

THE INFLUENCE OF FAITH-BASED MOTIVATIONAL FUNCTIONS ON MOTIVATION TO VOLUNTEER: A QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Volunteerism constitutes a significant economic contribution, especially within faith-based organizations, yet the motivations behind volunteer engagement remain complex. While existing research primarily employs quantitative methodologies, this qualitative descriptive study delves into the subjective perceptions of volunteers to expound upon the influence of faith-based motivational functions on their motivation to volunteer. Grounded in the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) model, this research investigates how volunteers at a non-denominational Christian church in Phoenix, AZ, articulate the impact of faith-based motivations on their volunteerism. The study uncovers rich insights based on data collected from 21 participants through digital questionnaires and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that faith-based motivations intricately intertwine with other volunteer functions, specifically, Values, Social, Career, and Enrichment. Participants express a deep sense of responsibility and obligation driven by religious values, emphasizing scriptural teachings and personal faith growth as common motivators. Additionally, the social dimension emerges as integral, fostering community growth and, occasionally, social pressure. Career-oriented motivations are less pronounced, suggesting a need for further exploration. Finally, pursuing personal growth and enjoyment underscores the intrinsic rewards of volunteerism, often intertwined with religious values and social connections. By illuminating the complex nature of faith-based motivational functions, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of volunteer motivation literature, informing targeted recruitment and retention strategies within faith-based organizations.

Keywords: *Volunteerism, Volunteer Functions Inventory, volunteer motivations*

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer workers contribute approximately \$203.4 billion to the economy through the contribution of their uncompensated time (Campbell, 2019). The motivation of individuals to engage in volunteer labor is seen as an essential resource to non-profit, faith-based organizations such as churches or religiously affiliated charities. In the U.S., approximately 62 million individuals volunteer, and about

33% of these are within religious contexts (Ralston, 2018). Churches rely on a steady volunteer base to sustain growth and change within the church body; therefore, understanding the motivation for volunteerism would provide organizations with data to help recruit and retain volunteers.

Current research trends use quantitative measures to link volunteer functions and functional psychology with an individual's motivation to

engage in volunteer work (Butt et al., 2017; Jigssa et al., 2018). Also, using quantitative measures, a link has been established that demonstrates religion as a functional motivator for volunteer work (Butt et al., 2017; Dennis et al., 2017; Erasmus & Morey, 2016). However, a gap has been identified regarding how volunteers perceive religion as playing a role in their motivation to volunteer (Lau et al., 2019). Continued research is needed to understand better the motivators that play a role in an individual's motivation to volunteer within religious settings. Although there is a large amount of quantitative data linking religion to volunteer motivation, researchers show an additional need for qualitative knowledge of why religion plays a role in volunteer motivation (Erasmus & Morey, 2016; Lau et al., 2019; Moate, 2017; Ralston, 2018). This study helps fill the research gap by analyzing how volunteers describe their motivations to volunteer.

PROBLEM & PURPOSE

It is not known how volunteers describe the influence of faith-based motivational functions on their motivation to volunteer. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive research is to study how volunteers describe the influence of faith-based motivational functions on their motivation to volunteer. Understanding this phenomenon from the point of view of the volunteer workers will fill a gap in the research literature on how volunteers describe faith-based motivational functions as influences for volunteering (Erasmus & Morey, 2016; Lau et al., 2019; Moate, 2017; Ralston, 2018). This will add insight into understanding why individuals participate in volunteer activities without the expectation of monetary compensation. The following research question will guide this qualitative study:

RQ1: How do volunteers describe the influence of the Volunteer Functions (Values, Social, Career, Enrichment) on their motivation to volunteer?

VOLUNTEER FUNCTIONS INVENTORY

The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) is the most reliable and widely used instrument by researchers (Chacón et al., 2017) to measure the motivations of volunteers. Hyde et al. (2016) found the VFI to be used in 61% of the empirical research exploring motivations among short-term or

episodic volunteers. Additionally, the VFI is used across various organizational structures, including non-profit, religious, education, and healthcare, and continues to see wide usage in current research on volunteer motivations (Chacón et al., 2017; Khalemsky et al., 2020; Kleimann, 2018).

Given the prevalence and reliability of the VFI instrument, prior research in the field employs mostly quantitative methodologies to understand the motivation of volunteers (Butt et al., 2017; Chacón et al., 2017; Jigssa et al., 2018; Kee et al., 2018; Kelley, 2019; Lau et al., 2019; Livi et al., 2019; Malinen & Harju, 2017; Moate, 2017; Rabun et al., 2017; Ralston, 2018; Stukas et al., 2016; Yamashita et al., 2017; Yeung, 2017). Although there is some, albeit limited, research on volunteer motivations completed using qualitative methodologies (Dennis et al., 2017; Fernandes, 2018; Lowe et al., 2017; Muckaden & Pandya, 2016), the absence of qualitative data in volunteer motivation research was noted as significant in many of the studies uncovered (Author, 2022).

The volunteer function inventory developed by Clary et al. (1998) is a widely used functionalist approach to aid in understanding the motivations of volunteers. The VFI lists the following six motivational categories:

Values: An altruistic function allowing the individual to express one's own values or beliefs.

Understanding: A function in which the individual seeks to gain new knowledge or experience through the action.

Enhancement: A function that allows for the development of the individual's ego.

Career: A function that motivates an individual towards career-oriented goals or experiences through volunteers.

Social: A function that allows the strengthening of the volunteers' social relationships.

Protective: A function allowing the reduction of negative feelings, such as guilt, by completing volunteer work.

Faith-Based Volunteer Motivation (FVM) Model

Erasmus and Morey (2016) acknowledged the reliability of the VFI as a measurement for volunteerism but noted that it had never been tested specifically for the reliability of faith-based volunteers. As a result of their validity study, Erasmus and Morey (2016) created the Faith-based Volunteer

Motivation (FVM) model, theorizing removing questions from the protective function and fusing together the understanding and enhancement function to create the enrichment function. The values, career, and social functions remained the same. In their follow-up study, using an instrument to test the model, the results showed to more accurately reflect the motivations of the volunteers within the studied faith-based organization (Erasmus & Morey, 2016). The FVM is used in this study as the basis for the research questions and to guide the interview questions. The focus when creating the FVM was to measure motivations within a faith-based context, making it a good choice for the theoretical base of this study. The research questions for the study are based upon the four factors: *Values, Social, Career, and Enrichment*.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was qualitative. A qualitative approach was appropriate because this research study focused on how volunteers perceive religion as playing a role in their motivation to volunteer. Researchers should use qualitative approaches when the goal of the study is to answer “how” or “why” questions (Sandelowski, 2000; Yin, 2016). This study’s research questions asked “how?” so a qualitative approach aligns best with the research questions. When the goal is to research the experiences or perspectives of individuals, which was the case for this study, qualitative research is also an appropriate choice (Harwell, 2011). Similar research studies have also used qualitative approaches to understand better why individuals initiate volunteering (Dennis et al., 2017; Fernandes, 2018).

Data was collected first through demographic surveys to qualify and rank the study participants. Since there were more responses than are generally used in qualitative descriptive studies, participants with the most volunteer experience were prioritized for data analysis. The prioritization of experienced volunteers helped with the data quality by limiting the responses from episodic volunteers. Prior research indicates episodic volunteerism has a greater motivational connection with the event (Hyde et al., 2016) than faith-based motivational functions, making these responses less desirable for this study. Duration and frequency of volunteering were used to aid in the prioritization

of the sample. A questionnaire with open-ended responses was used as the primary tool for collecting information about volunteer experiences from each study participant. With the research questions and study framework as the focus, the researcher used prior research literature about volunteer motivations to provide context and guidance for developing the questionnaire prompts.

The sample was drawn from volunteers in one non-denominational Christian church in Phoenix, AZ. Most research using a qualitative-descriptive design has between 10 and 15 participants (Kim et al., 2017). To qualify for this study, the participant needed to be: (1) over the age of 18 years old, (2) a member of the church from which the sample would be selected, (3) a volunteer at the church more than once a year, and (4) willing to complete a questionnaire. The sample was pulled from a church community because churches rely on volunteer support and are known to have a large pool of volunteers.

This research adhered to the Belmont Report (*National Commission*, 1974), respecting and protecting every participant who participated in this study. Site authorization of the participating church was obtained, followed by submitting an application to the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). An exempt status was applied due to the use of adult participants. All participants’ personal information and interview responses remained confidential, as the Belmont report (*National Commission*, 1974) recommended. All participation remained voluntary, and they received informed consent. Only data that was directly related to the research questions was collected.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

The data was collected through digital questionnaires, which included demographic-based questions to assist with purposive sampling. In total, 22 individuals meeting the participant criteria participated in the questionnaire; however, one participant did not fully answer each question. Of the 21 completed surveys, participants were ranked according to the frequency of volunteer activity. Fourteen questionnaires were identified for the data analysis, with all participants indicating they volunteer at least weekly. This number of participants allowed the researchers to reach a saturation level in the data collection process. This also allowed

the researchers to analyze data to an appropriate scope and depth.

Data analysis was completed through a six-step thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and is standard for qualitative-descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2010). To increase coding reliability, as suggested by Sandelowski (2010), both researchers individually coded the data by each question response and organized it into descriptive themes. Then, the researchers shared and collaborated on findings to generate common themes and patterns. Early themes included “alignment with skills and interests” and “pressure to volunteer.” From there, matrices were developed and color-coded in Google Sheets to aid in inductive analysis. This helped identify themes and patterns to gain a rich and full understanding of the participant responses.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

As the data were analyzed, the categories were grouped into the themes in the Volunteer Functions Inventory. Additionally, sub-themes from these categories were uncovered, adding to the depth of individual motivations. These categories aligned with the research question of:

RQ1: How do volunteers describe the influence of the Volunteer Functions (*Values, Social, Career, Enrichment*) on their motivation to volunteer?

Table 1 gives a summary of the findings from the study.

Table 1.
Themes, Sub-themes, and Key Points

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key Points
Values	Faith Responsibility/Obligation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most common motivator - Sense of being “called” to serve - Biblical teachings like Mark 12:31 and Ephesians 2:10 cited frequently
	Faith Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteering strengthens faith - Positive experiences lead to further volunteering - “Blessed” by volunteering, even when hesitant initially
Social	Community Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social aspect tied to the church community - Building relationships with similar values - “You grow together when you serve together”
	Social Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some feel pressured or “trapped” into volunteering - Pressure can lead to long-term commitments that cause hardship
Career	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few respondents mentioned skill development - No strong link to career advancement - Opportunity for further research
Enrichment	Personal Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tied to spiritual growth - Focused on developing humility and selflessness - “Putting others before yourself”
	Personal Enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteering provides satisfaction and enjoyment - Intrinsically linked to sense of accomplishment - Often enjoyed tasks with friends/spouse

Values Theme

Unsurprisingly, the general theme, *Values*, garnered the strongest responses from participants. However, what was surprising was the depth and breadth of response that can be linked to the *Values* theme. For each survey question, at least one respondent indicated a connection to their religious values. Within the *Values* theme, two subthemes emerged as the most common: *Faith Responsibility/Obligation* and *Faith Growth*.

Faith Responsibility/Obligation. This sub-theme was the most easily identified as the strongest motivating factor for this group of volunteer participants. Most responses included phrases indicating they are “called” toward volunteer service and that God instructs them to help others. Several responses included Bible verses as reminders for why they are serving such as “loving your neighbor as yourself” (The Holy Bible: New International Version, 1984/2012, Mark 12:31). Another repeated biblical teaching was the idea of being God’s workers on Earth: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (The Holy Bible: New International Version, 1984/2012, Ephesians 2:10).

However, it is important to note that these feelings of responsibility/obligation are not seen as a burden. Instead, many describe this faith responsibility as a joy and an opportunity to share and express love toward others, much like Christ modeled throughout biblical scriptures. One respondent wrote:

“Scripture is full of instances of people helping, being helped, overwhelmingly in a positive sense. Scripture tells me to emulate them. Jesus helped people, and he taught that we should use the gifts that God has given us [to help others].”

Faith Growth. Volunteer participants described a strengthening in their convictions as a reason to volunteer and a benefit of volunteering after the event/task has concluded. One respondent described growth in their faith by having the “... opportunity to share what Christ has done for me.”. Another response shared feeling “blessed” by volunteering even when they did not want to participate initially. This indicates that a previous

positive faith growth experience can lead to further volunteer participation.

Social Theme

Strong connections to some of the *Values* sub-themes were also prevalent when examining the *Social* theme. For example, the subthemes identified within this category include (1) *Community Growth* and (2) *Social Pressure*.

Community Growth. While analyzing Social themes within the data, the sub-theme of Community Growth was strongly evident. Many responses indicated an enjoyment in getting to know people with common worldviews through volunteering and growth in existing relationships. Some responses that reflect these ideas include: "...by volunteering, you learn [about] other's lives and can then act on that knowledge to develop a deeper social relationship or friendship," and "You form bonds with those that you serve with on a project or meet new people through serving and maybe discover that you have similar interests."

There were, however, distinctions that indicated the community being sought was not the respondents' own community but rather the greater church community they were volunteering within (thereby tying this to the *Values* themes as well). While the social/community aspect was present in the response, it was almost secondary to the motivation to volunteer. For example, one respondent described the social aspect of volunteering as a "blessing" and that the social aspects of volunteering "...reaffirmed that I am useful to the Lord..." Still, another response summed up this idea of community growth as part of their values with the concise statement, "You grow together when you serve together."

Social Pressure. A few comments indicated a more negative aspect of the Social theme. Some respondents described a social pressure that is present when asked to volunteer to the extent that they will participate in an activity if the recruiter is persistent enough. This same participant indicated feeling "trapped" into a longer-term volunteer position than had been originally intended, causing hardship or sacrifice.

Career Theme

Prior research indicates that career-oriented goals or activities have been shown to motivate volunteers (Clark & Basko, 2022). Additionally,

career-based motivational factors have been used specifically in religious-based volunteer research (Erasmus & Morey, 2016). In this research study, there were only cursory indications of career-oriented goals being a motivator. For example, a few respondents enjoyed developing "their skills" but did not specify that these skill-development activities were for career advancement. This offers an opportunity for more in-depth research in this area through interviews or focus groups to further understand the connection between volunteer motivations in a religious setting and career-oriented motivations.

Enrichment Theme

The betterment of oneself, while not a primary motivator, did appear in several responses. This mirrors the findings of other research on volunteer motivation (Clark & Basko, 2022; Erasmus & Morey, 2016). After reviewing the respondent data, the sub-themes of *Personal Growth* and *Personal Enjoyment* were revealed.

Personal Growth. Similar to some of the other responses in the various identified themes and subthemes, some of the responses most aligned with personal growth could also be tied to the spiritual (Values) aspects of volunteer motivation. Two responses indicated their volunteer activities provided learning opportunities, with the gained experiences being focused on "putting others before yourself" and developing "humility and humbleness." These comments reflect central commands within Christianity, and the volunteer participants for this sample found that practicing these teachings contributed toward their own personal enrichment.

Personal Enjoyment. This subtheme was perhaps the most intrinsically linked motivator for participating as a volunteer. Several respondents described volunteering as providing "satisfaction" and a "sense of accomplishment." Other responses indicated that they volunteered for activities they knew would be fun and tasks they would enjoy doing with others. Along with intrinsic enjoyment, there was an element of social enjoyment mentioned in several responses. The volunteers in this study participated partly because their friends or spouses were also involved in the task. Prior researchers have suggested that these types of motivators be categorized into an Affiliation

category to distinguish between enrichment and social functions (Clark & Basko, 2022).

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to understand how volunteers describe the influence of the Volunteer Functions on their motivation to volunteer. Based on the study's results, the most common function that volunteers identified as a motivator was the Values Function. Volunteers described their motivation to volunteer as strongly connected to their Christian faith. Many participants noted Bible passages that discuss the role of volunteerism for Christians. Many participants also noted that volunteerism helped them grow in their faith as Christians. Additionally, many volunteers stated that they felt obligated to volunteer as part of their faith and community. This data aligned with previous research showing that a Christian faith is directly connected with the motivation to volunteer (Author, 2022). This finding shows that faith and volunteer motivation are directly linked.

While many of the study participants noted a positive community and social motivation to volunteer, others felt that volunteerism was something they were pressured into. While this was not the most common theme found in the study, the researchers did find that some participants stated that they were only volunteering due to social obligation or community pressure. This data was also consistent with previous research in that a small group of participants noted it, but it was not the most common motivation experienced. Based on these findings, it is important that volunteer organizations do not rely on pressuring or "guilting" people into volunteering, as positive social motivators such as community growth were much more commonly noted by the participants of this study than social pressure.

This study found opposing data to previous studies (Clark & Basko, 2022) in that the *Career* theme was not as common among participants as the *Values* theme. This may be indicative of the sample used in this study, being that the participants were members of a church; however, the study showed that volunteers were more motivated by honing their skills during volunteering than by the opportunity to advance in their careers.

The final Volunteer Function that was identified through the data was the *Enrichment* theme.

This theme relates to personal growth and enjoyment, and several participants stated that this was at least a partial factor in their volunteerism. While this appears not to be the primary motivation for volunteering, many participants said they enjoyed spending time with friends and family. Some participants also discussed how volunteerism helped them with character development and growth, further motivating them to volunteer. This finding shows that volunteer organizations may want to use personal growth and personal enjoyment motivators to encourage more volunteerism.

One limitation of this study was the sample size and location. Because the study was completed with volunteers from one non-denominational Christian church in Phoenix, AZ, this may affect the overall outcome of the study. Due to time and logistical limitations, only one church was sought for this study. Further research should be done with volunteers from other churches or religions to see if the results are similar.

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct qualitative research with sample populations from various companies and organizations. It would be beneficial to see if the *Career* theme, specifically, had different results from a sample of people outside of the church setting and within an organization. For example, medical mission organizations often benefit from both episodic and continual volunteerism, with many medical missions tied to religious organizations. This may lead to future research about whether the setting or community in which volunteer work is taking place affects the motivators of volunteers.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to better describe the influence of faith-based motivation functions on an individual's motivation to volunteer. The results indicated that faith-based motivational factors are the driving reason for volunteering and are widespread throughout other motivational functions. Since faith values are almost inseparable from other motivating factors, volunteer administrators would benefit by targeting recruitment and retention efforts to support religious principles within the volunteer activities.

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