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Richard A. Stevick
*Messiah College, rstevick@messiah.edu*

J. A. Addleman

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Effects of Short-Term Volunteer Experience on Self-Perceptions and Prosocial Behavior

by RICHARD A. STEVICK and JOHN A. ADDLEMAN

Department of Behavioral Science Messiah College

Over the past 20 years, U.S. first-year college students have reported a declining interest in arriving at a meaningful philosophy of life, participating in their communities, and advocating for the well-being of the disadvantaged -- in contrast to a growing interest in becoming financially successful and gaining recognition (Astin, Green, & Korn, 1987; Dey, Astin, & Korn, 1991). A corrective that is frequently suggested as a remedy for this type of self-preoccupation is community service (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990; Hedin & Conrad, 1980; Kendall, 1990a, 1990b; Williams, 1980).

Thus, in the present study we attempted to determine whether students who had volunteer experience would be more likely than students in a control group to exhibit an altruistic response (make a financial contribution to a charitable cause). The behavioral measure of actual giving was the focus of the present study, but the participants' self-perceptions, self-esteem, values, locus of control, and moral reasoning were also compared after the students in the experimental group had completed their volunteer experience.

We hypothesized that, compared with the participants in a control group, participants who volunteered would be more likely to perceive and rate themselves as helpful on the Rokeach Values Survey (Rokeach, 1973), would score significantly higher in moral reasoning on the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986), and be more likely to contribute to a charitable cause. We also hypothesized that any changes in the participants' self-concept, self-perceived altruism, and locus of control would be statistically nonsignificant.

The study was conducted at a private liberal arts college in the context of a required general education course that focused on contemporary social issues and ethics. The 400 students were told that they had the option of applying for an 8-week, 21-hr community service position. The 120 available positions were oversubscribed by nearly 25%.

Seventy-four students from the pool of applicants were randomly assigned to either the experimental-volunteer group or the control group. The students in the experimental group were placed with agencies such as Big Brother-Big Sister, soup kitchens, and refugee services, and the students in the control group were told that they had not been placed because there had not been enough positions available. After 8 weeks, the students in both the experimental and the control groups were invited to participate in a college curricular study, for which they would receive $15. Fifty-seven of the 74 students accepted (30 from the experimental group and 27 from the control group).

After they had completed the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986), the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1964), the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966), the Altruism scale from the Work Values Inventory (Super, 1968), and the Rokeach Values Survey (Rokeach, 1973), the students were given the following options for the disposal of their $15. The
students could receive cash, put the money toward their tuition, purchase a gift certificate at a nearby restaurant, or donate the money to a charity or humanitarian agency of their choice. (This last option was the main dependent variable.)

Even though the students in both the experimental and the control groups had rated helpful as one of the three most important instrumental values on the Rokeach scale, none of them wanted to donate their $15 to a charity. Two students in the control group wanted to buy gift certificates. The T test analyses for all the standardized scales were statistically nonsignificant. Thus, only the third hypothesis, which predicted nonsignificance in self-concept, self-perceived altruism, and locus of control between the two groups, was supported. It is possible that 21 hr was not enough volunteer experience to affect the participants.

REFERENCES


Received December 29, 1994

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Address correspondence to Richard A. Stevick, Department of Behavioral Science, Messiah College, Grantham, PA 17027.

Originally published as: