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Paper Title: Measuring Volunteering: A Behavioral Approach

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Summary of Research

This study examines the study of volunteering from two perspectives. One is the traditional perceptual approach in which respondents are asked if they volunteer. The other is a behavioral approach in which respondents are asked if they performed specific behaviors that are considered to be volunteering behaviors. The results suggest that there is a significant and substantial difference in classifying people as volunteers between these two approaches. This paper presents these methodologies, their differences, and suggestions for how future studies of volunteering should be conducted.

Description

In the late 1980s, Independent Sector (IS) began its ground-breaking studies of giving and volunteering using a national sample of adults (and teens in separate studies). The initial studies were conducted for using an in-home interview methodology, while the later studies changed to a phone interviews (Independent Sector, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001). The change from in-house, personal interviews to phone interviews necessitated changes in the content of questions pertaining to volunteering.

In the early studies, the interviewer handed the respondent a card to read, asking him/her to indicate what things he/she had actually done, a behavioral approach to studying volunteering. When IS was forced, for financial reasons, to move to a phone-based interview methodology, the questions pertaining to volunteering were changed to a perceptual framework in which people were asked if they volunteered. This methodology, asking people if they volunteered, was mimicked by other researchers studying volunteering, continuing today.

The core problem in this methodology is that the answer to that question, do you volunteer, is totally dependent on each respondent's personal definition of what volunteering is. You might consider coaching on your child's team a volunteer activity while some other parent may not. We know this is true from the BLS Volunteering Supplement to the Current Population Survey. The author of this paper was the only non-government person to advise BLS on how to phrase questions on their study instrument. The author was only minimally successful in getting them to agree that there were shortcomings to asking this standard perceptual question, do you volunteer. BLS agreed, and hence added to their survey, a follow-on question to be asked of people who said they did not volunteer. In this follow-up question, "non-volunteering" respondents were prompted to recall certain behaviors such as coaching, tutoring, or mentoring as being included in volunteering behavior. When prompted, a significant number who said they did not volunteer were in fact volunteers, leading to an increase in the overall volunteering rate of about 8 percentage points.

The movement to using behavioral questions for studying perceptual concepts has recently been championed by CIRCLE at the University of Maryland in their Indicators of Civic Engagement (CIRCLE, 2002, 2004). In this data collection instrument, while they continue to ask about volunteering using the perceptual approach, they began asking about political engagement using a behavioral approach: Did you wear a political button? Did you have a sign in your yard?

The difference in this approach is critical. In the first, the perceptual approach, the researcher is dependent on each respondent's individual definition of volunteering in framing the response to the question. In the second, experts in the field have defined the behaviors that entail political engagement and classify respondents as being engaged if they perform those behaviors.

The author of this paper currently is leading a new study of volunteering and civic engagement of teenagers aged 12- 18. Using a survey instrument he designed, the author is asking about volunteering in two ways on the same survey instrument. The first way duplicates how BLS asks about volunteering with the same two questions, do you volunteer and if not, do you mentor, etc. The second, asked of all respondents, asks four behavioral questions: Did you tutor, mentor...; aid the clergy, participate in a choir...; helped people in places like hospitals, nursing homes, shelters...; work[ed] for a community improvement organization, environmental or animal welfare organization...

This is the first time the behavioral approach to studying volunteering has been studied head-to-head with the traditional perceptual approach. The preliminary results indicate that about 1/3 of the respondents could be classified as volunteers based on the standard perceptual questions, while about 2/3 actually performed behaviors that are considered volunteering. That is, there is a significant and substantial difference in the percentage of people who are classified as being volunteers when the approach to its study is changed from perceptual to behavioral. This paper will present the results of this study and make recommendations for how future studies of volunteering should be conducted.

Bibliography

Independent Sector, Giving and Volunteering in the United States, various years, Washington, DC

CIRCLE, www.circle.org