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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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communication, economics, leisure studies, political science, psychology, public administration, and sociology) have studied the subject vigorously. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a large percentage of studies emanate from the United States, and the vast majority of studies are located in “advanced” liberal democracies (Dekker & Halman, 2003).

In this chapter, we take a communication-centered approach to understanding contemporary issues surrounding volunteerism, and we engage in a detailed interdisciplinary review of the literature in order to identify key theoretical assumptions, empirical issues, and areas that we believe are ripe for more inquiry. The field of communication studies provides a particularly good platform upon which to build an understanding of volunteerism, not only because communication constitutes such a crucial empirical issue, but precisely because, as an academic discipline, communication studies is thoroughly multi-theoretical and multi-perspectival (Corman & Poole, 2000). Thus, it offers an ideal vantage point from which to integrate, compare, review, and critique both micro-studies of individual behavior and macro-studies of social structure, policy, and discourse.

Moreover, establishing a communication-centered perspective for studying volunteerism encourages greater exchange among various branches of communication inquiry, including organizational communication, health communication, and communication and social justice. For example, organizational communication scholars are well placed to understand volunteerism in terms of identification and social capital (Lewis, 2005), and health communication scholars are well positioned to investigate discursive connections between volunteering and well-being. Indeed, the United Nations, which designated 2001 as the International Year of the Volunteer, described volunteering itself in terms of efforts to improve the well-being of other individuals and communities (Anheier & Salamon, 1999). Scholars concerned with issues of social justice and dialogue also stand to benefit from enunciating a clearly defined set of terms and concepts to understand student volunteering as part of social justice-oriented service learning projects (Artz, 2001).

Given this context, we aim in this essay to understand who volunteers, what volunteering involves, what volunteerism means, and why these questions emerge as significant, by examining four key academic discourses on the subject. As we examine each discourse, we unpack conceptions and insights into communication processes that each point of view affords researchers. Before we begin our review of these discourses, literatures and approaches, however, we signal our overall direction by discussing our own perspective on the terms volunteerism, volunteering, and volunteer. Following these definitions, we elaborate a theoretical framework, and, finally, as we move through a range of studies of volunteerism, we tease out issues pertaining to each of the three key terms.

Volunteerism, Volunteering, and Volunteers

While scholars have made implicit distinctions among the terms volunteerism, volunteering (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991) and volunteer (Ellis & Noyes,
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1990), none offers explicit conceptual treatments of them. Consequently, making clear-cut distinctions is difficult, rendered more so by the fact that some researchers have used the terms interchangeably. For instance, Snyder (2001), for the most part, conflated volunteerism with volunteering, and understood both in terms of processes and activities. However, he did make one reference to volunteerism as a form, framework, or environment in which helping takes place (p. 16311), and that description serves as an interesting starting point from which to fashion a fuller understanding of volunteerism. Notably, Snyder’s emphasis on form allows us to appreciate volunteerism in historical terms. Accordingly, we define volunteerism as an overall framework which engenders particular types of economic and political structures, discourses, practices, and contexts for connecting individuals with society that are identifiable either in terms of activity (volunteering) or personhood (volunteer). At first glance, the notion of volunteerism so positioned is feasibly distinct from other possible terms to describe civic engagement such as charity, activism, or engaged citizenship (Barnill, Beitsch, & Brooks, 2001; Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Tocqueville, 1835/1969), and, in many ways, it is. We offer two such points of distinction between volunteerism and other similar terms: one distinction is structural and the other discursive.

Volunteerism as Structure

First, volunteerism can be understood structurally, as a social practice produced by the shrinking of the traditional welfare state.1 As states have attempted to deregulate and globalize markets over the last few decades, their historic welfare role has been reduced considerably (Kingfisher, 2002; Young, 2000). Whereas the precise nature of such structural adjustment has varied considerably from country to country (Kelsey, 1995), the very proliferation of a global “third sector” or a “non-government organization (NGO) sector” can be read as a consequence of state recession (Ganesh, 2005). Predictably then, studies have demonstrated a relationship between the amount of voluntary activity in a country and the overall size of its welfare sector: the less state welfare, the more the volunteering (Anheier & Salamon, 1999; Anheier & Seibel, 1990).

The high percentage of the U.S. population that engages in volunteering, popularly estimated at more than 50% (Independent Sector, 2002), could therefore be considered an index of the relatively small size of its welfare sector. New Zealand, for example, has a much lower incidence of volunteering at about 25%, but a much more evolved system of welfare and public health (Statistics New Zealand, 2004).

Moreover, structural pressures emphasizing market forces are creating shifts in the type and nature of voluntary engagement more significant and problematic than the change in numbers initially suggests, even in societies with long histories of volunteerism such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Milligan, 1998). For example, the move toward professionalization (Bloom & Kilgore, 2003) is changing the face of volunteerism, with expectations that the voluntary sector acts in rationalized, business-like
ways. So, even as it adopts a shadow state role, the voluntary sector, and organizations that deliver welfare services in particular, have begun competing for funds in ways that are not dissimilar to businesses. If funding contracts are to be retained it is necessary that they measure up to standards, demonstrate accountability, and meet state-driven outcomes efficiently. This drive to marketization (Simpson & Cheney, 2007) has instigated claims that the voluntary sector is bifurcated (Knight, 1993; Milligan, 1998). On the one hand, one can identify grass-roots initiatives that emphasize local engagement and empowerment through decision making, and on the other, voluntary organizations that resemble large corporations (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005).

Further, a palpable tension exists between the statistic that 50% of the U.S. population has volunteered at one time or another (Independent Sector, 2002) and competing popular claims about the marked decline of social capital in that country (Putnam, 2000). In this sense, the statistic itself indicates a logic of accountability and rationalization that stems from viewing volunteers solely as the “little fingers of the state” and business (C. Wilson, Hendricks, & Smithies, 2001, p. 132). This narrow view raises the specter of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992) about what actually constitutes volunteerism not only in a legal but also in a profoundly moral sense. Can civic engagement truly be measured in terms of the percentage of population that volunteers? Can it be achieved only in organizational contexts? Postcolonial perspectives, in particular, carry the potential to challenge the reified organizational focus of much research on volunteerism as excluding indigenous forms of communitarian action that position self and other in more complicated and fluid ways. C. Wilson et al. illustrated this point nicely in the context of the contrast, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, between Pakeha (European) and Maori ways of being:

When I get up as a Pakeha and mow my lawns, I mow my lawns…. When I go down the road to the disabled children’s home and mow their lawns I volunteer to do something for the other…. When my friend Huhana gets up and mows her lawns, she mows her lawns, when she goes down to the Kohanga Reo and mows lawns, she mows her lawns. When she moves across and mows the lawns at the Marae and the Hauora, she mows her lawns—because there is no sense of “other.” (p. 129)

Volunteerism as morally and culturally positioned implies that, in addition to being a structural phenomenon, it is also profoundly discursive.

Volunteerism as Discourse

The term volunteerism, as we argue below, appears to encompass more and more forms of civic engagement. For example, some scholarship on the subject interprets acts of interpersonal help—assisting a person to cross a street, for example—as constituting a form of informal volunteering (Spooley, Pearce, Butcher, & O’Neill, 2004). A vivid, if somewhat extreme, example of
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the extent to which historically distinct forms of civic engagement have been reinterpretated as exemplars of volunteering can be found in Winter’s (1998) reinvention of U.S. patriot Paul Revere’s famous midnight ride as an act, not of patriotism or revolution, but of “volunteering.”

Additionally, volunteerism as a discourse demonstrably emphasizes order over change, cohesion over discord, and individualism over collectivism. Most commonly, regardless of the consequence of acts of volunteering—which might include radical social change—stakeholders link the actual performance of tasks archetypically associated with volunteering with cohesion and coordination, such as answering phones, assisting patients at hospitals, hospice care-giving, or preparing food. Such emphasis upon cohesion and coordination can be explained with reference to the “language of decline” (Rathgeb Smith, 1999, p. 169) that characterizes discussions of volunteerism. Although social problems may seem chaotic, volunteerism comprises an ordered, structured, and functional solution. It makes sense, then, why academic discourses so often position volunteerism in organizational terms, while they frame activism more often as a social movement (see Napoli, this volume). Notably, some scholars consider the consequences of volunteering in terms of its potential to increase social cohesion and social capital (Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Others have argued that volunteerism constitutes a key term in promoting managerial participation systems such as quality circles (Stohl & Jennings, 1988).

Additionally, volunteerism also discursively emphasizes individualism over collectivism. With one or two exceptions, much scholarly literature on volunteering measures volunteering in terms of individuals’ attributes (e.g., Clary & Snyder, 1991; Clary et al., 1998; Mesch, Rooney, & Steinberg, 2006; Smith, 1994), rather than groups’ interaction (Iverson & McPhee, 2008; McComb, 1995). Indeed, the very term volunteer-ism emphasizes voluntas, or individual will (Habermas, 1984), which implies agency—the ability to make free, rational, and unencumbered choices. Such assumptions about order and agency occur with great frequency in studies of volunteerism. For example, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth’s (1996) extensive review of literature on key characteristics of volunteers emphasizes both free will and an ability to contribute to the public good. Brown (1999), in framing volunteering in the United States as behavior that occurs “in the national interest” (p. 39), began her essay with the claim that “the idea of public life in America is premised upon individual initiative” (p. 17).

Volunteering

One can understand the more specific concepts of volunteering and volunteer with reference to volunteerism as a general discursive and structural backdrop. We understand the term volunteering in performative and action-oriented terms, as contextual activity and experience that individuals, groups and communities may go through. Yet, researchers must unravel what sorts
and contexts of activities “count” as volunteering and what does not. The literature on volunteering, as indicated, acknowledges the importance of organizational context (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002; Barlow, Bancroft, & Turner, 2005; McComb, 1995; Tschirhart, Mesch, Parry, Miller, & Lee, 2005), and, hence, the term formal volunteering denotes volunteering for an organization. The idea that volunteering is predominantly organizational makes additional sense in the context of commentary by prominent social critics about the changing nature of the public sphere, and the increasing prominence of organizations as the primary way in which individuals connect with larger social issues and concerns (Habermas, 1989). However, as we mentioned earlier, more and more types of informal civic activities associated with helping and support also appear to be subsumed under the rubric of volunteering, including informal support to neighbors, or spontaneous care offered to strangers.

Moreover, scholars have described volunteering in many different ways, developing disciplinary lenses through which they define and analyze it. Notably, economists have tended to treat volunteering in terms of work, characterizing it as work performed without monetary reward and attempting to calculate the economic worth of volunteer work hours (Brown, 1999). Other scholars, notably in leisure studies, have framed volunteering as a form of “serious leisure” rather than work (Stebbins, 2002). Still others have considered it to be a “third space,” independent from work and leisure (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Finally, understood as a form of care, volunteering refers to altruistic acts performed outside the intimate sphere of family and friends (J. Wilson, 2000). In this sense, it can be conceptualized as a contained, rather than a radical notion of care that permeates public and personal boundaries.

Volunteer

The third key term under consideration in this essay is the term volunteer itself. We understand the term to be a form of identity produced under voluntarism. Thus, while we are not so much interested in noting essential characteristics of “the” ideal volunteer, we find the number of studies of volunteer characteristics quite telling. A major concern of research on voluntarism has been to answer the question: “Who volunteers?” (Carson, 1999). We will discuss specific characteristics later in this essay. For now, we acknowledge some irony in the attempt to characterize the ideal volunteer in the United States, where the largest number of such studies has been conducted, in the face of the widely cited statistic that 50% of the adult population of the United States has volunteered (Independent Sector, 2002). Given that the only common trait that this vast, diverse, and conflicted culture likely shares is the good fortune to be alive, we can reasonably suggest that attempts to develop personality profiles of volunteers are motivated not so much by sociological curiosity as they are by rationalized managerial volunteer recruitment and coordination needs. Finally, even the managerial character profile of the volunteer increasingly...
blurs, as more and more forms of social action become classified as volunteer-
ism. J. Wilson (2000), for instance, argued that no good sociological reasons
exist to study activists separately from volunteers.

Theoretical Framework: Discourses of Volunteerism

In this essay, we adopt a largely discursive position, in that we seek to examine
the discursive implications of interdisciplinary academic theorizing on volun-
teerism as much as to summarize the results of such research. Mumby (1997)
offered a useful way of understanding academic discourses. Drawing from
Ricoeur (1981), Mumby characterized four paradigmatic positions in academic
studies of communication: a discourse of representation, a discourse of under-
standing, a discourse of suspicion, and a discourse of vulnerability. Mumby’s
fourfold categorization can be contextualized with reference to several attempts
by scholars to situate various paradigms of inquiry in organizational studies,
in general, and organizational communication studies, in particular.

Perhaps the best known of these comes from Burrell and Morgan (1979),
who laid out four paradigms or ways of classifying organizational analysis:
functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism,
based on distinctions made along two sets of key dimensions: subjective ver-
sus objective approaches and theories of order versus theories of change. Deetz
(1996) critiqued and reconfigured these four paradigms, instead advocating
four discursive positions that did not rely on subject-object dichotomies or
functionalist notions of order and change. He labeled these paradigms nor-
mative, interpretive, critical, and dialogic discourses, arguing that they more
accurately configured the terrain of inquiry in organizational studies. Mumby’s
four discourses—representation, interpretation, suspicion and vulnerability—
frame much research in communication studies and organizational commu-
nication, and they largely echo Deetz’s formulation. However, his equation
of discourses of representation with positivism is more specific than Deetz’s
rendition of what counts as a “normative” discourse. We take the term repre-
sentation to incorporate positivist, post-positivist, as well as functional points
of view, given that none of these points of view enable a critique of represen-
tational practices themselves. Indeed, Mumby (1997) concluded that the other
three discourses “articulate increasingly transgressive orientations toward
the “notions of ‘representation’ and ‘correspondence’ as critical attributes of
knowledge” (p. 23).

A key advantage of organizing and analyzing academic studies of volun-
teerism in terms of these four discourses is that they provide a clear sense of
where scholarship has been conducted and what possibilities currently exist.
Conversely, however, some important continuities might well be lost were one
to treat each discourse as a discrete set. Therefore, as we discuss various aca-
demic studies organized with reference to four discourses, we observe contin-
uities, parallels, and potentials. To begin, we provide an introduction to each
discourse.
Discourses of Representation

According to Mumby (1997), a realist discourse of representation reflects positivist and functional perspectives on knowledge. Mumby connected this range of research through a singular view of rationality which suggests communication is an outcome of foundational knowledge about the world. According to Mumby, communication thus reflects the world “as it is” as if in a mirror. Positivist assumptions treat communication as “a conduit…for already formed ideas” (p. 4), and, in so doing, they conceptually separate language from thought and cognition. In sum, this framework presents communication as a product of thought in which the substantive content of what is communicated and the topic of conversation reflect the Cartesian subject-object split, with the former reflecting the latter. Communication is, therefore, ancillary to questions about the creation of meaning and, subsequently, larger questions of power and identity. As a discourse then, such research literally represents, reproduces, and legitimates communication in terms of outcomes in reality rather than understanding its implication in the construction of reality itself.

Discourses of Understanding

Mumby (1997) positioned an interpretivist discourse of understanding within the Modernist project because it attempts to reinterpret and expand the concept of rationality rather than reject it altogether. Such perspectives expand the concept beyond the instrumental reason enshrined in discourses of representation, to include rationality as a broad, inherently value-laden phenomenon. Further, a second tenet of such interpretivism is to understand subjects and objects in terms of interaction (Husserl, 1962), which is resonant with Kantian idealism rather than empiricist positivism. In this way, communication becomes construed as a process of dialogue between the acting subject and the other(s) and contributes to creating social reality as we know it. In organizational contexts, in particular, interpretive scholars pay attention to ways in which communication molds organizational reality via organizational culture, metaphors, or rituals, and certain communication practices constitute different organizational realities (Boden, 1994; Trujillo, 1992).

Discourses of Suspicion

It can be argued that interpretivism privileges action in the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984) but neglects structural influences (Deetz, 1996), which operate at a deep cultural and ideological level. Mumby (1997) asserted that both Western Marxist thinkers as well as those from the Frankfurt School have not abandoned all modernist assumptions. Rather, they have criticized the ways in which power relations have undermined the modernist project of emancipation, often by excessive emphasis on scientific-technical and bureaucratic notions of rationality. As Deetz contended, these scholars treat communication
itself as constructive, dialogic, and dialectical, with the risk of meaning deformation ever present. Moreover, they envision communication as the means through which members reproduce and maintain systems of domination via the construction of particular forms of identity. Ideology operates at the level of meaning, identity, and culture while hegemony reflects the ways in which ideological colonization is played out and sustained dialectically across a myriad of everyday activities and practices. Such critical theory aims to interrogate the deeper structural power tensions covered over by the superficial unity of organizational life.

Discourses of Vulnerability

Finally, Mumby (1997) maintained that discourses of vulnerability present selfhood in terms of the “de-centered subject” and question the possibilities for representation altogether. This perspective treats individual subjectivity as constructed of shards of multiple, conflicting, and sedimented discourses (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In this way, individuals are sites of discursive indeterminacy rather than agentic subjects, and discourse, thus, precedes acts of individual choice. As such, seemingly sutured individual identities result from dominant discourses, which paradoxically can themselves never capture the wholeness of experience because, according to Mumby, “meaning is always, by definition, partial, incomplete, and subject to slippage and transformation” (p. 16). A discourse of vulnerability, in this sense, implies and requires openness toward indeterminacy.

Discourses of vulnerability sometimes tout court reject the ability of discourse to fully represent reality (Derrida, 1976), instead positioning discourse itself as a shifting, self-representative set of signifying practices (Baudrillard, 1983). Studies focus on discursive struggle and acts of resistance rather than transformation. Indeed, as we will discuss later, such post-structural perspectives more likely treat academic representation practices as discourses rather than making claims about the nature of reality and society.

Having described our own position on the key terms of this essay and outlined the contours of four key academic discourses, we now examine how various discourses construct the relationships among volunteerism, volunteering, and volunteers respectively, positing different relationships among these terms. While our review is interdisciplinary, we focus on communication in that we refer to, and indeed revel in, issues of broad significance to communication scholars, highlighting such key constructs as cultures, frameworks, meanings, symbols, definitions, messages, values, discourses, and dialogue.

Discourses of Representation: Volunteers, Volunteering, and Volunteerism

Studies which draw on the tenets of the discourse of representation focus predominantly upon understanding individual behavior, whether from
psychological, economic, or even sociological standpoints. As we demonstrate in this chapter, researchers situated within this discourse are much more concerned with identifying characteristics of volunteers and describing acts of volunteering than they are with analyzing structural or discursive characteristics of volunteerism. Indeed, such studies often conceptualize communication most explicitly at individual levels, rather than at organizational or societal levels. Accordingly, we begin by presenting how positivist and post-positivist studies tend to characterize volunteers and volunteering, and we then move on to a discussion of how such studies see volunteerism itself.

Representations of Volunteers

Much work on who volunteers and why can be classified as part of a discourse of representation. Here, we outline some assumptions of research typical of this discourse and detail how rationality underpins such studies’ considerations of communication.

First, researchers tend to assume that volunteers can be categorized by structural socio-economic or demographic characteristics, which predict particular skills and attitudes. Several studies use data such as age (Omoto, Snyder, & Martino, 2000; Rotolo, 2000), income (Freeman, 1997), educational level (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996), occupation (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996), gender (J. Wilson & Musick, 2003), and race (Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000; Sundeen, Garcia, & Wang, 2007) to identify volunteers, thereby taking for granted that social stratification significantly predicts engagement in voluntary work (Goss, 1999). Volunteers are, therefore, located by “dominant statuses” that they already possess (Smith, 1994). For example, some quantitative studies (McPherson & Rotolo, 1996) have attempted to correlate greater voluntary participation with higher educational levels. J. Wilson and Musick’s (1997a) study found a higher incidence of volunteers among more highly educated and public service workers, although Brown and Smart (2007) cautioned against using education as a proxy for ability for non-dominant racial groups.

Brown (1999) concluded that those in the paid work force tend to volunteer more than those who are not. These findings are corroborated by a study of middle income Australians (Pusey, 2000). Clary and Snyder (1999) linked particular skills that volunteers possess, such as communication ability, with high human capital and personal resources, such as transportation and health. Further, Reinerman (1987) exhibited how higher volunteer engagement by public sector workers relates to a specific value position—a less individualistic, compartmentalized view of life than those who did not volunteer.

Second, studies sometimes assume that volunteers have distinct personality traits that dictate communication patterns, notably altruism. While psychological studies (e.g., Boz & Palaz’s 2007 analysis of Turkish volunteers) look beyond socio-economic conditions and demographic characteristics, they still reinforce the assumption that an essential version of the “traditional volunteer” exists. From this perspective, the typical volunteer is no longer determined by
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age, education, race, gender or income level, but rather an identifiable personality type. Accordingly, scholars list attributes such as extraversion, others-oriented empathy (Penner & Finkelstein, 1998), helpfulness (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007), and appropriate attachment styles (Gillath et al., 2005) as key characteristics of a volunteer that shape their communication with recipients of services rendered.

In turn, studies focused on personality traits often neglect the impact of social and organizational structures. Also, although psychological insights may be helpful in explaining individual engagement, they do not explain the surprising drop in social capital in the United States over the last four decades (Putnam, 2000). Studies that argue that individuals are repositories of altruism simply cannot explain such deep social fluctuations over time in seemingly stable dispositions (Wuthnow, 1991a).

A third assumption that characterizes literature in this area is that individuals act to maximize their own satisfaction. The emphasis in such research upon individual motivation prompts us to discuss the assumption that cost-benefit considerations significantly influence volunteers’ motivation and perseverance. Theory development in the area has focused extensively on initial motivation or goals (Omoto & Snyder, 1995), identifying volunteer goals based on underlying needs, such as altruistic, social, instrumental, self-esteem, and other motivations (Clary, Snyder, & Ridge, 1992). Scholars then classify volunteers on a continuum between pure altruism and clear self-interest (Barnett, 1996).

In sum, such research has argued that volunteers’ initial decisions to “bring themselves into contact with needy others…are made in part via a rational process during which people estimate the kind of emotional experiences they are likely to have during such encounters and then use these anticipated responses to determine the degree of satisfaction they expect to experience” (Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003, p. 249, our italics). Researchers, therefore, treat rational choice as a useful tool for predicting how organizational settings influence incentive structures for individuals (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996). For instance, Tschirhart et al.’s (2005) longitudinal study of stipended volunteers noted that initial altruistic motivations tended to decrease over time unless coupled with other outcomes such as social, instrumental, and self-esteem goals. However, quantifying value-laden goals (such as credibility, integrity, and self-fulfillment) remains difficult, particularly when respondents report multiple motivations (Clary & Snyder, 1999).

Representations of Volunteering

Studies oriented toward representation treat volunteering in several ways, but two in particular bear mention. First, academic discourses binarize volunteering as occurring in either formal or informal contexts. Second, such scholarship considers volunteering in terms of its parallels with paid work.

Representational discourses define formal contexts as explicitly
organizational. Moreover, these studies often focus on how organizations deal with and manage organizational activity around volunteers themselves. Issues include volunteer recruitment (Clary et al., 1992; Sundeen, 1992), socialization and training (Davis et al., 2003), coordination and role ambiguity (Merrell, 2000), or commitment (Wisner, Stringfellow, Youngdahl, & Parker, 2005).

Informal contexts, on the other hand, involve individual acts of helping that are determined more by dispositional attributes such as helpfulness or empathy (Finkelstein & Brannick, 2007). Researchers have characterized informal volunteering within family or neighborhood groups by sporadic occurrence, private impact, casual organizing, and often obligatory character, stemming from strong relational ties (Amato, 1990).

Second, and relatedly, scholars often explore formal volunteering in relation to paid work (J. Wilson & Musick, 1997b). The subtitle of Pearce’s (1993) book, The Organizational Behavior of Unpaid Workers, indicates the extent to which volunteering references both formal organization as well as the world of work. Within the context of an agency or institutional framework, some researchers attribute work-like attributes to volunteering in terms of organizational ties, timetabling and the need for skills. For example, Davis et al. (2003) defined volunteering as a long term commitment, not a one-off act of helping, as presented by bystander intervention research (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995). Davis et al. argued that establishing commitment requires initiating formal workplace-like contracts.

Conceptual parallels with paid work also emerge in studies that examine individuals’ transitions to the workforce, “using” volunteering (J. Wilson & Musick, 2003) as a means to enhance their success in obtaining a job later on (Wuthnow, 1995) due to acquired skills, community networking, and social capital (Onyx & Leonard, 2000). In fact, Duncan’s (1999) investment model of volunteering utilized an image of “well-roundedness” to indicate ability to potential employers. Notably, however, empirical research about utilizing volunteering to enhance job seeking success has yielded mixed results. Prouteau and Wolff’s (2005) study of French volunteers did not support human capital investment models.

Despite this empirical lacuna, rhetorical associations between volunteering and work predominate, as evident in the growing research on corporate volunteering (Buckley, 2005). Here, studies have interrogated how organizations should manage relationships between volunteering and organizational citizenship behavior (Farmer & Fedor, 2001). The idea that volunteering represents a training ground for future members of the workforce also becomes apparent in some aspects of the service learning movement in high schools and universities in the United States (Droge & Murphy, 1999).

**Representations of Volunteerism**

Studies oriented toward representation tend to present volunteerism as a relatively stable concept, which manifests itself differently across the lifespan and
across groups of individuals. Most of these studies orient toward describing and predicting individuals’ behavior (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999; J. Wilson & Musick, 1997b) and, consequently, treat institutional influences as stable, and pre-specified (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Thus, such studies tend to draw from early institutional theories (Scott, 1995).

Liao-Troth’s (2005) study of psychological contracts among volunteers provides one example of how research can focus on the individual and take institutional contexts as pre-given. Liao-Troth framed institutional norms and rules for acceptable behavior in terms of the parameters of the relationship, but these norms were not investigated. Likewise, other research designed to understand volunteer characteristics takes institutional features for granted instead of explaining or deconstructing them. For instance, Katz and Rosenberg’s (2005) economic interpretation of institutional volunteering sought to model and predict the relationship between altruism and productivity in developed economies without interrogating what it is about developed economies that might cause individuals to volunteer in the first place. Finally, several studies have examined the impact of religion upon volunteering and giving (e.g., Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990; Perry, Brudney, Coursey, & Littlpage, 2008; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; J. Kim, Kang, Lee, & Lee, 2007 for the impact of religiosity on volunteering in Korea which differs markedly from U.S. findings). Studies of religious influences tend to support a strong relationship between religious observance and altruistic behavior (Independent Sector, 2002; Lyons & Nivison-Smith, 2006). For instance, Yeung (2004) indicated volunteering in Finland may be viewed as a public expression of one’s faith, while Berger (2006) found that conservative Protestant denominations in Canada seem to both volunteer and give more in monetary terms than do Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and those with no professed religion. Although Berger identified factors which may mediate reasons for giving, such as access to social networks and the importance attributed to community, such studies do not interrogate how religiosity is constructed in the everyday lives of its observers.

**Discourses of Understanding: Volunteering, Volunteers, and Volunteerism**

Unlike the overt behaviorism often evident in studies oriented toward a discourse of representation, studies grounded in discourses of understanding tend to attribute a much more fundamental role to communication in constructing volunteer identities, and expectations of reciprocity and relationality establish particular ways of viewing volunteering. Such studies are also inclined to understand larger structures and vocabularies of volunteerism as constructed at the level of micro-practice through everyday talk. We argue that, in contrast to discourses of representation, according primacy to experience and activity emphasizes becoming rather than being a volunteer. Thus, we begin with the question of how discourses of understanding position and frame volunteering
and follow with a discussion of how volunteers are constituted as an object of inquiry. Finally, we appraise how such discourse constructs volunteerism.

Understanding Volunteering

Interpretive studies are arguably well placed to examine how individuals and organizations interact to create the “warm glow” factor. The value assigned to altruism itself is created by communicative practices that enshrine caring as the type of social interaction deemed most appropriate for volunteering (Rajulton, Ravanera, & Beaujot, 2007). For example, Roker, Player, and Coleman’s (1998) description of the lunch organized by adolescent students with a mild to moderate learning disability for residents of a nearby retirement home highlights the communicative issues of mutuality and reciprocal giving. In this situation, the project manager decided elderly residents with dementia were not suitable for the occasion since they “just ended up confusing each other” (p. 735). Other studies highlight such aspects of giving that representational studies do not capture, such as love, surprise, or authenticity. For instance, Ronel’s (2006) study of at-risk youth demonstrated that relationships between youth and volunteers developed because “[t]hey are amazed that people give them something for nothing, without payment. This sort of giving also frees those who receive the service from the obligation to give something in return…and this is what enables a genuine relationship to evolve” (p. 1142).

The relational and dialogic nature of volunteering serves as a particular source of emphasis for interpretive studies. However, relationality does not always imply equality (Schervish & Havens, 2002). Whereas some scholars envision constructed reciprocity as a “community commons where people come together to create layers of social connections and relationships” (Nunn, 2002, p. 14), others contest such positive assumptions of “we-ness,” arguing that opportunities for social interaction do not always create volunteer satisfaction (Wisner et al., 2005).

Intercultural communication research could provide rich insights into the management of dialogic encounters, such as Western “disaster mental health” professionals needed to negotiate significant cultural dissonance when training Sri Lankan volunteers in the wake of the 2004 tsunami (J. Miller, 2006). J. Miller’s nuanced account of indigenous responses contrasts with research which emphasizes the potential of intercultural exchange to foster reciprocal empowerment via challenging experiences either at home or abroad. Such exchanges may render both parties’ “cultural identity…open to further transformation and growth” (Kim & Ruben, 1988, p. 313) by questioning stereotypes and prejudices. For example, community elders were surprised at the positive impact on local children of a group of Australian volunteers involved in a community service project on New Zealand’s East Coast. According to McIntosh and Zahra (2007), “The holiday program with the volunteers…helped the kids identify with their culture. These volunteers were interested in them and in their culture and it made them proud to be Maori. They were
important to strangers, to outsiders. These people engaged with them personally” (p. 553). Thus, intercultural researchers track personal paradigm shifts in both parties which occur as a result of cultural exchanges.

**Understanding Volunteers**

Research that adopts a discourse of understanding concentrates far less on specific types of volunteers as determined by structural or dispositional categories. However, it holds the potential to adapt some psychological constructs that account for the mutual interplay between dispositions and situations. For instance, role identity research (Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005; Grieve & Piliavin, 2000) can easily be extended to examine the role of communication in the process of how volunteers construct their roles and adopt volunteer identities, or how empathy is intersubjectively constructed in situations which incite helping or empathic responses. Indeed, the emphasis on process emerges as the chief distinction between extant interpretive studies on volunteers and more quantitative studies on the subject.

Such interpretive research is less likely to classify and categorize societal contributors as inherently altruistic “joiner junkies,” instead discussing how individuals construct and align altruism with other issues such as social responsibility, in the process creating and developing a social currency. For instance, a newly retired physician described his participation in a community clinic run by volunteer professionals as a need, and he concluded that “[w]e almost owe this to society” (Reynolds, 2006, p. 371).

Researchers have, therefore, asserted that volunteers should be understood in terms of the communities that construct them (Iverson, 2003). In so doing, they focus on the way that societal pressures and expectations of altruistic responses create volunteers who offer help due to privilege, time availability or the devastation wreaked by a disaster. After registering as a mental health volunteer during Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. in 2005, Bartley (2007) noted that “I did not know when or if I would be called to go. The pain in my gut went away because I had done what I had to do. Now it was out of my control” (p. 5). Her personal narrative vividly evoked how torn she was with feelings of anxiety, personal incapacity, and a sense of duty.

**Understanding Volunteerism**

Unlike representational studies, research on volunteerism rooted in discourses of understanding examines the ways in which communication constitutes key social and cultural constructs associated with volunteerism, such as compassion, care (Andersson & Ohlen, 2005), giving (Jones, 2006), sacrifice, connection (Leonard & Hayward-Brown, 2002), and charity (Cloke, Johnsen, & May, 2007; Lyons, 2001).

Such research sometimes privileges organizational influence. Boden (1994) discussed how organizational talk can shape norms to such an extent that they
become normalized as accepted “rules of the game” (McDonald & Warburten, 2003, p. 382). Puffer and Meindl (2006), in a study of 200 managers and other professionals, determined that the managers carried extant understandings of organizational culture along with them as they entered particular contexts for volunteering. In a study of pro bono work by lawyers, Granfield (2007) also noted that the characteristics and incentive structures present in legal working environments impacted upon the “vocabularies of motive” (p. 113) and meaning attributed to volunteering.

Further, interpretive studies sometimes examine how everyday talk itself re-creates modes of organizing. Ronel’s (2006) study revealed how experiential encounters by at-risk youth framed organizational perceptions. Not only did youth perceive volunteers as external to the “establishment” (professional therapists/welfare officers), but they partly internalized volunteers’ altruistic inspiration and the value of non-material gratification.

Interpretive studies have also examined cultural influences which shape both volunteering and volunteers (Dougherty, 2005; Eckstein, 2001; Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2004). Studies consider how family, ethnicity, and religion provide scripts to establish ways of acting and behaving, which are “encoded, enacted, replicated, revised, externalized and objectified” (McDonald & Warburten, 2003, p. 384) selectively by rational organizational participants (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). For instance, studies which describe inter-generational socialization of volunteers by friends and family members assume mutually constructed understandings of volunteerism. Palmer, Freeman, and Zabriskie’s (2007) work on family participation in service expeditions challenged the assumption, often found in representational studies, that volunteerism simply comprises an individual pursuit with significant public good properties. Their study also suggested that views of volunteerism developed by adolescents who volunteer with their family diverge significantly from those engaged in school and community-based service learning (Littlepage, Obergfell, & Zanin, 2003). While the latter aimed to acquire personal leadership and life skills, teens within the family circle emphasized quality time together, enhanced relationships, and the development of common familial values and attitudes toward the community. Most interesting perhaps are studies, such as Palmer et al., that detail how individuals and families construct perspectives of sacrifice as positive, purposive, and pivotal to the experience of volunteering. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding ways in which race, gender, and family, create meanings of “care” and “self-sacrifice” (Mesch et al., 2006).

**Discourses of Suspicions: Volunteerism, Volunteering, and Volunteers**

Studies grounded in a discourse of suspicion approach volunteerism both structurally and discursively. In fact, it is often difficult to separate highly structural critical scholarship from recent neo-institutional studies that combine resource
Discourses of Volunteerism

dependency points of view with detailed understandings of power, society, and culture (Castells, 2001). Therefore, our take on discourses of suspicion is very broad, and it spans some neo-institutional approaches as well as more discursive perspectives on communication and society. Unlike interpretive studies, which take a ground-up approach to understanding volunteerism, critical studies more likely conceptualize individual agency and acts of volunteering with reference to larger systems of control. Therefore, we first take up the issue of how a discourse of suspicion interrogates volunteerism, and we follow this discussion by considering how it constructs volunteering and volunteers in terms of larger systems.

Volunteerism and Control

Oliver (1992) suggested, from a neo-institutional point of view, that socio-political, economic, and structural shifts may alter what are considered appropriate goals for voluntary agencies. Such changes create uncertainty regarding external environments, including funding and statutory requirements. Structural adjustment, in turn, affects on a global scale everyday communication practices and vocabularies and boundaries in non-profit and voluntary sectors. Blurred organizational and sectoral boundaries have dogged the voluntary sector, particularly in the social services, and critical researchers are prone to point that out. Hence, as state-directed institutions abandon the delivery of social services, the voluntary sector can be left to step in as a “shadow state” (Wuthnow, 1991b). On the other hand, corporate discourses of efficiency and contractual obligation may seem to impinge on involvement in community-based social services. Organizations are expected to be “accountable” at all levels (Kearns, 1994). Contracts now communicate expectations of volunteers in terms of time commitment and tasks, and they ensure organizations take on volunteers with clear track records. This two-pronged encroachment of corporate and state interests in the voluntary sector has significantly influenced the legitimation of voluntary activity in most Western nations.

Critical scholars also draw attention to the fact that volunteerism discursively implies that dominant status is ascribed to paid work, with unpaid labor treated as less valuable, even when the actual activities performed are the same (Hustinx, 2007). Scholars have highlighted the gendered nature of such distinctions, which serve to further undervalue the labor that women perform not only in the home, but also in communities (Daniels, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Raddon, 2003; Waring, 1999).

The orientation toward paid work as the most materially and symbolically rewarded form of engagement between an individual and society holds profound implications for how Rifkin’s (1995) clarion call heralding the “end of work” resonates for particular disenfranchised groups. Regardless of the extent to which unemployed individuals may make “civic money” (Beck, 2000) or “social wages” (see Rifkin) by volunteering, the activity guarantees them lesser material and symbolic rewards than paid work. In this sense, volunteers’
struggle to professionalize volunteering in the face of societal views which relegate it to a form of occupational therapy, or pseudo-work (Pearce, 1993) actually contributes to its dwindling legitimacy. Further, if scholars persist in viewing volunteerism in terms of work, it is more likely to emerge as a pale shadow to the world of work (Spoonley, 2004).

Volunteering, Paternalism, Exploitation, and Dialogue

Discourses of suspicion treat volunteering not in terms of relationality and reciprocity but in terms of its capacity for exploitation. Critical scholars have cautioned against the potential for volunteering to descend into paternalism, thereby reinforcing and constructing power inequities among groups of people. Rubin and Thorelli (1984) noted that beneficiaries of “help” may resent volunteers’ efforts, seeing their intrusion as a “humiliating experience” (p. 225) and may present an “ambivalent, resistant” (p. 224) face to volunteers, who in turn become disheartened (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005; Bussell & Forbes, 2002).

Critics of paternalism (Devereux, 2008) argue that pride in helping a needy other (who is expected to gratefully receive this assistance) can be problematic (Illich, 1968) because volunteers may not treat volunteering as a dialogic encounter but rather as a uni-directional handout, even if the comfortably middle-class volunteers experience personal growth and development, through “irreplaceable and enlightening personal experiences” (Artz, 2001, p. 240). Placing volunteers face-to-face with social problems does not ipso facto lead them to seriously delve into the underlying structural causes or to consider potential solutions to these problems. In their discussion of the impact of emergency feeding programs on volunteer attitudes to the experience of hunger, Edlefsen and Olson (2002) observed that, when volunteers were questioned about the causes of hunger, “many answers were hesitant and uncertain, or incoherent and difficult to follow. It often appeared that volunteers had never given this question serious consideration” (p. 96).

Paternalism is rife in charity-based models of volunteering, where attendant “institutional arrangements and discursive practices” (Frey, Pearce, Pollack, Artz, & Murphy, 1996, p. 111) tend to privilege individual notions of care, whence “societal injustices are issues of individual conscience and responsibility” (Artz, 2001, p. 241). According to Artz, one adopts a “doing for” rather than “doing with” (p. 247) stance which, as Frey et al. noted, encourages a “them” and “us” notion of community rather than a radical, non-exclusive “we.” In fact, Artz asserted that “institutionally-organized social services mitigating inequality” (p. 241) may, in fact, reinforce those very institutional structures which underwrite interpersonal experiences of helplessness and dependence (W. H. Papa, M. J. Papa, Kandath, Worrell, & Muthuswamy, 2005).

Within the international development NGO sector, for example, volunteering may be counterproductive and unsustainable if short-term interventions create “dependency instead of empowerment and [leave] communities with the feeling that local political choices are useless, or without impact, because the
resources of the local health care system are in most cases lower than those of the intervening NGO” (Benzian & van Palenstein Helderman, 2006, p. 413). Lacey and Icang (2006) also challenged the perspective that volunteer activity is “automatically advantageous to developing communities...because of the notion that volunteers have a genuine commitment to a project” (p. 42). In fact, they noted that, due to the power imbalance in international NGO work, it is the donors and volunteers that choose where to best spend their efforts, rather than the communities that are the targets of their work.

However, partnership approaches to volunteering, which focus on dialogue and social justice, aim to turn development on its head by requiring a volte-face in the type of communicative practices characteristic of voluntary organizations. Western perspectives suggest that the construction of a collaboratively negotiated direction, rather than reliance on a hierarchical dictate, and a holistic approach instead of a fragmented, sectoral perspective (Zoller, 2000) will facilitate this dialogic approach. This ideal can go horribly wrong. As in any relationship, mutuality is never assured, and, ironically, apparent openness (St. John & Shepherd, 2004) may disguise embedded rules within “an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” (Fraser, 1990/1991, p. 57).

A second potential pitfall in partnership models for volunteering might lie in the absence of equally developed dialogic communication skills by each party. Zoller’s (2000) analysis of a WHO Healthy Communities initiative, which was almost grounded before it flew, showed that trainers’ reluctance to direct or constrain participants’ understandings and judgments resulted in confusion and apathy. The desire for absolute neutrality and distanciation of any emotive response stifled dialogue. According to Zoller, apparent “fairness” ignored the fact that “excitement is crucial when asking citizens to take personal risks and to accept organizational styles radically different from the structured hierarchy with which most are comfortable” (p. 198).

Even if volunteers act with the best of intentions, they may still dominate decision making—possibly at the behest of those that they intend to help. In a health communication context, Petronio, Sargent, Andrea, Reganis, and Chichocki (2004) problematized the role of “informal healthcare advocates” in physician visits to patients. As Petronio et al. detailed, although advocates positioned themselves as altruistic supporters, emergent themes showed information-seeking privileged the advocate rather than the patient, and that the patient became a superfluous on-looker in the medical interview. Consequently, patients relied heavily on advocates when making medical decisions. Thus, health, environmental, and development communication researchers need to clearly articulate the conditions under which seemingly asymmetrical relationships might still be fruitful (Crabtree, 1998).

**Volunteers, Inclusion, and Exclusion**

Generally speaking, critical research that embodies discourses of suspicion tends to focus upon issues of volunteering and volunteerism, rather than
characteristics of volunteers themselves, precisely because this perspective assumes that individual agency is located within (and sometimes against) larger power structures and discourses. For now, it bears mention that such research would, as a starting point, be suspicious of the normative context within which notions of who should be considered volunteers are defined. Key questions involve who gets to volunteer, who is pressured to volunteer, and who is excluded from volunteering. For instance, Daniels’s (1988) study of middle-class women volunteers demonstrated the extent to which the expectation to volunteer at local charities stemmed from their gendered, middle-class positions. Some literature with critical overtones also cites class and ethnicity as contextual factors that prompt individuals to volunteer. That is, volunteers are much more likely to be White and middle class than working class and Hispanic or Black (Goss, 1999). Such pressures make some groups more “open” to volunteerism. For example, “work for the Dole schemes” for unemployed people (Macintyre, 1999, p. 103) as well as subtle pressures on retired seniors to “contribute” (Warburten & Crosier, 2001), can covertly erode the voluntary aspects of volunteering (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003). Also, marginalized or vulnerable groups (such as women or senior citizens) may be viewed as being open to exploitation due to their ability to be managed easily.

However, the converse is also true. So-called vulnerable groups can be excluded from volunteering (Gaskin, 1998) because of a communicatively constructed “stigma of worthiness” (Hankinson & Rochester, 2005, p. 94) or the normative shaping of who can volunteer well and who cannot. For instance, people with disabilities, often framed as pitiable, passive recipients of aid (Roker et al., 1998) can be treated as second-class volunteers because the quality of their volunteering can be perceived as inferior to that on offer by more “capable” or “powerful” volunteers (Balandin, Llewellyn, Dew, Ballin, & Schneider, 2006). The stigma of worthiness can also translate into feelings of being disposable, as detailed in Dein and Abbas’s (2005) study of English hospice volunteers, which established that a major stressor for volunteers was the fear that more able volunteers would take over their roles. Sundeen, Raskoff, and Garcia (2007) also identified social class as a barrier to formal organizational volunteering. The middle classes tend to have more time and resources to volunteer as opposed to working-class communities.

**Discourses of Vulnerability: Volunteerism, Volunteering, and the Vanishing Volunteer**

Poststructural perspectives in organizational communication have suggested that the development of a person’s “true self” comprises a construction of organizational talk (Tracy & Trehewey, 2005). It stands to reason then, that poststructural studies do not attempt to identify and catalogue characteristics of volunteers. Instead, such studies, which are few, are likely to understand the “face” of the volunteer as a subject position produced by discourses of volunteerism (Glasrud, 2007). In a sense, the “volunteer” in this discourse is vulnerable to the point of absence.
More so than other standpoints, postmodern points of view tend to treat academic studies of volunteerism themselves in discursive terms, and some clear tensions are visible between representational studies and those grounded in a discourse of vulnerability. Specifically, the latter position representational studies as themselves creating identities and subject positions that emphasize altruism, empathy and social responsibility, rather than isolating identifiable, stable features of actual volunteers. The relationship among studies grounded in a discourse of vulnerability with critical and interpretive work is more complex. Indeed, critical, interpretive and postmodern studies in general are not mutually exclusive and, in many ways, constitute a constellation of studies that have varying degrees of agreement and disagreement about the nature of rationality, subjectivity, and reality. Important continuities exist between critical and postmodern work in organizational studies (Mumby, 2001), and, in many ways, it is almost as difficult as it is useful to discuss them as separate categories. Nonetheless, a key advantage of treating studies that emerge from a discourse of suspicion as a category independent of studies that emerge from discourses of vulnerability is that the former enable us to capture a wide range of studies, including those that are grounded in a post-realist and structural worldview. Discourses of vulnerability enable us to focus upon volunteerism itself as a discourse, within which volunteering as activity and practice can be situated. Accordingly, unlike the first three sections where we take up each of our three key terms in varying orders, in the next section, we consider explicitly how volunteerism as a discourse constitutes and shapes both volunteering and volunteers.

**Volunteerism as a Discourse**

Like studies oriented toward suspicion, studies emerging from discourses of vulnerability are much more apt to concentrate explicitly about volunteering and volunteerism than essential characteristics of volunteers. Indeed, discourses of vulnerability have much to say about the shifting discursive spaces between paid and voluntary “work.” The latter, they say, is increasingly characterized by a discursive shift toward professionalization. The ironic consequences include the privileging of images of “the professional” (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; McDonald & Mutch, 2000) and the normalization of discourses of capitalist work (Featherstone, Lash, & Robertson, 1997), epitomized by the greater acceptability of instrumental motivations for volunteering.

This growing professionalization brings with it a responsibility structure, especially the expectation that those with greater expertise must exhibit more responsibility. In this way, professional/professionalized volunteers resemble discursive articulations of Du Gay’s (1996) “enterprising subject” and Miller and Rose’s (1990) “entrepreneurial self” in search of “meaning, responsibility, and a sense of personal achievement in life, and hence in work” (Miller & Rose, 1995, p. 454).

Thus, volunteer identities are predominantly driven by managerial discourses which focus on control and efficiency (Deetz, 1992), with consumption
as a powerful sign (Collinson, 2003) that one has attained self-"real"-ization. For instance, Hankinson and Rochester’s (2005) analysis of “branding” specific forms of volunteering, such as governance and campaigning separately from “generic” volunteering to attract a specific skills base, demonstrated the extent to which professionalization can turn volunteering into a discursive object akin to a consumer product.

Other scholars have also made connections among volunteering, enterprise, and commodification. For instance, Glasrud (2007) argued that volunteering is turning into a consumer activity, and volunteers themselves—like students (McMillan & Cheney, 1996)—treat the experience as “consumers” instead of “producers” who need to “feel good” about their volunteering. Rehberg (2005) proposed a brave new world of volunteerism which disengages from traditional forms of organizational commitment based on political or religious adherence to a new “reflexive” form of volunteerism (Hustinx, 2001) which thirsts after experiential learning or a “quest for the new,” and self-discovery or the “quest for oneself” (Rehberg, 2005, p. 109). Martinson (2006/2007) also detailed how discourses of volunteerism have resulted in the promotion of a commodified version of volunteering to aging populations as being beneficial to their health and longevity.

The result reflects less commitment to the collective goals of a specific organization’s “inspired by coordinating ideology or meaning systems” (Rehberg, 2005, p. 110) and a sort of bricolage involving flux and selectivity in choosing projects to construct a temporary personal biography, as is the case with tourists who volunteer (Mustonen, 2005). Further, a barrage of work from other perspectives describes participation in sporting, heritage, environmental, political, and professional contexts as not resonating with social concern but personal development (Dietz, Stern, & Guagnano, 1998; Miles, Sullivan, & Kuo, 1998; Warburten & Gooch, 2007).

Discourses enable the creation of particular forms of identity-centered performance. While discourses create the limits within which we enact personal identities (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Knights & Wilmott, 1999), space for action emerges from within discursive gaps (Nadesan, 1996). Thus, it stands to reason that, while discursive boundaries can powerfully constrain how individuals act out roles and interact in voluntary settings, significant discursive flux surrounds how we “perform” or practice volunteering.

Such performance is indeterminate—neither work nor leisure. As Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) asserted, volunteering can occupy a third space, distinct from both work and a “personal” life, which cannot adequately be captured in terms of a continuum between work and leisure. Additionally, poststructural studies problematize the boundaries that we draw between intimate spheres of care and more impersonal “helping” relationships. For instance, Adelman and Frey (1996) interpreted the performance of care in poststructural terms in their book A Fragile Community: Living Together with AIDS, where they discuss, in dialectical and dialogic terms, the profound ways in which individuals come...
to care for and with each other in the process of helping. Poststructural perspectives raise significant questions about whether models of volunteering as dialogic collaboration are at all universal. Moemeka (1998), for example, suggested that “community” is differently understood by members of collective and communal cultures, with attendant variance in expected communication strategies.

**Directions for Future Research**

To date, a significant portion of extant research has focused on identifying and managing discrete characteristics of “the volunteer.” Future investigation would do well to examine how volunteers are both enticed to participate in voluntary experiences and restrained by systemic influences which frame it in particular ways. Therefore, we present the following five potential avenues for future scholarship on volunteerism and volunteering.

**Culture, Institutions, and Context**

First, we need to acknowledge differences in cultural understandings of what constitutes volunteering, and how institutional frameworks influence these understandings. Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, and Lair (2008), in their exploration of meaningful work, called for research about the historical and cultural situatedness of the understandings groups and individuals develop about work and well-being. However, sometimes it appears that scholars wilfully ignore issues of culture and even remain cognizant of such omissions. For instance, Parboteeah, Cullen, and Lim (2004) stated that they “ignored the possible interactions among national culture and social institutions variables” (p. 440) in their theoretical treatment of cross-national incidence of formal volunteering.

As the majority of studies have been carried out in Western contexts, whether European, (British) Commonwealth, or American, researchers at the very least ought to avoid attributing definitive status or reifying an operational cross-cultural definition of volunteering: this includes situating volunteering as unpaid work within an organization or the free rendering of services without expectation of reward (Dekker & Halman, 2003). Particular challenges include exploring how cultural and postcolonial contexts without a history of charity-based volunteerism make sense of what volunteers do. For instance, Nakano (2000) related how the Japanese *borantia* (volunteer), a concept unknown two decades ago, has been constructed to enhance organizational affiliation for those without it, and to supplement civic participation in ways that the volunteers felt were more meaningful than their primary tasks. She noted the striking differences among different types of volunteers in terms of the extent to which volunteers felt they had stepped outside mainstream values of material security, personal success, and family devotion.

Qualitative researchers are well poised to analyze connections between volunteerism and the construction of personal and collective identities. For
instance, the role of guanxi, or relational networking, in Asian contexts constructs Web-like linkages which have very little in common with the individualistic/collectivist dichotomy manifest in Western conceptions of volunteerism (Liu, 2008). Related to such cultural dissonance is the relationship between mainstream conceptions of volunteering and postcolonial perspectives on the subject. Warburten and McLaughlin's (2007) article identifies a range of First Nations peoples whose attitudes to volunteerism do not fit the mainstream. Maori perspectives on volunteering in New Zealand, for example, stem from notions of kinship, in particular the concept of “mahi aroha,” which translates into English as a sense of sympathy and caring for all others (Oliver & Love, 2007). Such concepts hold the potential to change our understandings of the discursive boundaries dividing helping, home and work that mainstream perspectives on volunteerism construct.

Moreover, future research would do well to understand and assess the intercultural and power dynamics involved as key concepts related to volunteerism and volunteering travel across the world. For instance, while the service learning movement has particular relevance to the United States and is often characterized by a strong focus on social justice (Trethewey, 1999), scholars need to unravel service learning's potential for cultural domination and transplantation of economic models, before appropriating service learning programs across the world, from Australia to China (for related arguments, see Berry & Chisholm, 1999; Butcher, Howard, McMeniman, & Thon, 2003).

The “Dark Side” of Volunteerism

Future research needs to question the overly optimistic connotations conjured up by the terms volunteer, volunteering, and volunteerism, and it should consider that these terms might rather euphemistically describe Band-Aids for societies deeply wounded by the withdrawal of the welfare state and the retreating institutional influences of home, church, and school (Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006). Studies grounded in discourses of suspicion and vulnerability could provide useful insights on such issues. For instance, the relationships that volunteering has with individual and social well-being merits attention. To date, research on volunteering and well-being has discussed difficulties in establishing appropriate work-life balance (MacDonald, Phipps, & Lethbridge, 2005) or the burnout of volunteers through over-commitment (Glass & Hastings, 1998). Future research could draw from multiple academic discourses to examine how volunteers make sense of their activity when the experience of volunteering is negative (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002; Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005) and discursive influences upon such sense-making processes.

The impact of volunteering on the intended recipient also needs careful consideration, especially in terms of the ethics of help (Cloke et al., 2007). From a global development point of view, researchers from development communication, intercultural communication, volunteer tourism, and social justice perspectives could fruitfully contribute to understanding how the volunteer-
cum-international aid worker, engaged tourist, or service learning participant respectively selects and justifies appropriate experiences from a plethora of available environmental or human service projects, and interprets these as distinct from holiday destinations (Coghlan, 2006). Thus, scholars should attend to whether interpretations and practices serve to construct volunteerism as a form of consumption and self-development, or as a vehicle for establishing shared meanings which can contribute to globally just outcomes (cf., Arai & Pedlar, 2003).

**Volunteerism, Meaning, and Work**

Communication studies may be able to unpack the complex relationships among shifts in the way people volunteer and work, and changes in the meaning we give these activities. In particular, research needs to examine the ways in which volunteering is communicatively framed solely as an inferior variant of paid work, which is assumed to be the universal membership contract (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Implicitly, what “works” in paid work settings is applied wholesale to other contexts in terms of establishing and maintaining member-organization contracts, developing empowerment strategies (Chiles & Zorn, 1995), and fostering meaningful engagement. Lip service is paid to problems of role ambiguity, support and training, buy-in to organizational goals and responsibility for outcomes.

When full-time employment is privileged as the norm, there is implicit disregard for the growth in non-traditional, non-standard work, characterized by non-hierarchical institutional arrangements, the proliferation of temporary contracts, the expansion of part-time positions, and “extensification” of working hours (Gossett, 2002; Spoonley, 2004). The divide between those employed according to the “standard working model” of the mid-20th century (stable, full-time employment) and non-standard workers has only increased during economic reform processes. Research into volunteering in communities that are beset by “worklessness” (Baines & Hardill, 2008) or poverty (Messias, DeJong, & McLoughlin, 2005) problematizes the existing conceptual boundaries dividing voluntary action from “work.”

Another context for evaluating the shifting meanings among volunteering as work, volunteering as leisure, or volunteering as contribution lies closer to home, in the form of what we often refer to as public scholarship (Brouwer & Squires, 1996), which “[connects] the stories of our discipline with the stories of people’s lives” (Krone & Harter, 2007, p. 75). The considerable effort involved and the lack of obvious financial payoffs can lead us to cast such scholarship as a form of volunteering, particularly because civic scholarship (Greenwood & Levin, 2005) often goes unrewarded by academic promotion procedures. In this sense, public scholarship is increasingly a process which interrupts—both in terms of creating public space for debating issues which count and also in terms of the time it takes to do so (Cheney, 2007). Yet, univocally categorizing public scholarship as “volunteering,” and therefore non-
work, ignores the professional benefits it may confer, even if only ancillary ones in effect for scholars whose main work involves teaching students and conducting research.

**Gendering Volunteerism**

Studies of volunteerism would also benefit from moving beyond treating gender as one variable (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), which may explain or predict voluntary engagement, to descriptions of volunteerism as inherently gendered. Studies to date have yielded insights into how women manage the paid work-volunteering-family nexus differently from men (Kulik, 2000; Taniguchi, 2006), but usually only in terms of time devoted (Gallagher, 1994; Goss, 1999; Herd & Meyer, 2002). However, conceptualizing work as paid employment and volunteering as unpaid labor ultimately sustains the lack of recognition and invisibility of women’s domestic and community engagement (Messias et al., 2005, p. 26). New studies should examine the gendered meanings attributed to different types of ostensibly voluntary participation in political, scientific, touristic, and welfare contexts. Moreover, the ways in which these diverse manifestations of social and political engagement differentially emphasize responsibility versus rights or entitlements also require explication (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005).

In order to do so, the impact of gender on the organization of the range of “activities oriented toward collective action, care, concern, and development of others, as well as societal decision making and resource allocation” (McBride, Sherraden, & Pritzker, 2006, p. 153) warrants investigation. Assuredly, highly developed social networks tend to predict participation, as people are more likely to participate when asked by someone else (Hodgkinson, 1995), and those with more linkages to secondary organizations engage more (Lofland, 1996). More importantly, however, communication research needs to examine how gender underwrites “appropriate” forms of participation, and the relative value assigned to various social networks: family, paid work, non-standard work, and community engagement that includes volunteering.

Feminist scholarship offers much potential insight regarding how communication constructs specific gender roles in private and public settings. Volunteering research could add to our understanding of how social milieus in non-private, non-work domains shape a sense of obligation to both family and kin (Rossi, 2001) as well as to those outside one’s intimates in formal care-giving contexts. Currently, “formal volunteering” sustains the bifurcations between family and neighbor as another, more distant community member. This distinction becomes problematic, particularly because one relatively small geographic area may have overlapping, multiple communities. Further, the strong link between formal volunteering and the world of work or “real jobs” (Clair, 1996) reinforces the inherently gendered nature of volunteering (for detailed exploration of the relationship between gender and work, see Medved, this volume).
Volunteerism and Social Transformation

Finally, whether or not volunteerism actually produces genuinely caring and transformative social attitudes and organizations remains under-researched. In his review of Dekker and Halman’s (2003) edited text, J. Wilson (2004) corroborated the fact that “people [can] use the idea [of volunteering] to excuse themselves from political responsibility” (p. 1541), neglecting more expansive expressions of compassion in favor of rendering services to a limited circle of care, presumably within existing social networks. Penner (2004) provided a thoughtful appraisal of a system where “politicians…advocate policies that perpetuate or even exacerbate certain social inequities and then almost simultaneously encourage people to volunteer to help the victims” (p. 664) as a smokescreen.

Another important contribution to the volunteerism research involves the elaboration of the relationship among individual action, community development and human rights (e.g., Nagata, 2003). Stakeholders often present the volunteer as an indispensable building block in the construction of social capital and community spirit. Indeed, participation in voluntary associations has been employed as a proxy for democratic participation (Tocqueville, 1835/1969), and cries advancing the need for “active citizenship” on the part of young people (Brooks, 2007) are well documented. Yet, such communities or the societies they construct could well be fascist, not democratic. Volunteerism viewed as a carrier of citizenship may be easily transformed into a form of social control, reinforcing the status quo through the creation of ideal citizens. Coffey (2004), for instance, suggested alternative conceptualizations of volunteerism that lie closer to activism, centering issues of political change and democratic rights. Here, productive tensions might be set up between understanding volunteerism in contrast with activism (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005). Thus, scholars need to analyze the potential of alternative or emergent articulations of civic engagement, and the limitation of volunteerism itself as a metaphor for social action (Flanagan, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006; Melucci, 1996).

Summary and Conclusion

We summarize the main postulates of each discourse as regards volunteers, volunteering, and volunteerism in Table 9.1.

The four discourses that we have outlined make rather different contributions to our understanding of volunteers, volunteering, and volunteerism. As scholars examine who and what a volunteer is, they make significant assumptions about individuals and individualism. Studies focused on representation, therefore, describe personality attributes of volunteers and ways in which individuals represent particular social classes, ethnic groupings, or gender. In turn, discourses of understanding potentially explain how and why particular traits are appropriated as typical of volunteers, while a discourse of suspicion is well placed to critique such constructed understandings by exposing implicit power
Table 9.1 Key Features of Various Discourses on Volunteers, Volunteering and Volunteerism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Volunteer</th>
<th>Volunteering</th>
<th>Volunteerism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of</td>
<td>Volunteers are identifiable by demographics; Volunteers have innate personal characteristics.</td>
<td>Volunteering largely occurs in formal contexts, and has parallels with paid work.</td>
<td>Institutional contexts are pre-given.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of</td>
<td>Volunteers construct their identities.</td>
<td>Volunteering is constructed through reciprocity and relationality.</td>
<td>Larger structures and vocabularies of volunteerism are mutually constructed in everyday talk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of</td>
<td>Normative contexts privilege or marginalize individuals as volunteers.</td>
<td>Volunteering is open to coercion, exploitation and privilege.</td>
<td>State and corporate interests legitimate voluntary activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suspicion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse of</td>
<td>“The volunteer” is a discursive subject position.</td>
<td>Volunteering can create temporary discursive spaces for action.</td>
<td>Volunteerism is discursively constructed through professionalization, enterprise and consumerism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vulnerability</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

inequalities. A discourse of vulnerability, on the other hand, enables one to treat the entire figure of “the volunteer” with some irony.

In terms of volunteering, the actual activities volunteers engage in can be painted with functional brushstrokes or may be perceived as an exercise of meaning-making by volunteers trying to legitimate and balance both altruistic and egoistic motivations. Alternatively, the network of relationships established by volunteering may be viewed in terms of paternalism, with different sets of problems associated with charity-based and partnership models for volunteering. Finally, postmodern perspectives oriented toward vulnerability describe micro-practices constructed by shifting discursive struggles, which determine what is and is not appropriate fodder for volunteering.

Throughout this chapter, we defined volunteerism as the institutional and discursive framework which society, institutions, and organizations declare appropriate for voluntary involvement, and which provide a web of constraints and resources. The discourses of representation do not problematize systemic influences, either taking them as a given or reifying them in institutional terms. Conversely, the discourse of understanding more likely analyzes how interested parties construct contexts and structures; whereas, the discourse of suspicion pursues the potential to replicate inequality through supposedly
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beneficent structures. Discussions of volunteerism sometimes complicate sharp distinctions between discourses of suspicion and vulnerability. These two discourses offer much insight about the construction of appropriate spaces for volunteerism.

We hope that this review of the literature will draw further attention to the subject and prompt future investigation. Given the prevalence of popular discourses on volunteerism, the number of non-profit organizations that depend upon it, the millions of individuals and communities that engage in volunteering on a regular basis, and the surprising contexts in which one can see volunteering, it has perhaps never been as important to understand volunteerism in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. We look forward to such research.

NOTES

1. Twentieth century governments have, to varying degrees, engaged in the direct provision and funding of health, education, and welfare assistance to address issues such as unemployment, sickness, or disability.

2. Welfare schemes include a number of government policy initiatives for unemployed persons, including financial assistance (welfare benefits or the “dole”), training options, and work placement agencies. Consistent with an ethos of economic liberalization, citizenship, and self-responsibility, in some cases publicly funded financial assistance has been dependent upon an exchange of labor: “workfare” or “work for the dole” schemes.

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