

Exploring Motivation for Service and Volunteerism

Instructor Notes

Student learning objectives:

- Students will identify motives for volunteerism and service using the Common Book, *Little Princes*, as a guide.
- Students will identify ways that motives, perspectives, and context might influence how volunteer work manifests.
- Students will explore their own motives for service and their connections to communities and issues of social justice.

In the discussion guide that follows, excerpts from *Little Princes* and outside material are used to explore the fundamental reasons that humans participate in service and volunteering. The activities are framed using theory and empirical research, but this content is not presented as part of the discussion guide. So that instructors are aware of the framework used in the design of this material, a brief summary is provided for two approaches that may inform the discussion:

⌘ Yeung's Octagonal Model of Volunteer Motivation (2004) attempts to explain the reasons that people volunteer in terms of four dimensions that interact in various ways depending on individual and contextual characteristics. The four dimensions each represent a continuum that describes tensions related to motivation.

They are:

1. Getting-Giving: Is service an altruistic or egoistic act?
2. Action-Thought: Is service fulfilling a need to “do something” or is it a value-driven act?
3. Newness-Continuity: Is service fulfilling a desire to try something new or is it a habit that fulfills a need for consistency?
4. Distance-Proximity: Is service a way to contribute without taking personal responsibility or is it a way to become part of a group?

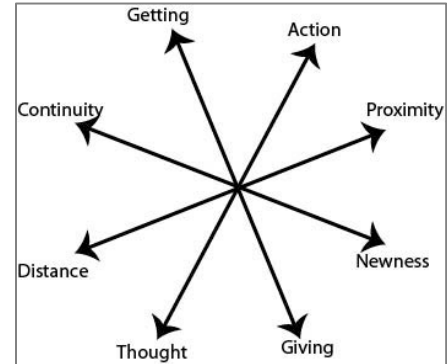


Figure 1 shows Yeung's octagonal model of volunteer motivation (adapted from the original, 2004).

Ultimately, the octagonal model of motivation is presented as a set of four lines, all intersecting at a central point. Each individual is said to have a point on each continuum, creating a motivational map. For most discussions, it is probably *not* necessary to fully understand this model, but the model does prompt some important questions that are integrated into the discussion guide below.

⌘ The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) is a *functional* approach to understanding volunteer motivations (Clary et al, 1998). A functional approach explains volunteerism as a way to meet specific personal psychological needs. This widely used, psychometrically validated tool describes volunteer motivations as fitting into six broad categories, described in Table 1.

Table 1 provides a summary of the six functions identified in Clary et al's (1998) Volunteer Functions Inventory.

Volunteer Function	Description
Career	Provides volunteers an opportunity to gain or enhance career-related skills.
Enhancement (Esteem)	Provides volunteers an opportunity to increase their own feelings of self-worth.
Protective	Provides volunteers an opportunity to reduce guilt of being "more fortunate" than others.
Social	Provides volunteers an opportunity to interact with others and to receive social affirmation.
Understanding	Provides volunteers an opportunity for personal growth and learning.
Values	Provides volunteers an opportunity to express their own altruistic values.

It is important to note that these functional categories are not mutually exclusive. The act of volunteering usually contributes to multiple functional goals for any individual, perhaps even all six simultaneously. It is also important to understand that these categories are meant to be descriptive; there is no value judgment implied by the categories.

If you would like to have your students gain a better understanding of their own motivations for service, an online version of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) is available to Virginia Tech instructors for teaching purposes. Individualized scoring sheets can be provided for each student in a class, and relative rankings of the values can be used to facilitate a conversation. Please contact VT Engage (engage@vt.edu) to arrange for your students to take the inventory at least four weeks in advance of the class session.

Works Cited

Clary, E.G., Snyder, M., Ridge, R.D., Copeland, J., Stukas, A.A., Haugen, J. & Miene, P. 1998. Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: a functional approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1516–30.

Yeung, A.B. 2004. The Octagon Model of volunteer motivation: Results of a phenomenological analysis. *Voluntas*, 15, 21–46.

Instructions

The guide below provides a set of discussion items designed to initiate a class conversation. In large classes, it may be useful to break into small groups so that everyone has a chance to contribute. With small groups, it may be useful to have each group report back some of their key discussion points after each question.

The final discussion item can be included in the class conversation, or it can serve as the basis for a written reflective response by individual students.

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Student Guide

Discussion Item #1:

**Consider the excerpts below and your recollection of the narrative from *Little Princes*.
Why did Conor Grennan initially decide to volunteer in Nepal?**

“...I made sure to point out that particular line to everybody I knew. ‘An orphanage in Nepal, for two months,’ I would tell women I’d met in bars. ‘Sure there’s a civil war going on. And yes, it might be dangerous. But I can’t think about that,’ I would shout over the noise of the bar, trying to appear misty-eyed. ‘I have to think of the children.’” (p5)

“If I caught any flak for my decision to travel, I would have a devastating comeback ready, like: ‘Well frankly Mom, I didn’t peg you for somebody who hates orphans,’ and I would make sure to say the word *orphans* really loudly so everybody within earshot knew how selfless I was.” (p7)

Psychologists and sociologists often say that people volunteer because of both altruistic (selfless) and egoistic (selfish) reasons.

- Do Grennan’s early motivations seem more altruistic or egoistic? Why do you say this?
- Do Grennan’s motives affect your perception of him?
- Do his motives affect your perception of his work in Nepal?

Discussion Item #2:

Why do people volunteer or participate in service activities?

Make an extensive list of reasons that people feel compelled to volunteer. Try to think about the underlying motivations for action. Use your own experiences to inform your answer.

- Why did you decide to participate in volunteering and service in the past?
- Why did you continue? Why did you stop?
- How did you feel during the act of volunteerism? How did the experience change you?

Look at the list of motives your class or groups has created.

- Are some of the reasons that you listed more socially acceptable than others?
- Do some of the reasons seem selfless? Is it realistic to expect that any action is completely selfless?
- Do some seem selfish? Is all volunteering selfish on some level?

Volunteers often say that they feel an “obligation to give back” or “to make a difference.”

- Do you think this feeling is authentic?
- Are there any drawbacks to being completely selfless?
- Are there any advantages to approaching your volunteer work from a selfish perspective?

Discussion Item #3:

Do motives matter?

[Marcia Finkelstein](#) (2008), among others, has shown that the ability of volunteer activities to fulfill motivational needs is important. She found that volunteers whose needs were met were more satisfied with their experience and, consequently, were likely to volunteer more time and to build longer volunteering relationships.

- Do Grennan's motives and his commitment to the Nepalese children confirm Finkelstein's findings? Why or why not?
- How did Grennan's early experiences in Nepal fulfill his motivational needs?
- If you were one of the children at Little Princes, would the motives of someone like Conor Grennan matter to you? Why or why not?
- How do you think the residents of the orphanage viewed Grennan?
- Was the relationship between the children and Grennan an appropriate one?
- What do you think would have happened if Grennan had never come back?

Discussion Item #4:

To whom is your responsibility as a volunteer?

In a sentiment that is often used as a call to action for potential volunteers, Margaret Mead famously said:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

By contrast, Ian Birrell recently wrote in [The Guardian](#):

The rapid growth of 'voluntourism' is like the rapid growth of the aid industry: salving our own consciences without fully examining the consequences for the people we seek to help. All too often, our heartfelt efforts to help only make matters worse.

- How do you reconcile these two statements?
- When is it acceptable to participate in service in a community of which you are not a member?
- What does Birrell mean by *voluntourism*? Is Conor Grennan a voluntourist?
- What would Mead and Birrell say about Grennan's experiences in Nepal?
- Would you have different expectations of Grennan if he was from Nepal?

Grennan began his volunteering experience with relatively little understanding of the local social, political, or economic context in Nepal. He also came to Nepal from a position of social and economic privilege that influenced his interpretation of the issues he saw at the orphanage.

- Did Grennan's ignorance of Nepal's culture or his personal background influence his approach to working at Little Princes? How?

- Can you think of any examples from the book when Grennan's actions were influenced by his own life experiences?
- Did Grennan make any decisions that put the children at increased risk?
- Do you think that reuniting the children with their parents was a good idea? Why or why not?

Thinking broadly about humanitarian and volunteering efforts, consider these questions:

- Does volunteering always lead to positive outcomes?
- Can you think of any examples when volunteering has had unintended negative consequences?
- Do you feel you made a difference when you volunteered in the past? If so, do you feel that you created *lasting* change?

Discussion Item #5

Consider the excerpts below and your recollection of the narrative from *Little Princes*. Do motivations for service change or are they stable over time and context?

As he prepares to leave Nepal after his volunteer service was over, Grennan writes (p55): "If walking into the responsibility of caring for eighteen children was difficult, walking out on that responsibility was impossible. The children had become a constant presence, little spinning tops that splattered joy on everyone they bumped into, I would miss that, of course. But the deeper sadness, the deluge of emotion, came from admitting that I was walking out on them."

Upon finding two of the "orphans" with their father in an airport, Grennan writes (p218): "They jumped up and wrapped their arms around my waist. I loved that feeling. I hadn't realized how much I missed the kids back at Dhaulagiri House and at Little Princes. Once you gained their trust they had no inhibition around you. The children used me as furniture, as a jungle gym, as a horse. And also as a surrogate parent, until the real one showed up. That hug by those two boys, with their smiling father standing a few feet away, lifted every last scrap of weariness I felt."

- Why did Grennan decide to return to Nepal and found Next Generation Nepal instead of returning to his more traditional career path?
- What factors led to this change of plans?
- Were there specific events, people, or places that influenced Grennan's decision?
- Do you think Grennan would have felt as committed if he'd been working in the United States instead of Nepal? Or working with the elderly instead of children? Why?

Thinking broadly about your own motives for volunteerism and service,

- What experiences might cause your motivational needs to change?

Discussion Item #6:

What types of volunteering and service activities are most likely to fulfill your personal motivational needs?

If you took the Volunteer Functions Inventory, look at the functions where you scored highest. If you did not, think about the things that motivate you the most from the list in the box (right).

What Motivates You?

- Advancing Your Career
- Having the Opportunity to Work with Friends
- Helping Others
- Learning New Things
- Feeling Good About Yourself
- Relieving Guilt

- If you were designing a volunteer experience that met your top 2-3 motivational needs, what would it look like?
- What duties would use your strengths and skills (e.g., interacting with people, writing policy briefs, doing physical labor)?
- What type of setting would be most interesting to you (e.g., an urban school, a village in a developing country, a community garden)?
- What types of tasks and settings would you like to avoid? Why?

Think about the things in your community that are very interesting to you or that spark your passions.

- What are the social issues and needs that are most interesting to you (e.g., hunger, homelessness, equality, environmental conservation, youth mentoring, health, disaster relief)?
- What organizations in your local community are working on these issues?
- Are there existing volunteer programs with that organization?
- Do these opportunities have the potential to meet your motivational needs?

Plan to become active in your local community:

- Do you currently volunteer with this organization or others? If yes, how deeply are you engaged? If no, are you interested in volunteering?
- At Virginia Tech, there are many opportunities to get involved with the local, national, and global issues. Have you explored these options?
- What types of barriers prevent you from being more involved in your community? Are these true barriers or are they something you tell yourself?