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Expanding the Pool of Volunteers: Enticing Ethnic Minorities to Become More Involved

Melanie Randle and Sara Dolnicar, University of Wollongong

Abstract

In Australia the value of volunteering runs into the tens of billions of dollars each year. The multicultural nature of Australia has resulted in greater heterogeneity amongst volunteers; however minorities are still under-represented in mainstream volunteering. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour to structure the study, the volunteering behaviour of ethnic minorities is investigated. All three constructs are found to be relevant for volunteering; however, the role that each construct plays varies between ethnic groups. Findings are significant for managers trying to attract volunteers from different ethnic groups because marketing messages can be targeted to the factors most influential in their particular decision making process.

Introduction and Background

The last half century in Australia has witnessed a significant increase in the heterogeneous nature of the population, largely due to the generous immigration policies of the 20th century. Since World War II almost six million people have settled in Australia and even now more than 115,000 migrants and refugees are granted visas each year (DIMIA, 2005). Sub-communities of Australians with different ethnic backgrounds are particularly prevalent in regions such as the Illawarra region of NSW. Since the early 1900's it has been host to the large Port Kembla steelworks, providing incentives for migrants to relocate to the region in the boom-times of the 1950's and 1960's when labour was in short demand (DIMIA, 2005).

In Australia, volunteering has an estimated value of AU\$42 billion per annum with 4.4 million individuals contributing 704 million hours (Volunteering Australia, 2001). It provides services which have contributed to the prosperity the country enjoys today and which otherwise would not be provided by government. Nonprofits are under increasing pressure to provide services previously provided by government (Bales, 1996) and with reduced funding. These factors, as well as the growth of depression, youth suicide and drug abuse (Cnaan, Kasternakis and Wineburg, 1993) have increased the demand for unpaid workers (Wymer, 1997). Volunteer managers are presented with even greater challenges in very multicultural communities because different groups can react differently to the same marketing messages. Illawarra organisations have expressed frustration at the difficulty of enticing ethnic groups to volunteer, reinforcing the finding of prior studies that minorities are less likely to be involved than the mainstream population (Fisher and Cole, 1993). In the current competitive climate where many organisations are struggling to survive and the fight for volunteers becomes more desperate, ethnic minorities represent an untapped pool of resources. Volunteer managers need to access these groups to supplement volunteer numbers. In multicultural communities being able to attract these groups is the difference between surviving and ceasing to exist.

Prior Research

Investigations of volunteering have found ethnic minorities to be over-represented in culturally specific causes (i.e. causes designed to assist members of that particular cultural group). However, in general they are under-represented in mainstream volunteering (i.e.

volunteering activities for causes to assist Australian residents generally, rather than to serve the needs of one particular cultural group) (ABS, 2001). In Australia, there has been a very mainstream, Anglo-Celtic approach to volunteering, which has excluded many groups who don't share common social roles and values (Kerr, *et al.*, 2001; Martin, 1999). This is an area still needing investigation. As Pires, Stanton and Cheek (2003) acknowledge: "attention to the problems of identifying and reaching a single, often relatively small, ethnic group, as opposed to some aggregate of groups, has been minimal" (p. 224). The gap lies in the investigation of the volunteering behaviour of Australians with different ethnic backgrounds that live in multicultural communities, and the relevance of different factors in predicting volunteering.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB, Ajzen, 1988) asserts that behaviour is determined by three constructs: attitude, social norm and perceived behavioural control (PBC) (Ajzen, 2002). These three constructs form behavioural intention. The TPB provides an interesting framework to investigate volunteering, particularly since anecdotal evidence questions the relevance of some constructs, for example PBC, for volunteering. However, prior studies which use the model to explain other philanthropic behaviours such as blood donation (Amponsah-Afuwape, Myers and Newman, 2002) contradict this. This study provides an opportunity to evaluate the relevance of PBC for volunteering.

Empirical Study

A qualitative approach was adopted because it matches the key aim of this study: to understand the behaviour of different ethnic groups in relation to volunteering. Unlike many qualitative studies which are lack theoretical structure, a previously developed theoretical framework was used to construct the study. This approach is often used in exploratory research and avoids the collection of possibly meaningless data which is difficult to interpret (Carson, *et al.*, 2001). The TPB was chosen because it is effective in predicting a broad range of behaviours, e.g. speeding (Elliot, Armitage and Baughan, 2003) and exercising (Downs and Hausenblas, 2003). It is likely that the TPB will also be relevant for volunteering, and may highlight differences in the decision process of different ethnic groups. Unlike most TPB studies this paper does not present findings in quantitative form. Instead, the model's constructs form the basis for the exploratory investigation and qualitative discussion.

An exploratory approach was chosen with the aim of assessing whether the TPB constructs were appropriate given the topic and market under investigation. This research made use of numerous qualitative research tools including group depth interviews (GDIs), individual depth interviews (IDIs), phone interviews and short interviews. Fieldwork was conducted between Nov 04 and Feb 05 in the Illawarra region of NSW. Ethnic groups were selected because they are the largest in the region and included Italian (2IDI, 1GDI), Greek (1IDI, 2GDI), German (1IDI, 1GDI), Dutch (3IDI), Macedonian (2IDI, 2GDI), Serbian (2IDI), Middle Eastern (2IDI), UK (6IDI, 1GDI) and Australian (2IDI, 2GDI) backgrounds.

Representatives from each group were chosen after approaching cultural organisations and agreeing on the most appropriate combination of qualitative technique/s for that group. Factors contributing to this decision included which techniques were likely to make participants most comfortable and most achievable given the time and cost restraints of the project. In addition to representatives from each group, IDIs were also held with "experts" from Volunteering Australia, Volunteering Illawarra, Wollongong City Council, the Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council and the Illawarra Migrant Resource Centre.

The methodology employed for this study followed many aspects of the systematic approach to qualitative research specified by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The “theoretical sampling” procedure and the “constant comparison” method were used to design the research and analyse data. An interview guide was used to loosely structure interactions with participants, and broadly covered the three constructs of the TPB. The sample was sufficiently large to enable frequency counts of statements or coded statements for a number of variables including attitude, social norm and perceived behavioural control. Frequency counts for subgroups were used to support the insights obtained from interviews and focus groups.

Results

Attitude

Generally, most cultures agreed that the types of services typically provided by volunteering organisations were valuable in improving the community. Mainstream Australians have a particularly positive view of volunteering which are similar to the attitudes of those from the UK, which is probably not surprising given their similarly Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. However, some cultures were not very familiar with the concept of volunteering or were uncomfortable with the notion. To some degree, Middle Eastern participants associated volunteering with slavery, that is, they felt that it was taking advantage of people because they were essentially working without being paid. Some expressed the belief that the services commonly provided by volunteers in Australia should be provided by government. For example, when discussing their interest in being involved in "Clean Up Australia Day", one Middle Eastern participant remarked: “Why should I do it, the government should pay someone to do it”. This view was echoed by the Serbian group who felt that anyone who worked for no pay was foolish and that it was an unacceptable arrangement. Some participants felt their primary responsibility was to their own family and that it would be inappropriate to focus their efforts outside their immediate family. This was particularly true of cultures which were very family oriented such as Italians and Greeks. The German group also expressed concern and suspicion about people they didn’t know offering them help for nothing in return. They believed in the notion of "a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work" and felt that when the pay was missing it upset the equation. They felt as uneasy about providing help for no pay as they did receiving it without paying. Generally, people spent much of their time focussing on their own families, and performing many of the activities commonly labelled as "volunteering". However, because they were directed within their own family group rather than towards broader society, they were not considered as such. For example, the Italian, Greek, and Macedonian groups all indicated that they would provide care for elderly family members or mind children, however they would not consider volunteering to provide these services for people they do not know.

Some, such as the Macedonian group, indicated that there were no systems for volunteering in their homeland and they were sceptical about it: “Volunteering is not common in Macedonia – this is one of the reasons we have problems getting volunteers”. Some cultures including German, Italian and Greek felt that they had worked hard for a long time and it was now their turn to relax. They felt they should benefit from services, rather than contribute to them, and that the younger generation should provide them just as they provided them when they were younger. There was a common view amongst most cultures that life is a cycle and everyone gets a turn to give back – however it was the form that this giving back took, and the beneficiaries, that differed between cultures.

Social Norm

Three key reference groups were influential in the decision to volunteer. These were (1) immediate family, (2) close friends and (3) other people within their ethnic group. Generally, individuals from Australia, UK and Holland were more influenced by their own attitudes in terms of their decision making than other referents such as families and ethnic group. On the other hand, individuals from the Greek, Italian and Macedonian cultures were more influenced by their families and ethnic groups. For example one Greek respondent stated: “My family and children would prefer me to help to them out, just as my parents helped me out”. One Macedonian woman remarked: “I would not do that work because my husband would not approve of me being involved in [a volunteering organisation] – it is not a woman’s job to do that kind of work with other people”.

Respondents were not only asked what these key groups thought about them volunteering but how much they cared what these groups thought. Again, some cultures such as Greek, Italian and Macedonian expressed greater concern about the views of their family, friends and ethnic groups than others, and would be more likely to consider this when making decisions about whether to volunteer or not. As one Greek woman commented: “I would be expected to volunteer for the Greek [community] first, it would be not as good to volunteer for other groups when we need help here”. Conversely, other groups such as Australian, British and Dutch were less likely to place a lot of emphasis on what others thought and were more comfortable volunteering even if others did not approve. For example, one Dutch participant remarked “It doesn’t matter what other people think, you have to do what makes you happy and if people don’t like it then that is their problem”.

Perceived Behavioural Control

There has been some question as to the relevance of the PBC construct for the act of volunteering. Anecdotally, it is suggested that this construct is only relevant for actions such as smoking or other addictions where the individual is constrained by physical compulsions. It can be argued that the act of volunteering is physically possible for almost everyone, so the PBC construct is irrelevant in this case. However, the findings of this study contradict this. A number of groups in this study expressed a positive attitude towards volunteering and the support of important others for being involved, but said as much as they would like to volunteer it was impossible due to factors outside their control. There were four factors stated most frequently as limiting their ability to volunteer. Firstly, lack of transport, particularly their own personal transport and because many (particularly migrant women) have never obtained an Australian drivers license. As a Serbian participant stated: “I would like to get more involved in things like volunteering to also practise my English but I have trouble getting there because I don’t drive”. Language is also a concern for many and is not catered for in many of the more mainstream volunteering organisations in Australia. For the most part, if people cannot speak English adequately they are unable to contribute to the cause. As one of the Macedonian community leaders stated: “The language barrier a big issue for [many Macedonian people] so they are more happy socialising with other Macedonians who they can talk to”. Thirdly, lack of time, either due to paid work commitments or family or friend commitments was restricting for some who would otherwise like to be involved. This was the case with parents with older children who were working full time. For example, one German participant stated: “My daughter would love to be more involved but she is so busy with work and the children. She will get more involved once she has more time”. Fourth, health, or lack thereof, was limiting for some, particularly the older participants. A number of respondents indicated there were many things they loved about volunteering such as the chance to

socialise and keep active, but that ill health prevented them from being involved any longer. For example, one Dutch participant noted: “I used to be very involved in volunteering but now I just can’t do it because of my knees”. The PBC construct is not only relevant in the decision to volunteer but takes on added importance for ethnic minorities because they feel that many volunteering activities are designed with mainstream Anglo-Australians in mind, and do not cater for ethnic minorities such as themselves.

Implications and Future Research

These findings are significant because they highlight the fact that Australians with different ethnic backgrounds are influenced by different factors, and to different degrees, when making the decision of whether or not to volunteer. This is important for marketers in terms of their approach to attracting and retaining volunteers from these groups because the messages used to attract them can be designed specifically to address the factors most influential for them. For example, for cultures where we know that individual attitude is a major influence in the decision, recruitment campaigns should be designed to directly try to enhance the image of volunteering among these individuals. This could include promoting the benefits to the community or to other individuals, enlisting celebrities to promote volunteering to raise the profile of the cause, and to utilise testimonials of people who have either (1) made a difference in people's lives through volunteering or (2) from people who have had a great time socialising and who portray the experience as fun and exciting.

For cultures where social norms play a key role promotional efforts should be aimed at the support networks – that is family, friends and ethnic groups – of potential volunteers. Instead of mainstream or blanket advertising campaigns this could be done, for example, by infiltrating the heart of different ethnic groups by approaching community leaders in an effort to enlist their support and identify forms of volunteering for which they can appreciate the benefits. Generating acceptance and support for selected volunteering activities would be done with the aim of transferring this view to more mainstream types of volunteering in the longer term and amongst future generations. For cultures in which PBC is low marketing campaigns could specifically tailor the volunteering experience to overcome these barriers. For example, where transport is an issue a bus could pick up groups of volunteers and return them home once the activity is completed. Where language is a problem there could be a volunteering group exclusively for individuals fluent in that language to make them feel more comfortable. Where time is an issue volunteering could be designed in shorter sessions so that people can participate without requiring a large commitment of time.

This exploratory study validates the relevance of the TPB constructs for volunteering amongst Australians from different ethnic backgrounds. The findings present two areas for future research. Firstly, while this study indicates that ethnic groups do differ in their volunteering behaviour and the factors contributing to the decision to become involved, it is possible that other factors are also contributing to this. For example, age, acculturation and bicultural identity are factors that could be better predictors of volunteering behaviour, but which have not been explored in this study. These factors could provide grouping criteria that produces more homogenous groups for marketing purposes than segmenting the market by ethnic group alone. Secondly, a logical next step would be to perform a more "typical" TPB study which quantitatively tests the predictive power of the TPB and the relative influence of the three constructs. The qualitative results could inform item development in line with the indirect and direct measures of the TPB. Further research could also test various promotional messages with different ethnic groups to assess the impact of each in recruiting volunteers.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE AND INTERVIEW METHODS

	% area population	IDI	GDI	Short Interview	Phone Interview
Ethnic Groups					
Australian	39.4	2	2		
English	35.9	2			
Irish	10.0	2	1		
Italian	4.0	2	1		
German	3.5	1	1		
Scottish	3.3	2			
Macedonian	2.1	2	2		
Dutch	1.6	3			
Greek	1.3	1	2		
Arabic	1.1	2			
Serbian	0.9	2			
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Is.	0.2	4			
Vietnamese	0.2	1	1		
Volunteering and Multicultural Experts					
Wollongong City Council Bushcare program		2			
Wollongong City Council Community and Cultural Development		1			
Bankstown City Council Bushcare program		1			
Volunteering Australia					1
Volunteering Illawarra		2			
Wollongong Multicultural Resource Centre		1			
Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council		1			
Bushcare Volunteers and Ex-volunteers					
Current Bushcare volunteers			2		
Ex-Bushcare volunteers		2			
General Community					
General community (incl. non-volunteers)				43	
Total		36	12	43	1