

Citation

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Conceptualisation of Volunteering among Non-volunteers: Expanding Definitions and Dimensions Using Net-Cost

ABSTRACT

Based on the four dimensions of volunteering (time, object, nature and environment) and net-cost analysis theory, this article examines the conceptualisation of volunteering among non-volunteers and what could attract them to volunteer (attractors). Using flashcard images of volunteering activities among a nationally representative sample in Australia, we reveal non-volunteers perceived the existing four dimensions of volunteering and in addition, two new dimensions of volunteering emerged: ability (required skill level) and social (who one volunteers with). Of these dimensions, object, nature and abilities were found to be the most attractive dimensions of volunteering to non-volunteers. The study further partially supports the use of net-cost theory as a framework for linking non-volunteer's perceptions of volunteering to their likelihood of volunteering, with the findings suggesting that low net-cost activities are more attractive to non-volunteers.

Key words: Volunteering, non-volunteers, net-cost, conceptualisation, attractors.

INTRODUCTION

What is volunteering? Depends on whom you ask. While there are many definitions of volunteering (Wilson, 2012), its conceptualisation remains ambiguous (McAllum, 2014). This is, perhaps, because volunteering encompasses a broad range of activities (Handy et al., 2000), is culturally specific (Oppenheimer, 2008) and has changed over time (Oppenheimer & Warburton, 2014). Although there is broad consensus as to what constitutes the core characteristics of volunteering, the perceptions on ‘what is volunteering’ are fluid (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010). There are persistent stereotypes of both volunteering and volunteers that remain embedded in society and are hard to dislodge (Ho & O’Donohoe, 2014; Oppenheimer, 2008). It is unclear, however, how these perceptions relate to individual decisions to participate in volunteering or not.

In 1996, Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth published a seminal article defining a volunteer and the action of volunteering. Their definition included four components: 1) the concept of free will; 2) no tangible monetary rewards; 3) an activity done through formal organisations; and 4) for the purpose of helping others. They showed that volunteering activities have four dimensions: 1) the *time* devoted to volunteering; 2) the *nature* of volunteering and the way volunteering is conducted; 3) the *object* of volunteering; and 4) the *environment* or broader eco-system of volunteering. Since then, the concept of volunteering has been theorised and researched as a diverse activity performed by an equally diverse range of individuals (Wilson, 2012).

Few studies, however, have examined how people actually conceptualise volunteering (Handy et al., 2000), and there is a paucity of research on how non-volunteers conceptualise volunteering (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017). This article explores the conceptualisation of volunteering among non-volunteers and suggests how these perceptions may relate to an individual’s ‘propensity to volunteer’ (Lockstone, Jago, &

Deery, 2002). While there may be many reasons why people volunteer (Wilson, 2012), as well as various barriers that explain why people do not (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007), the conceptualisation of volunteering among non-volunteers can play a potentially important role in influencing people's likelihood to volunteer (Lukka & Ellis, 2001). To increase the rate of volunteering, it is imperative to understand non-volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008), introduce them to volunteering and its positive attributes, and then possibly 'convert' them to volunteering (Plowden, 2003; Lie, Baines, & Wheelock, 2009).

In line with the theme of this special issue, the article begins by reviewing Cnaan et al.'s (1996) definition, dimensions and boundaries of volunteering. As this article focuses on a conceptualisation of volunteering and its association with participation, we draw on the net-cost approach (Cnaan et al., 1996; Handy et al., 2000) for analysis and discussion. The article reports on an Australian study that used flashcards illustrating various volunteering activities to stimulate discussion about how non-volunteers conceptualise volunteering. These results are analysed in terms of attractors to volunteering within the commonly used four dimensions of volunteering (time, nature, object, and environment) and two new dimensions that emerged from the analysis (abilities and social). The implications of these findings for the future conceptualisation of volunteering by the public, academics, and in public policy are detailed in the discussion.

Volunteering: Academic Definitions Versus Public Perceptions

There is no single agreement among academics as to how volunteering should be defined. Indeed, academics' views on volunteering are strongly influenced by their disciplinary background (Haski-Leventhal, 2009), such as psychology (with an emphasis on motivation to volunteer), sociology (social structures and cultures affecting volunteering) or political science. In addition, the diversity of volunteer activities adds to the challenges of defining the phenomenon (Musick & Wilson, 2008). As Hustinx and her colleagues (2010) suggested

‘volunteering continues to be a social construct with multiple definitions; and what is understood as volunteering is a matter of public perception.’ (p. 410). These social constructs can be shared by people from similar cultures and backgrounds (Handy et al., 2000). Academics often use definitions offered by Cnaan et al. (1996) or by Snyder and Omoto (2008, p. 3) who defined volunteering as ‘freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organisations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance.’

Snyder and Omoto (2008) and Cnaan et al. (1996) noted varying ‘degrees’ of volunteering, and scholars now view volunteering as a continuum (Whittaker, McLennan, & Handmer, 2015). At the narrow end (or ‘pure’, see Handy et al., 2000), volunteering is conceptualised as an activity with no coercion; involving no reward or personal interest; it is undertaken through a formal organisation or group; and involves no relationship or shared interests between the volunteer and beneficiary. Broader definitions involve degrees of coercion (for example, mandatory service learning in schools, court ordered community service); remuneration below the value of paid work provided; undertaken outside of formal organisations, directly with recipients as informal volunteering (Whittaker et al., 2015). Similarly, Petriwskyj and Warburton (2007) offered a typology of volunteering along two dimensions: formality (formal or informal) and composition (group or individual).

Each end of the volunteering continuum has conceptual, methodological, and cultural limitations. Conceptually, the narrow definitions of time commitment and formality result in the exclusion of important forms of volunteering. For example, as ‘giving time’ is a central characteristic of volunteering (Whittaker et al., 2015), volunteering includes both continuous (Snyder & Omoto, 2008) and episodic (Barraket, Keast, & Newton, 2014) forms. Similarly, as noted by Wilson (2012), the attachment of volunteering to an organisational setting fails to

account for important and beneficial voluntary activities occurring in communities where the infrastructure of not-for-profit organisations is underdeveloped.

While academic definitions of volunteering have evolved over the years, it is not clear if public perceptions have done so. Perceptions of ‘who is a volunteer’ vary greatly between cultural groups (Handy et al., 2000). A cross-cultural analysis revealed that Cnaan et al.’s four components of volunteering (free will, availability of reward, formal organisation, and relation to beneficiaries) are viewed differently in cultural contexts (Meijs et al., 2003). The perception of a ‘strict’ end of the continuum was widely shared, and embodied the image of a ‘traditional volunteer’, that is one who helps people through an organisation without remuneration, of their own free will and for a sustained period of time. In contrast, there was substantial cultural disagreement on new ‘grey areas’ of volunteering at the other end of the continuum, such as episodic volunteering (one-off activity) or volunteering through the workplace (Handy et al., 2000).

Perceptions of volunteering could be related to the desirability of volunteering and the likelihood to volunteer. Ho and O’Donohoe (2014) found that non-volunteers tended to ascribe negative attributes to volunteers. The authors explained that when non-volunteers articulated their understandings of volunteering, they revealed selective stereotyping of volunteers and of themselves. This stereotyping acted to either protect or enhance their self-esteem, and negative stereotyping of volunteers among non-volunteers was suggested to influence young people’s volunteering transitions, not only from “doubter” to “starter” but also from “doer” to “stayer” (Gaskin, 2003).

The four dimensions and recent changes in volunteering

Social transformations as well as progress in volunteering research over the last 20 years has resulted in changes to the four dimensions of volunteering as originally described by Cnaan et

al. (1996). Volunteering is continually evolving and new forms are emerging, such as corporate volunteering, episodic volunteering, online volunteering and micro-volunteering, all enhanced by social media, new technologies, and mobile lifestyles (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012). Before we examine if these new forms of volunteering are reflected in public perceptions, we review the four dimensions of volunteering and recent changes in respect of each one.

Time. This dimension refers to the amount of time that an individual spends on volunteering (Cnaan et al., 1996; Wilson, 2012). Lack of time is often the primary barrier to participation in volunteering activities (Sundeen, Raskoff, & Garcia, 2007). Studies on the amount of time spent engaging in volunteer activities have revealed a declining trend (ABS, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Lim & Laurence, 2015). However, newer trends in volunteering also relate to the concept of time and the way volunteers engage with it (Wilson, 2012). A shift towards a more individual style of volunteering was noticed more than a decade ago (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), as people now prefer volunteering that reflects their personal interests, commitments and lifestyles. For example, the rise of episodic volunteering (Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan, 2006) reveals a shift from volunteering as a consistent activity undertaken regularly over time to a one-off activity completed when it suits an individual. Similarly, micro-volunteering has emerged where tasks are divided into fragments, requiring only short timeslots of activity and accomplished collectively by a group of people (Bernstein et al., 2013).

Nature. The nature of volunteer participation refers to the way that the volunteering is conducted (Cnaan et al., 1996; Wilson, 2012), such as the type of activities and how they are done (for example, online or face-to-face). The nature of volunteering is also undergoing fundamental change. Traditionally, volunteering was a face-to-face service activity, which required volunteering in a designated location and through an organisation or group (for

example, providing food, assistance or companionship) (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003).

However, the development of new forms of volunteering has changed this dimension.

Volunteering can now be online (virtual volunteering), expanding the range of volunteering activities that can be completed in one's home or workplace (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008);

and spontaneous volunteering, stimulated by social media and unconnected to any formal organisation has emerged, for example, in response to national crises (Harris et al., 2016).

Informal volunteering, too, occurring outside of any formal organisational setting, has received increasing attention from academics and policy makers (Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007; Whittaker et al., 2015).

Object. The third dimension of volunteering, the object, is defined by whom the activity is intended to benefit (Cnaan et al., 1996). A narrow definition of volunteering accepts beneficiaries as strangers to the volunteer, typically from a vulnerable group. Broader definitions accept beneficiaries of similar backgrounds, or even the volunteers themselves (for example, support groups) (Cnaan et al., 1996). Furthermore, volunteering has grown with the expansion of new special interest groups, especially in the environmental (Measham & Barnett, 2008), animal-related (Abell, 2013), and political (Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998) spheres.

Environment. The environment is the broader context within which volunteering occurs (Cnaan et al., 1996) and this too has been transformed with a rise in third-party involvement, such as the engagement of workplaces as facilitators of 'corporate volunteering' (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2010). Similarly, universities act as third parties to facilitate student volunteering (Brewis & Holdsworth, 2011) and tourism agencies send volunteer tourists overseas to work on various projects (Holmes, 2014).

Net-cost analysis of volunteering

Based on the aforementioned dimensions and definitions of volunteering, Cnaan and his colleagues (1996) introduced the concept of the ‘net-cost’ of volunteering, as the private and public benefits associated with a volunteer activity minus the costs (in terms of time, money, opportunity, etc.). Handy et al. (2000) found that when costs were high and benefits were low (that is, high net-cost), respondents perceived the activity as volunteering, whereas when any personal benefits or kind of remuneration was received, this was perceived to be less like volunteering. The study found less agreement between countries about perceptions of activities that offered significant benefits to the volunteer and less value to society (Handy et al., 2000; Meijs et al., 2003).

The net-cost approach to conceptualising volunteering has been widely cited in the literature (Cnaan et al., 2011; Hallman & Zehrer, 2016; Musick & Wilson, 2008). Subsequent studies have found evidence that the public perception of net-cost is shared in other comparable national settings including Canada, India, Italy, Netherlands, the United States (Meijs et al., 2003); and Japan (Asano & Yamauchi, 2001). The net-cost approach has been extended to include public perceptions of other forms of pro-social behaviour, such as corporate community involvement (Stubbe, Roza, Meijs, & Moodithaya, 2011). Researchers have argued that the best volunteer programs minimise the net-costs to the volunteer (Handy & Brudney, 2007) and that individuals are more likely to volunteer if there are higher public benefits for their actions (Handy & Mook, 2011). However, we still lack knowledge on how net-cost perceptions might relate to an individual’s decision to volunteer.

Volunteering attractors and motivators

In examining what attracts people to volunteer, a vast body of literature has examined volunteer motivations (Mannino, Snyder, & Omoto, 2011). One of the seminal models of motivation to volunteer is the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI, Clary et al., 1998), which identifies six motives that volunteer work satisfies: value-expression, understanding, social,

career (including skill development), protective function, and personal enhancement. To date, the four dimensions of volunteering have not been studied in association with volunteer motivations. While understanding volunteer motivation is important, our study is concerned with how perceptions of volunteering relate to non-volunteers' likelihood to participate in an activity. To do so, it examines what attracts non-volunteers to certain volunteering activities. As such, we refer to these aspects as 'attractors' instead of motivation, defined as the specific aspects of volunteering activities that non-volunteers find attractive.

In summary, the current definitions of volunteering include four components (free will; no monetary rewards; helping others; and formal organisations) and four dimensions (time, object, nature and environment). These dimensions lead not only to broad and narrow definitions of volunteering, but also to various perceptions of what constitutes volunteering. While net-cost theory (Cnaan et al., 1996) has been used to capture perceptions of what constitutes volunteering, particularly in different cultures (Handy et al., 2000), we lack information on how these dimensions are perceived by non-volunteers and how they relate to the likelihood of non-volunteers taking up volunteering. This is particularly important given that the nature of volunteering has expanded and shifted over time. This study therefore examines the conceptualisation of volunteering by non-volunteers using the dimensions of volunteering. This is done in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1) How do the four dimensions of volunteering emerge in non-volunteers' perceptions of volunteering?

RQ2) Do any additional dimensions emerge in non-volunteers' perceptions of volunteering?

RQ3) What volunteering dimensions are most attractive to non-volunteers?

RQ4) Does net-cost theory serve as a potential framework for linking non-volunteer's perceptions of volunteering to their likelihood of volunteering?

METHOD

To explore the conceptualisation of volunteering among non-volunteers, a nationally representative survey of volunteers and non-volunteers was conducted. Based on the above literature review and a desire to understand how non-volunteers perceive volunteering, the data underpinning this paper draws upon the non-volunteer data.

The survey was administered online to a sample of Australian volunteers and non-volunteers during November-December 2015. A panel survey company was employed to guarantee access to the non-volunteer sample, a difficult group to identify and access. The company asserted its panels comply with all relevant industry standards, including those of the Australian Market and Social Research Society relating to reliable and validated data procedures (AMSRS, 2013).

Sample

The sample was stratified to represent the Australian population by a 70%/30% split of non-volunteers and volunteers, based on recent national participation data (ABS, 2015) and by age (18-35, 35-54 & 55+), gender (50% males; 50% females) and location (all States and Territories, metropolitan and regional split). At the close of the survey period, 1,007 responses were achieved, based on 12,019 invitations sent out on a randomised basis. The panel survey company piloted the questionnaire online. Twenty-six responses were received (n=16 volunteers and n=10 non-volunteers). With some minor revisions (for example, changing the response formats of some questions), the pilot confirmed that the question flow, routing and readability of the questionnaire were acceptable.

There were slight variations (9 responses or less) across the geographic breakdown of

the target and returned sample, indicating the sample was nationally representative based on this specification. Marginally underrepresented were respondents in the 18-34 age group and males, however, in both cases over 90% of the planned quota was obtained, which was considered acceptable. The panel company conducted quality checks on the data collected to mitigate against illogical or inconsistent responses, the overuse of non-response 'don't know' categories and overly quick survey completion (where completion time was less than 30% of the median survey length, which on average, took panel members 25-30 minutes to complete).

Survey

Determining volunteer status: A series of filter questions were used in succession to determine *volunteer status*: Q1 "Have you given time/volunteered in the last 12 months?", Q2 "Have you given time/volunteered in the last five years?" and Q3 "Have you given time/volunteered to any of the following within the last five years?" 1) Your kid's school or sport, 2) Your church, 3) Your work, 4) As part of your studies, 5) None of these). The response categories for these questions, including the sub-questions of Q3, were all the categorical options of Yes or No. To be classified as a non-volunteer, respondents had to select the 'No' option to Q1, Q2 and Q3 1-4 as well as the selecting the Yes option to Q3(5). This level of screening is more thorough than other studies (Clary et al., 1996; Sundeen et al., 2007) that simply define a non-volunteer as someone who has not volunteered in the previous 12 months.

Flashcards: To determine the appeal of volunteering in general and the attractors to specific volunteering activities, all non-volunteer respondents (n = 696) were shown a series of flashcards with an accompanying description of each volunteering scenario. In total, eleven flashcards were presented to respondents. The flashcards were important for stimulating discussion within a cohort with potentially limited knowledge of volunteering.

Based on the four aspects of volunteering and the net-cost theory, the flashcards were selected to represent the dominant organisation and activity types that the Australian population direct their voluntary effort to (corporate, event, online, emergency, disaster, family, sports coaching, environmental, animal, aged care, and international volunteering) according to the most recent national participation data (ABS, 2015). Furthermore, the flashcards represented a mix of various time commitments (e.g., episodic or continuing), nature of activity (e.g., face-to-face or online), objects (e.g., individuals or the community) and environments (e.g., local, remote or through a third party). In addition, the flashcards were selected to include activities with various levels of benefits to the individual volunteer and the public as well as a range of costs (time, effort, money).

Each flashcard was accompanied by text explaining the type of activity, time commitment and level of skill required. For example, there was an image of employees with company T-shirts, cleaning debris at the Australian bush and carrying logs. It was accompanied by the text: ‘corporate volunteers cleaning up after a bushfire. One-off activity during work hours, no skills needed’. Another image showed a firefighter with a hose at a bush fire and the text read: ‘volunteer firefighter. Regular training sessions, irregular service, skilled activity’.

Non-volunteers were asked to indicate the likelihood of their participation in the form of volunteering depicted in the flashcards using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely through to 5 = Very likely). If respondents expressed that they were “Likely” or “Very likely” to participate, they were prompted to answer the following open-ended query “What is it about this role that is appealing to you?” The analysis in this paper is primarily based on this open-ended data.

Data Analysis

The open-ended responses ranged from single word answers to short phrases, explaining respondents' reason(s) for expressing preference for each activity chosen. These responses were analysed in two stages: first, a thematic analysis was used to identify themes relevant to the research questions RQ1 through RQ3, based on interpretation of the data beyond its specific content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then, the themes were examined using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

During thematic analysis, themes were derived from raw flashcard data (or the open ended responses to the images) to structure the data in a systematic way (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were coded openly at first, into emergent themes. Most responses were coded into one theme, but some responses were coded into multiple themes, up to a maximum of three for any single respondent. In general, as the responses were generally short and straightforward, little interpretation was required on the coders' part to associate them with the themes. A second team member was engaged to code a sample of responses based on these themes, further clarifying theme descriptions and contributing to coding reliability. Themes were then organised into meaningful clusters to form dimensions, of which four were previously identified in Cnaan et al.'s (1996) model (time, nature, object and environment) and two additional themes emerged from the data (abilities and social).

At the content analysis stage, the number of references to each dimension in the participants' survey responses was counted. The total number of non-volunteers who mentioned each dimension with regards to every volunteering type is summarised in Table 1. For each volunteering type, the dimension most commonly cited by non-volunteer respondents is underlined and in bold. The analysis presented in Table 1 is based on the descriptors of each flashcard (which are represented in the grey shaded areas in Table 1), but mainly on the responses received.

Costs were calculated by time and skills required, as follows: if the activity was episodic and required no skills, the costs were considered low. Regular and high-skilled activity was medium and high. Public benefits were ranked from low to high based on the number of people who benefit and the level of change (i.e., from helping festival goers to saving lives). Volunteer benefits were calculated on the same scale, taking into account a sense of self-esteem, enjoyment and other personal benefits (Clary et al., 1998). The net-cost was then ranked based on the formula of Handy et al. (2000): $B_{i_{private}} + B_{i_{public}} > C_{i_{private}}$. The Likert scale items contained in the questionnaire were analysed to determine their descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.

FINDINGS

Conceptualising volunteering: The four dimensions of volunteering

Conceptualisation of, and attractors to, volunteering among non-volunteers were identified along each of the four existing dimensions. The following section describes the details of the four dimensions based on the flashcard data analysed in support of RQ1. Some activities described in the flashcards were represented by more than one dimension, and in those cases, the most prominent dimension is selected for brief discussion relative to the particular flashcard scenario.

Dimension 1: The time devoted to volunteering

Attractors to volunteering activities were identified when the time demand was either limited or flexible. Time-restricted volunteer activities (e.g., conservation or sports event) appealed to respondents who mentioned reasons such as “no on-going commitment required” and “no pressure to keep giving time”. In addition, participants expressed the importance of fitting volunteering into their existing schedules, including work. They provided responses such as “I have free time at home and this type of activity would suit my circumstances”.

Dimension 2: The nature of volunteering

The nature of volunteering, describing the activities undertaken or how volunteering is conducted, was related to several attractors. These included the appeal of the activity and its setting. Participants were drawn to activities they found attractive (“pleasant activity outdoors”, “I think it is great therapy”), simple to perform (handing out snacks at a cycling event), and evoked positive memories (“I did it once when I was in primary school like 10 years ago and I remember enjoying it”). Various settings also presented various attractors. Some participants were attracted to online volunteering because of its convenience (“can do this at home, don't need to travel or wake [up] early”; “easy to do from multiple locations”). Others were attracted to volunteering outdoors (“working out with nature”).

Dimension 3: The object of volunteering

The object of volunteering, which is associated with the beneficiaries of volunteering (such as individuals, communities, and meaningful causes), was the dimension most cited by participants when discussing their views on the attractiveness of the volunteering types. Beneficiaries were mentioned as attractors to volunteering. Helping people was attractive when participants related the benefit of loved ones (“My late mother and father benefited from this activity while in a nursing home”), and when participants could immediately recognise the benefit to beneficiaries (“It's very helpful work and the help given is felt immediately”). Helping communities was attractive to participants because in doing so, they were part of it (“[I] would be giving back to the community that may have or will help me”). These responses show the importance of beneficiaries when identifying the activity as volunteering. When the objects were causes (conservation, national remembrance events, and healthy lifestyles), participants cited their interest in the causes as reasons for volunteering (“I feel strongly about conservation”, “Health is very important”).

Dimension 4: The environment of volunteering

Representing the broader context structures that facilitate volunteering, this dimension received the least attention from respondents. An attractor however associated with this dimension was convenience from third party involvement (“It's all organised for me during work. I don't have to do anything but show up and do what's needed”. “It's part of the work day”, “My work will not complain if I am away for a day and I will not have to use holiday/sick day to do volunteer work”).

Conceptualising volunteering: Two new dimensions

In addition to the four extant dimensions of volunteering, two new dimensions emerged from the data analysis in support of RQ2: the abilities used while volunteering or required skills for each activity (abilities) and who people volunteer with (social). These dimensions are presented below.

(New) Dimension 5: Abilities

This dimension focuses on the abilities and skills either required to volunteer or that can be developed through volunteering. Attractors to volunteering were prospects of acquiring a desirable skill (“You get a chance to learn something new which can build up my career”), making use of an existing skill (“I have done coaching of kids before”, “It is within my professional skills”), or the ability to perform with no need of a particular skill (“No skills required felt like it's achievable”).

(New) Dimension 6: The social context of volunteering

The social context was an attractor to volunteering if the activities were done with colleagues, friends, and family (“doing something worthwhile with family”). Volunteering with familiar people had the potential to reduce the anxiety that is sometimes attached to entering new situations and groups (“I get to do it with people I know so I don't feel the anxiety with a new

thing. It would make me feel good about my work too, and build new relationships with colleagues”). However, the prospect of meeting new people who shared similar values or interests (“communicate with other volunteers while they are working for our community”) gave respondents incentives to get involved in volunteering. The opportunity to meet new people in general (“would allow me to meet lots of different people with different life experiences”) also attracted participants.

Volunteering attractors and the six dimensions

In support of RQ3, as can be seen in Table 1, *object* was the most important dimension for non-volunteers, mentioned 870 times, indicating that it was the intended beneficiaries of the volunteering effort that were the greatest attractors to non-volunteers in respect of their likelihood of taking up each volunteering scenario. The exception to this pattern was online volunteering for which the *nature* of the volunteering itself was the greatest attraction. Far behind were nature (281) and the new dimension of abilities (173). Across all flashcard activities, the least attractive dimension was the environment, which is perhaps indicative of the assumed facilitating role this dimension plays in the organisation of volunteering. An exception, however, was the scenario of corporate volunteers cleaning up after a bushfire. Of all respondents indicating environment to be an attractor (n = 49), 57% of them indicated this in respect to this flashcard. Additionally, like environment, time and social were mentioned less than 100 times each. Time was most prominently mentioned as an attractor in relation to more episodic forms and corporate volunteering and, to a lesser extent, online volunteering.

-INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE-

Net-Cost analysis of non-volunteers’ perceptions of volunteering

The likelihood of volunteer activity uptake by non-volunteer respondents was examined using the flashcard data and the descriptive analysis detailed in Tables 1 and 2. Each

flashcard is described using the four dimensions of volunteering and the related benefits and costs. Some activities were assessed as low net-cost given the relative high public and/or private benefits and low individual costs. For example, corporate volunteering to help clean up after a natural disaster had very high benefits to the community and to the individual volunteer (strong warm glow and public recognition). However, costs were low given that it is a one-off activity undertaken during working hours, requiring no skills, and low potential cost. As such, the net-cost was deemed low and respondents rated the highest likelihood of uptake relative to this flashcard scenario (mean = 2.96). Similarly, online volunteering to help research also had high benefits, low costs and therefore low net-cost, with a higher likelihood of uptake compared to the remaining scenarios (mean = 2.76), although non-volunteers intentions to volunteer in this capacity were neutral overall.

-INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE-

On the other hand, volunteer fire fighters have high individual costs of time, skills and risk. While the public and private benefits are high, the high costs make the net-cost high. Not surprisingly, the likelihood of uptake was the lowest (mean = 1.93). Coaching kids football requires high cost of time and skills and lower benefits, implying high net-cost, which corresponded with low uptake (mean = 1.94). While this is not quantified to a level where a statistical relationship can be determined, there is a connection between the net-cost and the likelihood of uptake, though the pattern is not perfect, partially supporting RQ4.

DISCUSSION

Volunteering is an important activity providing human resources for non-profit organisations, governments and society more broadly. Declines in volunteer participation (ABS, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Lim & Laurence, 2015) have increased interest in the possible recruitment of non-volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017). Shedding light on how

the under-studied group of non-volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008) conceptualise volunteering, this study contributes to academic debates concerning the definition and conceptualisation of volunteering. We therefore took the perceptions of non-volunteers and from that data examined the existing dimensions of volunteering, sought new emerging dimensions, and examined how these dimensions could be attractors to volunteering as a means of recruiting non-volunteers to the benefits of volunteering (Plowden, 2003; Lie et al., 2009).

In support of our research questions, the findings confirmed that non-volunteers perceived the existing four dimensions of volunteering (time, object, nature and environment) (RQ1) and additionally distinguished two new dimensions (abilities and social) (RQ2). The relative attractiveness of these dimensions based on individual perceptions was subsequently shown (RQ3). Of these, *object* was the most commonly mentioned attractor to volunteering, followed by *nature* and *abilities*. The popularity of *object*, which is the beneficiary of the volunteering activity, revealed that who one volunteers for is a major attractor, particularly if this beneficiary was perceived as deserving or meaningful.

In terms of the *nature* of volunteering, which is the way that the volunteering is conducted (e.g., in person or virtually), convenient and accessible activities were attractive. The *environment* for volunteering, which refers to the broader context, was less important than the other dimensions (possibly due to lower levels of awareness of such options). Receiving support from third parties (such as employers) was important to some participants. This could be attributed to the support required to make volunteering possible, but also to third parties' signalling that volunteering is important (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010).

Significantly, our findings reveal two new dimensions, which are important factors in non-volunteers' willingness to volunteer: *abilities* and *social*. It is possible that volunteering activities that required low skills or matched the individual skill-set, helped people perceive it

as doable (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017). The social context is also likely to enhance volunteering attractiveness, particularly if there are options for people to volunteer with someone they knew. This could be because it is seen as ‘fun’ (Stebbins, 2015) or because it reduces social anxiety (Handy & Cnaan, 2007). While *abilities* and *social* are mentioned in motivation to volunteer models, such as the VFI (Clary et al., 1998), this study finds that they also augment the dimensional definition of volunteering activities.

The study found partial support for net-cost analysis (Handy et al., 2000) as a framework for linking non-volunteer’s perceptions of volunteering to their likelihood of volunteering. The study provides tentative evidence that when activities are perceived as having low net-cost to the individual as well as high public and private benefits, the likelihood of uptake is likely to be higher. While net-cost theory has revealed that the higher the net-cost, the more an activity is perceived as volunteering (Cnaan et al., 2011; Hallman & Zehrer, 2016; Musick & Wilson, 2008), this study suggests that for non-volunteers, a lower net-cost is potentially associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering. This supports Handy and Mook’s (2011) findings that we need to understand that costs play a key role in driving behaviours for non-volunteers, as well as volunteers.

Based on flashcards shown to non-volunteers, the strongest attractors were corporate volunteers in natural disasters, online volunteering (assisting scientists with research) and conservation volunteers. Recent forms of volunteering such as episodic, corporate and online appeared to be associated with an increased likelihood of volunteering due to low costs to the individual (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). In alignment with the growing interest (academically and practically) in episodic volunteering (Handy et al., 2006), respondents were more willing to consider volunteering for a one-off activity, which required no regular commitment, potentially reducing its net-cost. On the other hand, international volunteering,

coaching kids football and firefighting had high net cost and therefore appeared to be less attractive to non-volunteers.

Conclusion

This study aims to contribute to the growing and evolving literature on the definition of volunteering and conceptualisation of volunteering by using a novel method (flashcards), sample (non-volunteers) and focus (attractors in volunteering dimensions). Conceptualisation of volunteering among non-volunteers is an important and under-researched topic, and the findings of this study contribute knowledge for scholars, practitioners and society more broadly. By studying the perceptions of volunteering among non-volunteers we can better understand volunteering conceptualisation and shed potential light on some of the reasons why people tend not to volunteer.

The article contributes to theory by expanding the dimensions of volunteering, relating them to volunteering attractors, and to net-cost theory. Focusing on non-volunteers and their perceptions of volunteering, this study examines the four dimensions of volunteering put forward by Cnaan et al. (1996) 20 years ago and offers two new dimensions that we hope can be incorporated into future definitional frameworks of volunteering. As part of this special issue on revisiting that seminal paper, this article aimed to enrich the conversation on conceptualisation of volunteering from the perspective of non-volunteers.

This article is the first one to link the four dimensions of volunteering to individuals' likelihood of volunteering in order to examine whether the way that specific volunteering activities are done (where, for how long, by whom and for whom) is related to how attractive they are for non-volunteers. In addition, this article uses the net-cost analysis in a novel way to focus on the way that perceived benefits and costs could relate to the attractors to volunteering. As such, this research contributes to the net-cost theory by being one of a

handful of studies that empirically examines the costs and benefits of volunteering and the possible relation to the likelihood to volunteer.

In practical terms, our findings suggest that volunteer organisations seeking to attract non-volunteers to volunteering should offer and highlight activities with low cost (e.g., episodic volunteering) and high benefits. Once people begin to volunteer and realise the benefits, it may be easier to attract them to volunteering activities that involve higher costs, but offer greater benefits to society overall. While episodic or online volunteering practices may not address all societal needs, they offer a convenient volunteering entry point. Such non-traditional forms of volunteering require wider promotion, as non-volunteers may not be aware of such options and developments in the volunteering space. This study offers direction for increasing volunteering participation and addressing societal changes. Finally, since the *object* of volunteering was important for participants of this study, it is important to show who the volunteering activity is for and who benefits from it instead of only focusing on the benefits to the volunteers.

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TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS OF VOLUNTEERING

Flashcard \ Dimension							Likelihood of uptake	
	Time	Nature	Object	Env.	Abilities	Social	Mean	Std Dev
[1] Corporate volunteers cleaning up after a bushfire	21	31	<u>159</u>	28	10	25	2.96	1.26
[2] Coaching kids football	0	21	<u>24</u>	0	4	1	1.94	1.07
[3] Conservation volunteers	2	38	<u>113</u>	1	16	6	2.66	1.11
[4] Handing out snacks at a cycling event	8	24	<u>48</u>	11	<u>48</u>	11	2.47	1.12
[5] Pet therapy	0	26	<u>141</u>	1	4	2	2.65	1.19
[6] Volunteer firefighter	0	11	<u>25</u>	0	10	1	1.93	1.03
[7] Volunteer steward at the Anzac dawn service	5	1	<u>55</u>	0	7	1	2.24	1.01
[8] International volunteering	0	7	<u>59</u>	0	10	1	2.01	1.14
[9] Family volunteering	1	19	<u>91</u>	0	15	13	2.59	1.09
[10] Online volunteering	29	<u>83</u>	62	2	42	0	2.76	1.19
[11] Disaster relief	5	18	<u>85</u>	0	5	0	2.43	1.12
Total for dimension	85	281	870	49	173	62		

N=696, Likelihood of uptake measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely through to 5 = Very likely). The numbers in the dimension columns (from ‘time’ to ‘social’) are the total number of survey respondents who mentioned each dimension with regards to every volunteering type. The bold and underlined numbers were the most frequent dimension per each flashcard.

TABLE 2: FLASHCARD DESCRIPTORS AND NET-COST ANALYSIS

	Activity (Nature)	Time	Nature	Object	Environment	Skill	Private benefits	Public benefits	Costs	Net-cost	Likelihood of uptake
1	Corporate volunteers in natural disaster	Episodic	Formal, face to face	Local community	Workplaces (third party)	None	High	High	Low	Low	2.96
2	Coaching kids football	Weekly	Formal, face to face	Children	Local to organisation, remote or local to home	Semi-skilled	Low	Low	High	High	1.94
3	Conservation volunteers	Episodic	Formal, face to face	Environment	Remote from organisation, remote or local to home	None	Low	Medium	Medium	Low	2.66
4	Handing out snacks at a cycling event	Episodic	Formal, face to face	Event participants	Local to organisation (event), remote or local to home	None	Low	Low	Medium	Low	2.47
5	Volunteers take pets to visit elderly people	Weekly	Formal, face to face	Community	Local to organisation, remote or local to home	None	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	2.65
6	Volunteer firefighter	Regular	Formal, face to face	Community	Remote from organisation, remote or local to home	Skilled	High	High	High	High	1.93
7	Volunteer steward at the Anzac dawn service	Episodic	Formal, face to face	Community/ event participants	Local to organisation, remote or local to home	None	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	2.24
8	International volunteering –	3 (3-6 months)	Formal, face to face	International community	Local to organisation, remote from home	Skilled	High	High	High	High	2.01
9	Family volunteering for homeless people	Regular	Formal, face to face	Community	Local to organisation, remote of local to home	Semi-skilled	High	High	Medium	Medium	2.59
10	Online volunteering – assisting scientists with research	Regular	Formal, online	Scientists, society	Remote from organisation, local to home	Skilled	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	2.76
11	Disaster relief	Episodic	Spontaneous, face to face	Local community	Remote from organisation, remote or local to home	Semi-skilled	High	High	High	High	2.43