



Building a Stronger Volunteer Pipeline: Why Empathy Matters Most

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Volunteer pipelines are often fragile, and organizations need better ways to identify and retain likely long-term volunteers. Therefore, understanding what really predicts long-term willingness to help matters for recruitment and retention.

This paper examines why people in the general population intend to volunteer in the future. *What personal motivations predict sustained volunteering intentions over time in the general population, and how do these motives interact over time?*

The study suggests that empathy was the only motivational factor that predicted later volunteering intentions than assuming that well-being or personal fulfillment will translate into volunteering. It also suggests that volunteering itself may shape prosocial tendencies over time.

#Motivationtovolunteer #Empathy #Meaninginlife #Socialvalueorientation
#Satisfactionwithlife

Background

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Context



- Much of the volunteering literature relies on cross-sectional data, which can show association but not the direction of influence. A repeated measures design is stronger because it can test whether one set of variables predicts later change in another.
- The study builds on **prosocial motivation theory** (Reykowski, 1984), which proposes **three pathways for why people help others**:
 1. The **intrinsic path** is about caring for others' welfare
 2. The **endocentric path** is about self-related well-being and positive self-congruence, helping make them feel good or meaningful.
 3. The **ipsocentric path** is about balancing costs and rewards in social exchanges or perceiving helping as worthy, fair, and reciprocal.
- The authors also asked whether these **motivations stay stable over time and whether volunteering intentions can influence them**.
- The study used a **2-wave online survey of Polish residents in May 2022 and May 2023**. The final sample included 566 adults and measured empathy, life satisfaction, meaning in life, social value orientation, and volunteering intentions across one month, one year, and two years, using a cross-lagged panel model.



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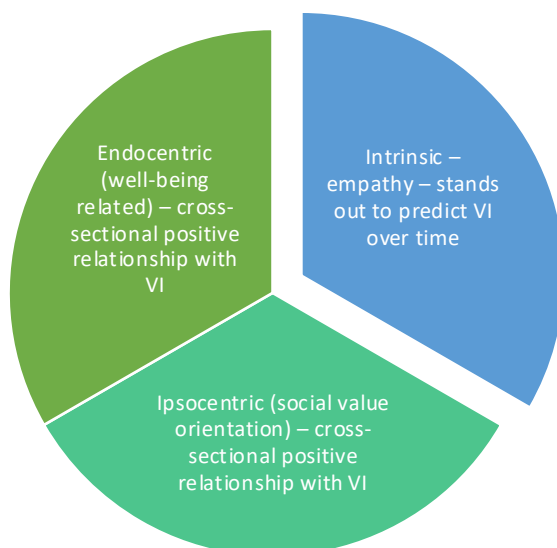
Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The study suggests a shift in emphasis for volunteer management. Recruitment efforts that rely mainly on highlighting personal benefits, self-fulfillment, or abstract “feel-good” messaging may not be enough to predict long-term commitment.
- **Empathy drives long-term volunteering:** Select empathetic candidates during recruitment (e.g., via empathy measures) to predict retention and reduce dropout, especially for long-term roles.
- **Sustain empathy in organizations:** Foster empathetic environments through workshops, beneficiary feedback, mentorship, role modeling, and reflexive practices.
- **Build empathy proactively:** Train mentalization skills in communities to spark volunteering, given its link to cognitive empathy.
- **Volunteering shapes prosocial attitudes:** Participation builds other-oriented social value orientation and cooperation, benefiting individuals (e.g., for compassion-based careers) and teams via collaborative projects.
- The findings are not a reason to ignore life satisfaction or meaning in life entirely. Those factors may still matter in the short term or in other populations, and the study only tested intentions, not actual volunteering behavior. But for predicting who is likely to keep intending to volunteer over time, empathy appears to matter most in this paper.

Figure: Prosocial motivations and volunteering intentions (VI) (own visualization)



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