

Benefits of Volunteerism across the Life Span

Diann Cameron Kelly

Associate Provost for Student Success, Adelphi University, Garden City, USA

Email: Kelly5@adelphi.edu

How to cite this paper: Kelly, D. C. (2023). Benefits of Volunteerism across the Life Span. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 13, 457-465. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2023.136028>

Received: May 16, 2023

Accepted: June 18, 2023

Published: June 21, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Volunteers bring support and validation to those who are marginalized in society. Further, volunteers serve as a means of care and concern that extends the mission and programmatic objectives of human service organizations. Volunteers are beneficial to society. However, there are critical benefits to volunteering that make being a volunteer worthwhile. The model for this discussion is three areas of development: personal development, skills development and values development across the life span. These areas of development impact the growth of individuals psychosocially, their abilities as well as their beliefs that would catapult them into adulthood. This chapter presents the benefits of volunteering and discusses its relationship to life span development perspective. It concludes with a summative narrative of the outcomes' connection to social justice.

Keywords

Volunteerism, Altruism, Psychosocial Development, Self Esteem, Self Efficacy, Life Span

1. Introduction

Volunteers make significant contributions to the community and promote social justice for the oppressed (Beardman, 2012; Liu, 2012; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). They bring support and validation to those who have minimal resources and those who are marginalized in society (Berkey, 2021; Liu, 2012; Primavera, 1999). Through their unpaid work, they serve as a means of care and concern that extends the mission and programmatic objectives of human service, medical and community organizations (Beardman, 2012; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020; Saraidi, Awofeso, & Dolan, 2020). Volunteers are beneficial to society. However, there are critical benefits to volunteering that make being a volunteer worthwhile.

Volunteerism emerges from the psychosocial construct of altruism. Altruism constitutes the practice of unselfish regard for or devotion to the welfare of oth-

ers (Beardman, 2012; Liu, 2012). This unselfish regard for the welfare of others is indicative of a response to inequality and oppression seen in society. It is meaningful in that it brings people together from mixed backgrounds and extends the quality of life of the volunteer (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020).

Altruism is a meaningful psychosocial construct in that it presents an individual's motivation to "do good" or solve a problem on behalf of the less fortunate. Individuals give their time, skills and personal characteristics to a cause that is designed to transform a social condition or problem. When people volunteer they give a host of positive outcomes to the helping organization and its program participants. This aspect of generosity makes a difference in the lives of marginalized individuals as well as the organizations aiming to diminish oppression. According to Saraidi et al. (2020), volunteers' altruistic behavior assists with understanding the plight of the oppressed and strengthening the volunteer's self-esteem. There are a host of benefits to the volunteer. The following discusses the benefits of volunteerism.

2. Literature Review

When people volunteer across the life span, they give their time, skills and values to those who are in precarious positions (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017). No matter the stage of development, volunteers receive positive outcomes in areas of personal growth, self-esteem and self-efficacy (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012; Primavera, 1999). In addition, volunteers gain skills and tools to improve their vocational standing (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020; Primavera, 1999). Finally, volunteers obtain increased awareness of important social issues, greater appreciation for diversity and social justice, and a strong commitment to the organization and the people they serve (Beardman, 2012; Liu, 2012; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020).

There is myriad of benefits to the volunteer. It is not just that the individual has a sense of accomplishment and knowing one has made a difference in the life of another individual. It is having an enhanced sense of self, defined skills and strengthened value-base attuned to promoting social justice. The model for this discussion is three areas of development that constitute benefits from volunteering: personal development, skills development and values development across the life span (Figure 1).

These benefits to the volunteer signal what can occur from being altruistic. The volunteer makes a difference in the life of a marginalized individual, their family and community. But the advantages to volunteering for the individual who is volunteering are significant. The benefits comprise the outcomes of personal development, skills development and values development. These three areas result from the activity of being altruistic and generous through volunteering (Figure 1).

2.1. Personal Development

One of the benefits to volunteerism is personal development of the individual.

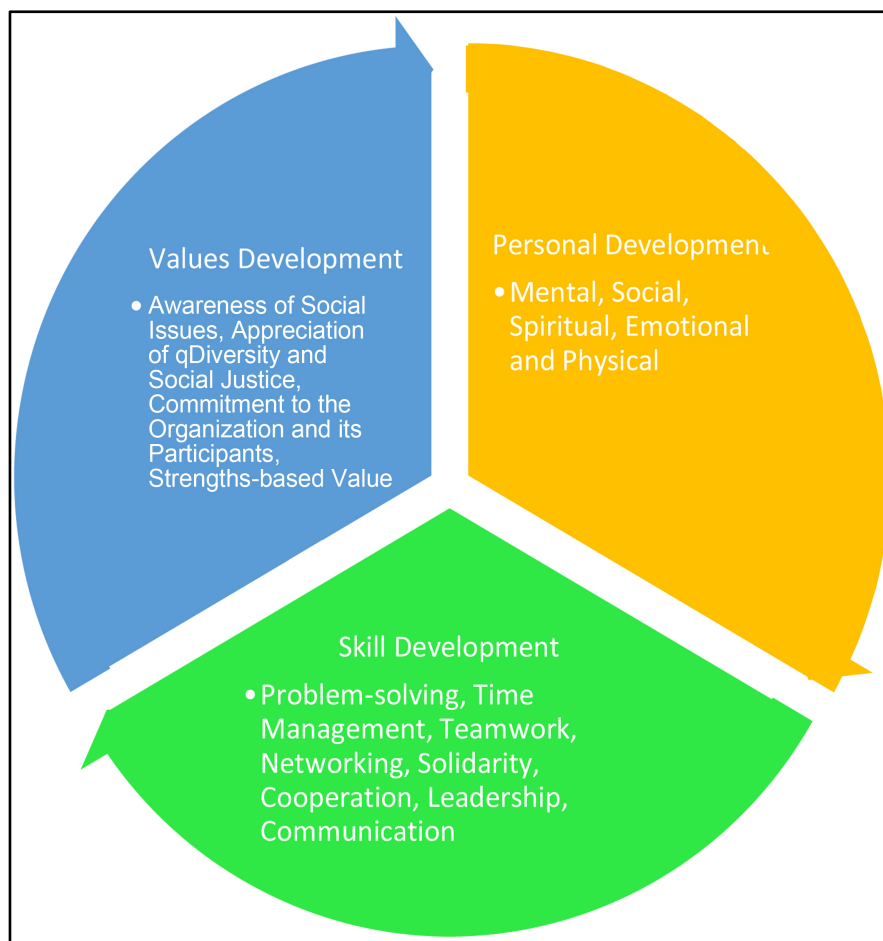


Figure 1. Model of benefits of volunteerism.

Personal development is the process of looking inward and focusing on ways to improve oneself (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). It encompasses the following areas: mental, social, spiritual, emotional and physical (Primavera, 1999). When individuals volunteer, they develop their mind and the way they think and acquire information/learn new things. They grow socially and spiritually, as well as emotionally. There are also physical benefits (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012).

Literature demonstrates that individuals who volunteer gain a host of personal outcomes (Primavera, 1999), like enhanced self-esteem (how we value and perceive ourselves) and self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's own ability to meet the challenges ahead and complete a task (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012). Volunteers are able to see themselves as changing the oppressive landscape for an individual, their family and their community (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017). Volunteers grow by becoming more self-reflective and aware of their connections to the less fortunate (Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017; Primavera, 1999). The less fortunate are humanized by the act of volunteerism, and strengthen the bond between the volunteer and the program participant (En-

lamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017).

Personal growth develops because the volunteer sees themselves as an agent of social change. The volunteer understands that they are doing something for the common good (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012). The outcome is elevated mood from being altruistic (Liu, 2012; Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2017). Another outcome is spiritual development where the volunteer connects to a higher power as they meet the needs of the less fortunate (Colson, 2009). Colson (2009) articulated that Christians and secularists share an outcome that develops the spirit of the individual. Whether the individual believes in a higher power, they stand as stewards of harvesting the well-being of another individual. This is altruism in action. The spiritual and physical benefits arise because the volunteer is providing a service for others and gaining overall health outcomes in the form of weight management, regulated blood pressure, stress relief and longer life span (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020).

In summary, personal development is critical because it influences the lens with which a volunteer sees themselves as an instrument of social change. The course of being altruistic is strengthened by the self-awareness that an individual is making a difference in the life of another individual. This difference is instrumental in inoculating the volunteer against negative thoughts about their impact on society. The components of personal development are benefits to the volunteer and further lead to prosocial behaviors.

2.2. Skills Development

Volunteerism allows for an individual to develop professional and personal skills that would impact their present and future careers (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Webster, 2016; Primavera, 1999). Problem solving is a key skill that develops when a volunteer is charged with solving a problem on behalf of a program participant. By working with other volunteers, an individual can find the best solution for a social issue that is diminishing the life of a program participant (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Webster, 2016).

In addition, volunteers acquire time management and teamwork skills. Many volunteers work in teams to address the crisis or problem at hand. Through collaboration, meeting deadlines and networking (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Webster, 2016; Primavera, 1999), volunteers build skills of solidarity and cooperation to promote a cause or social problem. Further, volunteers develop a strong work ethic by increasing their stamina and energy resulting in a positive work attitude (Primavera, 1999).

Finally, volunteers acquire leadership and communication skills. Leadership skills emerge as volunteers delegate tasks to their team. Communication skills develop as volunteers work closely with other volunteers and program participants to teach, train and give instructions. The dissemination of information is critical to communicating ideas and leading a team of volunteers (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Webster, 2016; Primavera, 1999).

Volunteers achieve vocational benefits from volunteering. These skills can be easily transferred to a place of employment. This is especially true regarding the communication skills and problem solving skills. Employers are looking for prospects who can critically think and communicate well.

In summary, when you volunteer, you are part of a team designed to solve a problem and make the life of an individual better. It is a complex endeavor in that the volunteer deposits skills to aid the program participant, but gains skills to take with them to their next venture, which may be a place of employment. Skills development is a key benefit for a volunteer in that it demonstrates the rich tapestry of employable benefits to the volunteer.

2.3. Values Development

Volunteering enhances the values of an individual volunteer (Lovell, Gray & Boucher, 2015; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). It increases one's awareness of social issues with a developed appreciation for diversity and social justice (Lovell, Gray, & Boucher, 2015; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). Volunteers also enhance their commitment to the organization and the people they serve (Lovell, Gray, & Boucher, 2015; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). When people volunteer, they show a growing commitment to a particular social issue or purpose (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Lovell, Gray, & Boucher, 2015).

Awareness of social issues emerge as a critical outcome of volunteering because it allows people to think critically about the people they are serving (Lovell, Gray, & Boucher, 2015; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020). Volunteers gain a belief system of the program participant that is primarily strengths-based and foregoes looking at deficits. The volunteers grow in their knowledge of the fortitude that allows the program participant to overcome the odds and be resilient. This value-system creates a support structure for the program participant (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012).

Further, volunteers gain an appreciation for diversity, inclusion and equity as well as for social justice. By working in teams with volunteers from diverse backgrounds, volunteers gain an appreciation of diversity, inclusion and equity (Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 2015). Also, volunteers acquire an appreciation for the diverse backgrounds of the program participants and their struggle for justice (Lovell, Gray, & Boucher, 2015; Mateiu-Vescan, Ionescu, & Opre, 2020; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 2015). The development of values causes the volunteer to strengthen their commitment to the organization and the people it serves (Enelamah & Tran, 2020; Liu, 2012; Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 2015).

In summary, volunteerism influences the values a volunteer holds dear. In addition to deepening their affinity for altruism and generosity, volunteers gain a profound admiration for diversity, inclusion, equity and social justice. By working with other volunteers and program participants from diverse backgrounds, they understand they have more in common with these individuals than dissimilarities. The values are experienced also by the program participants who see

themselves as being heard, seen and valued by a volunteer (Saraidi et al., 2020).

3. Applied Method

These benefits speak to the strength of volunteerism and how it impacts the well-being of the volunteer. Personal, skills, and values development are broad arrays of how an individual's life can be transformed from the work of volunteerism. Across one's development, these prosocial benefits influence the life span of an individual. Applying the Life Span Theory to this model, we see the development of human potential from the stage of preteen/adolescence to middle/late adulthood as it relates to volunteerism. Life Span is a component of developmental psychology that considers the study of individual development from birth to senior years (Erikson, 1980) (Figure 2).

4. Discussion: Volunteerism's Connection to Life Span

Volunteerism occurs across the life span, from preteen years to late adulthood. While maturing individuals from all cultures develop through the same sequence of stages, each culture and sub-culture has its own distinctive way of directing and enhancing the behavior at each stage of development. Erikson's position on development is optimistic about human nature (Erikson, 1980). He posits that children and adults seek to avoid pain but also seek to develop a positive sense of identity. Culture plays a role in the existential human's process of "becoming" throughout life. Volunteerism is a social construct deeply tied to culture.

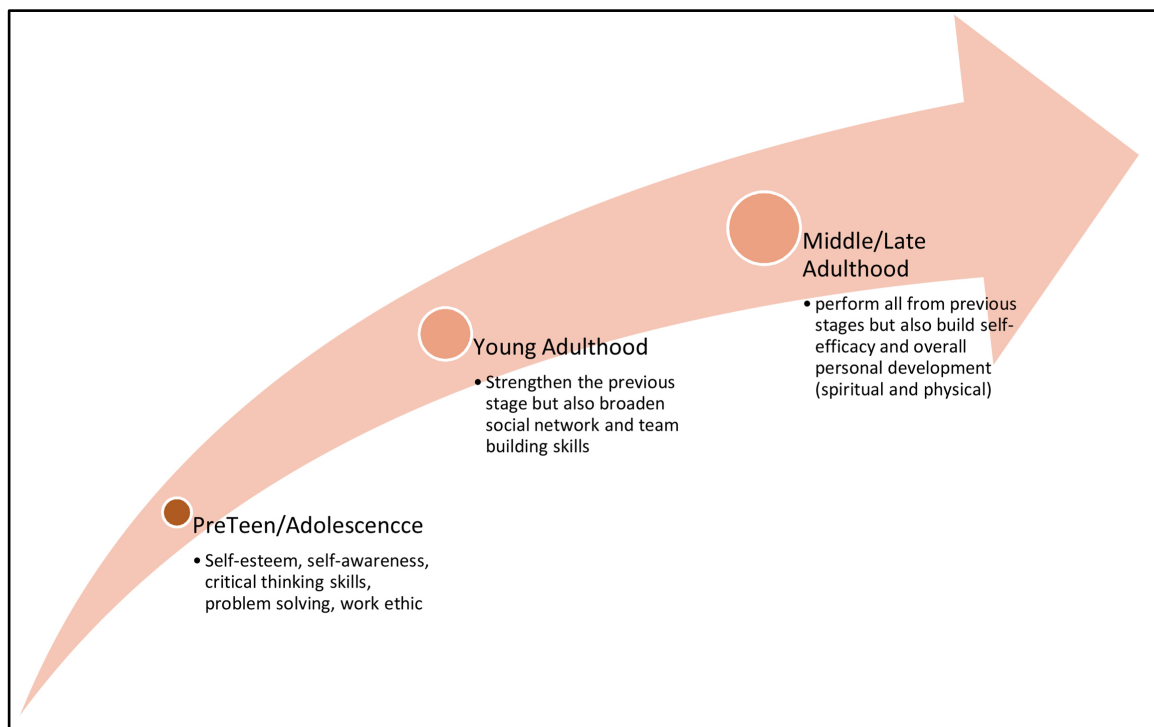


Figure 2. Benefits to volunteerism across the life span.

The motivation to volunteer is borne from a desire to give back and make and change the course of struggle and oppression experienced by marginalized individuals (Heckhausen et al., 2019). Volunteers bring affirmative agency and a spirit of motivation to the organization and the program participant to be an agent of social change. Shane et al. (2021) asked the question “why do people contribute to the well-being of others?” They looked at prosociality and generativity to isolate what promotes contribution to others. Their findings were that the constructs of prosociality and generativity have distinct trajectories in the course of the life span, peaking in mid life when expectancy and value for others is highest.

During the course of one’s life, when giving back to others, a volunteer emerges as a well-defined individual by middle adulthood. The benefits achieved from as early as preteen years, set the course for a more multi-dimensional, generative individual who is committed to affecting oppression experienced by marginalized individuals. Prosociality and generativity emerge in middle adulthood as outcomes of a lifetime of service to others. The more an individual supports the well-being of others, the more they develop as multi-dimensional, generative individuals committed to social justice.

Self-esteem emerges as a powerful outcome of prosocial behaviors through the life span (Orth et al., 2021). It influences the important life outcomes of relationship satisfaction, job satisfaction, occupational status, salary, and physical health. What the authors said is that self-esteem increases from adolescence to middle adulthood, reaching a peak at about 50 years. Self-esteem through the life span has a significant impact on real world experiences (Orth et al., 2021). The universe of a volunteer is intrinsically linked to how that person envisions the impact of their service to the less fortunate.

Here is the overview of volunteerism’s connection to the life span. During the preteen/adolescent years an individual who volunteers develops their self-esteem and self-awareness. In addition, they have the opportunity to strengthen their critical thinking skills, ability at problem solving and work ethic. Young adults strengthen the above but also broaden their social network and team building skills. Key to this stage of development is the issue of social belonging and solidarity. Middle adults and older adults get to perform all of the above but also build their self-efficacy and overall personal development, namely spiritual and physical (Kelly, 2006, 2008; Kirlin, 2002).

Through the course of volunteerism, individual volunteers acquire prosocial and generative areas that enhance their multi-dimensional personality across the life span. Volunteers enhance these areas because of the social connection and social belonging that occurs from volunteering.

According to Carmichael et al. (2015), social connection emerges from an intent toward social-information seeking goals. This is emphasized at the beginning of young adulthood.

“Our findings are consistent with the idea that selection and optimization serve important functions in early adulthood, and that engaging in deve-

lopmentally appropriate social activity contributes to psychosocial adjustments in the decades that follow.” (Carmichael et al., 2015: p. 95)

Each time a maturing individual emerges to another stage of development, they bring with them the prosocial skills they acquired during the previous stage. With volunteerism, they bring those benefits of volunteerism they acquired during one stage of development and deposit those gains to the next stage of development. This is the core of psychosocial development across the life span as a result of volunteerism.

In summary, the individual volunteer emerges from volunteering with an arsenal of advantages that propel them to the next stage of development. The beneficiaries of these psychosocial advantages are the organizations and program participants served by the volunteer no matter the stage of development.

5. Conclusion

Volunteerism is a critical asset to society and the people served by volunteers. However, to the individual volunteer there are a host of benefits and advantages that allow an individual volunteer to contribute to a cause and receive significant psycho-social benefits. The benefits derived from volunteerism are personal development, skills development and values development.

These benefits enable volunteers to contribute their talents to an organization and spread the work of curative social justice. Social justice is more than concerned with economic standing. It captures other spheres of social life. These spheres include race, gender and other causes and manifestations of inequality. What the volunteer sees is how inequality impacts the well-being of the marginalized individual. The volunteer deposits their skills to the organization to benefit the marginalized individual. Then the volunteer receives benefits that impact their livelihood and well-being, thereby transforming them into a multi-dimensional, generative individual.

The people and causes they serve will benefit from the service provided by the volunteers. However, the volunteers also gain significant advantages. Being a volunteer is a monumental service to humanity and its causes. The outcomes of volunteerism for the individual volunteer are enormous.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Ajrouch, K. J., Antonucci, T. C., & Webster, N. J. (2016). Volunteerism: Social Network Dynamics and Education. *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences, 71*, 309-319. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbu166>
- Beardman, S. (2012). Altruism and the Experimental Data on Helping Behavior. *Ethical Theory Moral Practice, 15*, 547-561. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-011-9309-4>

- Berkey, B. (2021). The Philosophical Core of Effective Altruism. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 52, 93-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12347>
- Carmichael, C., Reis, H. T., & Duberstein, P. R. (2015). In Your 20s It's Quantity, in Your 30s It's Quality: The Prognostic Value of Social Activity across 30 Years of Adulthood. *Psychology & Aging*, 30, 95-105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000014>
- Colson, C. (2009). The Problem of Goodness. *Christianity Today*, 53, 58.
- Enelamah, N. V., & Tran, T. (2020). Dimensions of Altruism Behavior among Americans in the General Social Survey. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 30, 213-227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2019.1673274>
- Erikson, E. (1980). *Identity and the Life Cycle*. WW Norton.
- Heckhausen, J., Wrosch, C., & Schulz, R. (2019). Agency and Motivation in Adulthood and Old Age. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70, 191-217. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010418-103043>
- Kelly, D. (2006). Parents' Influence on Youths' Civic Behaviors: The Civic Context of the Caregiving Environment. *Families in Society*, 87, 447-455. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3550>
- Kelly, D. (2008). Civic Readiness: Preparing Toddlers and Young Children for Civic Education and Sustained Engagement. *National Civic Review*, 97, 55-59. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.234>
- Kirlin, M. (2002). Civic Skill Building: The Missing Component in Service Programs. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 35, 571-575. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000872>
- Liu, J. (2012). Moral Reason, Moral Sentiments and the Realization of Altruism: A Motivational Theory of Altruism. *Asian Philosophy*, 23, 93-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2012.692534>
- Lovell, S. A., Gray, A. R., & Boucher, S. E. (2015). Developing and Validating a Measure of Community Capacity: Why Volunteers Make the Best Neighbours. *Social Science & Medicine*, 133, 261-268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.09.049>
- Mateiu-Vescan, R., Ionescu, T., & Opre, A. (2020). Reconsidering Volunteering: Individual Change as a Result of Doing Good for Others. *Voluntas*, 32, 1213-1227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00247-0>
- Mousa, T. Y., & Freeland-Graves, J. H. (2017). Motivations for Volunteers in Food Rescue Nutrition. *Public Health*, 149, 113-119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2017.04.004>
- Orth, U., Robina, R. W., & Widaman, K. F. (2021). Life Span Development of Self-Esteem and Its Effects on Important Life Outcomes. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 102, 1271-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025558>
- Primavera, J. (1999). The Unintended Consequences of Volunteerism: Positive Outcomes for Those Who Serve. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 18, 125-140. https://doi.org/10.1300/J005v18n01_10
- Saraidi, A., Awofeso, N., & Dolan, T. (2020). Volunteering in the United Arab Emirates' Health System—Motivations and Challenges. *Health*, 12, 334-352. <https://doi.org/10.4236/health.2020.124028>
- Shane, J., Niwa, E. Y., & Heckhausen, J. (2021). Prosociality across Adulthood: A Developmental and Motivational Perspective. *Psychology and Aging*, 36, 22-35. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000514>
- Stukas, A. A., Snyder, M., & Clary, E. G. (2015). Volunteerism and Community Involvement: Antecedents, Experiences and Consequences for the Person and the Situation. In D. A. Schroeder, & W. G. Graziano (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Prosocial Behavior* (pp. 459-493). Oxford University Press.