Maintaining Volunteer Behavior By Adjusting Motivation and Feedback

Research on pro-social behavior, specifically volunteerism, can give us some clues into the motivations that lead people to become volunteers. But, very little attention has been directed to why people continue to stay involved in these activities. And, by the same token, relatively little is known about why some people begin to volunteer but quickly cease the behavior. These are the issues my line of research will address. With little research exploring the maintenance of volunteer behavior, and the importance of volunteerism to the functioning of countless community organizations, I will conduct my research in order to understand what factors increase the likelihood that an individual continues his or her volunteer behavior.

Researchers have made progress in understanding why people become involved in volunteering. Dr. Mark Snyder and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have conducted the fundamental research on this topic (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, and Miene, 1998). Dr. Snyder has investigated the function that volunteering has in volunteers’ lives, and specifically what motivations are at play when someone decides to initiate volunteering. One finding from volunteer motivation theory that has not been adequately explored is the fact that people’s motivations often shift over time as they volunteer, and there are indicators that this may play a role in how volunteer satisfaction changes. Research that Dr. Snyder and I are currently conducting will lay the foundation for my line of proposed research. Early results indicate that the motivations of AmeriCorps volunteers, just like other volunteers, change throughout their volunteer term. Our current survey addresses how these motivations shift and captures what it is about volunteering that leads to lower levels of satisfaction. My proposed research will explore two factors that may lead to the maintenance of volunteer behavior via an increase in satisfaction: refocusing motivation for volunteering on internal reasons (“I volunteer because it is important”), and providing detailed information on the impact a volunteer is making. I will be testing my theories in the laboratory and in the field.

Laboratory Experiment One: My first laboratory experiment will explore the possibility that shifting motivations, from external to internal reasons, leads to increased satisfaction with volunteering, and thus volunteer behavior maintenance. We are finding in our current AmeriCorps surveys that one reason decreased satisfaction occurs in AmeriCorps members is that continued volunteer activity can begin to feel like a poorly reimbursed job. In lab experiment one I will have pairs of participants (university students) complete tasks ostensibly for a community organization. One of the participants will be paid a reasonable rate to do “work” and the other participant will be given a nominal amount and told that they are functioning as a “volunteer.” The work that the volunteering participant will be doing will be comparable to the work the paid participant is conducting. I propose that experimentally manipulating the way in which the volunteer position is described in order to emphasize internal incentives will lead to a higher satisfaction with the volunteer experience and increased intention to volunteer in the future.

Laboratory Experiment Two: In experiment two, I will examine how the feeling that one is making an impact as a volunteer increases volunteer satisfaction and future intentions to volunteer. In this experiment I will have two groups of participants. Both groups will conduct an activity labeled as “volunteering,” but one group will be given feedback on the impact they made with their volunteer activity while the other group will receive no feedback. Both groups will then complete measures gauging satisfaction with the activity and intention to volunteer in the future. My other advisor, Dr. Alexander Rothman, has an extensive background in exploring behavior maintenance (Rothman, 2000). His theory, which investigates the differences between
behavior initiation and behavior maintenance, has explored how people have different motivations when they start an activity and why they continue that activity. Behavior maintenance occurs because of a favorable view of what has happened as the result of the behavior. I hypothesize that volunteer behavior will be continued when feedback gives the volunteer a feeling that the behavior should be maintained because it has had positive results.

Field Experiment: In a field study I will work with AmeriCorps programs to implement interventions halfway through an AmeriCorps volunteer year. I will have three distinct groups of participants in the field study. The control group will have no intervention during the volunteer term. Experimental group one will have a supervisor-led discussion that will reframe the motivations for volunteering from external to internal reasons. Experimental group two will have the volunteers receive feedback on the impact they are making. Finally, I will be following up with the participants in all three groups to determine the amount of volunteering they are engaged in one year after their volunteer term. I propose that those in the two experimental groups will have long-term increases in satisfaction with their volunteer position, and that the reframing experimental group will have a greater increase in satisfaction over the feedback experimental group because of a more all-encompassing motivation adjustment. I also propose that higher satisfaction will lead to not only increased intentions to volunteer in the future, but also an actual increase in future volunteering.

Merit Review Criteria: Events such as volunteering are just now starting to get attention in the literature of social psychology and related areas. I chose to attend the University of Minnesota because it is the only place in the world where I have an opportunity to carry out and succeed in research that aims to further understand the initiation and maintenance of volunteer behavior. Dr. Snyder’s groundbreaking research on volunteer motivation will guide my own research methods and focus. Dr. Rothman’s innovative work on behavior maintenance will prove crucial for understanding the motivations and factors that contribute to volunteer behavior maintenance. With the combined assistance of Dr. Snyder and Dr. Rothman, my research will pave the way for a new foundation and understanding of the processes involved in the important subject of volunteer behavior maintenance.

Broader Impact Criteria: I believe that, in addition to its potential contributions to the theoretical understanding of the process of sustained volunteer action, my proposed line of research also has the potential for impact on volunteer programs at a local, regional, and national level. Volunteerism provides organizations with the ability to spread resources around to other vital areas. Gaining a better understanding of how to maintain volunteer behavior will allow us to drastically lower the attrition of volunteers and ensure their continued assistance. Developing relationships with organizations will be one of my priorities for my current and future career. If government bodies, nonprofits, businesses, and social researchers can work together everyone wins, and with my line of proposed research all of these above parties will have an aid in accomplishing the important social and community goal of improving volunteer behavior maintenance.

Key words: volunteerism, behavior maintenance, motivation, pro-social behavior