Super-Volunteers: Who Are They and How Do We Get One?

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Abstract
This article investigates super-volunteers, defined as individuals who volunteer 10 or more hours per week with a single organization. We conducted interviews with 25 super-volunteers to explore what motivates them to become super-volunteers and how they choose the organizations for which they volunteer. We also interviewed nine volunteer managers to explore the advantages and disadvantages of employing super-volunteers and what best practices they recommend for supervising them. Most super-volunteers in our sample were highly educated and had retired from careers that involved helping and supervising other people. Most decided on their own to pursue volunteering and then searched carefully for an appropriate organization. The super-volunteers chose nonprofits that they thought were effective, matched their values, and were willing to work with them to develop a meaningful and substantive volunteer position. Volunteer managers stated that super-volunteers brought great value to their agencies and had few disadvantages. However, managing super-volunteers did require more flexibility, time, and one-on-one attention than managing regular volunteers.

Keywords
volunteering, volunteer management, retirement

Many charitable nonprofit organizations in the United States rely on volunteers to accomplish their mission. Unfortunately, participation in volunteering has declined slightly in recent years from 26.8% of the population in 2011 to 24.9% in 2015. The median volunteer in 2015 donated 52 hr per year, or 1 hr a week (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). In addition, there has been a recent trend away from regular

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Volunteering to episodic volunteering, in which volunteers donate small amounts of
time on a single occasion or at irregular intervals (Hyde, Dunn, Bax, & Chambers,
2016). Because nonprofits compete for volunteer labor, this competition obliges many
nonprofits to cater to volunteers’ desires for short work hours and flexible schedules,
or even no regular schedule at all.

At the same time, some nonprofits have had a few highly dedicated volunteers who
contribute more time and give a higher quality of work and higher time commitment
than their average volunteer. Although some studies have examined how various fac-
tors affect volunteer hours, no study to our knowledge has looked specifically at the
characteristics of such highly dedicated volunteers, which we call “super-volunteers.”

This article defines a “super-volunteer” as someone who volunteers 10 or more
hours per week and who contributes a qualitatively higher type of service, often in a
leadership or skilled professional capacity. We interviewed 25 super-volunteers to
explore their answers to two research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What characteristics and experiences of individuals cause
them to become super-volunteers?

**Research Question 2:** What criteria do super-volunteers use in choosing an orga-
nization for which they will volunteer?

We also interviewed nine volunteer supervisors to explore their answers to the two
following research questions:

**Research Question 3:** What are the advantages and challenges in employing
super-volunteers?

**Research Question 4:** How can nonprofits best manage super-volunteers?

This study advances knowledge on volunteering by being the first to study highly
committed volunteers. Many studies have investigated low-commitment types of vol-
unteering; this study is the first to describe the persistence of super-volunteers and
track their reasons for their greater time commitments.

**Review of the Literature**

This section first examines how individual characteristics predict greater time commit-
ment to volunteering; it then examines how certain organizational characteristics and
management practices correlate with greater commitment of volunteer hours. For indi-
vidual characteristics, we follow Wilson and Musick (1997) in dividing the predictors
of volunteering into four categories: demographic variables, resources, motivations,
and social capital.

**Demographic Factors**

Volunteering varies by sex, race, ethnicity, and age. Non-Hispanic Whites tend to vol-
unteer more than non-Whites and Hispanics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016), but
among the latter who do volunteer, African Americans volunteer the most hours. Women in the United States tend to volunteer more than men (Einolf, 2011). Age has a curvilinear relationship with volunteering, with participation increasing during young adulthood and middle age but declining in old age as health declines (Musick & Wilson, 2007; U.S. Department of Labor, 2016).

**Resources**

Resource theories specify that individuals are more likely to volunteer if they possess the skills and free time needed to volunteer (Wilson & Musick, 1997). People with higher education and better job-related skills are more likely to volunteer than people with less education and fewer skills. Retirees and people who are employed part time volunteer more than those who work full time, although people who are unemployed volunteer least of all (Musick & Wilson, 2007).

**Motivations**

People have different motivations for volunteering. In their influential Volunteer Functions Inventory, Clary and colleagues (1998) propose six motives for volunteering: career, self-esteem enhancement, protective (to reduce negative feelings), social, understanding (the desire to learn about the world), and personal values. Value orientations that predict volunteering include empathic concern (Einolf, 2008; Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010), a principle of care (Wilhelm & Bekkers, 2010), concern for the next generation (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), moral obligation (Einolf, 2010; Schwartz & Fleishman, 1978), and an extensive moral orientation (Einolf, 2010; Oliner & Oliner, 1988). Religious values also predict volunteering, even while controlling for the effect of religious participation on social roles and integration (Einolf, 2011). Once people begin to volunteer for whatever reason, they may develop a volunteering role identity that they value, which encourages them to continue volunteering (Lee, Piliavin, & Call, 1999).

**Social Capital**

Social networks and trust foster volunteering in several ways (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Person-to-person appeals are one of the most common ways that organizations recruit volunteers, so that people with broad social networks are more likely to be asked. People who have a strong sense of trust feel more solidarity with other people and feel more inclined to help them, and they are also less inhibited by concerns about others taking advantage of their generosity (Brown & Ferris, 2007). Participation in religious institutions and service-oriented voluntary associations involve individuals in social networks in which norms of helping are shared among members. Even if members of these networks feel little internal motivation to volunteer or give money, they are subjected to external pressure and encouragement to do so (Lee et al., 1999).

Overall, people volunteer from a mix of self-oriented and other-oriented motives (Clary et al., 1998). They are more likely to volunteer if they have more resources of
free time, skills, and education. They are more likely to volunteer if they have wider social networks, both because they are more likely to be asked and because some social networks contain external norms that encourage volunteering. It is possible that super-volunteers simply have stronger motives, more resources, and broader and more values-oriented social networks than ordinary volunteers. We explore these issues in the interviews and the quantitative appendix to this article.

Comparing High-Commitment and Low-Commitment Volunteers

The studies cited above have as their dependent variable either the decision to volunteer at all or hours spent volunteering, where authors treat hours volunteered as a continuous variable. Only one study that we know of explicitly compares volunteers with a low contribution of time with those with a high contribution (Randle & Dolnicar, 2009). However, it sets the bar for a high contribution much lower than the current article, defining a high time commitment as 40 or more hours per year. That study found that demographically, high-contributing volunteers were more likely to work part time, were older, and were more likely to have children at home. High-contributing volunteers listed more motivations for their volunteering than low-contributing volunteers, particularly self-oriented ones such as socialization and feeling like they are doing good work.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) releases statistics each year from the American Community Survey that cross tabulate volunteer hours with demographic factors; the survey shows modest differences among demographic groups in the proportion that engage in 10 or more hours of volunteering. As the survey measures all volunteering, not volunteering at a single organization, the survey measures high commitment to volunteering generally, not a specific commitment to be a super-volunteer. Male volunteers (6.4%) were slightly more likely than women (5.5%) to volunteer at the high time contribution level of 500 or more hours per year. By age, the group with the largest proportion of high-contribution volunteers was those aged 65 or older (9.4%), followed by those 55 to 64 (6.8%), 45 to 54 (5.6%), 25 to 34 (4.6%), and 35 to 44 years (4.5%). African Americans have the highest proportion of those who volunteer 500 or more hours per year (6.4%), followed by Whites and Hispanics (5.8%) and then Asians (4.5%). Education does not correlate in a linear way with high-contribution volunteering; the highest proportion is among those with only a high school education (7.1%), followed by those with some college or an associate’s degree (6.4%), a bachelor’s degree or higher (5.8%), and those without a high school diploma (5.5%).

Married people (6.1%) are more likely to be high-contributing volunteers than never-married people (4.5%), but divorced, separated, and widowed people are more likely than both those groups (6.8%). Women with children below 18 years of age at home (3.9%) are less likely than women without young children (6.3%), and the same is true for men with (4.6%) and without (7.1%) minor children. People not in the labor force, a group that includes retirees and homemakers, are the most likely to be high-contributing volunteers (8.8%), followed by unemployed people (8.1%), part-time employees (5.0%), and full-time employees (4.1%).
To go beyond demographic variables, we conducted a preliminary study how variables measuring the resources of skills and free time, personality traits and motivations, and social networks affected high-frequency volunteering using a data from the large, nationally representative sample of the 1995 Midlife in the United States (MIDUS; 1995-1996) study. We found that volunteers who gave 40 or more hours per month did not differ from those who gave 19 or less hours in terms of education, but they did have more free time, as they were significantly more likely to be full-time students or homemakers and were significantly less likely to work full time. With regard to personality traits and motivations, highly active volunteers scored significantly higher than less active volunteers on agreeableness, generative concern, helpfulness, and a sense of obligation to volunteer. Turning to social networks, super-volunteers attended religious services significantly more frequently and had significantly more social contact with neighbors, friends, and family. Further information on the methods and results of this preliminary study can be found in the appendix.

Organizational Factors

Volunteers’ characteristics are not the only thing that influences their commitment of time; the organization’s management practices also affect volunteers’ involvement. A variety of measures of good management practices, as perceived by the volunteer, correlate positively with time spent volunteering; they include general satisfaction with the organization (Finkelstein, 2008; Finkelstein, Penner, & Brannick, 2005; Jamison, 2003; Waters & Bortree, 2007), a stronger feeling that one’s expectations are met (Farmer & Fedor, 1999), higher perceived organizational support (Farmer & Fedor, 1999), and more social interaction with other volunteers (Farmer & Fedor, 2001). Specific management actions that correlate with higher amounts of volunteer hours have been found in different studies. They include more training (Jamison, 2003), giving volunteers more challenging tasks (Jamison, 2003), having a greater feeling that one’s volunteer work makes an important contribution (Grube & Piliavin, 2000), having more of a feeling of general trust in the organization (Waters & Bortree, 2007), and having a stronger feeling that the organization uses its funds wisely (Grube & Piliavin, 2000).

All these studies mentioned above examine how different management practices correlate with the amount of time spent volunteering among all volunteers, and none focuses on those who volunteer 10 or more hours per week. None of them examines how managers can encourage volunteers to donate unusually high numbers of hours. Furthermore, most studies on management practices assume the validity of the human resources management (HRM) model (Brudney & Meijs, 2014), which states that managers should treat volunteers like unpaid employees, with written job descriptions, training and orientation, record keeping of hours, recognition, and evaluation (Brudney & Meijs, 2014). Although this model may be an efficient and effective way to manage large numbers of volunteers who make an ordinary time commitment, it may not necessarily be the best way to manage super-volunteers.
Overall, the research on volunteering tells us much about how individual demographic factors, motivations, personal resources, and social capital affect the decisions of individuals to volunteer and the hours they spent volunteering, but these variables alone did not substantively distinguish between volunteers who donate 10 or more or less than 10 hr per week (see the appendix). As described above, some organizational studies find that good volunteer management practices in general correlate with time spent volunteering, but no studies have looked at how specific organizational factors encourage or facilitate high-frequency volunteering. Our study uses qualitative methods to fill this gap, examining factors that motivate people to become super-volunteers, how they make that decision, the advantages and disadvantages to organizations of having super-volunteers, and how organizations can best manage them.

Method

We collected data for this project in two waves. In the first wave of data collection, conducted in 2009 to 2010, we focused on senior and retired volunteers. To generate a sample, we sent letters and emails to a number of nonprofit organizations in the Chicago area who employed senior volunteers, asking them whether they had any volunteers who contributed 10 or more hours of service per week and who made an exceptional contribution to the nonprofit’s work. Given that this is a qualitative, explorative study designed to formulate hypotheses rather than rigorously test them, we decided not to interview a control group of regular volunteers and to focus instead only on super-volunteers.

Some external events interfered with the completion of the project, and when we began interviewing again in 2015, we did not focus exclusively on senior volunteers. We contacted more than 100 Chicago area nonprofits and asked them whether they had any super-volunteers; if they did, we asked them to forward our recruitment email to them. In this wave, we interviewed both the super-volunteers and the nonprofit staff person who managed them. We recruited 15 super-volunteers and nine staff persons for a total of 24 persons in the second wave, making a total of 34 interviewees in the entire study. Although we did not specify that the persons in the second wave had to be elderly or retired, all but two (87%) were above 50 years of age and most were retired.

The first wave of interviews focused on the characteristics of the super-volunteers themselves. We asked respondents to detail their current volunteering, charitable giving, and person-to-person helping to friends and relatives. The interview then turned to the respondents’ history of volunteering and to their history of paid employment, looking specifically for links between their paid and volunteer work before retirement and their current commitment to volunteering. The interview then asked how life experiences, including experiences in their childhood and early adulthood, might have motivated their high commitment to volunteer work. Finally, the interview examined how religion, reciprocity, gratitude, and having an extensive sense of moral commitment to other groups might motivate volunteer commitment. We asked about the positive and negative aspects of working with their organization and asked them to give advice to other nonprofits in how to manage super-volunteers.
The second wave of interviews also examined the characteristics of super-volunteers but focused equally on how they worked with nonprofits. We again asked about their current volunteering, their motivations for doing it, and their satisfaction in doing it. We asked how they decided to become super-volunteers, how they chose which organization to volunteer for, their experiences with the organization, and advice for volunteer managers. In our interviews with volunteer managers, we asked how the super-volunteer began giving such a high commitment, whether the manager had any reluctance to give so much responsibility to a volunteer, the benefits and drawbacks of employing a super-volunteer, how they managed them, and any advice they had for other volunteer managers.

We transcribed the interviews in full and analyzed them using both closed and open coding. We used closed coding to measure demographic factors and to code for potential motivators for extensive volunteering. These items included their education and whether they had paid employment in jobs that were professional, supervisory, and prosocial in nature. We also coded whether volunteers were recruited to super-volunteer status or whether they made the decision independently. We used open coding to look for common themes in the managers’ statements about the advantages and disadvantages of employing super-volunteers, and in the comments of both volunteers and managers about how best to supervise super-volunteers. The principal author did most of the coding in consultation with the second author; we did not code numerically and, therefore, did not create statistical measures of coder agreement, but instead coded phrases to bring out themes. We counted the number of respondents who expressed each theme and report only those themes expressed by more than one respondent.

Findings

Of the 26 super-volunteers in our sample, 20 are White, four are African American, and two are Asian American. All but two are above the age of 50 and the average age is 69 years. They spent an average of 10 to 25 hr per week volunteering. Seventeen (65%) are female and 22 (85%) are married or have been married. They worked for a wide range of organizations including a senior center, a hot meals program for the homeless, the Girl Scouts, an ethnic community organization, several legal clinics, a veteran’s organization, a nursery school, and a community development organization.

Question 1: What Characteristics and Experiences of Individuals Cause Them to Become Super-Volunteers?

To answer this question, we looked at super-volunteers’ education, careers, and values. Most in this sample were highly educated, with seven having a bachelor’s degree, 13 having a master’s or law degree, and one having a doctorate; only two had less than a 4-year college degree. Most super-volunteers in the interview sample were retired, and most left careers in jobs that were highly skilled, involved supervision of others, and involved doing work that benefited others or society. Their preretirement careers included naval officer, corporate accountant, college professor, director of an English
as a second language school, director of nursing, school superintendent, and teacher. Four (16%) super-volunteers worked as managers in jobs not requiring a college degree, such as a flower shop owner, a cook, an office manager, and a retail sales supervisor.

Personal values were the key reason that most respondents became super-volunteers, and they articulated how the values and mission of the organization corresponded with their own values. As one volunteer with Girl Scouts (BC) stated, their organization’s values were

to help others, to value our country and the trust that goes along with keeping the Girl Scout promise. I’m also an advocate of the Girl Scout law and the elements of it, kindness, fairness, helpfulness, and using resources wisely.

A second Girl Scout volunteer agreed:

Actually, if everybody lived by the Girl Scout law in this world, we would have no more war. Even though we are not specifically connected with any faith, there’s a lot of faith that is part of Girl Scouting because you are asked to be friendly and helpful, honest and fair, considerate and caring. And the last part, where you are asked to be a sister to every Girl Scout, well, if everybody was a sister and brother to everybody, there’d be a lot less conflict and a lot more peace in the world. (LT)

A volunteer (ES) with a veterans’ organization is a veteran himself, and his brother, son, and daughter are veterans as well. After returning from the Korean War, his brother became an alcoholic and a criminal. After spending 18 years in prison, he died shortly after his release at the age of 41. ES volunteers to help other veterans adjust better to their return to civilian life. “I volunteer because I am always looking for a way to connect my hopes, desires, and philosophy to action.” A volunteer with an immigration legal services organization (HE) traced her motivation to her family background as the granddaughter of first-generation Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and to her professional background working as the director of an English as a second language school.

Another legal services volunteer (S) saw her volunteer work as a way of satisfying a commitment to correcting the injustices of the world that dated from her childhood, which she had up until now been unable to carry through on in her paid career. She went to law school because she wanted to prosecute cases of sexual abuse of children but found that her temperament was unsuited for courtroom advocacy. Later, she set her sights lower and became a volunteer for a legal services agency and found the work to be satisfying.

You do one case at a time and that’s all you can do. I got into law because I felt that I wanted to fight for those who had been wronged, but I see that you could do other things; you could help people with divorce. There might not be this horrible thing going on, but you can get them through the process and get them on with their lives. You don’t have to
do everything with a capital J justice; it sometimes is just good to help people out with their paper work.

A super-volunteer at a nursing home (EL) did not realize how much the mission of helping the elderly was important to her until she actually started doing it.

It’s like, it’s a calling. I just knew, when one of the residents said to me, “Why don’t you volunteer,” then “Ohhh.” That was it. This is what I want to do. This is what I should have done.

**Question Two: How Do People Make Their Decision to Become Super-Volunteers?**

The majority of super-volunteers decided on their own to become significantly involved in volunteering and then looked for an organization to work for. Fifteen of the 20 super-volunteers (75%) for whom we have information on this question said that the initiative to become a super-volunteer came from themselves. As one (BC) put it, her motivation was “internal—it came from who I am as a person and me wanting to contribute more to the organization.” Their decisions came from two sources: having health issues that prevented them from working for pay and wanting to devote their retirement years to prosocial work.

Three super-volunteers (15%) took on part-time volunteer jobs because health problems prevented them from working for pay, but did not prevent them from working at all. One (ED) explained that “I had a mild stroke, and I decided well, since I’m sitting around the house and I’m not working as much as I used to, I should get out of the house and do something worthwhile.” Another (NT) had to retire from her paid job as a teacher of preschool children, because health problems made it too difficult for her to work all day. She switched to working at the same school with the same age group as a volunteer teacher’s aide, working 3 hr each morning, 5 days a week.

The majority of those who decided to become super-volunteers did so because they retired from paid work and chose to spend their retirement years helping others and giving back. One volunteer’s story is particularly inspiring. His consulting firm had a mandatory retirement age of 62 and he began planning for his retirement in his late 50s. He attended the retirement planning sessions at his firm’s annual partner meetings and remembers one panel session in particular.

They set up four paths: they said you can teach, you can enter the board of directors’ world, you can have a second career, like find another paying job of some kind, or you can just kick back and have fun—it’s all about you right now. The first hand that went up in the audience says “I think you missed a path: There’s a giving back path, volunteering and doing something you know for the betterment of the world.” And the audience broke out into applause.

This super-volunteer felt the same way as the speaker, having decided before attending this panel that he wanted to spend his retirement years helping others.
Five super-volunteers were recruited by the organization; they did not seek out a high-level volunteer commitment on their own, but the organization slowly encouraged them to commit more and more of their time. One of the most successful organizations with this type of recruitment is the Girl Scouts; three super-volunteers in the sample worked for the Girl Scouts and none of them had originally set out to be super-volunteers. They all started as regular volunteers when their own girls were in scouting, increased their commitment over time, and continued to volunteer after their own children left the program.

One super-volunteer was first recruited when her daughter began participating in Girl Scouts.

The leader just figured every parent should volunteer and she just started giving people things to do. Before I realized, she said, “Oh, I registered you as a leader. I said ‘Excuse me, you what? Why?’” [laughs] That’s why I said it’s a cult—once they suck you in, they don’t let you go. (OT)

The Girl Scouts then patiently encouraged OT to take on more and more responsibility, despite her resistance.

Once staff got to know me, the person that was in charge of training at the time said, “Why don’t you be a trainer.” I said, “No I don’t want to do that; I don’t want to train.” And it was like five years she was constantly, “We need you to be a trainer,” “You should be a trainer,” “You would make a good trainer,” and finally I went “Fine! Fine.” So, I started training and I was in the office so much that it was, “Hey, can you do this? Can you do that?” That’s how it snowballed into what it is now.

Two volunteers at the same nursing home began volunteering because they were visiting relatives at the home, and the home staff asked whether they wanted to volunteer as well. One came to the home to visit her sister, and during her visits, . . . always in the background was, what can I do, what can I do, why do I feel fulfilled when I come here, what is it, what prompts me? . . . One of the residents said to me, “You’re coming here so often, why don’t you volunteer?” And boom, it just fell into place, this is what I want to do.

For those who decided on their own to become super-volunteers, their next step was finding an organization to volunteer with. For some, this step was easy because they had already been volunteering and only had to increase their hours. As one explained,

Once I retired, I had already made up my mind what I was going to do; I was going to volunteer, because I had been doing it so much. I started out with about four or five positions, then after a couple of years I had to start whittling down. (ML)

Other super-volunteers had to search for a long time before finding an organization that fit. As one described the process:
I was frustrated by the fact that I knew what I wanted to do, but there was no process I could go through to find an organization or a position to do what I’m doing right now. I went online and I googled children-based, academic-oriented, and I put in all these search parameters as you [do] when you look for volunteer positions and I got a million responses back and you start filtering through them and I could just tell I wasn’t going to get from A to B. Most of the volunteer stuff you find out there is like be a tutor with the kids after school but I was looking to actually take my business skills and make a difference in terms of helping an organization be successful . . . I was highly frustrated by the lack of process or a place to go to actually find this type of opportunity. (KT)

JS eventually found an organization by “happenstance” through a connection from his former employer. He met with the organization’s managers, described what he wanted to do, and they worked out a position for him as a volunteer management consultant on a major new project.

Some super-volunteers had difficulty not only finding an organization to volunteer for, but convincing that organization to let them volunteer and to use them efficiently. HE, a retiree with a doctorate in linguistics and experience in immigration law, first worked for one legal services nonprofit for about 6 months,

[but it] didn’t work out. They didn’t really know what to do with me. They had a very fast paced work environment. They work entirely on detained cases and they really didn’t have the time to integrate me into the way they do things, so a lot of the times I had nothing to do or something to do that I didn’t really know how to do.

After that work, she found another nonprofit that had an immigration law department but the department director did not want her. She began teaching English as a second language there with the goal of transferring to the immigration law section.

[The director of legal services] actually didn’t want any volunteers; he said that they’re more trouble than they’re worth. I was pretty determined, so I said, “I can do all this, I know all this stuff,” and he said, “Ok, do data entry.” So, I did and I did it accurately and relatively uncomplainingly for a couple of months. Then he began to call me over when somebody came in with a new issue, and he began to let me do a couple things. Gradually he saw that I did know how to do it so that’s how it changed.

Most super-volunteers chose organizations based on two factors—the organization’s commitment to the mission and their effectiveness in getting it done. HE observed the legal services staff and was impressed with what she saw:

I could see their profound commitment to the work they were doing and I was very moved by the people they were serving. I found that beneath the gruff exterior, [the director] and the other people who worked there had hearts like melted marshmallows. They also did a very good and very professional job: they kept up with the laws, they didn’t cut any corners, and they gave people really good service. So, I liked both the professionalism and the kindness.
Another super-volunteer (KT) had come into contact with poorly run nonprofits during his paid career, where he found employees who had “fantastic hearts but didn’t have good business skills.” He feared that

... I was going to get into the volunteer world, find an organization and say, “I love these people,” but then go home every night and bang my head against the wall saying, “Ugh, they just don’t get it.”

After much searching, he found a place where the employees “not only have great hearts but they’re also very talented, capable individuals and we’ve got a very good chemistry and mesh between us.”

**Question 3: What Are the Advantages and Challenges in Employing Super-Volunteers?**

From the staff perspective, the advantages of employing super-volunteers far outweigh the challenges. Volunteer managers stated that super-volunteers are committed to the agencies’ missions and increase their capacity to achieve their goals. Super-volunteers also offer expertise and a different perspective that may not exist within the organization’s staff.

According to our interviewees, one of the biggest benefits of super-volunteers is their ability to increase an organization’s capacity. A legal clinic supervisor (EC) says that his super-volunteers are “just a work load relief for administrative things that I could do, or other people could do, but would take substantial amounts of time.” Another manager (JC) said that his super-volunteer “was producing exactly as anyone else. So, at the very least, you can say that’s a $20,000 donation. It could be like an annual salary for someone.” A third (BC) noted that his volunteer had a prior career in management consulting where his “billable hours were like $950 an hour,” adding that “he’s given us nearly 20 a week now for four years. That’s a lot of capacity.”

Super-volunteers’ expertise is an added benefit for organizations. Many of the super-volunteers interviewed were retired and they brought technical and management skills from their paid careers to the organizations where they volunteered. A legal clinic was going through a technology upgrade and, instead of hiring an outside consultant, it was able to use a super-volunteer to help with the transition. His previous paid career was in information technology, and the staff was able to match his skill with their needs. He designed them a custom-made website that was far superior to anything they would have been able to afford from a paid vendor.

Several managers recognized that super-volunteers provide a unique and valuable perspective.

Sometimes they just provide perspective to us, you know? That we’re not thinking of. They’re able to provide that perspective to volunteers, the newer ones, and give them the perspective and feedback, the information that I can’t because I’m not a volunteer in the unit. (LU)
A manager of hospice volunteers (BP) calls her super-volunteers “additional unpaid staff . . . They’re doing the big picture things that our staff don’t have the time to do because they’re managing the day-to-day work.”

One supervisor considered his super-volunteer a mentor:

He gives me a neutral set of ears. He knows everybody on my team but he doesn’t supervise anyone. So when I’m thinking about it from a coaching perspective or a supervisor perspective, I can talk to him as a management guru and say what would you do in my shoes with such and such relationship, how would you approach this weakness. Or how would you celebrate this for that person, or how would you help mediate this particular conflict. (CD)

Volunteer managers had few problems with super-volunteers, and none stated that super-volunteers tried to take charge or overstepped their bounds. The most common challenge is the flexible nature of their volunteer status and maintaining volunteer accountability. Because volunteers are not employees, their responsibility to the organization is of their own choice—they are only bound to the agency because they choose to be. A senior center supervisor (ND) said, “one of the unique challenges is that because they’re volunteers, they’re not beholden to us.” Although super-volunteers put in many hours, they can set their own schedules and take more time off than regular employees. As one manager (ED) put it, there were few problems except for the fact that “they have their own lives and stuff, so they’ll be gone sometimes [and] other people have to pick up the slack and do the things for them.” Although this can be a challenge, “if they weren’t there, I would just be doing this [work] every week.”

**Question Four: How Can Organizations Best Manage Super-Volunteers?**

Super-volunteers are a great asset for nonprofits, but working with them successfully does take effort. First, staff have to put their own work aside to train a volunteer who is not bound by a contract or a paycheck and may quit at any time. Two super-volunteers, both of whom worked for immigration legal services providers, expressed the gratitude they felt toward their agencies for taking the time to train them in this very technical work.

They break down the tasks into very manageable pieces so that you’re not learning the whole process at one time. They teach it well. And they give you practice with supervision and they never criticize. They only praise what you’ve done. (RU)

The staff has been very supportive. I mean I had to come in and ask every question. I was always panicked asking questions; they answered all my questions, and they let me stay even though I thought they were going to tell me, “No, you don’t know enough.” (S)

Another volunteer (RU) pointed out the difficulties of leaving a paid career in which she occupied a senior position and starting over as a volunteer. Although she had been “really assertive about trying to find a place that fit me,” she recognized that others might be
hesitant, especially when you’ve been a professional and you’ve had a career and you have to agree within yourself to start at the bottom. When you’re 20 and 25 you’ll do that. When you’re 65 maybe it’s a little harder. So, it is incumbent on the organization to remember that and to help people start from the bottom without feeling like they’re at the bottom.

Despite the challenges that super-volunteers face when starting their work, most agreed that managers should “work them hard. If you don’t give them a purpose they will basically fall away” (E).

Some super-volunteers felt somewhat limited by their volunteer role and wished they had more influence on operations. ED, a former professional cook who now cooks as a volunteer, stated,

I’m a boss where I come from. I own and operate a business . . . So when I go in to somewhere the first thing they have to get used to is that this is an old man that has run a business for 30 some odd years and I really don’t need to follow you on an apron string.

Although he eventually found an organization that suited him, at first, he found some organizations that wanted volunteers to be “rather robotic. They want you to sit there and move here and do this and do that.”

Another volunteer (EL), who had formerly worked as an office manager, felt the same conflict in her volunteer work at a retirement home.

By nature, I’m a boss. I wish I could learn to keep my mouth shut sometimes. I have a lot of ideas, but maybe in conflict with what’s presented. Do they know better than I do? Sometimes I think not. There’s so much more that could be done with less stress. They waste so much time and so much energy. And I have to watch because I’ve always been a boss, I’ve always trained people, and that is something I’ve had to learn to back off, and that’s hard for me.

Some managed to work out a relationship with their organization where they were able to take on more responsibilities and act like a manager, but this took time. KT stated that he was not sure how much initiative to take at first:

At first, I was sort of hanging back and waiting for people to ask me to do things, and then I slowly started to step more and more and look for areas of need and take much more initiative. I never really asked for permission to do it but I was careful in how I gradually increased my level of involvement. The organization was gracious enough to let me play that role.

From the volunteer managers’ perspective, the main challenge in supervising super-volunteers lies in figuring out who will make a good super-volunteer and how to maintain a good relationship with them. As one manager put it,

[It is] really about delegation and knowing who you can trust and when you can trust them and who wants to be a leader. If you’re good at identifying who leaders are, then
invest in those people, because they will be a team member that does unbelievable things for your mission. (BP)

Another volunteer manager (CD) made a similar point: Managers should let volunteers “grow in ownership and actually own what they’re doing. Many of them come with a lot of leadership skills; let them lead.”

The super-volunteers that we interviewed did not find the traditional ways that organizations recognize volunteers, such as awards, thank-you letters, ceremonies, and gifts, to be important. For them, being able to do useful work that furthered the organization’s mission was the most important goal. They also valued individual attention. According to BC, managers should “recognize that each person is motivated differently, each person is contributing for different reasons. Really understand and find out more about the individual instead of saying they’re just another volunteer.” Another (E) said that the experience of being interviewed for the current study was motivating, and recommended that volunteer managers do something similar.

By talking to volunteers, by soliciting and engaging them and trying to reveal their motives and aspirations—many volunteers have never gone that way and you’re adding something to the volunteer experience just by talking about it. I am much more invigorated now.

Conclusion

This article used data from interviews with 25 super-volunteers to find out what motivates people to become super-volunteers, how they choose organizations to work for, and how they wish to be managed. It used data from interviews with nine volunteer managers to find out the organizational advantages and disadvantages of employing super-volunteers and their best practices for supervising them.

The most important motivation for becoming a super-volunteer was values, and super-volunteers placed great importance on finding organizations whose mission corresponded to their own values. However, other research has found that values are important motivations for all volunteers (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Thus, it is possible that an interview sample of regular volunteers would make similar comments about the importance of values in their volunteering. These findings may mean that this article was not successful in finding distinguishing characteristics in answering the first research question, what motivates super-volunteers.

However, perhaps the lack of difference is part of the answer: Volunteers and super-volunteers have similar motivations, but super-volunteers’ motivations are stronger, and super-volunteers also have more of an opportunity to donate time. Indeed, our survey study showed that prosocial personality traits in general, such as agreeableness, generative concern, and a sense of obligation to volunteer, predict super-volunteering (see the appendix). The super-volunteers in our sample also had more skills and free time than most regular volunteers, as most were retirees and had previously worked as supervisors in jobs that involved helping others.
The importance of values to super-volunteers implies some recommendations for volunteer managers. To facilitate recruitment, volunteer managers can ensure that values are highlighted on the organization’s website, as this is the first place that many super-volunteers will go to learn about a potential placement site. To facilitate retention and a stronger time commitment to volunteering, managers also should articulate the organization’s values to prospective volunteers and make sure that their own work and their volunteers’ work lives up to those values.

A second point relevant to volunteer managers is that managing super-volunteers requires time, individual attention, flexibility, and the willingness to custom design a position for a single volunteer. This approach does not agree well with the HRM model of volunteer management, which encourages taking a bureaucratic approach that aims to maximize professionalism and efficiency (Hager & Brudney, 2015). The HRM model does not necessarily have to be applied rigidly, but the popularity of the model may encourage volunteer managers to be somewhat rigid in their application of management systems; they may stick to preconceived job descriptions, rather than being flexible in designing jobs for unusual volunteers. The model may encourage managers to seek efficiency in managing many volunteers rather than investing a lot of time in a relationship with a single one. Organizations interested in attracting super-volunteers can put more resources into hiring volunteer management staff, giving the often-overworked volunteer management staff more time to develop working relationships with potential super-volunteers. In addition, volunteer managers can be alert to potential super-volunteers, whom this research identifies as people recently retired from careers as supervisors in jobs that involve helping others or bettering society, and who are looking to make a substantial commitment. The high potential contribution of such volunteers may justify an extra allotment of volunteer managers’ scarce resource of time.

A third point relevant to volunteer managers is the importance that super-volunteers place upon feeling like a respected, valued team member. When people leave paid employment and go into retirement, they lose the peer networks and support that come with paid work. Some retirees seek volunteer work as a way of replacing the networks and roles that they lost when they retired (Chambré, 1987). In the volunteer management literature, peer support has been found to be as important or more important than support and management from supervisors (Farmer & Fedor, 2001; Hidalgo & Moreno, 2009), so it is not surprising that peer support should emerge as a theme in this study. Volunteer managers should place potential super-volunteers in situations where they have the opportunity to enjoy the prestige, social contact, and feeling of being valued that they used to enjoy in their paid employment.

The small sample size limits this study to make generalization to the entire population of super-volunteers. We did not interview a comparison group of less active volunteers, so it is possible that some of our findings about super-volunteers’ motivations and their preferred management style might apply equally well to all volunteers. However, our qualitative research identified patterns and themes, namely, the importance of values motivations, the importance of managers’ flexibility, and the way that potential super-volunteers seek out and select organizations to work with.
Survey research with a larger and generalizable sample could confirm and expand upon them. Future research could also examine in more depth what life experiences and values lead super-volunteers to choose to make such a big commitment in retirement.

Our concluding words focus on two potentially negative issues that are relevant to scholars of volunteering and civil society in general. Most of the super-volunteers in this article were well-educated people who completed a professional career and sought to give back in retirement through an interesting, challenging, and personally involved way. In the future, will volunteers with these characteristics still be available to nonprofits? On the positive side, for the foreseeable future, the number of people of retirement age increases every year as the baby boom generation grows older. The boomers are perhaps less civically engaged than the preceding generations, but not much so (Einolf, 2009); in any case, their sheer numbers should make up for any reduced propensity to volunteer (Einolf, 2009). On the negative side, the rise in the age of retirement and the decision of many Boomers to continue working past the age 65 years may make this type of super-volunteer scarcer in the future.

Another negative side of super-volunteers relates to class and power. It is significant that our study, which recruited participants from nonprofits, did not find any super-volunteers with only a high school degree, despite the fact that they are the most common group of volunteers who serve 10 hr or more per week in the population (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Where are these less educated but highly active volunteers serving? Many may volunteer through church and religious organizations, which are places where less educated volunteers also tend to serve (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Some may volunteer in secular nonprofits but they may also serve as ordinary volunteers who give many hours, not in roles of authority like the super-volunteers in this sample. Finally, they may be more likely than educated people to split their volunteer hours among two or more organizations, so that they would not be identified as super-volunteers by this study.

The super-volunteers in our sample took on leadership roles within the nonprofits where they served, some even serving as mentors or consultants to paid staff. This gives these highly educated people a position of power in the organization, a position that may be inaccessible to similarly committed volunteers with less education. A recent article on a completely different population—youth volunteers in the United Kingdom—found similar results: Middle class volunteers had the cultural capital to perform well as volunteers, so they tended to dominate volunteer positions and crowded out volunteers of lower social status (Dean, 2016). As the United States grows ever more stratified between the haves and the have-nots, the nonprofits that have traditionally tried to bridge the gap between the two groups may be reinforcing class divisions through the selective recruitment and promotion of influential super-volunteers. Issues of class and power, along with issues of effective management, are important future directions for research on super-volunteers and other highly committed volunteers.
Appendix

Comparing Super-Volunteers and Less Active Volunteers Using Survey Data

In a preliminary analysis, we compared people who volunteered 10 or more hours per week with less active volunteers, leaving out of the analysis those who do not volunteer at all. We then compared highly active volunteers with regular volunteers on variables measuring demographic characteristics, resources, motivations, and social context. This appendix describes our methods and results.

Method

Sample

We used data from the 1995 wave of the MIDUS (1995-1996) panel study. The MIDUS study involved written surveys and telephone interviews with a nationally representative random-digit dialing sample of 3,032 noninstitutionalized, English-speaking adults born between 1920 and 1970. The estimated overall response rate was 60.8%, and the data are weighted to adjust for nonresponse. Full information about the sample, response rate, weighting, and survey design is contained in the MIDUS codebook, available from the MIDUS website at http://midmac.med.harvard.edu/research.html (MIDMAC, 2017).

Dependent Variable

The MIDUS survey asked respondents to write in how many hours they spend volunteering each month, and we recoded this variable into three categories: nonvolunteers, less frequent volunteers (1-39 hr per month), and highly active volunteers (40 or more hours per month). We also divided the less frequent volunteers category into two categories, infrequent volunteers (1-19 hr per month) and moderate frequency volunteers (20-39 hr per month).

Demographic Characteristics

Gender was measured with a dummy variable, and age was measured in years. Race and ethnicity were measured with variables for White, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic. Family status was measured with dummy variables for married, having children, and having minor children in the household, and with an interval variable for the number of children.

Resources

The MIDUS survey measures education on a 12-point ordinal scale, ranging from a primary school education to a doctorate or equivalent. Health was measured using the
average of two questions on mental and self-reported physical health, both of which are measured on a 1 to 4 ordinal scale, from poor to excellent. MIDUS measures household income from a variety of sources, and estimates the income for those who refused to answer the question. Finally, an idea of respondents’ free time can be gained from their answers to questions on their labor force status, which took the values of working full time, working part time, student, homemaker, self-employed, unemployed, and retired.

**Personality Traits and Motivations**

The MIDUS survey measured the “big five” personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience through a series of items asking respondents to state, on a scale of 1 to 4, how much a set of words described them. It measured helpful self-identification through a single item that asked, “when you think about your life as a whole up to the present, how would you rate your contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people?” with answers on a 5-point scale from excellent to poor. For generative concern, MIDUS has a six-item scale adapted from the Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), which asks respondents to what extent statements describe them, on a 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot) scale. Examples of the statements are, “Others would say you have made unique contributions to society” and “You have important skills you can pass along to others.” It measured obligation through a set of 19 questions about obligations to family, friends, work, government, and society in general, with scores from 0 to 10. One of the questions asked specifically how obligated the respondent would feel “to volunteer time or money to social causes you support.”

**Social Networks**

We used measures of integration into social networks through one’s religious congregation, other formal groups and associations, one’s neighborhood, and informal social interactions, and attendance at meetings of formal social groups. We measured religious social networks through a question about religious services attendance, which MIDUS codes using an ordinal scale ranging from never to weekly or more. We recoded this ordinal variable to create an interval variable measuring yearly religious services attendance with values ranging from 0 to 52.

To measure integration into formal social groups, we used three questions in which the MIDUS survey asked respondents to write how many meetings they attend each month in labor unions and professional associations, sports and recreation groups, and all other groups. The variables were added together to make a single measure of voluntary participation, with a mean of 2.27 and a standard deviation of 4.52. The variable was truncated at 15 meetings per month, or the 97% percentile, to prevent outliers from biasing the regression analysis.

For neighborhood integration, the MIDUS study has a four-item measure of trust and integration into one’s community derived from Keyes (1998), which measures
how much individuals trust their neighbors, feel safe in their neighborhoods, and feel that they can call on their neighbors for help if needed. We also used two questions that asked about social contact with neighbors, one that asked how often the respondent had “any contact, even something so simple as saying ‘hello,’” and another that asked how often the respondent has “a real conversation or get[s] together socially” with neighbors. Both have ordinal response categories ranging from *never or hardly ever* to *almost every day*, on a scale of 1 to 6, and we averaged the results together to create a single scale.

We measured informal social interactions through two questions about how often respondents were in contact with friends and how often they get together socially with family. Both questions had ordinal response categories ranging from *never or hardly ever* to *several times a day*, and we recoded these to an interval measure of times per month, ranging from 0 to 90.

**Method of Analysis**

We used *t* tests to compare highly active volunteers (40+ hr/month) with the least active volunteers (1-19 hr/month). We also used *t* tests to compare highly active volunteers with low and moderately active volunteers (1-39 hr/month) and found similar results. Only the comparison between highly active and least active volunteers is presented in the “Findings” section.

**Findings**

The range, means or proportions, and standard deviations for all variables are reported in the first three columns of Table A1. These statistics describe the entire sample, including nonvolunteers. The last two columns report the means or proportions for the least active and highly active volunteers and the asterisks report the statistical significance of the difference.

**Demographics**

There were no significant differences between the least active and highly active volunteers on age, race and ethnicity, marital status, or children. A larger percentage of highly active (69.6%) than least active volunteers (59.1%) were female, which was marginally significant at *p* = .068.

**Resources**

Highly active and least active volunteers had similar levels of education and occupational prestige. They also had similar mean levels of physical health, but highly active volunteers rated their mental and emotional health (3.9) higher than low-frequency volunteers (3.4; *p* = .088). Although there was not much difference in skills and health, there was a difference in amounts of free time. A lower percentage of highly active
Table A1. Descriptive Statistics and t Test Results, Comparing Volunteers Who Work 1 to 19 Hr per Month With Those Who Work 40 or More Hours per Month.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>M or %</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1-19 hr/ month</th>
<th>40+ hr/ month</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>69.6%†</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25-74</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any children</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
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<td>Number of children</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor children</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1-12</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mental health</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.9†</td>
</tr>
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<td>Physical health</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
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<td>Working full time</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>45.2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part time</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Full-time student</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.8†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>21.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>17.2</td>
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<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work hours</td>
<td>0-80</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>25.9*</td>
</tr>
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<td>Personality traits and motivations</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.65*</td>
</tr>
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<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
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<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>3.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generative concern</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All obligations</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering obligation</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>7.20</td>
<td>8.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Religious services</td>
<td>0-15</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.92*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood trust</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social contact with neighbors</td>
<td>1-6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at association</td>
<td>0-15</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meetings</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social contact with friends</td>
<td>0-90</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>34.4***</td>
</tr>
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<td>Social contact with family</td>
<td>0-90</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>32.3*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p ≤ .10. *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.
(45.2%) than least active volunteers (60.0%) were working full time, and the average hours worked each week by highly active volunteers (25.9) was significantly \((p = .011)\) lower than the hours worked by the least active volunteers (32.7). A larger percentage of highly active (5.8%) than least active volunteers (1.1%) were full-time students \((p = .083)\), and a larger percentage of highly active volunteers (21.9%) than least active volunteers (12.1%) were homemakers.

**Personality Traits and Motivations**

Of the big five personality traits, highly active volunteers (3.65) were significantly \((p = .025)\) more agreeable than the least active volunteers (3.53), but there were no other significant differences. Highly active volunteers (3.18) scored significantly \((p = .001)\) higher on the measure of generative concern than the least active volunteers (2.97), and highly active volunteers (3.77) also outscored the least active volunteers (3.56) on helpfulness \((p = .001)\). Highly active volunteers did not score higher than the least active volunteers on obligations generally, but highly active volunteers (8.33) did feel a significantly \((p < .001)\) stronger obligation to volunteer than the least active volunteers (7.20).

**Social Networks**

Highly active volunteers attended religious services (3.1 times per month) significantly \((p = .029)\) more often than the least active volunteers (2.3 times per month). Highly active volunteers had significantly \((p = .009)\) more trust and integration into their neighborhoods and spent significantly \((p = .085)\) more time socializing with neighbors. They did not have significantly higher attendance at meetings of formal organizations, but socialized significantly more with friends \((p = .002)\) and family \((p = .04)\).

**Discussion**

In the MIDUS sample, there were no significant differences between highly active volunteers and low-frequency volunteers in age, race and ethnicity, and family status; this finding differs from the recent Current Population Survey (CPS) findings, which did show differences in these variables. The difference may lie in the larger and more representative nature of the CPS sample, and the CPS sample findings should be considered more valid.

There were no differences in the resources of education and few differences in health, but highly active volunteers had more free time in the sense of working fewer hours and being more likely to be students or homemakers. Highly active volunteers scored higher only in the big five personality trait of agreeableness, and also scored significantly higher in motivations to be altruistic, including generative concern, helpfulness, and obligation to volunteer.

The largest difference between highly active volunteers and regular volunteers came in social networks, with highly active volunteers having significantly more contact with
neighbors, friends, and family, and highly active volunteers showing significantly more trust and positive feeling in their neighborhoods. Highly active volunteers attended religious services significantly more often than less active volunteers but did not outdo them in attendance at other formal association meetings.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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