Outside the Circle: A Case Study ofVolunteer Activities of AdultsWith Low Literacy Skills

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Abstract: This study of volunteer activities among 21 adults with low literacy skills in a social assistance program in Nova Scotia revealed attitudes and motivations relating to volunteerism among program recipients, as well as the six employment support workers who counselled them. Findings indicated that the definitions and understandings of "volunteerism" do not include "informal" volunteerism and client's non-traditional volunteerism was ultimately discouraged by the counsellors, leading clients to slowly disengage from their community over time.

Theoretical Frame

Existing literature on volunteerism focuses primarily on the mainstream *adult* population and formal volunteer activities with community agencies. An analysis of this literature reveals a paucity of evidence-based research in the literacy context. Where literacy is even mentioned by Anderson and Neimi back in 1970 and, later, by Merriam and Brockett (1997), it is "community disengagement" among adults with low literacy skills that dominates the writing. However, 90% of the adults (N=21) interviewed in this study reported volunteer activity at some point in their lives. However, none had volunteered in the 3 months prior to the interviews and the majority referred to a lack of information about volunteer programs and/or a dependence on their social services employment worker to arrange volunteer placements. The adults in the study appeared to have become discouraged through increasing dependence on the welfare system and were disengaging from their communities. This isolation was evidently being unwittingly fostered by dependence on their worker.

Cunningham (1988) identifies volunteer activity as key to social inclusion, as does Dechman (2002) who conducted a 20-year longitudinal study of Nova Scotia mothers. Dechman also noted that volunteer activities declined with education levels and that early school leaving was the biggest single risk factor for community alienation and marginalization, saying: "Difficulties in the school system provided one of the earliest and most reliable predictors of future social and economic exclusion" (p.2).

The ambiguity of the term *volunteer* is noted in the literature. Definitions of volunteer activity are key to this study and to a new understanding of volunteerism among adults with low literacy skills. Coleman (1998) defines formal and informal volunteerism, citing an increase in informal volunteer activity as being particularly relevant for rural areas where formal charities may not be operating. Coleman does not expand on the relationship between participation rates and formal versus informal volunteerism in later research, but literature as recent as Schugurensky and Mundel (2005) and Long and Pask (2005) acknowledges the significance of informal

volunteerism. However, they are silent on the relevance of this to adults with low literacy.

Design

This research was conducted with employment support caseworkers and clients of the Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) program delivered by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services and through a regional office that serves an urban center and a large rural area. Here, volunteerism is linked to employability – even supported with funding for clients – in the ESIA policy, but volunteerism is not defined in the policy. However, the six caseworkers participating in this study have interpreted the policy to mean formal volunteerism; meaning activities with traditional charities such as the Red Cross or the United Way. Importantly, the ESIA caseworkers can provide assistance with childcare and travel costs to clients who volunteer. But, they repeatedly noted a lack of volunteer activity among clients with low literacy levels compared with clients who have a high school diploma or higher education.

Using descriptive case study as the methodology, the first step was a focus group with six employment support workers. The workers ranged in age from 27 to 52, the majority held undergraduate degrees and had an average of 10 years of experience in their jobs. Five workers were female, one was male. The participating case workers were asked to refer appropriate clients for the interviews. They were asked to select clients with a maximum education level of grade nine who had a telephone. In stage two, 21 income assistance clients were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. They were selected randomly from the list provided by the caseworkers. The clients ranged in age from 21 to 61, 11 were female, 10 were male. In stage three, the interview data was then shared with the workers and reasonably should have challenged preconceived definitions and attitudes. However, the six workers did not acknowledge the level of volunteer activity reported by their interviewed clients in the second focus group (phase three), nor did they ask why clients who had previously located volunteer positions independently were now depending on their workers to help them.

Interviews With Clients With Low Literacy Skills

Only 2 of the 21 clients interviewed reported no volunteer activity in their lifetime. Interestingly, more than half of the clients said they had never volunteered when I began the interview, but then recalled both formal and informal volunteer roles within the first 5 minutes of our conversation. The most common volunteer roles described were in sport, recreation, schools, churches and service clubs. Although clients' initial definitions of volunteerism were consistent and homogeneous, more detailed and in-depth responses indicated there was a wide range of opinion on what constituted formal and informal volunteerism among them. Clients interviewed showed a tendency not to initially recall volunteer activity if it was not recent, usually within the past two years, but seeing volunteerism as informal opened a whole new door. A 51 year-old woman with four grown children recalled numerous volunteer roles as her interview progressed, saying:

> *I was a volunteer in the ladies auxiliary home many years ago. I was there about 4 years and then I moved away. My mother and sister belonged and I was there all the time so they said 'you may as well join.' We worked in the canteen at the bingo games 3 nights a week. I was a candystriper for 4 months in grade 9 but I got pregnant the next year and didn't go back to school. I served hot dogs and*

stuff like that at my son's ball games. I guess I did volunteer but I didn't look at it that way when you first asked me about volunteering because I think of soup kitchens and stuff like that.

Other clients interviewed described similar activities but did not define these as volunteerism. A 21 year-old single man made a clear distinction between volunteering with a community agency and other helping roles:

I've never actually volunteered. I'm just actually looking into volunteering with my caseworker. I sold tickets for different draws at school and there's an elderly lady across the street from us and sometimes I'll shovel her driveway when she doesn't have it done. This is just helping someone you know rather than volunteering.

Most clients did not consider informal volunteer activity relevant for employment, possibly because they were being interviewed by an employment support caseworker (meaning myself) and the initial assumption on their part was that volunteer work meant charity and community agencies. Younger clients and those who had recently been involved in employability activity were more likely to connect volunteering and employment. A 38 year-old single woman in a junior high level upgrading program said she preferred to help her neighbors but believed she would need to volunteer formally to achieve her career goal:

I get more satisfaction and more respect from helping neighbors. I help them with little things like shopping and laundry and they help me. My mother always said: 'help your neighbors – help yourself.' I'm in school right now but maybe 2 or 3 years down the road, I may do formal volunteering to get credit. My boyfriend wants me to go into nursing but I want to work with kids.

Increasing dependence on the employment support caseworker was evident through the analysis of the interview data. Despite their past volunteer activity, both formal and informal, several clients referred to requiring lists of volunteer opportunities or recommendations from their worker, or of needing "motivation" to begin the process of volunteering. Others indicated they had placed the responsibility of arranging a volunteer placement directly with their worker. While this might be expected for clients with cognitive challenges, other clients who had reported previous independent volunteerism also displayed a reluctance to seek their own opportunities after spending time in "the system". Several referred to their workers as motivators, as one elderly male noted: "If someone called to let me know about something, [e.g., volunteering], I'd probably check it out. It might give me that extra push." Others indicated they felt pressured to follow through on worker suggestions. A male client fearfully asked "will I be in trouble if I don't take a volunteer job that my caseworker tells me about?" The social hierarchy that exists within formal volunteer organizations was referenced indirectly through client comments. A cognitively challenged young male said: "it's hard to find volunteer work, that's why my counsellor helps me. Sometimes I get nervous to call a place," another male client said he now felt "outside the volunteer circle," despite previous formal volunteer activity, and a young female referred to several community agencies as "Places where you have to have a good education to get in", ignoring her earlier informal volunteer history.

The barriers the interviewed adults most frequently referred to were a lack of information and poor health. All 21 clients said they did not have enough information

about volunteer programs although 19 of these clients had reported previous volunteer roles. A 35 year-old single man who had previously volunteered with a national charity said: “I would like to see a list of volunteer things because I need to get out. How would I find out about volunteer jobs?” The data indicated volunteer recruitment programs are not reaching this sector of the population with comments such as “You never hear anything about volunteering, there’s not enough information about it, I think volunteer jobs should be better publicized.”

Health issues were referenced as barriers to volunteering by 15 of the 21 interviewed clients. Only 12 of these 15 clients had medical conditions documented by the ESIA program. Mental and physical health problems were described in detail as clients explained why they had not completed a variety of life plans and ambitions. A 39 year-old single woman with a lengthy volunteer history spoke of her current situation:

> *I went to the nursing home every day for 4 months and then they hired me for a year. Then I was laid off but I think a lot of it had to do with my medical problems. I’d like to volunteer again. I heard about a program at my church. They were looking for people to be with the older people. My injuries keep me from doing anything for too long, no lifting, bending or walking.*

The barriers of childcare and transportation recognized in ESIA policy appeared to be minor issues for most of the clients interviewed.

The Caseworkers and the Focus Groups

The first employment support caseworker focus group was held before the client interviews. All six caseworkers said they had interpreted the reference to volunteer work in ESIA policy to mean formal volunteer work and there was considerable discussion on the definition of formal and informal volunteerism. Workers noted that the budget for volunteering was rarely used, and identified health issues as the major barrier to volunteering for their clients, barriers of childcare and transportation were viewed as secondary. Clients were described as needy, with low levels of self-esteem and high levels of dependence. One worker described this as the income assistance culture and they all agreed that this dependence was a major barrier to volunteering, as they essentially understood it, as well as employment. One worker said that some of her clients view formal volunteering with an organization as outside their range of abilities, “Something for people with more money and/or education.” All the focus group participants identified the cultural issues surrounding economic hardship as key barriers to education, employment and volunteerism.

When the client interviews were complete, the same six workers received a summary of the client responses and then participated in a second focus group. The workers recognized and discussed the lack of client information about volunteering and the expressed level of client dependence. However, despite the earlier discussion on formal and informal volunteerism and the new data on their own clients, they did not acknowledge or discuss the amount of volunteer activity – either formal or informal – as reported by the interviewed clients. The workers did not reflect on why clients who had volunteered previously would now be in need of assistance in learning about and finding volunteer positions. Their own views were unchanged.

The workers did reflect on the marginalized status of their clients, effectively reinforcing what had been said before. One worker said interaction with other volunteers could be stressful for a person with low self-esteem, “Volunteer work can be very

humiliating. They may ask what you do for a living." Several said they felt the informal structure of many volunteer agencies did not provide the guidance they think their clients needed, suggesting the problems lay with the clients and the agencies, not with the social service system itself.

Findings and Conclusions

Although 90% of the interviewed adults with low literacy skills reported formal and informal volunteer activity, none had volunteered in the 3 months prior to the interviews. All cited a lack of information about volunteer programs as a barrier to participation. Older adults identified health concerns as a major barrier, younger participants reported barriers of childcare and a lack of time. Definitions of formal and informal volunteerism varied but the majority of interviewed clients said that only formal volunteer experience was relevant for employment and for the ESIA program. This view was also held by the participating employment support caseworkers who interpreted ESIA policy as applying only to formal volunteerism.

The six caseworkers remained intransigent when presented with the interview data that challenged their knowledge of past client volunteer activity. They noted that clients were not retaining the information provided by workers regarding volunteer programs and available supports. They did not note how clients were clearly becoming dependent on themselves as workers and how clients were getting further and further disengaged from the community. The workers acknowledged client dependence and marginalization but failed to recognize their role in the process. There was little indication that any of the participating workers planned to change either their counselling approaches or working definitions, or to seek clarification or changes in program policies.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This case study adds to theory by offering new insight into the socio-cultural perspective of adults with low literacy skills and into the relationship between these adults and support workers who provide career development services. The cycle of dependence and volunteerism evidenced in the relationship is a concept that requires further research. This relationship has only been explored in relation to formal volunteering. Future, practice-based research should use an expanded definition of volunteerism that includes informal roles. The role of volunteer placements in adult upgrading and employability programs is another concept worthy of additional research. A practical, activity-based component may draw non-participants to formal volunteer programs. Finally, the relationship between informal volunteerism and education levels, as well as national volunteer participation rates of adults with low literacy skills are research topics with implications for volunteer recruiters and adult educators.

On the basis of this case study, we offer several strategies to engage low income adults with low literacy skills through volunteer activities. First, educators and caseworkers must be aware of both their own attitudes regarding volunteerism and the range of volunteer programming available in their communities. Information must be kept current and specific and be delivered to clients frequently, with reinforcement using appropriate examples. Secondly, the subculture of adults with low literacy skills must be recognized and incorporated into volunteer recruitment strategies. Flexible opportunities should be presented by institutions such as social service agencies, including short-term or episodic volunteering and informal volunteer roles. Program planners should recognize

the potential for skill development and personal growth within non-traditional volunteer roles and support these roles in operational policies. Thirdly, volunteer recruiters should move beyond traditional print and electronic media advertising if they wish to attract adults with low literacy skills. Clients participating in this study said volunteer opportunities were not well advertised and that they like to be asked directly. Speaking engagements in education and employment programs might offer a more effective recruitment strategy to target this sector of the population. Finally, specific training on the volunteer process could be a valuable addition to education and employment programs. Information on the application process, interviewing for and maintaining formal volunteer programs, and using volunteer experience to achieve goals may lead to a healthy re-engagement with society and work. Clients with serious health issues or cognitive challenges may benefit from supported volunteer placements.

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