

Student Reflections on Service:

Cultural and Socioeconomic Variations in Motivations for and Valuation of Volunteering

Rebecca Kahn

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her junior paper, Rebecca Kahn explores the influence of socioeconomic status and cultural context on undergraduate students' conception of service work. One of the primary strengths of this paper is its **literature review**: by summarizing and pinpointing shortcomings in the research around her topic, Rebecca ultimately solidifies the importance of her contribution to the greater body of scholarship concerning service work.*

Excerpt

The literature suggests that people volunteer for a wide range of reasons, from background- and value-driven motives (often altruistic) to perceived benefits of increased capital (often related to personal and professional development). For students, personal/professional motivations to work and volunteer involve gaining qualifications for future careers and skills building (Erikson 1968; Reitzle and Vondracek 2000; Mortimer et al. 2002). Student volunteers across all demographics are motivated to do service work for self-interested motives: for example, to acquire cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Jones 2011). A study of British university students at eight London universities (not including King's College London) found that most students perceived an increase in their personal development, transferable skills, and employability after volunteering, and that half connected volunteering to their academic path (Braime and Ruohonen 2011). For many students, volunteering can have a formative effect on their career plans (Jones 2011). When it comes to international volunteering, which is on the rise (Davis Smith, Ellis, and Brewis 2005), students perceive benefits such as having fun and gaining international awareness, international social capital, and international career intentions (Stebbins and Graham 2004; McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2012).

Volunteering also involves motivations such as a sense of altruism and fulfillment. Regular student volunteers are more likely than non-regular volunteers to primarily perceive altruistic/value-driven motivations for volunteering, in addition to social and career-related motivations and benefits (Cnaan et al. 2010). Overgaard (2015) found that volunteer care workers are attracted to the work itself rather than the act of serving without remuneration and that their paid working lives and unpaid working lives are linked. A significant majority of British students reported that volunteering had created a

positive social impact in their communities, and 89% believed they were making a difference through their work (Braime and Ruohonen 2011). Motivation is not the only factor that determines involvement; the decisions young people make to engage in work and activities are related to family background, resources, goals, and investment in school (Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer 2006). Research shows that if families volunteer, youth are more likely to volunteer (Corporation for National & Community Service 2005). Holdsworth (2010) also found that ethnicity influenced likelihood of volunteering, and that these higher rates of ethnic minority volunteering could be associated with religious identity (2010).

Despite the research on motivations to volunteer, there has been little research on student and societal valuations of volunteering. G.R. Leslie, R.F. Larson, and H.L. Gorman define values as “group conceptions of the relative desirability of things” (qtd. in Brindhamani and Manichander 2015:4). Valuations differ depending on social and cultural context; they serve an important role and provide guidelines and priorities for social behavior. This is why in this study, I sought to explore how volunteering valuations, in addition to motivations, change depending on cultural and socioeconomic context.

Author Commentary

Rebecca Kahn

The year I wrote my JP, Princeton implemented a mandatory pre-orientation program involving community service and news articles were frequently published critiquing service gap years. The main reason I decided to study volunteer work, however, was personal. At Princeton, through my work at the Pace Center, I became curious about certain questions about the differences in meaning, worth, or significance students give service work: why were certain students disproportionately more active in the Center or clearer about their motivations for volunteering?

Defining a motive and creating the lit review is the single hardest part of any paper for me. Before I ask the classic question ‘Where will I insert myself into the conversation?’ I need to find a conversation! I was taking a course at the time called “Money, Work, and Social Life” which exposed me to sociological studies on unpaid labor. For example, we questioned accepted conventions, such as why women weren’t paid for household labor or whether student athletes should be paid. We didn’t read any studies on volunteering, which surprised me. Volunteering has long been thought to promote civil society and social cohesion, but people seem to conceive of it in a sphere apart from work. I knew there were studies about paid work that explore perceptions, valuations, and how these differ according to socioeconomic status or culture—so I decided to qualitatively explore similar questions for volunteering.

This excerpt comes from the second part of my overall lit review. I first discussed background on the sociology of service work (because it was a sociology JP, I had to situate it within sociological literature); second, the literature on student motivations and perceived benefits; third, variation by cultural background; and fourth, variation by socioeconomic status. I tried to make sure my results sections followed this pattern as well.

Some straightforward tips for crafting a lit review include going to Google and typing your key words (e.g. “volunteering students motivations”) plus “Google Scholar” and then looking at the references of each author you find. A tough part of a lit review is knowing when to stop looking for new sources. At some point, I reached a place where I wasn’t finding new and relevant studies. Another thing to know is that you’ll continue to change your lit review. As my questions and my hypotheses shifted, I had to reframe the lit review and remove certain studies that, while interesting, just added bulk.

Over the course of the year, I did in-depth interviews with 22 American and British university students. Some of my findings included the fact that students tend to perceive paid work as more important than unpaid service, that students of lower vs. higher SES are more motivated by personal background and experiences, and that cultural differences in institutional incentivization influence students' motivations and valuations of service work. The final thing I'll say is that having a motive and knowledge base grounded in the literature really helped me stay focused later on when I had moments of insecurity about my topic or direction.

Editor Commentary

Ryan Vinh

Literature reviews sometimes get a bad reputation for being dull or tedious. Sometimes dozens of pages long or even longer, they can feel like roadblocks preventing you from getting to the actual “interesting” parts of a paper. However, thinking about the literature review in terms of the Writing Lexicon can help show why literature reviews make those more “interesting” parts of a paper so interesting in the first place. The above excerpt is a great example of how even a literature review can have engaging, motivated components.

In this excerpt, Rebecca first focuses on the “wide range of reasons” proposed by the literature as to why people volunteer. Invoking a variety of studies, Rebecca explores motivations related to altruism, professional development, and career prospects. When doing so, she focuses on the key findings of each study, summarizing their main points according to broader themes related to service work. It is important to note that, instead of summarizing each study in excessive depth, Rebecca focuses on the broader argumentative thrusts of similar studies: “When it comes to international volunteering, which is on the rise (Davis Smith, Ellis, and Brewis 2005), students perceive benefits such as having fun and gaining international awareness, international social capital, and international career intentions (Stebbins and Graham 2004; McBride, Lough, and Sherraden 2012).” In this case, three studies are mentioned that all help to communicate the key ideas related to international volunteering and establish the existing scholarly conversation around this topic.

Having outlined these key ideas, Rebecca can now situate her work within the context of this scholarly conversation in order to reveal its shortcomings and intervene with her own research. Despite the past literature’s emphasis on these various motivations for volunteering, Rebecca notes that, “there has been little research on student and societal valuations as to why people volunteer.” She then goes on to state that there is a lack of literature that focuses on the way in which social and cultural contexts affect these valuations. This is the gap in the scholarly conversation to which Rebecca, throughout the rest of this paper, adds her own unique contribution.

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Bios

Rebecca Kahn '18 is a senior from Cincinnati, OH. She is a Sociology concentrator pursuing certificates in Portuguese, Creative Writing, and Entrepreneurship. Her interests include identity formation, behavioral economics, and social innovation design. Her senior thesis concerns the formation and maintenance of political beliefs of Midwesterners in the Trump Era. At Princeton, Rebecca has spent her free time volunteering with the Pace Center, working at the Center for Jewish Life, and traveling as much as possible. She is part of the Behrman Undergraduate Society.

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