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VOLUNTEERISM

Volunteerism refers to a broad range of activities that benefit another person, group, or cause and that are carried out by individuals by their own choice and without pay. Individuals engaged in volunteerism are referred to as *volunteers*. Examples of volunteerism include serving on the board of a museum, organizing a protest meeting against environmental pollution, preparing food in a soup kitchen, caring for the elderly in a nursing home, looking after pets or mail for a neighbor, and the donation of blood at a blood center. However, also more controversial activities like distributing flyers for an extremist political party and providing shelter to illegal immigrants may qualify as examples of volunteerism.

A common distinction is made between *formal* and *informal* volunteerism. Formal volunteerism is carried out in an organization, usually a nonprofit organization. Informal volunteerism is not carried out in an organization and usually benefits specific individuals or groups with whom the volunteer has personal connections. Informal volunteerism is also called *social support* or *helping behavior*. Informal volunteerism that benefits colleagues or one's employer is called *organizational citizenship behavior*.

In sociology and political science volunteerism is considered a form of civic engagement and an expression of cohesion or social capital in society (Putnam 2000). Formal volunteerism has received more attention in these disciplines than informal volunteerism, although the two are related empirically (Wilson and Musick 1997). The

focus on formal volunteerism is apparent in the frequent measurement of engagement in voluntary associations in general household surveys. These surveys contain lists of types of organizations, for each of which the respondent answers to what extent he or she is engaged in the organization (not engaged, passive member, active member, volunteer). In some household surveys respondents report the frequency of informal helping behaviors. Informal volunteerism is commonly measured in questionnaires on social support networks. Respondents indicate whether they have people (“alters”) available to them with whom they discuss important matters (emotional support) or who can assist them in practical matters like small repairs (practical support).

Volunteerism is more common among married persons, whites, the middle-aged and elderly, the higher educated, more frequent church attendees, rural residents, children of volunteers, and extraverted persons (Bekkers 2005, 2007; Penner et al. 2005; Putnam 2000; Wilson 2000). Differences between whites and blacks differ from study to study (contrasting findings in Wilson and Musick 1997 and Carson 1987). Among other things, volunteerism is more common among the higher educated because they have more civic skills, more knowledge, and a stronger feeling of efficacy (Brady et al. 1995; Nie et al. 1996). Individuals with more civic skills and knowledge are more able to understand arguments, to express their views, and to convince others. These are useful qualities that lower the cost and increase the expected benefit of volunteerism. Individuals with a stronger feeling of efficacy are more likely to think their volunteerism makes a difference for the beneficiary of their volunteerism, which increases its expected benefit. Formal volunteerism in turn enhances civic skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy. Beyond paid work, voluntary associations are an important context in which people gain experience in organizing meetings, learn to understand others, and gain confidence in their abilities.

Volunteerism is also linked with a variety of other benefits. Volunteers are known to live longer and to be healthier in old age than nonvolunteers. In addition volunteerism contributes to mental health and may contribute to success in paid labor in the long run (Penner et al. 2005; Wilson and Musick 2000). At the macro level voluntary associations strengthen civil society and democracy (Putnam 2000).

Because of these benefits, schools increasingly include service learning and community service programs in their curricula. Completing a service learning program, which itself is usually not a form of volunteerism because it is obligatory, may promote civic skills and volunteerism in the future, depending on several characteristics of the program. More beneficial programs have a moderate level of

freedom for pupils in selecting service activities, require a higher level of reflection from pupils, and are supervised by more enthusiastic teachers (Metz and Youniss 2005). Voluntary programs do not have more beneficial effects than required programs (Schmidt et al. 2006). Voluntary programs draw an audience that consists mostly of young people with a social background that facilitates volunteerism: parents volunteer themselves, are religious, and have higher socioeconomic status (Metz and Youniss 2005). Given that required service learning programs also have beneficial effects among youths from less-favorable backgrounds and perhaps even more so than among youths from advantageous backgrounds, required service learning programs may reduce social inequality in volunteerism and civic engagement in the long run.

SEE ALSO *Altruism; Altruism and Prosocial Behavior; Associations, Voluntary; Civil Society; Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs); Philanthropy; Prevention Science; Putnam, Robert; Social Capital; Verba, Sidney; Volunteer Programs*

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René Bekkers

VON NEUMANN, JOHN 1903–1957

John von Neumann (born December 28, 1903 in Hungary, died February 8, 1957 in Washington, D.C.) was a versatile scholar whose path-breaking ideas have enriched various disciplines. In social sciences his contributions to game theory, economic growth, and consumers' choice are of special importance.

Von Neumann's talents showed up early, and outstanding mathematicians tutored him individually. In 1923 he entered MSc chemistry studies in Zürich and at the same time studied for a doctoral degree in mathematics in Budapest. In 1926 and 1927, as an assistant to David Hilbert in Göttingen, he laid down the axiomatic foundations of quantum mechanics. His reputation grew rapidly, and he was invited to several universities. He visited Princeton University first in 1929 and became a professor of mathematics at its Institute for Advanced Study in 1933. He became a leading expert on shock and detonation waves, which became significant during World War II (1939–1945), when von Neumann became involved in important projects such as the Manhattan Project. It was mainly the complex nonlinear problems that emerged in these projects that made him realize the importance of computers, and he made key contributions to formulating the basic principles of computer science.

Von Neumann made major scientific contributions to the social sciences as well. As always, he was interested in comprehensive structures, and focused on the core problems in the field. He was the first to prove the existence of equilibrium for two-person zero-sum games in 1928, based on his famous minimax theorem. Using a similar mathematical structure he formulated a multisectoral model of balanced economic growth (first presented in 1932), which was a brilliant mathematical synthesis of some classical ideas concerning the production and price proportions of economic equilibrium. He was the first to employ a fixed-point theorem in the proof of existence of competitive equilibrium, on the one hand, and an explicit duality approach, recognizing the symmetry of the conditions that characterize the choice of optimal activities and the equilibrium price system sustaining it under the conditions of a competitive equilibrium, on the other. His model allows for different theoretical interpretations (classical, Marxist, neoclassical, etc.) indicating its general nature.

Although his model was a prototype of the highly abstract models used in modern economics, he cautioned often against the potential deterioration of such an approach into intellectual games. He saw this danger threatening not only the development of economics but also mathematics itself. He repeatedly criticized economists for not using more appropriate mathematics, and he emphasized the need for more comprehensive tools than those borrowed from classical physics.

Von Neumann set an excellent example for such a novel approach in his work with Oskar Morgenstern on game theory. In their book, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), they laid down the foundations of modern game theory and initiated a new discipline almost from scratch. It was in this connection that they developed the axiomatic theory of expected utility, which states that under certain conditions the preferences of a rational individual can be represented by a function of the expected utility form. The use of the von Neumann–Morgenstern expected utility function became universal in economics because it is analytically very convenient and its normative character may provide a valuable guide to rational actions. Although he dived only briefly into its domain, von Neumann's tremendous influence on the development of modern economics has been widely acknowledged.

SEE ALSO *Game Theory; Neoclassical Growth Model; Optimal Growth; Utility, Von Neumann-Morgenstern*

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VOODOO

SEE *Vodou*.

VOTE, ALTERNATIVE

The alternative vote is an electoral method wherein voters rank candidates, and the winner is determined by a sequential count in which the weakest candidate is repeatedly eliminated until one candidate has secured a major-