Exploring the ‘nurture’ of volunteer coordination

A PhD project providing a holistic view on the organisational context of volunteering

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Handout for the presentation at the VSSN Day Conference, 1. December 2011

Introduction / Research problem

New trends in volunteering and the increasing claims for professionalization in the voluntary sector challenge organisations to improve their way of interacting with volunteers. Volunteer coordination is not only about practices following the volunteer management cycle (Cuskey et al. 2006), but also about providing an organisational context which offers incentives for volunteering. Reflection about the effects of structures, organisational culture and perceptions of the volunteers’ role on volunteers and volunteer coordination is needed.

Goal / Approach

This research explores possibilities to capture attitudes towards volunteers within an organisation and the underlying values. An inventory for measuring the ‘volunteer-friendliness’ (Allen 2006) of an organisation (attitudinal volunteer coordination inventory) contributes to the understanding of how organisations can shape their relationship with the volunteer resource. In a further step, the inventory will be used for multivariate data analysis. Its impact on the perceived quality of volunteer coordination and the linkage with other constructs – such as hardly changeable organisational features and concrete HRM instruments – will be explored.

Theoretical background / Heuristic

Conceptually, this research is in line with the work of Hager and Brudney 2010. Volunteer coordinators can foster the ‘nurture’ of volunteer coordination, whereas they are limited by the ‘nature’ of their organisation. ‘Nurture’ constitutes the organisational conditions which volunteer coordinators are able to change, while ‘nature’ comprise organisational conditions which “cannot readily be overcome by a management response” (Hager and Brudney 2010, p.1). We follow the reasoning that the ‘nurture’ consists not only of the volunteer management cycle (as Hobson et al. 1997, Hobson and Heler 2007 focus on), but also of organisational attitudes and values towards volunteers. The latter define the relationship between the volunteers as a resource and the organisation and can contribute to the organisational receptiveness of volunteers (; whereas practices
adopted from HRM in the volunteer management cycle are rather focused on specific inter-personal relationship between the individual volunteer and his or her lead-manager).

**Previous research**

In a literature review, organisational factors affecting volunteers have already been identified and structured in three main clusters: HRM practices & instruments, organisational attitudes & values and organisational features that limit the action space of volunteers and volunteer coordination (Studer and von Schnurbein 2011). It can be shown that attitudes and values towards volunteers, (re)defined by social processes of integration and sensemaking, have mostly been studied with qualitative methods. A few quantitative studies questioning organisations about the organisational context of volunteering have been detected and examined with respect to their research design (Cuskelley et al. 2006, Gaskin et al. 1996, Hager and Brudney 2004a, Hager and Brudney 2004b, Hager and Brudney 2010, Hong et al. 2009, Machin and Paine 2008, Puffer and Meindl 1992, Rehnborg et al. 2002, Rehnborg et al. 2010, Rogelberg et al. 2010, Stirling et al. 2011, UrbanInstitute 2004, Watts and Edwards 1983). The analysis of the different research designs (see table 1) shows that organisational attitudes and values towards volunteers are seldom measured in a structured way, intending to capture different dimensions of the socially constructed organisational context. Additionally, just very few studies combine correlation analysis between variables of the ‘nurture’ (socially constructed, changeable organisational context) and the ‘nature’ (hardly changeable organisational features).

**Graph 1: Research outline in a picture (CEPS 2011)**
Expected findings

It is expected that organisations differ in their perception of the role of volunteers within the organisation. Possible dimensions distinguishing the attitudes and values towards volunteers are the importance given to the participation of volunteers in decision-making processes, social interaction between members of the organisation, flexibility, as well as the image of volunteers, the perceived contribution of volunteers to the overall service quality and the extent to which volunteers are seen as strategic resource. The volunteer management cycle is also included in the study, since the very existence of such a process is part of the ‘nurture’\(^1\). In a further step, the interplay of these aspects of the ‘nurture’ of volunteer coordination with the ‘nature’ of volunteer coordination – organisational features such as type of mission (voice vs. service delivery), field of activity or vulnerability of the clients – will be examined. That with, this research contributes to the identification of variables influencing the action space of volunteer coordination in its attempt to create a volunteer-friendly organisational context.

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\(^1\) Nurture is defined as “organizational conditions that volunteer resource managers … can directly influence as they seek to make their organization more inviting to prospective volunteers” (Hager and Brudney 2010, p. 1).
### Table 1: Quantitative studies questioning organisations about volunteer coordination (compiled by the authors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>HRM practices</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Study design / analysis</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Working area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuskelly et al. 2006</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>(x)</td>
<td></td>
<td>375</td>
<td>confirmatory factor analysis, multiple regression</td>
<td>useable self-administered survey</td>
<td>rugby club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaskin 1996</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>descriptive statistics</td>
<td>questionnaire</td>
<td>social services, development aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hager and Brudney 2004a*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1753</td>
<td>multiple regression</td>
<td>telephone interviews</td>
<td>human services, education, health arts, culture, and humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hager and Brudney 2004b*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>multiple regression</td>
<td>telephone interviews</td>
<td>(studies on different areas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hager and Brudney 2010*</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1135</td>
<td>OLS regression</td>
<td>telephone interview &amp; focus groups</td>
<td>human service, educational, and health focused organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong et al. 2009</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>factor analysis</td>
<td>structured telephone interview</td>
<td>programs with older volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machin and Paine 2008a</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1382</td>
<td>descriptive statistics, cross tabulation</td>
<td>telephone interviews</td>
<td>Voluntary and Community Sector, public sector organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puffer and Meindl 1992</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>201</td>
<td>factor analysis, regressions</td>
<td>AI supervisors, B volunteers</td>
<td>United Way in Buffalo, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehnborg et al. 2002</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>cross tabulation</td>
<td>mailed survey instrument</td>
<td>Texas state agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehnborg et al. 2010**</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>267 (Texas) 1753 (national)</td>
<td>comparison, descriptive statistics</td>
<td>telephone interview &amp; focus groups</td>
<td>human service, educational, and health focused organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogelberg et al. 2010</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>descriptive statistics, correlations, regressions</td>
<td>print and online questionnaire</td>
<td>animal welfare, Humane Society of U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schweizer (in Press)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>? (~1200)</td>
<td>descriptive statistics, cross tabulation</td>
<td>online survey</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stirling et al. 2011</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>156</td>
<td>thematic analysis, cross tabulation, bivariate analysis, multivariate analysis</td>
<td>semi-structured interviews, survey</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UrbanInstitute 2004</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1753 (charities) 541 (congregations)</td>
<td>descriptive statistics</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>all, mostly social &amp; community service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watts and Edwards 1983</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>(x)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>cross tabulation, chi-square test</td>
<td>self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>social service, health, education, youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* based on same data as UrbanInstitute 2004
** based on data out of Rehnborg et al. 2002 and UrbanInstitute 2004
References


