Some speculations on the origins and role of the Associative-Supportive motivation to volunteer

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Treuren (2009) demonstrated the salience of a new volunteer motivation – the Associative–Supportive motivation (AS), in explaining why many people volunteered to participate in five event organisations. This paper proposes a theoretical basis for this motivation, based on social identity and social exchange theory, before examining whether this new motivation is coherent with the Clary et al (1998)’s Volunteer Functions Inventory, and useful in explaining volunteer behaviour. This paper found that prior experience of the cause, but not prior knowledge of the organisation, was associated with higher levels of AS motivation. The AS supplemented version of the VFI had better model fit than the six-factor AS model.
Some speculations on the origins and role of the Associative-Supportive motivation to volunteer

Treuren (2009) demonstrated the salience of a new volunteer motivation – the Associative-Supportive motivation (AS), in explaining why many people volunteered to participate in five event organisations. This paper proposes a theoretical basis for this motivation, based on social identity and social exchange theory, before examining whether this new motivation is coherent with the Clary et al (1998)’s Volunteer Functions Inventory, and useful in explaining volunteer behaviour. This paper found that prior experience of the cause, but not prior knowledge of the organisation, was associated with higher levels of AS motivation. The AS supplemented version of the VFI had better model fit than the six-factor AS model.

Our understanding of volunteer motivation has developed substantially in the past two decades. Researchers have developed new perspectives on why volunteers make the initial decision to participate (Thoits & Hewitt 2001; Wilson 2000), and why volunteers continue to be involved (Sturmer, Snyder, Omoto 2005). Central to the emerging theory is the functionalist theory of volunteering, articulated by Clary et al. (1998)’s Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). Reflecting the evolution away from simplistic notions of volunteer motivation based on volunteering as an act of altruism, or later, as a combination of instrumentalism and altruism, the VFI is based on an acknowledgement that people act purposively, choosing to volunteer to meet personal needs (Clary, Snyder & Ridge 1992).

The VFI has provided a new clarity to the volunteer motivation literature by developing a six dimensional set of functions served by volunteering. From this perspective, volunteering motivation can be understood in terms of the need for acting out values, to increase understanding, undertake personal enhancement, develop career-related skills, to obtain social benefits, and to obtain some form of protection from negative personal feelings (Clary et al. 1998). From the functionalist perspective implicit in the VFI, people may begin volunteering with the same organisation and do the same work, but may be prompted for different reasons (Kiviniemi, Snyder & Omoto 2002). Three volunteers, for example, may volunteer to provide assistance in producing a not-for-profit organisation’s newsletter. One volunteer, a journalism student, may be prompted by the opportunity to develop their portfolio and their experience in hands-on journalism prior to entering the labour market. For this volunteer, the functional need is career development. Another volunteer, recently retired from a career in publishing, may wish to continue to use their existing skills for community benefit. Their participation may reflect a functional need for acting out their values. A third volunteer, currently on maternity leave, may have
chosen this volunteering assignment to get out of the house and meet new people. For this volunteer, the functional need is social engagement. As demonstrated by Kiviniemi, Snyder and Omoto (2002) and Marta, Guglielmetti and Pozzi (2006), a volunteer may volunteer for one, or more of these motivations (Treuren, in press). These motivations may change during a volunteer’s time within an organisation. A person initially motivated by a desire for protection may find that their involvement meets their social needs, or as they develop a deeper understanding in the field in which they are volunteering (Omoto & Snyder 1995).

Treuren (2009) has pointed to an additional motivation for volunteering – the Associative-Supportive (AS) motivation. In this motivation, a volunteer is prompted to participate because of a wish to be involved in the organisation or activity of the organisation, and is keen to ensure the success of this organisation (Treuren 2009). This motivation was identified by a close reading of the sport event volunteering literature. Treuren (2009)’s review of that literature demonstrated that a major reason for volunteering transcended the altruistic and egoistic dimensions of previous theorising about event volunteer motivation. For these volunteers, participation was primarily a manifestation of their wish to see the activity of the event succeed, and to – perhaps – be involved in the event or organisation. In that study, the AS motivation was the highest scoring of all motivations.

No published research has yet applied the Associative-Supportive Motivation to volunteers outside of event volunteering. This paper investigates whether the AS motivation is relevant to another type of volunteering such as cause-related volunteering like health promotion. Specifically, this paper proposes and tests a theoretical basis for the AS motivation before examining whether the AS scale items can be validly added to the VFI scale.

A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE ASSOCIATIVE-SUPPORTIVE MOTIVATION

This section draws on the Social Identity Theory and the Social Exchange Theory literatures to present an account of why the Associative-Supportive Motivation may explain why some people choose to volunteer.

Social Identity Theory points to the tendency of people to develop a sense of self based on their actual or wished-for membership of a specific group. The process of acquiring this perceived group membership has three stages, suggesting how individual choices can be shaped by associations with
their preferred social groups (Albert, Ashforth & Dutton 2000). The first step involves social
categorisation – the development of an awareness of different groups within the individual’s
environment, and the attributes of people who fit into each of those groups (Ashforth & Mael 1989).
The second step sees the individual self-identifying (‘self-categorisation’) with a specific group. Hogg,
Terry & White (1995) and Kalkhoff and Barnum, (2000) have pointed to the likelihood of an
individual taking on the attributes of the group – the values and attitudes embodied in the group.
Kalkhoff and Barnum (2000) describe this process as ‘depersonalisation.’ In the third step, an
individual distinguishes between other social groups and the one he or she belongs to, and evaluates the
differences between the various groups. Seeking to maintain and improve self-esteem by increasing
their consistency of attitude and action with their preferred group, the individual is more likely to make
choices that support their group’s interests (Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Tajfel & Turner 1979).
Ashforth and Mael (1989) have suggested that an individual’s self-esteem may be improved by
protecting the real (or imagined) interests of their group, especially against encroachment by other
groups or to prevent the possible failure of the group.

These processes of self-categorisation, identification and differentiation might explain the
origin of the AS motivation; explaining how personal decision-making about volunteering may have
its origins in the protection and development of their preferred community group. A person may have
been involved with a sporting activity in their youth, and over time, developed a sense of themselves
as a member of a particular sporting club, or as a sports person. In their perception, a person involved
with the club has an obligation to plays a role in supporting the club’s activities: either playing, or
participating in the various activities that enable the team to play. As their sporting career ends, their
sense of identity and their awareness of the need for help to ensure the continuity of the club makes
them more receptive to appeals to provide volunteer service to the organisation. Their previous
involvement has established their self-identification as a member of their group; their wish to
maintain or improve their self-esteem prompts them to act in ways to improve the organisation’s
interests, through volunteering.

A similar process is found amongst volunteers with a religious background. For these people,
an important part of their faith – the group they belong to – is their participation in charitable activity.
As a consequence, these people may be more amenable to invitations to participation in volunteer activity (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). Following this logic, we could expect people with prior experience of the event, activity, or organisation to report a higher level of AS motivation as a result of social identification.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides another explanation for the AS motivation. In SET, a person is understood to commit to a relationship where the social, non-economic benefits that result from that relationship exceed the costs associated with the relationship (Blau 1964). These benefits are primarily intangible as well as extrinsic. The exchange of these social benefits quickly gives rise to a perceived obligation for the recipient to provide reciprocal benefits to the provider of the initial benefit (Gouldner 1960). The strength of this obligation depends on, first, the effectiveness of enforcement of sanctions against those who do not meet their reciprocal obligations, and second, on the exchange orientation – the extent the individuals involved accept the obligation to reciprocate – of the participants (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). Organisational behaviour research has highlighted the pervasive influence of the norm of reciprocity (Jones 2010). Research into perceived organisational support, for example, has demonstrated that employer signals of support for employee interests is typically reciprocated by employees, manifesting through employee commitment, organisational identification and organisational citizenship behaviour (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades 2001).

The Associative-Supportive motivation can thus be understood as a manifestation of the norm of reciprocity, for people who have had a prior experience, however broad, of the event, activity or organisation represented by the volunteering. In the typical case the prior experience was positive, and created an unfulfilled sense of obligation in the potential volunteer. This sense of obligation is converted into active volunteering when a call to participate is received, with the volunteer seeking to ensure the success of the volunteering assignment. This would explain, for example, some sport volunteers. Having been a member of the team during their early adulthood, they retired from playing, but, in time, take an administrative role within the sporting club to ensure the continuity of the organisation. Associative-Supportive participation can also be triggered through a negative experience. Consider the case of a widow whose partner had died from a slow and painful illness, and
whose volunteering was triggered by the realisation of the need for support services for sufferers of the disease and the importance of increased fundraising for research into a cure. Thus, the person decides to volunteer.

In these examples, the AS motivation arose from reciprocity based on prior experience from people with a direct, personal experience of the event, activity or the organisation. However, it is also feasible that family members, or friends, of people with a direct experience may also be prompted to participate because of their perception of an obligation. Family members may decide to volunteer for AS reasons to ensure that their child’s sporting team or Scout troop continues (Burgham and Downward 2005); a friend may want to become active in social welfare volunteering, having seen the importance of the activity (Treuren, 2003).

Thus, drawing on the preceding sections, it may be expected that people with prior experiences of the cause giving rise to the organisation are likely to be involved in the event. Prior experience prompts a process of self-categorisation with the group surrounding the organisation that has emerged to engage with the cause. Self-categorisation prompts the process of depersonalisation, leading to the decision to volunteer. As a consequence, volunteers with experience of the cause of the organisation are likely to have a higher degree of self-categorisation and depersonalisation, manifested through a stronger wish for the success of the organisation. Hence,

*H1: Volunteers with a previous experience (either themselves, family members or friends) of the cause of the organisation are more likely to report a greater AS score than volunteers with no previous experience.*

But how important is previous involvement in the organisation? The previous discussion has emphasised the *cause* prompting the organisation. Could part of the AS motivation be loyalty for the organisation, or merely support for the organisation that enacts campaigning for the cause?

*H2: Volunteers with a previous experience (either themselves, family members or friends) with the organisation are more likely to report a greater AS score than volunteers with no previous experience.*
DOES THE ASSOCIATIVE SUPPORTIVE MOTIVATION SUPPLEMENT THE VFI?

If the AS motivation does actually exist, should it be added as a factor to the Volunteer Functions Inventory? As noted earlier, the current formulation of the VFI identifies six needs prompting volunteer involvement: Career (volunteering as a way of developing a career and career-related skills); Enhancement (volunteering as a way of feeling happier and more satisfied with their lives), Protective (volunteering as a method to overcome negative affective feelings, such as loneliness), Social (Volunteering as a means to win approval from others, or to spend time with friends); Understanding (volunteering as a way of exercising existing skills and developing new knowledge), and Values (volunteering as a manifestation of one’s social concern) (Clary et al.1998). Earlier research (Treuren, 2009) points to the evidence of the existence of the AS motivation amongst volunteers of five event organisations.

Several criteria need to be met to justify including a new factor in a multi-factor scale. First, is there a theoretical justification for the inclusion of the scale? In this case, this involves two issues. Is there evidence that the AS motivation exists? Treuren (2009) provides evidence of the existence of this motivation – at least for sporting event volunteers. Does the AS motivation add to the scope of the VFI to explain volunteering motivation? Prima facie, the wish to contribute to the success of the activity or organisation is outside the immediate, specific scope of the current items of the VFI, with its emphasis on career; personal enhancement, self-protection, social connection, increased understanding and personal values. An AS-enhanced VFI may explain more of volunteer motivation than the VFI alone.

The second issue follows from the first, but emphasises the statistical dimension of volunteer behaviour. Does the AS-supplemented VFI describe volunteer data better than the VFI alone? Does the AS-supplemented VFI provide better predictions of volunteering outcomes? This paper will compare the fit of the data with two proposed models: Model 1 – the baseline model, with the six AS factors, and Model 2 – where the AS motivation is added as an additional factor to the six factor VFI scale.

H3. The Volunteer Functions Inventory, when supplemented with the Associative-Supportive motivation, has better model fit compared to the Volunteer Functions Inventory alone.
METHOD

Participants
Respondents were drawn from a database of 1,600 volunteers of a large, well-established not-for-profit organisation in an Australian capital city. Established over fifty years ago, the organisation was dedicated to health promotion around a specific illness. Volunteers were engaged in a wide variety of administrative, fundraising, service provision and educational activities. Of these, 594 of the volunteers are recorded as being 'core' volunteers, because of their regular involvement. All of these people were invited to complete the survey. The remaining database was made up of people who had volunteered for at least one activity in the five years prior to the survey. The database gave no clue on the date of last volunteering or the nature of prior involvement. It was suspected by organisational personnel that a large number of these volunteers were involved only once, at an event four years prior. As a result, these volunteers were expected to be less likely to respond. In order to improve the response rate in a cost-efficient way, half of the non-core volunteers were randomly selected for inclusion in the survey. The sample frame therefore included 1,094 volunteers; 594 core volunteers, and 500 event volunteers. These volunteers were recruited through a survey package mailed to the address listed on the volunteer database. This package contained a mail-merged personalised letter from the organisation’s CEO encouraging respondents to complete the survey, an information sheet, the survey, and a reply paid envelope enabling the return of the survey back to the University. Of this sample frame, 55 survey packages were returned to sender; an additional 78 potential respondents asked to be removed from the mailing list. Completed surveys were returned from 195 respondents, giving an effective response rate of 20%. The average age of the sample was between 55 and 59 years, 68.2% were female. Respondents had volunteered for an average of six years (SD=6.65). Of the sampled volunteers 62.7% identified themselves as being ongoing volunteers, regularly involved in organisational activities or programs.

Measures
The surveys requested that respondents report on a variety of personal characteristics and demographic information.
**Associative-Supportive Motivation:** this was measured using the five item scale given in Treuren (2009). A Confirmatory Factor Analysis of this scale was undertaken using Mplus 5.21, suggesting acceptable model fit: ($\chi^2$ (3) = 0.44, p>.05; CFI= 1.00; TLI= 1.00; RMSEA =.00 [.00, .03]. SRMR = .004). These model findings, however, are not conclusive: although over-identified with three degrees of freedom, the good fit statistics may be the result of a lack of power due to the small sample size (Muthen 2013).

**Volunteer motivation.** This was measured using a scale based on the thirty items, six factor Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) of Clary et al. (1998), supplemented by the Associative Supportive (AS) scale reported by Treuren (2009). The data was fitted onto Clary et al.’s (1998) six factor scale, and the seven factor scale created by supplementing the VFI with the AS motivation.

**Previous Experience with the cause.** Respondents were asked ‘Prior to starting as a volunteer, did you, your family or your friends have any involvement with [cause]-related issues?’ Respondents were then invited to give a Yes/ No answer for each of the following: personal involvement (Previous experience – cause – personal), family involvement (Previous experience – cause – family) and involvement by friends (Previous experience – cause – friends). No reported experience was coded as ‘0’, and any experience was coded as ‘1’. Previous experience – cause (cumulative) was measured as the sum of personal, family and friend scores. Thus Previous experience – cause – cumulative ranged from 0 to 3. Previous experience – cause (dichotomous) was set at 1 if the volunteer reported that they had any personal, family or friend experience; otherwise, this variable was set at 0.

**Previous Experience with the organisation.** Respondents were asked ‘Prior to starting as a volunteer, did you, your family or your friends have any involvement with [organisation]?’ Respondents were then invited to give a Yes/ No answer for each of the following: personal involvement (Previous experience – organisation – personal), family involvement (Previous experience – organisation – family) and involvement by friends (Previous experience – organisation – friend). No experience was coded as ‘0’, and experience was coded as ‘1’. Previous experience – organisation – cumulative was measured as the sum of personal, family, friend scores. Thus Previous experience – organisation – cumulative ranged from 0 to 3. Previous experience – organisation (dichotomous) was set at 1 if the
volunteer reported that they had any personal, family or friend experience; otherwise, this variable was set at 0.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for this sample.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Hypothesis 1 examined whether prior involvement or experience with the cause was associated with higher levels of the Associative-Supportive motivation. Specifically, it was proposed that volunteers who had experience with the cause of this health-related organisation either (i) personally (ii) through friends or (iii) through family were more likely to be involved than people with less experience.

We tested this in several ways. First, we tested to see if different types of experiences with the cause of the organisation had different levels of Associative-Supportive motivation. Second, we tested to see if Associative-Supportive Motivation is cumulative. That is, do people with more experience of the cause, personally, their family and friends, report higher AS scores than volunteers with less experience of the cause? We then tested to see if there was an organisational-level effect by testing to see if previous personal, family or friend involvement in the organisation was associated with higher levels of AS motivation.

These propositions were tested through t-tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Table 2 reports on the t-tests showing the level of AS motivation for volunteers who had experience or no experience with the cause of the organisation through their own personal experience, their family or friends. As can be seen, volunteers who had personal experience or had a family experience with the cause were more likely to have a higher AS motivation than volunteers without such prior experiences. There was no apparent relationship between experiences of friends and the AS motivation.
Table 1 suggests, prima facie, that the effect of cause-related experience is cumulative. The more sources of experience (personal, family, friend) the higher the level of AS motivation ($r(173) = .22, p < .01$). This finding was corroborated by regression ($\beta = .22, t(173) = 2.99, p < .01$).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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This paper proposed that the more sources of experience with the cause, the greater the level of volunteer AS motivation. This was tested through a one-way ANOVA, which found that AS motivation differed across the four levels of experience ($F(3, 171)=3.28, p < .05$). Post-hoc analysis using the Student-Newman-Keuls test highlighted that while there was a statistically significant difference between volunteers with no prior experience with the cause compared with prior experience, there was no statistically significant difference between people who had more sources of experience with the cause. Thus, our hypothesis that AS is likely to grow with accumulated experience of the cause is not supported.

*Is there an organisation effect?*

Hypothesis 2 sought to clarify whether the AS motivation is influenced by prior experience of the organisation that supported the cause. This was tested by examining whether volunteers with experience (personal, friend and family) of the organisation reported higher levels of the AS motivation than volunteers with no experience. Using a t-test, we examined whether volunteers who had any experience of the organisation reported a higher level of AS than volunteers with no experience of the organisation, using the dichotomous variable. There was no statistically significant difference based on prior experience with the organisation ($t(173) = -1.73, p > .05$), and thus we can assume that there is no cumulative affect either.

*Supplementing the VFI with the AS motivation*

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the VFI framework would be improved by adding the AS motivation. This was tested by undertaking and comparing two Confirmatory Factor Analyses. The CFAs were undertaken using *Mplus* 5.23. Model 1 – the VFI model – had the following
characteristics: \( \chi^2 (550) = 1582.99, p < .001; \) CFI= .68; TLI= .66; RMSEA =.098 [90% CI: .093, .104]; SRMR = .14; AIC = 23333.82). Model 2 – the VFI and AS sub-scales together – had the following characteristics: \( \chi^2 (539) = 1159.60, p < .001; \) CFI= .81; TLI= .77; RMSEA =.077 [90% CI: .071, .082]; SRMR = .08; AIC = 22932.22).–Both models fit the data poorly based on the usual measures of assessing model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). However, the proposed model, Model 2 provides superior model fit statistics on all measures compared to Model 1. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

**DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Understanding why people volunteer has stimulated a substantial literature. In recent years, research has emphasised the role of volunteering as a means of satisfying functional needs. From that perspective, volunteers choose and continue to volunteer to satisfy a set of needs. Earlier research, based on the event volunteering literature, has highlighted the role of a need to support and ensure the success of an event, activity or organisation. This paper is concerned with, first, proposing a theoretical basis for this need – the Associative-Supportive motivation. The paper presented an argument locating the AS motivation in the social identity theory and the social exchange literatures, and proposed several hypotheses.

The first hypothesis proposed that prior experience with the cause would lead to a higher level of AS motivation than those with no prior experience. This hypothesis was supported: volunteers with any form of prior experience with the cause were more likely to report a higher level of AS motivation.

This finding, however, needs to interpreted with caution. The data suggested that having a friend with an experience of the cause had no effect on AS motivation. This suggests three issues for further research. First, that different types of experience have different effects on volunteer motivation. Prima facie, the more distal experience – that of a friend, rather than a family member or self – may have a weaker effect on the volunteering motivation. Second, is having an experience of the cause – in whatever way – as important as how many experiences the volunteer has? This data suggests the former rather than the latter. Third, subsequent research needs to use a scale-based
measure of the effect of the experience reflecting the intensity of the experience, rather than
dichotomous measure of experience, which distinguishes between experience and non-experience.

The second hypothesis sought to clarify whether previous experience with the organisation
had an effect on a volunteer’s AS motivation. There was no evidence in the data that a prior
involvement with the organisation had an effect on AS volunteer motivation. Taken together,
Hypothesis 1 and 2 suggest that AS volunteer motivation is primarily sparked by the experience of the
cause.

The final hypothesis sought to examine the psychometric properties of an AS-enhanced VFI.
Although the hypothesis was supported – the AS-enhanced VFI scale was a better fit for the data than
the existing VFI scale – neither scale met traditional scale fit criteria. Thus this finding is interesting
but not persuasive. Further research is needed.

This research has several limitations. First, it only compares the motivations of existing
volunteers. It does not compare the functional needs of potential volunteers. As a consequence, we
only have a weak test of the role of prior experiences, from people who self-selected into the
organisation. A stronger test would include people who chose to participate and people who choose to
not participate. Second, we are reliant on dichotomous measures of prior experience. Thus, the
experience of a person with a readily treated illness that was quickly identified and managed is treated
as equivalent to that of a parent watching their child die of a painful, incurable disease. This can be
resolved by using scale-based measure of the intensity of prior experience, and when recognising time
since experience, a weighted measure of the intensity and duration of prior experience.

CONCLUSION

This paper undertook three tasks. First to propose and test the theoretical basis for the
Associative-Supportive motivation. This motivation was explained in terms of the Social Identity
Theory and Social Exchange Theory frameworks. Subsequent testing found that this explanation of
the origins of the AS motivation was supported by the data.

The second task was to examine whether the AS motivation was a useful supplement to the
existing VFI scale. In terms of direct model comparison the AS motivation added to the predictive
strength of the VFI scale. Unfortunately neither model returned acceptable model fit statistics.
Third, we applied the AS motivation to a non-event based form of volunteering. Based on the findings of these hypotheses, there is some evidence that the AS motivation is relevant to prior experience with the cause and the organisation, and explains an aspect of the volunteering decision. Further research, however, is necessary.


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Notes: Items 1 and 3: Scored 0 or 1; Items 2 and 4: Scored 0-3; Items 5-11: Scored 1 to 7; Cronbach alpha reported on the diagonal; Correlations >.16 are significant at p<.05; Correlations >.21 significant at p<.01
TABLE 2
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF ASSOCIATIVE-SUPPORTIVE MOTIVATION BY EXPERIENCE

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<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>5.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s experience</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any experience of any kind</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Items score 0: no experience; 1: experience; * p < .05;