 2012). Restricted access to socioeconomic resources and feelings of alienation due to minority group status are possible explanations for lower engagement rates among (racial/ethnic) minorities, although empirical results are mixed in this regard (Musick and Wilson 2008; Niebuur et al. 2018). Structural inequality and socialisation processes also lead to gendered resource attributes with men being more likely to have the civic skills and women being more likely to have the social skills conducive to volunteering (Ackermann and Manatschal 2018, 4456; Musick and Wilson 2008, 172). Thus, the relationship between gender and volunteering is complex, and gender effects vary according to life stage, volunteer domain, context and between formal and informal volunteering. For example, females are slightly more likely to participate in formal voluntary work in the United States, but no consistent gender difference is found in Europe in this respect (Niebuur et al. 2018). Finally, being married or partnered and having children tends to increase the likelihood to volunteer. However, (recent) transition into parenthood was found to be inversely related to volunteering (Niebuur et al. 2018).

Second, certain psychological dispositions are linked to volunteering. Research shows that extraverted people in particular are predisposed to volunteer. But agreeableness or lower-order facets of this personality trait such as empathy and trust also tend to foster volunteering (Ackermann 2019; Musick and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2012). However, regarding trust, Bekkers (2012) finds that the higher levels of trust among volunteers are mainly due to selective attrition, that is, that persons with low trust are more likely to quit volunteering. Additionally, values and norms are necessary but not sufficient components of social action that help to explain some amount of the variation in volunteering (Musick and Wilson 2008). Sets of values relevant to volunteering are, for example, humanitarianism, materialism, individualism and religiosity (Musick and Wilson 2008). Empirically best documented is the positive impact of religiosity, often measured by church attendance (Niebuur et al. 2018; Wilson 2012). Further, the positive influence of the norms of generalised reciprocity, justice and social responsibility is highlighted (Musick and Wilson 2008). Psychological research has also shed

light on the motives underlying volunteering. For example, the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) (Clary et al. 1998) applies a functional viewpoint to examine “the needs met, the motives fulfilled and the functions served by volunteering” (Mannino et al. 2011, 129). It assesses six motivational functions that may differ between individuals and can help explain why people (continue to) volunteer. For example, people volunteer to express important values and beliefs such as altruism (values function) or to gain and exercise knowledge and skills (understanding function). However, it should be noted that while still proving useful in volunteer research, the VFI has been criticised for several reasons, for example, regarding the functions’ exhaustiveness and exclusiveness (Wilson 2012, 181).

Third, volunteering is influenced by the contextual setting. At the micro or interpersonal level, individuals embedded in larger and more diverse formal and informal social networks are more likely to volunteer because of higher chances of meeting volunteers, learning about volunteer opportunities and being expected or asked to volunteer (Musick and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2012). From a meso-level perspective, institutions such as schools, organisations, associations or congregations can also directly boost volunteering among their members by actively supporting or even mandating it, by socialising their members into volunteering and by increasing their resources (Nesbit et al. 2016). Shifting the analytical focus further towards the macro level, characteristics of geographically defined units (e.g., neighbourhoods, cities, states, regions, countries) can also shape volunteering, albeit with somewhat less consistent results than at the individual level. At the subnational level, the role of social diversity, especially racial or ethnic diversity, in the closer residential environment has received much scholarly attention. Most studies report a detrimental effect on volunteering (Baer et al. 2016), which is often explained by the fact that diversity lowers social trust (Wilson 2012). In addition, volunteering is generally more prevalent in rural than in urban areas (Paarlberg et al. 2022). At the national level, nations with strong and long-standing democratic institutions, higher average education levels and prospering economies tend to have higher volunteering rates (Baer et al. 2016, 580). With respect to religiosity, some studies find that a devout national context has

positive effects on volunteering (e.g., Ruiter and De Graaf 2006), while others report a negative (e.g., Prouteau and Sardinha 2015) or curvilinear relationship (e.g., Lim and MacGregor 2012). Empirical evidence on the impact of governmental welfare provision is inconclusive but tends to favour the idea that a generous welfare state provides people with the resources needed for voluntary work (e.g., economic security and free time), thereby “crowding in” volunteering (Baer et al. 2016). Finally, referring to transformative societal developments, the role of digitalisation for volunteering is evaluated. Filsinger et al. (2020), for example, show that internet use is positively related to the probability of undertaking unpaid work in most voluntary organisations, in particular in social strata where volunteering is less prevalent.

With respect to the positive consequences of volunteering, it is widely argued that volunteering not only benefits its recipient (be it a person, group or cause), but also the volunteer and society as a whole. Regarding benefits to the volunteer, a substantial body of research suggests that volunteering not only alleviates or protects against mental illness, but also generally enhances mental health and psychological well-being (Bekkers et al. 2016; Wilson 2012). Volunteers’ better mental health can be attributed to, among other things, increased life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-efficacy and social connectedness (Haski-Leventhal 2014). Moreover, volunteers report better subjective health, show better physical functioning and have a reduced mortality risk (e.g., Bekkers et al. 2016). It should be noted, however, that the positive relationship between health and volunteering is bi-directional: It is not only that volunteering maintains and strengthens health, but good health also facilitates volunteering. Based on human capital, signalling and social capital mechanisms, volunteering is also widely expected to bring socio-economic benefits to the volunteer, for example, in the form of higher educational achievement, enhanced job prospects and increased income (Eberl and Krug 2021; Musick and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2012). Recent studies support the idea of an SES-enhancing effect of volunteering, at least for some groups (Eberl and Krug 2021; Wilson et al. 2020). Moreover, there is a long tradition in political science of considering voluntary associations as “schools of democracy”, maintaining that

volunteering strengthens civil society and democracy by creating good citizens. From such a “neo-Tocquevillian” perspective, voluntary associations teach their members civic skills (e.g., to organise a meeting), broaden their social networks and spread democratic virtues such as solidarity and tolerance, thereby socialising them into larger political engagement (Freitag 2021, 138; Musick and Wilson 2008, 460f.). However, while a large number of (cross-sectional) studies find positive correlations between civic/social participation and political involvement, more recent research suggests that, at least for adults, voluntary organisations function as “pools” rather than “schools” of democracy, that is, that this positive relationship is not the result of political socialisation but mainly due to self-selection (e.g., van Ingen and van der Meer 2016). With regard to the societal benefits of volunteering, there are some indications for positive ecological effects of volunteer rates or voluntary association density, for example on economic performance, the labour market or crime rates (e.g., Botzen 2016; Buonanno et al. 2009; Freitag 2021).

NATHALIE HOFSTETTER
AND MARKUS FREITAG

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NATHALIE HOFSTETTER AND MARKUS FREITAG

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