Knowledge Development
Canada Volunteerism Initiative

Motivations for Volunteering with Youth-Oriented Programs

A REPORT

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Introduction

The ability to secure resources necessary for the production of goods or services is a determining factor in assessing the effectiveness of any organization (Chelladurai, 1987). Arguably, the most critical resource is human capital. This includes both paid staff (if the organization has any) and volunteers, who are often responsible for providing direction, leadership, and program implementation. Voluntary organizations, including youth-oriented programs (e.g., Scouts Canada, Girl Guides, minor hockey, etc.), could not function without the help of volunteers. From this perspective, an organization's ability to recruit and retain volunteers is central in determining how effective it will be over time.

Over the years, considerable insight has been gained regarding the motivations of volunteers. However, little work has focused on those who volunteer with youth-oriented organizations. This is surprising given the large number of organizations that exist to provide services to young people.

In 2003, Riemer et al. reported motives for volunteering among those whose work involves youth. In this report, we examine people's motives for volunteering with youth-oriented programs. Understanding motives can help charitable and nonprofit organizations determine who to target as potential volunteers and how to communicate with them.

Understanding Motivation

Motivation is more than just positive thinking or trying harder. It is what drives people to act and determines, in large part, the activities to which they choose to direct their energy. Fundamentally, research about motivation is trying to understand the "why of behaviour" (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 3). Most researchers would agree that understanding human motivation provides insight into how human behaviour is energized and directed (Deci & Ryan, 1985). That is, if we know a person's motivation, we should have a clearer understanding of the types of activities a person will engage in, how hard that same person will work at those particular activities, and how long he or she will continue to work at those activities. Whether or not a person chooses to engage in a given behaviour is largely connected to his or her needs or goals, and whether or not the behaviour will satisfy those needs or goals. In order to keep people motivated, the specific reasons and motivations underlying their behaviour must be met.

Motives can, therefore, be thought of as the various needs a person has (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological). Individuals will often set goals for themselves that, if achieved, will satisfy their needs. Therefore, learning a person's motives for volunteering can provide insight into what the underlying needs or goals are.

The Research Process

This project has two phases. In the first phase, we interviewed 39 long-term youth program volunteers from southern Saskatchewan. The participants were recruited from organizations dedicated to delivering services to youth (e.g., Girl Guides, Scouts, minor hockey). Participants were given an honorarium for their participation. Each of the interviews was recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions were then examined for recurring themes. One focus of the interviews was understanding motives for volunteering, and how they change over time.

In the second phase of the project, a total of 2,000 volunteers with Scouts Canada and Girl Guides of Canada from the four western Canadian provinces (250 from each organization in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) were randomly selected to participate in the research. These volunteers were mailed a survey designed to measure the motives previously reported in the volunteer literature, and the unique motives identified through the interviews.

A total of 1,119 people responded (56%). Since Scouts Canada allows both females and males to volunteer, and Girl Guides of Canada restricts their participation to females, there were 779 females (70%) and 333 males (30%).[1] The survey participants ranged in age from 14 to 89 years (the average age was 43.5) and had been involved with the organization for an average of 5.4 years. The majority of survey respondents were: parents (88%); had children involved in the program (79%, see Figure 1); were between the ages of 25 to 44 (48%, see Figure 2); and lived in communities of over 100,000 people (42%, see Figure 3).

[1] Seven respondents did not indicate their gender.

Figure 1: Distribution of Survey Respondents by Number of Children Involved

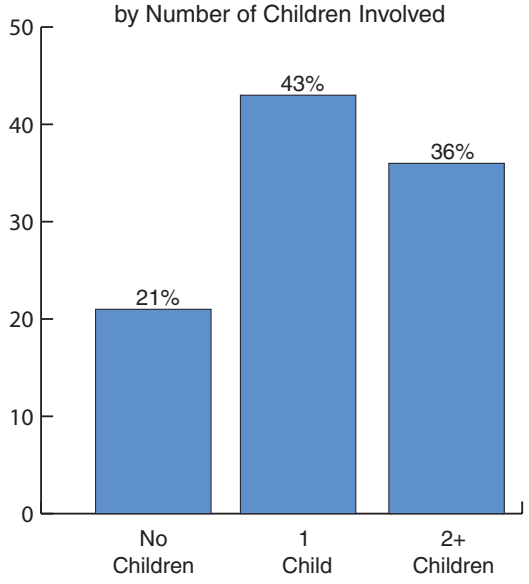


Figure 3: Distribution of Survey Respondents by Community Size

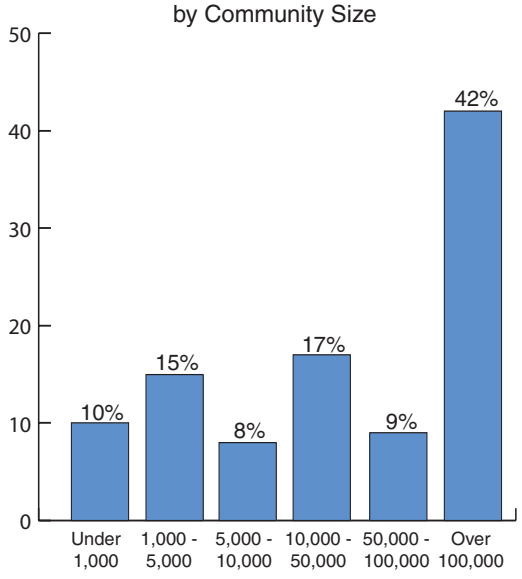
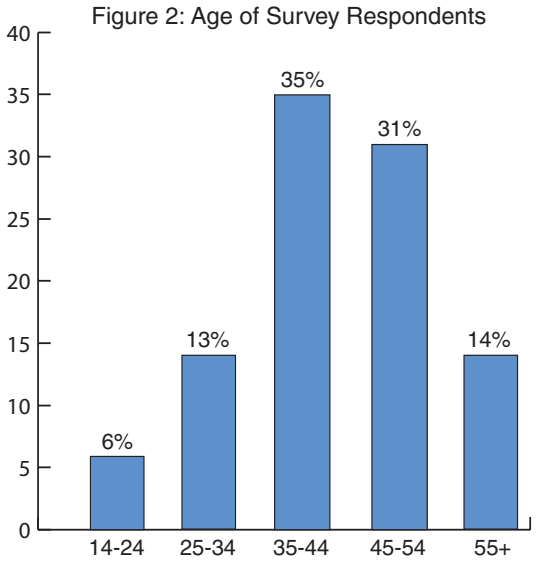


Figure 2: Age of Survey Respondents



The Interview Results

Four fundamental motives for volunteering with youth-oriented programs emerged from the results of the interviews:

1. involvement of children or family members;
2. interest in the activity itself;
3. creating something better;
4. and sense of obligation.

Involvement of children or family members

This motive was the one most frequently cited by our interviewees. Much of this motive is tied to the obligation that parents feel to ensure that their own children have a good experience in an activity, or to become more intimately associated with the experiences their children are having. Parents told us:

"My children needed to learn how to skate, so I got involved."

"My son played ball and my husband coached, so I got involved."

"I wanted to be informed as to my children's activities."

"It was a way to be involved in what the kids were doing."

Some respondents went so far as to indicate that their child's involvement was the only reason that they volunteered for a particular organization. That is, their connection with the organization would end once their child was no longer involved. One parent told us:

"When the children are done, I'll be done. I may still carry on as an official, but I won't look for another organization to get involved with."

Interest in the activity itself

Many interviewees spoke fondly of their own experiences with a youth-oriented organization when they were younger, and told us about the special place that it had in their personal development. Many of these individuals also saw volunteering as an opportunity to continue their positive connection past the point of being an actual recipient of the service, and felt that volunteering was a chance to give back to an activity that they were particularly good or skilled at. This was illustrated by some respondents who told us:

"I love baseball, grew up playing, and wanted to be involved with my kids."

"I have a love of the game. I am pretty good and so have knowledge to give to others."

"I've always had a passion for the sport."

"I like classical music. I want to promote classical music. I feel like the cooperative nature of an orchestra is better than this competitive individual stuff."

Creating something better

A third motive identified by interviewees was the need to be involved in the creation of something new, or the opportunity to make something, or someone, better as a result of their involvement. The act of volunteering provides many respondents with a sense of achievement.

"It's a great opportunity to promote your vision of what a youth orchestra should be, an opportunity to shape the organization."

"Being involved with a start up is very exciting. It is exciting when you start putting things together, see the athletes, see the programs start."

"Developing the park and seeing the growth of the facility is rewarding."

Sense of obligation

Some people feel a sense of obligation to volunteer. If no one else can be found, or there is a lack of qualified or willing individuals, these people will volunteer. This motive may stem from a desire not to let others down. Some respondents told us:

"I started because there was no one else to do it."

"They needed someone to organize because we live in a small community."

Discussion

The results associated with the first two motives suggest that people who have benefitted from a particular program (either directly themselves, or indirectly through their child's involvement) are more likely to consider volunteering for a youth-oriented organization. Respondents felt that it was important to make a direct and personal connection with an organization or with an activity, as that personal connection would make them more likely to volunteer.

The Survey Results

The survey examined the relevance or importance of motives for volunteering in youth-oriented programs. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which each of 38 statements was true for them on a scale from 1 (not at all true for me) to 7 (very true for me). Many of these motives can be found in the broader volunteer motivation literature, and others were identified as a result of one-on-one interviews[2].

Items with similar themes were grouped together to make nine distinct motives. The nine motives were:

1. helping others;
2. career advancement;
3. a chance to escape;
4. social interactions;
5. pressure from others;
6. ego enhancement;
7. societal expectations or norms;
8. helping the community;
9. and helping their children.

Helping others

Helping others, particularly those less fortunate was the strongest motivation for volunteering (5.6 out of 7, see Figure 4). Sample statements from respondents include:

"I am concerned about those less fortunate than me."

"I feel a need to help others."

Career advancement

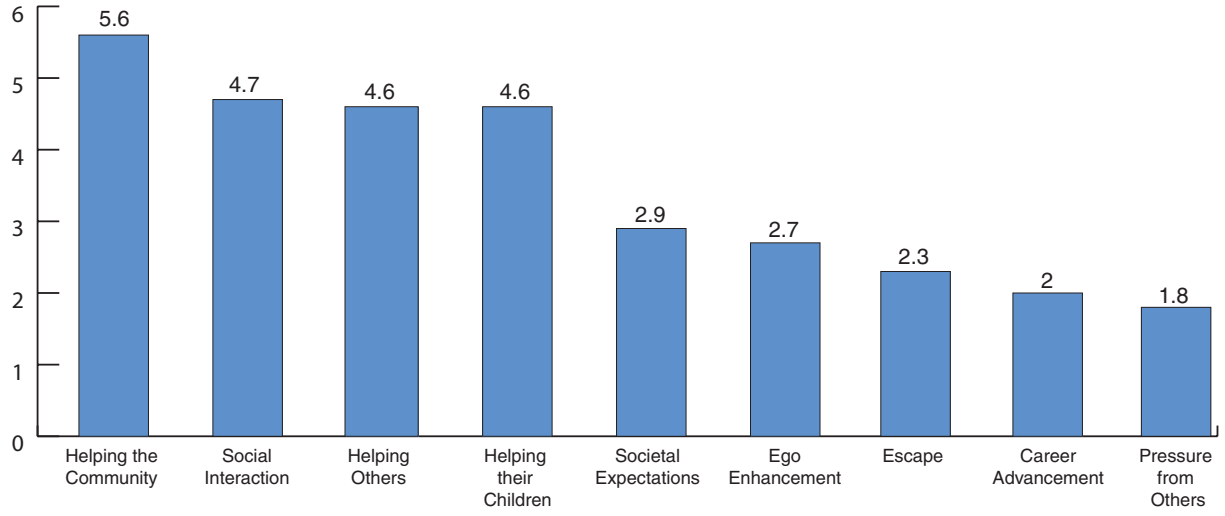
Many people volunteer because they see the activity as an opportunity to develop or further enhance a skill set that will benefit their own career development. Some respondents told us that:

"It will help me get a foot in the door at a new job."

"It will look good on my resume."

[2] These motive scales were developed through a series of pilot tests. Data from these tests were subjected to item-to-total correlational analyses as well as factor analytic techniques.

Figure 4: Motivations for Volunteering in Youth-Oriented Programs



A chance to escape

Some individuals volunteer as a way to escape from the problems and concerns they face in their regular lives. Volunteering is seen as a means to get away from or work through their problems. Some respondents said:

"It allows me to escape from my troubles."

"It helps me through some of my own personal problems."

Social interaction

One motive for volunteering that is often identified is the desire to meet others or make new friends.

"It allows me to make new friends."

"It allows me to interact with others."

Pressure from others

Some people volunteer because they feel pressured by those around them. Some respondents felt that:

"Others expect it of me."

"I feel pressured by someone close to me."

Ego enhancement

Others may become volunteers because, in their opinion, the activity will raise their worth in the eyes of others, or because they think that volunteering for a particular activity or program would be prestigious.

"I like the recognition."

"It is important that I am respected for doing worthwhile work."

Societal expectations or norms

Some people begin volunteering because there is an expectation that everyone in a given culture or society become involved in their community. Some respondents with this experience told us that they began volunteering because:

"My family and friends also volunteer."

"People close to me volunteer."

Helping the community

Another important motivation for volunteering is the benefits that a particular organization provides to the community in which the volunteer lives. Many respondents felt that:

"It allows me to put something back into the community."

"It provides for the greater good of the community."

Helping their children

An important reason that many people gave for volunteering in youth-oriented programs was to ensure that their children would be provided with a good experience, or to ensure that their children had opportunities to participate in certain activities. Some respondents told us that:

"It allows me to spend time with my children."

"It makes certain my children have a good experience."

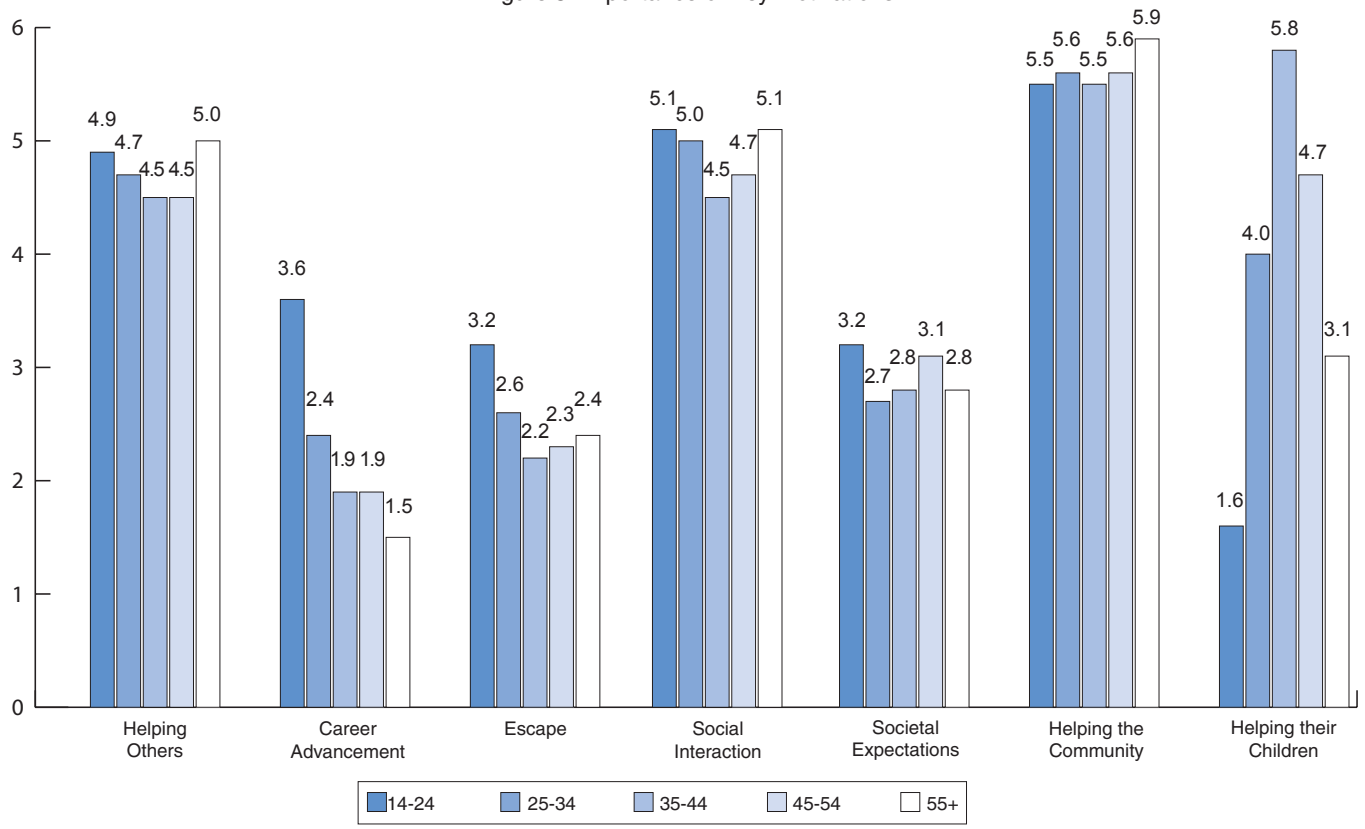
Discussion

As we saw in Figure 4, indicated that the four most important motives were: helping the community; social interaction; helping others; and helping their children.

There was some variation in the ratings of the various motives based on age, gender, and whether or not one or more of the participant's children were participating in the program.
Women rated social interaction more highly as a motive than did men. This finding is consistent with other research in the area. This was the only motive that varied significantly by gender.

The importance of almost all of the motives varied by age (see Figure 5). Career advancement was most important to younger respondents, particularly those determining a career path, or those just embarking on a career. Helping others and helping the community tended to be more important for those who were older. Finally, helping their children became an important motive for respondents in the middle years or the child-raising years.

Figure 5: Importance of Key Motivations



Consistent with the findings from the interviews, helping their children was very important for parents of children participating in the various programs offered by Scouts Canada or Girl Guides. Social interaction, on the other hand, was more important for those with no children participating (see Figure 6). Helping their children was the only motive that varied significantly for those who had children participating in the program when compared to those who had no children participating.

The findings indicated that individuals between the ages of 25 and 34 who had children participating in the program were the most strongly motivated by helping their children (see Figure 7). Moreover, as individuals aged, the strength of this particular motive tended to decrease even when the participant had children participating in the youth-oriented program.

Figure 6: Importance of Social Interaction and Helping Their Children

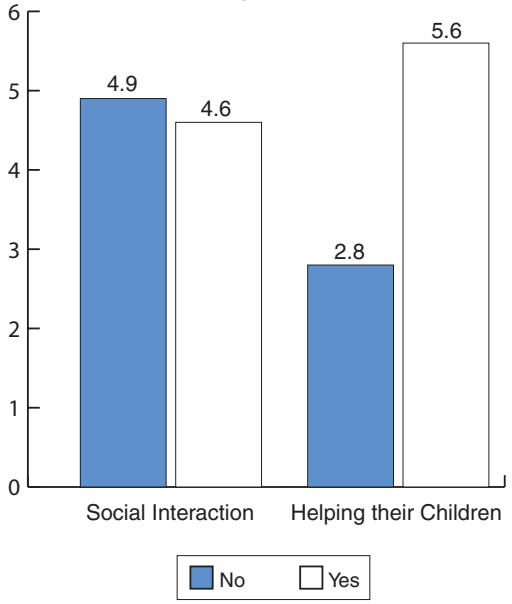
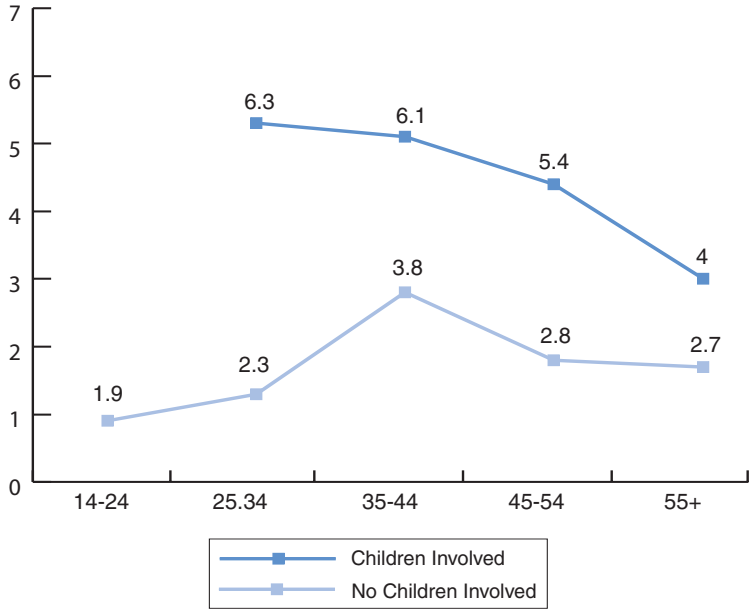


Figure 7: Importance of Helping their Children by Age and Whether their Children are Involved



Recommendations

When recruiting volunteers for youth-oriented programs, organizations should target the parents of the children who participate or who may participate in the future. The parents of children who participate in youth-oriented programs are a very responsive group. While it is always advantageous to highlight the real benefits the local community receives from youth-oriented programs, many parents will respond more readily when the organization highlights the benefits to their own children.

Individuals who had a positive childhood experience with a youth-oriented program represent another potentially responsive target group. Since a positive past experience is an important motivation for certain individuals, organizations should consider keeping records of long-time participants. Moreover, participants nearing the end of their tenure with the organization should be encouraged to continue their association in a leadership role (i.e., as a board member).

When recruiting older adults, organizations should emphasize the opportunity to help others, to help the community, and give something back. These particular motives seem to be of greater importance for this age group.

Youth-oriented programs should not overlook young adults as a potential group of volunteers. In addition to highlighting how volunteering would provide opportunities to help others, help their community, and to increase social interactions, recruiters should highlight that volunteering may have a positive influence on future career opportunities.

It is a good idea to provide potential volunteers with a vision of the impact their involvement can have. Always highlight the difference a volunteer can make through involvement in a youth-oriented program. People appreciate the opportunity to make a real difference.

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