Burnout and duration of service among Chinese voluntary workers

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A survey study conducted among 226 Chinese voluntary workers in Hong Kong showed that satisfaction with voluntary work, integration into the voluntary institution, and burnout syndromes contributed to volunteers’ expected duration of service. Regression analyses also showed that different sets of variables predicted different spans of expected duration of service. Work satisfaction was the most salient predictor for expected duration of service from six months to ten years. Lack of personal accomplishment predicted expected duration of service for six to twelve months, whereas emotional exhaustion and depersonalization influenced volunteers’ expectation to continue in the service for five to ten years.

Voluntary workers (VWs) are the main human resources of social services and non-profit organizations. VWs are different from paid or obligated caregivers who provide long-term assistance and support to those who suffer from chronic or serious illness (Omoto & Snyder, 1995). This study focuses on volunteers who have formal membership in an organization to provide services; but their participation is due neither to contractual obligation nor familial relationship with the recipients.

In recruiting and managing voluntary workers, an organization has to consider not only why a person wants to be a voluntary worker, but also how to motivate the volunteers to remain in the organization. Predictors for becoming a voluntary worker are different from those for continuing to be a voluntary worker (Black & DiNitto, 1994). Being able to predict volunteers’ intentions to stay is important because these organizations work with a large number of volunteers at a large staff-to-volunteer ratio. For instance, the Hong Kong chapter of Oxfam, with a team of 1500+ volunteers, has a ratio of twenty-five volunteers to one permanent staff. And the American Red Cross, which works with 1.5 million VWs, has a ratio of forty-five to one. Charitable organizations offer extensive training to volunteers to prepare them for service. Maintaining a low turnover rate and a stable team of experienced volunteers can reduce human and monetary resources spent on recruiting and training new volunteers. This study focuses on identifying psychological and organizational factors that contribute to continuation of voluntary services among volunteers.

Burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1986) define burnout as a syndrome of emotional depletion, a sense of lack of personal accomplishment, and being cynical and callous towards one’s work.