

## **Natural Helping Systems: A Survey of Red Cross Volunteers<sup>1</sup>**

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*The present study consisted of a nationwide survey of the characteristics and motives of Red Cross volunteers. Volunteers in the sample were predominantly white, female, middle-aged, and well educated. Although the volunteers were motivated primarily by altruism, younger volunteers tended to be motivated by less altruistic considerations than older volunteers were. Youthful volunteer experience in Red Cross was related to both adult involvement and adult financial support. The results are discussed in terms of their applied implications for the Red Cross and other voluntary organizations, and their theoretical implications for future research on volunteerism.*

Dohrenwend (1978) has suggested that the goal of community psychology is a reduction in the amount of psychopathology in the population at large. She further suggests that this goal be accomplished through the elimination of psychosocial stressors or the alleviation of their effects. In fact, there is a long history of the concept of a "competent community," a community that effectively "utilizes, develops and otherwise obtains resources," and fosters the development of new types of manpower in the service of providing material and social support in times of crisis (Cottrell, 1964; Iscoe, 1970).

In response to the lack of available professionals to provide these supports, the utilization of "nonprofessional" volunteers and paraprofessionals in the delivery of mental health services has been

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promoted (Albee, 1959, 1967; Sobey, 1970; Zax & Specter, 1974). Research evidence supports the contention that the use of these sources of manpower in mental health is worthwhile: Clients receive service comparable to that provided by professionals (Durlak, 1979), service agencies experience reductions in the work load of staff with a concomitant increase in the quality of service (Weinstein, Gibbs, & Middlestadt, 1979), and the nonprofessionals themselves benefit in terms of increased self-esteem, knowledge, and a greater tolerance of others (Zax & Specter, 1974). Traditional mental health services, however, represent only one approach among many that may enhance the psychological well-being of a community. In their examination of spontaneous remission of psychological distress, Bergin and Lambert (1978) suggest that people in distress have simply discovered potent change agents that exist naturally in society, and have put these agents to work as "natural therapists."

While the contributions of nonprofessionals working in the field of mental health have been recognized, community and social psychologists have largely ignored the 50 million nonprofessional volunteers who serve in other capacities throughout the United States (Cook, 1979). These volunteers make up a network of preexisting or "natural" support systems which provide a myriad of services to their communities through such charitable organizations as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Girl and Boy Scouts, YMCA, Planned Parenthood, Easter Seals, and the United Jewish Appeal. Most of these nonprofessional volunteers are not involved in the delivery of traditional mental health services. They may, nevertheless, constitute organized, natural support groups which promote the psychological (and physical) well-being of their communities. Thus, the study of community volunteerism and the characteristics and motives of the volunteers in such natural support systems is important to the goals and strategies of community psychology.

In their summary of the research on motivation of volunteers, D. H. Smith, Reddy, and Baldwin (1972) concluded that adequate empirical studies on volunteer motivation do not exist. The lack of more current research suggests that this conclusion is still an accurate representation. On the basis of limited evidence and abundant theoretical speculation Smith et al. (1972) also concluded that a "general obligation to participate," and a "general perception of instrumental value" are the strongest factors in determining volunteer participation. Smith et al. also make a distinction between altruistic and nonaltruistic (self-serving) volunteer activities. The "altruism" referred to in this distinction appears to be an abbreviated version of a type of internal motivation described by Katz and Kahn (1978), i.e., value expression.

Using Katz and Kahn's (1978) schema of motivation, a useful distinction may be drawn between altruistic and self-serving motivations which is

based on the type of incentive for the behavior rather than on the presence or absence of an incentive altogether. According to Katz and Kahn no one behaves for purely altruistic reasons insofar as all behavior is motivated by either external, i.e., money, academic credit, or internal rewards, i.e., social affiliation, value expression. The type of internal or psychological reward called value expression seems the most useful in accounting for the behavior of the "dedicated" or "altruistic" volunteer who works diligently without any obvious reward (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Individuals motivated by value expression engage in behaviors, e.g., volunteer service, in order to express personal values and thus maintain or enhance their self-esteem. In the present study, the distinction made between altruistic and self-serving motives is based on this distinction made by Katz and Kahn between value expression and other types of internal and external rewards. Thus, motives dealing with the expression of personal values, e.g., "to help those less fortunate," are herein referred to as altruistic motives while other motives, e.g., "to develop social contacts," "career exploration," are referred to as self-serving motives.

The purpose of the present study is to extend this area of research by examining the characteristics and motives of members of one of the largest voluntary associations in the United States, the American Red Cross (Bakal, 1979). In discussing the Red Cross, Bakal writes "No other charity can match the prestige of its following and its organizational strength" (p. 212). Currently the Red Cross has 1.4 million volunteers and provides one-half of the nation's blood supply, in addition to a wide variety of other services, including first-aid and parenting classes, disaster preparedness and relief operations, youth leadership development, and transportation for senior citizens, to name just a few (American Red Cross, 1979). This organization was chosen for study because of its widely recognized unique position among American voluntary associations and its interest in self-evaluation in the face of declining volunteer strength throughout the volunteer sector (Bakal, 1979).

This survey was designed to gather data on (a) the characteristics of Red Cross volunteers, (b) motivational factors which contribute to service as a volunteer, and (c) the relationship between volunteer service as a young person and later adult involvement and financial support. (The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position of the Red Cross.)

## METHOD

A 13-item questionnaire was designed to assess adult (over 18 years of age) volunteers' (a) demographic characteristics, (b) type and extent of youthful and adult involvement with Red Cross, (c) position in the

organization, e.g., policy-making responsibilities vs. no policy-making responsibilities, (d) reasons for volunteering as a youth and as an adult, (e) perceived relationship between youth and adult involvement in Red Cross, and (f) perceived relationship between youth involvement and adult financial support of Red Cross. Instructions accompanying the survey described its purpose as "a first step toward understanding what kinds of people become adult volunteers."

Questionnaires were mailed to volunteer directors of a stratified random sample of 195 Red Cross chapters across the United States. Three surveys were mailed to each volunteer chapter director with the instructions to randomly distribute the surveys to (a) a "policy-making" adult volunteer such as a member of the chapter's Board of Directors, (b) an "administrative" adult volunteer such as a "service chairman" who provides leadership within a particular program area, e.g., blood, disaster, youth, and (c) an "operational" adult volunteer such as those who work within a specific program area without assuming a leadership role. Those volunteers surveyed returned their completed, anonymous questionnaires to Red Cross National Headquarters using stamped, self-addressed envelopes provided with each form.

## RESULTS

### *Response Rate*

Of the chapters surveyed, 67% responded. The return rate for larger chapters was greater than that for smaller chapters (100% of the chapters in or near cities larger than or equal to 500,000 responded, 84% of chapters in or near cities between 100,000 and 500,000 responded, 62% of chapters in or near cities 25,000-100,000 responded, 52% in cities 10,000-25,000 responded, and 8% of the chapters in cities smaller than 10,000 responded). A total of 455 individual volunteers completed the questionnaire, representing a return rate of 59%.

### *Description of Sample*

Of the respondents, 60% were female and 40% were male; 94% were white and 6% were non-white minorities. The age of volunteers ranged from 18 to 89 years of age with a mean of 49.26 years. Of the sample 46% had some college education, and 33% had studied at the graduate level. The average number of years in school for volunteers in the sample was 15.5, with a range of 4 to 23 years.

The mean number of years of service to Red Cross was 12.08, with a range of 1 to 60 years. Of the responding volunteers, 37% had served Red Cross 1 to 5 years, and 9% of the sample had served over 30 years. The median length of service was 7 years.

Of those volunteers responding, 43% occupied policy-making positions in their local Red Cross chapters, 26% held administrative positions in the organization, and 25% were "operational" volunteers. Fifty-six percent of the males in this sample held policy-making positions, compared to 39% of the women ( $\chi^2(1) = 12.21, p < .005$ ). The relationship between sex and volunteer position in Red Cross was also found in a multiple regression analysis designed to predict position (policy-making vs. non-policy-making) from other demographic and volunteer experience variables. Two significant predictor variables emerged from this analysis: sex,  $F(5, 415) = 12.77, p < .001$ , and number of years of experience as a Red Cross volunteer,  $F(5, 415) = 7.50, p < .001$ . When each variable was considered separately, sex accounted for 2.98% of the variance in position scores while years of Red Cross service accounted for an additional 2.49% of the variance. No other variables were found to be related to volunteer position within the organization.

### *Volunteer Motivation*

Volunteers were asked to rate the importance of various reasons for volunteering from two perspectives. First, they were asked to identify the extent to which a variety of motives led to their involvement in Red Cross as youth (before age 18). Next, they were asked to use a 9-point Likert scale (9 = important reason; 1 = not a reason) to rate the extent to which various motives explained their continued involvement in Red Cross as adults. Inspection of the means in Table I and the results of pairwise *t* tests suggest that the most important reasons for volunteering both as a youth and as an adult were altruistic.

A principal component factor analysis (SPSS release 7.2) of the responses to all items supported the theoretical distinction between altruistic and self-serving motives. The largest factor to emerge from this analysis accounted for 12.3% of the variance and consisted exclusively of the altruistic motives such as to help others less fortunate, to practice ideals and convictions, and to be a good neighbor. The factor loadings for the various altruistic motives on this factor ranged from .59 to .85. The third factor to emerge from this analysis included all of the self-serving motivation items such as career exploration and development, develop social contacts, and learn how to relate to people. This factor accounted for 7.9% of the variance, with the factor loadings for the self-serving motives ranging from .41 to .79. Mean factor scores on the altruistic factor were significantly

**Table I.** Mean Importance Ratings of Reasons for Becoming a Red Cross Volunteer as a Youth and for Continuing as an Adult<sup>a</sup>

Reason	Youth			Adult		
	<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>
To practice ideals and convictions	167	6.19	2.64	369	6.74	2.41
To meet social obligations	153	3.19	2.63	—	—	—
To develop social contacts	152	3.13	2.38	318	3.09	2.31
To help others less fortunate	180	6.72	2.46	379	6.87	2.48
To be a "good neighbor"	178	6.65	2.48	380	6.73	2.38
To express my religious faith	150	2.78	2.53	—	—	—
To learn how to relate to people	156	4.22	2.92	—	—	—
For career exploration and development	157	3.94	3.08	—	—	—
As a hobby or extracurricular activity	166	5.38	2.76	—	—	—
To fulfill a school or job requirement	153	2.60	2.76	—	—	—
To become active in my community	—	—	—	387	6.89	2.35

<sup>a</sup>Of the respondents, 26% had previous service as youth volunteers in Red Cross. Not all motives were listed in both youth and adult involvement questions.

different from the mean factor scores on the self-serving factor ( $t(134) = 29.86, p < .0001$ ). (The second factor in the analysis included the position variables and accounted for 8.8% of the variance.)

While altruistic motives for volunteering were emphasized by the sample as a whole, a differential trend in responding to more self-serving reasons was found on the basis of age. Significant negative correlations were found between age and a composite of the ratings subjects gave the following self-serving reasons for volunteering as youth: "career exploration and development," "develop social contacts," "hobby or extracurricular activity," and "learn how to relate to people" ( $r(138) = -.48, p < .001$ ). These differences in youth motivation and adult motivation were also explored by comparing responses to retrospective questions about youth motives with the responses concerning current motives. Paired *t* tests for correlated data conducted on a composite of altruistic motives as a youth versus a composite of altruistic motives as an adult indicated that volunteers considered altruistic motives to be more important to their adult service than to their service as youths ( $t(152) = -4.42, p < .001$ ). These results are consistent with those cited above involving negative correlations between age and the importance of various self-serving motives for volunteering as a youth.

Additional information on what motivates volunteers was obtained by examining the reasons for volunteering which respondents added under the

category of "other." Several volunteers characterized their volunteer service as a way to "repay" Red Cross for services rendered to themselves or their family, e.g., service to husband in the army, blood transfusion for wife, or disaster relief. Other volunteers indicated they volunteered, in part, because they enjoyed the camaraderie and interpersonal relationships among Red Cross personnel, while others indicated they were influenced to volunteer through the example of a close friend or family member. Some volunteers pointed to volunteer service as an effective use of leisure time. Many volunteers appear to look to Red Cross as a source of social support useful in coping with stressful life events, e.g., widowhood, physical disabilities, retirement. One volunteer went so far as to say that she volunteered to maintain her "mental health." Another group of volunteers stressed the acquisition of new skills, e.g., leadership, and personal fulfillment as reasons for their volunteer involvement.

#### *Relationship Between Youth Involvement and Adult Financial Support and Involvement*

One of the objectives of the present study was to determine whether youth involvement in Red Cross (either as a volunteer-provider or as a recipient of Red Cross services) leads to later adult involvement in the organization. Two approaches were taken to answer this question: analysis of responses to the question "Did your experience as a Red Cross youth participant provide motivation to become an adult Red Cross volunteer?" and a multiple regression analysis with number of adult years of service as the dependent variable.

When volunteers were asked directly, "Did your experience as a Red Cross youth participant provide motivation to become an adult Red Cross volunteer?", 78% of those with experience as Red Cross youth volunteers answered this question in the affirmative. Only 23.4% of those adult volunteers with a history of nonvolunteer contact as youth, e.g., receiving first-aid training rather than giving such training, answered this question in the affirmative ( $\chi^2(1) = 70.67, p < .0001$ ). Of the adult volunteers sampled, 79% reported some type of contact with the Red Cross as youths.

In the regression analysis, predictor variables included age, receiving Red Cross services as a youth, and volunteer experience with Red Cross as a youth. Because the variable of age had an obvious relationship with the number of adult years in service ( $r(439) = .50, p < .001$ ), the question in this analysis became "To what extent can youth involvement predict adult years in service when the variable of age is statistically controlled?" The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table II. As expected, the variable of age accounted for a statistically significant portion of the variance associated with adult years in service (25.14%;  $F(1, 434) =$

169.56,  $p < .01$ ). Both the dichotomous variable, youth volunteer experience, and the continuous variable, years of service as a youth volunteer, accounted for significant portions of the variance associated with adult years in service (experience, 2.59%;  $F(1, 434) = 14.14, p < .01$ ; and years, 3.6%;  $F(1, 105) = 5.36, p < .05$ ). These represent significant, albeit small, independent contributions to the prediction of adult years of service above and beyond that made by the variable, age. Nonvolunteer contact with Red Cross as a youth, e.g., through a swimming or first-aid classes, did not account for a significant independent portion of the variance associated with adult years of service.

The volunteers were also asked, "To what extent would you say that your involvement in Red Cross youth programs influenced your financial support of Red Cross as an adult?" Of the adult volunteers with experience as Red Cross youth volunteers, 79% indicated that their volunteer experience as youth exerted either "some" influence (30%) or a "significant" influence (48.5%) over their later financial support of Red Cross; 22% responded that their youth volunteer experience was "not a factor" in their adult financial support of Red Cross.

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine the characteristics and the motives of Red Cross volunteers and to address questions regarding the relationship between experience as a youth volunteer and adult service to, and financial support of the Red Cross. The major findings include (a) support for the theoretical distinction between altruistic and self-serving motives, (b)

**Table II.** Multiple Regression Analysis: Relationship Between Youth and Adult Involvement<sup>a</sup>

Predictor variable	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	Percentage variance accounted for	F(1, 434)	p
Age	.5013	.2514	.2514	25.14	169.56	< .01
Youth volunteer experience (yes or no)	.5266	.2773	.0259	2.59	14.14	< .01
Nonvolunteer contact as youth (yes or no)	.5288	.2797	.0024	.24	1.43	> .05 ns

<sup>a</sup>The dependent variable in this analysis was the number of adult years in service to the Red Cross.



confirmation that altruistic considerations are the primary motives for volunteering, and (c) evidence that relative to older volunteers young volunteers put greater emphasis on the importance of self-serving motives for volunteering. In addition, tentative evidence that youth volunteer involvement, in itself, may lead to later adult involvement and financial support, and evidence that the distribution of Red Cross volunteers is skewed in terms of sex, race, and educational achievement was found. These results have both applied implications for the Red Cross and other voluntary organizations, and theoretical implications for future research on volunteerism.

### *Implications for Voluntary Organizations*

With an annual budget of approximately \$400 million and with over 1 million volunteers serving annually, the Red Cross is one of the largest non-profit, charitable organizations in the United States (American Red Cross, 1979). Volunteers occupy the vast majority of the service, administrative, and policy-making positions in the organization, the volunteer to staff ratio being 660 to 1. While it is obvious that these volunteers provide a plethora of services to their communities, it is apparent from this study that membership in this organization also provides important rewards for its volunteers. These data have practical implications for recruitment. Volunteerism may be encouraged by being cognizant of the existence of two distinct kinds of rewards for participation in voluntary organizations, and by framing requests for volunteer help with the value systems of specific target populations in mind. It is important to recognize the role that personal growth and fulfillment, as opposed to self-sacrifice, plays in the motives of younger volunteers. For example, the potential elderly volunteer may be persuaded by suggestions that volunteering can put their expertise and time to good use while providing valuable services to their community, while the potential youth volunteer may be more likely to be attracted by suggestions that working in volunteer organizations gives them valuable work experience and a chance to make new friends.

The respondents to this survey were typically white, middle-aged, female, and well educated. Using the criterion of education to determine socioeconomic status, the sample appears to be predominantly upper middle-class (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). While the evidence is inconclusive, there is reason to believe that indigenous volunteers may function as a crucial "bridge" between an agency and the disadvantaged segments of the community (Grosser, 1969; Lorion, 1978). Toward this end it may be important for service organizations like the Red Cross to increase the overall involvement of minorities in planning for and providing service. The

racial and socioeconomic status of the *recipients* of Red Cross services may be an even more important issue that merits further investigation.

Although 60% of the sample was female and 40% was male, less than 40% of the policy-making positions in the organization were occupied by females. The Red Cross is not alone in its heavy reliance on female volunteers to deliver services (Ellis & Noyes, 1978; Bakal, 1979; Brozan, 1979), or in its lack of representation of women in policy-making positions (L. Smith, 1975; Devereux, 1960). This underrepresentation of women in policy-making positions may reflect the nature of the business, financial, and legal organizations that typically contribute policy-makers, e.g., members of the Board of Directors. However this pattern of utilizing women in the less demanding and less gratifying positions in an organization may discourage highly talented and motivated women from becoming involved. In this vein Bakal (1979) provides evidence that today's volunteer wants more challenge and responsibility in their volunteer work. The shrinking supply of female volunteers nationally (Bakal, 1979) may be replenished by increasing the challenge, complexity, and responsibilities of volunteer jobs. Fortunately, the Red Cross has already recognized the need to involve more women and ethnic minorities in the organization (Holland, 1980).

The results of the present study provide tentative support for the assumption that youthful volunteer experience in Red Cross is related to adult involvement and financial support of the organization. However mere contact with the organization as a youth, e.g., as a recipient of service, does not seem to promote later adult involvement in Red Cross. By recruiting and involving volunteers at an early age, charitable organizations may reap long-term benefits (in the form of adult service and financial support) as well as short-term benefits (in the form of youth service itself). These results, however, must be viewed with caution insofar as they are based primarily on retrospective self-report measures.

The extent to which these results and implications of this study can be generalized to other voluntary organizations is an empirical question. However, the demographic similarities between Red Cross volunteers and members of other voluntary organizations found here suggests that the current findings are probably relevant to other voluntary organizations.

### *Implications for Theory and Future Research*

The fact that both youth and adult volunteers emphasized the importance of altruistic motives supports several theories which posit that altruistic motives can account for some types of prosocial behavior (Aronfreed, 1970; Hoffman, 1976). However, despite this overall trend to underscore the importance of altruistic reasons for helping, many

volunteers did stress the importance of less altruistic, more self-serving motives, e.g., "to develop social contacts," "for career development and exploration," "development of personal and social skills," "personal fulfillment." The current finding that young volunteers cite less altruistic motives than older volunteers is consistent with those reported by Gottlieb (1974) from a much younger sample of Vista volunteers. This tendency may reflect a shift in cultural values from one generation to the next (Lasch, 1979), or Maslow's (1954) assumption that more basic needs are satisfied during childhood and youth, while the need for self-actualization and fulfillment are more relevant to adults. An alternative explanation of these results is that youth are more honest than adults in reporting their motivations for volunteering.

D. H. Smith et al. (1972) suggest that more fruitful theory and research in the field of volunteerism will result from considering both altruistic and nonaltruistic voluntary action. These authors appear to vacillate, however, between viewing altruistic and self-serving motives as two independent variables or one continuous variable. The present study provides data on this issue which clearly argue for a conceptualization of altruism and self-serving motives as being independent. Future research will hopefully further explore the relationship between altruistic and nonaltruistic motives for volunteering, and the interaction between these dimensions and age.

Respondents also suggested additional reasons for volunteering which merit further study. Some respondents invoked the "norm of reciprocity" to explain their participation as volunteers; these volunteers characterized their service as repayment to Red Cross for services rendered to themselves or their family. Others were influenced by the example of a close friend or family member. This type of influence is consistent with a "social learning theory" conception of prosocial behavior (Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977). Frisch (1979) has suggested elsewhere that organizations like the Red Cross can act as "institutional role models," promoting altruistic values and volunteerism in lieu of other modeling influences, e.g., parents.

Many respondents looked upon Red Cross as a source of social support, especially in times of crisis or change, e.g., a disabling accident, widowhood, retirement. This reason for volunteering is interesting given the fact that those citing it were acting officially as providers of service rather than as recipients. This finding corroborates Riessman's (1965) "helper therapy principle" that giving help often is as much profit to the helper as it is to the helpee. One possible source of help for the helpee in this case may be the social camaraderie among volunteers. In fact, several volunteers said they volunteered, in part, because of the relationships developed with other volunteer personnel. One possible explanation that merits further research is that volunteers as a group may be more friendly and socially responsive than others. Another explanation for this finding may be that volunteers can

find others with similar interests and values through charitable organizations such as the Red Cross.

Several authors (Frisch, 1979; Mussen & Eisenberg-Berg, 1977; Yarrow & Zahn-Waxler, 1977) have emphasized the importance of inculcating prosocial behavior at an early age in order to foster an enduring concern for others and in order to promote the skills and awareness needed to channel this concern into constructive individual and community action. The present finding that 79% of the adult volunteers had contact with the Red Cross in their youth offers some support for these contentions, although clearly, a longitudinal study of volunteers would be more appropriate for answering questions about the effects of service as a young person, and shifts in motivational factors over the course of a volunteer's service. Another limitation of the present study, the absence of nonvolunteers in the sample, also limits the conclusions regarding the relationship between youth and adult involvement. Future studies of this kind should also include questions pertaining to involvement in a variety of voluntary associations, rather than focusing on only one specific organization.

Further exploration of the motivations and characteristics of community service volunteers is important in order to increase our understanding of the development and maintenance of voluntary service, and to gauge the impact of these voluntary natural support systems on their communities and the volunteers themselves. As it is stated in the recommendations of the President's Commission on Mental Health (1978), there is a need for a major new initiative "to recognize and strengthen the natural networks to which people belong and on which they depend. . . (including) voluntary associations based on principles of intimacy and mutual aid."

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