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Volunteering with At-Risk Youth: The Correlation
between the Volunteers' Background, Motives for
Volunteering and Self-Concept Clarity, and the Amount
of Empathy Towards the At-Risk Youth.

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Abstract

Volunteering in modern societies plays a significant role in social organization. Since the 1970's Israel has seen a reduction of government involvement in social services which has led to a steady increase in volunteer activity. Today, many organizations benefit from the support of volunteers. There are many options for volunteering; their characteristics and effects on society are varied. The National Council for Voluntarism in Israel (2007) defines volunteering as an activity that involves spending time, granting direct or indirect unpaid services, expertise, and/or knowledge; doing something that aims to benefit the environment, an organization, a movement, or a community or someone other than, or in addition to, close relatives. It must be a choice freely made by each individual.

This research will focus on volunteers working with at-risk youth. Its main purpose is to examine how the age of the volunteer affects motivation to volunteer, self-concept clarity, and empathy. Moreover, it will characterize the relationship between the variables: motives for volunteering and self-concept clarity, and the level of empathy, in relation to the volunteers' age.

The functional approach to volunteerism claims that behavior may serve different functions for different individuals at different stages of life. Motives for volunteering vary in accordance with a person's age. Individuals choose volunteering tasks based on personal motives and needs and these may change over time. Researchers have cited six different motives that can serve as a stimulating force for volunteering: understanding (learning more about the world) and the acquisition of knowledge,

strengthening of social status, career gain, ego-protective motives (which reduce negative feelings), self-enhancement motives and motives that accentuate and express ones values. These motives can be divided into two distinct categories: *Self-oriented motives* (which include the first five motives) and *other-oriented motives* (which include the motive of values.)

Self-concept clarity refers to the extent to which an individual's self-beliefs and perceived personal attributes are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable.

Empathy refers to the ability to understand and react to the emotional state of another. Empathy increases sensitivity towards others and can lead to pro-social behavior. Theoreticians relate to empathy as multi-dimensional, which includes emotional and cognitive structures.

162 unpaid volunteers for at-risk youth answered self-reported questionnaires which were analyzed quantitatively. Based on the literature that relates to the different stages of life, participants were divided into four age groups: (1) 18-25, (2) 26-36, (3) 37-54, (4) 55+.

Three hypotheses were made: (1) Significant differences will be found among the four age groups regarding *motives for volunteering*. In the younger age groups (ages 18- 25 and 26-36), the level of *self-oriented motives* for volunteering will be higher while the level of *other-oriented motives* for volunteering will be lower than in the older age groups (ages 37-54 and 55+). (2) Significant differences will be found

among the four age groups for the variable of *self-concept clarity*, which will be highest in the two middle groups (ages 26-36 and 37-54). Moreover, it will be higher for ages 18-25, than for the 55+ age group. (3) Significant differences will be found among the four age groups for *empathy*, which will be higher in the two middle age groups (26-36 and 37-54), in comparison with the youngest (18-25) and the oldest (55+) age groups.

The first hypothesis was almost completely confirmed: significant differences were found among the hypothesized age groups for *self-oriented motives* for volunteering in four out of the five sub-categories (career gain, understanding and acquisition of knowledge, social gain and ego-protective motives). However, as opposed to the original hypothesis, no significant differences among the researched age groups were found for the self-oriented motive of *self-enhancement* and for the other-oriented motive of *values*. The second hypothesis was partially confirmed. In accordance with the hypothesis, significant differences were found among the studied age groups for self-concept clarity. However, as opposed to the original hypothesis, levels of self-concept clarity in the 55+ age group were significantly higher in comparison to the other three age groups. The third hypothesis was not consistent with the research results. No significant differences were found in any of the measurements of empathy among any of the age groups.

This research also examined the extent to which one can predict the level of empathy for the background variables, for motives for volunteering, and for self-concept clarity. It was found that an increase in levels of self-oriented motives caused an increase in levels of empathy. Moreover, an increase in the levels of the *values*

motive for volunteering caused an increase in *empathic concern* and a decrease in *personal distress*. It was also found that an increase in *self-concept clarity* caused a decrease in the levels of *empathy*. In addition, women aged 26+ had higher levels of *affective empathy* than men.

This study also examined the patterns of structural relationships between the variables among all sampled participants. It was found that *self-concept clarity* acted as a statistically significant partial mediator in the relationship between *self-oriented motives* for volunteering and *affective empathy*. However, it did not act as a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between *self-oriented motives* for volunteering and *cognitive empathy*. Furthermore, the measure *self-concept clarity* also did not act as a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between *other-oriented motives* for volunteering and the two measures of *empathy* that were examined.

Discussion of the results raised several possible explanations for the effects of the volunteers' age on the research variables. The discussion connected the current research results with theories that deal with individual needs in different stages of life, theories that compare characteristics of volunteers and non-volunteers, and initial and secondary benefits gained by volunteerism. Moreover, the discussion proposed a possible explanation for the current findings based on theories on the multi-dimensional aspect of empathy, which are congruent with theories on the stages of life and theories that relate to individual characteristics and needs of the adult.