

A Data-Driven Definition Of Volunteer Types: The Key To Adjusted Volunteer Management Practices

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Many seminal contributions have been made in economic, psychology and managerial academic literature that support improvement of volunteer management practices. Despite the great value of this vast amount of academic literature, an important gap still remains regarding generalizability across the many heterogeneous types of volunteers that exist, and for providing concrete recommendations towards practitioners (Cnaan et al., 1996). Literature in general agrees about the fact that many distinct volunteer types exist and that reported findings might be limited to the particular type of volunteers studied and/or tested in a specific study (Wilson and Musick, 1997). As a result, from a scientific point of view, other academics are often left puzzled about the lack of generalizability of particular findings to other types of volunteers; and from a practitioner point of view, recommendations provided might be less relevant for other volunteer contexts (Wilson, 2000).

Given this challenge it is our aim to complement the existing body of literature with a data driven classification of volunteer types. In particular, we aim to describe several homogeneous clusters of types of volunteers, within the broad and heterogeneous range of types that exist. Such classification, will allow, both academics and practitioners, to frame findings and recommendations within and across boundaries of volunteer types. Furthermore, we use a data-driven approach, as this allows us to maximize similarity of different volunteer criteria within types of volunteers, and to maximize clearly observable distinct and mutually-exclusive types of volunteers. Both from an academic and practitioner point of view this is desirable, as it allows for defining clear-cut homogeneous types, in which generalizability can be high, and for which comparability with other types is more straightforward.

For our study we utilize the 2009-wave of the German Volunteer Survey; a large-scale survey (N=20,000) on volunteering and civic engagement among individuals of 14 years and older. The sample was drawn through random-digit-dialing and stratified according to state size, thus, it is representative of the German-speaking population in Germany (Müller et al., 2013). Given the selection of core variables of interest, this study looks at respondents that in a broad sense considered themselves being a volunteer (defined as “having responsibilities that are done voluntarily without being paid” in activities like sports or welfare associations, arts, culture or education). This resulted in a useable sample of N= 7,023 volunteers that are actively doing volunteer work in various activities and organizational types and come with various backgrounds, as well as - most importantly - with different volunteer motives, task preferences, and volunteer expectations as well as general values. With this broad and heterogeneous sample we perform multi-stage cluster analysis.

As basis for cluster analysis, factorial properties (exploratory and confirmatory

factor analyses) have been established using the key variables of interest. These variables were selected based on important criteria identified in the literature. Thereafter, a three stage clustering process has been applied. First, the 7,023 profiles were randomly assigned to 23 mutually exclusive blocks of 300 observations, and Ward's method was applied independently for the profiles composing each block. The ideal number of clusters was determined through multiple criteria for each block separately. Clusters derived from the 23 independent first-stage analyses were pooled and subjected to second-stage clustering. In addition, third-stage clustering was applied, because agglomerative clustering provides no natural mechanism to relocate profiles retrospectively found to be misplaced. In a final step and to support the validity of the final typology, various internal and external variables were used to characterize the clusters. Deviations in the expected prevalence of demographics such as activity in specific volunteer sub-sectors, age, gender, education and location within each profile type was determined by two-tailed tests of the standard error of proportional differences.

For the distinct homogeneous types of volunteers that we define based on our cluster analysis, we discuss the most important classifying characteristics and postulate which types have been mainly covered in earlier research, and other types that are still under-researched. From this discussion we derive avenues for further research, and we conclude with limitations and practical recommendations.

References

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