



## **Volunteering, subjective well-being and public policy**

Binder, M. and Freytag, A. (2013). Volunteering, subjective well-being and public policy. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 34, pp. 97-119.

### Overview

This article comprises an investigation into the impact of volunteering on the subjective well-being of volunteers. Taking into account variables such as volunteers' motives and personality traits, the authors analyse data compiled by the British Household Panel Survey to reach their conclusions. Overall, they find that regular volunteering has a significant, causal effect on increasing subjective well-being.

### Background

Having provided a definition of volunteering as “any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson, 2000, pp. 215), the authors explore a variety of factors of volunteering. Naturally, their primary interest is in the *consequences* of volunteering, i.e. increased well-being, however they also acknowledge the *experience* factor and discuss the *antecedents* of volunteering as part of the “volunteering process model” (Snyder & Omoto, 1992; Wilson, 2012). The authors recognise the *antecedents* – namely, *personal disposition*, *human resources*, *life course*, and *social context* – as important to the volunteering-wellbeing relationship. During their own analysis, particular attention will be paid to the impact of volunteers' personality traits (with emphasis on *trust*) and social networks on the outcomes, in particular, subjective well-being.

### Methodology

This paper comprises analysis of data collected by the British House Panel Survey (BHPS), examining social and economic changes across households in Great Britain. This survey of around 5,000 households and approximately 15,000 individual adults (16+) addresses socioeconomic and demographic factors such as income, job, social values, education, etc. The survey has known 18 waves since its conception in 1991, and this investigation utilises data collected in the even-numbered waves from 6-18, as these waves include the variables “life satisfaction” and “volunteering”.

Regarding the “life satisfaction” variable, authors analyse BHPS data in response to the question: “How dissatisfied or satisfied are you with your life overall?”. Respondents are able to reply on a 1-7 Likert scale, where 1 = not satisfied at all and 7 = completely satisfied.

As for the “volunteering” variable, the authors analyse data collected by the BHPS on the frequency of voluntary work. Asked how often they do “unpaid voluntary work”, respondents can answer on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 = never/almost never, 2 = once a year or less, 3 = several times a year, 4 = at least once a month, and 5 = at least once a week. Other variables included in the investigation revolve around socioeconomic status (income, education, employment status, etc.) and personality traits, including “trust” as well as the “Big 5” (Digman, 1990):

Agreeableness, Extrovert, Openness, Neuroticism and Conscientiousness. This data is then analysed using Fixed-Effect Regressions Models.

A limitation of this investigation is the nature of the collected data. The data obtained by the BHPS is from a questionnaire, meaning there is inevitably room to question the validity of the findings. The self-reporting nature of the data makes it susceptible to misreporting, exaggeration, and understatement. However, the authors recognise this limitation and introduce methods such as “propensity score matching” and use of quantile regressions to counteract this issue.

Furthermore, while the dataset for the “life satisfaction” and “volunteering” variables was substantial and sustained over several years, when introducing other variables, such as personality traits, into the equation, the robustness of the analysis was hindered. For example, the authors note that including the “trust” variable is thought to have significantly decreased the sample size, as well as reducing the time period to a matter of two years since 1991, or, the authors have been forced to assume personality traits are unchanging over time.

#### Findings and recommendations

This investigation has found that, overall, regular volunteering has a positive impact on subjective well-being. Although it is noted that it can take time for the positive impact to be observed, if one volunteers over a sustained amount of time, subjective well-being can be seen to significantly increase.

However, the authors also find that the positive impact of volunteering is less significant regarding those who are already happy, and in some cases, the impact is actually negative. It is suggested that this signifies a “defensive” effect of volunteering, whereby less happy individuals mitigate negative aspects of their life, i.e. loneliness, unemployment, etc. by partaking in unpaid voluntary activity. This suggests volunteering is not a primary source of happiness for those who are already satisfied in life. Conversely, the effect of stopping voluntary activity has an even more significant impact, negatively affecting subjective well-being.

Having gathered such findings, the authors are able to recommend that policymakers encourage voluntary activity as a means to improving happiness and well-being. They suggest that advertising campaigns could be run promoting this beneficial effect of volunteering, as well as introducing awards and prizes, even if the goal is to increase voluntary activity rather than individual happiness. However, policymakers must take caution so as not to overwhelm the volunteering sector with motives other than the “altruistic” motive, such as those who seek to volunteer purely for their own “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1989, 1990) feeling. Binder and Freytag also warn against the suppression of volunteers’ personality traits under the implicit or explicit pressure to volunteer from policymakers, which could result in a decrease in volunteering and volunteering-conducted happiness.



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