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Motivations Behind Volunteering in Europe: The Personal Values Perspective

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Summary

This paper explores the motivations behind volunteering in Europe, distinguishing between the reasons volunteers give for their involvement and the underlying mental drivers rooted in personal values. Drawing on the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) and four mini-case studies, it confirms that expressing altruistic and humanitarian values remains a primary motivator, while highlighting the complex interplay between self- and other-directed motivations. Despite the significance of this topic, comparative research across Europe remains sparse. To address this gap, the paper analyses pan-European value trends using Schwartz's value framework and European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2024. The findings suggest weak but consistent positive relationships between volunteering and values like benevolence and universalism, and a negative relationship with power values. While some individualistic values show ambivalent effects, fears of value change undermining volunteering appear overstated. The paper cautions against overgeneralizing research findings for volunteer management and emphasises the importance of context-specific insights. Rather than chasing broad trends, volunteer-involving organisations may benefit from targeting niche motivations. The paper concludes by advocating for more coordinated and comparable data collection on volunteer motivations across Europe, emphasizing the potential of small-scale, practice-based research supported by shared instruments and open data repositories.

Keywords: Volunteering, Motivation, Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), Values, European Social Survey

1. Introduction

This article explores why individuals across Europe volunteer, focusing on their motivations. At first sight, an overview of the motivations of individuals is a self-evident way to answer the question 'Why (do people) volunteer?', but it is not. First of all, the why-question could also be answered with references to traditions and culture (people are supposed to volunteer), to circumstances (they slip into volunteering after a request for help that they cannot refuse), or to individual resources that make volunteering easier (Musick/Wilson 2008: 39–398; Smith et al. 2016; Dekker/Halman 2003). Secondly, it is not that clear what motivations are (Peters 2015). Do we mean the reasons that people give (are aware of or use as rationalisations and think are adequate to present as legitimisation of their actions) or the 'real' motivators or drivers of volunteering behind what people are saying? And if so, what kind of drivers do we include? Probably not circumstantial factors, but more the psychological drivers, but still: are we looking for specific motivations for volunteering or also for personality traits and values that increase the chance of volunteering? And if we look for explicit reasons or mental drivers: are we trying to shed light on why people started volunteering or why they continue to do so? Motivations tend to change from conscious specific motives to start an activity to less conscious processes of following habits and obligations felt towards other volunteers or the organisation, which then develop into a 'volunteer role identity' (Van Ingen/Wilson 2017): Long-time volunteers might volunteer basically because they are volunteers, it is part of who they are without specific reasons.

Enough troubling thoughts. In this article, we will focus on reasons that volunteers (involved in formal volunteering) give for their involvement and on the values that might stimulate volunteering. We will remain agnostic about the final meaning of what people say. Reasons might, as such, be seen as motivations (how do people motivate/explain what they are doing?) or as indicators for motivations as (unconscious) mental drivers.

Section 5.2 briefly presents research perspectives on volunteer motivations, and section 5.3 offers examples of how volunteers motivate their involvement in four practices in Europe. Section 5.4 moves from reasons of volunteers to values in the population. We focus on differences in values between volunteers and non-volunteers and try to discover trends by analysing European Social Survey data. In section 5.5, we conclude with a summary and considerations for further research and implications for policy.

2. Research on motivations to volunteer

There are a lot of categorisations of motivations to volunteer, more or less embedded in theoretical thinking and empirically supported. Popular dichotomies distinguish intrinsic versus extrinsic (Degli Antoni 2009), altruistic versus egoistic (Lemmon/

Wayne 2015), individualistic versus conformist (Wuthnow 1998), self-oriented versus other-oriented (Stukas et al. 2016), and autonomous versus controlled motivations (Güntert et al. 2022).

By far the most important theoretical framework to investigate the motivations of volunteers is the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) developed by Clary et al. (1998; Musick/Wilson 2008: 56–65; Kals et al. 2021; Wilson/Son 2022; Zhou/Kodama Muscente 2023). It distinguishes six primary functions to be served by volunteering:

1. values function: express altruistic and humanitarian concerns.

2. understanding function: develop knowledge and practice new skills.

3. social function: gain social approval and develop relationships with others.

4. career function: gain experiences and contacts useful for a job or career.

5. protective function: reduce negative feelings and deal with personal problems.

6. enhancement function: develop as a person and enhance self-esteem.

These functions are supposed to play an important role in volunteering, but Clary et al. do not claim that the list is exhaustive. VFI uses thirty items to measure the above six functions and has been used in many studies in diverse cultural and organisational settings with good results with regard to the dimensionality and scalability of the items (Dunn et al. 2016). Among the repeated findings are that the career function is more important for young volunteers, and that the values function is the most important (and career and social functions overall least important) for volunteers' satisfaction, commitment, and intention to continue (Zhou/Kodama Muscente 2023).

VFI has been questioned for its coherence and theoretical basis, as well as for biases in the measurement. This is because VFI items may suggest benefits that respondents would not otherwise have considered but might confirm 'out of either acquiescence or social conformism' (Chacón et al. 2011: 55; Wilson/Son 2022). Also, VFI (and similar lists offering good reasons) may overestimate the number of motivations[1] as well as underestimate what is actually important to volunteers. In particular, the values function, measured with a few general pro-social statements, has been found inadequate to measure the major concerns and ideals of volunteers.

This has led to the construction of extended VFIs, for instance for environmental volunteers (Lind/Lundberg 2024) and volunteers in sports (Angosto et al. 2021). Another trend is combining VFI with other approaches, for instance the

1 Vecina/Marzana (2019) found in the same volunteers' sample more than 90% indicating social and protective motivations while using VFI, but only 3% according to answers to open-ended questions.

Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between more and less intrinsic/autonomous motivations, claiming that more self-determination contributes to more commitment and satisfaction (Güntert et al. 2022). Other authors combine VFI with measurements of values (Stukas et al. 2016; Meijers et al. 2024) and indicators of community-attachment (Kals et al. 2021). Religion can be added as a combination of values and community, and the field of explicit reasons is sometimes supplemented by adding measurements of personality traits and 'implicit pro-social motivations' (Aydinsli et al. 2016).

Almost all VFI-studies – exceptions are Niebuur et al. (2019) and Lockstone-Binney et al. (2022) – focus on volunteers only. This goes without saying if one considers motivations as reasons for doing something but makes no sense when one looks at motivations as mental drivers that increase the chance that somebody volunteers. In that case, a comparison of volunteers and non-volunteers is needed. This has been done by adapting VFI, but many of its items are explicitly referring to volunteering and remain highly hypothetical for those not volunteering.[2]

An alternative is to use measurements of more general 'pro-social' dispositions and values related to altruism and solidarity (Dekker/Halman 2003). This research might result in describing the characteristic value profile of volunteers as 'a syndrome of generosity mixed with civic engagement and concern for the common good' (Reed/Selbee 2003: 103), but overall, direct relationships between volunteering and values turn out to be rather weak (Dekker/Halman 2003). However, some non-relationships can be 'positive' as well in this field, for instance the finding that 'individualising' values (stressing individual autonomy and self-expressive values) are not negative for volunteering. They might even be positive: "being intensely committed to self-realisation and material pleasure did not seem to be incompatible with doing volunteer work ... ... people who were the most individualistic were also the most likely to value doing things to help others" (Wuthnow 1991: 22). This American finding is echoed in later quantitative research in European countries: "contrary to our initial expectations, those individuals displaying hedonistic or achievement values are in fact more likely to volunteer in formal organisations than others" (Plagnol/Huppert 2010: 164).

Measurements of values play a role in research as indicators of motivational broad goals of individuals but also as indicators of cultures that might stimulate or discourage volunteering (Inglehart 2003; Hustinx et al. 2015). The basic values of Schwarz (2010; Plagnol/Huppert 2010; see further Section 5.4) are commonly used for that purpose.

2 Cary et al. (1998) tested their measurement instrument also on non-volunteers, instructed with "... please indicate how important or accurate each of the following reasons for volunteering would be for you". Niebuur et al. (2019) rephrase statements ('volunteering makes me happy' as a statement for volunteers becomes 'volunteering would make me happy' for non-volunteers).

Meta-studies of motivations to volunteer research suggest a growing measurement diversity (Chen et al. 2022), while VFI is still the hard core of psychological research of volunteers. Given this common core, it is remarkable that very little comparative and almost no longitudinal empirical research has been done. Most research concerns limited groups of volunteers: working for the same organisation or in the same field or with the same background (students and pensioners are popular, among students there is also some research with convenience samples). This might have to do with the diversity of the population (difficult to sample) and perhaps also with the focus of research on recruiting and retaining volunteers for specific organisations.

3. Motivations of volunteers in four practices

In this section, we explore the motivations of volunteers in four specific practices. The texts boil down findings from mainly qualitative research among volunteers in new or exceptional circumstances, which might support reflecting on why-questions.

3.1 Volunteers during the earthquake relief efforts in Croatia

Antonia Matković Puljek

The devastating earthquake that hit Croatia's Sisak-Moslavina County in 2020 triggered a wave of volunteers willing to help citizens in need. The Croatian Volunteer Development Centre conducted a survey aimed to examine attitudes and experiences of volunteers included in earthquake relief efforts (DKolectiv 2021). The research was conducted in 2021, while most volunteers were still on site. Their answers to open-ended questions shed light on the diverse motivations behind their participation:

- *Solidarity* with those affected stood out as a primary motivator to start volunteering for most volunteers. Many were driven by their own values and beliefs and the sense of community. They also wanted to set an example for others and feel useful in a time of crisis.
- In maintaining volunteers' initial motivation, *emotional rewards* played an important role. Respondents often described happiness and fulfilment they experienced from helping others and from being part of a collective effort. They were generally satisfied with their involvement and contribution and would recommend crisis volunteering to others.
- *Social interactions* were another powerful motivator. Many valued the teamwork and camaraderie that was built during the relief efforts. Not only have they formed bonds with fellow volunteers and coordinators, but they also connected with the earthquake-affected population. For some, these connections became a main factor to commit to long-term volunteering instead of offering only one-time help.

Despite strong motivations shown by the surveyed volunteers, we identified several challenges in the volunteering process that hindered their efforts, such as inadequate coordination, inefficient task allocation and poor communication among organisations that were involved. Volunteers were also very critical about authorities and their slow and inadequate response, noting that much of the burden of this crisis fell on civil society organisations and informal initiatives. For many, however, this distrust in public institutions also served as a powerful motivator to step in where formal structures failed. Some volunteers continued their efforts months after the earthquake, motivated by a sense of duty and the belief that the broader public had forgotten about Sisak-Moslavina County. They felt that without their involvement, affected communities would be left without adequate help for the recovery efforts.

This research demonstrated that volunteers were driven by strong motivations to help during the earthquake crisis. However, national research on volunteering (DKolectiv, n. d.) shows that sustaining this enthusiasm is challenging – only about eleven percent of the population volunteers at least once a year. To build a more resilient community capable of responding to future challenges, it is important to find ways to sustain these motivations beyond moments of crisis and promote ongoing engagement in everyday support to those in need.

3.2 Volunteers during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Poland[3]

Anna Domaradzka

In the initial stage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in February 2022, over half of the Polish adult population engaged in different forms of giving and volunteering in response to the mass forced migration from Ukraine caused by the full-scale invasion of the country by Russia. Out of this group, 59 % organised collections of money and goods, 44 % engaged in direct volunteering, 39 % helped people to settle in, and 20 % hosted refugees (Roszczyńska et al. 2023). Shortly after the war in Ukraine began, people who helped refugees identified more strongly with Ukrainians and had more friends involved in providing help than those who did not help. After two years, people who continued to provide assistance had a higher level of identification with refugees, had parents who were more socially involved, talked more often with their families and friends, and showed higher trust in strangers.

When questioned in interviews (Trochymiak/Wróblewska 2024, Domaradzka et al. 2025), the volunteers referred to three main types of motivation driving their involvement:

3 This text is based on surveys (waves in 2022, 2023, 2024) and interviews in reception centres in Warsaw (2022), conducted by A. Domaradzka, E. Domaradzka, M. Roszczyńska, A. Rychwalska, M. Trochymiak, N. Wróblewska and A. Żbikowska at the Institute for Social Studies at the University of Warsaw (Domaradzka et al. 2025; Trochymiak/Wróblewska 2024).

- *Moral obligation*. Volunteers frequently mentioned feelings of moral obligation, based on the belief that it is natural to step in and help when dramatic events cause human suffering. Helping others in difficult situations was understood as a 'moral duty' or it was presented as fulfilling a personal 'need to help', which arose in reaction to the misfortune of others.
- *Reclaiming agency*. The second most frequent motivation was the need 'to do something' and gain a level of control in the face of the insecurity caused by the crisis. Here, the motivation was related to one's own well-being, which was threatened by the war erupting so close to the Polish border. Engaging in concrete efforts and seeing their results was a way to overcome the feeling of helplessness, restore the sense of meaning and reduce anxiety among volunteers.
- *Professional duty*. Some volunteers also mentioned the aspect of challenging themselves, seeing the crisis as an opportunity to put their skills in action and use them for the benefit of others. This sense of duty was linked with professional skills that volunteers were motivated to employ to 'get the job done' despite difficult circumstances.

The collective response to the crisis demonstrates how deeply personal, moral, and professional motivations intersect, revealing the profound impact of identification with war victims and social network engagement in emergency volunteering.

3.3 Volunteers in hybrid settings in Sweden

Johan von Essen

To explore new volunteer realities in Swedish society, the focus is on volunteers in hybrid organisations where one can expect to find professionalisation, blurred borders to other societal spheres, other forms of affiliation than membership, welfare orientation, and an apolitical view on volunteering. For this reason, in-depth interviews were conducted with police volunteers, corporate volunteers, and volunteers in a highly professionalised volunteer organisation producing welfare services (von Essen 2020). Three main motivations emerge from the interviews:

- The most frequent answer, when asked about motives for volunteering, is that *it makes it possible to produce something without being paid*. As actions categorised as unpaid work, they are independent of formal hierarchies and labour law relationships.
- Another central motive was that volunteering is *the outcome of an engagement*. However, it did not concern any engagement, but specifically being good to somebody or acting for a good cause. No one mentioned any ideology, political conviction, or referred to the broader society when they elaborated on engagement as a

motive for unpaid work. Instead, they emphasised another aspect of engagement: its specific function as an expression of themselves as persons.

- *To act for the benefit of the 'other' w*as a third important motive to volunteer. Some interviewees added that unpaid work must be performed for the benefit of someone outside their own private sphere, otherwise it does not count as free choice. For example, nursing or taking care of elderly parents is not categorised as unpaid work because it is perceived as either too natural or too imperative to be deliberate or driven by free choice.

Freedom and goodness are the two organising principles in the structure of motives for unpaid work in hybrid settings in Swedish society. That their efforts are voluntary and for the good of others imply that being engaged in volunteering affirms that they are autonomous subjects and allows them to express themselves as moral actors. Volunteering is then framed so that being engaged in and carrying out such efforts is to stand out as an individual and as a good person in contrast to the norm of gainful employment in the materialistic society and to the natural inclination of man to act in self-interest.

3.4 Faith-based volunteer tourists in party-tourism destinations

Konstantinos Tomazos

In studying Faith-Based Volunteer Tourism (FBVT) through the lens of street aid volunteers, the deeper existential and esoteric aspects of this form of tourism come into view. Such volunteers exemplify values such as service, compassion, and community by participating in patrol groups within the night-time economy, offering support to individuals who are heavily intoxicated. FBVT groups address a critical service gap, intervening in situations that might otherwise escalate to require medical or police involvement.

As part of this broader trend, Christian volunteer tourists travel to international party destinations with the goal of making a positive impact. Interviews with twelve Faith Based Volunteer Tourists uncovered six key motivations to participate: values, altruism, social, enjoyment, team building and generativity (see Tomazos 2024 for further references):

- *Religion*. The opportunity to express one's religious values and/or extend religious values and beliefs to another. It was virtually impossible to separate religion and the act of helping others in the context of street aid volunteer tourism (often called voluntourism). The participants were working and talking to people about the error of their ways and trying to help them to get onto the same path as themselves.

- *Altruism*. Participants consistently highlighted altruism as a key motivator. This was expressed through helping others, supporting causes, and serving the community. Altruism in the study manifested as purposeful actions aimed at benefiting others or society, transcending mere good intentions.
- *Social*. Volunteers also look for personal rewards like fulfilment or belonging. Rather than diminishing the ethical value of volunteering, this motivation can enhance sustained engagement and a cycle of goodwill. Especially in a Western context, modern volunteering reflects a shift from collective, community-focused efforts to a more individualised, reflexive approach (Inglehart 2003). Individuals increasingly seek causes that resonate with their identities and values, framing volunteering as a personal journey rather than a collective responsibility.
- *Enjoyment*. Permits the volunteers to have fun while engaging and being active.
- *Team Building*. The opportunity to have an impact within a team towards a common goal.
- *Generativity*. The opportunity to contribute to society, help future generations and/or express concern for the welfare of others.

My study of the interviews highlights the interconnectedness of these motivations and suggests that while religion and spirituality may be the primary drivers, the personal and social benefits of volunteering are also integral to the overall experience.

The balance between altruism and egoism also reflects the broader spectrum of human behaviour. We are complex beings, and our motivations often involve multiple layers. The desire to do good in the world is rarely devoid of personal context, and that's part of what makes volunteering so compelling. It highlights our shared humanity – the idea that helping others is a fundamental aspect of who we are, whether that help comes from a place of pure altruism or involves personal gain. My study underscores the importance of recognising the complex interplay between these motivations and how they work together to create a meaningful and transformative volunteer experience.

3.5 Interim conclusion across the four cases

The main motivations mentioned above mirror the enhancement, understanding, social and in particular values function of the VFI – with a glimmer of the protection function, as not following the appeal of values would probably hurt one's self. In addition to that, the motivations of volunteers in the four cases might have two things in common: stressing personal freedom (it is my choice to engage and recognise a duty) and opposing something (failing authorities, religious obligations, normal work, the daily self).

4. European trends

There are studies about the diversity and developments of volunteering in Europe (Damian 2019, Meijs/Hendriks 2022), but they tell us little about the motivations of volunteers. There are some cross-national studies about reasons to volunteer for specific segments of volunteers. An example is Grönlund et al. (2011) using convenience samples of volunteering students from five European (and eight other) countries to investigate how motives differ between cultures. In accordance with two of their hypotheses, the authors find for instance "Students from countries with high individualism scores rated resume-building motives higher compared to those from countries with lower individualism scores. Students from countries with the dominant cultural value of egalitarianism rated altruistic motives higher compared to students from other countries" (Grönlund et al. 2011: 102).

Another example is Principi et al. (2013), who compare older volunteers in three European countries and note "that higher levels of motivation in a given country may not be an indicator of more participation. According to the present study, Italian older volunteers are much more motivated than Dutch ones, whereas volunteering at an older age is particularly more widespread in the Netherlands, than in Germany and in particular in Italy" (729).

There are two studies with a broader selection of countries and samples of all volunteers. They use the second wave of the European Values Study (early 1990s), to the best of our knowledge the only pan-European large-scale population survey with questions for volunteering respondents about their 'reasons for doing voluntary work'.[4] Dekker/Van den Broek (1998) use data from eleven West European (and two North American) countries and investigate the correlates of reasons indicating compassion and sense of duty (seen as traditional motives) and reasons indicating personal satisfaction and gaining skills (seen as self-directed/modern motives). They find no relationship between reasons and the level of modernisation of the countries and limited evidence for modernisation of motives at the individual level (Dekker/Halman 2003).

Hustinx et al. (2015) use data from 17 European countries to investigate differences in reasons to volunteer related to religiosity, value patterns, and non-profit sector regimes. Their findings are diverse and nuanced. For instance, at the individual level religiosity is positively related to altruistic reasons and negatively to self-oriented reasons, but at the country level there is only a negative relationship to self-oriented reasons. Altruistic reasoning does not decline when countries are more secular.

4 14 reasons are presented, from 'religious beliefs' and 'to help give disadvantaged people hope and dignity' to 'for social reasons, to meet people' and 'did not want to, but could not refuse'.

From these kinds of findings, one can speculate about trends in motivations. The process of secularisation probably strengthens self-directed motivations but does not have to weaken altruistic motivations as secular sources of altruism might offer compensation.

To get a fuller and less speculative picture of trends, we need data about real changes, but as said, longitudinal research of motivations is missing for Europe. To shed some light on changes, we have to move from reasons of volunteers to values as possible drivers. I will explore values of volunteers and non-volunteers in two modules of the European Social Survey (ESS), the first one (2002/2003) and the most recent one (2023/2004, as far as available in February 2025). The modules differ in questions about volunteering. In 2002/2003 the question was: 'For each of the voluntary organisations I will now mention, please use this card to tell me whether any of these things apply to you now or in the last twelve months, and, if so, which.' One of the options is 'Done voluntary (unpaid) work for such an organisation'. Presented are eleven types/fields of voluntary organisations, and as number twelve 'any other voluntary organisation such as/similar to the ones I've just mentioned'. Respondents who indicated to have volunteered in at least one case are considered to be volunteers, the others as non-volunteers. In 2023/2004 the best available question was: '... still thinking about different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong, during the last twelve months, have you done any of the following?' with one of the options being 'volunteered for a not-for-profit or charitable organisation'. Our comparison might be somewhat biased by the different questions (volunteers in sports and other leisure organisations are explicitly addressed in 2002/2003 but might feel excluded in the civic action perspective of 2023/2004).

However, the two modules have (almost) identical questions about values: the 21-item Human Values Scale or Portrait Values Questionnaire, designed by Schwartz to categorize respondents according to their basic values (Schwartz 2010; Davidov et al. 2008). The question is: 'Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer', with the options on the card being: 'Very much like me / Like me / Somewhat like me / A little like me / Not like me / Not like me at all / options to refuse an answer or say I don't know'. The people presented are he or she, in accordance with the (assumed) gender of the respondent. Two examples: 'Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/She likes to do things in his/her own original way' and 'It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. He/She

avoids anything that might endanger his safety.' The resulting 21 'portraits' present 21 value-indicators that cover ten basic values (see Table 5.1).[5]

For 16 European countries we have data about volunteering and values in both modules (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and Slovenia). The average of the national percentages of volunteers was 18 % in 2002/2003 (from 5 % in Poland to 37 % in Norway) and 22 % in 2023/2004 (from 5 % in Hungary to 42 % in Norway). The average change per country was 6 percentage points and there is no way to decide how much of this is real change and how much the consequence of different questioning.

To get a full picture of possible drivers, table 5.1 presents information about all 21 value measurements, and not the ten basic values they are supposed to indicate. The first numbered column shows the estimated European population change in values (volunteers and non-volunteers in the 16 countries) on a 100 points scale between 2002/2003 and 2023/2004. The largest changes are an increase of 'to help people and care for others' well-being' (+5) and 'to seek fun and things that give pleasure' (+4); the largest decrease shows 'to do what is told and follow rules' (-3). Columns 2 and 3 show differences in values between volunteers and non-volunteers per module. If there are significant differences in both periods, they are in the same direction. The biggest difference is that volunteers put a higher value than non-volunteers on 'to think new ideas and being creative' (+4, +5) and on 'to try new and different things in life' (+3, +5), and a lower value on 'to live in secure and safe surroundings (-3, -4). Overall, the value changes and differences are rather small (max. 5 on 0-100-scales). Looking at the basic values, volunteers score on average consistently (all constituent values in both periods) higher on universalism, benevolence, and stimulation, and lower on security.

Columns 4 and 5 show the unique statistical effects of values on the probability of volunteering in both periods: the findings are not only adjusted for country differences but also for the effects of the other values.[6] The direction of significant effects (positive or negative) is visible as well as their rank order between brackets: 1 is the most important discriminating value and 13 (2023/2004) or 14 (2002/2003) is the least important. The rank orders differ, but not extremely. In both periods, 'to think of new

5 There is no room here to go further into the relationships between the values, but the ten basic values can be structured in two dimensions and roughly four categories: self-enhancement (achievement and power) versus self-transcendence (universalism and benevolence), and openness to change (self-direction and stimulation) versus conservation (conformity, security, and traditional). Hedonism is related to both openness to change and self-enhancement (Davidov et al. 2008; Schwartz 2010).

6 This explains differences between columns 2 and 4 and between 3 and 5. Ignoring other values, in both periods volunteers score a little bit higher in columns 2 and 3 on the second universalism value (equality), but adjusting for other value differences, this indicator does not discriminate between volunteers and non-volunteers (column 5 and 6).

ideas and being creative' is the most important positive value, but in 2002/2003 'to be humble and modest, not draw attention' is more important, but negative (taking the effects of other values into account).

Table 1 Values and volunteering

		Differences in values[a]			Effects of values on volunteering[b]		
Basic value[a]	Measurements: It is important …	1. 2023/4 -2002/3	2. Vol – non-vol in 2002/3	3. Vol – non-vol in 2023/4	4. 2002/3	5. 2023/4	6. Future[c]
Universa-lism	… to understand different people	2	2	4	+ (8)	+ (3)	++[d]
	… that people are treated equally and have equal opportunities	3	1	2			
	… to care for nature and environment	1	2	3	+ (11)	+ (5)	+
Benevo-lence	… to help people and care for others' well-being	5	3	3	+ (3)	+ (4)	+
	… to be loyal to friends and devote to people close	3	1	2		+ (10)	+
Confor-mism	… to do what is told and follow rules	-3	-2	-2	- (9)		
	… to behave properly	1		-1	+ (14)		
Tradition	… to be humble and modest, not draw attention	3	-3	-1	- (1)	- (7)	–
	… to follow traditions and customs	-2	2		+ (6)	+ (13)	– –[d]
Security	… to live in secure and safe surroundings		-3	-4	- (5)	- (2)	
	… that government is strong and ensures safety	1	-3	-2	- (4)	- (8)	–
Power	… to be rich, have money and expensive things	-2	-2	-2	- (7)	- (6)	+
	… to get respect from others						
Achieve-ment	… to show abilities and be admired	-1					
	… to be successful and that people recognise achievements	-2					
Hedo-nism	… to seek fun and things that give pleasure	4		1		- (12)	– –[d]
	… to have a good time	3			- (12)		

Stimulation	… to try new and different things in life	-1	3	5	+ (10)	+ (9)	–
	… to seek adventures and have an exciting life	3	2	4		+ (11)	++[d]
Self-determination	… to think new ideas and being creative	1	4	5	+ (2)	+ (1)	+
	… to make own decisions and be free	2		1	- (13)		
Increase of Nagelkerke pseudo r^2 by adding values to countries					.026	.039	

a Statistically significant ($p<0.05$) differences on 0-100 scales between 2023/4 and 2002/3 and between Volunteers and non-volunteers (adjusted for countries).

b Direction of statistically significant ($p<0.05$) effects of values on the chance to volunteer (adjusted for countries and other values) and between brackets the rank order of the strength of the effect (according to Wald statistics).

c Guesstimate of the future impact of the value on volunteering by combining the direction of the value change and the effect of the value on volunteering in at least 2023/4.

d See note 6: + + = positive impact increases; – – = negative impact increases or positive impact decreases.

Source: European Social Survey 1 (2002-2003) & 11 (2023-2024)

The results in columns 2 to 5 are from separate analyses for 2002/2003 and for 2023/2004 because the measurement of volunteering is quite different. If we ignore this difference, we can speculate about trends or the future impact of values. We expect a positive trend when a value with a positive effect becomes more popular or a value with a negative effect becomes less popular; and the other way around for negative trends. Combining the change in column 1 and the signs in columns 4 and 5 (5 only if there is no significant difference in 2002/2003), we get seven positive and five negative trends in motivation. In four cases the sign is double because the effect of the value on volunteering differs significantly between 2002/2003 and 2023/2004.[7] For example, the increasingly popular value 'to understand different people' has a positive effect on volunteering and in 2023/2004 more than in 2002/2003 and gets for that reason a '++'; 'to follow traditions and customs' is becoming less popular and its effect on volunteering is decreasing and gets a '– –'.

Summarizing the "guesstimates" of Table 5.1 in terms of basic values, one might expect that universalism and benevolence will strengthen as drivers of volunteering, and tradition will work less positively and more negatively. The impact of other basic values is unclear because value-indicators have no or only partial effects, or effects are opposed (the stimulation values: both have a positive effect on volunteering but one is getting less popular and the other more popular).

7 Ignoring the difference in measuring volunteering for a moment, multivariate analyses of the combined modules, four values*year significant interaction effects suggest changes: understand different people and seek adventure have a stronger positive effect in 2023/4; follow traditions has a weaker positive effect and seek fun has a stronger negative effect in 2023/4.

The effects of values on volunteering appear to be small (small differences between volunteers and non-volunteers and low Nagelkerke coefficients in the last row of columns 4 and 5). Moreover, our statistical effects say as such nothing about causality. A pseudo-panel study of ESS modules by Vega-Tinoco et al. (2024) shows bi-directional relationships between civic participation and Schwartz-values, with some evidence that the impact of participation on values is stronger than vice versa.

The results are largely in line with other findings in analyses of other ESS data. Both Schwartz (2010) and Plagnol/Huppert (2010) report positive associations of pro-social behaviour indicators with benevolence (focus on welfare for ingroup) and universalism (focus on welfare for all). Besides, Schwarz (2010) finds power and security inhibit pro-social behaviour and effects of conformity depending on the kind of behaviour. As quoted before, Plagnol/Huppert (2010) find positive associations between volunteering and hedonistic or achievement values.

5. Conclusion

Motivations to volunteer can refer to reasons volunteers give for their activities and to mental drivers of people's propensity to volunteer. Reasons of volunteers have often been investigated with the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). Expressing altruistic and humanitarian values is found to be the most important function of volunteering. This also emerges from the four small case studies in section 5.3. These studies also show a strong intertwining of other- and self-directed motivations.

There have been remarkably few comparative analyses of motivations of volunteers and there exists hardly any pan-European research. To say something about European trends, we focused on motivations in the sense of mental drivers, i.e. values in the population that might stimulate people to volunteer. We used Schwartz's measures of basic values and found some weak relationships in line with earlier research on pro-social behaviour: benevolence and universalism are positively related, and power values are negatively related to volunteering. The impact of other individualistic values is ambivalent. Taking differences between 2002 and 2024 as trends, one may expect fewer benefits for volunteering from valuing tradition, but a growing positive impact of universalism and benevolence, and mixed effects of self-directed values. These estimates are statistically weak, but strong enough to counter 'panicky' assumptions about strongly negative consequences of value change in Europe.

I hope that the preceding sections have offered some useful reflections on motivations and insights into findings of earlier research, as well as fresh food for thoughts in regard to most important motivations for volunteers (from the four mini case studies in section 5.3) and the future of the values of volunteering in Europe (from the quantitative exploration in section 5.4).

But what can we practically do with this in volunteer policymaking and management? I do not cherish the hopes of Zhou/Kodama Mucente (2023: 1350), who conclude their article on volunteer motives by stating: "We hope that this meta-analysis, which is the first of its kind, will provide future volunteer managers with accessible and valuable insight into volunteer motives that can directly translate into improved practices and better organisational outcomes." This does not seem feasible, and attempts to directly apply conclusions from research in other or across settings seem risky. Motivations differ between types and fields of volunteering and change in interaction with other volunteers and organisations.

The biggest risk is taking research findings of majorities or general trends as applicable in all settings. Just as it will often be more profitable for a political party to be the sole representative of a minority preference than to share a majority preference with others, it may be better for a volunteer-involving organisation to go against trends, focus on a minority and look for a niche. Research, as presented here, is more likely to be useful as environmental information, especially to dispel popular assumptions about changes (such as negative values change), or as inspiration to do one's own practical research (for instance using VFI to start internal discussions about what is important for volunteers and for the organisation).

Some final thoughts about future research: As regards values motivating to volunteer in the population, ESS seems to be a good source with its Schwartz-values battery. However, it would be nice if questions concerning volunteering or variants of pro-social behaviour were asked more broadly. The current ESS-question about volunteering as a form of civic action (see section 5.4) tilts towards politically inspired activities.

For further research on motivations of volunteers in Europe, population surveys with a battery of questions for volunteers only (as in EVS 1990; see section 5.4) are an option but remain expensive, therefore the information on what volunteers do inevitably remains very limited. What seems more promising is some coordinating action directed to projects researching volunteers in different settings (organisations, events, groups). They could be made more comparable with a core list of questions for surveys for volunteers (VFI with more values), a few optional open-ended questions, and enriched with information about the setting. Archiving such data in an open repository would make it accessible for policymakers and managers, who might learn more from small research in similar practices elsewhere in Europe than from research about general trends across Europe.

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