

## **EFFECT OF VOLUNTEERISM ON MENTAL HEALTH AND HAPPINESS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we examined that whether engaging in voluntary work leads to greater well-being, measured by self-reported mental health and happiness. The primary objective of the research study was to establish a relationship between variables including volunteerism, mental health and happiness. Additionally, we assessed direct implication of volunteerism on mental health among the volunteers and non-volunteers. In order to evaluate, 50 volunteers and 50 non-volunteers were selected through snowball sampling from different areas of Karachi (Men: 56 and Women: 44). Participants filled questionnaire containing Demographic sheet, a Mental Health Questionnaire (Bargar, 1996) and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (M. Argyle & P Hills, 2002). Pearson correlation test result indicated significant correlation between both variables. Moreover, an independent sample t-test revealed significant difference in the scores of mental health and happiness among volunteers and non-volunteers. Drawing on data, findings suggest that volunteerism lead to good mental health and happiness in volunteers.

**KEYWORDS:** Happiness, Mental Health, Voluntary Services, Volunteers, Well-Being

### **INTRODUCTION**

Volunteerism- service to others is integral for establishing world peace and creating harmony. It will help towards education and giving people the ability to help them in the best possible way(Thoits, 2001). It is imperative to understand the fact that volunteerism is an integral step towards creating and sustaining healthy civic societies in the next millennium (Van Willigen, 2000). In the sixth biannual scientific report on health, well-being, longevity and helping people it is safely confirmed that a helpful life is more likely to be happier and a healthier one(Post, June,2014). This statement has been central to our research which aims to provide an up to date scientific evidence for this association between giving, flourishing interwoven with happiness and psychological aspects of health and well-being (Post, June,2014). All these major surveys conducted nationally and internationally notably identify that giving and generosity is a crucial subject linked to happiness and mental well-being.

The vast majority of people have more material wealth today than their parents had; the percentage of these populations that is happy, however, has not increased whereas, depression and anxiety rates have increased dramatically (Post G. , 2005). However, such elevated rates require serious reflection on our social environment. Given these trends, sociologist and psychologist are interested in evaluating determinants and consequences of volunteer participation which has improved significantly over the span of years (Thoits, 2001).

Over the years researchers have been trying to establish a relationship between the social and physiological implications of volunteerism. For this purpose, several models have been designed to explain various domains of volunteer work (Sullivan, 1997). Volunteer motivation model explains motivations behind the voluntary services. The model high

points the fact that people volunteer for different reasons including accomplishing new skills, self-enhancement, improving self-worth or to express community commitment and personal values (Omoto Allen, 1990). Furthermore, values and attitude model establishes an important connection between volunteering services and individual beliefs about the significance of community participation or altruistic responsibility (Janoski, 1998). Additionally, volunteer personality model describes an individual personality or innate traits which motivates individual to involve in volunteer activities.

Psychological well-being or mental health is the capacity to develop psychologically and emotionally, knowing about others, overcoming psychological problems and being able to maintain relationships socially. Kamkary, K. & Shokrzadeh, S. (2012) found positive significant relationship between happiness and mental wellbeing. Several studies revealed that volunteering makes people happier, particularly when there is personal contact between the server and service receiver. Happiness increases when volunteers help people they do not know (Steger, 2008).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The volume of literature on the association between the variables such as volunteerism and impacts on psychological health and well-being has increased rapidly in the last decade. Early cross-sectional studies showed positive correlations between volunteering and mental health (Sneed, 2013). However, these studies have failed to establish a direct relationship between volunteerism and mental health which can't be generalized to the entire population (Post G. , 2005). Recently, with a major shift in the evolving trend and paradigm there have been number of longitudinal studies which have helped to determine a relationship with these various variables (Schwartz, 1999). Well-being includes a feeling of hopefulness, happiness and goodness about one self. An early study by Hunter and Lin concluded that volunteers scored significantly higher in life satisfaction and reported fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress in comparison to non-volunteers (Hettman, 1990).

Additionally, Rietschlin, (1998) has found that volunteerism leads to a lower level of psychological pain and cope up effectively with stressors. Similarly, Van Willigen, (1998) found that volunteerism increases life satisfaction and decreases hopelessness; and its association with improved physical health. Implication of these studies suggests that volunteerism and attendance in community work suggests that doing voluntary work improves the well-being of individuals (Van Willigen, 2000).

Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario and Tang (2003) researched on volunteering and well-being among the individuals in the formal community involvement. Statistics of the research study revealed that volunteering is associated with better health ratings, increased life expectancy, decreased mortality, higher levels of contentment and lower levels of functional dependence and depressive symptomatology. However, overall evidence for contingent effects of volunteering on well-being is limited and inconsistent. Additionally, few studies have investigated the extent to which volunteering might be associated with different dimensions of psychological well-being (Greenfield, 2004).

Another popular research study by Borgonovi, F. (2008) defragmented the relationship between good health and doing well. The research utilized self-reported measures of health and happiness in order to examine that whether engaging in volunteer work leads to greater well-being (Borgonovi, 2008). The research suggested clear ties between volunteerism, good physical health and mental health (Akkin, 2012). As per analysis, volunteers significantly highlighted decreased rates of depression and mortality therefore, likely to be happier than non-volunteers. However, the research study does not explain the motivating factors for voluntary work and reverse relationship between feeling well and inclination to

voluntary work (Bruhin, 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this analysis, we conducted a survey which was based on the standard set of questionnaire. The questionnaire was exclusively designed to assess self-reported psychological well-being and happiness among volunteers and non-volunteers.

### **Participants**

A random sample of 100 participants (N=100) was selected through snowball sampling. Out of 100 participants, 50 were volunteers and other 50 were non-volunteers. 68% of the participants were men and 32% were women. The volunteers were selected from different areas of Karachi including Karachi University and Aga Khan Community in Karachi. Both, volunteers and non-volunteers belonged to the age range of 18yrs – 65yrs.

### **Measures**

Participants were asked to fill a questionnaire containing Demographic sheet, Bargar (1996) Mental Health questionnaire and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) (M. Argyle & P Hills, 2002).

Bargar (1996) mental health questionnaire was based on 12 items measuring difficulty which an individual faces in a particular area in one's day-to-day life. It ranges from no difficulty to extreme difficulty. A low score on Mental Health Questionnaire is linked with low difficulty in dealing with everyday issues and a better mental health. Internal consistency at time 1 ( $\alpha=0.62$ ) and time 2 ( $\alpha=0.58$ ) separated by two weeks was found satisfactory (Bargar, 1996).

The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) prepared by Michael Argyle and Peter Hills at Oxford University (2002) was also administered in the research study. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire is a scale used for the measurement of psychological well-being, individual differences and personality. The OHQ demonstrated high scale reliabilities with values  $\alpha(167) = 0.92$  and  $\alpha(168) = 0.91$  respectively. The inter-item correlations for the OHQ were  $r = 0.04$  to  $0.65$ , mean  $0.28$ . The OHQ scores aggregated over all items were strongly and significantly related,  $r(163) = 0.80$ ,  $P < 0.001$  (M. Argyle & P Hills, 2002).

### **Procedure**

After taking informed consent from the participants, objective of the study were explained clearly to the participating members. Participants were asked to fill a questionnaire which included a demographic sheet. Participants were asked to fill Mental Health questionnaire (Bargar, 1996) and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) of Michael Argyle and Peter Hills (2002). After filling questionnaire, results of individual participants were emailed to their respective email address as token of appreciation to participate in the research study. For statistical analysis of data, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare happiness and mental health of both groups. Also, Pearson correlation was used to establish a relationship between variables such as volunteers, psychological well-being and happiness.

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Correlation between Mental Health and Happiness**

| Variables                 | N   | r       | Sig  |
|---------------------------|-----|---------|------|
| Mental Health & Happiness | 100 | -.855** | 0.00 |

Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels (2-tailed)

**Table 2: Independent Sample T-Test Indicating Difference of Happiness of Volunteers and Non-Volunteers**

| Variable  | Volunteers |        | Non-volunteers |        | <i>t</i> (98) | <i>P</i> | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|-----------|------------|--------|----------------|--------|---------------|----------|------------------|
|           | M          | SD     | M              | SD     |               |          |                  |
| Happiness | 153.882    | 15.967 | 116.422        | 19.759 | 10.426**      | 0.00     | 2.08             |

An independent sample *t* test showed that the difference in happiness scores between the volunteers ( $n = 50$ ,  $M = 153.882$ ,  $SD = 15.967$ ) and non-volunteers ( $n = 50$ ,  $M = 116.422$ ,  $SD = 19.759$ ) were statistically significant,  $t(98) = -10.426$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = 2.08$ .

**Table 3: Results Indicating Significant Difference in Mental Health among Volunteers and Non-Volunteers**

| Variable      | Volunteers |        | Non-volunteers |         | <i>t</i> (98) | <i>P</i> | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|---------------|------------|--------|----------------|---------|---------------|----------|------------------|
|               | M          | SD     | M              | SD      |               |          |                  |
| Mental health | 6.300      | 3.1184 | 26.3400        | 11.1403 | 12.249**      | 0.00     | -2.44            |

An independent sample *t* test showed that the difference in mental health scores between the volunteers ( $n = 50$ ,  $M = 6.300$ ,  $SD = 3.1184$ ) and non-volunteers ( $n = 50$ ,  $M = 26.340$ ,  $SD = 11.140$ ) were statistically significant,  $t(98) = 12.249$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $d = -2.44$ .

**Table 4: Frequencies, Percentages and Chi-Square Test Indicating Gender, Age and Marital Status Difference between Volunteers and Non-Volunteers**

| Variable              | Volunteers<br>N=50 | Non-Volunteers<br>N=50 | $\chi^2$ |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------|
| <b>Gender</b>         |                    |                        |          |
| Male                  | 26 (46.4%)         | 30 (53.6%)             | 0.420ns  |
| Female                | 24 (54.5%)         | 20(45.5%)              |          |
| <b>Marital status</b> |                    |                        |          |
| Married               | 28(53.8%)          | 24(46.2%)              | 0.423ns  |
| Unmarried             | 22(45.8%)          | 26(54.2%)              |          |
| <b>Age</b>            |                    |                        |          |
| Young                 | 30(52.6%)          | 27(47.4%)              | 0.545ns  |
| old                   | 20(46.5%)          | 23(53.5%)              |          |

*Ns* = non-significant

Chi-square test results indicated non-significant gender, age and marital status differences among volunteers and non-volunteers

## DISCUSSIONS

The systematic review and meta-analysis has identified numerical evidence based on potential health benefits of volunteering. Volunteer work is widely believed to be beneficial not only for the community as a whole but also for an individual who perform it. Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to the actual consequences of the volunteer service contributing to an individual's physical and psychological mental well-being.

Qualls, (2002) found that over time the risk factors increase for mental illnesses so maintaining mental health is extremely important. He added that in order to maintain mental health three things need to be followed first, having a low risk of disability or any disease; second, mental and physical well-functioning, and thirdly living a life to its fullest(Saroglou, 2005).

Overall, results of the study are congruent in illuminating the idea that volunteering has been found to have better psychological effects in the lives of people. The result of the study summarizes a positive correlation between greater mental health and volunteerism. Volunteering is significantly associated with happiness and increased frequency of formal volunteering increases levels of self-reported happiness. The research study suggests a stronger link between volunteer work and well-being. The research study makes an important contribution by high pointing a positive association between the variables.

Voluntary work is beneficial to well-being as Reitschlin (1998) identified that those people who contribute in voluntary group membership have low psychological distress and also decreases the quantity of negative effects of the various events which cause stress(Jenkinson, 2013). Van Willigen (1998) said that volunteerism increases life satisfaction and decreases depression of people (Van Willigen, 2000). Young and Glasgow (1998) also stated that volunteerism is positively related with better physical health.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The major limitation of the study is the participants chosen for the study were mostly affiliated to a particular community. Therefore, future research directions must include people from diverse backgrounds and communities. Additionally, the research study did not analyze motivating factors among volunteers. Furthermore, the research study did not establish a reverse relationship between feeling well and inclination to voluntary work. Moreover, the research study did not compare the levels of psychological well-being and happiness in secular and religious work. Finally, all other variables such as age, gender, socio-economic factors were kept constant.

## CONCLUSIONS

Results of present study and in the light of the available literature suggest that engaging in voluntary services improves mental health and also contribute in attaining happiness. The statistical analysis of the answers provided by the respondents' suggests greater prevalence of psychological well-being and happiness among volunteers. More research on doing well and contributing to the society will spark a movement in public health focusing on civic engagement and helping behavior within communities.

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**APPENDIX**

**INFORMED CONSENT**

We, students of Psychology Department, Karachi University, are conducting a study concerning your beliefs and attitudes. We need your cooperation for this purpose. You have to fill out the following questionnaires. Please don't leave any question unanswered. Feel free to ask any question. If you feel threatened in any way while answering the questions, you can leave them unmarked and handover the questionnaires back. The information given by you is to be used only for research purpose and would be kept confidential.

**DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET**

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Education:**

**Occupation:**

**Marital status:**

Please answer the following Question:

Q. Do you presently offer volunteer work for any religious organization? For a school or educational organization? For a political group or labor union? For a senior citizens group or related organization? For any other national or local organization, including hospitals, schools etc?"

Yes

No

A Mental Health Questionnaire (Bargar, 1996)

**INSTRUCTIONS:** For the following questions, please rate your **level of difficulty** in the situations by circling the corresponding number. Please fill this questionnaire completely.

**0=No difficulty; 1=A little; 2=Moderate; 3=Quite a bit; 4=Extreme**

|  | ND | AL | M | QB | EX |
|--|----|----|---|----|----|
|  | 0  | 1  | 2 | 3  | 4  |
| 1. Managing day-to-day life (e.g., getting places on time, handling money, making every day decisions) |    |    |   |    |    |
| 2. Performing your duties at home, work, or school   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 3. Relationships with family members   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 4. Getting along with people outside of the family   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 5. Lack of self-confidence, feeling bad about yourself   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 6. Adjusting to major life stresses (e.g., new job, new school, moving, separation, death)             |    |    |   |    |    |
| 7. Feeling satisfaction with your life   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 8. Overall emotional condition   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 9. Maintaining a relationship with a significant other   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 10. Feeling comfortable around people you don't know   |    |    |   |    |    |
| 11. Accepting the authority of others  |    |    |   |    |    |
| 12. Expressing your needs to others  |    |    |   |    |    |

## The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ)

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Below are a number of statements about happiness. Would you please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each by entering a number alongside it according to the following code:

1=strongly disagree; 2=moderately disagree; 3=slightly disagree; 4=slightly agree; 5=moderately agree; 6=strongly agree. You will need to read the statements carefully because some are phrased positively and others negatively. Don't take too long over individual questions; there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and no trick questions. The first answer that comes into your head is probably the right one for you. If you find some of the questions difficult, please give the answer that is true for you in general or for most of the time.

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am ( )                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2. I am intensely interested in other people                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 3. I feel that life is very rewarding                                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4. I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone                        |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5. I rarely wake up feeling rested ( )                                      |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6. I am not particularly optimistic about the future ( )                    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7. I find most things amusing   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8. I am always committed and involved                                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9. Life is good   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 10. I do not think that the world is a good place ( )                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 11. I laugh a lot   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 12. I am well satisfied about everything in my life                         |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 13. I don't think I look attractive ( )                                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 14. There is a gap between what I would like to do and what I have done ( ) |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 15. I am very happy   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 16. I find beauty in some things  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 17. I always have a cheerful effect on others                               |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 18. I can fit in everything I want to                                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 19. I feel that I am not especially in control of my life ( )               |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 20. I feel able to take anything on   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 21. I feel fully mentally alert   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 22. I often experience joy and elation                                      |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 23. I do not find it easy to make decisions ( )                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 24. I do not have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life ( )  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 25. I feel I have a great deal of energy                                    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 26. I usually have a good influence on events                               |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 27. I do not have fun with other people ( )                                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 28. I don't feel particularly healthy ( )                                   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 29. I do not have particularly happy memories of the past ( )               |   |   |   |   |   |   |