

## Chapter 4

# Volunteering as a Psychosocial Resource

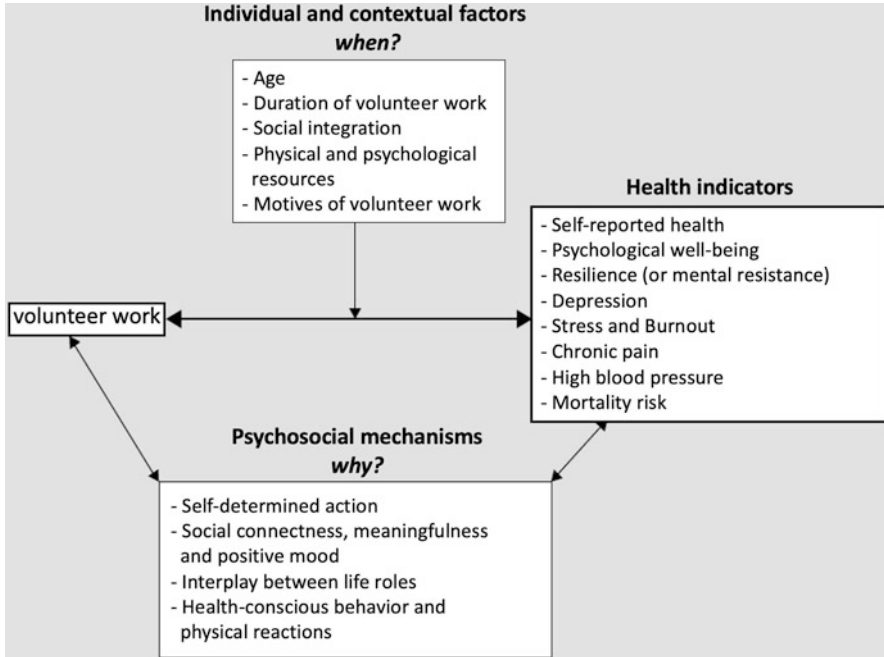


It may seem paradoxical that working without remuneration can contribute to well-being, yet this is precisely what has been observed in empirical studies: Volunteer work can act as a *psychosocial resource*. In order to understand this rationale, it is important to see volunteering within the context of the salutogenic model and role theories. This helps explain how volunteering can:

- Contribute to maintaining health and promoting well-being.
- Complement or compensate other areas of activity, especially paid employment.
- Contribute to a better work–life balance.

### 4.1 The Salutogenic Approach to Volunteering and Health

The term *salutogenesis* was first coined by Aaron Antonovsky (1979) and is a framework that stands in stark contrast to the traditional, pathogenic approach to health and medicine. Whereas pathogenesis focuses on what makes individuals ill, salutogenesis delves into factors that help them thrive, even in the face of adversity. Such factors are primarily of the psychosocial type, where the different environments a person navigates play a key role. In sum, psychosocial resources can be defined as the individual differences and interpersonal characteristics of the environment that have beneficial effects on mental and physical health outcomes (Taylor & Broffman, 2011). At the core of the salutogenic model stands the concept of *sense of coherence* and its three pillars (Antonovsky, 1987): This is the idea that stress reduction and health promotion can be achieved when our environments are perceived as structured and predictable (*comprehensibility*), we feel capable to meet the demands posed by the environment (*manageability*), and these demands are seen as challenges worthy of our effort (*meaningfulness*). The salutogenic model has ignited



**Fig. 4.1** Illustrating the context and causal factors for volunteer work and health. The double arrows leave the direction of causality open, i.e., bidirectional influences are considered. Single arrows indicate how contextual factors influence the relationship between volunteer work and health. (Source: Figure 7.1 from Ramos & Wehner, 2015)

new interest in recent years (Bauer et al., 2020), and the link between sense of coherence and health/well-being has found empirical support (Eriksson, 2017).

It is therefore clear that volunteering can be seen as a psychosocial resource from a salutogenic perspective: As a self-determined activity, we expect volunteers to experience a sense of control/autonomy over their tasks and meaningfulness in their engagement. Interpersonal characteristics, such as feedback, recognition, and social support, translate into enhanced individual factors such as a sense of competency, mastery, and belongingness, all of which strengthen an individual's psychosocial resources.

However, the relationship between volunteering and well-being is far from being a linear one. Whereas some factors serve as psychosocial mechanisms that explain *how* and *why* this relationship exists, certain individual and contextual factors explain *when*, or under which circumstances, volunteering and well-being are correlated. Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the different mediating and moderating factors considered in the scientific literature. We hereby provide some empirical evidence based primarily on longitudinal studies reported in Ramos and Wehner (2015), as well as more recent studies.

*Psychosocial mechanisms:* Why, or how, is volunteering associated with health and well-being? The central explanatory approach is found in the aforementioned salutogenic approach as well as in the theory of self-determination, which has been previously presented in connection with the motives of volunteer work (Sect. 2.3). Weinstein and Ryan (2010), for example, have laid out a multi-method series of studies that show how self-determined autonomous prosocial behavior can influence well-being for both the helper and the recipient. In addition to self-determination theory (see Sect. 2.3) and salutogenesis, the *role-enhancement* thesis (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) provides a framework for how the volunteer role can spillover to other domains, compensating or complementing other life roles. Some of the key findings for mediating effects are (cf. Ramos & Wehner, 2015):

- Volunteering can lead to *social connectedness* and a sense of belonging, which in turn can mitigate depressive symptoms, according to longitudinal studies (Musick & Wilson, 2003; Russell et al., 2019).
- Studies have shown that volunteering can bring about a sense of *meaningfulness* in our actions and the feeling that “our work matters.” This, in turn, translates into psychological well-being and improved self-rated health (e.g., Piliavin & Siegl, 2007). Recognition from others further underscores that sense of meaningfulness, yielding beneficial changes in well-being such as lower ratings in depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction (Matthews & Nazroo, 2021).
- In the long run, volunteer work is associated with increased happiness, higher self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, and more successful accomplishment of tasks, which correlate with *positive mood*, and lead to higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001) and lower cardiovascular risk according to a randomized controlled trial (Schreier et al., 2013).
- Volunteers report higher satisfaction with their *marriage and family life* (Jirovec, 2005).
- Volunteer work correlates positively with *paid work engagement*, which in turn correlates with better work performance (Rodell, 2013).
- Older volunteers are more functional in other life domains and *less prone to depression* than non-volunteers of the same age (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005).
- Volunteers acquire better *coping* mechanisms for work and everyday life and build stronger social networks that enable them to deal successfully with their living conditions (Luoh & Herzog, 2002).

*Individual and contextual factors:* Under which circumstances does volunteering have a positive impact on health and well-being? As stated earlier, volunteering does not automatically equate to better health. In fact, recent studies have questioned this thesis, as they have found no causal effects for volunteering, e.g., when controlling for personality traits such as neuroticism (King et al., 2014) or in a sample of students doing community service (Whillans et al., 2016). Several individual and contextual factors have been studied within the field of volunteering and some have been discussed in Chap. 3. We now present some of the evidence on moderating factors as it pertains to health-related outcomes (cf. Ramos & Wehner, 2015):

- *Age of volunteers:* A consistent pattern observed in research is that older volunteers seem to benefit more in terms of health-related outcomes than younger volunteers (Chi et al., 2021; Grimm et al., 2007; Hansen et al., 2018; Kim & Pai, 2010; Van Willigen, 2000).
- *Duration of volunteering:* Continuous volunteering over longer period of time is more often associated with better health-related outcomes in comparison to sporadic or short-lived engagement (Jiang et al., 2020; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Parkinson et al., 2010).
- *Motives for volunteering:* Other-oriented volunteering is more often associated with better health outcomes such as social well-being, lower depression, and better overall mental health (Yeung et al., 2018) than when the motives are self-oriented. Konrath et al. (2012) even found a relationship between volunteering and mortality rate four years later, with volunteers living longer than non-volunteers, but only when their motives were other-oriented.
- *Social integration/Physical and psychological resources:* While the social integration experienced in volunteering can cultivate psychological well-being, it is also true that pre-existing individual differences in social, physical, and psychological resources can also impact the effect of volunteering on health. Piliavin and Siegl (2007), for instance, found that people with lower social integration at baseline benefited the most from volunteering. A recent study also found lower suicide risk for volunteers with good mental health at baseline, but not for those with poor mental health (Rosato et al., 2019). Finally, volunteers with chronic diseases reported higher emotional stability and resilience than non-volunteers or volunteers without chronic conditions.

## 4.2 The Interaction Between Paid Work and Volunteering

In agreement with Greenhaus and Powell (2006), we assume that people can benefit from different, complementary roles in different areas of life (see Brauchli & Wehner, 2015). This can be explained by different psychological assumptions.

- *Additive model:* This concept suggests that experiences from different areas of life have additive effects on our well-being: Volunteer work can contribute to happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction in addition to volunteer work and other important areas of life and social roles.
- *Buffer model:* This approach suggests that participation in different areas of life can have a mutual, stress-buffering effect: Voluntary work has a high potential for such a buffering effect because it acts as a source of satisfaction and well-being for those who carry it out.
- *Synergistic model:* This variant suggests that the experiences we gain in one area of life (volunteering, hobbies) can generate benefits in other areas of life (gainful employment) in the sense of a transfer of positive experiences.

Although role theories (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) suggest that an increase in roles and areas of activity also leads to an increase in conflicts, we postulate that volunteer work has a rather positive overall effect in the interaction of different areas of life and see three reasons for this:

1. *Stress buffer potential:* Volunteer work can influence the perception of stressors. For example, in the course of volunteering, stressors in one's work or family environment may come to be considered as irrelevant, thereby having a reduced negative impact on health and well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Mojza and Sonnentag (2010) also found that volunteers may perceive potentially stressful situations as less relevant.
2. *Resource development potential:* Through their volunteer work, individuals can build resources such as social support, self-efficacy, and self-confidence (Brauchli et al., 2012, 2017). Not only can these be transferred directly to other areas of life (Hobfoll, 2011), but they also help to deal with stressors.
3. *Recovery potential:* Persons involved in volunteer work may show increased resilience, recovering more easily from stressful situations by regenerating their depleted resources through activity in another area of interest (Sonnentag & Zijlstra, 2006).

### 4.3 Work–Life Balance

The recent decades are characterized by considerable changes in social, economic, and technological structures. This change means that significant areas of life such as work, family, friends, hobbies, and formal/informal volunteer work have to be reconciled (see, e.g., Greenhaus & Allen, 2010). According to Brauchli and Wehner (2015), reconciliation means that the various areas of life are more- or less strongly separated (segmentation) or integrated (integration) depending on personal needs, goals, and circumstances. These preferences are not mutually exclusive, but can be either more- or less-pronounced, depending on life circumstances. If we are successful in this, we often speak of *work–life balance*, even though this term is misleading, as it excludes “work” from life and provides little nuance as to what “life” means (e.g., hobbies, volunteering, education, etc.).

Volunteer work is expected to have a positive impact on other areas of life and thus make a significant contribution to work–life balance. Nevertheless, the possibility should be considered that volunteer work could also prove to be a burden. On this question, Ketterer (2011) interviewed volunteers in England without parental responsibilities. The compatibility of different areas of life is also of great importance for this group of people, and the following statements can be considered typical.

- “My ideal career would be to do my job three days a week, then maybe one day a week in consulting and another day volunteering. That would give me something like a balance.”

- “I don’t like to have too much to do and the feeling that I won’t make it. But my volunteering alongside my work is something that I enjoy and it feels good.”
- “As long as the volunteer work comes in a package, so that I can integrate it, know how much time I have left, and I can say when I will be at home, then it is okay.”
- “I have to make sure that I don’t think about my work when I go in there; that I have a separation between my professional and my private life. That’s how I create that balance for myself.”

Data from the Swiss Household Panel (FORS, [n.d.](#)) show that the additional role of volunteering appears to reduce rather than increase compatibility problems (Brauchli & Wehner, 2015). Looking at the overall picture, there is an *inverted U-shaped relationship* between work–life balance and the frequency with which volunteer work is carried out: Volunteer work is perceived to be most beneficial at a rate of one to three times per month; if the frequency is higher or lower, volunteering is perceived as less beneficial to work–life balance.

Using an online questionnaire, employees in Switzerland were surveyed and information was obtained on their work–life balance, the demands and resources of their volunteer work, and their state of health (Ramos & Wehner, 2015). The extent of volunteer work correlated positively with self-reported health, psychological well-being, and work commitment and negatively with stress and burnout. It is interesting to note that volunteers rate their work–life balance as better than non-volunteers, which is reflected in better health. In an online survey of 746 Swiss workers (264 of which were volunteers), Ramos et al. (2015) found further support for the notion that assuming additional roles does not equate with more conflict.

#### 4.4 Event Volunteering, Voluntourism

To conclude our chapter on volunteering as a psychosocial resource, we want to draw attention to a new phenomenon where the line between work and vacation is blurred: event volunteering, voluntourism. Volunteers are increasingly looking for forms of engagement that fit their biographies, promise spectacular experiences, and address social problems that are “in” at the moment (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Therefore, volunteering becomes less predictable and loses continuity (cf. Safrit & Merrill, 2000). In particular, three developments toward new forms of volunteering can be observed.

1. *From continuous volunteering to episodic and event volunteering:* When people volunteer, they usually do so regularly and over a long period of time. This image of the “long-term volunteer” often obscures the fact that a considerable amount of volunteer work is done in one-off projects, at major events, and at local events.
2. *From local engagement to global voluntourism:* Rising incomes, growing mobility, and new communication possibilities made worldwide tourism a central

social phenomenon of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s, alternative forms of tourism have been developing, referred to as ecological, sustainable, or even “soft” depending on their orientation. One of the fastest-growing forms of alternative tourism is voluntourism. Voluntourism means the combination of tourist travel with volunteer work and usually takes place abroad.

3. *From stationary to virtual volunteering*: Within the last 10 years, the Internet has become a central place of information exchange, value creation, and social interaction. This raises the question of the extent to which prosocial behaviors of the “offline world” are translated into virtual forms or replaced by them (Sproull et al., 2005). The term “virtual volunteering” refers to forms of volunteering that are fully or partially mediated via the Internet (Ellis & Cravens, 2000).

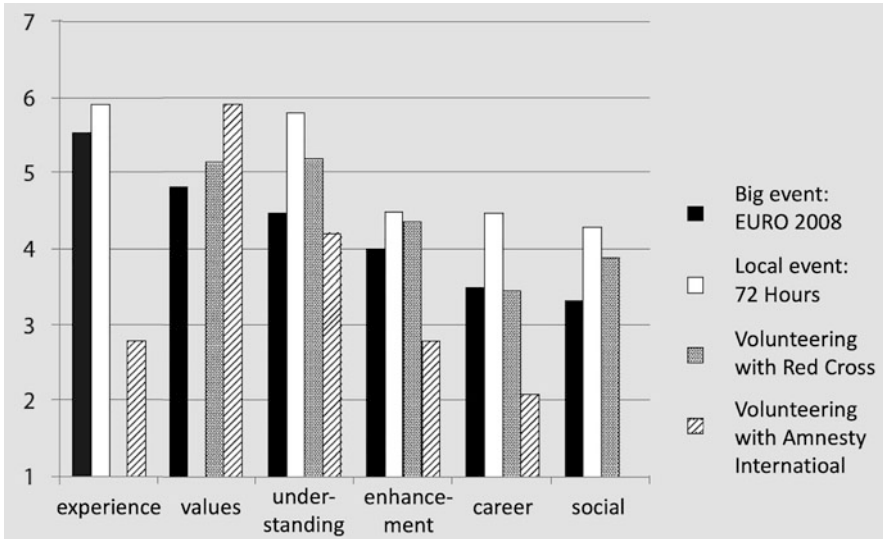
Based on these preliminary considerations, we conducted two studies to investigate the motivation of *event volunteers*. The first was a large-scale event, the 2008 European Football Championships, and the second was a local, community-based event, the “Action 72 Hours.” We used the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) by Clary et al. (1998) to assess the motivation of the volunteers. We newly added the *experience function*. Instead, we omitted the protection function; so far, this function has not been found to be relevant in any study in the event context.

The “Action 72 Hours” is a social action by youth associations in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, which took place in Switzerland for the second time in 2010. The participating action groups each chose or were given a charitable social, ecological, intercultural, or political task to solve (after a phase of preparation) on a specific date within 72 hours. In 2010, more than 28,000 children and young people were involved in these actions. We interviewed 321 group leaders of these actions before and after their involvement.

EURO 2008 was one of the biggest events in Switzerland in recent years. We surveyed 870 “Host City Volunteers” of the German-speaking venues in Switzerland. These volunteers were mainly deployed for public viewing, traffic services, and guest services.

Figure 4.2 shows the importance of the different functions of volunteering for volunteers at the EURO 2008 tournament and the “Action 72 Hours.” For comparison, where collected, the values of traditional volunteers of the Swiss Red Cross (525 respondents, mean age 47 years) and Amnesty International Switzerland (285 respondents, mean age 48 years) are given. The reported differences are statistically significant.

First of all, it becomes apparent that the *experience function* is the most important function or motivation for event volunteers. For classic volunteers involved with Amnesty International, on the other hand, it hardly plays a role. The social adaptation function, on the other hand, plays a clearly weaker role for EURO 2008 volunteers than for classic Red Cross volunteers. The commitment of friends and relatives, and the pressure to do the same, thus seems to be a less important motive for volunteering at major events. Interestingly, among the volunteers of the local event “Action 72 Hours,” a manifestation of the social adaptation function is found,



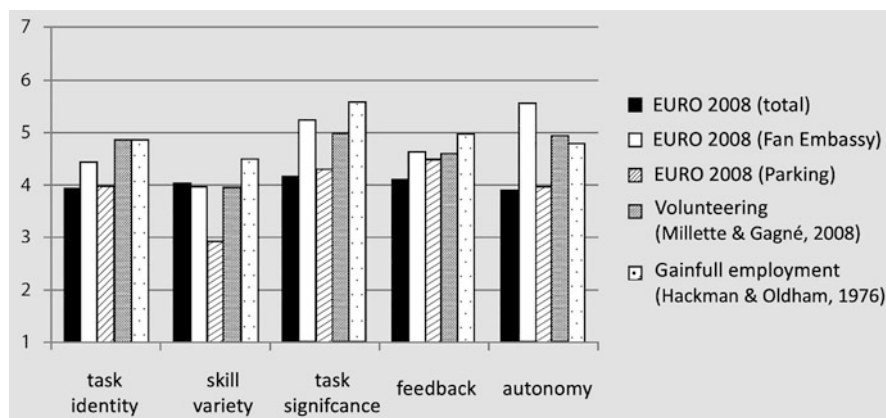
**Fig. 4.2** Comparison of the importance of the functions of volunteering (cf. Clary et al., 1998) among event volunteers and classic volunteers

which is even higher than that among classical volunteers. One explanation may be that volunteers involved in “Action 72 Hours” or similar initiatives have a very high attachment to their community. Interestingly, career considerations are not generally more pronounced among event volunteers. Volunteering had a particularly strong career function for the group leaders of the “Action 72 Hours.”

In addition to the question of *why* (i.e., motivation), psychological research into voluntary work is increasingly concerned with the question of *what*, i.e., the design and organization of voluntary work. Even though volunteer work is not gainful employment, since it is unpaid, it is still work in the sense that it could be paid under other circumstances. Therefore, in our survey of EURO 2008 volunteers, we also recorded the five job characteristics specified in Hackman and Oldham’s (1976) Job Characteristics Model. All reported differences are statistically significant.

Figure 4.3 shows that the design of the volunteer activities at the EURO 2008 across all activity characteristics turns out to be *less motivating* than in activities that are usually found in gainful employment. Compared to traditional volunteer work, the activities at EURO 2008 are also less well designed, with the exception of the diversity dimension. However, there is a large variance between the activities. The volunteers who worked in the so-called Fan Embassies (information and help for visitors to the EURO 2008 tournament) report a very motivating activity design, while the volunteers in the Parking task area report a very less motivating activity design.

But is the design of volunteer activities at all significant for event volunteers? Studies in the context of classic volunteering have shown that the design of volunteer activities has an influence on the satisfaction of volunteers and their willingness to

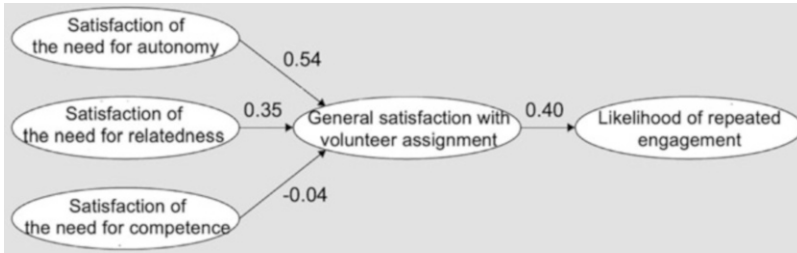


**Fig. 4.3** Comparison of activity characteristics according to Hackman and Oldham (1976) for event volunteering, traditional volunteering, and gainful employment

remain involved. Studies of this nature have been scarce for event-based volunteering (Doherty, 2009). Therefore, in our analysis of volunteering at EURO 2008, we also investigated which activity characteristics could be considered success factors. For this purpose, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, as presented in Neufeind et al. (2013). First, it was shown that *activity characteristics have a significant influence on volunteer satisfaction in the event context as well*. A good 37% of the variance in satisfaction could be explained.

The character of volunteering as an experience emerges strongly when we consider *voluntourism*. Every year, tens of thousands of people, most of them young, travel abroad to do volunteer work in social institutions, agricultural initiatives, or nature reserves. We see a new form of volunteering emerging here: *Voluntourism*. There are already some findings on the motivation of voluntourists. In one of the first studies, conducted by Rehberg (2005), people who had inquired at Caritas Switzerland and the Center for Information, Counseling, and Education (cinfo) about possible short-term assignments abroad, i.e., who were potential volunteers, were asked about their motivation. Rehberg identified 12 motives, which were assigned to three groups:

1. To achieve something positive for others. This group includes the motives of helping, wanting to bring about change, wanting to realize ethical values, and feeling useful.
2. Striving for something new. This group includes the motives of seeking intercultural exchange, the desire for variety, becoming familiar with a new culture, contact as well as learning and expanding language skills.
3. The search for the self. This group includes the motives of personality development, discovering and exceeding personal limits, and wanting to develop professionally.



**Fig. 4.4** Overview of regression analyses: Satisfaction of basic psychological needs as a prerequisite for the satisfaction and continuation intention of voluntourists. The numbers “0.35,” “0.40,” and “0.54” indicate a strong influence or correlation

Hudson and Inkson (2006) found a similar mix of altruism, adventurousness, and self-actualization.

As part of Kuhn’s (2013) study, 54 Germans and Swiss individuals who had volunteered abroad as part of “Service Civil International” (SCI) during the previous three years were asked to complete Clary et al.’s (1998) VFI. Within this framework, we also examined the extent to which the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in the context of self-determination theory (i.e., the needs for autonomy, competence, and relationship during engagement) determined volunteers’ overall satisfaction with their engagement as well as their likelihood of repeated engagement. Regression analyses showed that in our sample of voluntourists, *fulfillment of the needs for autonomy and relationship had a significant impact on volunteers’ overall satisfaction* (see Fig. 4.4). However, the fulfillment of the need for competence had no influence.

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