
CURRENT RESEARCH IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Submitted: August 10, 2011
Revised: January 30, 2012
Accepted: February 1, 2012

DISPOSITIONAL CORRELATES OF INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

Marcia A. Finkelstein
University of South Florida

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated dispositional variables that underlie informal volunteering, service that occurs outside of any organizational structure. Dispositional variables previously related to formal volunteering, individualism/collectivism and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, were examined along with perceived locus of control. Time spent in informal service was related to collectivism, intrinsic motivation, and an internal locus of control. The relationship of these traits to volunteer activity distinguishes the present findings from prior examinations of formal volunteerism. In those studies, neither individualism/collectivism nor intrinsic v. extrinsic motivation was related to time spent helping but did influence motives for volunteering.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, investigations of prosocial behavior shifted from spontaneous helping in emergencies (e.g., Latane & Darley, 1969) to sustained non-obligated service such as volunteerism. The research largely focused on formal volunteering, defined as unpaid work carried out under the auspices of an organization (e.g., Penner, 2002). Our own studies of formal (e.g., Finkelstein, 2009, 2010; Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005) and informal (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007) volunteering examined the role of individual variables in initiating and sustaining the activity. The data supported a model that integrated two approaches to understanding sustaining volunteering.

The first, functional analysis (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 2002) emphasizes the antecedents of volunteering, specifically one's motives for helping. People are thought to volunteer in order to satisfy specific needs or motives. Different individuals will participate in the same volunteer work for different reasons, and an individual's motives may change over times.

Role identity theory (e.g., Callero, Howard, & Piliavin, 1987; Grube & Piliavin, 2000) focuses on factors that sustain volunteering. According to this perspective, one's self-concept consists of a hierarchy of social role identities that guide behavior. With continued activity, a given role, such as

that of volunteer, is internalized. This new identity drives future behavior as the individual strives to make his or her behavior consistent with the changed self-concept.

Recently we explored the association between volunteer motives and identity, respectively and individualism/collectivism (Finkelstein, 2010). The constructs initially distinguished among cultures (Hofstede, 1980) but have since been applied to the individual. As such, individualism and collectivism represent personality traits, albeit traits that are adaptable to situational demands (Triandis, 2001). Fundamental to the individualist is a focus on autonomy, on independence and self-fulfillment. Personal goals take precedence over group goals and personal attitudes over group norms. In contrast, collectivists define themselves in terms of their group membership. They will submerge personal goals for the good of the whole and maintain relationships with the group even when the cost to the individual exceeds the benefits.

In our volunteer data, collectivism was associated more than individualism with two motives for volunteering: to satisfy altruistic tendencies and to strengthen social ties. Collectivism also correlated with the development of a volunteer self-concept. In contrast, individualism was strongly associated with career-related objectives for helping and was unrelated to the formation of a volunteer identity. However, no difference emerged between individualists and collectivists in amount of time devoted to volunteer service. The results suggested that the two differ, not in their willingness to volunteer, but in their reasons for helping.

Other dispositional variables systematically related to formal volunteering include intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivational tendencies (Finkelstein, 2009). An intrinsically motivated individual engages in an activity because it is inherently interesting or satisfying; intrinsically motivated activities are a form of self-expression, with the objective residing in the behavior itself (Amabile, 1993). Extrinsically motivated individuals undertake a task in order to obtain some separable outcome. Their aim is to acquire external rewards or avoid negative consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation correlated positively with the formation of a volunteer role identity and with time spent volunteering. An intrinsic orientation also was associated with “internal” motives for volunteering, those that can be satisfied by the volunteer activity itself. Such motives included expressing altruistic values, strengthening social ties, acquiring new learning experiences and exercising one’s skills, increasing self-esteem, and alleviating guilt regarding one’s good fortune. Extrinsic orientation was most closely associated with “external” motives (specifically career aspirations), which require an outcome separate from the volunteer work in order to be fulfilled.

The present study extended our investigation of the role of these variables to informal volunteering. The term applies to ongoing, unpaid services that individuals perform outside of any organizational structure (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007). Like organization-based helping, informal volunteering provides critical services to communities (e.g., Wilson & Musick, 1997). An AARP (2003) survey of Americans age 45 and older reported that 51% of respondents engaged in formal volunteering, while an additional 36% indicated that they performed a variety of activities that benefit specific individuals or the community as a whole.

We examined the influence of individualist v. collectivist tendencies and intrinsic v. extrinsic motivational orientation. We also added a construct that we anticipated would be particularly important to informal volunteering: perceived locus of control.

Locus of control

People differ in the extent to which they believe they determine the outcomes of events that affect them. The concept of “locus of control” refers to one’s perception about the underlying causes of events in his or her life. Those who perceive personal traits and efforts as determinative are said to possess an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966; 1989) and are referred to as internals. In contrast, externals believe that events are controlled by fate, chance, or other external circumstances. To externals, the course of their lives is contingent on forces outside themselves. Locus of control is conceptualized as a continuum, ranging from *external* to *internal*.

One’s perceived locus of control (LOC) can affect, and is affected by, volunteer activity. A longitudinal study by Thoits & Hewitt (2001) showed that volunteer work enhanced feelings of mastery. We added LOC to our study of informal volunteerism because of its private, individualized nature relative to formal volunteering. We reasoned that the absence of organizational support likely requires the individual to assume a greater role in determining how and when to help, making informal service more suited to internals.

Hypotheses

Prior work (Finkelstein, 2010) indicated that collectivism correlates more closely than individualism with volunteering that is motivated by the desire to strengthen social ties.

Volunteer service by collectivists predominantly focuses on in-group members (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). These findings suggested that collectivists will prefer volunteer opportunities that allow them to help people who are familiar to them rather than strangers. This is more likely to characterize informal volunteering than service in an organizational setting.

Hypothesis 1. Collectivism will be more closely associated than individualism with informal volunteering.

Because of the lack of organizational context, informal helping is less public than formal volunteerism, and external rewards such as career advancement are less likely to result. Consequently, we expected informal service to appeal more to intrinsically than extrinsically motivated individuals.

Hypothesis 2. An intrinsic motivational orientation will be associated more closely than an extrinsic orientation with informal volunteering.

With no organizational staff to define the tasks and guide the informal volunteer, the individual is responsible for shaping his or her volunteer activity. Internals seek situations that require

personal control. In a competitive game, internals were less likely than externals to rely on their opponents' expertise, even when that reliance would garner them additional points (Julian & Katz, 1968). This tendency should make internals more likely than externals to feel comfortable with the relative lack of structure in informal volunteering.

This view of LOC finds parallels in the workplace. Internals seek autonomy which in turn enhances job satisfaction (e.g., Spector & O'Connell, 1994). Externals may remain in positions, not because of satisfaction with them, but because of fear of change (Jain, Giga, & Cooper, 2009). Assuming a similar need for predictability of volunteer activity, the lack of structure that defines informal service may present difficulties for those with an external LOC.

Hypothesis 3. An internal LOC will correlate positively with time spent in informal volunteer service.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 302 undergraduates (266 female, 36 male) at a metropolitan university in the southeastern United States. Their average age was 21.16 years.

Participants completed questionnaires in exchange for extra course credit. The questionnaires were administered online through the psychology department's participant pool management software. An introductory paragraph explained that the purpose of the study was to learn about participants' volunteer experience. They were assured there were no right or wrong responses, and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. All responses were anonymous.

Measures

The survey began with questions about gender and age. Respondents then completed measures of the following variables.

Informal Volunteer Inventory. Time spent volunteering was measured with a 23-item checklist (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007). The list enumerates a variety of informal volunteer activities, and respondents indicated how frequently they engaged in each during the past year. They were instructed that they were to consider only volunteering that occurred on their own, not through any organization. Nor could they consider help given to anyone in their household. Items included "Helped with shopping or drove someone to appointments or stores" and "Mentored, tutored, taught, coached, or trained a person." A Likert response format was used, with alternatives ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Almost every day*).

Work preference inventory (WPI). The WPI (Amabile et al., 1994) assesses college students' and employed adults' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward their work. We used the form developed specifically for students. The 30-item instrument contains 15 items designed to measure intrinsic motivation (e.g., "Curiosity is the driving force behind much of what I do") and 15 measuring extrinsic motivation (e.g., "I'm less concerned with what work I do than what I get

for it”). The Likert response format ranged from 1 (*Never or almost never true of you*) to 4 (*Always or almost always true of you*). Coefficient alpha was .77 for intrinsic orientation and .70 for extrinsic orientation.

Individualism-collectivism. The construct was measured with the scale developed by Singelis et al. (1995). The instrument contained 27 items, 13 assessing individualism (e.g., “My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.”) and 14, collectivism (e.g., “It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want.”) The 5-point rating scale had alternatives ranging from 1 to 5 (*Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*). Coefficient alpha was .72 for individualism and .78 for collectivism.

Locus of control. The 20-item scale was adapted from Levenson, 1981. Ten items were written from the perspective of an internal LOC (e.g., “I believe that my success depends on ability rather than luck”) and 10 (reverse scored), an external locus (e.g., “I believe that the world is controlled by a few powerful people”). The 5-point Likert response format offered options ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Coefficient alpha was .68.

RESULTS

Our goal was to understand dispositional correlates of informal volunteering. The results and discussion are organized around this objective and the hypotheses that were tested. Table 1 presents the correlations among the variables along with their means and standard deviations. Consistent with the Hypothesis 1, collectivism correlated with informal volunteering ($r = .14$, $p < .05$) while individualism did not. However, the difference was not significant, $t(299) = 1.24$, *ns*.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, And Reliability Coefficients For Individualism/Collectivism, Motives, Role Identity, And OCB

	LOC	Intrinsic	Extrinsic	Individualism	Collectivism
LOC	(.68)				
Intrinsic	.20***	(.77)			
Extrinsic	-.04	.04	(.70)		
Individualism	.04	.15*	.54***	(.72)	
Collectivism	.14*	.37***	-.01	.01	(.78)
Informal Vol.	.13*	.20***	-.04	.04	.14*
Mean	69.43	43.42	38.04	43.80	59.44
SD	8.48	5.97	5.83	6.02	18.44

Note. $n = 302$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

The second hypothesis predicted that intrinsic motivation would correlate more strongly than extrinsic with frequency of informal volunteering. The results supported the hypothesis. An intrinsic orientation was significantly associated with informal volunteering ($r = .20$, $p < .001$), while extrinsic was not. The difference was significant, $t(299) = 3.08$, $p < .01$.

Finally, we expected informal volunteering to show a positive association with an internal locus of control (Hypothesis 3). Again, the data support the hypothesis ($r = .13, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The results reveal a partial profile of the informal volunteer as intrinsically motivated, collectivist in orientation, and perceiving an internal locus of control. The relationship of these characteristics to volunteer activity distinguishes the present findings from prior examinations of formal volunteerism. In those studies, neither individualism/collectivism (Finkelstein, 2010) nor intrinsic v. extrinsic motivation (Finkelstein, 2009) determined amount of time spent volunteering. The traits did, however, influence specific motives for volunteering.

That these constructs did affect time spent in informal volunteering likely is attributable to the absence of an organizational structure. Formal volunteers typically enter a well-established structure with staff whose responsibility is to guide the volunteer process. The organization often has developed strategies for volunteer recruitment and retention, including orientation and training sessions. Employees who regularly work with volunteers assign them specific tasks. The volunteer's job is to meet the stated needs of the organization rather than create an experience that conforms to his or her own interests.

Without the aid of a formal structure and associated staff, informal volunteers must work with the beneficiaries of their help to create their own service experience. The task thus requires a greater degree of self-sufficiency, one hallmark of internals (Julian & Katz, 1968). Volunteers must create and shape their own experience, and internals prefer to rely on their own skills even when turning to others might improve performance. Their need to control outcomes would suggest a preference for activities outside of any organizational framework and the accompanying strictures.

The lack of organizational context that characterizes informal volunteering also means fewer opportunities for tangible rewards for helping. Clary et al. (1998), proposing that individuals volunteer in order to fulfill specific motives, identified six motives for volunteering. For five of the six motives, the individual may find fulfillment in the volunteer work itself. The sixth objective, a desire for career-related advancement, requires an outcome outside the behavior in order to be satisfied (Finkelstein, 2009). Because of the lack of a formal support network, informal volunteering is unlikely to lead to job-related rewards. Consequently, informal volunteering should tend to attract those who find satisfaction in the activity per se. In short, informal service should appeal to the intrinsically motivated, and the present results support this conclusion. An intrinsic orientation was the only construct examined that independently contributed to amount of informal volunteering.

Intrinsic motivation may be an effect, as well as a cause, of informal volunteer service. Informal volunteers by definition have no access to agency staff to provide instruction or intervene to help solve problems. Neither are there supervisors to criticize the volunteer's performance or question the outcome of his or her volunteer activities. Because informal activities require individual initiative and can be tailored to the volunteer's own strengths and interests, successes should instill feelings of competence in the volunteer. With evidence of one's competence

comes a shift toward an increasingly internal LOC and this, in turn, enhances intrinsic motivation (Phillips & Lord, 1980). That is, LOC mediates the relationship between perceived personal competence and an intrinsic orientation.

The direction of influence between LOC and informal volunteering also remains unexplored. An internal locus of control may lead to informal service, or the activity may spur the development of an internal locus of control. Perhaps an internal LOC is an antecedent as well as a consequence of volunteerism. Alternatively, both LOC and informal activity may be affected by a third variable such as intrinsic orientation or collectivism. We have begun a longitudinal study of people involved in informal service in order to address questions of causality.

We recognize that organizational as well as dispositional factors exert a profound influence on formal helping (e.g., Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Indeed, the organization as a determining influence on prosocial behavior largely guided Penner's (2002) conceptual approach. Yet the present data are striking in that removing the organization did not substantially alter the relationships between helping and the dispositional variables examined. Perhaps friends and family offer both support and expectations similar to those that the staff of service agencies provide to their volunteers. The result is that variables heretofore conceptualized as describing individuals within organizations are equally important in initiating and sustaining informal helping.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Marcia Finkelstein is Professor of Psychology at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Her research examines ongoing prosocial behavior in the form of volunteerism and organizational citizenship behavior. E-mail: marcie@usf.edu