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A Phenomenological Look at 4-H Volunteer Motives for Service

Abstract

Volunteers play a vital role in 4-H programs. Without their service, many programs would not be possible. Understanding volunteer motives provides Extension educators with tools for finding high-quality volunteers. The research reported here used McClelland's (1985) framework for motivation (affiliation, achievement, and power) and phenomenological research design to discover what motivates volunteers to serve as leaders for a 4-H club. The findings support McClelland's description of the need for affiliation and achievement. It is recommended that Extension volunteer leaders select volunteers that exhibit a high need for affiliation and achievement to serve the 4-H organization.

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Introduction

Extension programs, including 4-H, rely on volunteers for programming and would be hard-pressed to survive without them (White & Arnold, 2003). Because volunteers are critical to organizational operations, it's important to understand what motivates them to donate their time and effort from a theoretical and empirical perspective (Culp III, 1997).

Volunteer motivation has been studied extensively. The majority of findings conclude that volunteers are driven by a need for affiliation and achievement; however, few studies have identified the *essence* of volunteer motives from a phenomenological perspective. The research reported here, which was underpinned by McClelland's (1985) theory of motivation, collected empirical evidence to reveal the essence of volunteering using a phenomenological research design.

Henderson (1981) found that volunteers were motivated more by affiliation than achievement. Fritz, Karmazin, Barbuto, and Burrow (2003) examined the different motivators between rural and urban volunteers and determined that both groups were equally motivated by affiliation. Rohs, Stribling, and Westerfield (2002) examined the reasons individuals participated in the Master Gardener program and found status and belonging to the organization as primary motivators. Rouse and Clawson (1992) studied motives of mature volunteers and concluded achievement and affiliation were most important to this group as well.

Schmiesing, Soder, and Russell (2005), using the Clary et al. (1998) framework to examine the sources of motivation for adults who volunteered with a youth literacy program, found volunteers were motivated by altruistic values. Smith and Finley (2004) examined the reasons individuals volunteer for programs in natural resources and forestry, and reported adults were interested in outdoor activities and working with youth. Vetter, Hall, and Schmidt (2009) examined motivations of rural volunteers by generation; Millennials were motivated by achievement and recognition. White and Arnold (2003) researched why volunteers were attracted to programs, why they stayed, and why they left. They concluded that volunteers came because it would make a difference in a young person's life and that they left because their child was no longer in 4-H. All these studies support McClelland's theory of motivation, which claims people are driven by the need for power, achievement, and affiliation.

Theoretical Framework

McClelland (1985) identified three motivations for human behavior, including the need for achievement, affiliation, and power. A person is driven to fulfill their strongest need. However, there can be interaction between the three needs that affect a person's behavior.

The achievement need is driven by an individual's "desire to accomplish goals, grow through challenges, and to improve one's self" (Connors, 1995, p. 26). Individuals driven by achievement often set goals they know they can reach.

The need for affiliation is broken into two sub-categories: affiliation and intimacy. People who are driven by the need for affiliation gravitate toward social relationships, enjoy talking with other people, and prefer to work with friends over content experts when working in teams. People with the affiliation need are often perceived as seeking other's approval, enthusiastic, and expressive. The need for intimacy is "the desire to form meaningful relationships where psychological growth results, and where a feeling of commitment and concern for another develops" (Connors, 1995, p. 28), resulting in a need to build deep relationships with others.

The need for power is motivated by the desire for influence and authority. A desire for power itself is neutral; however, one's expression of it may result in positive or negative outcomes. McClelland (1985) proposed that because of cultural norms, some individuals seek power through prestige.

Purpose of the Study

A 4-H program was established fall 2010 at a land-grant university to provide opportunities for Agricultural and Extension Education degree-seeking undergraduates to practice managing a 4-H club and to serve on-campus families. Undergraduate students volunteered to establish and maintain the club. In order to continue recruiting and retaining high quality volunteers, the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of the *essence* of volunteer motives using McClelland's theory of motivation as the theoretical foundation for the study.

Methodology

The researchers used an empirical phenomenological research design to execute the study (Moustakas, 1994). This design allowed the researchers to focus on the *essence* of volunteer motives

as described by three participants during a 1-hour, face-to-face semi-structured interview. Additional data included detailed notes from observations of club meetings and activities. The participants were chosen purposively from a group of 20 student-volunteers who exhibited a high time commitment to planning and executing 4-H activities.

A critical step in conducting a phenomenological study is to practice epoché, a process of setting aside or *bracketing* "prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). The researchers kept a reflexive journal throughout the study to address bias. During the phenomenological reduction phase, observations in relationship to participants' experience of volunteering were described. During the analysis, the data were coded and clustered into themes to paint a portrait of the essence of volunteer motives for service.

Imaginative variation, a process whereby the researcher "seeks possible meaning through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97) was employed by looking at volunteer motives from the researcher's perspective as the group leader as well as the child's experience as a 4-H club member working with the volunteers. These frames helped lead to the final stage of describing the essence of the experience. Husserl (1931) described *essence* as what is "common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is" (p. 43). The essence is never fully described from all views; however, it can be synthesized by the researcher from analysis of the data in relationship to the literature and the context of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations for the Conduct of Qualitative Research

Tracy (2010) outlined several ethical considerations to ensure the protection of human subjects and to enhance the rigor of the study. *Sincerity* was addressed through self-reflexivity, vulnerability of subjects, honesty, transparency, and data auditing. Self-reflexivity allowed the researchers to be cognizant of all interactions with the volunteers during the interview and club meetings. The volunteers were encouraged to be open and honest about their experiences, both positive and negative, that would assist in understanding its essence. Detailed notes were kept during the interviews for *transparency*. All interviews were transcribed verbatim from the digital recordings for *accuracy*. In reporting the findings, participant quotes were used to support findings and to add contextual richness to the data (Table 1). Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Creswell and Miller (2000) describe *peer debriefing* as "review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or phenomenon being explored" (p. 129). The researchers participated in peer debriefing with seven other agricultural education experts over a 15-week period to reflect on methodological rigor.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and interpreted with McClelland's (1985) framework for volunteer motives in mind. During the interpretation, coded text was analyzed according to Moustakas' (1994) guidelines, including grouping relevant codes together and looking for critical expressions that define themes. The participants were asked to review interpretations for accuracy, a process known as *member checking* (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The themes were then examined to

construct an essence of volunteer motives.

Findings

The essence of volunteer service emerged in the form of five distinct themes detailed in Table 1 and include 1) a deep need to serve others driven by achievement, 2) the effects of parents on feelings toward volunteerism driven by affiliation, 3) a desire to emulate others driven by affiliation, 4) the experience of volunteering itself driven by achievement, and 5) the impact of volunteering on future opportunities driven by achievement. The essence of each theme is supported by quotes from the participants. The need for power was not found in the research reported here.

Table 1.
Themes and Essence in Relationship to McClelland's (1985) Three Sources of Motivation

Theme	Essence	McClelland's Three Sources of Motivation
1. A deep need to serve others	Was a worthy use of time and a desire to serve others	Achievement - Challenge self to grow as a person.
	Sue - "Being able to use our time to serve a greater good."	
	Steve - "Being able to help someone is one of the biggest things for volunteering."	
	Lance - "As a former agricultural education teacher, I wanted to continue to help others."	
2. The effect of parents on feelings toward volunteerism	Major influences included parents and the church	Intimacy - Desire to develop similar relationships parents had in the community.
	Steve - "My parents have always been involved in different organizations, especially youth groups. My dad is the youth minister in my church and my mom assists in that."	
	Sue - "It was my mom, any time she knew of an opportunity when I was younger, she enrolled me. She was probably the one who initiated it, saying we could always do something for someone else"	
3. A desire to emulate others	Sue - Expressed a desire to be like a woman in her community who was constantly giving back to the community. "Your school class is putting on a play and dinner and you needed an extra	Affiliation - The desire to be similar to role models.

	hand, she didn't wait to be asked.	
	Steve - "There was a man I wanted to be like because he took care of business and was able to help people. He also made them feel good about it."	
4. The experience of volunteering	Steve - "The experience of helping someone else because you never know how that could come back tenfold."	Achievement - The desire to grow as a person and help others grow as well
	Suzy - "The best time is when you see somebody else that you know doing it or you want to lead someone else into doing it."	
	Lance - "Kids [need adult support] and any way that I can help them I am going to. When I see them understand something new, it makes me feel like I have made a difference."	
5. The impact of volunteering on future opportunities	Steve - "I will continue because I will be around the same community that I am in now and I know that I won't stop volunteering and putting myself out there to help other people."	Achievement - Desire to see growth in self and future families
	Suzy - "I am going to get my kids involved and do what I can through their activities. There's just no if and or buts about it."	

Conclusions

Five themes emerged to explain why three college-aged students volunteered for a 4-H club. The themes were 1) a deep need to serve others, 2) the effect of parents on feelings toward volunteerism, 3) a desire to emulate others, 4) the experience of volunteering, and 5) the impact of volunteering on future opportunities.

According to McClelland's theory of motivation (1985), all three volunteers were driven by the need for achievement and affiliation. This finding is concurrent with other studies. Henderson (1981) found most volunteers were driven by affiliation and then achievement. However, unmarried volunteers were more likely to be driven by achievement. All three volunteers in the research reported here were single and childless, and were driven by the need to form an attachment to the 4-H youth. Attachment can be explained as a need for affiliation (Fritz, Karmazin, Baruto, & Burrow, 2003).

Clary et al. (1998, p. 1,517) described one function of volunteering as a need for "individuals to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others." Altruistic concerns were noted in the volunteers in the study, who talked about a feeling of achievement after volunteering.

The participants also reported that it was important to make an impact. In addition, altruistic

behavior was attributed to the influence of their parents, who taught them that it was important to be active members of their communities. This lesson carried over into young adulthood, similar to the findings of Rohs (1986) and Smith and Finley (2004). Each volunteer had a person that he or she desired to emulate as well. The role model exhibited Clary et al.'s notion of values toward volunteerism.

The participants planned to continue volunteering after they left college. White and Arnold (2003) indicated that time demand increases can cause 4-H volunteers to quit. However, one participant (Suzy) was motivated to continue her service even as a wife and mother. On the other hand, Steve was aware that he might need to reduce volunteering due to his career and personal life.

The themes presented here suggest that the essence of volunteering lies in the need to fulfill two needs, affiliation and achievement, as manifested in the need to make a difference in others' lives and to participate in work that serves a higher purpose. The experience of volunteering motivated the participants to continue this activity, in part due to parental influence, commitment to community, and service to others.

The findings of the study reported here are limited to the three participants, and no generalizations are implied. However, phenomenological research encourages analytical transference of the essence of why young adults volunteer when similar situations are present.

Implications for Practice

Extension educators are responsible for selecting and training volunteers and spend a great deal of time and effort doing so; thus, it's important to select the right people (Culp III, 1997) and to have an understanding of what qualities will lead to long-term and productive service (Smith & Finley, 2004). Using McClelland's theory of motivation, the volunteer traits identified as most productive were influenced by the need for achievement followed closely by affiliation.

Vettern, Hall, and Schmidt (2009) proposed that volunteer managers select volunteers based on observation of volunteers for their need to have fun and feel needed. To find volunteers:

- Set up an activity for volunteer to participate in that is fun and interesting to them.
- Observe their interactions to note if they are interested in helping others.
- Talk with them to determine if affiliation and/or achievement needs can be met through the volunteer opportunity provided.

These steps will allow volunteer managers to understand volunteers' motives and needs, leading to reduced volunteer attrition and stronger programs through committed personnel. Understanding the motivations of the volunteers who participate can allow the educators to effectively communicate with their volunteers. Communication allows the volunteers to feel part of the 4-H experience and keeps their interest longer in the program. The volunteers in the study reported here were achievement motivated. To reach this group, an educator should recognize that volunteers are looking for growth in themselves and in the 4-H members they serve. It is important to provide

volunteers with training and support to allow them to continue to grow, achieve, and serve their communities.

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