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9 Discourses of Volunteerism

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Public discourse often promotes volunteerism as a novel and empowering solution to social problems, and it is a significant international phenomenon. In this essay, we engage in an interdisciplinary review of the literature on the topic. We begin by clarifying three key terms around which we organize our review: *volunteer*, *volunteering*, and *volunteerism*. We take an explicitly discursive approach in our review, treating academic research on volunteerism as instantiations of discourses of representation, understanding, suspicion, and vulnerability (Mumby, 1997), and we use this framework to identify key areas of research and their possibilities and limitations. We conclude with some suggestions for future study.

DISCOURSES OF VOLUNTEERISM

Scarcely a day goes by without public attention in a range of societies being drawn to the issue of volunteerism. Volunteering, we are invariably told, benefits us, and volunteers themselves are good people (Winter, 1998). Some scholars have argued that volunteerism is *the* means through which citizens build contemporary democratic communities and that volunteer work creates linkages between diverse interests and classes in the face of declining social capital and widening social, economic, and political disparities among large groups of people (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, scholars have suggested that academic and practitioner discussions of volunteerism are characterized by a “language of decline” (Rathgeb Smith, 1999, p. 169) that describes the quality of collective life in terms of erosion and decay, to which volunteering is presented as a solution. In this context, it becomes important to consider what sorts of political and community participation volunteering might engender. Further, what does it mean to interpret civic engagement, which we understand as our personal and collective involvement with social issues, primarily through the lens of volunteerism?

Our collective enchantment with volunteerism is further indexed by the sheer number of academic essays on the subject since Sills’s (1957) influential book, *The Volunteers*. Scholars from a broad range of disciplines (including

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