

Chapter 1

Definition of Volunteer Work and a Model of Volunteer Activity



Volunteer work can best be defined as a free, non-profit activity that usually serves the common good. The aspect of *voluntariness* is essential and distinguishes it from other forms of work. Anyone who speaks of volunteer work is not just talking about individual helping behavior or civic engagement but, indirectly, always also about the national system of gainful employment within which volunteer work takes place and with which it must be compatible.

1.1 Introduction: A Clarification of Terms

We propose a reference definition that can be adopted, modified, or extended depending on the emphasis of the research topic or practical use (Mieg & Wehner, 2002):

Volunteer work refers to non-profit activity including unpaid, self-organized or institutionally organized, socially oriented work; this means a *personal, non-profit* commitment that is connected with a regular, project- or event-related *expenditure of time*, which could in principle also be carried out by another person and *could potentially also be paid for*.

This definition refers to three essential characteristics of volunteer work, which should also be taken into account by research:

1. *Voluntariness*: The activity is free, autonomous, independent. From this follows: The coordination of volunteer work with gainful employment is not trivial; this coordination cannot be based solely on the logic of volunteer work.
2. *Non-profit status*: Volunteer work constitutes a not-for-profit system that adds value to society. A central question here is: How can this type of service and its added value—e.g., as social capital—be grasped without merely thinking about monetarization?

3. *Meaningful activity*: Voluntary work is a meaningful activity, whereby the question must be asked: What are the underlying motives? What can we learn, from volunteer work, for work in general and for the system of gainful employment in particular?

The term “non-profit” is used analogously to non-profit organizations and foundations to emphasize the contribution to the common good. We will use the reference definition in those places where we want to emphasize the special characteristics of voluntary work. Otherwise, we will also refer to them as “voluntary work” or “volunteering.” However, volunteering is not the same as *lay work*: Many experts and professionals also undertake voluntary work within their field of expertise; moreover, volunteers can develop *expertise* for their work (cf. Mieg, 2001).

1.2 Volunteering in Europe: Statistics, Trends

We assume that voluntary work says something not only about individual helping behavior in the respective civil society within which it takes place, but—because of the aspect of work—is also closely related to the respective constitution of the national system of gainful employment. Thus, one can ask:

- Is volunteer work *neutral* and only secondary to gainful employment? The area of volunteer work then defines a parallel world to gainful employment and is to be understood similarly to the area of value-oriented religious practice or many balance-oriented hobbies.
- Is volunteer work *complementary* or even *compensatory* to gainful employment? Voluntary work would then offer room for motives and fulfillment of meaning that might not be provided by gainful employment.
- The function can also be *instrumental*: Voluntary work might also serve gainful employment, e.g., if biographically or professionally relevant qualifications and skills are to be acquired through voluntary work.
- It is conceivable that volunteer work is to be understood in a *recompensatory* way to gainful employment: Some people are so satisfied with and grateful for their work (and their lives) that they want to give something back to society through voluntary work.
- It is also conceivable that the relationship between voluntary work and gainful employment may be *conflictual*, at least at times, whether because time commitments cannot be mutually agreed upon or even that ideological rifts might emerge, for example, if an employee in the chemical industry also volunteered for Greenpeace.

In the following, we summarize the most important findings of the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS).

The most recent EQLS survey of 2016 interviewed around 37,000 people “face-to-face” in the 33 European states (28 EU member States and five candidate

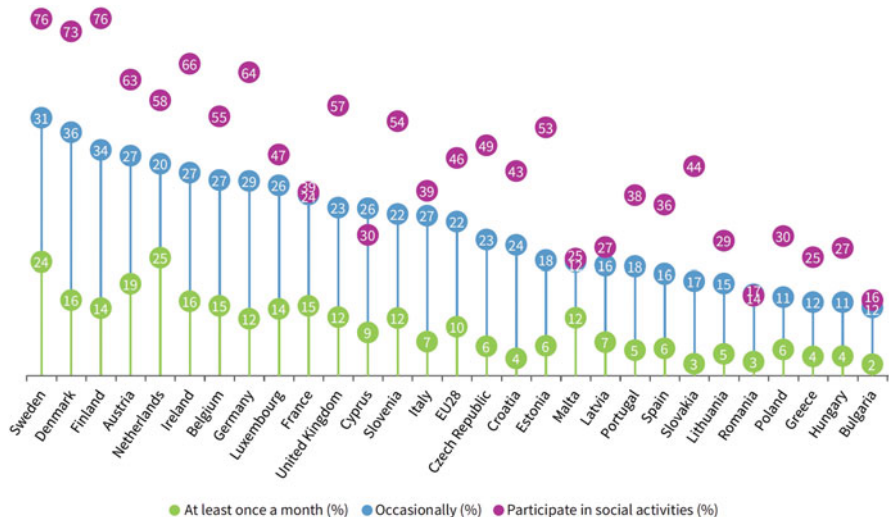


Fig. 1.1 Voluntary work in European countries (Eurofound, 2017, Fig. 34)

countries). The survey report devotes a separate chapter to voluntary work and organized social activities (Eurofound, 2017). Although the numbers of people involved in voluntary work (see Fig. 1.1) vary greatly, the average is impressive: *One in three EU citizens (33%)* carried out some voluntary work during the previous 12 months—similar to that for 2011. Rates of volunteering range from 6% in political parties or trade unions to 19% in educational, cultural, sports, or professional organizations (op.cit., p. 94).

With regard to the social profile of volunteers, the picture that has been familiar in the literature for many years is evident: Rates of volunteering are in fact higher among the *employed* than among the unemployed in the EU as a whole—and consistently so at country level. Higher volunteering rates, whether occasional or regular, are also associated with a higher *level of educational attainment* and *higher income* (p. 95).

1.2.1 Trends in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland: From Formal to Informal Volunteering, Shorter Duration of Commitment, but Minor Changes in Gender Distribution

Germany, Austria, and Switzerland produce volunteer surveys based on population-representative *telephone interviews*. In Germany, the surveys (approximately 38,000 participants) have been conducted every five years since 1999. All findings reported here are from 2019 (see BMFSFJ, 2021). For Switzerland, data from the fourth wave

of the survey (about 5000 interviews) are available from 2019 (see Lamprecht et al., 2020); for Austria, from the third wave (about 4000 interviews) and the survey year 2016 (see BMASK, 2016). The three—predominantly German-speaking—countries have particular specifics but are nevertheless compared here, given their similarly pronounced engagement rates and survey instruments. *Germany* is one of the largest EU countries, with a resident population of about 83 million, of which about 14% are non-German citizens. *Austria* is home to around 8.6 million people, of which foreigners make up about 16%. *Switzerland*, which is not part of the EU and has three language regions, has a population of around 8.5 million, with foreigners making up around 25%.

In all three countries, a distinction is made between *formal volunteering* (carried out in associations and organizations) and *informal volunteering* (self-organized and carried out outside the home). The Swiss data reveal a trend that is also evident to a lesser extent in the other surveys: A shift in engagement (of 6%) from the formal to the informal sector. For the 55 to 74 age group, the ratio is 44%:52% (formal: informal) and even rises to 77% for informal neighborhood help for this age group (see: www.beisheim-stiftung.com). In the report from Germany, this observation reads as follows: “More and more committed people carry out their activities in informally organized frameworks, which generally have flatter hierarchical structures and require fewer management and board positions” (BMFSFJ, 2021, p. 40).

In Germany, approximately 17% of volunteers spent six or more hours per week on their commitment in 2019. Since 1999, there has been a *trend toward less time-intensive volunteering*: The proportion of volunteers who invest a lot of time in their volunteering activities (six or more hours per week) fell by 6%, while the proportion of those who invest significantly less time (up to two hours per week) rose by 9% over the same period. The same trend can be seen in Austria and Switzerland.

In connection with the participation rate, the *gender distribution* is also interesting. Whereas in Germany, the first four waves (from 1999 to 2014) consistently showed higher engagement among men (in 1999, the difference was 10%), in 2019, there is no longer a statistically significant difference, this also being true for the other two countries. Furthermore, in all three countries, *women are more involved in the informal sector*, and men are more involved in the formal sector, with differences of between five and seven percent. Ultimately, these differences in distribution reflect the classic, rather conservative division of roles.

1.2.2 *Persistent Inequalities: Income and Education*

Differences in volunteering are evident—in all volunteer surveys known to us—not only in gender distribution, but also in age groups, between rural and urban populations, employment status, occupational status, and household income or form. To put it in a nutshell: *the more well-off individuals are, the higher the participation rate*. This is particularly evident for educational attainment (which is

supportive for voluntary work) and, nowadays, migration background (less supportive).

As an example, the difference between persons with the highest and lowest *educational attainment* given for selection is a full 25% in Germany for the survey year 2019 (high education = 51%, low education = 26%). While in Austria in 2016, persons with compulsory education volunteered at 21%. Many experts and professionals also undertake voluntary work within their field of expertise. This unequal participation rate is additionally evident for the two sectors: Fewer people with only compulsory basic education are engaged in the formal sector. This means for participation rates in the formal sector for Switzerland in 2019: people with low educational attainment: 21%, with high educational attainment: 40%. In the informal sector, the ratio is 32% vs. 44%.

1.2.3 Volunteering Fulfills Many Functions: Wanting to Make a Difference “In a Small Way”

From the beginnings of psychological research on volunteers to the present day, the question of volunteers’ motivations, attitudes, and motives has been and remains central. No volunteer survey, therefore, refrains from also asking about motivations for getting involved. The motivation has changed little over the last 10 years or more: *Fun* is high on the list, which, however, should be more aptly described as “enjoyment of the respective voluntary activity;” this is at least confirmed by self-reporting and qualitative interview data (see Wehner & Güntert, 2015). Consistently across all three countries, the three primary reasons are the desire: (1) to get together with other people, (2) to help or to do something useful: *Wanting to make a difference “in a small way.”*

The fact that volunteering or helping one’s neighbors might also benefit one’s professional life is a relevant consideration for just under a quarter of volunteers in Austria in 2016. Sixteen percent of those involved also expect their unpaid commitment to help them enter a profession or paid employment. Whereas in 2006, only one in 12 people expected to benefit from volunteering when starting a career, by 2016, this proportion had risen to one in five. This is a trend that has also been evident in other volunteer surveys in recent years (see Freitag et al., 2016; Simonson et al., 2017; Stadelmann et al., 2010): In the working society, volunteering is becoming increasingly *relevant for career biographies* and is now also frequently listed in the curriculum vitae. As we can see, the boundaries between work and non-work are shifting, and this has implications for civic engagement, neighborhood help, and voluntary association activities (see Rosenkranz & Görtler, 2002).

1.3 Volunteer Work as a Meaningful Activity

We understand volunteer work as a meaningful activity. There is now a wealth of research on the concept of *meaningful work*. The approaches lead back to ideas that shaped science at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the Russian activity theory (Alekssei N. Leont'ev)¹ and its social-cultural view (Lev S. Vygotski); on the other hand, the phenomenological thinking in German philosophy and sociology (e.g., Alfred Schütz, Hannah Arendt) with Arendt's plea for a "*vita activa*" as a legacy (Arendt, 1958: *The Human Condition*): Only in deliberate social practice, i.e., *vita activa*) can we do justice and dignity to ourselves and the human condition at the same time. In the context of this book, we should add that meaningful work as *vita activa* is also a means of maintaining good health.

For our context, we would like to present volunteer from the perspective of research on the *meaning of life* (Schnell, 2020). According to this, meaningful work is characterized by four peculiarities: significance, purpose, coherence, and belonging. Schnell and Hoffmann (2020, p. 2) provide the following explanations:

- *Significance* means the "perceived impact of personal action, or non-action."
- *Purpose* refers to the "availability of a direction, serving as a compass when it comes to making decisions and choosing goals."
- *Coherence* describes a "sense of comprehensibility and consistency."
- *Belonging* means "perceiving oneself as part of something larger than the self, as having a place in this world."

With reference to volunteer work, we would like to make two additions. Firstly, volunteer work—as meaningful work—is "*temporally complex*" (Bailey & Madden, 2017): with its own temporal work rhythm, allowing for personal control of time, for working slowly but diligently, etc. The main resource we invest in volunteer work is our time, and this, unlike money or reputation, is in principle non-renewable.

Secondly, volunteer work is *deeply social*. Bailey et al. (2019) call this a paradox of meaningful work: One must be with others to get to oneself: "meaningfulness arises in the context of self-fulfillment and self-actualization, yet it is dependent on the 'other' for its realization." (p. 490). The deeply social character of volunteer work can be very aptly represented by how Karl E. Weick (1995) described sensemaking in organizations: It is grounded in a person's *identity construction*; it is driven by *plausibility* rather than accuracy; it is *ongoing* (now, retroactively, in constant adaptation); and it is *enactive*: With volunteer work, the world is set up as it should be ("enacted"), even if it is still far from any notion of perfection.

Volunteer work means the donation of meaning by personal activity, and—according to Arendt—a "disclosure of the agent in speech and action" (Arendt, 1958, chap. 24). We close with three quotations, which prove representatively, for

¹The work of Theo Wehner's Zurich research group (and Wehner & Güntert, 2015) was based on the activity theory of Leont'ev (Leontjew, 1981, 1982; cf. Wehner et al., 2015), which, however, is not available in English.

many, how much volunteer work turns around the motive of meaningful work and enactive sensemaking:

- “I can make myself useful anywhere. But here I get something back that I usually don’t get so easily. What it really is, I can’t say so easily—and I don’t have to” (43-year-old coordinator of a hospice group).
- “To experience meaning is what I am all about! If I were paid for the work, I would no longer do it, then I would have to make comparisons, deal with performance and who knows what else” (64-year-old volunteer at a university hospital).
- “[. . .] if the whole thing doesn’t make sense to me anymore, then I can and would stop immediately; I don’t need to know what makes sense to someone else—I have a feeling for it” (58-year-old volunteer with the Swiss Red Cross).

Meaningful Work: A Study on Firefighters A key difference between volunteer work and gainful employment is that volunteer work is usually unpaid, while pay and the accompanying livelihood security is a feature and important motive for gainful employment. Compensation seems to have a strong influence on motives, as empirical findings show that motive structures differ among volunteers once the commitment is remunerated (Strubel et al., 2016). In this context, Lehmann et al. (2018) investigated and compared the *experience of meaning in life* in gainful employment and volunteer work using the example of firefighters. The central question was whether there are differences in the experiences of meaning when the activities in gainful employment and volunteer work are the same or at least similar in many aspects.

For the study, 45 professional and 100 volunteer firefighters from Germany were surveyed. To investigate meaning in life, the study participants answered the *Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Fragebogen zu Lebensbedeutungen und Lebenssinn: Schnell & Becker, 2007)* that distinguishes 26 sources of meanings. The results of the study are clear (see Fig. 1.2): Although professional and volunteer firefighters operate in a similar activity environment and even have more similarities than differences in their motivational structures and job satisfaction (Kals et al., 2016), the results clearly show differences in the expressions of some sources of meanings. *That is, volunteer firefighters are more likely to draw on more diverse sources of meanings than professional firefighters.*

Particularly noteworthy is the source of meaning “*generativity.*” Generativity as a central developmental task describes the feeling of leaving a trace in life; a reverberation that lasts beyond one’s own death. Generativity also characterizes the ability to take responsibility and care for subsequent generations. If the individual does not succeed in mastering the developmental task of generativity, he or she falls into a health-threatening stagnation (Erikson, 1982), which is often described and perceived as a midlife crisis.

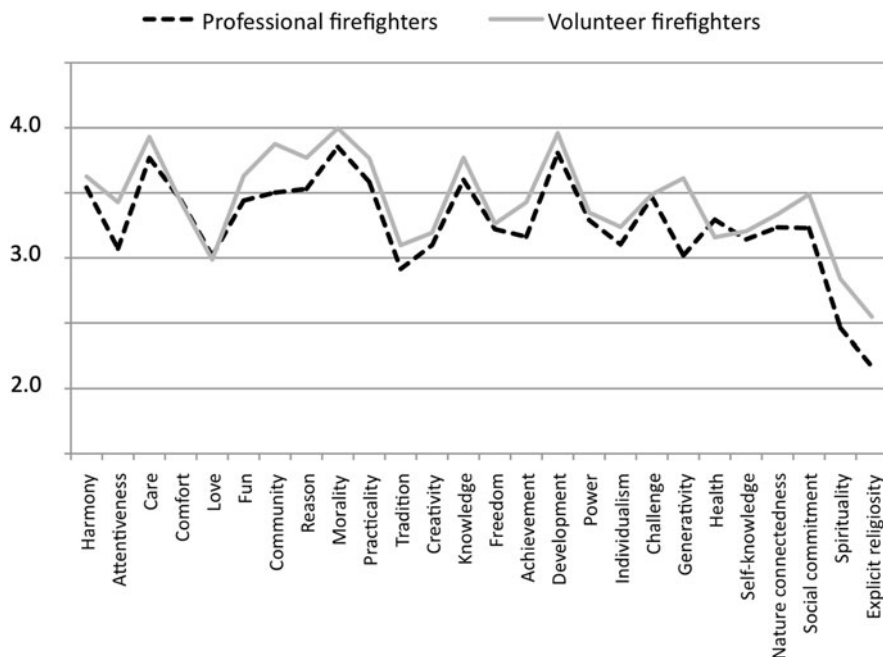


Fig. 1.2 Experience of meaning in life among professional vs. volunteering firefighters (data from Lehmann et al., 2018). Values range between one (least) and five (most)

1.4 The Voluntary Engagement of Older People

For various reasons, high expectations are associated with the voluntary commitment of older people. From a sociopolitical perspective, the volunteer work of this population group can be understood *as a valuable resource*, as older people have freer access to their time and can contribute a wealth of experience. Furthermore, volunteering is seen *as an opportunity for older people*, as it offers opportunities to participate in social life, to experience social inclusion as well as recognition, and to be able to engage in meaningful activity. It is therefore not surprising that in Austria, too, the highest participation rate of 57% occurred within the 60–69 age group, and that 43% of 70–79 year olds still volunteer (BMASK, 2016, p. 17).

Furthermore, the engagement of older people benefits not only volunteer organizations and society as a whole but also the individuals themselves. A large number of studies have shown that volunteering by older people is associated with better physical and mental health (Li & Ferraro, 2005; Luoh & Herzog, 2002), lower probability of illness, better mental well-being, greater life satisfaction (Onyx & Warburton, 2003), lower mortality (Harris & Thoresen, 2005), and better general well-being (Baker et al., 2005). This list includes aspects that people want for old age or need for successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

A meta-analysis (Okun & Schultz, 2003), which included all available and comparable studies, showed that in old age certain functions are indeed mentioned more often or less often than by younger volunteers. Above all, the career function, but also the experience function, i.e., the desire to learn new things, becomes less important with increasing age. In turn, the importance of the *social adaptation function* increases. This means that people become more active voluntarily with increasing age because their circles of acquaintances and friends are also active voluntarily. This can be explained by the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999), which states that as people age, they become increasingly aware that their lifespan is limited. As a result, older people begin to focus more on the present and not just the future, which results in a shift in primary goals in life. Close social acquaintances become more important, while the pursuit of success and the acquisition of new knowledge and experiences become less important (Fung et al., 2001).

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