Keeping the Light Burning: 
A Study on the Filipino Culture of Volunteerism, on its Perception and Volunteer Motivations

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Abstract

This paper will discuss volunteerism in the Filipino context. By using both the qualitative and quantitative methods, the researcher tries to discuss the intricacy of the culture of Filipino volunteerism, the underlying societal conditions and how it affects motivations. The research uses the rational actor theory as the macro theory and Clary and Snyder’s Functional Motivations theory as a meso theory to explain volunteer motivations. The statistical data were gathered from Brgy. Sta. Monica and Brgy. San Bartolome, Quezon City and will be analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The qualitative data were obtained through the cooperation of the National Citizen’s Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL). This research would like to prove that the underlying conditions of the Philippine Society affects the motivations of a person to volunteer.

Keywords: volunteerism, civic participation, socio-psychological motivations, social conditions
Introduction

“Why is volunteerism necessary? It is supposed to promote common good. What you do as a volunteer must have an impact the society as a whole, in order for the society to improve, you contribute to nation building...the fact that you are doing it, that is already the reward.”
(Magbual, 2014, personal interview)

The culture of volunteering, as a worldwide social phenomenon, has played a major role in the society. It contributes to the improvement of life of the varying sectors of the society, and is a important resource for addressing different issues and concerns in the broader context of human development.

Approximately 140 million worldwide engage in some form of volunteer activity every year. This represents more or less 12% of the total worldwide adult population. These voluntary interactions generate about $400 billion of contribution to the global economy. (Virola, Ilariana, Reyes, & Buenaventura, 2010)

In the Philippines, three of every four Filipinos 13 years old and over, volunteered in between the years 1998 and 1999. Notably, the incidence of volunteering in the Philippines is much higher compared to developing countries such as the United States (56%), Canada (31%) and the UK (48%) in the same margin of time. (Fernan, 2002)

For Filipinos, democracy and volunteerism are deeply ingrained in culture and history. Culturally, the Filipino people are social and expressive; they want to feel that belong and that they are part of something big. Historically, this is very evident – from the fight for freedom during the Spanish occupation, to the reestablishment of democracy the People Power Revolution has brought during the 1980’s, and until recently, the expression of unity and camaraderie with the victims of the Typhoon
Haiyan in the Visayas area. The Filipinos never fail to express their desire volunteer their help.

This very phenomenon is what captured the interest of various social scientists. Volunteerism, as a form of civilian participation, contributes to the formation of a healthy democracy (Bekkers, 2005). It is a form of political interaction in the sense that it is a manifestation of an actor’s freedom to associate, act and express. As United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report (2002) states; “volunteerism holds an enormous scope for broadening participation in governance and promoting more equitable outcomes for people.”

In the Philippines, however, volunteerism as a concept has not been studied thoroughly. Despite the fact that volunteerism in the country has been lively, its understanding as a social, political and economic concept in connection with the underlying social conditions it tries to address has not been studied thoroughly.

The researcher, as a member of several volunteer organizations, would like to explore on how to widen civic participation, like volunteerism, in the Philippines. Through this research, it can help volunteer organizations by offering a framework on how to attract more volunteers based on their interests, therefore widening the scope of volunteer participation.

The Filipino brand of volunteering is unique because it cuts across many cultural cleavages and this research aims to describe the Filipino understanding of volunteering and volunteerism.

It also aims to explore on the volunteer motivations. The research’s main argument is that volunteers get private and public benefits by volunteering and seek
these benefits because they are rational actors. These motivations are then affected by certain factors such as gender, economic standing and educational attainment. This was postulated by Clary, et al. (1998) in their Functional Motivations theory.

Lastly, this research aims to find out how people perceive volunteerism and voluntary action and how this affects the will of a person to volunteer.

With these objectives in mind, the researcher would like to explore on the following research questions.

1. What characterizes the Filipino brand of volunteerism?
2. How do Filipinos perceive volunteerism and the volunteers?
3. What motivates volunteers?
4. How do factors such as age, gender, economic standing and educational attainment affect volunteer motivations?
5. What are the underlying social conditions that affect a volunteer’s motivations?

To answer these questions the paper will discuss data obtained from a survey from the two barangays with active volunteering traditions. Also, the researcher conducted focus group discussions with the volunteers of the National Citizen’s Movement for Free Elections.
Review of Related Literature

The practice of employing the help of volunteers takes several forms – corporate volunteering, activism, lobbying, election campaigning and service learning in schools. More so, institutions like the Church, the government and different non-government institutions have utilized this very “noble” human interaction in order to advance their objectives, mission or advocacies. As a result, different individuals working for different institutions will gain different views, understanding, and perception on their work as a volunteer.

The variation in the definition of volunteerism given by the different scholars in the field of economics, social sciences, and psychology are as divergent as the views of those volunteers on the ground. Brown, Meers, and Williams (2013) in their study that explores the motivation behind volunteerism explained the phenomenon as “the donation of both money and time” in a non-profit organization. They stipulated that volunteers derive higher levels of “warm glow” when donating time and effort, than when donating money. They explained volunteerism in an economic perspective by weighing the opportunity costs and utility of volunteering.

However, Weemaes and Shokkaert (2009), in their study which aims to explain the amount of time invested by volunteers from eight European countries through the data they obtained from the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) posits that the traditional explanation of volunteerism as the “voluntary contribution of time for the production of a public good” does not fit the empirical reality. They explained that if volunteers are really motivated by such concern for public good,
the contribution in large populations should be minimal, as predicted by the rational free-rider theory.

Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004) limits the definition of volunteerism as “those activities people undertake for organizations without receiving a wage or any other form of monetary or material remuneration.” The authors admitted that their definition of volunteerism is rather restrictive in the sense that it highlights on the participation in organizations, and that it fails to capture the informal networks which may also be considered as volunteerism such as “participation in networks of friendship and extended kin.” This definition, as they say, may understate the true extent of volunteerism. Marta, Pozzi and Marzana (2010) further supported this notion on volunteering by describing it as a “specific type of sustained, planned, and prosocial behavior that benefits others and occurs within an organizational setting.”

While the previous researchers mentioned believe in a structured, institutional and organization-oriented definition of volunteerism, CIVICUS, IAVE & UNV (2007) believes that in order to understand volunteerism the focus should be on the individual volunteer. They reason that the understanding of volunteerism is as “diverse as the individuals who volunteer” and is shaped by different contexts and experiences. This is rooted to the common understanding of volunteerism as an “action taken freely, by choice, aimed at helping a third party or the society at large.”
Medina (2012) in her work, citing Paine, et al. (2010), further supported the common understanding of volunteerism stated by CIVICUS, IAVE and UNV. The researcher agrees on the common features present in the existing definitions of volunteerism – that a volunteer work must a) be unpaid, b) undertaken through the act of free will, and c) it must benefit others. However, different authors contend these basic principles in defining volunteerism.

It is a common understanding that a volunteer work must be something that is done without compensation of any kind – a purely altruistic action. However, CIVICUS, IAVE & UNV (2007) and UNDP (2003; also Marta, Pozzi and Marzana, 2010) recognizes the idea that sometimes it is inevitable for a volunteer to receive compensation or rewards, either materially or in “soft rewards” such as feelings of belongingness, friendship or camaraderie among others. In order to accommodate for these instances, the researcher stated that volunteerism is an act done not for financial gain. Smith (1981; as cited in Haski-Levanthal, 2009) supported this by arguing that there is no such thing as a purely altruistic action by defining volunteerism as “essentially motivated by the expectation of psychic benefits of some kind as a result of activities that have market value greater than any remuneration received for such activities.”

In the discussion regarding the act of free will as an essential component of a voluntary action, Haski-Leventhal (2009) gave various views on this aspect by citing other authors. Van Til (1986) focused on the minimal coerciveness in volunteering, saying that it is “a helping action of an individual that is valued by him of her, and yet is not
aimed directly at material gain or mandated or coerced by others.” This was supported by Ellis and Noyce (1990) by pointing on the importance of free will as a social action that is without coercion and going beyond obligation.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework:**

**Rational Actor, Functional Motivations and Volunteerism**

The most frequent description of volunteering is to interpret it as “doing something and contributing time for the production of public good,” meaning doing something for the benefit of all despite the fact that a person, in this case a volunteer, may not receive something in return. However, there is a major question that comes in to mind when we analyze.

The first basic assumption of the rational actor theory is that people are utility maximizers, meaning people do things because they receive the greatest amount of benefit for doing such things as compared to other things. As Sardinha and Pires (2011) thinks, if volunteers are indeed motivated by concern for public good, it should be that in countries with large populations, like the Philippines, there should be a considerable amount of people that have no interest in volunteering. But that is not the case because as stated by Fernan (2002), the culture of volunteerism in the Philippines is a vibrant one.

In the context of the Philippine society, volunteering is not necessarily the most “rewarding” thing to do. The country is very much ridden in poverty and economic disparity (Remo, 2013), gender inequality (ADB, 2013) and relatively low access to education (Balisacan & Pernia, 2002). Therefore, it implies that there must be private
benefits that a volunteer can get from volunteering aside from being just purely public benefits.

Volunteers are rational actors after all – they are goal-oriented people who maximize utility. They have hierarchically ordered preferences and choose from these preferences based on assumptions about their environment; and that these preferences are common among all volunteers.

To expound on the private benefits that volunteers seek, Clary et al. (1998) said that people engaging in similar acts have different underlying motives to do so. The researcher assumes that these different underlying motives are a result of the underlying social contexts in the society that the volunteers experience. These motivations are then the cause that pushes a person to engage in voluntary work. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will explore on uneven distribution of economic resources, gender inequality and lack of access to education.

According to the functional motivations theory, there are six functions of volunteerism namely the values function (humanitarianism, helping the less fortunate), understanding function (learn more about the world, exercise skills that are often unused), enhancement function (seeking to grow, develop psychologically), career function (gaining career-related experience), social function (strengthening relationships), and protective functions (reduce negative feelings such as guilt, address personal problems (Clary, et al., 1998).

These six categories can be grouped into three larger groups: those motivations that are driven to increase public goods (purely altruistic motivations, or motivations that
seek to “help” the society; composed of value functions), motivations that are derived from *warm glow* (motivations derived from the “warm feeling” after doing something good or accomplishing something; composed of protective function and enhancement function), and lastly, *instrumental motivations* (beneficial private outcomes like acquisition of usual skills, friendly relationships, and getting a job; composed of career functions, social function).

These three groups can be further categorized into two larger groups: instrumental motivations and socio-emotional motivations (public goods and warm feeling). In the survey, the instrumental motivations are indicated as meeting other people (MP), enjoying (EN), honing one’s skills and abilities (HSA), and personal growth (PGR). On the other hand, socio-emotional motivations are indicated as helping others (HO), feeling needed (ND), and feeling obligated (OBL). The researcher hypothesizes that certain groups of the society are motivated by these two groups relative to the resources that they have.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

**Methodology**

This research will employ both qualitative and quantitative methods. To gather quantitative data, the researcher made a survey and processed them through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). On the other hand, the researcher gathered the qualitative data through the cooperation with National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) by holding focus group discussions.

Before the group discussion and survey, informed consent was asked from those who will be participating in the study. For the group discussions, oral permission and consent were asked. On the survey, however, the respondents were asked to sign free prior and informed consent forms.

The researcher introduced himself, informed them of the study’s objectives, and ensured them that the data that will be derived will be used only for the purposes of
academic research. Before the group discussions were held, the group was asked permission to record the interview. The participants agreed to record the discussion.

During the last week of December, the researcher conducted a preliminary study of the volunteer culture of the two barangays by looking for active volunteer groups and other possible venue for volunteering.

Also, the researcher communicated with the National Citizen’s Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) to conduct a focused group discussions with their volunteers from different backgrounds. The volunteers should be composed of those from the administrative level, and those form the grass roots. Thus, two groups were formed composed of the most senior volunteers, women volunteers, volunteers from the level of local chapters and those who serve as policy makers.

In the first weeks of January, the first batch of focus group discussion were held composed of the most senior volunteers, a regional coordinator from Mindanao, a member of the National Council and the two members from the Secretariat. Two weeks after, a second focus group discussion were held. The batch was composed of chapter chairpersons from Metro Manila and a member of the secretariat.

The data that were obtained were transcribed then arranged thematically for further analysis. Open coding was employed in order to arranged the data thematically.

For this study, the researcher conducted a survey in two locations – Brgy. San Bartolome in Quezon City, an urban barangay with a population of 44,739; and Brgy. Sta. Monica in Hagonoy, Bulacan, a rural barangay with a population of 8,683 (NSCB, 2010). The two barangays that were chosen have environments conducive for
volunteering activities. TV 5’s Alagang Kapatid Foundation Incorporated is situated in Brgy. San Bartolome, Novaliches, Quezon City. Informal volunteers flock in warehouses like this during calamities to help pack goods for donation. While Brgy. Sta Monica, Hagonoy, Bulacan is home to several volunteer groups like the Hagonoy Young Leaders’ Program, a venue for formal volunteerism. The survey was conducted with 200 respondents, 100 questionnaires were distributed in each barangay.

The survey form is derived from Clary and Snyder’s (1998) Volunteer Function Inventory Scale. The original questionnaire gives two sets of questions related to a volunteer’s reasons and experiences with volunteering. The researcher altered the questionnaire in order to suit to the objectives of this study because the original questionnaire should only be given to active volunteers, whereas this study aims to also capture the perception of non-volunteers. The questionnaire used in this study contains the demographic information of the respondent such as age, sex, marital status, gender, highest educational attainment and wage per month in order to determine how the motivations differ from each sector.
Findings and Analysis

The Filipino Brand of Volunteerism

Volunteerism has existed for centuries and is a worldwide phenomenon. Whether described as *mephato* in Bostwana, *minga* in Ecuador, *gotong royong* in Indonesia, *dobrovolchestvo* in the Federation, *kwitango* in Rwanda, *ubuntu* in South Africa, *sharamadana* in India or *jitolee* in Kenya (or *Harambee*), *al taawun wal tawasul* in many Arab States, volunteerism is a universal human phenomenon that occurs across all cultures, economic levels, genders, and ages. (Virola, Ilariana, Reyes, & Buenaventura, 2010)

The culture of volunteerism is the culture of expressing the willingness and capacity to freely help others and improve the society. This is the main conception of the concept of volunteerism in the Philippines. “It is supposed to promote common good. What you do as a volunteer must have an impact the society as a whole, in order for the society to improve; you contribute to nation building...the fact that you are doing it (that) is already the reward.” (Magbual, 2014, personal interview)

The Western cultures have basically three main criteria in determining whether an act of giving is an act of volunteering. Paige et al. (2010) characterized these criteria as: first, it must be a work that is done without payment; second, the act must be done without coercion; and lastly, it must benefit others (Medina, 2012). Therefore, volunteerism in the Western world can only exist as mutual aid or self-help, philanthropy or service to others, civic participation and advocacy or campaigning (UNDP, 2003).

The Filipino concept of volunteerism has a different characteristic as compared to that of Western concept. Fernan (2002) in his research has discovered that there are unique forms of volunteerism in the Philippines that Westerners might find a little bit
absurd. Among the common activities that are identified as “volunteering”, two activities stood out – “praying for someone” and “lending money without interest.” He further elaborated that the persistence of these activities can actually be rooted in the history and culture of Philippines.

“It may help to think of these two activities as partly stemming from how Filipinos popularly regard volunteering, that is, an act that involves actually helping out someone in need rather than being merely the generic manifestation of an inner compulsion to be charitable. In the case of praying for someone, this assistance takes on a purely religious form, not surprising in a country that stubbornly clings to the legacy of four hundred years of Spanish Catholicism.

Lending money is also an act of assisting someone in need, with 33 percent of respondents saying they engaged in this activity. Apparently, people consider this to be a form of charity even though the money lent out is eventually returned. In an environment where poverty is still widespread or where cash flow is a problem, having to borrow money is quite common. Ordinarily, lending money, particularly without any collateral, is a money-making activity, more associated with loan sharking rather than with altruistic behavior. Therefore, in contrast to the exploitative nature of loan sharking, the logic of lending money without interest is helping someone in need without extracting a payment or penalty while involving some cost to the lender, thus a form of charity.”

Furthermore, the Filipino understanding of volunteerism seems to challenge the conventional conception of volunteerism. There are instances when people were invited to volunteer, the first thing that they would ask is if it has “bayad”. As Del Corro (2014, personal interview) recounts,

diyan. Nangyari sa akin yan sa Mindanao eh, naghahanap ako ng volunteers, “magkano?” Ganoon kaagad.”

More so, volunteering in the Western cultures that volunteering should be an act that is done without coercion. The Filipino culture, however, it tightly knit. Unlike Westerners who value individualism, Asian countries like the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Thailand and Japan value collectivism. Dutta-Bergman and Wells (n.d., as cited in Cimatu, 2008) defined collectivist cultures as “…the close linkage among individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives and are primarily motivated by the norms and duties of those collectives, emphasizing connectedness with other members of the collectives.” In other words, these cultures are cultures that are more prone to coercion. As Maligaya (2014, personal interview) narrates,

“‘Yung Filipino brand of volunteerism, I think it’s part of our culture also, kasi mayroon tayong tinawag na bayanihan. Volunteerism ‘yun eh, it’s like you want to be of service to the community. ‘Yung sense of community. Unlike in Western states na, you have a house, you live independently. In the Philippines, it’s almost impossible to be a private person. Parang everybody has a say on what you should do next, and what you should think.”

As a by-product of this highly collectivist culture that the Philippines has, social institutions like families and peers act tend to be stronger and are powerful pressures on people’s will to volunteer. The transference of the culture of volunteerism is stronger in highly collectivist nations. As a proof, Del Corro (2014, personal interview) recounts how she started as a volunteer:

“Ang daddy ko ang nagmulat sa kanila na kapag NAMFREL, volunteerism, 'wag kayong umasa na may

These are things that are unique to the Filipino brand of volunteerism. These cultural traits are actually factors on how and why people engage in voluntary actions. People want to interact with other people because it defines who they are and they want to engage with others in one way or another. On the other hand, aside from the tightly knit cultural relationships that Filipinos have, the social situations also define the motivations of volunteers in the Philippines.

Motivations and the Underlying Social Conditions

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<th>Socio-emotional Motives</th>
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Table 1. A table showing the percentage of each motivation. (Note: The colored boxes are the dominant motivation for each sector.

The politics of volunteerism lies on who has the access to the resources – those who have more money, those who work and those who have studied clearly has some advantage. It is interesting to think that these underlying social conditions are reflected in the motivations a person to volunteer. It is assumed that people volunteer whatever resources they have. As Alvia (2014, personal interview) says, people cannot give what they do not have. People will more likely create a hierarchy or what they can give as a volunteer.

The basic assumption of the rational actor theory is that people act based on where they can derive the most utility. Therefore, is assumed that those who are in disadvantageous situations would more likely volunteer based on whatever resource that they have. To explore on this, this part will analyze the results of the survey conducted in order to discover the underlying social conditions.

This way, this research is saying that people are rational because they have choices – to volunteer or not, to give this or, or to give that. Ultimately, people will choose to volunteer because as Magbual (2014, personal interview) says, volunteerism is a reward in itself, whether an actor gives their resources or their time, they derive utility from the experience. It is a way of leveling the inequality and the lack of access in the society.

In the survey conducted, women account for almost 70% of respondents. The results of the survey show that women derive more utility from socio-emotional motives (72.3%) that from instrumental motives (70.2%). Men, on the other hand derive more
utility from the instrumental motives (29.8%) compared to socio-emotional motives (27.7%).

It is notable to mention that not motivated by meeting other people and enjoyment. The opposite is true to the motivations of men. Among the all motivations, men feel obligation the least as the motivating factor, while the reverse are true to women.

This implies that there is a gender inequity existing among men and women that are perpetuated by gender roles. Talcott Parsons (1942, 1954) theorized that women are subjected into gender roles. These gender roles limit the access of women to engage in activities outside the home. Women, more so, Filipino women feel this because of the system of patriarchy that controls our current system.

One of the products of this patriarchal system is the economic disparity between men and women. Men, most of the time, are the ones working, and therefore have a greater say on where to spend the money. However, in the case that women are working, the nature of their job includes agriculture or domestic work which requires their full effort. This explains why women are more motivated by socio-emotional motivations – women have no material resources to give. (ADB, 2013)

The sample that the survey has can be described as having a high level of education (mostly made up of those who took or are taking college), considering that a campus of Quezon City Polytechnic University is situated in Brgy. San Bartolome. Brgy. Sta. Monica has its own National High School in the barangay. There are 144 respondents who are either college graduates or are currently in college, 18 of which have post-
graduate degrees. There are also 49 respondents who attended formal education until high school, and 7 attained elementary education.

Those who have attended higher educational attainment are motivated by socio-emotional motivators (78.6%), while those of lower educational attainment are more motivated by instrumental factors (24.9%). Those with lower educational attainment feel less obligations to volunteer (11.1%), while 88.9% of the respondents who have high education have significantly high feelings of obligation.

There is clearly a disparity among those with higher educational attainment to those with lower ones. The feeling of obligation is an indirect proof of who holds the authority and power. Those who acquired higher levels of education are more pressured to make a “voluntary act”. However, they are usually the ones holding the places of authority. They are the leaders, chairpersons, and manager of volunteers and volunteer organization.

As for the higher levels of socio-emotional motivations, Maligaya (2014 personal interview) hypothesizes that,

“Kung college level, usually, idealistic yung bata. Gusto niyang i-apply sa buhay niya [yung mga natutunan niya], usually those volunteers coming from UP. Because all throughout the school life, you have to give back, service to the nation, and this is one concrete way to do that.”

It follows that those who have low education seek the opportunity to have an access to personal gains such as connectivity, jobs and other material gains. This implies that those with lower levels of education are limited in their choices outside volunteer work.
Most respondents can be considered as low-wage earners. There are 129 respondents who earn less than 10,000 Pesos per month. There were also 42 respondents who are middle-wage earners (10,001 Pesos – 19,999 Pesos), while there are 29 respondents earning more than 20,000 Pesos.

People with low incomes and high incomes (it appears) are more motivated by instrumental factors (64.3% and 15.2% respectively), while people with middle wage incomes are motivated by socio-emotional factors (29.7%). It is also interesting to see that rich people do not feel any obligation motivation, while poor people feel the most obligations (55.9%).

The disparity in obligation motivations can be explained by one thing – people with high incomes do not feel obligations because they mainly donate money instead of engaging in the voluntary action itself. On the other hand, like people with low income have the same propensity of engage in volunteerism due to instrumental motivations because they associate it with the opportunity to acquire jobs and to feel socially integrated.
Conclusion and Recommendations

This research, by providing the data from the survey, has proven that volunteers also seek the private benefits of the said engagement. However, it must be noted that these motivations differ from gender to gender, economic standing based on income, and lastly, educational attainment.

The culture of volunteering in the Philippines is rich. It cuts across all social dimensions. Despite the fact that this research went away from the view that volunteerism is a noble thing to do because it is not self-interested, it does not aim to ridicule the tradition. Rather, it aims to spread the tradition of volunteering wider by providing organizations with the guide on how to actually recruit more volunteers.

As we have seen, the Filipino brand of volunteerism is unique in the sense that it deviates from the traditional, western conception of volunteering by having various forms of volunteering such as praying and lending money without interest. More so, it is inevitable to notice that because of the strong collectivist culture in the Philippines, the culture of volunteering is sustained from generation to generation.

Lastly, from the volunteer’s motivations, we discovered that the culture of volunteerism reflects the underlying social conditions in the Philippines like the patriarchy, lack of access to education and economic disparity.

To conclude I would like to quote Magbual (2014, personal interview),

“What should be the aim of volunteerism? A good cause, but it can take many forms – you notice that people who join have different causes. For
instance, if it’s caring for the environment that you want to promote, for instance alleviation of poverty, it is for addressing the illiteracy, you know Penaflorida that you want to promote.”
Works Cited


