



Volunteer Responses to Scandals in Nonprofit Organizations

Eva Maria Jedicke – University of Freiburg, Germany | Isabella M. Nolte – Harz University of Applied Sciences, Germany | Jörg Lindenmeier – University of Freiburg, Germany

This article addresses ethical dilemmas faced by nonprofit volunteers in the face of a nonprofit scandal. It provides a sort of “ethical roadmap” for NPOs to better respond to volunteers’ needs during a scandal, while at the same time, offering insights as to how to re-build trust and public legitimacy to enable NPOs to fundraise and grow.

The authors investigate how volunteers respond to scandals in nonprofit organizations, and the role of moral reasoning strategies as drivers of volunteer behavior.

The authors conclude that addressing the perspective of nonprofit volunteers during a scandal is critically important. They use a model of volunteer support based on moral reasoning theory. They find that moral intensity has a significant and direct effect on volunteers’ willingness to donate, though not a significant effect on volunteering.

[#Fundraising](#) [#Nonprofits](#) [#NonprofitScandals](#) [#NonprofitVolunteer](#) [#Volunteering](#)

Background

&

Context



- **Research on donor reactions to nonprofit scandals has increased recently**, though the reaction of volunteers remains understudied.
- This study addresses the impact of nonprofit scandals on volunteer behavior. **It provides insights into the dynamics of volunteer behavior in situations where the behavior of nonprofit organizations can be classified as unethical.**
- Drawing on the moral reasoning framework, this research **examines how the moral reasoning strategies of moral rationalization, moral decoupling, and moral coupling affect volunteers' responses to nonprofit scandals.**
- The study is based on an online **survey of 415 German volunteers** conducted between September 2022 – January 2023.
- Participants were shown **fictional scenarios describing mismanagement of funds at board level and asked how they would react** - whether they would continue supporting the organisation or respond to the unethical behaviour.
- The authors focus on **volunteers' willingness to keep contributing their time and cash donations during a crisis**, integrating moral intensity and cognitive dissonance as drivers of volunteers' support behavior.

ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- **Nonprofit scandals lead to a reduction in donor and volunteer support**, while the effect is stronger on donations than on the willingness to continue to volunteer. Volunteer support is stronger anchored in social ties and personal identity, whereas financial donations are easier to withdraw without immediate social consequences.
- To maintain support, **NPOs should apologize for misconduct, and highlighting their programs' successes.**
- When volunteers see a **scandal as serious, it creates a strong feeling of discomfort.** If this feeling isn't resolved, volunteers tend to see the whole organisation as problematic and are more likely to stop giving their time.
- Even though there are variations of volunteer support following a nonprofit scandal, volunteers face ethical dilemmas. **This means that it is important for NPO leaders to provide context that makes it easier for volunteers to justify criticized behavior.**
- **Public legitimacy is crucial** for nonprofits to secure trust and resources.
- **Responding to volunteers' needs during a scandal** (including a better understanding of the psychological process involved) may help them to maintain their willingness to volunteer despite the scandal.

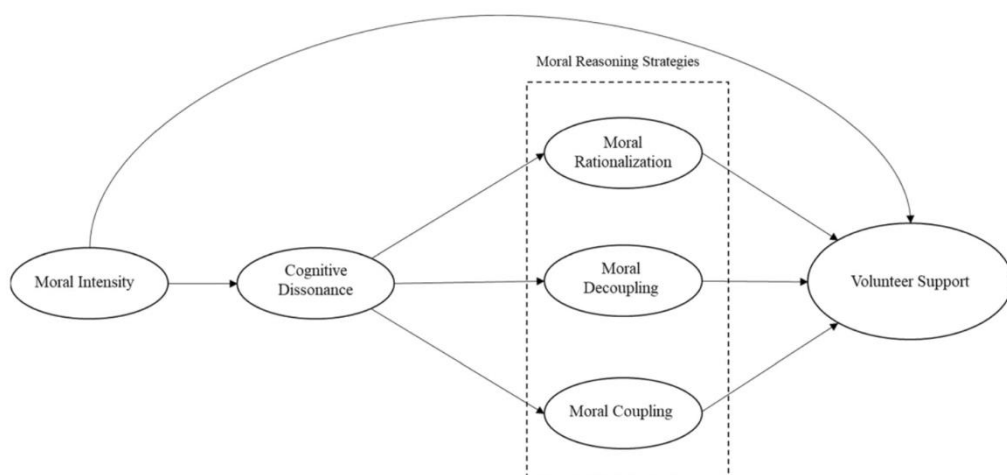


FIGURE 1 | A moral reasoning model of volunteering support during nonprofit scandals.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2026/3 is published in March 2026 and has been written by Brad Mazon from Sahiyo. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.