

'I'll do it because I want to, not because I have to'

## An exploration of the implications of obligation for volunteerability

12

Linda Bridges Karr

### Introduction

While not a new phenomenon, certain obligatory forms of volunteering are becoming more common, and they are often considered (at least partial) answers to the problems of individualization and alienation that are so prevalent in advancing societies. By definition, such initiatives do bring particular target groups in touch with taking action on behalf of others with minimal prospects of economic reward. The long-term consequences (value?) of these programs, however, and the extent to which they achieve the (sometimes lofty) goals that they are expected to achieve, remain unclear. Scholars have offered a wide array of arguments both for and against the use of varying degrees of coercion to encourage people to volunteer. Empirical evidence is sparse and contradictory.

This paper explores the issue of mandatory volunteering, focusing on the circumstances under which obligation may cultivate and enhance "volunteerability" (see Meijs, this volume) and those under which it may serve as an impediment. In keeping with the theme of this series - the future of volunteering as a tragedy of the commons - this paper focuses on the question of whether and how obligatory forms of volunteering affect the long-term supply of volunteer effort. This issue is highly relevant, as governments and societies are relying increasingly on volunteers to provide services for which there would otherwise be insufficient resources. At the same, processes of individualization, social isolation, and alienation are continuing to advance, leading some to sound the alarm that society as we know it is disintegrating before our eyes.

Volunteering is therefore seen as a means of providing services while creating and strengthening the interpersonal bonds from which the fabric of society is woven (social capital).

Recent years have seen an increase in initiatives that require a certain level of volunteer effort, particularly among young people, with the goal of instilling a number of civic virtues, including tolerance, involvement, and a willingness to help others. While current research does suggest that early experiences with volunteering do seem to contribute to volunteering behavior in adulthood, less attention has been paid to the mechanisms that underlie this relationship. Some research even suggests that the association is somewhat spurious, having more to do with social and cultural environments that emphasize volunteering rather than with the actual experience of volunteering. Emerging studies of service learning, social internships, and other forms of social learning experiences within and parallel to formal curricula suggest that the quality and nature of these experiences can have enduring effects - positive or negative - on the perspectives that the young people who participate in them develop concerning social participation and volunteering. The challenge is to identify conditions under which a certain degree of obligation enhances the chances of future volunteering (volunteerability) and integrate them into the debate concerning programs of mandatory volunteering.

Because young people constitute one of the most important target groups of such initiatives, this article

focuses on programs that are intended to introduce young people to volunteering through projects that take place within (and are in various degrees required) formal educational settings. Although the arguments in this paper are supported and illustrated by research and evidence that focuses primarily on young people and volunteering, the concepts should be equally applicable to other obligatory volunteer settings (e.g., corporate volunteering, national service, court-ordered community service, *pro bono* legal representation).

The paper begins with a general discussion of theoretical concepts related to the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Existing social scientific theories imply a number of conditions that could be expected to enhance (or impede) the chances that coercion will actually foster a particular (voluntary) behavior in the future. In the second section of this paper, I use an elementary schema as a bridge to apply the general concepts of motivation to specific contextual questions related to volunteering and volunteering experiences. The article ends with a number of propositions that could be tested in future research and taken into consideration by organizations that are (or are thinking about becoming) involved in social learning projects (or other forms of obligatory volunteering).

### **Obligation and volition**

Coercion can dampen the perception of self-determination, which is an important ingredient of the ability of individuals to view themselves as competent and valued (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Consider a child who has been told for the last time to clean up her room or face the consequences (e.g., no playing outside until the job is done). In an effort to avoid the undesirable consequences while preserving her own perception of self-determination, the child is likely to turn purposively toward the task at hand while assuring her father, "I'm only doing this because I want to, not because I have to."

Obligation (coercion) is the polar opposite of volition. Obligation is imposed from without; volition arises from within. The issue of mandatory volunteering the-

refore centers on the interaction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Many theories of motivation refer to a "crowding-out effect," whereby external incentives (e.g., monetary payment) tend to dilute or even destroy the intrinsic desire to engage in a particular activity. In their well-known conception, Deci and Ryan (1985), activities are intrinsically motivated if they provide a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. In this view, external rewards need not be detrimental to intrinsic motivation, as long as they do not impinge upon these three goals.

Note that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not mutually exclusive; individuals pursue multiple goals with their behavior. The connection between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation through the feeling of autonomy can explain decreasingly intrinsic motivation for activities to the extent that they come to be perceived as expected.<sup>1</sup> The perception of autonomy, however, is not the only factor that determines motivation and behavior. This approach does not include a mechanism for addressing differences in the extent to which individuals focus on certain characteristics of situations while ignoring others or the effects of such selective attention on motivation and behavior within a given context. A recent theoretical advance in sociology with regard to the explanation of pro-social behavior offers a means of exploring these effects.

Sociological goal-framing theory (see Lindenberg, 2006) is based on the assumption that, in their interactions with others, the behavioral choices that people make are affected by the goals they seek to achieve through their behavior (i.e., a goal frame) and their perception of the relationship within which the interaction occurs (i.e., a mental model). Attention is selective, however, as it is impossible to focus on all goals equally at the same time. A key proposition of sociological goal-framing theory is that the details that take center stage in a particular context tend to obscure other choices.<sup>2</sup>

Lindenberg (2006) describes three "master frames" (i.e., overarching sets of goals that influence behavior and serve as core motivations), which individuals use

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank René Bekkers for raising this point in a discussion during the Invitational Conference in Rotterdam on 7 September 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed application of goal-framing theory to the context of volunteering, see Karr (2003) and Karr and Meijis (2006).

to evaluate social situations and plan their behavior accordingly. Behavioral choices that are made within the hedonic frame are guided by goals that are directed toward immediate gratification. The goal of maximizing tangible resources steers behavior within an instrumental gain frame. Action choices that are guided by a normative frame are oriented toward acting appropriately. In any given situation, an individual may be guided by several frames simultaneously, but one will tend to take precedence over the others. Characteristics of the situation determine the relative salience of each of these master frames, which is subject to change.

Each of the three master frames reflects a type of motivation. The instrumental frame may be roughly equated with extrinsic motivation. The hedonic and normative frames each represent a particular form of intrinsic motivation (i.e., “enjoyment-based” and “obligation-based” intrinsic motivation, respectively). This distinction highlights an important point: the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation does not rest solely upon the presence or absence of external behavioral incentives; the extent to which individuals are oriented toward increasing their resources is of at least equal importance (see Lindenberg, 2006).

The child in the previous example does not want to stay inside all day. The prospect of having to do just that is the catalyst that finally motivates her choice to clean her room. As she makes clear in her retort, however, the motivation is not entirely extrinsic. The child is probably also aware that a tidy room is more pleasant (hedonic consideration) and the fact that she did what was expected of her will please her parents (normative consideration). While these considerations were already present, they were probably over-ruled by other - stronger - hedonic considerations (e.g., girls just want to have fun.) The father’s “threat” served to redefine the situation, thus shifting her primary focus into an instrumental frame.

Coercive behavior is arguably directed toward strengthening the instrumental gain frame of another individual.

The dominant “reward” in such a situation is the absence of an undesirable consequence. Although coercion is generally effective in obtaining a particular behavioral response at any given time, the long-term effects of the use of coercion largely depend upon the extent to which the coercion enhances or diminishes the individual’s focus on other types of goals.<sup>3</sup> This will depend upon a number of factors, including the severity of the “threat” and the availability (and awareness) of additional rewards. For example, in former Soviet-Bloc countries, “volunteer work” was imposed by the government under threat of unemployment and the loss of other basic necessities. As Bell (2001) observes, “In some countries ... volunteer recruitment is low and remains unpalatable because of the negative images of state-demanded ‘volunteering’” (see also Salamon & Anheier, 1996).<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Kahane (1975) describes how the egalitarian manner of socialization to which young people in the kibbutz were exposed fostered the development of a “pragmatic commitment” to acting in the common good that persisted well into adulthood, even for those who eventually left the kibbutz. The “coercion” in this context is quite different from that which was exercised under the former Soviet regime. In the latter example, the “coercion” consisted largely of peer pressure among equals.

The issues that have been raised in this (brief) discussion of the interplay of obligation and volition provide a means of extending the original question that this paper seeks to answer (i.e., whether and how obligatory forms of volunteering affect the long-term supply of volunteer effort). The question of whether obligation enhances or impedes the sustainability of this common societal resource has no clear answer. It depends upon contextual characteristics of the situations of which obligatory volunteering is a part. The following section delves deeper into one particular context of obligatory volunteering.

### **School-based social-learning experiences**

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive overview of service learning or similar experiences.<sup>5</sup> These experiences, however, do provide a

<sup>3</sup> Including, but not limited to, the need for self-determination.

<sup>4</sup> Kuti (2004) argues that generalizations the history of volunteering in Eastern Europe and Central Asia are difficult, due to specific cultural and historical developments in each individual country.

<sup>5</sup> Other authors provide excellent reviews of issues and models specifically related to this topic. For example, see Moon (2004), Meijs and Van der Voort (2005), and Mateman (in this volume).

context within which to explore the effect of obligation on the likelihood that (young) people who engage in volunteering activities that are in some sense obligatory will continue to volunteer in the future. The relevance goes beyond the question of whether requiring volunteering in the school context increases the chance that a non-volunteering student will become a volunteer in the future. Another important question to be asked concerns whether service requirements can potentially decrease the future involvement of students who are already committed to volunteering. As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between obligation and volition is quite complex. The purpose of this section is to illustrate the dynamics between these two processes in concrete application.

To be sure, not all service-learning programs are obligatory. Many schools offer them as optional supplements to the curriculum or as elective courses that can fulfill a general requirement. The fact that they are all in some way connected to the school setting, however, does provide an element of obligation, particularly those that carry some form of academic credit.<sup>6</sup> Students who begin such a program, even as an elective, are not likely to be able to withdraw at their whim without experiencing some sort of undesirable consequence.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this paper, obligation will be treated as the extent to which specific aspects of service programs are specified externally, as opposed to remaining open to choice.

Because of the decentralized implementation of school-based social-learning initiatives, the extent of obligation in such experiences is obviously subject to variation. The effects of obligation on the future volunteer activity of students are therefore highly dependent upon the ways in which particular programs are structured. According to McLellan and Youniss (2003), "required and voluntary service operate as distinct systems involving separate factors" (p. 49). These authors compare two school-based community-service programs in a major U.S. metropolitan area, one of which was integrated and directed as a part of a set curriculum and the other of which allowed students to

choose the manner in which they would fulfill their required number of service hours. They argue that programs that are more highly structured (i.e., those that involve a higher level of obligation) can serve to bring students into contact with types of service and involvement that they would be unlikely to choose of left to their own devices, and that the experience can contribute to the development of a future affinity for similar forms of involvement. On the other hand, programs in which students are free to choose their own forms of involvement (i.e., those that involve a lower level of obligation) can serve to strengthen the participation of students who are already active through their membership in organizations outside of the school.<sup>8</sup>

A key point in the value of each type of program is that students experience the relevance of the service activities to important aspects of their own realities (e.g., relevance to coursework, as stressed by teachers in the more-structured program, or relevance to valued activities, as expressed by the intensification of existing extra-curricular volunteer activities).

At the university level, service-learning programs that are integrated into the curriculum (and that are therefore obligatory, at least to some extent) have also proven to have positive effects on students' intentions to engage in volunteering or other community-service activities in the future (e.g., see Karr & van Loenen, 2006; Roschelle et al., 2000; Weber & Glyptis, 2000; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 1999; Godfrey, 1999). As with high-school programs, the effectiveness of university service-learning experiences in this regard is largely attributed to the ability of such programs to bring students into contact with volunteering (or other forms of community service) who would otherwise not have had the opportunity (or ability, or even interest).

## Discussion

The central question of this paper concerns the effects of obligatory volunteering on the long-term supply of volunteer effort. Although "obligatory volunteering" may seem a contradiction in terms, the concept rests

<sup>6</sup> Recent experiments with various service-learning experiences in a university business school in the Netherlands bring the requirement of educational credit into question. For further discussion see Meijs and Van der Voort (2005) and Karr and Van Loenen (2006).

<sup>7</sup> According to Graff (2006) "The denial of an important, valuable, or desired benefit may be as 'coercive' as the exercise of force or the imposition of a penalty by an external source." (p. 15)

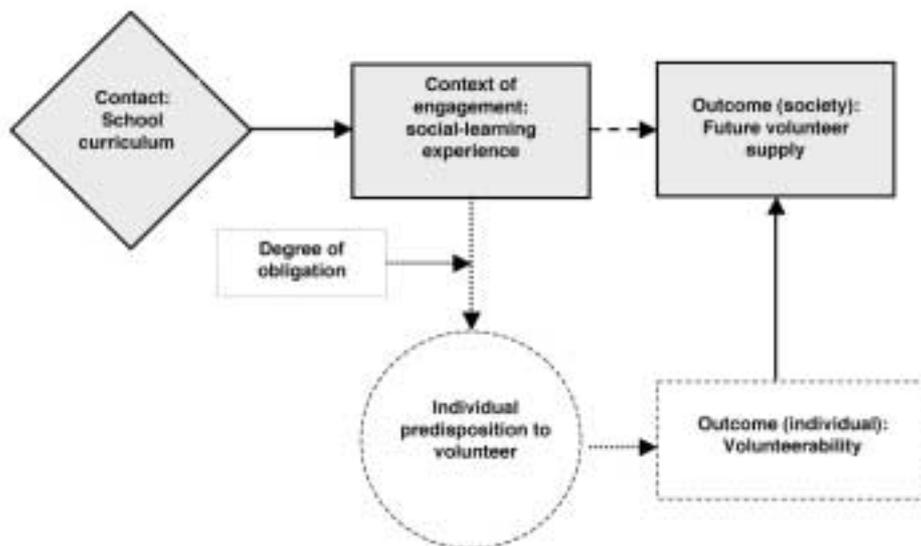
<sup>8</sup> This result is consistent with findings from Wilson & Musick (1997, 1999) and Bekkers (2004).

along a continuum between obligation and volition. Theoretically, the balance between these two extremes can be expressed in terms of interactions among various forms of motivation. From this perspective, obligation can be helpful in cultivating volition as long as situational factors allow sufficient emphasis on normative or hedonic goals, in addition to those that are purely instrumental.

Because of their prevalence and the important position that they have developed on national governmental agendas, social-learning experiences offer a suitable context within which to explore the relationship between obligatory volunteering and the future sustainability of volunteering. More concretely, we can consider the circumstances under which a certain degree of obligation enhances or diminishes the motivation of young people to volunteer in the future.

As illustrated by the examples that are provided above, existing evaluations of social-learning experiences do not provide clear answers to this question. Because of the difficulties that are inherent in longitudinal research, particularly across widely varying contexts, this situation is unlikely to change. Nonetheless, we can identify a number of conditions that could be expected to increase the likelihood that such initiatives will achieve the goal of safeguarding and enhancing the volunteerability commons. To do so, I will draw on a dynamic schema that I proposed in an earlier article (Karr, 2005). In this schema, the process of volunteering encompasses a number of different elements (e.g., individual predisposition, contact between the individual and the volunteer context, engagement in volunteering, and outcomes at various levels).

**Figure 1. Investigating the effects of obligation in school-based social-learning experiences on individual and societal-level volunteerability**



The illustration in Figure 1 adapts the elementary schema that is mentioned above to the central question of the paper.

The shaded areas represent the relationships that are assumed in the adoption of school-based social-learning experiences as a means of increasing the volunteer supply. The contact between the individual and

the volunteering context is given; it occurs through the school curriculum, which includes some form of social-learning experience. The context of engagement is also given. The outcome in question concerns the future supply of volunteers, which school-based social-learning experiences are expected to affect positively. The white areas of the figure reflect a more detailed view of the process. Individuals (students)

come into contact with the context of engagement (school-based social-learning experiences). The context of engagement affects the predisposition of individual students toward volunteering, and this relations-

hip is conditioned by the degree of obligation, which is a characteristic of the context. Predisposition to volunteer affects individual volunteerability, which is assumed to affect the future volunteer supply.

### **An illustration**

Teresa and Clara are both sixteen years old and are average students in the same high school. Teresa is outgoing, popular, and enjoys shopping and having fun with her many friends. She is very conscious of how she appears to others, and is always alert to the latest trends. Clara is neither as outgoing nor as outspoken as Teresa is. She has many interests, and is a member of the school's theater club. In describing herself, Clara likes to say that she is still "trying to figure out who she is."

One year, a number of students had planned to help with a toy drive for children in foster care. Both Teresa and Clara were asked to help. Teresa's response was, "Are you kidding? I don't have time to scrounge around for toys on Saturday like all those goody-goodys. I have much better things to do." In fact, Teresa and her friends sometimes make jokes about the "goody-goodys" in their class, who are often involved with fund-raising drives, petitions to save (as Teresa puts it) "the species du jour," or other community activities. Because Clara had already planned to visit relatives that weekend, she did not give the project another thought.

At the end of the school year, it was announced that a new statewide civics curriculum would require each student to participate in a service project of at least ten hours during the coming academic year. Each school could decide for itself how this requirement would be carried out. Because of their positive experiences with the toy drive, the school had decided to work with the local department of social services to arrange a number of volunteer projects to benefit underprivileged and foster children in the community.

Teresa is negatively predisposed to volunteering. When faced with the behavioral choice of volunteering or not, the first thought that comes to her mind is that she does not want to look like a "goody-goody." In other words, the negative considerations concerning the behavior are in the foreground, even though she may also be aware of some reasons why it might be a good idea to volunteer anyway. Teresa views the project in the coming school year with dread; she participates grudgingly, and she and her friends gripe amongst themselves about the "stupid work" they are required to do. At the end of the project, Teresa sighs with relief, "At least I'll never have to do that again!" For Teresa, the obligatory program did ensure that she volunteered, but the resentment that it created reinforced the negative considerations that already played such a strong role in her thoughts. It is unlikely that Teresa will volunteer again in the future.

Clara has few, if any, preconceived notions about volunteering. Unlike Teresa, Clara views the new project simply as "something that I'll have to do for Civics next year." Furthermore, she is actually happy that she will get to leave the school building several times in order to work on the project. While she reads books to children in a shelter, Clara finds that she can use her acting skills to make the children fall on the floor with laughter. In describing her experiences, Clara says, "I've never played to such a fabulous audience before!" In Clara's situation, the original definition of the volunteering experience as "school activity" eventually became supported by perceptions of an "enjoyable experience" and an "artistic challenge." The obligatory program drew her attention to the positive aspects of volunteering. When the children's shelter asked Clara if she would like to work with their summer program as well, Clara response was, "Just try to keep me away!"

The fact that the obligatory experiences that are described above take place within a formal educational context is a crucial point, and any attempt to generalize to other forms of obligatory volunteering should be made with extreme caution. For example, Loder (2001) examines the effects of requiring lawyers to provide a certain number of hours of free legal services to indigent clients. Some argue that pro bono requirements would help lawyers learn to make a habit of giving back to the community in this way, thereby encouraging further donations of time and services (i.e., they would eventually internalize a moral norm of contribution). In contrast, Loder finds that such requirements tend to encourage practicing lawyers to provide only the minimal level of services required, thereby reducing the future contributions of those who were otherwise inclined to make substantial contributions. In the context of law-school, mandatory service requirements did not diminish the future pro bono intentions of those who were already positively inclined to do so. For students who were negatively disposed or neutral toward pro bono work, however, the negative feelings associated with being coerced into providing free legal services dampened their (already slight) intentions to volunteer in the future.

#### **Proposition for research and practice**

Future investigations should consider the issues that have been discussed above in a variety of contexts of "obligatory volunteering." In addition to the school-based programs that have been addressed in this article, other contexts could include employee volunteering, "loaned-executive" programs and court-ordered community service. The following are examples of propositions that can be derived from this representa-

tion and that could be tested in future empirical research.

1. Obligatory volunteering experiences can affect the predisposition of individuals toward volunteering.
  - a. The relationship between obligatory volunteer experiences and the predisposition of individuals toward volunteering is affected by the degree of obligation that is involved in these experiences.
  - b. Extremely high levels of obligation are likely to have a negative effect on the relationship between obligatory volunteering experiences and the predisposition of individuals toward volunteering.
  - c. Moderate levels of obligation are likely to have the most positive effect on individuals who have a neutral predisposition toward volunteering or those who are negatively predisposed.
2. The volunteerability of individuals who are positively predisposed to volunteer is higher than that of individuals who are negatively predisposed or of those who have a neutral predisposition to volunteering.
  - a. Volunteerability increases as an individual's predisposition toward volunteering changes from negative to positive.
  - b. Volunteerability decreases as an individual's predisposition toward volunteering changes from positive to negative.
3. Increases in individual volunteerability have a positive effect on the future volunteer supply in society.
4. Decreases in individual volunteerability have a negative effect on the future volunteer supply in society.

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