

In the Footsteps of Kurt Lewin: Practical Theorizing, Action Research, and the Psychology of Social Action

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How and why do people become actively involved in doing good for others and for society by taking action to respond to social problems? Such involvement can take the form of participation in volunteerism and philanthropy, community groups and neighborhood organizations, and social activism and political movements. To understand the dynamics of these processes of social action, I draw on coordinated programs of basic and applied research, conducted in field and laboratory settings, to illustrate the complex interplay between features of persons and properties of their environments in determining why some individuals become involved in social action, what sustains their involvement over time, and the consequences of such action for individuals and for society. Then, building on the messages of these programs of research, and the theoretical perspectives guiding them, I consider implications for social policy issues of relevance to individuals, groups, and society as well as the ways in which the social sciences can contribute to the effective functioning of society and the well-being of its citizens.

It is an honor and a privilege, and a great delight, to receive the Kurt Lewin Memorial Award of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). I am thrilled to be here with you at this, the 7th biennial SPSSI convention, among friends and colleagues. Preparing this talk has been a time for reflection

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Much of the research described in this article is the product of my long-standing and ongoing collaborations with Allen M. Omoto and with E. Gil Clary, and has been supported over the years by, among other sources, the Gannett Foundation, the American Foundation for AIDS Research, the Aspen Institute, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Science Foundation, and the National Institute of Mental Health.

on the Lewinian tradition and the lessons that I have learned from following in the footsteps of Kurt Lewin.

The Legacy of Kurt Lewin

Let me begin with a few of Kurt Lewin's most familiar, and most often quoted, words of wisdom that are parts of his legacy.

- “Every psychological event depends upon the state of the person and at the same time on the environment, although their relative importance is different in different cases” (Lewin, 1936, p. 12). So influential is this proposition, often expressed in the famous formula $B = f(P,E)$, that Lewin is seen as a founding parent of both personality psychology and social psychology, and this proposition is at the heart of interactionist approaches to integrating influences of the person and the situation in the study of personality and social behavior.
- “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). This proposition is a fundamental tenet of the action research tradition pioneered by Lewin (1946, 1947). In this enterprise, basic research and applied research are linked in a reciprocal relationship, mutually complementing and enriching one another.
- “If you want to truly understand something, try to change it” (Lewin, 1951). This proposition captures the essence of the tradition of experimentation, both as it is practiced in basic research (to test hypotheses about causality) and in applied research (to document the effects of interventions).

These three propositions help to define the missions of SPSSI and its concerns with social science and social issues. These propositions also serve as guiding principles for much research on social issues. Today, I wish to talk with you about some of this work, specifically attempts to understand how and why people become involved in doing good for others and for society by taking action to respond to social problems. In so doing, I hope to illustrate some of the ways that basic research in the social sciences can address some of the practical problems that confront society.

Problems Facing Society

To be sure, there are many problems facing the world—conflict and violence, prejudice and discrimination, poverty and hunger, to name just a few. There is a sense in which these are fundamentally human problems—problems caused by the actions of humans, and that only the actions of humans can solve. One way that people can address the problems of society is through a set of activities known

collectively as *social action* (for a review of theory and research on social action, see Snyder & Omoto, 2007).

What Is Social Action?

In many ways, working alone and working together, people take action for the benefit of other people, their communities, and society at large. They donate money to help charitable causes do their good works. They serve as volunteers to provide services to those who cannot care for themselves. They join neighborhood groups and community organizations and, where none exist, take the initiative to found them. They vote in elections and they work on political campaigns. They engage in lobbying and advocacy to push for legislation of concern to them. They participate in social movements dedicated to such issues as human rights or world peace. These activities are all instances of people seeking to address the problems of society by engaging in social action.

The Intrigue of Social Action

Social action is intriguing for a variety of reasons, many of which engage key features of the Lewinian tradition. First of all, it involves real people engaging in real actions on behalf of real causes, often doing so over extended periods of time and at some personal cost and with some sacrifice. Further, social action represents a bridge between individual and collective concerns, a way for people to join their own interests with the interests of other people, to bond with their communities, and to become engaged with the larger society. As such, social action provides a real world laboratory for asking and answering questions about when and why people act for the good of others and for the benefit of society—laboratories for working within the Lewinian tradition of action research.

Social action is intriguing for another reason. For, as much as social action is highly valued (after all, it is rather hard to disagree with the idea of making the world a better place), there are no laws that mandate social action, no rules or commandments that dictate that one must be a volunteer, that one must donate to charity, or even (in this country) that one must vote. Rather, when people become involved in social action, they do so because they choose to do so and because they want to do so. As such, social action provides opportunities to understand the psychology of volitional phenomena, undertaken on the initiative of individuals and groups without the requirement or the obligation to become involved.

Moreover, social action is intriguing to me as a psychologist because it engages my dual identities as a personality psychologist and as a social psychologist. For, social action is both an individual phenomenon in that it involves the actions of individuals, reflecting their own values, motives, and personalities (and, hence, of concern to me as a personality psychologist) and a social phenomenon in that

it often is engaged in by groups of people who band together to perform activities intended to serve a collective good (and, thus, of concern to me as a social psychologist). Accordingly, social action provides rich opportunities to bring together the perspectives of personality and social psychology in a distinctively Lewinian fashion.

Why Does Social Action Occur?

Clearly, social action occurs, both at the level of individual behaviors (such as charitable giving, volunteering, and voting) and at the level of collective actions (such as community organizations, political campaigns, and social movements). But, in many ways, social action is a rather curious phenomenon. For a variety of reasons, social action simply should not occur. There is, for example, no press of circumstances, no bonds of obligation, and no requirement that people involve themselves in the affairs of their communities and society. Moreover, it is effortful, and it has opportunity costs, potentially taking people away from their work, their leisure, their friends, and their families. So, the big question is: Why does social action occur? Why do people get involved in social action in the first place? And, why do so they stay involved, often doing so for extended periods of time? The question of “why” is the question of motivation—a question that cries out for a psychological explanation.

The Role of Motivation

Across diverse forms of social action, investigators have focused on the role of motivations in understanding why people engage in it (for a review, see Snyder & Omoto, 2007). To some extent, this emphasis reflects the fact that many of the features of social action are characteristics of motivated forms of action. That social action is entered into freely and without obligation, that people actively seek out opportunities to get involved, that they persist in their involvement over extended periods of time and in the face of personal costs, that they often pursue multiple routes to reach the same ends of doing good—all of these features seem to be those of a motivated phenomenon.

In this spirit, researchers have searched for motivations that move people to seek out opportunities to initiate social action, and that sustain their actions over time. Some of these motivations are personal and some of them are social. That is, in accord with Lewin’s famous formula, $B = f(P, E)$, some motivations come from within the person (in the form of needs, goals, purposes, and motives that move people to action) and others come from the social contexts in which individuals operate (including the influences of other people, whether acting as individuals or groups, that lead people to take action).

Let us examine some of these personal and social sources of motivation, and their interplay. And, let us do so in the context of a form of social action in which the role of motivation has been extensively studied. That form of social action is volunteerism (for a review of theory and research on volunteerism, see Snyder & Omoto, *in press*). Every year, millions upon millions of people volunteer. These volunteers provide (among other services) companionship to the lonely, tutoring to the illiterate, counseling to the troubled, and health care to the sick. In the United States alone, it is estimated that some 61 million people or close to 30% of the US adult population volunteered at least once during 2005–2006 (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2008). These legions of adult volunteers are joined by substantial numbers of young volunteers (in fact, high school volunteering recently reached its highest levels in the past 50 years) and elderly volunteers (one of the great “growth sectors” in volunteerism). Whereas the United States has long been marked by relatively high rates of volunteerism, voluntary action can be found in countries throughout the world (e.g., Allik & Realo, 2004; Curtis, Baer, & Grabb, 2001; Curtis, Grabb, & Baer, 1992; Dekker & Halman, 2003; Flanagan, Bowes, Johnson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; Van Vugt, Snyder, Tyler, & Biel, 2000) with volunteerism on a global scale being promoted by many organizations, including the United Nations through its UN Volunteers program (2008) and World Volunteer Web activity (2008).

Volunteerism is an important source of helping. The helping and services of volunteers are often provided on a sustained and ongoing basis, and they frequently fill gaps in services and programs that support individuals and communities. According to one estimate, volunteers contribute over 15 billion hours of volunteer services each year; with a monetary value of some 240 billion dollars (Independent Sector, 2001). Not only does volunteering deliver benefits to individuals and communities in need of the services of volunteers, but volunteering delivers benefits to volunteers themselves, including positive effects on self-esteem (Yogev & Ronen, 1982), academic achievement (Osguthorpe & Scruggs, 1986), and personal efficacy and confidence (Yates & Youniss, 1996). More generally, helping behavior, and volunteerism in particular, have also been linked to better health, greater optimism, and longer life for those who offer assistance to others (e.g., see Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; House, 2001; House, Robbins, & Metzner, 1982; Midlarsky & Kahana, 2007; Post, 2007; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Wheeler, Gorey, & Greenblatt, 1998). However, volunteerism is also, at times, associated with more negatively toned experiences, including stress, burnout, and stigmatization (e.g., Snyder, Omoto, & Crain, 1999).

Volunteerism is also a special form of helping. Like many forms of social action, the actions of volunteers are—just that—voluntary, performed on the basis of the actor’s free will without coercion or bonds of obligation; as such, volunteerism differs from the helping that occurs when, say, a person provides care for an aging parent or a sick spouse. Moreover, volunteering to provide services

for others involves some amount of deliberation and planning (volunteers must decide not only whether to help, but also where to help, when to help, and how to help); as such, acts of volunteering are not reflexive acts of assistance such as those that occur when bystanders respond to emergencies. In addition, volunteering typically extends over time—weeks, months, and years—rather than being limited to one-time special events (such as walks or runs for charity). In addition, the acts of volunteering are typically undertaken without expectation of material compensation or as part of one's job; as such, there is what may appear to be (and perhaps actually be) a self-sacrificing, virtuous, selfless, and altruistic quality to volunteerism. Finally, volunteers usually give their time to organizations that seek to assist causes and people who desire help and even seek it. For further discussion of the defining and characteristic features of volunteerism and its relations to other forms of helping and prosocial behavior, see Snyder and Omoto (in press), Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, and Schroeder (2005), and Piliavin and Charng (1990).

The prevalence of volunteerism, its conceptual importance for understanding the nature of helping, and its practical significance as a way in which individuals work to address social problems, all help to define it as an important social issue, worthy of basic and applied scientific inquiry. And, the key question in such scientific inquiry is: Why does volunteerism occur?

The easy answer to this question, of course, and one that is intuitively appealing, is that it is a matter of values—the values and ideals of service to others and to society. And, to some extent, it is a matter of values. Surveys of public opinion consistently reveal widespread support for the ideals of helping others and working for the common good. In the case of volunteerism, by margins of over 3 to 1, Americans agree that “people should volunteer . . . their time to help other people and thereby make the world a better place” (Independent Sector, 1988). But, it's not just volunteers who value service. For, with actual rates of volunteering hovering under 1 in 3, the 3 to 1 ratio of favorability toward the idea of volunteering must be made up of substantial numbers of people who do not themselves actually volunteer, which would clearly suggest that many people who don't volunteer share with their counterparts who do volunteer the belief that volunteering is a good thing and that people should serve as volunteers. So, it would seem, values may not be the whole story of who volunteers and why.

What seems to characterize volunteers, and to distinguish them from non-volunteers, is the integration of these values and ideals of helping others into motivational agendas that links the good that volunteers do for others to good done for the self (e.g., Snyder & Omoto, 2000). That is, volunteers seem to be motivated to use volunteering as a way to do something for themselves (to boost their self-esteem, to make friends, to gain skills) at the same time as they do good for other people. This answer to the question of why volunteerism occurs emerges from research that has articulated the motivations that promote it.

Much of this research (including my long-standing and still ongoing collaborations with Allen M. Omoto and with E. Gil Clary, as well as work by other researchers in other countries; for a review, see Snyder & Omoto, in press) has involved studying volunteers in service with community-based organizations, often following them over months and years as they move through the course of their service. Our work has been guided by functionalist theorizing that emphasizes the purposes served by action and the role of such purposes in initiating, guiding, and sustaining action (e.g., Snyder, 1993; Snyder & Cantor, 1998). In the case of volunteerism, a functional analysis concerns the needs being met, the motives being fulfilled, and the functions being served by volunteer service (e.g., Clary & Snyder, 1991; Omoto & Snyder, 1990; Snyder, Clary, & Stukas, 2000; Snyder & Omoto, 2000).

Research guided by functionalist theorizing has revealed that quite different motivations can and do underlie the very same actions. Thus, several people may all engage in the same form of volunteerism, say working side by side in a shelter for the homeless, but do so in the service of quite different motives, motives that can be identified and measured with inventories of volunteer motivations. In fact, inventories have been developed to assess motivations for volunteerism (e.g., Clary et al., 1998; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Ouellette, Cassel, Maslanka, & Wong, 1995; Reeder, Davison, Gipson, & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Schondel, Shields, & Orel, 1992), and these inventories have revealed strong family resemblances in the motivations identified across distinct demographic groups of volunteers (e.g., Omoto & Crain, 1995; Reeder et al., 2001) who span a wide range of ages (e.g., Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998; Okun & Schultz, 2003; Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1996), and who serve on behalf of a great variety of causes and concerns in many countries around the globe (for recent examples, see Chacon, Vecina, & Davila, 2007; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Handy et al., 2000; Liu, Holosko, & Wing Lo, in press; Marta & Pozzi, 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2007; Penner, 2002, 2004; Wilson, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1999).

Among the motivations identified by these inventories are personal *values*, including humanitarian concern about others as well as other personal convictions, including religious and spiritual values (Omoto & Schlehofer, 2007; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Another motivation revolves around community concern and the desire to help a community, whether or not the volunteer is a member of that community (e.g., Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Some people volunteer for reasons that are more self-focused, including volunteering for career reasons, either to bolster career and networking opportunities or to obtain career relevant experiences, and volunteering to gain greater understanding or knowledge about a problem, cause, or set of people. Other motivations for volunteering include personal development (e.g., developing skills, testing oneself), esteem enhancement (e.g., to feel better

about oneself or bring stability to one's life), and social concerns (e.g., to meet people and make friends).

The functionalist theoretical perspective and the motivations identified in research guided by it serve as reminders that volunteers act both on behalf of others (e.g., volunteering to alleviate social problems) and on behalf of themselves (e.g., volunteering to make friends, acquire skills, or affirm values). These functionally oriented motives, which weave together actions in the service of others and the quest for benefits to the self, are intimately and intricately linked to the processes of volunteerism, differentiating volunteers from nonvolunteers, predicting the behavior of volunteers, and guiding and directing the course of volunteer service.

Volunteer motives predict volunteer behavior. Volunteers generally score higher on these motives than nonvolunteers (e.g., Clary, Snyder, & Stukas, 1996). In addition, volunteers can be motivated by more than one motive; in fact, in one study of volunteers, fully 62.9% had multiple motives for volunteering (Kiviniemi, Snyder, & Omoto, 2002). And, these motives predict who stays active as a volunteer. In a field study of AIDS volunteers, Omoto and Snyder (1995) found that volunteer motives significantly influenced duration of service over a 2.5-year period—and did so better than other relevant predictors (such as having the traits of a “helping personality” [which had no direct association with length of service, but which did influence their satisfaction with their volunteer experiences and their integration into their volunteer organizations], or being part of a large and supportive social network [which actually interfered with length of service]). That both personal (e.g., motivation, personality) and social (e.g., social networks) factors are in play in determining length of service is, of course, congruent with Lewin's $B = f(P,E)$ formulation of the joint involvement of persons and environments as forces determining behavior.

These motivations form the basis for “agendas for action” in which the motivations that bring people into volunteerism foreshadow events to come over the course of one's service as a volunteer—with these motivations influencing the decision to become a volunteer, interacting experiences as a volunteer, and foreshadowing the outcomes of volunteer service (for examples of research on the interweaving of motivation in the unfolding dynamics of the volunteer process, see Clary & Orenstein, 1991; Clary et al., 1998; Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003; Davis et al., 1999; Gagné, 2003; Omoto & Snyder, 1995; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998; Piliavin, 2005; Simon, Stuermer, & Steffens, 2000).

Becoming a volunteer. The decision-making processes involved in becoming a volunteer are revealed by how people respond to messages designed to encourage people to become volunteers by appealing to their motivations. Critically important in these processes is the matching of messages to motivation. That

is, building on the diversity of potential motivations for volunteering, research has demonstrated that the persuasive impact of a message—whether in the form of a videotaped public service announcement, a printed brochure, or a newspaper advertisement—is greater when it directly addresses the recipient’s primary motivations than when it does not (e.g., Clary & Snyder, 1993; Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994; Clary et al., 1998; Smith, Omoto, & Snyder, 2001).

To examine the role of motivation matching in becoming a volunteer, and to do so in a field setting, Smith, Omoto, and Snyder (2001) created newspaper ads encouraging volunteerism. For example, one ad contained a rather other-focused appeal (e.g., “volunteer to help people in need”) and another contained a comparatively self-focused motivational appeal (e.g., “volunteer to feel better about yourself); a control ad contained no appeal to any motivation. Next, we placed these ads in campus newspapers and tracked which ads people responded to by listing a telephone number to call but changing the name of the contact person in the ad. Callers later completed measures of their motivations for volunteering. Of particular relevance to the matching principle, callers who responded to the other-focused ad were higher in other-focused motivations than those who responded to the other ads, although the matching effect was not as strong for the self-focused ad.

These findings, as well as those from companion studies in the laboratory (e.g., Clary et al., 1994; Clary et al., 1998), attest to the power of motivationally based appeals to recruit volunteers, with these appeals especially likely to attract motivationally matched volunteers. The same matching principle is reflected over the course of volunteer service, where the interaction of personal motives and experiences as a volunteer predicts critical events in the life history of volunteers.

Satisfaction as a volunteer. In a field study of an “elder volunteer” program, the matching of benefits to motivation (e.g. actually making the friends or getting the esteem boost that one seeks through volunteering) predicted satisfaction with volunteer experience (Clary et al., 1998). Moreover, in a longitudinal study of the volunteer process, Crain, Omoto, and Snyder (1998) have found that matching between motivations, expectations, and experiences was predictive of greater satisfaction and lesser burnout, which suggests that matching may be associated with positive consequences of volunteerism. Additional evidence of the importance of matching volunteers’ tasks and experiences to their motivations in predicting satisfaction is provided by research by Davis et al. (2003) and Houle, Sagarin, & Kaplan (2005).

Intentions to continue volunteering. Moving further along in the process and examining intentions to continue serving as a volunteer, Stukas, Clary, and Snyder (1999) studied students in a campus volunteer program, and found that the matching of benefits to motivation (e.g., looking to gain career skills through

volunteering and actually gaining them, finding that volunteering actually affirms one's important humanitarian values) predicts short- and long-term intentions to volunteer). Moreover, commitment to sustained service has been found to be greater among volunteers whose experiences were congruent with, or matched, their motivations for volunteering as measured 6 months earlier (O'Brien, Crain, Omoto, & Snyder, 2000). Finally, these effects of matching on intentions for continued volunteer service have also been demonstrated in laboratory analogs of volunteer activity (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2000; Williamson, Snyder, & Omoto, 2000).

As critically important as motivations are throughout the course of service as a volunteer, there are indications that motivations may operate differently at different stages of the volunteer process. In fact, one important lesson we have learned is that the forces that initiate action are not necessarily those that sustain action. Thus, Omoto and Snyder (1995) have found that, although "other-oriented" considerations such as humanitarian concern figure prominently in the motivations reported by new volunteers, such motivations have little predictive power in accounting for ultimate duration of volunteer service (see also, Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). By contrast, in our research, although "self-oriented" motivations such as esteem enhancement are relatively rare among the motivations that bring volunteers into service, such motivations have great predictive power in forecasting just how long volunteers will remain active as volunteers.

The irony here may be that it is the most self-oriented, and perhaps even selfish, of citizens who end up making the most altruistic contributions to society through their sustained involvement in volunteerism. For this reason, it can be tempting to use the term *selfish altruists* to describe volunteers who have created the "win-win" situation of doing good for themselves at the same time as they do good for others and for society. The criteria for identifying actions as altruistic are, of course, complex (for one discussion, see Batson, 1998); nevertheless, the motivations behind volunteer service may be revealing of some of the complex intertwining of the dynamics of actions for the benefit of others and actions for the benefit of the self (for further discussion of this interplay of considerations of self and other in social action, see Snyder & Omoto, 2007).

The lessons that we have learned about the motivations behind volunteerism are complemented by research on the important role that other features of individuals, including their personal and social identities (e.g., Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999; Martino, Snyder, & Omoto, 1998; Piliavin & Callero, 1991; Simon et al., 1998; Simon, Stuermer, & Steffens, 2000; Stuermer & Kampmeier, 2003; Stuermer & Simon, 2004) as well as their traits and dispositions of personality (e.g., Atkins, Hart, & Donnelly, 2005; Davis, 1983, 1996, 2005; Davis et al., 1999; Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003; Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007; Penner, 2002; Penner, Fritzsche, Craiger, & Freifeld, 1995), play in determining who gets involved in volunteerism. Moreover, the lessons that we have learned about the

motivational foundations of volunteerism also apply to other forms of social action. In fact, studies of phenomena as diverse as participation in social movements (e.g., Klandermans, 1984, 1997; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Simon et al., 1998; Stuermer, 2000; Stuermer & Simon, 2004; Stuermer, Simon, Loewy, & Joerger, 2003), organizational citizenship in the workplace (e.g., Finkelstein, & Penner, 2004; Penner, Midili, and Kegelmeyer, 1997; Rioux & Penner, 2001), community leadership (e.g., Bono, Snyder, & Duehr, 2005), and civic and political participation (e.g., Miller, 2004; Teske, 1997; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) have all revealed motivations with strong family resemblances to those emerging from studies of volunteerism.

The Role of Connections to Other People and Communities

In keeping with the idea that social action is both an individual and a collective phenomenon, theory and research point to important influences of other people and the social contexts of people's lives. In particular, there are growing indications that connection with one's community can and does facilitate social action.

Thus, in our studies of volunteerism, Allen Omoto and I have found that connections to other people and to the larger community are intricately interwoven into the processes of volunteerism (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Specifically, in our research, we have found that concerns for the well-being of one's community and the influences of other community members figure prominently in the motivations of new volunteers. Moreover, over the course of their service, volunteers become increasingly connected with their surrounding communities, including those defined by their volunteer service organizations. And, their effectiveness as volunteers is enhanced by these community connections.

Furthermore, volunteering builds community. For instance, our longitudinal data reveal that, as a consequence of their work, volunteers are increasingly surrounded by a community of people who are connected to their volunteer service, including people they personally have recruited to be volunteers (Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Moreover, as connections to a community of shared concerns increase, participation in the community (including engaging in forms of social action in addition to volunteerism (such as giving to charitable causes, attending fund raising events, and engaging in social activism) also increase (Omoto & Malsch, 2005; Omoto & Snyder, 2002). Finally, volunteering can and does contribute to the creation of bonds of social capital (e.g., Stukas, Daly, & Cowling, 2005); in fact, volunteering is sometimes considered a key indicator of social capital itself (Putnam, 2000; see also Wilson & Musick, 1997).

It appears, then, that there is cyclical process at work here, one in which connection to community leads to volunteerism, which builds further community connection, which stimulates more volunteerism, which in turn leads to other forms of social action. As this process spreads and permeates the larger society, it

may contribute to the emergence, development, and perpetuation of a concerned, caring, and actively involved citizenry.

The Collective Context of Individual Action

Moreover, these considerations of community serve as a powerful reminder that, even though volunteers act as individuals, there is a larger collective context for their actions. For, much volunteering occurs in the context of groups, organizations, and movements that recruit, train, and place volunteers.

Further, in the context of these collective concerns, some volunteering is explicitly intra-group (helping other members of one's own in-group (whether defined by race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, and the various "fraternal" and "self-help" groups and organizations designed to provide help within ethnic, religious, or racial groups) and other volunteering is inter-group (helping others who aren't members of one's own group—e.g., charity involving the rich helping the poor, missionary work, and other forms of service overseas, such as the Peace Corps). It turns out that volunteering within groups is facilitated by a sense of "we-ness" that is associated with empathizing with members of an in-group (who are, in some sense, extensions of one's self) whereas such feelings of empathic "we-ness" do not seem to apply in helping across group lines (e.g., Stuermer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005; Stuermer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006).

This sense of "we-ness"—of sharing concerns with others, of psychological connection to one's community, of acting together for the benefit of one's community—need not be defined with regard to a specific place or geographic entity with clear physical boundaries (a neighborhood, a town, a city). But, instead, it can be a community in a psychological sense of belonging to and connecting with a broad and diverse community of people with shared concerns, whether or not they live in the same geographical area or even interact with each other. In this sense, community includes more people than one personally knows or even possibly can know—a community defined by the feelings of connection, attachment, identification, and esteem that one derives from it. (For elaboration on conceptions of community, and their involvement in volunteerism and other forms of social action, see Omoto & Snyder, 2002.)

In our recent and ongoing research, Omoto and Snyder (2008, in press) are working to develop reliable and valid measures of this psychological sense of community and to actually create it through systematic interventions. Recall Lewin's adage that "If you want to truly understand something, try to change it"; in accord with that adage, in our research we have tried to change sense of community, to create it, to build it, to enhance it. Thus, we have incorporated both the intervention and the measure of community in a field experiment that we have conducted with some 600 participants recruited through community-based AIDS service organizations in California and Minnesota. Our findings indicate that

psychological sense of community, whether created by our interventions or measured with our inventory, had clear consequences for individuals and potential benefits for society. For individuals, psychological sense of community had positive health consequences, including reports of decreased likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior and greater likelihood of engaging in HIV preventing behaviors (for oneself and for others). Moreover, of potential benefit to *society*, psychological sense of community resulted in increased intentions to become involved in one's community by giving money and goods to charity, joining community groups, and participating in social activism.

More generally, sense of community manifests itself in diverse forms of action. People with a strong sense of community are likely to be active in their neighborhoods by, among other things, engaging in neighboring behaviors such as lending their neighbors food or tools (Kingston, Mitchell, Forin, & Stevenson, 1999), participating in community organizations (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Perkins & Long, 2002; Wandersman, 1980; Wandersman, Florin, Friedmann, & Mier, 1987), and engaging in political activities (Davidson & Cotter, 1991). Moreover, bonds of connection within communities and the social capital associated with them have been implicated in the reduction of crime within communities (Saegert, Winkel, & Swartz, 2002) and the promotion of the health of community members (Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, & Prothrow-Stith, 1997). In a larger sense, it would seem that one consequence of the interplay between the sense of community connection and social action may be the creation of a culture of service, participation, and involvement in civil society.

Features of Community Conducive to Social Action

Building on the important role of community in facilitating social action, let us now turn to the question: What features of community are most conducive to social action? To address this question, my colleagues and I have focused on the stability of communities, reasoning that, when people have lived in a community for a long time, one in which others have also lived for a long time, they will develop an identity as a community resident, be invested in and concerned for the well-being of the community, and get involved in doing good for their community (Oishi et al., 2007).

In one study on the effects of residential stability, we looked at preserving the environment as a form of procommunity action. Specifically, we showed that residents of stable communities (as indexed by the proportion of residents in each resident's zip code who lived in the same house as they did 5 years ago) purchased "critical habitat" license plates (the funds from which are dedicated to preservation of the environment) more often than did residents of mobile communities (Oishi et al., 2007).

In another study (Oishi et al., 2007), we examined home game attendance for Major League Baseball teams (as an index of support for one's community through investing time and money in attending games). Here, we found unconditional support for the community in stable cities such as Philadelphia (where they came out for the team win or lose) and conditional community support in *mobile* cities such as Phoenix (where they were there for the team when it was winning, but not when it was losing).

Moreover, we have also brought residential stability into the laboratory (Oishi et al., 2007) and found that individuals in experimentally created stable microcommunities whose members worked on a series of tasks with the same people helped other members more than did those in unstable microcommunities whose members worked with different people for each task. Moreover, the effect of stability was mediated by identification with the community, with residential stability leading to identity as a community member which in turn led to helping other community members.

The findings from our studies of residential stability and procommunity action are complemented by the work of other researchers who have implicated residential stability in identification with one's community, which in turn manifests itself in diverse forms of helping behaviors, procommunity involvement, collective efficacy, and social action (Kang & Kwak, 2003; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Taken together, the work on residential stability and social action contribute to an emerging "big picture" of the mutual interplay of individuals and their contexts (recall, again, Lewin's famous formula about the interplay of persons and environments in accounting for behavior)—just as individuals, acting on their motivations, engage in social action that builds connection to community, so too do some kinds of communities promote identification with the community and, in turn, social action.

Social Action, Social Science, and Social Policy

Reflecting on the nature of social action, I am struck by the bridges that it builds between the actions of individuals, their concern for other people and the groups to which they belong, and their participation in their communities and society at large. In addition to the perspective that it provides on these linkages between individuals, groups, and society, the scientific study of social action may also be revealing of the links between social science and social policy.

In the case of volunteerism as a form of social action, as we have seen, its importance in providing much needed services to individuals, communities, and society is well-documented. Moreover, volunteerism (and, more generally, helping behavior), as we have also seen, has been linked to better health, greater optimism, and longer life. Accordingly, it could be argued, as Omoto and Snyder

(in press) have done, that social policies that promote volunteerism (and other forms of social action) would be in the interests of society. In societies in which the ideals of volunteerism are widely shared, and in which substantial amounts of helping are provided by volunteers, the knowledge generated by scientific inquiry into volunteerism become a valuable basis for informing social policies designed to encourage volunteerism and to optimize its effectiveness.

In contemplating the policy implications of theory and research on volunteerism, I find it useful to consider policy issues of relevance to individuals (e.g., explicating the benefits and costs of volunteer service, so that individuals can make informed decisions to become volunteers and/or to seek out the services of volunteers), organizations (e.g., educating service organizations about how to design programs to optimally recruit volunteers and promote their satisfaction and effectiveness), communities (e.g., informing community leaders about the ways that volunteerism can build a sense of community and solidify bonds of social capital), and society at large (e.g., informing government leaders about how societal policies and practices can translate prosocial ideals into actual involvement in social action). For a more elaborated discussion of the social policy implications of theory and research on volunteerism, see Snyder and Omoto (in press); for discussion of volunteerism as public policy, see Chambré (1989); and, for discussion of some of the considerations that may be relevant to programmatic attempts to promote volunteerism with requirement and mandates, see Stukas, Clary, and Snyder (1999).

In addition, if it is true, as it has been said, that “a society is judged by how well it responds in times of greatest need” (Watkins, 1989), then networks of civic engagement and social action may be the building blocks of a society well able to respond to the needs of its citizens and to meet the challenges that confront it. Moreover, to the extent that organizations, communities, and society are built on the principles that scientific research has documented as important in promoting social action, it is likely that positive consequences for individuals, communities, and society will result.

Accordingly, a scientific understanding of the nature of social action, and the articulation of policy implications of this scientific understanding, may be ways in which basic and applied research in the social sciences can contribute to the effective functioning of society and the well-being of its citizens. Moreover, in the study of social action, researchers can engage in diverse forms of “action research” advocated by Kurt Lewin (1946, 1947; see also, Chein, Cook, & Harding, 1948; Sanford, 1970). In pursuing such agendas of action research, they can intertwine basic and applied research concerns and methodologies in the interests both of advancing scientific theories and of solving pressing social problems. In so doing, research on action can and will become research in action.

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