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Positive emotional expectations predict volunteer outcomes for new volunteers

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Abstract Emotional expectations are likely to influence behavioral outcomes, even when entering novel situations. In the present study, it was proposed that positive emotional expectations would influence volunteer outcomes for new volunteers. New and experienced volunteers were recruited for a two-part longitudinal study. Study hypotheses were confirmed. The mere anticipation of positive emotions was able to predict volunteer outcomes for new volunteers. Emotional expectations (i.e., sympathy, satisfaction) were positively associated with intentions to continue volunteering, identification with the volunteer role, and predicted volunteer persistence 6 months later for new volunteers. For experienced volunteers, emotional expectations were only significantly and positively associated with volunteer role identity. Moreover, the intent to persist as a volunteer was found to have a stronger positive association with actual persistence for experienced volunteers than for new volunteers.

Keywords Volunteerism · Expectations · Empathy · Sympathy · Positive emotion · Anticipation · Satisfaction

Introduction

Volunteerism positively impacts all involved, from the volunteer to society as a whole. In 2009, over 63 million people in the US volunteered some of their time to or on behalf of a charitable organization (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010), totaling roughly 169 billion dollars worth of labor (Corporation for National and Community Service 2010). The benefits to the volunteer are also substantial. Volunteering has been associated with enhanced positive feelings, academic and life skill development for adolescents (Astin et al. 1999), increased social networks (Omoto and Snyder 2002), greater life satisfaction, and improved physical and mental health (see Corporation for National and Community Service 2007; Omoto et al. 2008; Post 2007). Even given all the benefits people may receive from volunteering, the act itself comes with costs, such as the loss of time and money required to volunteer, or the potential to enter highly aversive or distressing situations.

Although the costs and benefits of volunteering may not be entirely clear to individuals, the decision to volunteer most likely involves the consideration of the two. The decision to volunteer is not spontaneous (e.g., Davis 2005; Penner 2002), but rather a process involving thoughtful consideration of the costs and benefits of volunteering that is influenced by individual differences (Davis et al. 1999). Consequently, the decision may be influenced by the emotional expectations for the volunteer experience, and the influence of these expectations may carry into the actual experience including the length of time spent as a volunteer. Emotional expectations in this case describe specific feeling states (i.e., sympathy, satisfaction, distress) that are likely to be experienced while volunteering in the near future.

The purpose of the current study is to examine how the specific emotional expectations of new volunteers affect volunteer outcomes, and volunteer persistence in particular. There is reason to believe that emotional expectations may have a greater influence on volunteer outcomes early on in the volunteer process than in later stages, after the individual has been exposed more fully to the volunteer experience

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within a particular organization. As such, it is likely that expectations about the situation affect their beliefs about future volunteering for individuals who are new to a volunteer organization. Furthermore, emotional expectations may affect how much people identify with the volunteer role, even before any actual volunteering takes place.

Volunteer expectations

The first few months of volunteering appear to show the highest incident in volunteer loss for an organization, making persistence of new volunteers exceptionally important (e.g., Davis et al. 2003; McCurley and Lynch 1996). However, much of the research to date on volunteer persistence has utilized a cross-sectional sample of volunteers with varying lengths of time involved as volunteers. Volunteering is a process that unfolds over time, with each prior stage influencing subsequent volunteer stages (e.g., Omoto and Snyder 1995, 2002). Factors prior to volunteering are likely to affect volunteer experiences and consequences from those experiences. For instance, new volunteers may be much different in the attitudes they hold about volunteering than continuing volunteers who have been volunteering for months or years. Volunteer motives, for example, are found to change over time (Omoto and Snyder 1995).

People who have recently entered into volunteering may be uncertain of what to expect, and as such could rely on their emotional expectations in order to make behavioral decisions. Davis et al. (1999) report two studies using non-volunteers testing whether emotional expectations (i.e., sympathy, satisfaction, distress) for a specific volunteer setting (e.g., working with abused children, picking up mail for a health clinic) contributed independently to the decision to volunteer in that setting. In Study 1 participants reported their hypothetical volunteer preference, whereas Study 2 participants were asked to select a volunteer activity to engage in for a 2-h period. In both studies, the authors did not find a direct relationship between sympathy or distress expectations and preference for a particular volunteer setting. However, satisfaction expectations significantly predicted preference for a volunteer setting. Moreover, a mediated path from sympathy expectations to situational preference was supported via satisfaction expectations.

Davis et al. (2003) expanded on these studies by following new volunteers to test the effect of empathic dispositions, and their manifested emotions (sympathy, distress, satisfaction) on volunteer involvement and persistence. Following volunteers from various organizations over their first year, the authors found little to no support for the path proposed from antecedents (i.e., dispositional empathic concern and personal distress) via experiences

(i.e., sympathy, distress, satisfaction), to consequences (i.e., volunteer involvement, persistence). In relation to the current study, however, the researchers focused on empathic dispositions prior to volunteering, rather than emotional expectations. Whether emotional expectations for a chosen volunteer activity influence volunteer persistence, or factors strongly related to persistence (such as behavioral intent and volunteer role identity) is still unknown.

Volunteer persistence: behavioral expectations and volunteer role identity

Existing psychological theories on rational choice seem well suited to understand volunteer persistence as a planned behavior. The theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1985, 1991), predict that the immediate determinant of a behavior is the intent of that individual to engage in the behavior. Within the context of volunteerism, the best predictor of sustained volunteering should be a volunteer's own intent to continue volunteering. A number of studies have supported behavioral intent as the best predictor of volunteer behaviors such as enrolling as a volunteer (Okun and Sloane 2002), engagement in volunteer activities (e.g., Harrison 1995; Warburton and Terry 2000; Greenslade and White 2005), and volunteer persistence (Chacón et al. 2007).

Researchers have also put great importance on a person's identification with the volunteer role in determining volunteer persistence. Penner (2002) suggests that the degree to which a person identifies with the role of volunteer is "the direct and proximal cause of sustained volunteerism" (p. 463), thus mediating the effects of other factors on sustained volunteering. The concept of a volunteer role identity (e.g., Callero et al. 1987; Piliavin and Callero 1991; Grube and Piliavin 2000), originates from Stryker's (1980) identity theory in which prolonged engagement in a particular role encourages its incorporation into one's identity. A greater identification with the volunteer role has been shown to lead to more hours per week spent volunteering and to persistence as a volunteer (e.g., Piliavin and Callero 1991; Penner and Finkelstein 1998; Grube and Piliavin 2000; Finkelstein et al. 2005).

Although both role identity and behavioral intentions serve as strong predictors of volunteer persistence, two studies suggest that behavioral intent is more closely tied to persistence. A study on youth volunteers found that the relationship between volunteer role identity and persistence was mediated by the intention to continue volunteering (Marta et al. 2005). More recently, Chacón et al. (2007) tested a three-stage model of volunteer persistence that places behavioral intent as a proximal predictor of engagement in a behavior. Following a group of social

work volunteers over a 1-year period, the best predictor of persistence over the year was the intent to persist as a volunteer followed by volunteer identity. Satisfaction with the volunteer experience indirectly related to persistence via behavioral intent. This study, however, did not focus on new volunteers having relatively little or no volunteer experience within the organization. Rather, the focus was on volunteers with as much as 8 months of volunteer experience, giving these individuals at least some experience as volunteers within the organization. For instance, the items tapping satisfaction related to satisfaction tied to volunteer experiences (e.g., task satisfaction, satisfaction with the organization). As such, their intentions are more likely based on actual experiences rather than the anticipated experiences of new volunteers. Nevertheless, both the intent to continue as a volunteer as well as identification as a volunteer are found to play a key role in sustained volunteering.

The current study

Volunteering is a planned behavior where individuals deliberately and intentionally decide to become volunteers (e.g., Omoto and Snyder 1995; Penner 2002). However, what predicts volunteer outcomes such as persistence may vary throughout the volunteer process. The following predictions consider the role of emotional expectations on volunteer outcomes for new volunteers.

During the initial stages of volunteering the volunteer is likely to have the least insight into the volunteer experience, and as such would have to rely on expectations to guide behavior. It was predicted that positive volunteer expectations would affect decisions made in later stages of the volunteer process, such as the intent to continue volunteering, for new volunteers. Specifically, it was hypothesized that positive volunteer expectations (expecting to feel sympathy and satisfaction when volunteering) would be positively correlated with the intent to continue volunteering for new volunteers ("Hypothesis 1"). Based on the work of Davis et al. (Davis et al. 1999) it was also predicted that volunteer expectations of satisfaction would mediate the relationship between volunteer expectations of sympathy and the intent to continue volunteering ("Hypothesis 1a").

Expectations may also impact the volunteer experience by positively influencing identification with the volunteer role. People are more likely to adopt a role when it is personally meaningful (Callero et al. 1987), and positive expectations for the role may be associated with identification as a volunteer. As such, it was expected that new volunteers would be more likely to integrate the role of volunteer into his or her identity when the emotional expectations for that role were positive, but not negative (e.g., expectations of distress; "Hypothesis 2").

Any intention to continue as a volunteer is more likely based on expectations for the volunteer experience than on "real" knowledge for new volunteers. Given this reasoning, it was hypothesized that positive volunteer expectations of sympathy and satisfaction would predict actual volunteer persistence for new volunteers but not for experienced volunteers ("Hypothesis 3"). On the other hand, it was expected that experienced volunteers are able to base their intentions to continue volunteering on actual experiences rather than on expectations, thus being better able to predict their future participation. As such, it was proposed that intent to persist as a volunteer would be more predictive of actual volunteer persistence for experienced volunteers than for new volunteers ("Hypothesis 4").

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 110 volunteers from campus-based volunteer programs at a northern California liberal arts college. Each volunteer program targeted different populations for services such as at-risk youth, retired adults, homeless families, and recent immigrants. The programs were structured under an umbrella organization that followed the academic calendar, such that volunteering commenced at the beginning of the academic year and paused for winter and summer breaks. The overall mean age was 22.08 years (SD = 4.08). The sample was predominantly women (75.8% women; 24.2% men). Most of the participants in the original sample were new volunteers to their respective volunteer program (n = 76). Forty-one percent of the total sample ($n = 45$) reported no previous volunteer experience at all before joining the organization. "Experienced volunteers" (i.e., volunteers returning from the previous academic year; $n = 34$) had volunteered from 1 to 7 semesters in their volunteer program (M = 2.06, SD = 1.46). A total of 64 (58%) of the original participants took part in a follow-up survey.

Volunteers were approached and recruited to in the study at orientation and training meetings, and before any specific volunteer programs had commenced for the academic year. They were asked to take part in a two-part longitudinal study regarding their experiences as volunteers by completing two questionnaires. The first questionnaire (Time 1) contained items regarding expectations for the volunteer, identification with the volunteer role, and intent to volunteer the following semester (6 months later). Six months after first contact (Time 2), participants were sent an email inviting them to participate in the second phase of the study. Embedded in the email was a link to take the second questionnaire. Participants were directed to follow the link to take the second

survey that asked volunteers if they were currently volunteering in the same organization.

Measures

Emotional expectations

At Time 1 participants rated the degree to which they anticipated experiencing *sympathy*, *compassion*, *distress*, *anxiety*, *enjoyment*, and *satisfaction* in relation to volunteering (taken from Davis et al. 1999). Responses ranged from 1 (*would not feel this way at all*) to 5 (*would feel this way very much*). Items were combined to form measures of Sympathy Expectations (*sympathy*, *compassion*: $r = .40$), Satisfaction Expectations (*satisfaction*, *enjoyment*: $r = .35$), and Distress Expectations (*anxiety*, *distress*: $r = .33$).

Role identity

Five items created by Callero et al. (1987) assessed the degree to which the volunteer role (specific to the volunteer organization) is part of the respondent's identity. Sample items for an organization (e.g., *Tutorial*) include: "Being a [*Tutorial*] volunteer is an important part of who I am," "I have no clear feelings about being a [*Tutorial*] volunteer" (reverse scored). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Coefficient alpha for this scale was .72.

Volunteer status

At Time 1, participants reported if they had previously volunteered for the current organization (yes/no), and if so for how long (in semesters). Those who responded "no" were classified as new volunteers, whereas those who responded "yes" were classified as experienced volunteers.

Prior volunteer experience

Participants reported if they had any organized volunteer experience before joining the current organization (yes/no).

Intent to persist

A single item at Time 1 asked participants the likelihood of their continued involvement as a volunteer in the following semester (0–100%).

Persistence

At Time 2, participants reported whether they were presently volunteering (yes/no). For those who answered "no," each reported how long after the semester began (i.e., Time 1) they ceased to volunteer. As the organization requires a commitment to volunteer for a semester-long period, the persistence measure coded those who ceased to volunteer as either -1 (immediate termination, $n = 11$) or 0 (end of commitment termination, $n = 13$). Those who were still volunteering at Time 2 were coded as 1.

Time constraints

The degree to which a volunteer had outside time constraints was measured by a number of items including the number of academic units (i.e., unit hours) currently enrolled ($M = 16.11$, SD $= 2.89$), number of hours per week currently working ($M = 9.38$, SD $= 10.98$), and the number of hours per week spent involved in other organizations and outside volunteer work ($M = 3.39$, SD $= 4.81$). A time constraint composite was created by averaging units, work, and time spent in outside organizations.

Results

Descriptive data

A total of 76 new volunteers and 34 experienced volunteers provided complete data for analysis at Time 1. Of the total sample, 41% reported no previous volunteer experience in or outside of the current organization ($n = 45$; 59% of new volunteers). Time 2 participation included 44 new volunteers and 22 experienced volunteers (from Time 1). With regard to persistence, 83% of respondents at Time 2 reported volunteering the entire fall semester (i.e., 3.5 months; $n = 55$). Those who did not volunteer the entire fall semester ($n = 11$) averaged a 51-day retention (SD $= 32.54$ days). Sixty four percent of the participants at Time 2 reported continued volunteering into the spring semester ($n = 42$) while 36% did not continue with the organization in the spring semester ($n = 24$).

Sample considerations

With study retention at 58% from Time 1 to Time 2, comparisons were made using Time 1 data between those who did and those who did not complete the Time 2 questionnaire. Mean scores in emotional expectations, intent to persist, and volunteer role identity were compared to see if any differences existed among those who participated in both parts of the study versus Time 1 participation only. *T* test comparisons found that means across the Time 1 variables did not differ statistically between the two groups. *T* test comparisons were also conducted to compare new and experienced volunteers across key measures at Time 1. New and experienced volunteers only differed on

Table 1 Descriptive data for new volunteers at time 1 ($n = 76$), and persistence at time 2 ($n = 42$)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Persistence (time 2)							
2. Intent to persist	75.40	20.83	.24*				
3. Role identity	4.85	1.14	.51**	.50***			
4. Sympathy expectation	4.13	.78	.31*	.21*	.37***		
5. Satisfaction expectation	4.53	.55	.41**	.28**	.44***	.29**	
6. Distress expectation	2.24	.81	.14	.09	−.07	.27**	−.17+

$^+$ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 Descriptive data for experienced volunteers at Time 1 ($n = 34$), and persistence at Time 2 ($n = 22$)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Persistence (time 2)							
2. Intent to persist	82.50	27.03	.41*				
3. Role identity	5.97	.89	.53**	.31*			
4. Sympathy expectation	3.94	.76	.01	−.14	.13		
5. Satisfaction expectation	4.60	.42	−.19	.06	.38**	.25*	
6. Distress expectation	2.12	.84	.25	−.01	−.04	.43**	−.12

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

mean volunteer role identity ratings ($t = -5.09$, $p < .001$), with experienced volunteers identifying to a greater extent with the volunteer role. Descriptive data and the inter correlations for the variables measured at Time 1 are given separately for new volunteers (see Table 1) and experienced volunteers (see Table 2).

Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses 1 and 1a

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test if emotional expectations were predictive of the intent to persist for new volunteers. This analysis revealed a significant regression equation after controlling for prior volunteer experience outside of the organization, F (3, 71) = 2.76, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .11$. Satisfaction ($\beta = .27$, $p = .03$) was a significant and unique predictor, but not sympathy ($\beta = .11$, ns) or distress expectations ($\beta = .11$,

ns). Whereas simple correlations show a significant relationship between both positive emotions and intent to persist (sympathy expectations, $r = .21$, $p < .05$; satisfaction expectations, $r = .28$, $p < .01$; but not distress expectations, $r = .09$, ns, see Table 1), regression analyses indicated expectations for satisfaction as the single unique predictor when emotional expectations were entered simultaneously.

Given the results of Davis et al. (1999), it was expected that satisfaction expectations would mediate the influence of sympathy expectations on the intent to persist for new volunteers ("Hypothesis 1a"). Mediation analyses were conducted following Baron and Kenny's (1986) process to test the significance of a reduction in direct effects when adding a third (i.e., mediating) variable to regression analyses. In this case, analyses tested whether the direct effects between sympathy expectations and the intent to persist for new volunteers were reduced with the addition of satisfaction expectations as a mediating variable. Positive correlations were confirmed between the three variables for new volunteers (see Table 2). Satisfaction expectations were significantly correlated with intent to persist while controlling for sympathy expectations ($\Delta R^2 = .05$, $p < .05$), whereas sympathy expectations were no longer correlated with intent to persist when controlling for satisfaction expectations ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p = .22$). A Sobel test confirmed that the reduction in variance was marginally significant ($z = 1.82$, $p = .07$). Full mediation was also supported, the relationship between sympathy expectations and intent to persist dropped to non-significance once satisfaction expectations were taken into account (see Table 3).

Although many of the hypotheses were made specifically for new volunteers, the following analyses were conducted in order to note if the relationships predicted also applied to experienced volunteers. Since returning volunteers varied in the amount of time volunteering in the current organization, this effect was controlled for in the first step of the regression. For returning volunteers, the overall regression equation testing the role of emotional expectations and volunteer intent was not significant after

Table 3 Satisfaction expectations as a mediator between sympathy expectations and intent to persist for new volunteers ($n = 76$)

	B	SE B	β
Step 1:			
Sympathy expectations	5.88	2.99	.22*
Step 2:			
Sympathy expectations	3.93	3.06	.15
Satisfaction expectations	9.16	4.34	.24*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

controlling for length of time within the organization, $F (3, 29) = .70$, ns, $R^2 = .07$. No emotional expectation reached significance within the model ($\beta s = -.20$ through $.20$, ns). Moreover, simple correlations did not indicate any significant relationship between positive or negative volunteer expectations and the intent to persist among experienced volunteers (sympathy expectations, $r = -.14$, ns; satisfaction expectations, $r = .06$, ns; distress expectations, $r = -.01$, ns). Mediation analyses for experienced volunteers failed to meet initial steps of the mediation analysis for returning volunteers.

In sum, positive emotional expectations, but not negative emotional expectations, were positively related to the intent to continue volunteering for new volunteers, but not for experienced volunteers. In addition, the relationship between sympathy expectations and the intent to persist was mediated by satisfaction expectations for new volunteers.

Hypothesis 2

Simple correlations indicated a positive relationship between positive emotional expectations and identification with the volunteer role (sympathy expectations, $r = .37$, $p < .001$; satisfaction expectations, $r = .44$, $p < .001$) but not negative emotional expectations (distress expectations, $r = -.07$, ns) for new volunteers. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test that positive emotional expectations would be positively related to identification with the volunteer role for new volunteers after controlling for prior volunteer experience. This analysis revealed a significant overall regression equation with all three emotional expectations after controlling for prior volunteer experience, $F (3, 71) = 9.11$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .28$. Both sympathy expectations ($\beta = .31$, $p = .008$) and satisfaction expectations ($\beta = .35$, $p = .002$) were significant and unique predictors of the role identity, but not distress expectations ($\beta = -.07$, ns). Adding intent to persist significantly added to the overall regression equation, $\Delta R^2 = .16$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .43$. Sympathy and satisfaction expectations remained significant predictors after intent was entered in the model ($\beta = .26$, $p = .01$, $\beta = .24$, $p = .02$, respectively).

For returning volunteers, simple correlations indicate a significant and positive relationship for satisfaction expectations and role identity ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), but not for sympathy expectations ($r = .13$, ns) or distress expectations ($r = -.04$, ns). A hierarchical regression model controlling length of time in the organization was not significant, $F (3, 29) = 1.75$, ns, $R^2 = .14$. No emotional expectation reached significance within the model ($\beta = -.08$ through $.33$, ns). However, adding intent to persist resulted in a significant regression equation $F (5, 28) =$ 2.76, $p = .04$, $\Delta R^2 = .13$, $p = .03$, $\beta = .37$. Emotional expectations were not affected by entering intent to persist.

Hypothesis 3 and 4

The final set of analyses investigated whether differences in the relationships among the key variables at Time 1 predicted actual volunteer persistence using data from Time 2. It was proposed that volunteer persistence at Time 2 would be positively associated with positive emotional expectations for new volunteers ("Hypothesis 3") and with the intent to continue volunteering for experienced volunteers ("Hypothesis 4"). Two separate hierarchical regression analyses for new and experienced volunteers were conducted testing the role of emotional expectations and intent to persist as a volunteer (Time 1) on volunteer persistence at Time 2. For new volunteers, step 1 controlled for prior volunteer experience and additional time constraints from Time 1 to Time 2. For returning volunteers, step 1 controlled for length of time in the organization and additional time constraints from Time 1 to Time 2. Emotional expectations (sympathy, satisfaction, distress) were entered in the second step, followed by intent to persist and volunteer role identity in the third step of the equation for both groups.

For new volunteers, the overall model including emotional expectations and control factors was significant, $F (5, 33) = 4.38$, $p = .004$, $R^2 = .40$. Entering intent to persist and role identity did not significantly add to the overall regression equation, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, ns. In the final model, satisfaction was the only significant unique predictor of persistence ($\beta = .36$, $p = .03$). For returning volunteers, the overall regression equation containing emotional expectations and control factors was not significant, $F (5, 15) = .29$, ns, $R^2 = .09$. However, entering intent to persist and role identity significantly added to the overall regression equation, $\Delta R^2 = .49$, $p = .006$. For returning volunteers, role identity was the only significant predictor of persistence within the final model ($\beta = .60$, $p = .008$).

Discussion

The current study found support for the notion that positive emotional expectations for the volunteer experience influence volunteer outcomes for new volunteers. The emotional expectations of new volunteers were found to have a positive relationship to the intent to continue volunteering and to actual volunteer persistence. In addition, the results suggest that emotional expectations are positively related to identification with the volunteer role prior to any actual volunteering taking place. Although experienced

volunteers were found to have similar relationships between positive emotional expectations and volunteer outcomes, the observed relationships did not hold as strongly as for new volunteers.

These results indicated that the emotional expectations of new volunteers influence volunteer outcomes, particularly the anticipation of satisfaction from volunteering. Prior to volunteering, factors such as personality, motivation, and demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity) have been used to note how individual differences affect the decision to volunteer. These results suggest that expectations formed prior to volunteering may also carry into later stages of the volunteer process to affect volunteer outcomes. Expectations that are formed prior to direct volunteer experience may affect both the belief that they will continue to volunteer and how much they identify as a volunteer. Notably it was a volunteer's expectations for satisfaction, rather than expectations for sympathy, that were more strongly related to the observed volunteer outcomes. This finding is in line with previous research observing satisfaction predicting volunteer persistence (e.g., Finkelstein 2008; Omoto and Snyder 1995; Penner and Finkelstein 1998), although some find an association with hours volunteered but not persistence (Davis et al. 2003; Finkelstein et al. 2005). This study shows that the mere anticipation of satisfaction from volunteering, regardless of prior experience or behavioral intent, will result in greater persistence for new volunteers. It should be noted that satisfaction in this study is prospective, tapping into beliefs volunteers have about future engagement. Satisfaction in the volunteerism research has been largely treated as retrospective, focusing on satisfaction felt with the volunteer experiences, organization, or the satisfaction of volunteer motives. Although this difference may add to the existing inconsistencies in the assessment of satisfaction in the volunteerism literature (e.g., Chacón et al. 2007), prospective satisfaction may provide a more complete picture of the factors influencing persistence.

In line with previous research (e.g., Chacón et al. 2007; Marta et al. 2005), the single best predictor of volunteer persistence for experienced volunteers was the intent to persist. This relationship was not observed for new volunteers. It is possible that this result is due to the differences in knowledge regarding the situation. New volunteers may base their behavioral expectations (i.e., intent to persist) on their emotional expectations (i.e., sympathy, satisfaction) more so than experienced volunteers. This is not to say that new and experienced volunteers have substantially different emotional expectations. The emotional expectations of new volunteers were not found to differ from those of experienced volunteers.

That emotional expectations were also positively associated with volunteer role identity for new volunteers goes slightly against the notion that volunteer identities are formed throughout the volunteer experience. However, findings from Serpe and Stryker (1987) indicate that college students join organizations when their expected roles in the organization are in tune with their previously held identities. Some volunteers may come into the volunteer context with a predisposition that encourages adopting the volunteer identity. In this study, it was hypothesized that volunteer expectations impact early identification with volunteering. It should be noted that the volunteer role identity is one that is inherently chosen, and perhaps repeatedly chosen given the fact that most volunteers can cease volunteering at any point in time. Thus, the decision to become a volunteer is inseparable from the integration of the volunteer identity to the self. Moreover, salient identities may serve as cognitive schemas, affecting the interpretation of situations and guiding behavior (Stryker and Burke 2000). In the case of volunteering, there may be the belief that volunteers are other-oriented individuals, or empathetic toward those they help. These individuals may then expect to be more sympathetic or more satisfied within the volunteer context as compared to others who do not carry these particular beliefs about volunteers.

The first few months of volunteering may serve as a shaking out process where external variables (e.g., time conflicts), and not individual factors, have the most effect on volunteer persistence (e.g., Davis 2005). This was not the case in this study. Most (58%) participants who did not continue volunteering mentioned school, work, or involvement in other organizations as leaving little time for volunteering. However, controlling for change in constraint appeared to have no impact on the relationships observed. Moreover, post-hoc analyses found no relationship between volunteer persistence and time constraints at Time 1 ($r = -.06$, ns), or Time 2 ($r = -.08$, ns), or with an increase in these time constraints from Time 1 to Time 2 ($r = -.07$, ns).

Strengths and limitations

The present study was limited in many respects. The analyses pertaining to actual persistence were conducted using small sample sizes, thereby reducing the statistical power needed to examine some of the hypothesized relationships. Further, because this was ultimately a correlational study, drawing causal conclusions about the relationships between key variables was not possible, especially analyses focused on Time 1. Future studies will need to address whether it is positive emotional

expectations that lead to initial identification with the volunteer role and not vice versa.

In light of the limitations, this study had several strengths. Whereas volunteerism studies tend to recruit from only one volunteer organization, there were a variety of programs within the present study targeting different populations. Moreover, the population sampled seemed very useful for this study because, in contrast to traditional volunteering, there were clear points at which volunteers began, committed to work as volunteers, and deliberately decided to return as volunteers (i.e., between academic semesters). Recruitment and initial participation in the study occurred as the campus-based programs began volunteer recruitment. The follow-up portion of the study occurred as most participants had made the decision of whether or not to continue volunteering into the following semester. Finally, this study used a sample of young volunteers, many of which had no previous volunteer experience anywhere prior to this study. Having no prior history, these participants had no prior volunteer experiences to base their emotional expectations for the volunteering observed in this study.

Conclusion

The initial months of volunteering can be the most fragile time for volunteer sustainability. Individuals are determining whether there is a fit between what they expected from a volunteer experience and the experience itself, and whether the benefits of volunteering are worth the costs. This study suggests some strategies volunteer organizations may use to increase volunteer sustainability at this sensitive time. Early on, volunteer organizations may emphasize the various positive experiences that volunteerism can offer, perhaps allowing experienced volunteers to share their positive emotional experiences as volunteers. Organizations may also advise their leadership to encourage new volunteers to become involved in aspects of the organization that lead to satisfying and positive emotional experiences early in the volunteer experience.

Extending scientific knowledge of factors influencing persistence can assist in alleviating high turnover rates for volunteer organizations. A significant investment is made in the recruitment, screening, and training of each volunteer. High turnover disrupts the stability of the organization due to the loss of resources and, in some organizations, by the loss of the relationship developed between client and volunteer. With this and future research, volunteer organizations will be better equipped to provide experiences that nurture and prolong the volunteer experience.

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