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Original Research

Motivations for volunteers in food rescue nutrition

T.Y. Mousa^a, J.H. Freeland-Graves^{*}

Department of Nutritional Sciences, 103 West 24th Street, Painter 444, Nutritional Sciences A2703, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 78712, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: A variety of organizations redistribute surplus food to low-income populations through food rescue nutrition. Why volunteers participate in these charitable organizations is unclear. The aim of this study is to document the participation and motivations of volunteers who are involved specifically in food rescue nutrition.

Study design: A cross-sectional study was conducted in two phases.

Methods: In phase 1, a new instrument, Motivations to Volunteer Scale, was developed and validated in 40 participants (aged ≥ 18 years). In phase 2, the new scale and a demographics questionnaire were administered to 300 participants who were volunteering in food pantries and churches.

Results: The pilot study showed that Motivations to Volunteer Scale exhibited an internal consistency of Cronbach's α of 0.73 ($P < 0.01$), and a reliability from a test–retest of times 1 and 2 was $r = 0.9$ ($P < 0.05$); paired t-test was insignificant ($P > 0.05$). The scale was validated also by comparison to the Volunteer Function Inventory ($r = 0.86$, $P < 0.05$). The constructs of the newly developed Motivations to Volunteer Scale were requirement, career improvement, social life, and altruism. The mean motivation score of the 300 volunteers was 9.15 ± 0.17 . Greater motivations were observed among participants who were aged >45 years, women, Hispanics, college/university graduates, physically inactive, non-smokers, and had an income $\geq \$48,000$.

Conclusions: The Motivations to Volunteer Scale is a valid tool to assess why individuals volunteer in food rescue nutrition. The extent of motivations of participants was relatively high, and the primary reason for volunteering was altruism. Health professionals should be encouraged to participate in food redistribution.

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Introduction

In the United States (US), the amount of food that is deposited in a landfill has been estimated to be 30%–40% of total waste.¹

This large quantity of food waste is somewhat shocking as 13.4% of the US population has been reported to lack food security and does not know the source of their next meal.² One approach to reduce food loss is the redistribution of surplus food to a low-income population that is in need.

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 512 471 0657, +1 512 619 3102 (mobile); fax: +1 512 471 5844.

E-mail addresses: mousa_tamara@yahoo.com (T.Y. Mousa), jfg@mail.utexas.edu (J.H. Freeland-Graves).

^a Current address: Amman 11196 – Jordan. P.O. Box: 960364, USA. Tel.: +1 962 79 5008407 (mobile).

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In recent years, a large number of communities have become involved in food rescue nutrition by the creation of charitable networks of organizations that reallocate unwanted food. The magnitude of this reused food in the US population is huge. For example, Feeding America (formerly Second Harvest) was created to fight hunger in 1975. Today, it is the biggest non-profit national program of its kind. In 2015, this program donated an approximate annual amount of 800 million pounds of food, supporting 60,000 pantries that fed 46.5 million individuals.³

Other national, volunteer-based food networks exist in the United States including Campus Kitchens Project, Donate Don't Dump, and We Don't Waste.⁴ This Samaritan approach of food relocation occurs due to the efforts of both employees and volunteers. The focus of this paper is to explore why volunteers chose to donate their time to food rescue nutrition.

The reasons for volunteer participation in this field are complex. Motivations are hypothetical constructs that describe the rationales for actions and behaviors of individuals, explaining why and how one acts and responds to issues.⁵ In 2007, a national study investigating community service in 1454 adults from 48 states found that almost half (48%) were women, aged 25–74 years. The principle motive cited for volunteering was the personal and social importance of providing support to help the food insecure in the society. These intentions included empathy and morality, commitment to ideals, having better income, and being in a relationship.⁶

The 2005 Current Population Survey investigated the effect of life events on volunteerism in 90,000 adults. Two-thirds of participants were women, with an average age of 45 years. More than three-quarters of the volunteers were Caucasians, married, employed, and had a mean annual income of \$77,936. Participants who were male and divorced were less likely to volunteer by at least 10-fold. Being white, married, employed, educated, and having children and high income increased the likelihood of volunteering by more than 2-fold ($P < 0.05$).⁷ Thus, a higher income and education level and being married are associated with greater volunteerism.

Numerous scales have been developed to measure characteristics of volunteers.^{8–15} However, these studies did not assess the reasons for volunteering in the redistribution of food to those in need. The aim of this study is to document the extent of participation and motivations of volunteers who are involved specifically in food rescue nutrition.

Methods

Design

A cross-sectional study was conducted in spring 2015 in two phases. In phase 1, a new instrument, Motivations to Volunteer Scale, was developed and validated in 40 volunteers. In phase 2, the scale was tested in 300 adults (≥ 18 years) involved in food rescue nutrition. These volunteers were recruited from locations of food redistribution such as food pantries and churches.

All participants were administered the demographic and motivation questionnaires in one visit. The demographics

questionnaire contained information about personal characteristics and socio-economic status. The Motivations to Volunteer Scale queried reasons and intentions for participation in food rescue nutrition.

Participants

A total of 340 individuals (≥ 18 years old) volunteering in charitable organizations were recruited from locations of food donation by the use of flyers and personal communication (via volunteering in food rescue nutrition agencies). The nature of the research was explained, and the informed consent was obtained. The protocol of this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin.

Instruments

The Demographic Questionnaire utilized was based on previous research in this laboratory.¹⁶ Information was obtained about age, ethnicity, weight, height, education, marital status, occupation, socio-economic status, and self-reported health. This tool also was slightly revised to collect additional data about the participant's sex and engagement in physical activity, smoking, and drinking alcohol.

The Motivations to Volunteer Scale was derived initially from concepts found in a literature survey. A preliminary scale was tested for content validity by a panel of nutrition academics and professionals and then revised. This 21-item scale instrument includes information about the type, frequency, duration, location, and motive to participate in food rescue nutrition. Then this instrument was tested and validated in a sample of 40 volunteers. The final scale exhibited an internal consistency (correlations between items and total score) of Cronbach's α of 0.73 ($P < 0.01$). To confirm reliability, the scale was administered to the same participants 2 weeks apart. The intraclass correlation of times 1 and 2 was $r = 0.9$ ($P < 0.05$), with an insignificant paired t -test ($P > 0.05$).

For additional validation, the 1998 Volunteer Function Inventory was administered to the same 40 individuals. This older instrument measures motivations to volunteer in general.¹⁷ The total score of the new Motivations to Volunteer Scale (top score = 14) correlated well with that of the Volunteer Function Inventory (top score = 30; $r = 0.86$, $P < 0.05$).

To measure construct validity, factor analysis was performed on the scores of Motivations to Volunteer Scale of the total sample ($n = 300$).¹⁸ Constructs of the scale were identified and grouped as four areas: requirement, career improvement, social life, and altruism. This scale consisted of 21 statements that described whether the individual agreed (score = 1) or disagreed (score = 0) with reasons underlying their motivation for volunteering in food rescue nutrition. Items that were associated with a negative influence on motivations to volunteer were reverse coded, such that a higher score reflected greater motivation.

Statistical analysis

The Graduate Pack of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, 19.0 for Windows 2010 (SPSS, Armonk, NY), was used to

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