



MOTIVATIONS OF VOLUNTEERS IN A FOOD BANK PROGRAM: A
PILOT INVESTIGATION

Vivien Runnels

ABSTRACT

The voluntary sector makes important contributions to Canadian life. Theoretical models of volunteer motivation offer a number of possible explanations for participation as a volunteer. Four participants took part in in-depth interviews for a pilot research study which sought to understand how the experience of volunteering in the context of a Canadian food bank program might influence participants' motivations for volunteering. Three themes were evident. First, volunteers liked the people with whom they volunteered which provided motivation to participate as a volunteer. Second, the participants possessed knowledge of local poverty and food insecurity, which motivated them to address it within the context of their community. Third, they framed their volunteering as 'helping', not as 'working', which meant that their participation was not identified as paid work or a substitute for it. This conception of participation as volunteers also allowed them to see food bank users as neighbours and peers, and clearly meant they were not profiting from the poverty of others. In addition to theoretical models which provide a foundation for global understanding of people's motivations to volunteer, these themes suggest that local theories of motivations for volunteering or contextually-based explanations are important.

INTRODUCTION

McClintock (2004)p1. defines volunteerism as “the contribution of time, resources, energy, and/or talent without monetary compensation”. Volunteers are defined as people who “willingly perform a service without pay, through a group or organization” (Hall et al., 2001; Hall et al., 2001)p59. The non-profit and voluntary sector, after government and the private sector, is referred to as the third pillar, because of the important contributions and support it provides to many aspects of Canadian life (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2003; Scott, 2003). The sector undertakes a wide range of activities. There is great diversity in organizational structures and governance. Some organizations work closely with governments, have large numbers of paid staff and manage large budgets. Other organizations operate on shoestring budgets, staffed by volunteers only and have little contact with governments. Whatever their structures, responsibilities, and relationships with government and the private sector, sustaining voluntary sector organizations in changing political, social and economic climates is challenging

Within the sector, many volunteers frequently undertake difficult, testing or challenging work, so that why volunteers are motivated to participate and continue to participate, is an important question (Elson, 2009; Phillips, 2001; Clary et al., 1996). However, other than large scale surveys which quantitatively report reasons for volunteering, and which may fail to capture variation in volunteers’ values (Wilson, 2000), little is known about motivations for volunteering. This enquiry therefore starts out with an intention of uncovering motivations of volunteers. Further, the author’s experiences in two provinces as a volunteer for a local food bank, have led to an interest in learning more about the motivations of volunteers in a specific context of food banks. This paper therefore sets out to respond to a question, “How might the experience of volunteering in a food bank program motivate volunteers?” The outline of this paper is as follows: first, I provide some background to the history and current status of food banks in Canada to provide a context for volunteer participation. This is followed by a brief look at theoretical work. I then describe the methods of a pilot qualitative investigation. Findings from the analysis of the data are accompanied with some discussion and conclusions.

DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT STATUS OF FOOD BANKS AND VOLUNTEERS' PARTICIPATION IN CANADA

Food banks developed during the early to mid-1980s in Canada as a community response to public hunger. The first Canadian food bank was established in Edmonton in 1981 (Riches, 1986). A food bank has been defined as "a place where food is contributed and made available to those in need";¹ The International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) codes food banks, as a sub-group of Group 4: Social Services, which provide "human and social services to a community or target population," and more specifically as organizations that deal with income support and maintenance, and material assistance. (Tice & Salamon, 2006; Salamon et al., 2007; Ashman et al., 2008). In practice in Canada, food banks are referred to by a number of different names depending on location and local preferences.² The services are also referred to as emergency food programs. The term 'food bank' may also refer to larger umbrella food distribution agencies that serve smaller service agencies which deliver food directly to individuals in need.

Food bank programs are not designed to provide a substantial amount of food for individuals and families: most programs aim to provide sufficient food for 3-5 days a month (Pegg, 2008). It has been noted in the literature however, that these non-profit organizations do not always meet their goals, or need to use alternative strategies to acquire food other than through food donations (Teron & Tarasuk, 1999; Pegg, 2008). The total number of known food banks in Canada was 707 in 2008 (Pegg, 2008). Currently food bank organizations across Canada which are represented by Food Banks Canada (formerly the Canadian Association of Food Banks), serve approximately 85-90% of people who access emergency food programs, numbering over 700,000 Canadians.³

¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/food%20bank>

² Such names include food pantries, food cupboards, food shelves, food networks, community food banks, food distribution association and food hamper programs. For example, members of the Alberta Food Bank Network Association almost exclusively use the term "food bank" . <http://www.afbna.ca/foodbanks/>. In Ontario, in addition to "food bank", other names include "food share shelter", community and 'caring' cupboard, food 4 all, outreach for hunger, bread basket, <http://www.oafb.ca/members.html?letter=ALL>. Programs that are part of organizations whose sole focus is not emergency food provision also have local designations.

³ <http://foodbankscanada.ca/main.cfm>

In some communities, food bank programs are coordinated by paid staff, but are mostly staffed by volunteers. Volunteers donate time, money and talents to govern the programs, to fund and acquire donations, and to coordinate and administer the programs. Volunteers may interact directly with food bank program users or work behind the scenes; they keep administrative records and collect statistics; they acquire, package and distribute food, and maintain facilities. Almost thirty years after the formation of the first Canadian food bank, food banks have become 'institutionalized' or permanent Canadian fixtures (Riches, 2002), and the support of volunteers continues in providing individuals and households with some food, to address their hunger (Pegg, 2008). Although it is argued that the responsibility for assisting citizens to meet their basic needs for food when they cannot, lies with the state and not with the voluntary sector (Poppendieck, 1998; Dietitians of Canada, 2005);(Tarasuk, 2001; Riches, 2002; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003), the current and continued participation of volunteers seems important and necessary. Why these volunteers participate, may help program planners to understand how to successfully recruit and retain volunteers.

THEORETICAL MODELS OF MOTIVATION

Motivation theory provides a basis for theorizing motivations associated with volunteering. According to Maslow, (Maslow, 1943), motivation is driven by needs. After meeting basic physiological needs, "higher' needs (of human motivation) emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism" suggesting that there is a hierarchy of needs, although this hierarchy is somewhat fluid. Maslow suggests that 'field determinants', which we might more generally call 'context' or 'culture', are also one of many determinants of behaviour. "While behavior is almost always motivated, it is also almost always biologically, culturally and situationally determined as well." The motivations of volunteers may be driven by 'higher' needs of motivation, but according to this theory, motivations may be influenced by the social context of volunteering. More recently, Batson and Shaw (1991) have proposed that motivation is not driven solely by egoism and that demonstration of altruism suggest a pluralistic approach is necessary to for models of motivation. (Batson & Shaw, 1991).

Yeung (2004) looks at volunteerism “holistically”, and combines Maslow’s work with Ford’s motivational systems theory (1992) to provide a basis for understanding motivations of volunteers (Yeung, 2004; Ford, 1992). Yeung’s theory provides additional components of a motivation theory for consideration. She proposes that volunteer motivation changes over time, which suggests that motivation is dynamic. Further, a systems-theory view of humans, is useful because it allows the inclusion of factors other than individual or personal factors, such as the social setting to explain motivation.

Other theories of volunteer motivation focus on individual factors. For example, Thoits and Hewitt (2001) have proposed a model of volunteering focused on personal well-being. In this model, people select themselves in and out of volunteer work based on personal characteristics and physical and mental health (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Lasby reports on the motivations to participate of Canadian volunteers associated with their personal and economic characteristics through an analysis of the Canadian National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating 2000 data (Lasby, 2004).

In a comparison of Canadian and American volunteers, Hwang, Grabb and Curtis (2005) suggest that reasons for participation in volunteer work are determined by collective or societal reasons as well as personal motivations. For example, they suggest greater state provision of welfare and health services in Canada might influence participation levels, implying that if volunteers think that the state is fulfilling a need, then they are less motivated to participate, or, alternatively stated, are rationally motivated to participate in areas where the need appears to be greater. Individual Canadians are slightly more likely than Americans to emphasize personal reasons rather than altruistic reasons, for their volunteer work, although the authors found the difference was not significant (Hwang et al., 2005). The motivations of volunteers may be influenced by a broader societal framing and valuing of volunteer work (Smith, 1981; Carpenter & Myers, 2007; Batson & Shaw, 1991)

The literature provides a number of theoretically-based accounts of volunteer participation and motivation. Accounts of experience in different areas of volunteerism, and in different contexts, that may

influence motivations for volunteering however, are largely missing from the literature. The next section of the paper reports the methods and findings of a pilot qualitative study which inquired as to how volunteers' experiences of volunteering in a food bank program might motivate volunteers.

METHODS

DESIGN & PROCEDURE

The study was designed as a pilot for a larger study intended to look at volunteers' motivations in the context of food security programs in Canada. A semi-structured interview, which is an interview that uses pre-established questions to guide an interview, but also allows for interviewer exploration and pursuit of particular threads, was developed (Oppenheim, 1992; Hopf, 2004). The first part of the interview was designed to solicit information about personal and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, and information about the individual's history with the organization. Some of these questions were drawn from the Canada (formerly National) Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating. The second part of the interview included questions designed to elicit information about the respondents' experiences and the context for their volunteer work, including questions about the respondents' experiences of food bank volunteering, their motivations, their perceptions of hunger in their community, and their personal volunteer contributions and benefits (See Appendix). Volunteers at a food bank in Ontario were asked by a co-volunteer if they would be willing to be contacted by the researcher for an interview about their volunteer participation. The researcher contacted volunteers who had supplied his or her contact information, explained the purpose of the study and requested an interview. An interview was conducted at a place of convenience and time of the participant's choice.

ETHICS

Participants were informed that the study was developed for and conducted as part of a graduate course approved by an Ontario university. The study was directly supervised by the student's professor. Participation in the interview was considered to be minimal risk. In case

of concerns about the study, participants were given contact information for the university research ethics board which oversees course-related research, as well as that of the supervising professor. Participants were assured of confidentiality in their participation, and anonymity in the reporting. The consent forms were read by the participant, and reviewed orally with each participant before participants gave consent to participate. After the interview, consent forms were stored separately from interview notes. All interview notes were secured in a locked case in the researcher's home.

DATA ANALYSIS.

Handwritten verbatim notes were taken during the interviews by the researcher who is a trained speedwriter. Immediately after the interviews, notes were checked for clarification and errors, and word processed. Demographic data were separated from qualitative responses. The records were examined using qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000), which is an approach to the data that allows later development of grounded theory (Sandelowski, 2000; Charmaz, 2006; Morse et al., 2009). Special attention was also paid to the language that participants used. Data were sorted using Word tables to assist in organization. Subsequent steps for analysis were repeated reviews of the sorted data in order to identify recurrent themes related to the participants' experiential knowledge.

FINDINGS

Interviews with four volunteers of a local food bank were conducted. To maintain anonymity, personal information that would identify the respondents has been removed. Similarly, other identifying characteristics of volunteers, the food bank location, the hosting organization, and specific characteristics of the location have been removed. Respondents are also referred to as participants in this article. Food bank users are referred to as users.

Analysis of the interviews identified three recurrent themes drawn from respondents' experiences of volunteering in food bank programs. These themes which provide an explanation of respondents' motivations

to participate were drawn from their accounts of social interactions in and outside the food bank, their knowledge of the local context with regard to poverty and hunger, and their framing of volunteering as something other than work. The participants' own words are used to illustrate the themes.

INTERACTING SOCIALLY

The first questions asked "why do you volunteer with the food bank?" and "What... keeps you working here?", were intended to draw out volunteers' motivations. All four participants said their main reason for volunteering with the food bank was that they liked the people that used the food bank and the volunteers they worked with. Interacting with these people whom they liked gave them motivation to continue participating as volunteers. Their comments particularly referred to their enjoyment of and respect for the volunteers. One said "the volunteers are very nice", and another said, "I can't stay away. I like the people." Participants thought very highly of their co-volunteers: "I don't know what the food bank would do without the volunteers," and another said "they are people who are so dedicated. Without them I wouldn't want to think about how it would go. Lucky to have people who make this time," and "they are people who are dedicated and care." One volunteer referring to the people she worked with, spoke at length of the pleasure that volunteering at the food bank gave: "it's lovely, a wonderful place to be...I love it and ...it's an absolutely fascinating thing to do." Participants reported meeting each other outside of food bank hours for meals, special events and recreation: participation in these activities was dependent on being a volunteer or past volunteer at the food bank program. Volunteers clearly derived enjoyment from doing activities with people that they genuinely liked, trusted and respected. Participation as a volunteer in this particular location, appears to have positively encouraged social interactions and the development of personal social relationships amongst volunteers.

KNOWING ABOUT POVERTY AND RESPONDING TO NEED

Those interviewed either had first hand knowledge of poverty and food insecurity (n=2), or had gained knowledge of food bank users' lives through interaction with them (n=2). Volunteers understood users were

in genuine need of food as a result of poverty. "Nobody's going to hang around for hours in the cold and snow. ... sometimes there are people lined up at 7 a.m. waiting...Nobody's going to wait for hours." They did not see users as personally responsible for their situations, it was "more about knowing that nobody was excluded from the possibility that lives and livelihoods may be at risk at some point in a lifetime". Users were thought of in the same way as family members who might need help at some time during their life. "In life we have helped and been helped - a lot of families don't have that to fall back on. We take the place of an extended family." Volunteers thought that food bank users were wrongly blamed for their problems, and did not appreciate those critics who passed judgment. One said, "They (the public) shouldn't pinpoint stuff like that, it could be them". Knowledge of need also fostered a non-judgmental perspective. One of the volunteers expressed a sensitivity to people's difficult lives by dismissing activities such as giving people recipes or encouraging 'good nutrition' and other such things, which were all felt to be patronizing.

Volunteers responded to knowledge of the users' situations by "mak(ing) them feel human and treat(ing) them with dignity. We also share and give them support. They feel that somebody cares and I think it's an important part of it." One volunteer said that the volunteers tried to make people at ease and "not embarrassed at having to use it (the food bank). Some (users) feel really bad at having to use it." The volunteers "...give out hugs when somebody needs them ...and compassion." Volunteers "respect people and try to help out." Another came to realize that there will always be people with problems and "if I can help a little bit that's fine."

Motivations to volunteer were based on knowledge of users' situations which volunteers wanted to address. Their participation was seen as a positive response to poverty within the context of a community. One of the volunteers suggested that food bank volunteering was simply a practical expression of what it meant to be a member of a community. Another said, "people help you, they don't leave you alone and on your own", - also expressing an idea of collectivity and collective interests in community well-being.

HELPING, NOT WORKING

Throughout the interviews with the volunteers, the word 'help' was used in several ways: to indicate helping users; helping other volunteers 'get the 'job' done'; and to facilitate the work of the food bank. For example, referring to a task, one volunteer said, "I feel like I'm helping out." There were some references to 'helping the community,' and 'helping the system.'

At no time during the interviews did volunteers frame their activities at the food bank program as 'work'. Activities were always couched in terms of 'helping'. Even some users returned the help they were given by 'helping' at the food bank, not by working there. For volunteers in this location, help was not work. Neither was volunteer help seen as unpaid work, which contrasts with some definitions and valuing of volunteer activity. It seemed to be a different category altogether. The word 'work' was used to describe a specific task that they were engaged in, for example, "I like working with them" meant carrying out a particular task with other people. In all other instances, 'work' referred to paid employment. For example, "All of us (volunteers) have worked in different areas of life, some of us are retired" and "I work Wednesday and Fridays." There was certainly worth placed on what was being contributed, and recognition that volunteers were engaged in work-like tasks, but volunteers' language created a distinction between (volunteer) help and work.

Volunteering at the food bank was seen as a specific role that could not be replaced by paid staff members. The help that was being given was given on the basis of community members and equals helping each other. "Our relationship with the people we serve as volunteers - we're not making money out of their poverty. I think that's important to them." Although economic society puts a price on most things, that was not how the volunteers at this location framed or placed value on their contributions.⁴ Neither was the volunteer/user relationship conditional

⁴ An estimation of voluntary contributions in Canada is addressed through equivalency to full-time work. Sometimes a monetary value is placed on these figures. For example, over 2 billion hours of volunteer time contributed in 2007 represents the equivalent of 1,076,673 full-time year-round

on any exchange in this location, such as an expectation that users would also volunteer at the food bank.

CONCLUSION

The themes from this study, whilst suggesting that volunteers' knowledge and their experiences of the local culture of this particular food bank program are contributors to their motivations to volunteer, must be treated with caution. The findings are limited by the small number of participants. Further interviews would be necessary for determining if the themes were relevant to other participants, and if other themes became evident. As a local study, the findings are not generalizable, nor intended to be. Further research and analysis with a larger sample of respondents and locations, would permit comparison of differences and similarities in motivation. Whether types of program influence motivations to volunteer, could be made by comparing different areas of volunteer life with food bank programs.

From a practical perspective, making a link with a program's culture as a possible influence on volunteers' motivations might be useful knowledge for program planners and coordinators. For example, if developing social relationships and interactions are seen to be important, planners may propose and implement actions to encourage, reinforce and preserve them.

Theoretical models provide a foundation for exploring and understanding people's motivations in volunteering in general. The themes from this study suggest that local theories or contextually-based explanations of motivations for volunteering should also be considered. Recent theoretical work, such as that proposed by Hustinx and Lammertyn, may provide a conceptual framework to incorporate such thinking (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Whatever is learned about volunteers' motivations in a food bank program from this study or from the literature, it is clear however, that respondents in this location will continue to volunteer "as long as I'm able" and "hope I can keep doing it for a long time."

jobs (assuming 40 hours of work per week for 48 weeks). Source: Statistics Canada, Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2004 and 2007.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge with many thanks, the person who helped facilitate and the people that participated in this study of volunteers. I thank them also for their insights that they shared so willingly.

APPENDIX : SELECTED QUESTIONS

What is it about the food bank/cupboard that keeps you working here? (or thinking about leaving) Do you enjoy volunteering here? And why? If no, why not?

Do you think you receive any personal benefit from volunteering at the food bank/cupboard? If yes, what are these benefits?

If you were talking to a friend about the work that you do at the food bank/cupboard, what are some of the things that are important to you that you would tell him or her about?

Would you please give me an idea of volunteers that you work with? Who are they? What are they like? Do you see the people that you volunteer with in any other capacity?

What do you and food bank volunteers think you contribute to the community? What do you and food bank volunteers hope to contribute to the community in the future?

Why do you think people in this community have problems getting enough food?

Has the experience of volunteering at a food bank made any difference to the way that you think about people needing emergency food in Canada? What role do you think volunteers should play in issues like people needing emergency food in Canada ?

In your experience what do you think the community thinks in general about the idea of people being hungry in Canada?

REFERENCES

- Ashman, K., Haggard-Guenette, C., Hamdad, M., & Yu, M. (2008). *Satellite account of non-profit institutions and volunteering 1997 to 2005* (Rep. No. Catalogue no. 13-015-X). Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Batson, C. D. & Shaw, L. L. (1991). Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 2, 107.
- Carpenter, J. & Myers, C. K. (2007). *Why volunteer? Evidence on the role of altruism, reputation and incentives* Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., & Stukas, A. (1996). Volunteers' motivations: Findings from a national survey. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Action Quarterly*, 25, 485-505.
- Dietitians of Canada (2005). *Individual and household food insecurity in Canada: position of dietitians of Canada* Toronto: Dietitians of Canada.
- Elson, P. R. (2009). A short history of voluntary sector-government relations in Canada. *The Philanthropist*, 21, 36-74.

Ford, M. E. (1992). *Motivating Humans: Goals, Emotions and Personal Agency Beliefs*. London: Sage.

Hall, M., McKeown, L., & Roberts, L. (2001). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2000 national survey of giving, volunteering and participating* Ottawa: Statistics Canada & Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

Hopf, C. (2004). Qualitative interviews: an overview. In U.Flick, E. von Kardorff, & I. teinke (Eds.), *A companion of qualitative research* (pp. 203-208). London: Sage Publications.

Hustinx, L. & Lammertyn, F. (2003). Collective and Reflexive Styles of Volunteering: A Sociological Modernization Perspective. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary & Nonprofit Organizations*, *14*, 167.

Hwang, M., Grabb, E., & Curtis, J. (2005). Why Get Involved? Reasons for Voluntary-Association Activity Among Americans and Canadians. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *34*, 387-403.

Lasby, D. (2004). *The Volunteer Spirit in Canada: Motivations and Barriers* Toronto: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*, 370-396.
- Morse, J. M., Noerager Stern, P., Corbin, J., Bowers, B., Charmaz, K., & Clarke, A. E. (2009). *Developing grounded theory. The second generation*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc.
- Oppenheim, A. N. (1992). *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*. Herndon, VA.
- Pegg, S. (2008). *Hunger Count 2008. A comprehensive report on hunger and food bank use in Canada* Toronto, Ontario: Food Banks Canada.
- Phillips, S. P. (2001). More than stakeholders: Reforming state-voluntary sector relations. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *35*, 182-201.
- Poppendieck, J. (1998). *Sweet charity? Emergency food and the end of entitlement*. New York: Viking.
- Riches, G. (1986). *Food Banks and the Welfare Crisis*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development.
- Riches, G. (2002). Food Banks and Food Security: Welfare Reform, Human Rights and Social Policy. Lessons from Canada? *Social Policy and Administration*, *36*, 648-663.

Salamon, L. M., Haddock, M. A., Sokolowski, S. W., & Tice, H. S. (2007).

Measuring civil society and volunteering: Initial findings from implementation of the UN Handbook on nonprofit institutions. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods. Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, *23*, 334-340.

Scott, K. (2003). *Funding matters: The impact of Canada's new funding regime on the non-profit and voluntary organizations* Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development.

Smith, D. H. (1981). Altruism, volunteers and volunteerism. *Journal of Voluntary Action Research (Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly)*, *10*, 21-36.

Tarasuk, V. & Eakin, J. M. (2003). Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture: an ethnographic study of food banks in Ontario. *Social Science & Medicine*, *56*, 1505-1515.

Tarasuk, V. (2001). A Critical Examination of Community-Based Responses to Household Food Insecurity in Canada. *Health Education & Behavior*, *28*, 487-499.

Teron, A. C. & Tarasuk, V. S. (1999). Charitable food assistance: What are food bank users receiving? *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, *90*, 382-384.

Thoits, P. A. & Hewitt, L. N. (2001). Volunteer Work and Well-Being. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *42*, 115-131.

Tice, Helen Stone and Salamon, Lester M. (2006). The international classification of non-profit organizations. *Classifications Newsletter*, 5-6.

Voluntary Sector Initiative (2003). *A shared journey. Mid-term reflections on the Voluntary Sector Initiative* Ottawa: Voluntary Sector Initiative, Government of Canada.

Wilson, J. (2000). Volunteering. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *26*, 215-240.

Yeung, A. B. (2004). The Octagon Model of Volunteer Motivation: Results of a Phenomenological Analysis. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *15*, 21-46.