



Grin and bear it: An examination of volunteers' fit with their organization, burnout and spirituality



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ABSTRACT

Volunteers are an essential asset to the success of nonprofits, government, business and philanthropic organizations. About 64.5 million people, or 26.5% of the U.S. population, volunteered at least once between September 2011 and September 2012, donating a median of 50 hours (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Despite these encouraging statistics, volunteer turnover presents a significant problem for nonprofits. Though considerable evidence has been amassed on antecedents and mechanisms predicting employees' intentions to quit, surprisingly few studies have examined volunteer intentions to quit. Based on both Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011) and person–organization (PO) fit theory (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), this study begins to address this void by examining the extent to which poor PO fit between volunteer goals, personality and values with their organization influenced their intentions to quit through the mechanism of burnout. Further, we investigated whether the proposed mediated relationship depended upon volunteer daily spirituality, or the tendency to daily experience the transcendent dimensions of life. Using a sample of volunteers from a variety of nonprofit organizations ($N = 355$), poor volunteer fit positively predicted volunteer intentions to quit through their burnout. Further, the full mediation model was moderated by individuals' level of spirituality, with burned out volunteers reporting higher spirituality, indicating lower quitting intentions compared to those lower in spirituality. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Volunteers are an essential asset to the success of nonprofits, government, business and philanthropic organizations. About 64.5 million people, or 26.5% of the U.S. population, volunteered at least once between September 2011 and September 2012, donating a median of 50 hours (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). The 2010 Deloitte Volunteer Impact Survey reported that 84% of companies believe that volunteers are critical in helping nonprofits reach their long-term social goals (Deloitte Development, 2010).

Despite these encouraging statistics, a problem faced by nonprofits is volunteer turnover (Garner & Garner, 2011), defined as when volunteers leave an organization and need to be replaced (Skoglund, 2006). A sobering statistic reported by Eisner, Grimm, Maynard, and Washburn (2009) is that more than a third of the volunteers who volunteer in one year fail to volunteer the next year. Given the time and expense accrued by organizations in recruiting, screening and training volunteers, in addition to the possible toll

on the volunteers who abbreviate their tenure with the organization, this volunteer turnover is both a social and business problem that merits our attention. One of the immediate precursors of turnover, and the focus of this investigation, is volunteers' intentions to quit (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Jaros, 1997), which is a cognitive manifestation of the behavioral decision to quit (Elangovan, 2001).

Though considerable evidence has been amassed on antecedents and mechanisms predicting paid employees' intentions to quit, surprisingly few studies have examined key predictors and processes driving volunteer intentions to quit. Though scholars can and should continue to investigate the applicability of employee models of turnover to volunteer populations, this study begins to investigate whether factors that influence employee intentions to quit also apply to volunteer intentions. It is possible that differences in the experience of intentions to quit for paid employees and volunteers exist. For example, job dissatisfaction of paid employees has generally been shown to be related to intentions to quit (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), but volunteer samples have shown little relationship between dissatisfaction and intentions to quit (Kulik, 2006). Thus, this study continues to investigate intentions to quit among volunteers and acknowledges

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differences between volunteers and employees as they emerge. However, given the paucity of research on intentions to quit among volunteers, borrowing theory and findings from the employee literature as a starting point becomes necessary as discussed hereafter.

Specifically, the purpose of this study was to begin to address the general lack of research on volunteer intentions to quit by examining the extent to which the fit between volunteers and their organization influenced their intentions to quit through the mechanism of burnout. A second objective of this study was to explore whether volunteer spirituality attenuated the relationships between fit and burnout and burnout and turnover intentions, with spirituality defined as “the individual’s perception of the transcendent in daily life” (Underwood, 1999, p. 11). Building upon the theoretical frameworks of person–organization fit and the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), this research has the potential to expand the volunteer literature in three meaningful ways. First, it introduces a new and different potentially relevant predictor of volunteer intentions to quit, poor volunteer fit with the organization. Second, this study suggests that COR theory, which has traditionally been applied to employee samples, has broad application within volunteer populations. Third, and finally, this study suggests a key individual difference, a volunteer’s spirituality, conceptualized as a person-based coping resource, would buffer the effect of poor person–organization (PO) fit on volunteer burnout and attenuate the relationship between burnout and volunteer intentions to quit.

1.1. Person–organization fit and COR theoretical frameworks

Person–organization (PO) fit is historically rooted within psychological theories of person–environment (PE) interaction, including Terberg’s (1981) interactional psychology theory and most notably Lewin’s (1938) seminal theory of psychological forces, which posited that behavior is best understood as a product of the environment and the person’s subjective experience of it. Person–environment (PE) fit can be viewed as a meta-theory encompassing theories of person–vocation fit, person–job fit, person–organization fit, person–group fit, person–supervisor fit, but is generally defined as “the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched” (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005, p. 281). Over its nearly 100-year history, various conceptualizations of fit content have surfaced (e.g., values, goals, personality, and needs) as well as fit measurement strategies (e.g., direct vs indirect measures; objective vs. subjective methodologies; homogeneous vs. heterogeneous measures, and global or molar versus more micro approaches).

Among all the fit dimensions, PO fit has been the most extensively studied, with the vast majority of these studies testing employee samples to predict employee attitudes and work-related outcome, with two major meta-analyses summarizing this voluminous research. A meta-analysis by Verquer, Beehr, and Wagner (2003) focused on the PO–attitude relationship, finding that PO fit significantly predicted job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intentions to turnover. Hoffman and Woehr’s (2006) meta-analysis on the effect of PO fit on work-related outcomes showed that PO incongruence predicted increased turnover, reduced citizenship behaviors and decreased organizational performance (Andrews, Baker, & Hunt, 2011), and some have reported these relationships even when controlling for cognitive ability (McCulloch & Turban, 2007) and the Big Five Personality traits (Tsai, Chen, & Chen, 2012).

Only two studies have empirically examined fit among volunteers. Van Vianen, Nijstad, and Voskuil (2008) research, based on data from Dutch volunteers in six organizations, found that

personality fit, defined as the similarity between volunteers’ self-described personality and their perception of the personality of the prototypical volunteer in their organization, was positively related to volunteer satisfaction and affective commitment. Kim, Chelladurai, and Trail (2007) found that the relationship between PO fit and person–task (PT) fit significantly predicted both empowerment and intentions to continue volunteering among US soccer volunteers.

It is noteworthy that both employee and volunteer studies of fit focused on outcomes, consistently demonstrating that good fit was associated with both positive affective and behavioral outcomes. However, remarkably lacking in the organizational studies were explorations of how poor fit influences more proximal, psychological variables, such as strain and burnout, which could offer potential explanatory mechanisms for understanding the fit–outcome relationships. The six studies of the fit–strain relationship identified in a meta-analysis by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) showed that poor employee PO fit was significantly related to greater strain. More recently, poor PO fit has also been shown to be positively associated with burnout in a variety of contexts including Finnish teachers (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2011), faculty physicians (Shanafelt et al., 2009), and Chinese manufacturing employees (Tong, Wang, & Peng, 2015). Finally, the scholarship within occupational health and burnout has long recognized and empirically demonstrated the role of poor fit on strain, burnout and ultimately compromised health (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1980; Edwards & Van Harrison, 1993; French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982; Maslach, 2003; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Thus, considerable research has documented myriad negative consequences of poor fit for both employees and volunteers, including strain, burnout, negative affective and behavioral manifestations and deleterious health outcomes. Poor PO fit appears to be a significant stressor with a capacity to facilitate burnout and other negative outcomes and as such, can be grounded in COR theory of stress. Further, COR theory fills a theoretical void characteristic of much of the PO fit research (Edwards, 2008), providing a parsimonious and elegant way to explain how the stressor of poor PO fit influences strain and burnout.

Hobfoll (2011) describes COR theory as a “fundamental theory to the field of burnout and the emerging field of positive psychology, especially where it has been applied to challenging work circumstances” (pp. 116–117). Indeed, considerable scholarly evidence has demonstrated the usefulness of COR theories in the prediction of burnout (e.g., Hobfoll, 2010; Hobfoll & Freedy, 1993; Neveu, 2007). A primary premise of COR theory is that resources are positively valued, with resource gains leading to positive psychological, physical, and behavioral outcomes; in contrast, stressors are perceived negatively as they act to reduce resources, potentially resulting in burnout and negative outcomes (Hobfoll, 2001, 2002, 2010). Thus, when stressors confront a person, resources must be marshaled to address those stressors, leading to resource loss and risk of burnout.

Burnout, though conceptualized and measured in a variety of ways, from multifaceted approaches of Maslach and colleagues (Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006; Benevides-Pereira & Das Neves Alves, 2007; Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Schaufeli, Bakker, Hoogduin, Schaap, & Kladler, 2001) to the narrower conceptualization of Pines and Aronson (1988). Pines and Aronson’s more focused definition of burnout as comprising elements of exhaustion better fits the volunteer population of this study as we assume that volunteers would quit before enduring long-term volunteer commitments that would produce cynicism, depersonalization, and other dimensions of burnout more characteristic of employees who often can’t leave their organization. Pines and Aronson (1988) define burnout as a state of exhaustion encompassing three components: physical (e.g., low energy, chronic fatigue), emotional

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